

Episodic Memory Training



Elisabeth Wenger, Yana Fandakova, and Yee Lee Shing

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Abstract Episodic memory circumscribes the ability to remember events, occurrences, and situations embedded in their temporal and spatial context – in other words, the memory of “what,” “where,” and “when.” Throughout the lifespan, episodic memory functioning continuously undergoes extensive change, with rapid increases during childhood, some decreases in adulthood, and accelerated decline in very old age. Given the important role that episodic memory plays in our daily lives, the prospect of potential trainability of episodic memory is a highly attractive idea. This applies to educational settings that aim to facilitate children’s memory, to younger adults hoping to optimize their episodic memory ability, but probably even more to older adults, who generally experience a profound decline in episodic memory functioning that can seriously affect their well-being and life quality. In this chapter, we first provide a brief definition and account of the processes that are involved

E. Wenger (✉) · Y. Fandakova
Center for Lifespan Psychology, Max Planck Institute for Human Development,
Berlin, Germany
e-mail: wenger@mpib-berlin.mpg.de

Y. L. Shing
Center for Lifespan Psychology, Max Planck Institute for Human Development,
Berlin, Germany

Institute of Psychology, Goethe University Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main, Germany

in episodic memory. We then discuss two theoretical frameworks, one concerning the components of episodic memory across the lifespan, the other concerning the conception of plasticity. These theoretical frameworks help to guide us through the large body of memory training literature. We then summarize and integrate the behavioral and neuroimaging literature on memory training. Building upon some key points extracted from these sets of literature, we finally discuss the utility of multifactorial types of memory training and potential future work in this direction.

Introduction

Episodic memory circumscribes the ability to remember events, occurrences, and situations embedded in their temporal and spatial context – in other words, the memory of “what”, “where,” and “when” (Tulving 2002). It is the unique ability of humans to travel back in time and re-experience past events. To achieve this, elements belonging to the same event need to be associated with each other while being separated from other elements belonging to other events (Tulving 2002).

Throughout the lifespan, episodic memory functioning continuously undergoes extensive change, with rapid increases during childhood, some decreases in adulthood, and accelerated decline in very old age (Shing et al. 2010). Given the important role that episodic memory plays in our daily lives, the prospect of potential trainability of episodic memory is a highly attractive idea. This applies to educational settings that aim to facilitate children’s memory (see Johann and Karbach, this volume), to younger adults hoping to optimize their episodic memory ability, but probably even more to older adults, who generally experience a profound decline in episodic memory functioning that can seriously affect their well-being and quality of life (see also Boller et al., Guye et al., this volume). In the following, we first provide a brief definition of the processes that are involved in episodic memory and lay out the conception of plasticity we subscribe to. We then summarize and integrate the behavioral and neuroimaging literature on memory training and aging. Building upon some key points extracted from these sets of literature, we finally discuss the utility of multifactorial types of memory training and potential future work in this direction.

Episodic Memory: Definition and Processes

Episodic memories – in contrast to semantic memories that are encyclopedic and not tied to a time or place – refer to specific episodes or events in a person’s life. These memories are tied to the time and place in which the information was acquired. It follows that episodic memory as a form of explicit memory involves

encoding, consolidation, and retrieval of events. When new declarative information is processed by the brain, it is presumed to be *encoded* by the medial temporal lobe (MTL) and then preserved in different cortical parts in the brain (Paller and Wagner 2002). The *consolidation* of memory traces is a process that stabilizes memory traces so they are preserved, and typically takes place during postlearning periods when the brain is not consciously encoding or retrieving a certain memory (McGaugh 2000; Dudai et al. 2015). *Memory retrieval* is assumed to approximate encoding processes in terms of activated brain regions (Nyberg et al. 2000) and is generally found to be dependent on the MTL as well as prefrontal cortex (PFC) and posterior parietal cortex (PPC).

Two-Component Framework of Episodic Memory

In an effort to combine and integrate neuronal and behavioral evidence, it has been proposed that episodic memory embodies two interacting components (Moscovitch 1992; Shing et al. 2010).

1. The *strategic* component refers to control processes that assist and coordinate memory processes at both encoding and retrieval. These processes may include elaboration and organization of memory content at encoding, and specification, verification, monitoring, and evaluation of relevant information at retrieval (e.g., Simons and Spiers 2003). On the neural level, the strategic component relies mostly on regions in PFC and PPC.
2. The *associative* component, on the other hand, refers to mechanisms that bind together different features of a memory item, different memory items, or a given memory episode and its context, into coherent representations, and is mediated by areas of the MTL.

Several behavioral experiments have indicated that these two components show distinct developmental trajectories across the lifespan (Brehmer et al. 2007). In short, the associative component has been found to be relatively functional by middle childhood, but exhibits age-related decline in older adults. These changes are thought to reflect the relatively earlier maturation of MTL during childhood, along with pronounced MTL declines in later adulthood. In contrast, the strategic component has been found to function at a level below that of young adults in children and older adults, most likely due to protracted maturation of PFC regions (and to some extent, of parietal regions as well) across childhood and early age-related decline in PFC regions across later parts of adulthood (Shing et al. 2010).

The Concept of Plasticity

Research has shown that the brain is malleable by experience – that is, plastic – from childhood to young adulthood and even into old age and can therefore adjust to new challenges, albeit to varying degrees (Lövdén et al. 2013; Kühn and Lindenberger 2016). In the conception that we subscribe to, plasticity denotes the capacity for change in brain structure induced by a mismatch between the demands of the environment and the current functional supply the brain can momentarily offer (Lövdén et al. 2010; see also Wenger and Kühn, this volume). In the majority of cases this can be accomplished through neuronal and behavioral variability and flexibility within a given equilibrium, that is, optimizing the use of already existent resources. If the system is capable of a response to altered requirements through this flexibility then no mismatch is experienced and no plastic (structural) change is necessary. However, if these processes do not suffice in fulfilling environmental demands, either due to dramatic changes in requirements or due to damaged functionality of the brain following brain injury, then change is demanded and can manifest in the form of plasticity. If the mismatch is too large, though, and new requirements are far too high for the momentary functional level of the brain, the system will not be able to assimilate in any way and plastic changes will not evolve. In other words, this model emphasizes that the system needs to experience mismatch, which means that the new environmental requirements need to lie between certain boundaries of task difficulty being not too high or too low in order to evince experience-dependent plastic changes. Such changes can then help the system to adapt to new circumstances.

Plasticity in Episodic Memory

Training programs designed to enhance memory performance have proliferated over the past decades and meta-analytic reviews support the efficacy of at least some of these types of memory training across a broad array of memory tasks (Verhaeghen et al. 1992; Lustig et al. 2009). Episodic memory can be trained by instructing people to use a specific strategy such as the Method of Loci,¹ name–face mnemonics, number mnemonics, story and sentence mnemonics, strategies altering the organization of material (categorization, chunking, associations, imagery) or optimizing basic processes like rehearsal or concentration, or even strategies making the best use of external memory cues (Gross et al. 2012). While attempts to train episodic memory via strategy instruction have dominated research on memory plasticity, there have

¹ In the Method of Loci, participants are presented with lists of words, which are learned by forming visual associations between the n th word and the n th place (locus) of a fixed trajectory of places (loci) scanned mentally by the participant. Retrieval occurs by taking a mental walk along the trajectory, retrieving the associated image at each locus, and deriving the original word from it.

also been a few attempts to target memory without strategy instruction. For example, in the repetition-lag training procedure (Jennings and Jacoby 2003) participants are given several trials of a continuous recognition task in which they have to use recollection to identify repeated items. After each trial, the number of intervening items between repetitions increases gradually. This incremented-difficulty approach has been shown to enhance the ability to recollect information across increasing delay intervals and has also been replicated and shown to generalize to at least some working memory tasks (e.g., Jennings et al. 2005; Bailey et al. 2011; Boller et al. 2012; Stamenova et al. 2014). Thus far, a variety of training routes have been shown to improve episodic memory performance in younger as well as older adults.

Age-Related Differences in the Efficacy of Memory Training

Given the pronounced developmental changes in the associative and strategic components of episodic memory across the lifespan, memory training benefits may vary across the lifespan depending on the degree to which different training regimes put different requirements on the two components. Turning to aging, cognitively healthy older adults are able to acquire and utilize memory strategies, even up to their 80s and can indeed improve their memory performance through this form of contextual support (Brehmer et al. 2014; see also Guye et al., this volume). Older adults often show much improvement in memory performance after strategy instruction, bringing them to the initial level of performance of younger adults before training. The benefits of strategy training in older adults can also be long-lasting – in the large ACTIVE trial participants in the memory training group showed increases in memory performance that were maintained up to 5 years after training (Willis et al. 2006). However, in terms of plasticity, younger adults seem to profit more from strategy-based memory-enhancing interventions than older adults do (Brehmer et al. 2007). This is clearly visible in the so-called testing-the-limits approach: after extensive training in serial recall of word lists with the Method of Loci (i.e., after 17 training sessions distributed over the course of more than 1 year), there was an almost perfect separation of age groups – a magnification of age differences in performance after training (Baltes and Kliegl 1992). Thus, while older adults can clearly benefit from strategy-based memory training, sometimes approaching or even reaching the initial performance level of younger adults, they do not benefit as much as younger adults do, leading to a magnification of age differences after training (see Fig. 1).

There may be several reasons for the above findings. For one, older adults may have difficulties in forming novel associations between landmarks and the to-be remembered information, for example due to age-related decline in MTL regions, which are crucial for the associative component of episodic memory. They may also have difficulties in the use of mental imagination for memorization and find it difficult to form bizarre or unnatural images, which is important for the efficacy of the Method of Loci. Both of these explanations would add up to being a barrier

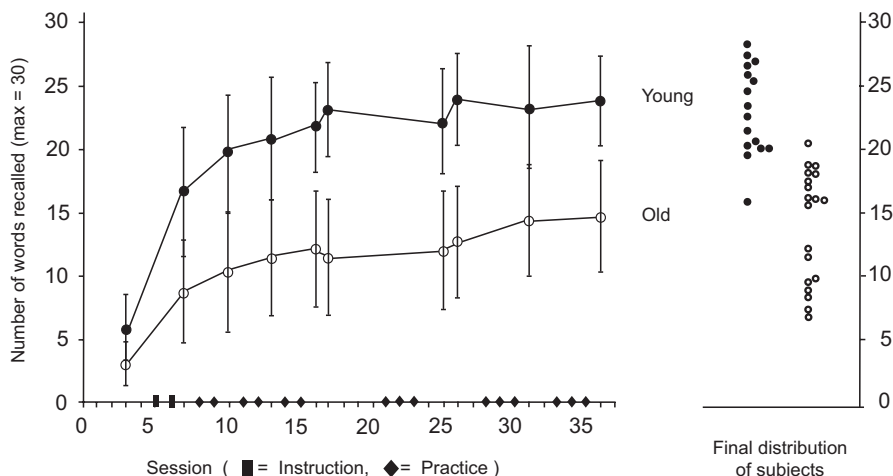


Fig. 1 Training effects and magnification of age differences. Older adults can benefit from memory training, thereby reaching initial performance levels of younger adults. However, younger adults benefit even more, leading to a magnification of age differences after training. (Adapted from Baltes and Kliegl 1992)

when using rather than acquiring the mnemonic. Age differences in compliance regarding the use of the taught strategy may also play a role. In addition, critical variables associated with learning in old age (e.g., the speed of mental operations) are characterized by large age differences favoring the young. Age differences in episodic memory performance could then be magnified by training (i.e., an amplification model) partly because the abilities known as fluid intelligence (working memory, executive control, perceptual speed) are reduced with advancing age (Verhaeghen and Marcoen 1996). While between-person and therefore age differences can be reduced after initial mnemonic instruction (i.e., compensation), age differences are magnified after extensive adaptive practice because baseline performance and general cognitive resources correlate positively with training gains, leading to reduced memory plasticity in older adults (Lövdén et al., 2012).

The repetition-lag training procedure has been consistently shown to improve older adult's recollection (Jennings and Jacoby 2003) with effects maintained up to 3 months after training (Anderson et al. 2018). However, evidence for generalizable benefits beyond the trained verbal task has been mixed. Other approaches focusing on perceptual processing have shown that training auditory perception tasks increased older adults' memory for auditory information (Mahncke et al. 2006). Finally, one might expect that training executive control processes, which are central to the strategic component, may help improve episodic memory (Ranganath et al. 2011). And indeed adaptive working memory updating training has been shown to transfer to an untrained episodic memory task (Flegal et al. 2019; see also Könen et al., this volume). Such a possibility is particularly inter-

esting with respect to aging as older adults show an increased tendency to falsely remember details of events that did not happen in the past due to age-related declines in monitoring and control in the PFC (Fandakova et al. 2012). Thus, programs that aim at improving executive control may help reduce memory errors across the lifespan, and in particular in later adulthood (see also Karbach and Kray, this volume).

Children's episodic memory performance can also be improved through instruction and practice, and even more so than older adults': Children can advance to the trained level of young adults when they have the chance to practice the newly learnt strategy extensively (Brehmer et al. 2007; see also Rueda et al., this volume). In this case, instruction gains may primarily reflect developmental and individual differences in the strategic component of memory – that is, the current ability of individuals to make use of the newly learnt mnemonic strategy to actively organize (or categorize) the to-be-remembered material. Practice gains on the other hand, which are much stronger in children than in older adults, may then reflect developmental and individual differences in the associative component of episodic memory more than differences in the strategic component – that is, individuals' latent potential in fine-tuning mechanisms involved in the execution of the mnemonic strategy to optimize the formation and retrieval of new associations.

Taken together, this evidence reveals that while both children and older adults benefit from memory strategy instruction, only children can improve significantly more through extensive training and practice because they can rely upon the associative component of memory, which is relatively mature. Older adults, on the other hand, show deterioration in the associative component such that even after the strategic deficit has been reduced by strategy instruction, they are limited in their memory improvement.

Training-Related Changes on the Neural Level

Given the improvement in behavioral performance, it is unsurprising that some studies (mostly employing the Method of Loci training) have found associated change in brain activation. A comparison of encoding before and after instruction revealed increased activity in frontal areas and fusiform gyrus, and recall after instruction additionally showed significant activation in parahippocampal gyrus and parietal regions as compared to recall before instruction (Kondo et al. 2005). Maguire and colleagues investigated superior memorizers in contrast to control subjects and found increased activation during encoding in very similar regions: namely, medial parietal cortex, retrosplenial cortex, and right posterior hippocampus (Maguire et al. 2003). Importantly, nearly all of the superior memorizers in this study happened to use a spatial learning strategy like the Method of Loci. In general, the activation of frontal regions in these studies underlines the increased engagement of control processes and thus the strategic component, with more posterior,

parietal activation pointing to the specific involvement of imagery due to the nature of the training, while activation in temporal lobe indicates increased engagement of the associative component.

In the context of an aging study, Nyberg and colleagues demonstrated increased activity during memory encoding in occipital-parietal and frontal brain regions after learning the Method of Loci in young adults. Older adults did not show increased frontal activity, and only those older participants who had benefited from the mnemonic exhibited increased occipital-parietal activity (Nyberg et al. 2003). Focusing on memory retrieval, a semantic strategy training was found to improve older adults' word recollection along with increased hippocampal/MTL activity during retrieval (Kirchhoff et al. 2012). Notably, older adults who showed greater training-related changes in MTL activity also showed greater training-related increases in PFC during semantic elaboration at encoding. Together, these findings suggest that age-related differences in memory plasticity may reflect both diminished processing resources along with failure to engage those resources appropriately in crucial task-relevant processing. Interestingly, a study focusing on encoding success (i.e., successful memory formation) instead of encoding processes generally, regardless of outcome (as in the case of Nyberg et al. 2003), found no age differences in neural activation, but rather comparable training-induced activation changes across the lifespan (Brehmer et al. 2016). This might speak to the proposition that brain areas supporting successful memory encoding following strategy instruction and practice remain quite stable across the lifespan, particularly in those older adults that have more youth-like brains, such as the positively selected study sample in the Brehmer et al. study (brain maintenance hypothesis of cognitive aging, Nyberg et al. 2012).

A few studies have also investigated changes in brain structure evoked by memory training. Eight weeks of training with the Method of Loci have been shown to result in improved memory performance along with increases in cortical thickness in the right insula, left and right orbitofrontal cortex, and right fusiform cortex (Engvig et al. 2010). This memory training additionally led to maintenance of frontal fractional anisotropy, a measure of white matter integrity, as compared to a control group that showed decreases over the course of training. Older adults who showed maintenance or increase in frontal white matter also showed greater improvement in memory performance (Engvig et al. 2012b). Another training paradigm for episodic memory has been implemented in the form of vocabulary learning. As the matching of an unknown word with a semantic meaning comes close to the concept of associative memory (Davis and Gaskell 2009) and language learning holds a high motivational aspect, it provides ideal grounds to investigate episodic memory plasticity. Mårtensson et al. (2012) studied changes in brain structure following 3 months of intense foreign-language acquisition in Swedish interpreters. Results showed increases in hippocampal volume and in cortical thickness in the left middle frontal gyrus, inferior frontal gyrus, and superior temporal gyrus for interpreters compared to a control group, whereby some of these regions showed a correlation with behavioral measures of proficiency or struggling (Mårtensson et al. 2012). But even in less intensive regimes, for example when learning Italian vocabu-

lary at a more normal pace, improvements in memory performance were associated with increases in hippocampal volume, independent of time devoted to the studies and amount of acquired vocabulary (Bellander et al. 2016).

To date, memory training studies have focused primarily on memory at short intervals after studying the to-be-remembered information. At the same time, using an effective strategy or creating a well-bound representation of different events can positively affect the longevity of memory traces, making them more resistant to forgetting. Thus, it is possible that memory training reduces forgetting at longer delays via improved strategy use and associative binding. On the other hand, in animal research increased neurogenesis in the hippocampus has been associated with forgetting due to weakening of existing memories while at the same time facilitating encoding of new memories (Akers et al. 2014; Epp et al. 2016). This research suggests that to the extent to which structural changes in the hippocampus may reflect neurogenesis (see Wenger and Kühn, this volume), interventions that promote hippocampal growth may increase rates of forgetting of existing memories while at the same improving new learning. To test these predictions, one would need to extend existing measures to include delayed memory and measures of learning as opposed to pure performance at a given point in time.

Strategy Instruction – Manifestations of Plasticity or Not?

Instructions for the use of a new strategy to improve episodic memory performance can be viewed as a case study for the plasticity model introduced above (Lövdén et al. 2010, 2013). Can we regard functional changes as evidence for plasticity when participants show improved performance after instruction for strategy use? Following the theoretical definition laid out above, a more or less immediate change in behavioral performance and its accompanying change in functional activation due to strategy instruction would not be considered as manifested plasticity but rather as flexibility. In the words of Paul Baltes, this improvement following instruction could be termed *baseline reserve capacity*, namely what an individual is capable of when the conditions of assessment are optimized, that is, providing for an extended range of possible performances with additional resources (Baltes 1987). *Developmental reserve capacity*, on the other hand, would then be the plasticity as defined in our theoretical model above, namely a further extension of performance range after conditions have been altered, with the aim of full activation, and possibly expansion, of an individual's task-relevant cognitive or neural resources. The strongest evidence for such developmental reserve capacity or plasticity would then be given if memory performance as such *generally* improved after strategy training, even if the newly acquired strategy was not used at this specific moment. Theoretically, the extensive use of such a mnemonic technique as the Method of Loci may enable an aged individual to re-challenge brain regions important for episodic memory tasks that have become under-challenged due to age-related

decline. The heightened recruitment and engagement of these brain regions may then evoke macroscopic changes in brain structure – hence manifestations of plasticity.

Who Benefits the Most from Memory Training?

As highlighted above, training benefits vary considerably across individuals and age groups (see also Cochrane and Green, Karbach and Kray, Katz et al., Könen et al., this volume). With strategy instruction of the Method of Loci, children and younger and older adults showed a similar pattern such that participants who started out with the lowest performance showed the greatest benefit from strategy instruction, consistent with the idea of flexibility and baseline reserve capacity (Baltes 1987; Lövdén et al. 2012). At the same time, among children, those who had higher baseline ability showed greater benefit from adaptive practice of the strategy.

In addition, for older adults with a relatively spared strategic component, it may be sufficient to arrange the environment in a way that promotes the use of an effective strategy, whereas for older adults with more pronounced declines a more directed instruction of a strategy may yield the largest memory benefit (Fandakova et al. 2012). Similar effects have been reported using the repetition-lag procedure such that older adults who spent more time encoding an item in a proactive controlled manner were also the ones who showed the largest training benefits (Bissig and Lustig 2007). On the neural level, among older adults with memory complaints, individuals with larger hippocampal volumes showed larger improvements with memory training, possibly reflecting greater potential for change with an intervention (Engvig et al. 2012a).

Together, these examples suggest that successful boosting of memory performance may be achieved through different training manipulations, depending on the functional status of the associative and strategic memory components. While research on individual differences has focused primarily on memory encoding and/or retrieval, consolidation processes, especially in relation to sleep constitute another potentially important predictor of memory training gains that shows considerable heterogeneity across the lifespan (e.g., Muehlroth et al. 2019).

Combination of Training Types to Enhance Generalizability and Maintenance

In general, it seems to be beneficial, if not necessary, for the enhanced magnitude and preservation of behavioral effects to combine training of mnemonic techniques with other important factors affecting memory performance. A crucial limitation of targeted training interventions has been the widespread inability to sustain and

generalize (i.e., transfer) the benefits of training in a specific strategy beyond the tasks actually used for training (Noack et al. 2014). The most promising results have been provided by multifactorial interventions, in which different memory enhancing techniques were combined with training of other skills (e.g., attention and relaxation). Under these circumstances, memory performance can improve and be sustained for up to 3.5 years (Stigsdotter Neely and Bäckman 1993). Stigsdotter Neely and Bäckman provide well-founded arguments for the benefit of involving several critical aspects of memory functioning in memory training programs if they are to be maximally effective. Age-related deficits in episodic memory have an array of different sources (Bäckman 1989). Deficient retrieval mechanisms alone, or impaired encoding and retrieval mechanisms could just as well play a role as attentional deficits. Older adults also seem to be disadvantaged with respect to a number of noncognitive factors, such as laboratory anxiety and level of arousal. As memory deficits accompanying the aging process have several origins, efforts to alleviate these deficits should ideally be multifactorial as well, to best target the problems. Training of encoding operations to provide effective strategies for organization and visualization of the material could then be combined with training of attentional skills – to improve concentration, focusing of attention, and vigilance, all of which are necessary to meet the attentional demands of remembering – and should additionally be combined with training to reduce levels of situational anxiety. Specific pretraining techniques focusing on image elaboration, verbal judgement, and relaxation have also been shown to enhance the application of a mnemonic technique and helped to maintain its efficacy (Sheikh et al. 1986).

Boosting Memory Training: A Promising Future Training Paradigm

Furthermore, reaching beyond the rationale for multifactorial combined training, we would like to emphasize that physical exercise intervention also needs to be taken into consideration (see also Bherer and Pothier, this volume). In particular, this applies to children and older adults whose bodily functioning is also undergoing pronounced changes that may have strong implications for cognition. Observational studies continue to suggest that adults who engage in physical activity have a reduced risk of cognitive decline and dementia (Düzel et al. 2016). Exercise can exert a protective effect, even if initiated in later life. Although the mechanisms through which physical exercise affects cognition and especially episodic memory are not yet fully understood, there is growing evidence that selected aspects of cognition are responsive to increases in physical exercise (Cotman and Berchtold 2002). This association is obviously particularly relevant in children, where numerous studies have now shown that children’s aerobic fitness is associated with higher levels of cognition and differences in regional brain structure and

function and that aerobic fitness levels can predict cognition over time (Chaddock et al. 2011). Also in adulthood the powerful influence of exercise training has been shown repeatedly. For example, Erickson and colleagues observed that the hippocampus increased in size after 1 year of moderate exercise, and this structural change was correlated with changes in spatial memory performance (Erickson et al. 2011; but note that memory changes did not differ between experimental and control groups). Another study reported selective increases in cerebral blood volume in dentate gyrus – possibly an indicator for exercise-induced neurogenesis – after 3 months of exercising, which correlated with changes in cognitive performance (Pereira et al. 2007). In an earlier study, a combination of mental and physical training led to greater effects on a memory score than either activity alone (Fabre et al. 2002). The mental training program was multifactorial and comprised tasks involving perception, attention, association, and imagination.

Taken together, we propose that future studies should focus on such multidomain training approaches based on findings from the animal literature. Researchers examining rodents have emphasized both cognitive enrichment and enhanced physical activity as the driving forces behind plastic changes (Kempermann et al. 2010). One can speculate that physical activity may not only enhance cognition directly but also improve plasticity as the capacity for change per se. Physical activity may therefore boost the effects of cognitive enrichment or training on both the behavioral and the neural level. Such an additive effect of physical exercise and environmental enrichment has been shown before in the mouse hippocampus (Fabel et al. 2009). Voluntary physical exercise and environmental enrichment both stimulate adult hippocampal neurogenesis in mice, but via different mechanisms. That is, running in a wheel induces precursor cell proliferation, whereas environmental enrichment exerts a survival-promoting effect on newborn cells. Fabel and colleagues reported an increased potential for neurogenesis in that proliferating precursor cells were activated by running and then received a survival-promoting stimulus due to environmental enrichment following the exercise. Ten days of running followed by 35 days of environmental enrichment were additive such that the combined stimulation resulted in a 30% greater increase in new neurons as compared to either paradigm alone (see Fig. 2; Fabel et al. 2009). Translated to the human hippocampus, this may mean that physical exercise could stimulate proliferating precursor cells that would then be more likely to survive if challenged by appropriate cognitive enrichment relying on the hippocampal structure, as for example memory demands. In this way, physical exercise could first “prepare” the aged MTL for increased usage. Hypothetically, any ensuing strategy instruction and specifically the practice of memory strategies could then – and perhaps only then – be successfully and fully exploited. As the associative and strategic components of memory function in intricate ways and are critically important for episodic memory performance, it seems to be a promising route to target both components and the neural regions underlying their functioning, namely MTL and frontal lobe, in a combined multidomain training paradigm.

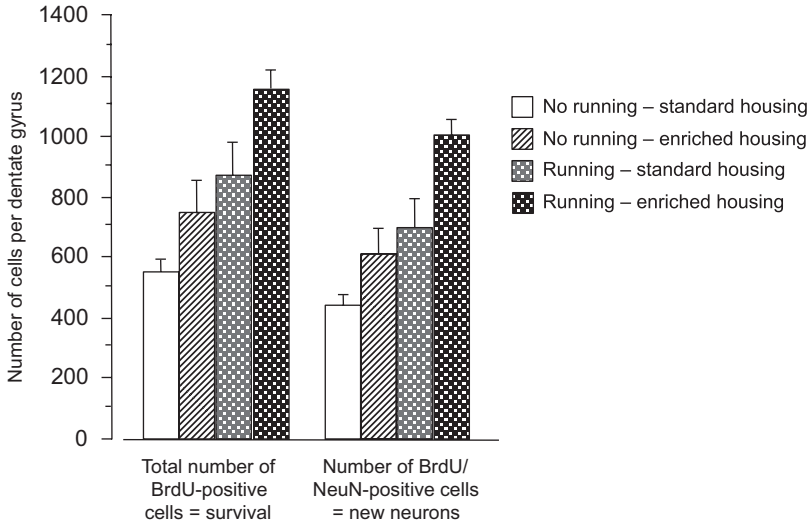


Fig. 2 Additive effect of physical exercise and environmental enrichment in the mouse hippocampus. Voluntary wheel running and enriched housing have each been shown to result in an increased number of cell labels with Bromodeoxyuridine (BrdU) and new neurons compared to no running in standard housing. Combined running and enriched housing results in an even greater increase of BrdU-positive cells and newborn neurons. BrdU is commonly used to detect proliferating cells in living tissue. (Adapted from Fabel et al. 2009)

Concluding Remarks

Put simply, episodic memory can be trained. Children as well as younger and older adults profit from training, most often shown using strategy instruction, and it is encouraging to see that older adults can reach initial performance levels of younger adults after strategy instruction. Importantly, such performance gains most likely reflect manifestations of flexibility – defined as the adaptive reconfiguration of the existing functional and structural repertoire, and if implemented correctly, rely most heavily on the strategic component of memory, that is, on prefrontal regions of the brain. Further performance gains following extensive practice are then most likely to be manifestations of plasticity. Unlike flexibility, plasticity does not only make use of preexisting neural resources, but also changes them fundamentally. Here, older adults show reduced levels of plasticity compared to children and younger adults, as indicated by their lower performance gains following practice. In our view, one promising route for intervention is to provide older adults with memory training in combination with physical exercise to revitalize plasticity and thereby boost training effectiveness. Strategy training alone may be too narrow an intervention to result in substantive transfer and lasting maintenance of acquired skills. Currently, combined memory training types, most promisingly in concert with physical exercise, seem to be the best bet to not only target the strategic, but also the associative component of memory, thereby hopefully having a widespread and lasting effect on memory functioning.

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