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Definitions

Implicit Memory

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A memory is defined implicit when the learned information is retrieved and used without awareness of remembering it and with no reference to the learning phase.

Implicit memory refers to the retrieval phase and should not be confused with covert learning without formal instructions (e.g., statistical learning). Learning can be intentional or incidental depending on whether or not there is awareness of the subsequent testing phase. In the testing (or retrieval) phase, memory is labelled explicit or implicit depending on whether or not one is aware of using information from a previous learning phase. Any content of memory (e.g., events, abilities, notions), independently of the modality of learning, can be retrieved either implicitly or explicitly. Expert drivers remember how to drive implicitly, but in specific situations (e.g., while parking uphill) they may rely explicitly on learned manoeuvres.

Implicit memory is assessed with indirect memory tests, for instance, asking participants to name objects, solve problems, or complete letter strings: implicit memory is shown by how current behaviour is influenced by the previous experience. However, in everyday life, most memories are implicit. When recognising a person, using a word in a conversation, or sending a message via the smartphone, that word, that person and that procedure are usually remembered without explicit reference to the learning circumstances. Expert behaviour is a form of implicit memory: information is always available and accessible without revisiting or overtly reconstructing the learning phase. At the level of subjective experience, implicit memory includes indistinct feelings of familiarity, habitual sensorial experiences, as well as affections and emotions towards people and events.

Implicit is not synonymous with unconscious, as the memory content is the object of consciousness, nor does it overlap with automatic, because it not only involves cue-dependent, but also more complex aspects of knowledge and behaviour (e.g., algorithms for solving problems, playing a musical instrument, mastering a topic, one's own beliefs and prejudices). The distinction between explicit and implicit memory does not coincide with the distinction between declarative and non-declarative memory. Implicit does not encompass only procedural memories, it includes episodic and semantic memories.

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