COGSCI 2006
The 28th Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society

Vancouver, BC, Canada
July 26-29

Memory for Serial Order in Social Cognition: Does Order Matter When We Are Forming Impressions About Strangers?

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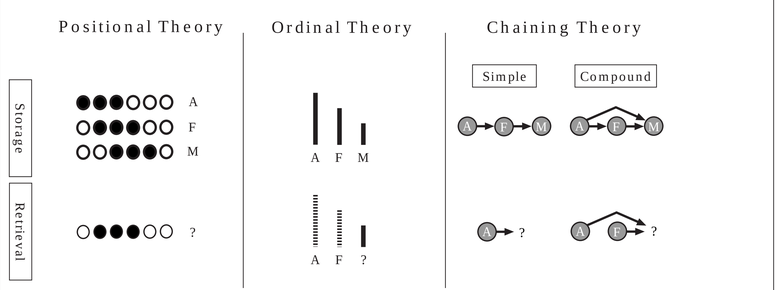
Abstract

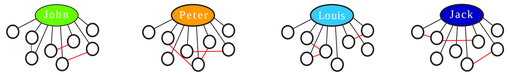
The systematic study of memory for serial order has yet to find its niche in social cognition. According to the person memory literature, the organizational process underlying impression formation results in a network of associative links between information nodes (behaviors and traits) representing the target. This representation should facilitate the recall of source information and impair the recall of order information. The present study shows that both order and source information were better recalled under impression formation conditions, suggesting that the representation of a target person tends to preserve the relative position of events in a time sequence.

Theories of Memory for Serial Order



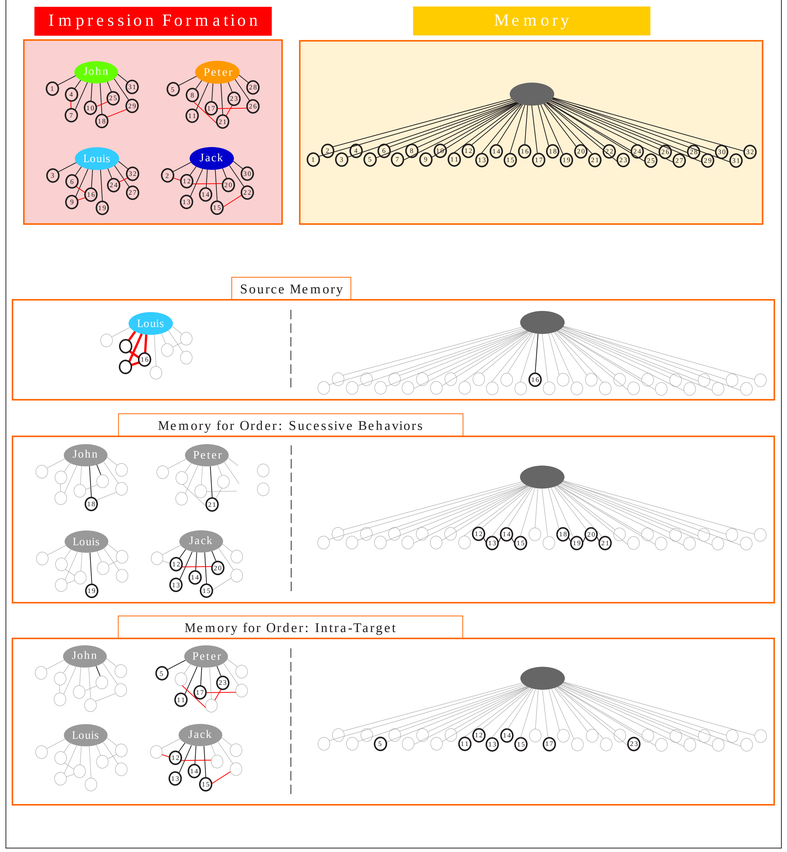
Person Memory

Associative Network Models



Study 1

Hypothesis



Method

Participants

- 109 undergraduate students from Higher School for Applied Psychology (ISPA, Lisbon)

Design

- 2 (processing goals: impression formation set vs. memorization set) X
- 4 (replications of stimulus list: version 1, version 2, version 3 and version 4) X
- 2 (succession of behaviors: successive vs. non-successive) X
- 2 (nature of the target: intra-target vs. between-target) factorial mix design with the last two variables grouped within-subjects in the four versions of the stimulus list

Materials

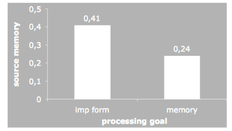
- 32 behavioral descriptions of 4 targets (8 x John, 8 x Louis, 8 x Jack and 8 x Peter) organized in 4 blocks of 4 behaviors each, according to the combination of the variables succession of behaviors and nature of the targets.
- there was (1) a block of 4 behaviors in successive positions in the stimulus list performed by the same target (SI); (2) a block of 4 behaviors in successive positions performed by different targets (SB); (3) a block of 4 behaviors in non-successive positions performed by the same target (NSI); and (4) a block of 4 behaviors in non-successive positions performed by different targets (NSB)

Procedure

- participants were instructed to form impressions (or to memorize) behavioral descriptions
- the 32 behaviors were presented for 8 seconds each
- filler task
- order the 4 behaviors of each block (memory for order)
- identify the target that had performed each behaviors (source memory)

Results

Source Memory

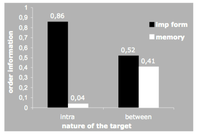


t (101) = 1,91, p<0,03

Memory for Order: Sucessive Behaviors

F (1,97) = 0,05, p = 0,82 (M = 0,02)

Memory for Order: Intra-Target



F (1,99) = 6,28, p < 0,01
t (99) = 3,02, p <0,01

t (99) = 1,92, p < 0,03
t (99) = 0,44, p = 0,66

Discussion

- results showed:
  - that source information was better recalled under impression formation conditions, suggesting that intra-target organization did in fact occur
  - memory for the order of intra-target behaviors was better in impression formation than in memory conditions, again suggesting intra-target organization
  - we found no indication of better memory for order of successive behaviors under memory relative to impression formation conditions
- these data replicate the effects found by Hamilton et al. (1980) and Garcia-Marques and Hamilton (1996) with a different measure, namely source memory instead of free recall. According to the mentioned authors, these data constitute strong evidence supporting the idea that forming an impression is organizing information in a way that attempts to make sense of a person. If that organized representation results in a pattern of inter-item associations, when we use the behavior to trigger the person node, there will be plenty of ways to access it.
- results of memory for order seem to suggest that participant's performance is always better when they are forming impressions

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