

How The Proust Effect Can Contribute To Our Self-Understanding

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Given that the mind is where our autobiographical memories reside, it is of course a fundamental part of our self-perception. Although our experience of life involves the five senses, we often gravitate towards sight and sound when recalling those memories, with old photos and nostalgic playlists being examples respectively.

However, since academics have concluded that smells are "more effective triggers of emotional memories than other-modality cues", I question why the role of smell-evoked emotional memories in our self-perception seems like such an abstract topic. Maybe it's because smell is so intangible.

But regardless of what the reason might be, the impact that more engagement with our smell-induced emotional memories could have on our understanding of who we are is why we shouldn't put a limit on the types of memories that we consciously explore.

Often discussed with a focus on smell, psychologists refer to spontaneously reliving emotional memories through sensory stimuli as the Proust Effect. Consultant psychologist Ingrid J. Collins explains that we experience the phenomenon "when a whiff of a certain perfume, a snatch of a long forgotten song, the taste of a particular food, perhaps the face of a once familiar person, or a re-stimulation of an old feeling suddenly propels us back into our cache of memories that we had assumed were long since buried."

The fact that the Proust Effect tends to draw on our more distant and/or rarely-revisited memories is relevant to self-perception due to the potential insight that it could offer into our identities.

This is because we could build upon our emotional intelligence by practicing more introspection in relation to our emotional responses to smell when we're in different situations and spaces from time to time.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the Proust Effect can also be a source of emotional discomfort and therefore its significance goes beyond solely positive emotional connections to the past and its aromatherapeutic potential.

For people unfamiliar with its existence, it could be beneficial to know that research shows that the Proust Effect can trigger unpleasant emotional memories, especially in individuals who've experienced trauma.

This is because it could provide some of us with a practical explanation for a negative smell-stimulated response (e.g. anxiety and nausea) that we simply considered to be meaningless or unusual.

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For instance, if someone learns that this reaction could in fact be a consequence of a bad personal experience, it could help them to navigate life with a little more knowledge about what their mental health is uniquely sensitive to.

This could manifest itself as actively avoiding certain smells, making family and friends aware of these triggers or even seeking therapy to address the negative emotions that come with them, says Collins. "Unless we have the will to resolve a negative memory that has surfaced in this surprising way, we choose to leave ourselves vulnerable to experiencing the pain once more".

So, ultimately, learning about how our past can influence our behaviour in this not-so-obvious way could be a valuable layer of our self-perception because of how we can use that information to protect our mental space.

But if we think about how the Proust Effect works with regard to the trauma of loss as well, it is easier to perceive the emotional complexity that may appear when the memory of a former physical constant is triggered by smell.

This is because countless scent-marked moments make up a person's existence and loss introduces a new dimension to people's emotional attachment to them. For Ayoade Bamgboye, a 26-year-old strategist and comedy writer, coming to terms with the recent death of her father has meant that she has experienced the complex role that the Proust Effect can play first-hand.

While sharing that one of his favourite perfumes was Black Orchid by Tom Ford, she explains why her emotional responses to smells that remind her of him are not monolithic: "So many people wear [the perfume], so I could just be on the train and smell it and look for him," says Bamgboye. "So, I think now more so, when you're faced with the reality that you'll never see a person again, something like a smell really triggers a lot of things. [...] It's on a spectrum of positive and negative [and] sometimes you're caught off guard by something like that."

This perspective on loss and the Proust Effect is supported by psychology, since Collins explains that we can lose conscious touch with our memories if "they are too painful to exist on the surface of our lives" and this means that a sensory trigger can sometimes be "a shock, pleasant or traumatic".

If we first look at the Proust Effect in a positive light, we can see that it informs us of how we could creatively make use of the influence of our environment scent-wise.

For example, since aromatherapy posits that essential oils and plant extracts contain properties that can enhance our mental wellbeing (e.g. lavender oil can help to alleviate stress and anxiety), some people would propose an aromatherapeutic-style use of our Proustian memories, due to the expectation that the scents we individually recognise as triggering positive emotional memories would function similarly.

So, we could view the Proust Effect as an unorthodox self-learning tool for understanding how we could tailor our environment scent-wise to improve our mood. (I'd say that, for me, the smell of coconut oil has an almost aromatherapeutic quality because of the warm, childhood memories I have of it, and that's why I consider it to be a staple product for hair and skincare.)

For 22-year-old Samantha Henry, a mother, creative and third year Advertising student, the Proust Effect can also be defined as a vehicle through which she can appreciate the past. Describing her positive experience, Henry says: "One of the memories I really remember based on smell is [from when] I was really young, when I was 4 or 5, and my mum and I used to go to Crystal Palace Park. They used to have geraniums, and that smell, I can just really vividly remember it because it was a really nice day, it was really warm, and it was a memory between me and my mum," adding, "It's just weird because it's not really an important day or anything."

Since the scent of geraniums brings back the feelings of happiness, hope and the naivety of childhood for Henry, even if it's just for a split second, the Proust Effect's multifaceted nature evidently involves enabling us to retrospectively see the value that we've subconsciously put onto a seemingly ordinary day in our lives.

While the idea that the Proust Effect can trigger a mix of emotions associated with a lost loved one may be overwhelming at first, how we individually choose to frame all of this in our mind could help with the grief. For instance, Bamgboye believes that each smell-evoked emotional reminder of a lost loved one is a piece of them that has been left behind and therefore each one is "almost like a gift", even those that cause emotional discomfort.

But she does also recognise the need for a balance when interacting with smell-induced emotional memories in the context of bereavement, since she says:

"But now, I don't think that it is too healthy to try and look for the stimuli, I think that it's better [if] it finds you. It is an important part of moving on."

In viewing the mind as a reimagined definition of "home", identifying that emotional (dis)comfort can arise from smell-evoked memories definitely plays a role in understanding this personal space. This could contribute positively to our self-perception due to the sense of empowerment that comes with that knowledge.

This is because whether it is the aromatherapeutic potential, an unusual way to reminisce or an insight into the residual impact of personal trauma, what the Proust Effect reveals about our emotional relationship with our environment scent-wise could provide people with a self-awareness that they didn't know they needed until that unexpected moment.