

A duty to remember, a right to forget? Behavioral Modulation of Emotional Memory Traces

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The project focuses on manipulations of memories in general and traumatic memories that may develop into a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in particular. In addition, it will clarify the legal status of memories and analyze whether substantive legal requirements can be meaningfully reinterpreted in light of current memory research. This is crucial when juridical decisions have to be based on reports from witnesses with traumatic memories: On the one hand these memories are important for court proceedings, on the other hand the respective individuals suffering from traumatic memories have a very understandable interest in getting rid of their traumas as soon as possible. Within the framework of the project PTSD will serve as a model case for psychological injuries in tort and criminal law. It explores neuroimaging biomarkers of PTSD and their usability as evidence in court proceedings. In parallel, it examines the conflicting interests between the state and the individual with regard to manipulations of traumatic memories and it will investigate experimentally how traumatic memories can be effectively modulated by two behavioral strategies: sleep and repeated retrieval. The latter, known as the testing effect, enhances long-term retention of information and may serve as an experimental equivalent of police interrogations. Among other tests concerning the relation of sleep and emotional memory, the project scrutinizes the hypothesis that sleep deprivation is a possible intervention to prevent the development of PTSD in traumatized individuals.

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