

Being in the 'no': questions influence what we remember

September 14 2011

Imagine that you are sitting in the park, deeply engaged in a conversation with your loved one. A group of teenagers pass by in front of you. The next day you learn that the police are looking for someone to identify them as these teenagers are suspected of a serious mugging. You would most probably not be able to make a positive identification. Do you really have absolutely no memory for their faces? A new study, which will be published in an upcoming issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggests that such information will make its way into your memory anyway.

The inability to make a positive identification of the teenagers could be due to the fact that [memory](#) for unattended elements in our environment is not strong enough to support a Yes response, says Anat Maril of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. "Therefore the trick is to examine how confidently people say No to the unattended information they are trying to remember".

The classic opinion voiced from the beginning of modern [psychology](#) has been "What you don't pay attention to isn't remembered", says Yaakov Hoffman of the Hebrew University and Bar-Ilan University. The absence of memory for unattended items has been studied in the past by telling people to focus on one element in a picture, then asking if they remember another element, one in which they did not attend to. Their answer – No.

But Hoffman and Maril along with co-author Oded Bein thought it was

unlikely that the unattended element completely failed to make it into memory—instead they thought the problem was the simple yes/no question used in the memory test. They used the same experiment other researchers have done to investigate this kind of memory. Each participant sat in front of a computer. They were shown pictures with words superimposed on them. Each word only appeared for a quarter of a second. The participants were given a task with the pictures—seeing whether any duplicates appeared one after another. There was no time to pay attention to the word.

Then each participant was asked whether they'd seen a list of words—the words in the experiment and some other words. Some people who were just asked to answer yes or no showed no memory. But others were given four options—definitely yes, I think so, I don't think so, and definitely not. "We discovered that when you look at the different 'no' responses memory is revealed" says Maril. People were more confident about words that they weren't shown. With the [words](#) that did flash by, they were more likely to respond that they didn't think they'd seen the word.

Hoffman concludes that perhaps everything we see makes its way into our memory, such as billboard ads when driving by or perimeter signage at sport arenas, but we need to know how to ask, and we need to carefully listen to the answer: "I don't think I remember" does not mean "I remember not!".

More information: "Explicit memory for unattended words: The importance of being in the "NO"" *Psychological Science*.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Being in the 'no': questions influence what we remember (2011, September 14)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-09-being-in-the-no-questions.html>

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