NEW COLLEGE

NEWS RELEASE

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Does the trick of associating unrelated material with something to be remembered actually help a person to remember over a short period of time?

New College Psychology Professor David Gorfein doesn't think so and he is experimenting to find out.

Working on a two-year National Science Foundation grant, Dr. Gorfein, with the help of several New College students, is trying to measure human memory over short intervals of time, usually periods of less than one minute.

The measurement process consists of presenting material to a person and then giving him a task to prevent his rehearsing what he is supposed to remember. Then he is asked to recall the original material. The extent to which he remembers serves as a measurement of short-term memory.

Material presented for retention usually consists of nonsense syllables consisting of three, four or five letters. Sample syllables are "poj", "fen", and "taj." Dr. Gorfein uses the nonsense syllables because subjects can remember very easily a familiar word or syllable.

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According to Professor Gorfein, "My theory is that associations in short-term memory serve to inhibit recall whereas in long-term memory the opposite is true."

In other words, to remember something for a long time, he feels it probably helps to associate it with something familiar. To remember something for only a short time,such as a phone number, from the time you look it up to the time you dial it, it is probably best to concentrate on the number itself, rather than trying to find something to associate with it.

Dr. Gorfein's research is expected to throw new light on the part word association plays in memory and to answer questions such as, "Does storage (memory) decay if it is not transferred to the long-term memory?" and "Do different strategies help remember?"

The study should also contribute to the general memory theory, which is still not complete. According to Professor Gorfein, scientists have only had the techniques to measure memory for the last seven or eight years.

Dr. Gorfein's work arises out of experience he gained during the summer when he studied memory at the University of Michigan, also on a National Science Foundation grant.

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