



Memories from the 1994 Rwandan genocide

How do survivors recall their experiences ?

Memories from the genocide are highly detailed and vivid. Those results challenge the common idea that memories for traumatic events are unreliable.

How do we remember traumatic events, and are these memories different in individuals who experience post-traumatic stress? Researchers from the Psycavi team studied this question using Autobiographical Interview with 110 participants (58 women, 52 men) who lived through the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

It is widely believed that memories of traumatic events are impoverished or even non-existent, due to amnesia or suppression. At the same time we know from controlled lab-based studies that negative emotion can enhance memory.

In the current study people were asked to verbally share autobiographical memories from the 1994 genocide, as well as memories from other time periods in their lives. Memories were transcribed verbatim, and researchers applied a coding method that allowed to quantify the structure of memories (episodic and non-episodic). The coding of memories allowed them to ask if it is really true that traumatic events are «badly » remembered, and if this differs as a function of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) experienced. Very few studies have used this approach to study historical/societal events, even less so outside the United States and specific populations such as veterans.

The study reveals that memories of events from the genocide were mnemonically enhanced, specifically they were higher in episodic detail than non-episodic detail. This mnemonic enhancement was also present in negative events that occurred outside of the genocide (accident, natural disaster, etc.), though memories from the genocide were more detailed overall. These results challenge the idea that memories of traumatic events are suppressed or impoverished,

instead they appear to be highly vivid and episodically detailed, more so than other kinds of memories. Somewhat surprisingly, researchers did not find any impact of PTSD on memory details. Frequent commemorative events and opportunities for memory recall related to the genocide against the Tutsi, in both private and public contexts, may account for certain observed findings. Understanding the structure of individual memories of these impactful societal events may aid in psychological healing at the individual and societal level.

Autobiographical Memory

Autobiographical Memory (AM) encompasses both our general and semantic knowledge about ourselves (e.g., our first name) and memories of events in our lives (e.g., the evening of our high school graduation)

Episodic Memory

The ability to remember personally experienced events, specifically recalling what happened, where, and when, allowing for "mental time travel" back to re-experience the past with a sense of self (Tulving, 2002)

Traumatic Event

Event involving actual or threat of death, serious injury, or loss of physical integrity of the self or others (DSM-V, APA 2013)

FOR MORE INFO



[Blumenthal, A., Caparos, S., & Blanchette, I. \(2024\). Understanding the structure of autobiographical memories: A study of trauma memories from the 1994 Rwandan genocide. *Memory & Cognition*, 52\(7\), 1597-1608.](#)