

# Learning and memory



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Memory in “ The Manchurian Candi In the film “ The Manchurian Candi

Laurence Harvey plays the role of a soldier who along with a group of his unit members, is captured by the Korean enemy. During the period of capture, he is brainwashed through a process of hypnosis that is generated by the stimulus of a pack of playing cards. When he starts playing Solitaire, the process of classical conditioning sets in and upturning the Queen of Diamonds renders him amnesiac and responsive to any command, including the command to kill. The Korean enemy deliberately selects this soldier because he is the son of a U. S. Senator and a ruthless political operative, played by Angela Lansbury. By programming his memory in this manner, the Koreans are able to program him into a killing machine. The cards function as the hypnotic device, while the Queen of Diamonds is the direct conditioning stimulus. Once he has killed, the soldier fails to remember his actions when the hypnotic spell is broken and his mind is wiped completely clear of any memory of his criminal acts in killing others. In effect, he suffers from a case of partial amnesia whenever he is conditioned and primed by the stimulus of the cards, so that the events occurring during the spell when he is conditioned are completely wiped out of his conscious memory.

Implicit memory also plays a role in this film. Implicit memory is a separate kind of memory in which a person’s previous experiences may aid in the performance of a task without a conscious awareness of these previous experiences (Schacter, 1987). This is the case with the character of the soldier programmed to kill, as played by Laurence Harvey. He has been taught how to kill without scruples during a hypnosis session involving all of his team mates. In ordinary circumstances, his sense of ethics and morals could have functioned as a bar to indiscriminate killing and he would have

found it acceptable to kill only in a war situation, being a soldier. However, under a state of hypnosis when he is in a temporary state of amnesia, his explicit memory of killing as a soldier serves to enable him to perform killing tasks with unimpaired ability because he always visualizes himself as being in a collective, combat situation with his team mates.

However, these memories do remain as a part of his unconscious memory and the film deals with how one of his team mates helps him to break the amnesia that is cast upon him through conditioning. In the case of the character of Marco played by Frank Sinatra, the collective programming of memory that has been carried out on all the members of the soldiers group is not as effective. From time to time, Marco has dreams where he visualizes the hypnotic illusion of a lecture on flowers that is being given by some old ladies, vis a vis the reality of a hypnosis session conducted by Communist Koreans and his fellow soldier pulling out a gun and shooting a member from the soldiers group. It is in effect, Marco who discovers the conditioning element, i. e, the cards and helps his team mate to break free of the memory conditioning that turns him into a temporary amnesiac and killer.

#### References:

\* Schacter, D. L. (1987). “ Implicit memory: history and current status”, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 13: 501-518.

\* “ The Manchurian Candidate” (1962). Directed by John Frankenheimer, Starring Laurence Harvey, Frank Sinatra, Angela Lansbury