Memory Errors in Real Life

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# Introduction

Memory errors happen to be a commonplace part of everyday life, more so than most people even realize. It is not as if everything that we remember about our lives is filled with errors, but it can verily be said that our memory does fill in its gaps, if any, with incoherent and implausible facts (Tourangeau, 1999). According to Sir Bartlett, “remembering is an imaginative construction or reconstruction of facts” with an “active organization of past reactions, or of past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operating in any well-adapted organic response” (Bartlett, Bartlett, & Kintsch, 1995). The human brain has unlimited storage capacity-, but, our attention to a subject is what makes a memory stronger and more lasting as compared to others. However, being at fault is something the human brain cannot comprehend. Thus, when push comes to shove, it would much rather give us an untrue answer than drawing a blank.

# Discussion

A prime exam of memory distortion can be seen in the case of an NBC reporter and his Iraq war visit that landed him in hot waters/ In the March of 2003, a famous NBC reported Brian Williams reported that as an on-the-ground journalist during the Iraq war, when a Chinook ahead of the helicopter he was in was blown out of the sky by an RPG. His helicopter made an immediate safe landing. However, the story was run under the headline "Target Iraq: Helicopter NBC's Brian Williams Was Riding in Comes Under Fire", with another anchor reporting that it was a close call for Brian Williams (Stanley, 2015).

However, over the next 12 years, Williams’ account of the story would dramatically change. Initial, he stated that he was in a helicopter that was half an hour behind the one that was attacked and blown out of the sky by the RPG. Later, however, the story changed, with him stating that he himself was in the craft that was attacked. In 2007, he stated that he looked down upon the RPG that was fired at his craft and one had also blown the craft ahead of him out of the sky (Farhi, 2015). This claim was refuted by the soldier piloting the craft, stating that all they sustained were small-arms fire and the door gunners in the craft responded to them. This time and many times in the future, Williams apologizes for his statements. By 2015, Brian Williams had embellished the helicopter story over 11 times, each instance becoming more bizarre and confusing than the one before (Farhi, 2015). This, among other things, made NBC suspend Brian Williams for a period of six months, a decision that adversely impacted Williams’ decade long reputation as a reporter and public figure (Steel & Somaiya, 2015).

# Critical Analysis

The Brian Williams saga gartered a whole lot of interest, while it lasted. While to most it seemed like a case where Williams was trying too hard to mark himself a hero, to others it seems that Williams suffered from a case of “the fog of memory”. With people considering it a way to save face, Lawrence Patihis, a psychologist studying memory had a different take on things. In his opinion, no person can be considered immune to memory distortion. He proved this by stating that 20 percent of people participating in a study generated false memories when suggested something untrue. For instance, if he mentioned the footage of Flight 93 crashing in Pennsylvania on September 11th existed, one in every five people would confess to seeing it, while an event like this never even occurred in the first. In case of Brian Williams, Lawrence is of the opinion that false information may have stemmed from him watching the footage of the damaged helicopter over and over again, parts of it mixing in with his own memories (Robb, 2015). Additionally, if a number of years have passed since the memory has occurred, the integration of false memories during its reconstruction is far more likely. Add in the traumatic effects of the event, whether Brian’s helicopter was blown with the grenade or not, it is highly possible that he could have had no recollection of the incident, with the brain’s tendency to block out traumatic experiences (Hayes et al., 2011). Thus, a narrative change over a period of 12 years is highly possible.

# Conclusion

Our memory isn’t as reliable as we would like to believe. It is prone to errors and the evidence to prove it is irrefutable. However, there are means to overcome every sort of error. Thus, there may be a few that can possibly help with memory errors. As mentioned early, past experiences are more prone to distortion. However, by using memory retrieval processes, it is possible to improve the accuracy of one’s memory and keep distortion at bay. The memory retrieval process requires you to actively search for evidence that corroborates your memory and then talk to an individual that may have shared the experience with you to find out memory facts that are common among the two of you. Finally, looking through collateral information can help you build an accurate and more reliable recollection of your memory (Gallo & Lampinen, 2015). This can allow you to keep memory errors at bay while keeping your integrity intact.

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