MEMORY AND HISTORY: WHAT CAN YOU BELIEVE?

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EDITOR’S PREFACE AND ABSTRACT: The archivists attending the joint meeting of the Midwest Archives Conference and the Society of Rocky Mountain Archivists, held in Topeka in October 1995, were privileged to hear a plenary address by W. Walter Menninger, M.D., the president and chief executive officer of the Menninger Foundation and Clinic. Dr. Menninger was formerly dean of the Karl Menninger School of Psychiatry and Mental Health Sciences, and is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Kansas University Medical School. He has written and lectured widely throughout his long and distinguished career, to both professional and lay audiences.

Dr. Menninger also has a long-standing interest in the problems of history, especially in the relationship between human memory and historical reality. His psychiatric practice and his professional research have afforded him ample opportunities to consider the complexities of human memory and its relationship to historical documentation.

His plenary remarks—reproduced here almost exactly as he delivered them—center on the idea that memory can rarely be depended upon to faithfully recall past events, especially those in which the subject directly participated. For various reasons—including self-protective mechanisms in the mind and the disaggregated fashion in which the mind stores memory fragments—we tend to remember past events unreliably and our recollection changes over the course of our lives. As Dr. Menninger points out, this calls into question historical documentation that is predominantly based on people’s recollections of past events.

While historians and other end users of historical evidence are the principal targets of Dr. Menninger’s cautions, his message is an important one for archivists, as well, as we assess the reliability—and therefore the archival value—of our sources and as we become increasingly involved with creating our own documentation through tools, like oral history, which rely so heavily on individual memory.
Introduction

Ten years ago it was my privilege to keynote the annual meeting of the American Association of State and Local History when it met in Topeka, where I was asked to share some thoughts on the relationship of the human mind and history. At the time, I had been intrigued with the vicissitudes of human memory. All too often I came across instances of individuals recalling history as it wasn’t. In a period when modern technology has enhanced the recording—tape and video—of oral history, I thought it advisable to explore the validity and reliability of memories. My title on that occasion: “Say It Isn’t So: When Wishful Thinking Obscures Historical Reality.” Today, I want to pick up on that theme, with a recognition that the past ten years have seen further recognition of the limits to the accuracy of human memory.

As a physician specializing in psychiatry and psychoanalysis, I am keenly aware of the importance of the past as prologue. As part of a clinical evaluation, it is essential to take a careful history. Knowledge of an individual’s past experiences and behavior is vital to understanding his or her present difficulties. Yet, as a result of any number of processes, an individual’s perceptions and memories can be distorted. Usually, the distortion is a function of an emotional need to preserve one’s self-esteem or protect the individual from the emotional consequences of what actually happened. For whatever reason, historical reality is modified.

In 1985 psychologist Daniel Goleman authored a book about this phenomenon entitled Vital Lies, Simple Truths, The Psychology of Self-Deception. He included an extraordinary example of this process—John Dean’s memory. You may recall that John Dean was the legal counsel for President Nixon at the time of the Watergate cover-up. When he came forth to testify at the Senate investigatory hearings in June of 1973, Dean submitted a 245-page statement recounting, in specific detail, events and conversations over the many months he was involved in the Watergate affair. When queried about his facility for recalling details of conversations which took place many months before, Dean responded: “My mind is not a tape recorder, but it certainly receives the message that is being given.”

Little did he apparently realize how his remarks might be checked. For when the tapes of Nixon’s conversations with his staff were ultimately revealed, it was possible to check the accuracy of Dean’s detailed recollections. (This comparison was actually done by Ulric Neisser.) On the day of the grand jury indictment of the five Watergate burglars, Dean met in the Oval Office with Nixon and Haldeman. Dean reported the meeting as follows:

The President asked me to sit down. Both men appeared to be in very good spirits and my reception was very warm and cordial. The President then told me that Bob (Haldeman) had kept him posted on my handling of the Watergate case. The president told me I had done a good job and he appreciated how difficult a task it had been and the President was pleased that the case had stopped with Liddy. I responded that I could not take credit because others had done much more difficult things than I had done.... I told him that all I had been able to do was to contain the case and assist in keeping it out of the White House. I also told him
there was a long way to go before this matter would end and that I certainly could make no assurances that the day would not come when this matter would start to unravel.³

When this statement is compared to the taped session:
Comparison...shows that hardly a word of Dean’s account is true. Nixon did not say any of the things attributed to him here: he didn’t ask Dean to sit down, he didn’t say Haldeman had kept him posted, he didn’t say Dean had done a good job (at least not in that part of the conversation), he didn’t say anything about Liddy or the indictments. Nor had Dean himself said the things he later describes himself as saying: that he couldn’t take credit, that the matter might unravel some day, etc. (Indeed, he said just the opposite later on: “Nothing is going to come crashing down.”) His account is plausible, but entirely incorrect.⁴

To understand these distortions, one must conclude that Dean’s testimony described not the meeting itself but his fantasy of the meeting as it should have been. In Dean’s mind, Nixon should have been glad that the indictments stopped with the five burglars, Haldeman should have told Nixon what a great job Dean was doing; and Dean should have told Nixon that the cover-up might unravel instead of actually telling him it was a great success. The key to understanding this phenomenon is wishful thinking.

Tell It Like It Is

At times, we are challenged to “tell it like it is,” or in the words of Dragnet’s Joe Friday: “Give me the facts, ma’am, just the facts.” Yet, if you look more carefully, you discover that people don’t really want to hear it “like it is”; they want to hear it like they want it to be.

Historically, there is a tradition of rejecting findings from knowledge or science when they challenge our sense of the world as it should be and wound our self-esteem. Recall the degree to which Copernicus was vilified because he had the gall to suggest the earth was not the center of the universe, but instead revolved around the sun. There is still much resistance to the concept of evolution as forwarded by Charles Darwin.

We are often as threatened by the truth about ourselves as by the truth about the world. Many of Sigmund Freud’s ideas have been rejected because people are reluctant to accept the idea that there exist within our minds thoughts, feelings, memories and past experiences which are not accessible to our conscious awareness, but which, nonetheless, influence our behavior and conscious thoughts.

Further, we are troubled that others might learn the “truth” about us. At one time or another, nearly all of my patients have reluctantly shared with me the fear that if I knew the awful truth about them, I would have nothing more to do with them. Yet all of us have crazy and unacceptable thoughts and feelings, which we share with no one, because if we did, we would be “exposed.” No one is immune to these feelings, no matter what station in life. We pretend, and we hold forth pride. We deny our limitations. We work hard to defend ourselves from seeing it “like it is” and facing up to any emotional and embarrassing consequences of that reality.
Autobiographical Memory

Students of memory identify different kinds of memory. There is the short term or “working” memory, which occurs when you look up a telephone number and keep it in mind until you dial. There is long term memory of events in the distant past, like your childhood home. There is “implicit” or “procedural” memory, which refers to behavioral knowledge of an experience without conscious recall, such as a skill once learned like riding a bicycle or swimming, or an affective reaction in response to a stimulus without understanding the basis for that reaction. There is “explicit” or “declarative” memory, which is the ability to consciously recall facts or events. There is “episodic” memory for specific events which have occurred in your life.

Autobiographical memory is largely episodic memory for both unique events occurring in one’s life—like a graduation—and recurring events—like trips to grandmother’s house. These memories typically include a great deal of visual imagery, but they are in no way like a video camera recording because such events are not experienced objectively. Our perceptions are inevitably biased by a variety of factors: our age and capacity to understand what is happening, our expectations and knowledge at the time of the event, and the stress and bodily sensations experienced during the event. It is significant that, no matter how accurately an event may be perceived and stored, when it is remembered it is not simply replayed as on a videotape; it is reconstructed.

With regard to memory for life events, research shows that as time goes by details get lost, though memories for unique events are likely to be more accurate than memories for recurrent events. With recurrent events we may recall generally what happened and reconstruct details according to what is plausible. Or, “we may sharply remember a few details and then reconstruct the whole from them: ‘Out of a few stored bone chips, we remember a dinosaur.’ Alternatively, consider this library metaphor: ‘memory is not so much like reading a book as it is like writing one from fragmentary notes.’”

Psychologist Elizabeth Loftus characterizes human memories as being stored in mental drawers in our brain, drawers which “are obviously extremely crowded and densely packed. They are also constantly being emptied out, scattered about, and then stuffed back into place.... As new bits and pieces of information are added into long-term memory, the old memories are replaced, crumpled up, or shoved into corners. Little details are added, confusing or extraneous elements are deleted, and a coherent construction of the facts is gradually created that may bear little resemblance to the original event.”

From her work with eyewitness testimony in legal cases Loftus has found that “Memories don’t just fade, as the old saying would have us believe, they also grow. What fades is the initial perception, the actual experience of the events. Every time we recall an event, we must reconstruct the memory, and with each recollection the memory may be changed—colored by succeeding events, other people’s recollections and suggestions, increased understanding or a new context.” Indeed, Loftus offers some striking examples of instances where eyewitnesses have clearly had their memories strongly influenced by the subtle suggestion of law enforcement officers.
Rewriting History

In George Orwell’s 1984 the central character, Winston Smith, worked in the Ministry of Truth where he rewrote newspaper articles in the archives each time there was a change in alliances. He would have to change the old enemy to a new ally and make it appear as if it had always been as it now was, and vice versa.7 We now know that what Orwell fantasized indeed occurred in recent history, with a rewriting of records behind the old Iron Curtain.

While that activity represents an obvious and overt threat to the historian’s search for accuracy in the past, there is another more subtle rewriting of history. This is the rewriting that occurs as people in their mature years reminisce and recall events of their earlier lives—but do so incorrectly. Clearly, some historians recognize this propensity; at least Carl Van Doren did in his Pulitzer prize-winning biography, Benjamin Franklin. Early in the book, Van Doren observes:

So far in this history, Franklin, speaking of himself in his own words, has almost always spoken in the words of the Autobiography which he wrote 45 years after the departure from Gravesend, when he was sage and famous and writing for his son, the governor of New Jersey. Perhaps then he tempered the account of his youth, saw his course as straighter than it was, left out or had forgotten his ranker appetites, remembered too clearly the mind and will which had out lasted the lost years.8

An interesting perspective on recollection of life events is found in the research of psychiatrist George Vaillant, who interviewed, thirty years later, 95 subjects of a study begun in the late 1930s and early 1940s at Harvard. The original study was funded by the W.T. Grant Foundation as a longitudinal study of young adults in good health. Vaillant notes that:

Psychologically, the Grant Study subjects in adult life fared much better than the population as a whole, but it is hard to say how much better. Originally chosen for good health, there were none who experienced difficulties too severe to master, but there were also none who had survived the game of life without pain, effort, and anxiety.9

As he organized his data from the follow-up interviews, Vaillant compared the data with questionnaire responses obtained at the beginning of the study. He writes:

It is clear that the distortions produced by adaptive mechanisms may, over a period of years, become part of the individual’s world view. Truth too awful to bear is unconsciously altered or postponed; the altered truth then becomes subjectively true. In other words, the men’s adaptive styles affected their childhood environment as much as childhood affected choice of adaptation.10

Observes Vaillant, “Repression is the prototype of all the adaptive mechanisms—if you cannot bear it, forget it.”11 Certainly, some individuals use this adaptive mechanism more than others. It is not surprising for persons to recall a past which is simply consistent with their present views. Indeed, some have observed that history is a record of present beliefs and wishes, not a replica of the past. Remembering is a reconstruction using bits of past experience to describe a present state.
In describing the childhood memories of Leonardo da Vinci, Freud wrote:

[Childhood memories] are not fixed at the moment of being experienced and afterwards repeated, but are only elicited at a later age when childhood is already past; in the process, they are altered and falsified, and are put into the service of later trends.  

Consider, in this context, the case of Robert Jordan, one of the composite Grant Study subjects interviewed by Vaillant. At age nineteen, Jordan was extremely conservative and attended Catholic mass four times a week. He also reported to the study psychiatrist a dream that he experienced perhaps forty times. When Vaillant interviewed him thirty years later, Jordan maintained that as soon as he arrived in college, he had doubted the validity of religion and given up church altogether. He also said that he could only recall one recurrent childhood dream, which was not the same one reported during his college years. Concludes Vaillant:

A dream repeated forty times and church going repeated four times a week had been forgotten. How then may we obtain truth about the adult life cycle? Clearly it must be studied prospectively. It is all too common for caterpillars to become butterflies and then to maintain that in their youth they had been little butterflies. Maturation makes liars of us all.

Vaillant cites other instances of forgetting. One man originally reported a class standing in military school of third out of 150. At the time he was fifty years old, he had become second out of 900. Another Grant Study subject did not approve of his adolescent children’s use of marijuana. Yet in 1940, he had praised the pot-like effects of alcohol, when he wrote: “I get gentler, sweeter, less sarcastic, and enjoy dancing more. My mind is usually quite bright; I feel closer to music than ever, more open to people. Alcohol is always a pleasant experience.” Vaillant notes that this man, in worrying over his adolescent children, had almost forgotten that in his own adolescence, he too had been a long-haired university dropout who wandered across Europe.

Memory As A Self-Portrait

Menninger psychologist Jon Allen suggests that what you recall at any given moment is consistent with your self-concept at the time. You have a strong tendency to reconstruct events you experienced in a way that is consistent with your current self-image and the rest of your knowledge about yourself. What you remember is consistent with what should have happened in light of your current self-portrait. If you’re feeling depressed, you’ll remember your failure; if you’re feeling confident, you’ll remember your success. As your self-concept changes, you revise your autobiography. Further, nothing stays still in the brain. Every reconstruction is always a partially new construction. Especially as you recall an event many times, the connections become changed in the process. Under the guidance of your self-portrait, when you reconstruct, you may weave in fantasy and wishful thinking, reshaping your “memory” in your brain.

As Elizabeth Loftus has put it, “Truth and reality, when seen through the filter of our memories, are not objective facts, but subjective, interpretative realities. We interpret the past, correcting ourselves, adding bits and pieces, deleting uncomplimentary or disturbing recollections, sweeping, dusting, tidying things up. ...We are innocent vic-
Recollections Of Childhood Trauma: True Or False

In the field of psychiatry in recent years, there has been an increasing controversy about the recollection by some patients of childhood traumatic experiences, particularly incidents of sexual abuse. The uncertainty of how to interpret adult recollection of childhood memories was reflected in Freud's early work. As his patients recounted such experiences, he first assumed they were based in some factual past event. Then he came to the conclusion that some of such reports were more likely a reconstruction and not an actual experience. An increased awareness of the considerable extent of child abuse in recent years has prompted clinicians to reconsider that position.

We have had an explosion of such recollections in clinical psychiatry as we have gained more understanding of patients struggling with multiple personality disorder and other personality disturbances associated with early trauma. At the same time, the zeal of some therapists in search of presumed early childhood trauma has led to the phenomenon of the "false memory syndrome." It is quite clear that not all recovered memories in these patients accurately reflect past events. Indeed, the American Bar Association Journal two years ago featured an article on "Buried Memories, Shattered Lives" which cited legal cases where judges and juries were beginning to view with skepticism some sex abuse claims based on so-called recovered memories.17

The American Psychiatric Association formulated a statement addressing the issue of memories of sexual abuse. It acknowledges that some individuals who have experienced documented traumatic events may nevertheless include some false or inconsistent elements in their reports. Further, it notes that memories can be significantly influenced by questioning, especially in young children. Also, memories can be significantly influenced by a trusted person, such as a therapist, who suggests abuse as an explanation for symptoms or problems, despite initial lack of memory of such abuse. Repeated questioning may lead individuals to report "memories" of events that never occurred.18

Memory In Old Age

Numerous studies have found changes in memory associated with the aging process. Typically, with the loss of brain cells, there is impairment of short-term memory, of immediate recall of recently learned information. Long-term memory is less impaired, although such recollections may well be distorted.

Virginia Revere and Sheldon Tobin studied reminiscence data from two population groups, one middle-aged and the other older-aged. They hypothesized that the older group would relate to the past in a different way, suspecting the older person no longer has a need to see the past realistically. "Rather," they opined:

the need is to see the past in such a way as to achieve some measure of immortality, to see oneself as a hero of a life worth remembering. Stated
another way, to see oneself as a hero of a drama worth telling, a drama worth having lived for.19

Revere and Tobin found that the intensity and involvement with the memories and the extent of dramatization were, as anticipated, much greater in the older group than in the middle-age group. There was no significant difference between the two groups in the consistency of values and acceptance of life as it was. But, in the older group, the researchers more often found a positive affirmation of life or a greater incidence of viewing significant figures positively.

The researchers conclude, "older persons were not only more involved with their pasts, but involved in the special way of mythicizing their recollections." This mythicizing of significant figures" can be interpreted as an adaptational response that is different from making sense of one's life.... These aged persons have recast their memories to make the uniqueness of themselves vivid. In this sense, the past becomes more real and more poignant. The myth is the reality."20

**An Historian's Recollections**

The theme persists: our memories may not be completely trustworthy and our recollections may be more wishful thinking than true reality. Our memories recreate a past that justifies and sustains our self-esteem. Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., calls attention to this problem in his essay, "The Historian as Participant." He suggests that "there is something distinctive about the historical temperament and the historical approach; the historian surely brings to the observation and analysis of events a perspective different from that brought by the nonhistorian."21

Yet Schlesinger also questions whether participation in public events might not disqualify someone from writing about these events as an historian. He recalls the words of Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the few historians to suffer the ultimate criticism of the executioner's axe, that "whosoever, in writing a modern history, shall follow truth too near the heels, it may haply strike out his teeth."

Schlesinger writes that personal participation in an historical episode may well make the historian more critical of his materials. He notes:

In writing about the past, the technical historian often is tempted to use letters, diaries, memoranda, newspapers as if they were reliable forms of evidence. When such evidence is construed under the pressure of direct experience, however, it may become more apparent that A's letters are his own self-serving versions of events; that B's diaries are designed, consciously or not, to dignify the diarist and discredit his opponents; that C's memoranda are written to improve the record; and that the newspapermen recording the transactions had only the dimmest idea of what was really going on.22

Schlesinger goes on to write:

It is not obvious in practice that time has been, in fact, the father of truth, if by truth we mean the agreement of historians...As long as the problems are still alive, the passage of time only offers new possibilities for distortion. The present, as historians well know, re-creates the past.
This is partly because, once we know how things have come out, we tend to rewrite the past in terms of historical inevitability. Schlesinger cites what James has called “our indominitable desire to cast the world into a more rational shape in our minds than the shape into which it is thrown there by the crude order of experience.” He then concludes that “the historian’s compulsion is the passion for pattern. Reconstructing the events in the quiet of his study, he likes to tidy things up, to find interconnections and unities.”

The Search For Truth

Schlesinger’s observations differ little from the observations of Freud and other students of human nature and the human mind. We seek to order our universe to make it reasonable and predictable and manageable. But we are human and subject to human frailties and limitations. We search for the truth, but only half-heartedly, when we fear the truth may not be in our best interests. So we are inconsistent and self-serving in our recollections, despite our best intentions to be otherwise. As often as not, we may not fully understand why we feel or act the way we do, and we struggle after the fact to come up with a rational explanation for our feelings and actions.

As a psychiatrist, I try to take an objective position with regard to patients who come to me. I will confront my patients with any disparity between the truth as they perceive it and the truth and reality as I see it. Yet I know that reactions within me can bias my own perception if I am not careful. And I have been most impressed with the unevenness of memory.

Clearly, the historian seeks to be objective in the assessment of historical materials and to draw appropriate inferences from those materials. Nevertheless, we all need to keep in mind the limitations of data based on human memory and reminiscence. In terms of your work, you must recognize the limitations of oral history and reports of past events based just on later memory. Autobiographers should check memories against other verifying information with regard to one or another historical event. We must acknowledge the human propensity to replace reality with wishful thinking, toward the end of an enhanced self-esteem, and an affirmation of worth and meaning for one’s lifetime.
NOTES


