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MUSIC, AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY, AND EMOTION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relative abilities of music and other types of meaningful, autobiographically related memorabilia, to evoke emotional response and associations. Both the strength of evoked emotion and the nature of autobiographical association are considered. The study also used involuntary-produced physiological responses to affective stimuli to provide a second source of data to those obtained by subjects' self reports. Undergraduate students were asked to listen to a meaningful song and to look at a meaningful memento from their high school years. In both conditions, physiological data which have been shown to correlate with intensity of affective response (skin temperature and arterial pulse amplitude) were collected, to assess strength of evoked emotion. In addition, subjects wrote down the memory associations which the music or memento evoked. The physiological changes were measured relative to a baseline period before the listening or viewing period, to assess strength of affective response. The memory association writings were analyzed for positive and negative affective words as well as for specificity of memory, measured by ratio of concrete nouns to abstract nouns. Statistical analysis of both sets of data reveal that music produced significantly stronger emotional response than the mementos, but the mementos evoked much more significantly specific memories.

BACKGROUND AND AIMS

It is commonly reported that music is strongly connected to meaningful life events and strong emotions. Nevertheless, the literature on autobiographical memory and music is as yet not extensive, especially with regard to the privileged nature accorded music in evoking very strong emotions connected to a personal past. This study examines the relative abilities of music and other types of meaningful, autobiographically related memorabilia, to evoke emotional response and associations. Both the strength of evoked emotion and the nature of autobiographical association are considered. The study also used involuntary-produced physiological responses to affective stimuli to provide a second source of data to those obtained by subjects' self reports.

METHOD

Undergraduate students were asked to listen to a meaningful song and to look at a meaningful memento from their high school years. In both conditions, physiological data which have been shown to correlate with intensity of affective response (skin temperature and arterial pulse amplitude) were collected, to assess strength of evoked emotion. In addition, subjects wrote down the memory associations which the music or memento evoked. The physiological changes were measured relative to a baseline period before the listening or viewing period, to assess strength of affective response. The memory association writings were analyzed for positive and negative affective words as well as for specificity of memory, measured by ratio of concrete nouns to abstract nouns.

RESULTS

Statistical analysis of both sets of data reveal that music produced significantly stronger emotional response than the mementos, but the mementos evoked much more significantly specific memories.

CONCLUSIONS

This study supplements prior accounts of autobiographical emotion, providing more detail and avoiding complete reliance on self reported emotional response.

TOPIC AREAS

Emotion in music