

Who are you again? Context and not content impairs memory for personal identity

Effie J. Pereira, Rachel Markham, & Jelena Ristic
Department of Psychology, McGill University

Encountering individuals outside of their typical context hinders our ability to retrieve information about them, revealing an effect referred to as the *butcher-on-the-bus* phenomenon (Mandler, 1980). Here, we investigated whether this phenomenon is driven by the degree to which we know the *butcher*, or the degree to which the inconsistent context of a *bus* impairs our ability to remember the butcher's personal identity.

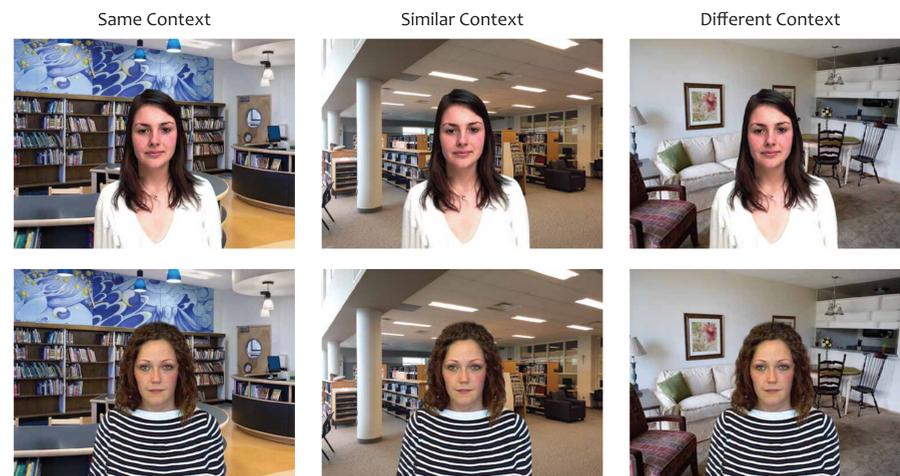
We assessed person recognition memory for new and well-known individuals, within studied, similar, and new contexts.

Memory for Newly-Encoded Individuals

Study Phase



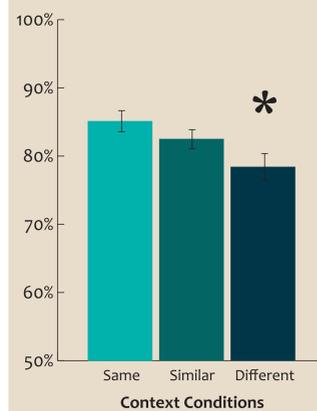
Studied Person
New Person



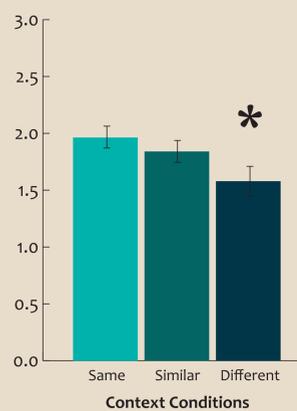
Speeded Recognition Test "Do you recognize this person?"



Accuracy $p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$



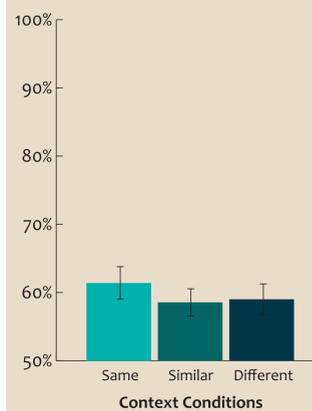
d' $p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .15$



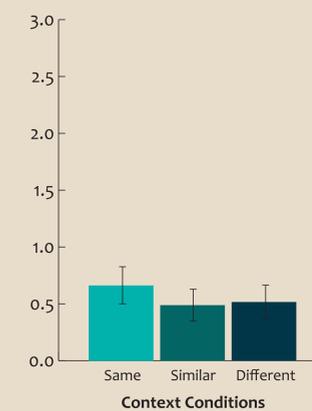
Forced Recognition Test "Do you remember this person's name?"



Accuracy $p = .30, \eta_p^2 = .03$



d' $p = .25, \eta_p^2 = .03$

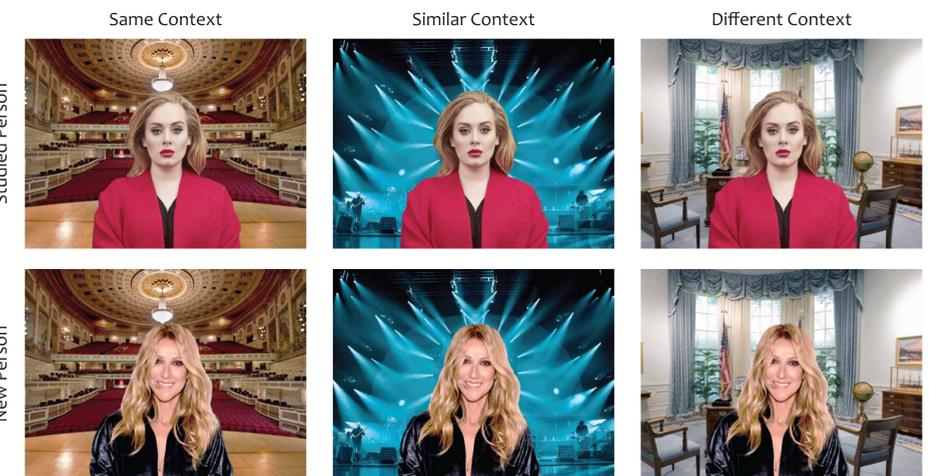


Memory for Well-Known Individuals

Study Phase



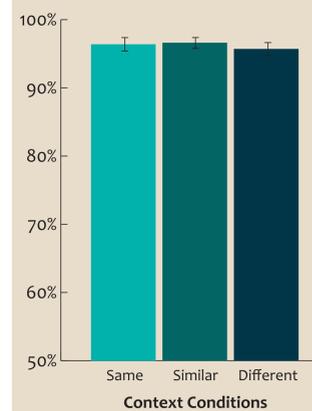
Studied Person
New Person



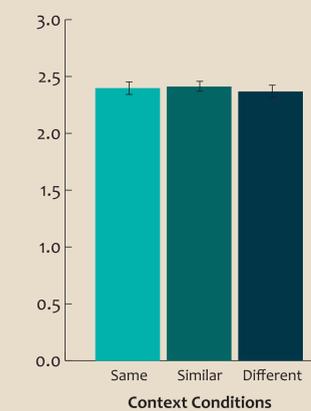
Speeded Recognition Test "Do you recognize this person?"



Accuracy $p = .76, \eta_p^2 = .01$



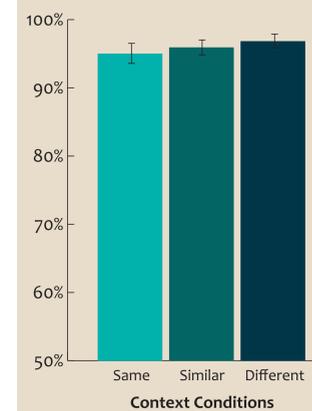
d' $p = .75, \eta_p^2 = .01$



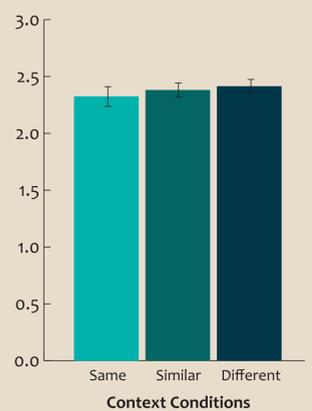
Forced Recognition Test "Do you remember this person's name?"



Accuracy $p = .36, \eta_p^2 = .02$



d' $p = .33, \eta_p^2 = .03$



For new individuals, different semantic contextual information impaired person recognition but did not affect overall performance in recognizing personal identity. These contextual differences were not observed for well-known individuals. This suggests that semantic contextual differences impair person recognition only when the person is not well-known to us.