

6. Memory as a Way of Knowing

Opening activity

Read the following list of words out loud *once* and try to remember as many as you can. Then, without looking, write down as many as you can remember. *After* you have done so, look for the comment at the end of this chapter.

door, glass, pane, shade, ledge, sill, house, open, curtain, frame, view, breeze, sash, screen, shutter¹

Does memory work like a video camera?

Read the following five statements. True or false? What do you think?

1. Amnesia makes one unable to remember one's identity.
2. Unexpected objects generally grab attention.
3. Memory can be enhanced through hypnosis.
4. A confident eyewitness should be sufficient to convict a defendant on criminal charges.
5. Memory works like a video camera.

In a large survey conducted in the United States in 2009, the majority of respondents agreed with three of these statements:

- 83 per cent of respondents thought that amnesia makes one unable to remember one's identity
- 78 per cent thought that unexpected objects generally grab attention
- 55 per cent thought that memory can be enhanced through hypnosis.

Although fewer agreed with statement #4, the number was significant for its social implications:

- 37 per cent of respondents thought that the testimony in court of a confident eyewitness

“Memory... is knowledge from the past. It is not necessarily knowledge about the past.”²

Avishar Margalit

should be sufficient to convict a defendant on criminal charges.

Significant for an assessment of the reliability of memory altogether was that:

- 48 per cent thought that memory is permanent
- 63 per cent thought that memory works like a video camera.

However, experts working in memory research reject *every single one of these common beliefs*. All five statements are false. It would seem that, at least in these regards, a common understanding of memory differs from what psychologists have discovered.³

How do we know through memory?

Through our memories, we carry with us the knowledge we are gaining – our skills, our past experiences, and the shared knowledge we have developed informally and formally through our lives. Through our memories, we grow our personal sense of identity and our sense of our place within the shared knowledge and shared life of our communities. Whether our memories of our lives are distressing or happy, we often feel them to be deeply significant to how we understand the world. But how reliable is memory as a way of knowing?

Even to ask this knowledge question can be disturbing. How could we doubt our own pasts? Memory intertwines with our sense of our own personal identities to the point that denial of the accuracy of our memories can feel like an assault. Little feels as convincing as a vivid memory: “I was there. I saw it. I felt it. I remember.” What we remember, moreover, affects who we consider

¹ McRaney, D. 2011. *You Are Not So Smart*. New York. Gotham Books. P 176.

² Avishar Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Harvard University Press, 2003), page 14

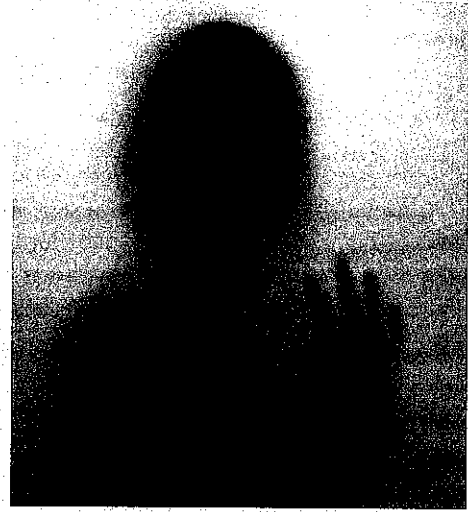
³ Simons, D.J. and Chabris, C.F. 2011. What People Believe about How Memory Works: A Representative Survey of the U.S. Population. *PLoS ONE* 6(8): e22757. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0022757 <http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0022757> accessed 21 May 2012.

For Reflection

What is your earliest memory? Are you aware of parts of your own life that, for the moment at least, have escaped your memory?

Do you personally keep photographs, written messages, or personal objects from the past? If so, why does it matter to preserve memories? Do you choose to preserve bad memories and good ones equally?

Do you think your memories of the past influence your interpretations of the present and your choices for the future? If so, in what ways? What, besides the memories themselves, would be lost – to you and to others – if all of your knowledge of your past were erased?



ourselves to be in the present and what decisions and actions we might take. Yet surely almost all of us also acknowledge that we cannot remember very clearly what happened in an event even last week, and treasure photographs and keepsakes to preserve moments as they blur into the past.

What, then, do we need to understand about memory as a way of knowing? An accurate appraisal of memory leads to our being able to judge how best to *use it* and how to *evaluate it* as a justification for the knowledge claims. In the chapter ahead, we will touch on remembering and forgetting, the intersection of memory and other ways of knowing, and the role of memory in personal and shared construction of our sense of the past. Memory certainly does not work like a video camera, but how does it work?

It seems that not all memories are treated in our brains in the same way. Psychologists tell us that the distinction we treated in chapter 2 between types of knowledge – between skills and knowledge claims – is borne out in the different ways they are retained. Our knowledge of skills – our ability to ride a bicycle or play a guitar, for example – is stored and processed in our brains as *procedural memory* – encoded information that we do not consciously recall. Even after years of not having ridden a bicycle, we can still get on one and off we go, riding it so “automatically” that it is intuitive. (We will return to intuition in a later chapter.) Facts and events in the past are processed

differently from skills. We retrieve facts about family or information we have learned in school, or recall events from the past, in the form of *declarative memory*, with subgroups semantic memory (memory based on information) and episodic memory (based on experiences in time and place). As we make knowledge claims, we have reason particularly to question the dependability of our declarative memory as a justification for belief.

Eyewitness testimony: memory on trial

“I was there. I saw it.” The testimony of eyewitnesses has a ring of truth about it, especially when the witnesses themselves are convinced. Eyewitness reports have long been considered to provide convincing evidence for reaching conclusions in everyday conversations, media reports, social research, and courts of law. Yet scientific study of memory has prompted some critical questions about how much we can trust such reports, especially when the implications are serious.

So concerned was the Supreme Court of the American state of New Jersey that they ordered a special inquiry into the reliability of eyewitness identification of suspects. The legal system was putting memory itself on trial with the knowledge question: How reliable is eyewitness testimony?

Investigators set out to examine the current findings on memory by the human sciences,



'Eyewitness testimony: memory on trial'

Witnesses in some courts of law swear to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth". What features of eyewitness memory might make it difficult for even the most honest of witnesses to tell the truth of what really happened?

particularly consulting psychologists. They also looked closely at their own procedures, with full access to all of their past records, in order to consider both factors within the legal system and particular characteristics of witnesses as they identified suspects. The unanimous Supreme Court ruling in August 2011 (*State v. Henderson*) was conclusive: memory is not a reliable record of the past — it does *not* work like video tapes of events stored in a vault. As the ruling put it, "Memory is a constructive, dynamic, and selective process".

The document, moreover, gave extensive summaries of susceptibility to error, based on actual court records from the past. The conclusion cited memory expert Elizabeth Loftus, and three stages of memory: the *acquisition* of the memory in the past, the *retention* of the memory between its acquisition and recall, and its *retrieval* in testimony. In his summary, the judge declared:

At each of those stages, the information ultimately offered as "memory" can be distorted, contaminated and even falsely imagined. The witness does not perceive all that a videotape would disclose, but rather "get[s] the gist of things" and constructs a "memory" on "bits of information and what seems plausible." The witness does not encode all the information that a videotape does; memory rapidly and continuously decays; retained memory can

be unknowingly contaminated by post-event information; [and] the witness's retrieval of stored "memory" can be impaired and distorted by a variety of factors, including suggestive interviewing and identification procedures conducted by law enforcement personnel.⁴

The factors that the investigation identified as influencing testimony are likely to bear a strong resemblance to those you picked out yourself if you did the activities in "Sense perception and observation" in the last chapter. You might want to look back to the follow-up summary at the chapter's end.

The investigation also included factors regarding the *methods* of eyewitness identification of suspects from a line-up: witnesses were asked to pick out from several people the one person they had seen commit a crime. Problems included: the nature of the instructions given to witnesses, the amount of time between observation and identification of the suspect, the construction of the suspect line-up, and the administration of the identification so that the administrator also has no information. (The latter is called a double-blind system.) As we will consider more fully when we treat areas of knowledge, the *methodology* of study is immensely important for eliminating possible sources of error. Significantly, the New Jersey Supreme Court ordered major changes in the state's eyewitness identification system.

Memory and intuition: some common biases

Even if we experience memory decay over time, can't we at least depend on our everyday memories and the things that just "pop to mind" as we remember them? Our quick, intuitive access to events of the past gives the recall a sense of immediacy, of reliability. And yet, here again, it seems that we have to be aware that we are filtering our memories as we look back.

In one common error, we tidy up the past to create the narrative that leads to the present as we know it. This *hindsight* bias is sometimes called the *I-knew-it-all-along fallacy*. We might find out that a man we know has been regularly cheating his customers, and "realize" that we had been suspicious of his actions all along. We might learn that a bridge,

Voices



Jane Clarke, IB graduate 1979

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Memory in Psychotherapy and Poetry

What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it. Gabriel Garcia Marquez

As a psychotherapist I learned the power of memory in shaping our story of ourselves and our sense of identity. I learned that memory is both tenacious and fragile, that it is formed and reformed in the recalling. I saw how our emotional experience, assumptions, expectations and associations influence our memory of an event. I experienced the mystery of how we protect ourselves from some memories and yet burden ourselves with others. At first I found it disconcerting to realise that various members of a family could each remember the same event differently. I had to let go of the notion of objective truth in relation to memory. I came to see that what matters for the individual is finding the truth of their memories and exploring how that memory has shaped how they experience themselves as adults. What is interesting is why we remember particular

moments when so many moments of our lives are lost to us, and how we relate to what we remember. This understanding of memory as mutable and individual is liberating for me as a poet. My memories are my own to explore, to learn from, to play with and shape. The process of retrieving bits and pieces of memory and giving them form is an endless source of creativity. Through my writing I have come to question where memory ends and imagination begins. Perhaps they work side by side making stories. They seem to be mutually dependent as I have found that the more I recall of my own life story the more I can imagine the stories of others and the more I use my imagination, the more I seem to remember. Often one memory releases another. Sometimes it's like as if, out of the blue, a new memory comes knocking on the door of consciousness wanting to be heard, to be seen and to given expression.

The process of working with memory, which began for me in my own psychotherapy, led me to poetry. When I began to write poetry in my early forties I was surprised that so much of my writing brought me back to the farm in the west of Ireland where I had grown up. As a psychotherapist I was ever conscious of the influence of our earliest relationships on our development but through writing I discovered that it was the old house and farmyard, the fields and hedges, ditches, rivers and turloughs of county Roscommon that shaped my imaginative landscape. Working with memory is the bread and butter of both psychotherapy and poetry. Sometimes when I have written a poem around a memory it is as if I have given that memory a home. It is a joy to me when readers resonate with the memory and can read themselves into the poem. Writing a poem can be a way of making meaning of a memory, of coming to understand a memory for the first time or of putting a more bearable distance between myself and a painful memory.

I see memory as the springboard but the poem is the dive. While a poem is often sparked by memory, it must be free to go beyond memory to wherever the poem needs to go. This is where memory, imagination and craft meet. When I read aloud my poem "Honey", people often ask me, "Did that really happen?" I have vivid memories of the dog and of that morning in the farmyard but, knowing that memory has a life of its own, all I can truly answer is, "That is how I remember it."

Honey

Away, away, he shouts, sending her up the hill,
through furze and bracken, to gather scattered sheep.
Listening for his whistle to bear left or right,
she snakes towards them, belly to the ground.

They raise their heads, sniff, ears pricked,
then flock together and run for the gate.
She comes back panting, stands at his side,
eyes bright, tongue lolling out.

She had the herding instinct from birth;
when she was just a pup he'd find her

has collapsed in a nearby town, and "recall" that we've noticed it swaying; in fact, the accident was inevitable, wasn't it? We can even blame authorities for not having taken the preventative actions that were obviously necessary – but only "obviously" as we look back. ("The authorities must have known!" And thus is born many a conspiracy theory.) You'll recall *confirmation bias* from the last chapter – a tendency to notice what we expect to notice. *Hindsight bias* is a similar cognitive bias, but looking back in memory.

In a related bias, *consistency bias*, we interpret our own past in a way that is consistent with how we are now. We edit out of our memories actions that we would presently condemn as foolish or hurtful, for example, or interpret past actions in ways that lead to the qualities that we approve of in our present selves.

We tend to retrieve our memories, too, in a very anecdotal way. As intuition interacts with memory, we are prone to the *availability heuristic*: we assess how *likely* it is for something to happen based on how *easily* examples can be retrieved from memory. The memories instantly available seem more important, more representative, more

in the haggard rounding up the hens.
You'll make a right cod of her, he gives out,
when we dress her up like our teacher
in our mother's headscarf and glasses.
We sit her at the kitchen table,
offer her a cup of tea and a scone.

A Sunday close to lambing, three men in the yard,
one with a rifle under his arm. *Your dog and Dunne's*
wreaked havoc last night, thirty ewes dead or dying,
mangled in barbed wire, lamb beds hanging out.

From an upstairs window we watch him
walk to the shed. He drags her by the scruff,
leaves her at their feet. He says nothing
when he comes in, says little for weeks.

Jane Clarke

haggard: a part of the farmyard where hay is kept
a cod: a fool or a good for nothing
he gives out: he scolds

likely to happen – for instance, airplanes crashing, terrorists attacking, people winning the lottery. But what determines the memories that are *available* for our intuition to grab? Probably recent personal experience or the extent of coverage of events in the media! With the quick judgments of intuition, we are very bad at using memory to calculate probability.

The role of forgetting

Memory decay, distorted memory, hindsight bias, consistency bias, the availability heuristic – what a lot of problems beset the reliability of our memories! Take heart! The same memory decay that contributes to making us unreliable eyewitnesses in a court case also appears to contribute to our being able to manage our lives.

Memory expert Elizabeth Loftus explains, "We seem to have been purposely constructed with a mechanism for erasing the tape of our memory, or at least bending the memory tape, so that we can live and function without being haunted by the past. Accurate memory, in some instances, would simply get in the way."⁵

Forgetting can also help us to recover from distressing past events, neuroscientists report. Much of our forgetting can be willful, as if we are weeding out memories we do not want. Apparently the "neural circuit underlying this skill [is] analogous to the one that inhibits impulsive actions".⁶ At least in this regard, the conclusions of cognitive scientists do not counter commonly held beliefs about memory: common advice for dealing with romantic heartbreak is to try to get over it and move on! (How many sad songs are about forgetting?)

Even when the past events are not distressing, though, forgetting seems to have a positive role. It enables us to leave behind clutter and trivia to retain memories that seem more important. As science writer Ingrid Wickelgren comments, "The act of forgetting crafts and hones data in the brain as if carving a statue from a block of marble. It enables us to make sense of the world by clearing a path to the thoughts that are truly valuable."⁷

The story of Solomon Shereshevsky is a wrenching example not of the *failure to remember* but the *failure to forget*. He could remember every word of a speech he had heard only once, and could quickly memorize even poems in foreign languages and complicated mathematical formulae. However, he could not sift through all the irrelevant details in his memory to pick out characteristics of whole events. Feeling that his mind was full of chaos, he even wrote down what he wanted to forget and burned the paper as an attempt to rid himself of these unwanted memories.

The suggestibility of memory

Perhaps more troubling for reliance on memory is not just that it is susceptible to error and forgetting, but that it can be entirely created by suggestion. Have you ever been convinced that you remember something from your early life, only to realize that you probably constructed the memory based on a photograph you had seen or stories told within your family? Have you ever wondered whether

a memory could have been a dream, or even something from a film or book?

As part of her research into the reliability of memory, psychologist Elizabeth Loftus investigated the ways in which memories could be modified by techniques of suggestion. She was examining an issue with serious and immediate implications, because of the numerous memories of childhood abuse reported during the 1990s. Much psychological research of the time claimed that victims had repressed their traumatic memories for years and were recovering them in the present as they were encouraged to do so. As they "recovered" their memories, they accused people, often family members, of having sexually abused them in their childhoods and thereby having caused symptoms from which they presently suffered. The memories, it true, testified to past damage, and, if false, unduly created present damage, ruining reputations and splitting families.

In her research on "recovered memory", however, Loftus discovered how easily memories can be created. It was entirely possible that the abuse had never taken place, but that patients were instead responding to suggestions from their therapists – therapists who were unaware of the extent to which they were influencing or planting the memories themselves. Although debate continues to surround what is known as "recovered memory" or "false memory syndrome", in 1998 a working group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists reported, in summary, that "no evidence exists for the repression and recovery of verified, severely traumatic events, and their role in symptom formation has yet to be proved."⁸ More overtly condemning of arguments for emotionally-induced amnesia is Berkeley psychologist John Kihlstrom: "Laboratory analogs of traumatic amnesia are models in search of a phenomenon; theories of traumatic amnesia are explanations in search of facts."⁹

⁵ Elizabeth Loftus, cited in William Saleton, "The Memory Doctor", 4 June 2010. Slate. http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/the_memory_doctor/2010/06/the_memory_doctor.html accessed 11 June 2010.

⁶ Wickelgren, I. January/February 2010. "Trying to Forget". *Scientific American Mind*. Pp 33–8. <http://www.delanceyplace.com/1/11/12>, accessed 14 January 2012.

⁷ Wickelgren, I. January/February 2012. "Trying to Forget," *Scientific American Mind*. Pp 33–8. <http://www.delanceyplace.com/1/11/12>, accessed 14 January 2012.

⁸ Brandon S. Boakes J, Glaser D & Green R (1998). "Recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse: implications for clinical practice". *British Journal of Psychiatry* 172: 296–307.

⁹ John F. Kihlstrom, "Trauma and Memory Revisited", paper presented at the 6th Tsukuba International Conference on Memory: Memory and Emotion. March 15, 2005 <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~kihlstrm/Tsukuba05.htm>

More broadly applicable to memory as a whole was what came out of Elizabeth Loftus' research: that memory is much more susceptible to suggestion and modification than had previously been realized. Her work also raised numerous issues of ethical concern for the ways that knowledge of techniques of memory modification could or should be used.

Loftus posed questions for an entire society to answer: "When we have mastered the false memory recipes, we will need to worry about who controls them. What brakes should be imposed on police, lawyers, advertisers? More than ever, we'll need to constantly keep in mind that memory, like liberty, is a fragile thing."¹⁰

Memory, sense perception, and emotion: trauma

What do we edit out of our memories in a normal process of forgetting? Are emotional events more likely to be remembered, and more accurately?

Partial answers emerge from recent research. For instance, a collaborative group of memory researchers have tracked the memories of Americans of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 that have become known as "9/11".¹¹ They were investigating "flashbulb memories" – memories that seem incandescently lit by their emotional impact at the time. They surveyed 3,000 American within days of the event, then at intervals thereafter. After one year, participants were roughly 60 per cent right about the details as they remembered them and after three years roughly 50 per cent right. Yet the decay of memory did not affect the vividness of their recall or their faith in the accuracy of their memories.¹²

As the research continues, though, it appears that direct experience and emotion affect the accuracy of memory: "the closer we are physically and mentally to the event, the more we get it right,

and the more we can recount every sight, sound and smell we experienced."¹³

In other contexts, it seems clear that the emotional impact of direct experience can affect not only the content of memory but also the way memory processes the past. A medical researcher working with child soldiers traumatized by violence explains that there is a difference between emotional memories and memories of learned knowledge: "It is entirely possible for facts to vanish completely from the memory, whereas in extreme cases emotional recollections remain stored for a whole lifetime. Active intervention is necessary to reduce the priority level of negative memories."¹⁴

Dr Schauer-Kaiser, international director of Vivo, an organization of health professionals that works with rehabilitating child soldiers, comments on their nightmares, flashbacks, depression, debilitating attempts to keep bad memories at bay, and high suicide rates. The past will not stay in the past: its effects live on in the present, through emotionally traumatic memory. Some children have lost any trust in the world and any sense of self-esteem. Others have learned to enjoy cruelty and killing. Their negative emotional memories will not fade away on their own, but have to be replaced, actively and clinically, by positive ones.

The implications not just for individuals but for their societies and the world are significant. Duncan Bell of Cambridge University, professor of international relations and political thought, draws strong connections between personal histories and the developing history of nations:

The connections between memory, trauma and identity have been drawn in various and often-conflicting ways. It is a fairly common assumption, however, that certain harrowing events, including genocide, war, terrorism, civil and ethnic strife and radical regime transitions, generate serious and often catastrophic

¹⁰ Elizabeth Loftus quoted in William Saleton, "The Memory Doctor", 4 June 2010. Slate. http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/the_memory_doctor/2010/06/the_memory_doctor.html accessed 11 June 2010.

¹¹ "9/11 National Memory Survey on the Terrorist Attacks", <http://911memory.nyu.edu/>

¹² Hamzelou, J. 7 September 2011. "Manhattan memory project: How 9/11 changed our brains", *New Scientist*. <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn20873-manhattan-memory-project-how-911-changed-our-brains.html>, accessed 24 May 2012.

¹³ Murray Law, B. September 2011. "Seared in our memories", *American Psychological Association*. Vol 42, number 8. P 60. <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/09/memories.aspx> accessed 24 May 2012.

¹⁴ Peter Popham, "Helping killers choose life", *The Independent*, 27 December 2012 <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/helping-killers-choose-life-8431686.html>

challenges to communal self-understandings, and that the “memory” of such “traumas” plays a significant and sometimes elemental role in shaping subsequent political perceptions, affiliations and action.¹⁵

Personal testimony and the shared record

When memory is fallible, and when facts fade more quickly than the emotional impact of trauma, how much trust can we place in the eyewitness testimony of child soldiers, refugees, survivors of attempted genocide, or the many other victims of violence who tell their stories? How we answer this question has serious implications for contemporary tribunals, the shifting political landscape, and the record we distill into one of our major areas of knowledge – history.

What evidence, then, contradicts or fortifies the individual recall? For some memories, perhaps no further evidence is possible – either because the event in the past “recovered” in memory may never have happened, or because other participants or witnesses are silent or dead. Yet for large social catastrophes, there often is a landslide of evidence – hundreds and thousands of voices corroborating the general story with their accounts contributing to a written archive, physical evidence of destroyed villages or cities, remains of concentration camps or torture chambers, and in recent times the technological recordings of photographs, films, audio records. We also have the documents and images of organized attempts to give medical aid and emergency shelter, and the evidence of people mobilized to help. We may be uncertain about the factual recall of a single testimony, but doubt declines with mounting and converging evidence. Although people hearing each other’s stories may be influenced in their own, such that stories begin to resemble each other and become more fixed in the telling, on a large scale it does become possible to recount what happened to a whole group.

The collective story of a social upheaval is probably more factually reliable, with accumulation of evidence, than one individual’s story. Moreover, as people pool their experiences, remembered from different vantage points and perspectives, we gain a more extensive communal record.

“... one might almost say: no memory, no identity, no identity, no nation.... Collective memories.... are active components in the creation and reproduction of nations.”¹⁶

Anthony Smith

Yet surely our knowledge still gains in communication of knowledge from individual voices, speaking of their own personal experiences. Can we truly understand unless our imaginations, and often our emotional responses, are engaged? The personal memory may contain factual flaws, but it may, at the same time, give us greater understanding of what the experience has meant to the people who lived it.

Collective memory and history

The collective memory, passed on through language, influences a sense of a collective identity. But who will determine the boundaries of the “society” and tell our collective story? What are the dominant voices that tell us *who we were*, and the implications for *who we are* – and will dissenting voices be heard? For what purposes *in the present* will our collective memory of the past be used?

When interpretations of today are shaped by cultural and political perspectives, we can expect the stories of yesterday to be similarly shaped; the creation of a sense of group identity with a collective story is a social and political issue, with competing narratives. But whoa! We will return to history as an area of knowledge later in this book.

Shared memory and knowledge

The area of knowledge of history, however, is not the only one that depends on memory, with all of its supporting artifacts and language. It could be argued, indeed, that every area of knowledge is largely knowledge of the past – knowledge accumulated and passed down over millennia. In treating areas of knowledge later in this book, we will be considering the different ways in which each of them builds on knowledge created in the past. In its development, too, each one has its own history.

¹⁵ Duncan Bell, “Introduction” *Memory, Trauma and World Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, page 5

¹⁶ Anthony Smith, “Memory and Modernity: reflections on Ernest Gellner’s theory of nationalism”, The Ernest Gellner Memorial Lecture. European Institute London School of Economics and Political Science. <http://gellnerpage.tripod.com/SmithLec.html>. accessed January 28, 2013.

Discussion Activity

Memory and trauma: child soldiers



“Suddenly all the death I had seen since the day I was touched by war began flashing in my head. Every time I stopped shooting to change magazines and saw my two lifeless friends, I angrily pointed my gun into the swamp and killed more people. . . . My childhood had gone by without my knowing, and it seemed as if my heart had frozen.”¹⁷

*Ishmael Beah, former child soldier,
Sierra Leone, taken as a soldier at the age of 12*

“What has humanity created?” demands Romeo Dallaire. “What have we permitted to be created?” As a general and a peacekeeper, he has witnessed children used as a weapon of choice. They are easy to catch, light to carry, and easy to manipulate through drugs and indoctrination once they have been ripped from their families. “Man has created the ultimate cheap, expendable, yet sophisticated weapon, at the expense of humanity’s own future: its children.”¹⁸

Information questions for background

- What is the definition of a “child soldier”?
- Why is child participation in conflict a particular concern?

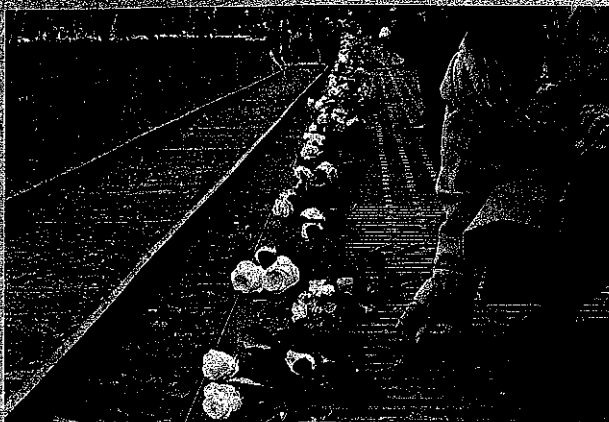
- Find out about international conventions against child soldiers, numbers involved, and organizations that work to protect children from military recruitment.

Knowledge questions to apply to this topic

- concepts and language: Who and what determines what “childhood” is, and when it ends? Who and what determines what a “soldier” is? In what ways is it important to clarify concepts and define terms in exchange of knowledge?
- memory as a way of knowing: To what extent is “memory” the *content* of what we recall, and to what extent the *process* of recollection? In what ways is either affected by emotion?
- memory, emotion, faith/trust, and sense perception: In what ways do these ways of knowing interact? How is their interaction affected in the case of child soldiers?
- memory, language, and truth: What are the problems of reliability associated with eyewitness accounts? Is a child soldier necessarily remembering events as they really happened? What factors can make the memories doubtful? On the other hand, what factors can make personal testimony particularly convincing and valuable as evidence?
- history: To what extent could history be called “the collective memory of the past”? How is the present – and possibly the future – affected by how we understand the past?
- ethics: Is it wrong for children to be recruited into armed conflict? If so, why?
- ethics: Does awareness of a problem bring any responsibility to correct it? Why or why not? Whose responsibility is the problem of children traumatized by violence?
- CAS (Creativity Action Service): TOK explores knowledge questions, including those of ethical responsibility. For practical action, however, it passes the questions to another part of the IB Diploma programme, CAS. What can be done toward solving the problem of child soldiers – or, more broadly, toward creating a better and more peaceful world?

¹⁷ Ishmael Beah, “The Making, and Unmaking, of a Child Soldier”. New York Times, January 14, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/14/magazine/14soldier.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

¹⁸ Romeo Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children: The Global Quest to Eradicate Child Soldiers*. Random House, Canada, 2010. pages 4, 3

Discussion Activity**Shared Remembrance**

In this photograph from a ceremony in October 2011 in Berlin, Germany, participants place white roses on the railway tracks in memory of the first deportation 70 years earlier of members of the Jewish community to their deaths in concentration camps. In many parts of the world, rituals of remembrance are part of regular public ceremony, and monuments of commemoration are part of the public space.

- What monuments or ceremonies of remembrance exist in your own society? What do they commemorate? Do they mark sad and happy memories equally? Are there

any major differences of perspectives on what exactly they mean?

- Do ceremonies of remembrance preserve the personal knowledge of the participants, or the shared knowledge of the society? Is there such a thing as "collective memory" and, if so, what is it?
- Are remembrances of the past relevant only to our understanding of the past? In what ways are commemorations relevant to the present, or even to the future?
- In what ways might knowledge of history be important to decision-making of the present?

“Memory is the highest, and perhaps the most meaningful tribute one can pay to the victims of genocide. Those who commit genocide do not only intend to kill, but to erase their victims from the collective memory of the world.”¹⁹

Richard Sezibera
former Ambassador of Rwanda

Oral history is particularly dependent on the combination of memory and language, and on the unbroken connection between generations as the stories that carry knowledge are told again and again. “My people’s memory reaches into the beginning of all things,” declared Chief Dan George of the indigenous Coast Salish nation, commenting on traditional stories that reached back to human creation. “If the legends fall silent, who will teach children of our ways?” A chief and a poet, he reflected late in the 20th century on the importance of transferring knowledge from an oral tradition to a written one, to preserve the memory of his people:

We have suffered much, now we stand to lose all unless we preserve whatever is left from the days of our ancestors. To do this, the spoken word is not enough. . . . Therefore we must write about our ways, our beliefs, our customs, our morals, how we look at things and why, how we lived, and how we live now. . . . To those who believe in the power of the written word these books will proclaim our cultural worth. It has been done so for other races and their teachings.²⁰

¹⁹ Richard Sezibera, cited in Robert Krell, “My Journey as a Child Holocaust Survivor”, adapted from his keynote address at the United Nations International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, 27 January 2012. <http://www.un.org/en/holocaustremembrance/docs/paper18.shtml>

²⁰ Chief Dan George. *My Heart Soars*. Saanichton, British Columbia: Hancock House Publishers, 1979. <http://www.umilta.net/chief.html>

We will return in chapter 8 to the role of language as a way of knowing, both oral and written, and to the preservation and sharing of memory through the written archive.

Memory: a TOK way of knowing

Memory, clearly, does not operate on its own as a way of knowing. It interacts with sense perception and emotion, intuition and language – not just in the *content* of memories retained of the past but also in the *process* as we recall the past, reshape it, or forget it. As the New Jersey judge summed it up, “Memory is a constructive, dynamic, and selective process.”

As we build and question our knowledge, we certainly do want to be aware that memory is not totally reliable, and want to know what further questions to ask, or fallibilities to take into account, before reaching conclusions with memory as the justification. At the same time, though, we do not want to be so doubtful that we fail to appreciate the fine role of memory in our lives.

Fragile and malleable though it may be, memory nevertheless allows us to build our knowledge as we learn from past experience, storing our skills in our procedural memory and our experiences and information in our declarative memory. Memory allows us to create our identities, understand increasingly our place with other people in a society, and gain a sense of continuity in our lives. Assuredly, memory is not perfect. But can't we still manage with imperfection, recognizing it as

such and simply doing our best to overcome its limitations?

In situations where the truth of the past does have significant implications, we really must confront the fallibility of memory and seek corroboration before accepting knowledge claims. The truth matters, for instance, in trials and tribunals, in records that affect the decisions of the present, and in explanations that influence our understanding of how we came to stand where we are. In such cases, we aim for *objectivity*: we try to confirm memories with other memories (coherence check) and seek out any other forms of evidence that would corroborate or revise our versions of the past (correspondence check).

In many situations, though, we can probably function cheerfully with a blurry sense of the past. We are often content with our own *subjectivity*: we care about what the memories mean to us, and how they function in the stories we tell ourselves of our lives. Does it really matter what song was, *in fact*, playing on that special evening long ago, the one with the full moon – or whether the moon was, *in fact*, full? For much of our lives, we might accept our personally edited fuzziness of memory and realize that, when our memories conflict with someone else's, we could both be wrong. We might recognize the deficiencies of our memories and, instead of despairing over imperfections, take appropriate action: keep the keepsakes and take the photographs, and enjoy them. *And* – write our upcoming appointments into the calendar, so that we don't forget.

For Reflection

How can memories of the past be checked for accuracy?

What are the dangers to knowledge of over-emphasizing the reliability of memory?

What are the dangers to knowledge of over-emphasizing the unreliability of memory?

Activity on words from the beginning of the chapter:

Most people taking this test will include “window” in the list of words they recall, even though it is not one of them. Can you suggest why? Could such collective agreement on a false detail of memory ever have disastrous consequences?