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How Reliable Is Your Memory?

Memory is one of the most important types of human cognition. Memories not only shape one's identity, but they also play a crucial role in one's mental and psychological well-being. People tend to trust their memory and rely on it in a variety of situations, however is it always a valid source of information? Psychologist Elizabeth Loftus discusses this question in her TED speech and explains that the phenomenon of false memories is much more widespread than one might think. Many contemporary researches confirm Loftus' claims and reveal how human memory can be manipulated by means of different psychological techniques.

In her speech, Loftus describes a precise mechanism of the formation of false memories. In particular, she states that, unlike many people imagine, memory does not work as the recorder that simply registers the events of reality. Instead, it functions much like a "Wikipedia page" (Loftus *How Reliable*). In other words, memories can be edited both by the bearer of the memories and by other people. It can be done by creating stressful circumstances, using specific question formulations, providing suggestive information, etc. Clearly, memory is subject to manipulative actions and various kinds of distortion.

Interestingly, memory experience itself can stem from other cognitive processes, which also contributes to understanding of false memories. Thus, some researchers distinguish between "Knowing and Remembering," or 'Familiarity and Recollection,' and [it is] shown that errors often result from misattribution of familiarity which can sometimes be corrected with recollection" (Johnson 5256). In other words, the information that is familiar to a person through indirect contact can turn into a false recollection of a supposedly direct experience. Many associative and integrative processes of cognition can lead to such confusion (Johnson 5255). This kind of manipulation with one's memories is often involuntary, and a person cannot control it.

Loftus specifically focuses on the notion of misinformation. It is misleading data or accounts that can be fed to a person unintentionally or on purpose (Loftus *How Reliable*). It may include media coverage, multiple confusing witness reports, or other sources. Being exposed to misinformation can result in "misattributing a memory from one source as having occurred in another" and, therefore, its content being altered (Roediger et al. 301). The speaker underlines that misinformation is everywhere, and it leads to the "contamination" of people's memory (Loftus *How Reliable*). The scientist exemplifies her claims with the experiment where the subjects who needed to identify an interrogator were put in highly stressful conditions and were fed misleading suggestive clues, which eventually made them choose the wrong people (Loftus *How Reliable*). She also provides alarming statistical data citing a project revealing that 300 individuals convicted of the crimes they did not commit ended up in prison based on faulty eyewitnesses' memories (Loftus *How Reliable*). Evidently, the issue of false memories can have a drastic impact on people's lives.

The Loftus' discussion of psychotherapy is concerned with a particularly significant role of the false memory phenomenon in terms of its influence on one's psyche. The psychologist explains how certain types of therapeutic approaches, including the use of imagination exercises, hypnosis, and dream interpretation can lead to the formation of false memories in a patient. For instance, when a therapist works with the client and asks him or her to imagine a certain life scenario that could have taken place in the past, the repetition of the practice may result in the emergence of the false memory due to the so-called imagination inflation (Loftus *Memory Distortion* 287-288). The suggestive character of such therapeutic manipulations creates the environment where the patient can easily acquire new non-existent recollections of the past events.

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Especially ambiguous may be a therapist's attempt to work with repressed memories. This type of recollections is based on the hypothesis that people "banish traumatic experiences" in order to cope with their destructive effect (Loftus *Memory Distortion* 283). Brewin and Andrews concisely explain the procedure: "Clients with no suspicion of having been abused enter treatment with a therapist who suggests their problems are likely to stem from repressed memories of child sexual abuse and sets about encouraging them to recover the memories using hypnosis, guided imagery, or related techniques" (2). Clearly, suggestive approach utilized in therapy can lead to an implantation of a traumatic recollection that did not take place in reality. Loftus tells about the woman who was made to believe she had lived through the experience of ritualistic abuse after she attended therapy. This connection between psychotherapeutic processes and creation of faulty memories prompts many scientists to attempt to gain a more profound insight into the nature of false memories.

Therefore, intentional implantation of the non-existent memories has been the subject of multiple studies and experiments in psychology and cognitive sciences. Remarkably, researchers even managed to create unusual distorted recollections in the minds of individuals. For instance, in one study, more than a half of the participants produced false memories of a hot balloon ride when presented with a "(merged) picture of them in a hot-air-balloon" (Steffens & Mecklenbräuker 7). Numerous similar experiments on memory implantation have been carried out over the past several decades. Apparently, scientists strive to understand the mechanism of memory implantation and determine why certain people tend to develop false memories while others do not.

However, it is emphasized that researching of distorted memories is challenging. The problems in the credibility of experiment outcomes may arise due to the lack of direct control over the focus group, as well as over the stimuli that trigger the formation of such memories (Steffens & Mecklenbräuker 3). Besides, it is necessary to take into consideration multiple variables such as the subjects' age, gender, cognitive development peculiarities, etc. All these factors make the false memory exploration highly complex and demanding in terms of the methods and technologies required for its realization.

Even more importantly, the studies on implantation of the false memories have ethical implications. Loftus recognizes that altering a person's memories in a manipulative manner may lead to the changes in their behavior and attitudes. Undoubtedly, this technique contradicts the general ethics because it meddles with a person's mind and psyche. However, the scientist also provides the examples of the false memories being helpful in combating unhealthy food choices in children and suggests that parents may try to use the implantation approach (Loftus *Memory*

Distortion). Yet, the issue of the ethical acceptability of the use of false memories remains a subject of debate.

Loftus' speech has certainly made me ponder over the relation between human memory and human identity. Although I have never experienced or witnessed a false memory, now I have a much more skeptical view of the recollections of my own life. The studies conducted by Loftus and other scientists prove that the memories that have shaped me as a personality and have given me precious experiences might be not entirely accurate. This perplexing conclusion leads to the question as to how much our identity is affected by the false memories the formation of which is not under our conscious control. Nevertheless, I believe one should trust his or her memory and rely on this cognitive source. Our brain capacity is immense, and the amount of recollections altered by misinformation of various sorts is probably miniscule in relation to the enormous body of real, vivid, and credible accounts of our lives.

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