
Are Memories A True Reflection Of The Events?

We often associate the word 'history' and 'fact' as synonymous and interchangeable. We don't take into consideration what goes on while recounting or retelling stories or events from the past. Memories are constructed and reconstructed with every re-telling of the event, and with every repetition, the recollection is slightly altered and changed. The question that this paper aims to answer is whether memories and personal testimonies paint an accurate picture of what truly went down in the past, or do they create false alternate realities?

David Gallo defines memory as "not simply recording of the past, but a deliberate piecing-together of retrieved information and other relevant information in an effort to make sense of the past" (Gallo 13). Stories of our ancestors are often passed down generation after generation in the oral and written form. After a few decades, these memories are seen less as a person's stories and life experiences and more as a 'historical account', which is viewed as being an unchangeable fact. However, how people recall memories is not only about what they want to remember, but also about how they want to be remembered by others. One might distort the details of a story to make oneself look better, or in cases of testimonies, to plead innocence. In Akutagawa's story *In the Bamboo Grove*, the three people involved in the murder provide three contrasting testimonies of what had happened, as each of them had their self-interest relating to honour and pride in mind. This illustrates how oral narrations of an occurrence can be laced with misrepresentations and contortions of the truth.

Psychologists have conducted extensive research on the 'false memory syndrome' or the 'misinformation effect' and have found that it is possible to plant memories of events that never happened in the first place. Studies have shown that when people experience an event and are later exposed to new and misleading information about it, their recollections often become distorted. In other words, they can be coaxed into 'remembering' events that had never happened. Participants in one such study were led to believe that they got lost in a shopping mall as a child and an old man helped them get back to their parents, but all of this never happened (Loftus). Researchers planted a false memory in their heads, of which they were later convinced that it was the truth; it was their history. As a result, this invalidates the very idea based on which these events are recounted and remembered; historical memory cannot be trusted, and our past being an alternate becomes a possibility.

In the novel *The Sense of an Ending*, the protagonist Tony talks about how "memory isn't the lies of the victors, but the self-delusions of the survivors" (Barnes 16). The history that we know is of Tony's – the survivor who chose to tell it, and not Adrian's – the victor who died. Tony recalls certain things which are just distorted and altered versions of his past. It is highly probable that Adrian's version of the story would've been very different from Tony's. After all, what one ends up remembering isn't always what one has witnessed (Barnes 1). Tony doesn't remember the letter he wrote to be as scathing and malicious as it was, hence making his judgement of Adrian and Veronica's character and behaviour towards him highly questionable. Retold stories characteristically add background details absent from the originals, hence not only reordering past scenes, but creating wholly new ones (Lowenthal).

Another phenomenon, called the 'Mandela effect' also goes to show how collective memory,

i.e., memories of large groups of people can also be contradictory to actual events. One of the most popular examples is the dialogue “Luke, I am your father” by Darth Vader from the Star Wars saga. The phrase is closely associated with the series, with millions’ worth of merchandise having this dialogue on them. However, Darth Vader never actually said these words - he said “No, I am your father” as a response to Luke. Nonetheless, fans incorporate this dialogue into their lives and swear that it is a true memory. Hence, these false memories and recollections are not just held by individuals, but also by larger groups, even societies. Collective memories, in this case and many others, have often proven to be constructed realities – events that people want to believe were true, but are actually not.

Loftus describes memory as being “like a Wikipedia page – you can edit it, but so can others” (“How reliable is your memory?”). The idea of retroactive interference comes into play here. It is a phenomenon wherein new information learnt comes in the way, and interferes with the old information which our memory has stored (Williams). For instance, one might have had a bad experience with a course at college. Over the years, they keep meeting people who are convinced that it was an amazing course. After a while, the person will also start to believe that their experience of the course was amazing. This is because the old information is still being stored in our memory, but it cannot be retrieved because of the competition created by the new information that comes in. Hence, we can be led to believe that we had a drastically different experience, making our memory of events unreliable and unstable.

In fact, an act as simple as describing an incident of the previous day is not completely accurate. Michael Gazzaniga says that we are basically programmed to lying – that there is an ‘interpreter’ in the brain that reconstructs events, and in doing so makes errors of perception, memory and judgement. This interpreter also tries to keep our story together, and to do that, it learns to lie to itself. This is especially apparent in cases of autobiographies and memoirs – even though they describe the person’s life to a certain extent, a large part of the narration is this ‘interpreter’ lying to itself to give an illusion of being in control (Freeman). Elie Wiesel’s Night is an autobiographical account of the author’s experience in a German concentration camp, and the horrors he faced during that one year of his life. Whether his image of the camp is completely accurate is questionable – the unreliability of memories is increased when they engage traumatic materials (Ibrahim). Memories involving emotional or physical distress demand avoidance and repression – so, Wiesel’s account can’t be seen as a factual retelling of the occurrences of the concentration camp (Childers).

Despite evidence that suggests otherwise, history in textbooks portrays itself to be a factual and exact account of events of the past. The narrator in such textbooks offers a detached and objective view of history and leaves no scope for things such as differences in vantage points, memory lapses, perception etc. Hence, the history that we’re traditionally taught in school does not present an actual view of what went down in the past, but creates an image of the past which is sparsely sprinkled with truths.