Urgently seeking – Memory

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18th December 2024



All too often, the human brain stores memories wrongly or lets them fade into oblivion. How do researchers participating in NRP 80 “Covid-19 in Society” ensure as far as possible that respondents provide them with accurate, unaltered information about the pandemic period? The following contribution

answers this question and inaugurates the new series on NRP 80 on DeFacto.



Our memories are not to be trusted. We mix up birthdays and names, mislay our wallets, and many of the things we think we remember did not happen as we perceived them. This has consequences not only for us and those around us but also for research. In psychology and the social sciences, dealing with falsified or distorted recollections has long been recognised as a challenge.

Researchers participating in NRP 80 “Covid-19 in Society” are faced with the question of how well people remember events and feelings that occurred during the pandemic. “Many people have wiped the Covid-19 pandemic from their minds,” says Alexander Seifert of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland. He is co-leader of the NRP 80 project “Intergenerational cohesion”, which investigates how people from different generations stayed in contact with each other during the pandemic. “During the interviews, people sometimes say they can hardly remember anything about it.”

Some experiences stick in people’s minds better than others. According to Seifert, respondents were able to describe creative ideas for keeping in contact despite the rules on social distancing. “One woman met up with friends for fountain chats, as she called them. The fountain served to keep them socially distanced.” Others communicated from window to window or from window to street. The residents of one district organised a sort of COVID-compliant treasure hunt where the children looked for teddy bears on windowsills. In many cases, however, researchers must help test subjects fire up their memories. Seifert and his team use pictures, for example. “We ask people to bring photos from that period, and we show them Covid campaign posters issued by the Federal Office of Public Health,” explains Seifert. “Both can help to put them back in that situation.”

Embellishing or exaggerating?

Researchers working on the NRP 80 project “Urban spaces for young people,” led by Anke Kaschlik of Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW), use the same ploy. This project investigates the use and significance of public, private, physical, and virtual spaces for young people, both generally and during the pandemic. Kaschlik says that young people perceive the four years since the pandemic as a longer period than older people do.

Young people are interviewed during group workshops in schools. “Our project covers the whole spectrum of schools – from vocational colleges to secondary schools,” says Kaschlik. This range, with around 230 respondents, offers some guarantee that memory gaps will be avoided in the project. To refresh their

memories, the researchers also ask the youngsters to look at their photos and social media posts from that period. They also plot pandemic measures – such as when gatherings of more than six people were first prohibited – on a timeline.

“These points of reference have an effect,” explains Kaschlik. “Some young people found memories started bubbling up, which then got others in the group talking, too.” One example is that of two youngsters called Rouven and Tatjana. As Rouven looked at the timeline of measures, he said, “Oh yes, that’s right; it was when everyone was panic-buying.” This jogged Tatjana’s memory, prompting her to add, “We were panic-buying toilet paper then.”

According to Kaschlik, the group workshops have another advantage because people don’t simply forget. Consciously or unconsciously, they create, embellish or taboo their recollections. If young people disobeyed the rules during the pandemic, for example, they might not like telling the researchers this. “Yet, at the same time, they want to show off a bit in front of their peers. So, it can all balance out, and ultimately, we obtain reliable statements, at least taken as a whole.” The researchers validated the results of their analysis with the young people at further workshops.

The research team also conducted ‘walking talks’ with three school classes, i.e., interviews while walking together through parks or youth centres, for example. Anke Kaschlik says that this approach proved to be very helpful when it came to talking to young people in detail about specific places and their qualities. “It was much easier for the young people to express their views on the opportunities and obstacles to using certain urban spaces on site.”

Building trust

Someone aware of the risk of false memories is able to take countermeasures. The NRP 80 project “The Covid generation” looks at young people’s wellbeing during the pandemic. One part of the project consists of interviews with around 30 experts from government bodies and other organisations on policy measures used to support young people during the pandemic. According to project co-leader Núria Sánchez-Mira of the University of Neuchâtel, the risk of simply forgetting is low in this kind of professional context. “However, it may be that someone wishes to present an embellished image of their institution.”

To prevent this, the researchers rely on factual analyses. They consult reports on the measures implemented and keep referring to them during the interviews. As Sánchez-Mira states, it is also important to build trust with the respondents. “Please be assured that it is not our aim to criticise you or your institution. We want to draw lessons for future pandemics.”

Don’t be afraid of difficult topics

Annika Rohrmoser and Gemma García Calderó of the University of Basel also mention factual knowledge and trust. Both are PhD students working on the NRP 80 project “Loneliness prevention,” which examines how lonely people felt during the pandemic and which measures alleviated this. A core aspect of the research involves conversations with around 40 people who experienced

loneliness during the pandemic.

The researchers prepare for these qualitative interviews meticulously. They question experts in this field, and Gemma García Calderó is preparing a review of the existing studies. “This knowledge gives us confidence that we are addressing the important points and asking questions that shed light on them from various angles,” she explains. “It helps us avoid misunderstandings and uncover any inconsistencies in the answers.”

Annika Rohrmoser points out that there is a stigma attached to the very idea of loneliness. “Many people believe they are to blame for feeling lonely, so they shy away from talking about it.” To avoid taboos of this kind, it is important to create the appropriate interview environment. “We try to show the respondents that each and every one of us feels lonely at times. And that our recollections are important and there are no right or wrong answers.”

Data from longitudinal studies

Memory problems crop up in quantitative as well as qualitative data surveys, especially when events are long in the past. In a nationwide survey, for example, the “Intergenerational cohesion” project is asking 1,600 people how often they were in contact with grandchildren or grandparents during the pandemic and in non-pandemic times. “Originally, we wanted to compare the time before the pandemic with the time of the pandemic itself,” explains Alexander Seifert. Since it took a while before the NRP was able to commence work, however, this struck the researchers as too risky. Instead, they decided to compare the pandemic period with the present.

The project “The Covid generation” has chosen an elegant approach: to find out how the pandemic affected the wellbeing of young people, it takes data from the Swiss Household Panel, which has surveyed some 10,000 Swiss households annually since 1999. “There was even an extra round of surveys during the pandemic,” explains Núria Sánchez-Mira. “Since the respondents were describing their current situation in each case, their recollections were less distorted.”

There is no guarantee of accurate and unaltered memories. However, NRP 80 researchers are aware of the challenge. They consistently apply various methods and strategies to recognise undesirable influences or a tendency to distort and exercise caution when interpreting their results.

References:

- NRP 80, research project “Intergenerational cohesion”
- NRP 80, research project “Urban spaces for young people”
- NRP 80, research project “The Covid generation”

- NRP 80, research project “Loneliness prevention”

Picture: NFP80

This article has been edited by Robin Stähli, DeFacto.