

I Loved Her, I Loved Her Not: How Current Thinking Can Sway Our Memories of Love

May 16, 2019



As our memories fade, we rely on our current assessment of a person to remember how we felt about them in the past, and new research suggests this extends to some of the most central figures in our lives: our parents. The [findings](#) are published in *Clinical Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

“Memories of the love we felt in childhood towards our parents are among the most precious aspects of autobiographical memory we could think of,” says lead author Lawrence Patihis, researcher at the University of Southern Mississippi. “Yet our findings suggest that these memories of love are malleable—which is not something we would want to be true.”

“If you change your evaluation of someone, you will likely also change your memory of your emotions towards them and this is true of memory of love towards mothers in childhood,” Patihis explains.

For their first experiment, Patihis and coauthors Cristobal S. Cruz and Mario E. Herrera recruited 301 online participants. Some participants wrote about recent examples of their mother’s positive attributes,

such as showing warmth, generosity, competence, and giving good guidance; others wrote about recent examples of their mother's lack of these attributes. Participants in one comparison group wrote about a teacher and participants in another comparison group received no writing prompt at all.

The participants completed a survey assessing how they currently thought about their mother's attributes, including her warmth and generosity. They then completed the Memory of Love Towards Parents Questionnaire (MLPQ), which contained 10 items designed to measure the love participants remembered feeling for their mother at different ages (e.g., "During the whole year when you were in first grade, *how often on average* did you feel love toward your mother?" and "During the whole year when you were in first grade, *how strong on average* was your love toward your mother?"). The MLPQ also measured participants' current feelings of love for their mothers.

The participants completed the measures again 2 weeks and 4 weeks after the initial session.

The results showed that the writing prompts influenced participants' current feelings and their memories of love. Specifically, participants who were prompted to write about their mother's positive attributes tended to recall stronger feelings of love for their mother in first, sixth, and ninth grade compared with participants who wrote about their mother's lack of positive attributes.

These effects endured at the 4-week follow-up for first grade memories, but not for memories of sixth grade or ninth grade.

Additional findings showed the effects of the writing prompts were not simply the result of changes in participants' mood.

A second experiment, with another 302 online participants, replicated these findings. Importantly, the participants did not differ in their current assessments of their mother before receiving the writing prompt, indicating that the effects of the writing prompts were not due to preexisting differences among participants. The findings also revealed that participants' current feelings of love for their mothers, as measured at the start of the experiment, were misremembered 8 weeks later following the experimental manipulation. The writing prompt effects had begun to fade by the time the researchers conducted an 8-week follow-up after the experiment.

The authors plan to expand this research to explore whether the same effects emerge for other emotions and target individuals and they're also exploring whether successes in life might similarly alter childhood memories of emotion. In addition, the researchers hope to find out whether these effects might influence later behavior.

"The significance of this research lies in the new knowledge that our current evaluations of people can be lowered if we choose to focus on the negative, and this can have a side effect: the diminishing of positive aspects of childhood memories," says Patihis. "We wonder if wide-ranging reappraisals of parents—perhaps in life or in therapy—could lead to intergenerational heartache and estrangement. Understanding this subtle type of memory distortion is necessary if we want to prevent it."

All [data and materials have been made publicly available](#) via the Open Science Framework. This article has received [badges for OpenData and Open Materials](#).