Flashbulb Memories Modulated by Emotional Arousal in Korean Young and Elderly People:
Comparison of President Roh's Suicide and North Korea's Nuclear Crisis
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Key Words: flashbulb memory, emotion, elderly people

1. Object
Flashbulb Memories are memories for the circumstances in which one first learned of a very surprising and consequential (or emotionally arousing) event [1]. The former president of Korea, Roh, committed suicide on May 23, 2009. Two days later, North Korea announced they did nuclear experiment and launched several missiles. While shocked by both events, it seemed that Koreans were emotionally aroused more by Roh’s suicide than by North Korea’s nuclear crisis. A highly arousing event will make people remember it better. The elderly might be affected by emotion more than the young.

2. Method
Participants were 66 young (average age = 22.7 yrs., 12.8 yrs for education) and 52 elderly people (average age = 64.4 yrs., 10.9 yrs for education) in Korea. Nineteen questions were surveyed three times: one week, three months, and six months after the two events. According to the previous studies [2][3], six open-ended questions were included to assess flashbulb memory of participants’ circumstances when they heard of the events. And other questions were included to check intensity of emotion, degree of confidence in memory, vividness of one’s recall, and current emotional responses.

3. Result
Young and elderly people were more aroused by President Roh’s suicide than by North Korea’s nuclear crisis, and elderly people experienced more intense emotion in both events (Figure 1, right). Concerning flashbulb memory, the elderly made equal performance to the young (Figure 1, left). Memory of Roh’s suicide decreased in the second survey, but remained thereafter. On the contrary, memory of nuclear crisis continued to decrease. Throughout the survey, the elderly revealed steady and higher level of confidence in their memory, in contrast to the young with decreasing confidence. The elderly also showed higher scores of vividness, emotional and visceral responses than the young, though all the measures decreased as the survey repeated.

4. Discussion
Generally speaking, the elderly have weak memory, and it has been reported they have relatively poor flashbulb memories. In this study, however, they performed well equally to the young. Roh’s suicide produced high level of emotional arousal, while nuclear crisis seemed to produce less arousal. Therefore emotional arousal could be a major factor modulating flashbulb memories [4]. The elderly were highly confident in their memory, while their feeling of vividness was still decreasing. This indicates that their self-monitoring is decaying. Other measures revealed ordinary decreasing patterns. Further survey is needed to trace flashbulb memory of Roh’s suicide.

5. Reference
There have been debates about whether flashbulb memory is either special or a kind of autobiographical memory. This study indicated that flashbulb memory could be special in some conditions.