Discuss the role of emotion in memory.

(25 marks)

‘Flashbulb memory’ is a term first coined by Brown & Kulik (1977) to describe a special mechanism for memory which is especially vivid, immune to decay and lasts a lifetime. They discovered this by noticing people could remember vividly the situation they were in when president JFK was assassinated in 1963. They tested people on six key features: where they were, what they were doing, who told them, how they reacted, how others reacted and events following immediately afterward. An interesting finding was that more black people had flashbulb memories (FBs) for Martin Luther King than white people, and vice versa for JFK – hinting on a personal significance factor. But their main conclusion was that rapid change in emotional state and surprise were the main factors in triggering FBs.

Rubin and Kozan (1984) asked students to describe their 3 most ‘complete’ memories, when they categorised them they found that surprisingly almost none mentioned learning of an important event via the news – instead personally significant events e.g. sporting events, or injuries made up the majority of most detailed memories. This highlights that surprise or rapid emotional change is not as significant a factor in FBs as personal significance – but nonetheless proves that FBs exist. Conway (1994) further tried to prove that personal significance was the defining factor of FBs, he tested people’s recollection of Margaret Thatcher’s resignation – which should only create FBs for people in the UK as it was tested immediately after the resignation and again 11 months later. Results showed 86% still had flashbulb memories in the UK. This was only 29% for other countries. This provides evidence for FBs as they should be consistent and unchanging. However, although memories were consistent over time, there is now yet on how accurate they were to begin.

On the other hand, Neisser (1982) asserts that FBs do not exist, and the accurate recall is due to excessive rehearsal – as people will most likely talk about a significant event leading to frequent rehearsal. A strong supporting study for this is Nurham (2003) who looked for FBs in earthquake survivors in Turkey. He found that those directly affected by it had better recall than those who hadn’t – and the details matched those in the news as opposed to the actual accounts. This study has high ecological validity as it is a field study involving a real life traumatic event.

The methods used to study FBs have high ecological validity; this is because they are all conducted in real-life situations such as Brown and Kulik who studied reactions to real-life trauma. However, there are significant flaws in the methods; such as not accounting for rehearsal in the media – which we are constantly subjected to – also the fact that it is very hard to accurately ‘measure’ how ‘good’ a memory is and more importantly how accurate it is – only that person will have been in that exact circumstance and so no-one else could support the accuracy of their recollection.

Repression was a term coined by Sigmund Freud to describe a memory being locked away from the conscious mind. This is called an ‘ego defence mechanism’. When a particularly traumatic memory is made, it causes anxiety, so the memory is repressed to prevent recall and thus anxiety. Freud used his patients’ case studies to support this idea – particularly