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Effects of categorization on item memory and forgetting

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Abstract: Memory and categorization have different goals. The goal of memory is to keep a distinct record of each individual item. In contrast, categorization aims to treat items as equivalent in some way despite differences. When memory for items is the priority, research suggests that adults are able to bind many elements of an experience to form a complex memory structure, and that such binding may help guard against forgetting due to interference from learning in similar situations. When categorization is the priority, however, complex binding structures in memory may impede generalization. In this experiment adults demonstrated robust memory for items after learning one set of categories, but much worse memory for items that were categorized differently in a second set. Results suggest that this interference was due to failure to form complex binding structures in memory, as a result of selective attention during categorization.