A multiple psychological perspective of individual unlearning: A theory-driven review and conceptualization

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Abstract
Radical changes render part of human knowledge irrelevant in new contexts. Although learning new knowledge is critical, individuals also need to reduce their reliance on context-irrelevant knowledge to ensure effective performance in the workplace (individual unlearning (IU)). In spite of the surge of studies on IU, it seems that the explicit literature of IU has not paid sufficient attention to the well-established, rich studies informed by psychological theories. We draw on established psychological theories of human learning –i.e., behaviorism, cognitivism, and social constructivism- to develop a theoretically informed framework for conceptualizing IU. Accordingly, we review literature of human resource management and organizational behavior to examine how IU is framed and conceptualized. The review rejects the claim that IU is an emerging theme in management literature by showing a wide range of studies that examine IU concept, without using such a terminology necessarily (implicit literature). The analysis of the literature also rejects the arguably dominant conception of IU as discarding outdated knowledge. Rather, it suggests that IU has been mostly understood as “reducing the reliance on context-relevant knowledge”. Finally, the review helps us show the distinct ways of conceptualizing and operationalizing IU and several critical dimensions such as the centrality of knowledge-irrelevance and the agencies and mechanisms that constitute IU. Discussing these insights, we re-conceptualize IU and suggest opportunities for future studies.

Keywords: individual unlearning, psychology, cognitivism, behaviorism, social constructivism