Imperfect Cognitions

Blog on delusions, memory distortions, confabulations, biases and irrational beliefs.

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"I forgot that you existed": Making people responsible for their memories

This post is Marina Trakas, a philosopher and cognitive scientist interested in the ethical and epistemological aspects of memories of our personal past.

Marina Trakas

In a recent empirical study published in the *American Psychologist*, researchers from the University of Texas at Austin (Yan et al. 2024) investigated a novel and relatively unexplored factor possibly contributing to the gender gap in science, particularly in citation practices: memory mechanisms. They found that during a free recall task, wherein professors were asked to remember the names of experts and rising stars in their field, male professors (but not their female counterparts) underrepresented women researchers compared to a set of baselines.

One possible explanation for this finding could be that male professors either did not remember female names or recalled fewer of them due to a lack of memory traces of these names. If they never encoded this information, they cannot remember it, given that this information is not available for retrieval. This explanation seems straightforward, but it is unlikely to be the right kind of explanation.

Why is it unlikely? Everyone would probably agree that nowadays, it is highly improbable that these male professors never meet or hear about a tenured female colleague working on similar topics. It might occasionally occur in tightly knit inner circles within certain fields where there are only a handful of people working on the topic. However, such instances are quite rare when considering the broader field to which this subfield may belong. But there are more than just intuitive reasons to doubt this initial potential explanation.

The same researchers conducted a series of additional tests to ensure that the tendency to remember more male names was not simply due to availability. First, they examined the order in which names were recalled: while male professors were unlikely to recall a woman's name near the beginning of the list, the likelihood of recalling female experts increased as the list progressed, suggesting that female names were indeed available but took more time to come to mind.

Secondly, to further explore this possibility, they included a recognition task where lists of famous researchers' names were presented for later recall. Male names were not recognized more frequently than female names, as would have been expected under the availability hypothesis, indicating that female names were just as available as male names. All of this points to an accessibility bias (for a distinction between availability and accessibility, see Tulving & Pearlstone 1966): existing stereotypes, as well as less exposure to female researchers and greater social closeness with male researchers, may make female names less accessible to men when considering whom to cite and whom to invite.

Then the question that arises is: what should we do to remember better and have more inclusive memories in academia? Let's revisit the availability hypothesis and the accessibility hypothesis, as they both suggest different approaches.

A strong interpretation of the availability hypothesis would suggest that when women and people from underrepresented groups in academia are not cited or invited to participate in academic activities, it is simply because their names are not available to those making decisions, who are often men. Their names do not come to their mind because there is no trace of them at all. Perhaps an initial stereotype influenced perception, attention, or encoding processes, resulting in the information about a less frequently encountered female researcher not being retained for later recall.

However, it is not the male professor's fault for not remembering that female researcher. Although the male professor could have made more effort to pay attention to her, there is nothing else he could have done after that initial stage. He has no control over memory processes after that stage, as consolidation processes are mostly unconscious and involuntary. Therefore, male researchers cannot be held responsible for these non-inclusive memories that overlook female researchers.

This holds true in two ways: these memories cannot be properly attributed to them as expressions of their agency, much less as expression of their values; and these men cannot be held accountable for their memories, as it would not be reasonable for others to have specific expectations and demands regarding what they should remember when they have no control over it (for the distinction between attributability and accountability, see Zheng 2016). In conclusion, a strong interpretation of the availability hypothesis suggests that people cannot be held even minimally responsible for their memories: who we remember or forget, and how we remember the past, are largely beyond our control.

A strong interpretation of the accessibility hypothesis paints a completely different picture of the responsibility for our memories, suggesting that we bear some level of responsibility. Thus, male researchers can be blamed for misremembering or forgetting the names of female researchers when considering citations or invitations. Since many of these names have been encoded and are indeed accessible, albeit at a slower rate than those of their male counterparts, failing to remember them or remembering them only as a last resort indicates a form of vice. But what kind of vice? To address this question, it would be useful to examine the actions that these male researchers could have taken to exhibit greater virtue in remembering.

Firstly, they could have exercised more caution and refrained from blindly trusting the first names that came to mind. Blindly trusting the first memories that come to mind in all circumstances can be pernicious, both to others and oneself (for instance, when influenced by a negative mood, only recalling negative aspects of a past experience that reinforce that mood). We do not always have to believe the first memory that pops up in our mind; we can adopt various epistemic attitudes toward memory, including skepticism toward spontaneously recalled memories (Trakas 2021). When such memories have the potential to cause harm and there are no time constraints, consciously and voluntarily exercising our metacognitive abilities to better control and monitor our memories can help prevent or mitigate their potential negative effects.

For example, deliberately focusing on and examining a past experience that initially appears entirely negative can lead to the recollection of more neutral or even positive aspects of that experience. Similarly, concentrating on and thoroughly searching for experts' names in their field can enable male researchers to remember a more diverse range of names and avoid solely focusing on their socially close male colleagues who come to mind first. These processes of monitoring and control can involve conscious, voluntary mental actions, where one attempts to enhance one's own memories by searching within one's own mind, or conscious, voluntary pragmatic actions that entail interaction with the external world and others, such as consulting other colleagues or conducting online literature searches, an option also highlighted by the authors of the aforementioned empirical study (Trakas 2019).

The issue is that these actions do not happen automatically. Engaging in them first requires certain kinds of knowledge. Understanding our own memory capabilities and limitations is crucial to determine when these additional actions are needed. For instance, knowing if one struggles to recall the names of female colleagues when organizing an event, or often tends to automatically endorse the first memories that come to one's mind, is essential for recognizing when extra effort is necessary to have better memories. However, it is not just knowledge about our individual memory abilities that is important; understanding the general workings of memory may also be crucial.

Preliminary findings from an ongoing study I am conducting with psychologist Ryan Daley (Gordon College, US) and philosopher Kate Finley (Hope College, US), as part of a project supported by the Summer Seminars in Neuroscience and Philosophy (Duke University/Templeton World Charity Foundation), suggest that certain metaphors used to conceptualize memory may lead to misconceptions about how memory functions.

The more people consider memory as akin to a hard drive, recording device, or mental time travel, the less likely they are to believe that memory can be biased and influence our decisions and actions towards others, potentially causing harm. While we are still researching whether these memory metaphors also impact memory performance, it is plausible that socially circulating concepts and beliefs about memory, internalized by individuals, also shape their processes of memory monitoring and control, as well as their beliefs and evaluations of their own memory abilities.

But knowledge alone is clearly insufficient. Engaging in mental or pragmatic actions to form better memories also requires certain virtues. Not only the epistemic virtue of seeking knowledge about one's own memory and memory in general, but also, and more importantly, other epistemic virtues such as avoiding overconfidence in one's memories, being open to revising one's own memories, and being receptive to others' perspectives on a shared past, among others. These virtues, which can collectively be termed mnemonic humility, as they all relate to recognizing the limitations and fallibility of memory, are essential for motivating mental and pragmatic actions in our pursuit of better memories.

Virtue and knowledge appear to be deeply intertwined in memory enhancement. Neither is alone sufficient, but both are indispensable. As they enable us to exert some degree of control over our memory processes after encoding, we can be held responsible for misremembering and forgetting, in a twofold sense. Memories can be attributed to individuals since they are, at least in part, reflections of their agency and values, and thus, of their selves. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that individuals would be held accountable for their erroneous, distorted memories, and memory omissions.

This is certainly an imperfect duty, meaning that "we cannot simply ignore it, but we are not obliged to dedicate all our time and resources to it" (Zheng 2016, p. 73). It also ultimately relies on people's good intentions, which are grounded in moral values such as equality, justice, and inclusion, and perhaps even a sense of caring towards others, including strangers. A person who is racist, misogynistic, or narcissistic will never engage in these additional metacognitive actions because they lack the inherent motivation: to be fair, inclusive, and compassionate towards others. They may even deliberately suppress a memory if a female name spontaneously comes to mind (see this). Fortunately, there are individuals out there, including within academia, who possess good intentions. As I have attempted to demonstrate, these individuals are also morally responsible for remembering better and more inclusively.

Posted by Lisa Bortolotti at 08:00 No comments:

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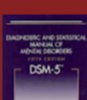

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