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# Memory: Fact & Fiction

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## What is Memory?

Memory is central to our everyday lives. We rely upon our memory to find our way to work, find our car keys, remember how to cook dinner, or recall what happened in the last episode of our favourite TV show. Memory also gives us an understanding of who we are--what our parents were like, the family situation we grew up in, and our responses to various events in our lives. Our sense of identity is comprised of the composite of these memories and without them, we would have no sense of who we are.

Even though memory is so central to our lives, there are many misconceptions about it. Many view the recall of memories as being like replaying a video in the mind, which shows every detail of a past event. However, psychological research demonstrates that this is not so. One reason for this is that when we form memories, we do not simply record events as a video recorder might. Rather, we extract what we consider to be important, and remember that instead. Firstly we interpret the available information, then extract what we decide is most important, and finally retain the meaning of the event.

So, our interpretation of an event determines what we remember. This means that if our interpretation is incorrect, then our memory will also be inexact. For example, if you saw Uncle John digging a hole and burying something in the garden at midnight, and your interpretation of this behaviour was that he was trying to hide something, then you will remember this incident in a sinister light, and will be likely to interpret his future behaviour in the same light. However, you would interpret this event differently, and then remember it quite differently, if you had heard Aunt Ethel nagging him throughout the evening to bury the garbage.

Another aspect of memory that is clear from psychological research is that memory is malleable. Even after information is retained in memory, it can undergo many transformations over time. Since we remember interpretations, when we encounter a new piece of information that appears relevant to what is already stored in memory, we often transform the old information to be consistent with the new information. This is seen in eyewitness testimonies, where new evidence presented to a witness can modify what they recall of an event. Even the questions asked of a witness can modify their memory. For example, witnesses have been asked the following questions;

1. "How fast was the car travelling when it smashed into the wall?", or
2. "How fast was the car travelling when it hit the wall?"

Witnesses recall much greater speeds after question 1. Why? They are influenced by the implication that the car must have been travelling exceptionally fast if it smashed into a wall, as it is possible to hit a wall even at low speeds (Wortman & Loftus, 1985).

Our memories are not as reliable as we commonly believe. This is partly due to the fact that we are not remembering exact events, and memory is malleable. Also, memories can be formed out of dream material which an individual can later confuse with actual events.

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## References

Wortman, C.B. & E.S. Loftus. 1985. *Psychology*. 2nd edition. New York: Knopf. Page 189.

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## Implications for Psychotherapy

This has obvious implications for psychotherapy. Questions asked of clients can modify the memory they have. Indeed experimental evidence shows that suggestions to a client in psychotherapy can modify or even create memories. These are now referred to as false memories. Three implications can be seen to result from this evidence of the fallibility of memory:

1. Legal aspects of clients going to court based on recovered memories. [Recovered memories are memories that have been repressed and are recalled at a later time]
2. Legal aspects of recovered memories affecting current relationships of the victim of abuse.
3. Informing clients that what they remember is suspect when they doubt it themselves could be counter-therapeutic.

The Australian Psychological Society [APS] state that without the independent corroboration of recovered memories, their usefulness in court is most dubious. Thus psychologists must be cautious in responding to questions from clients about pursuing legal action based on recovered memories. This would seem like a sound approach also for TA practitioners

Secondly, psychotherapists can assist in shaping clients' memories as has been shown above, via the questioning, commenting and expectations they have. This can at times radically affect how the client relates to people in his current environment. For instance, if a client recalls his father sexually abusing him this can dramatically effect their current relationship. The memory of this may have been shaped at least in part by the therapist's questions, etc. This obviously is most undesirable for the client's father, indeed the client's entire family and could possibly leave the psychotherapist open to legal action from the client's father. The client's awareness of the malleability of memory would seem essential to deal with some of these problems.

Thirdly, anyone who has worked with clients in the area of sexual, physical and emotional abuse know that clients can often doubt what was done to them. This can be from repression of the memory as a way of dealing with it. Alternatively they may have been told directly from the abuser or other family members that it did not occur or was not significant. They may have been very young. They may also question that it was abuse because they did not try and get away, try to stop it or tell someone there and then.

Whatever the circumstances, for a therapist to say to a client that what they are recalling as memory is suspect would encourage the client's self doubts about the occurrence of the abuse and its significance, particularly if the victim's family denied anything happened. This could be most damaging to the client. He may hear the therapist say, "I do not believe you either". The APS guidelines in this instance state, "Psychologists should be cautious about conveying statements about the accuracy of memory reports given by clients" [p. 21]. They state that psychologists should understand the difference between narrative truth and historical truth and the personal narrative can be helpful in therapy independent of the accuracy of the reports.

I find this guideline unclear. Does it mean that clients should not be informed of the fallible nature of memory, or that the psychotherapist should in some circumstances not inform the client and in other cases do so? If this is what the guideline is suggesting then I must very much disagree with it.

For a therapist to knowingly keep a client uninformed in a important way would have significant consequences on the therapeutic relationship. Trust immediately comes to mind. Surely the client's trust in the psychotherapist would be damaged as a result of deceiving by omission. If I was the client I would want to be informed.

I would much prefer to be able to tell clients that what they are remembering is factual. The reality is that it may not be. Some will be factual and some will be a distortion and we do not know which is which without independent corroboration. I would agree that in some cases it would be necessary to deliver the information in a very careful fashion, but it is necessary to inform the client. In addition, it may be necessary to deal with the ramifications of such information, such as the client hearing the therapist as saying he is lying, when this is not the case.

## **Case Example**

Joe, 48 year old industrial psychologist. He began recollecting sexual abuse of four decades ago by a neighbour and his father. As he discussed it and thought about it he reported becoming clearer about what, where and when the abuse occurred. for instance, he recalled the back yard shed as one place where the neighbour abused him.

However, all along he doubted the memories. He had strong feelings and internal dialogue that it was not true whenever he talked about it. This was a significant hindrance to his recall of events and resolution of his feelings about it. So when he was informed of the fallibility of memory this was met with discouragement.

However, he did acknowledge my honesty with him, knowing that I could have just kept quiet about it. As we worked further it became apparent that it was Joe's belief in the memory that was important rather than concerning oneself with its accuracy. We will never know the facts, and as the father and the neighbour were now both dead we could never get external corroboration. In continued work with Joe, this then developed as the therapeutic goal. The facts are unknown. Instead it was the belief in the memory that became the therapeutic goal that allowed the resolution of the trauma. In this instance there is no knowable 'truth', but what I believe to be 'truth' is important. This became Joe's therapeutic goal.

## **Conclusion**

This case example provides us with one example of how to solve the dilemma created by the knowledge that our memories are not as accurate as we would like them to be. Clients who doubt their recall of events are often hindered when they realise that human memory is quite fallible and their recall may be fallacious. One then changes the therapeutic goal to the belief in the recall, not in its 'truth' as the 'truth' can never be known.

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## **References**

Guidelines relating to the reporting of recovered memories. *The Bulletin of The Australian Psychological Society*. February, 1995.

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