

3-27-1998

A Mnemonic for Intelligence Analysis and Operations

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (1998) "A Mnemonic for Intelligence Analysis and Operations," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 12 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol4/iss12/1>

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Title: A Mnemonic for Intelligence Analysis and Operations

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Volume: 4

Issue: 12

Date: 1998-03-27

Keywords: Intelligence, Memory, Self

Abstract. This article describes and critiques the self-reference effect as a mnemonic facilitating intelligence analysis and operations.

Research on the psychological component of the biopsychosocial construct of human memory best supports models that highlight social construction, a significant role for expectations, continual change, associative facilitation and interference, social comparison processes, saliency based on emotional arousal and perceived differences, and temporal effects--especially those of primacy and recency. Given that human memory appears to be anything but analogous to the retrieval of "snap-shots" of life, it is extremely vulnerable to generating pictures, stories, and emotional reactions quite different than what might have actually taken place. The implications of memory vulnerabilities are enormous--for criminal justice proceedings, compliance with safety procedures in extreme environments, and more specifically for the analysis of intelligence information and the employment of intelligence information during intelligence operations.

In essence, human memory seems to be self-referential because most of its common models are related to one's conceptions of self. In this regard, a recent meta-analysis of cognitive strategies to facilitate memory retrieval supports procedures of self-reference as valuable mnemonics. It turns out that purposely relating items of information to one's self--organizing and elaborating the information in self-referential terms--facilitates retention. This self-reference effect appears to be superior to semantic coding in which information is related to existing structures and networks of meaning that are similar or different from its own meaning. The effect also appears to be superior to episodic coding in which information is related to existing structures and networks of events that are both similar or different from the events within which the information seemed to occur.

Would the self-reference effect be more potentially useful for intelligence analysis or operations? Intelligence analyses are often developed with sophisticated artificial intelligence supports and statistical models that ensure one's best formal assessment of what has happened--similar to the best of actuarial and statistical prediction in clinical assessment. Given that clinical psychological research suggests that the actuarial and statistical is often superior to the intuitional assessment perspective, one might well posit that the self-reference effect is more useful during field activities related to intelligence operations--perhaps, doing no more than making the best out of a bad situation. Here, a case officer or agent may employ the self-reference effect to best protect or retain information until it can be recorded in a safe, controlled environment within a more formal data base.

Regardless of the self-reference effect or other mnemonics, will retained information be "completely accurate"? No: varied epistemological perspectives suggest that it never is. Moreover, there are preconscious and unconscious motives, needs, emotions, and conflicts impacting on and partially constituting the self that ineluctably attenuate the self-reference effect. But at present, the self-reference effect may be as good as it gets, given state-of-the-art, psychological understanding of human memory. (See Bovasso, G., & Rettig, S. (1997). Self-reference effect in perceptual judgments by individuals and groups. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 84, 95-98; Cull, W.L., Shaughnessy, J.J., &

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