

Quirks: Zeigarnik Effect

The following text borrows from Wikipedia, which offers a helpful synopsis.

In psychology, the Zeigarnik effect states that people remember uncompleted or interrupted tasks better than completed tasks. In Gestalt psychology, the Zeigarnik effect has been used to demonstrate the general presence of Gestalt phenomena: not just appearing as perceptual effects, but also present in cognition.

Zeigarnik worked under professor, Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin. She first studied the phenomenon after noticing that a waiter had better recollections of still unpaid orders. However, after the completion of the task – after everyone had paid – he was unable to remember any more details of the orders. Zeigarnik then designed a series of experiments to uncover the dynamic facts underlying this phenomenon. Her research report was published in 1927.

The reliability of the effect has been a matter of some controversy. Several studies attempting to replicate Zeigarnik's experiment, done later in other countries, failed to find significant differences in recall between finished and unfinished (interrupted) tasks (e.g. Van Bergen, 1968). It seems that the effect depends on additional factors, most above all on the importance of the interrupted task for the person.

The advantage of remembrance can be explained by looking at Lewin's field theory: a task that has already been started establishes a task-specific tension, which improves cognitive accessibility of the relevant contents. This tension that has formerly been established is being relieved upon completion of the task. In case of task interruption the reduction of tension is being impeded. Through continuous tension the content is easier accessible and it can be easily remembered.

References

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