WHAT A MESS! PUTTING SOME ORDER IN PERSON MEMORY

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The way we represent information about people in memory is a key issue in social cognition. However, the person memory models that specify how we encode and retrieve this information focus exclusively on item information, neglecting how order information is represented. In fact, the systematic study of memory for serial order remains absent from social cognition.

According to the associative person memory models, an impression is a network of associative links between behaviors that is formed during encoding. This spontaneous organization facilitates the recall of item information but should hinder memory for item order.

In 4 experiments we used 2 different paradigms to address this question, contrasting impression formation (IF) with memorization (M) processing goals and using measures of order information along with measures of item information. Furthermore, we used information describing single and multiple targets.

Results show across the 4 experiments, with different measures of order and item information, that both order and item information are better recalled under IF goal conditions. These findings suggest that order information is preserved in IF. In addition, IF outperform M conditions on memory for the order only when the information refers to a single target. Moreover, the way IF participants spontaneously retrieve information from memory do not follow the sequence of the studied behaviors, suggesting that order is not represented by associations between items in successive positions.

The data will be discussed in terms of the implications of the new findings regarding order information to the way we represent information about people.