

Early-Career ‘Memories’

September 30, 2015

In late 2005, I applied to several psychology PhD programs. I was invited for an interview at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), and I remember meeting Elizabeth Loftus and thinking to myself, “There’s no way I’m qualified to work with a person so highly esteemed and accomplished.”

Thus, I approached our meeting less as an interview and more as a fun opportunity to sit down with someone who might offer some wisdom and advice — perhaps an interesting story or two about her experiences as a psychological scientist and expert in criminal cases. I think my mindset made me feel less nervous about our meeting.

As we spoke, I was struck by how easy it was to talk to her. There was not even a hint of conceit or pretentiousness about her, although she has certainly accomplished enough in her career that a little vanity might be understandable. She related a story to me about how when she was young, she discovered a cat stuck in a neighbor’s tree, and a friend suggested they throw rocks and sticks at it to knock it down. She insisted that they find the cat’s owner and climbed the tree herself to rescue it. There was something endearing and offbeat about her storytelling. Soon after our meeting, I received an offer to come to UCI and work in her lab.

Fast forward to the summer of 2014. I was facing the possibility of a seventh year as a doctoral student at UCI when I was offered a postdoctoral fellowship at The New School for Social Research in New York City. This was a full-circle moment for me: I attended The New School as an undergraduate, so the professors who had taught and mentored me 8 years earlier would now become my colleagues. I accepted the offer, which was contingent on successfully defending my dissertation, and then I got to work. I sequestered myself in my house while everyone I knew luxuriated in the sublime Orange County summer sun and finished writing what would become the longest and most excruciatingly detailed research report I had ever written. My entire experience as a PhD student built to this moment: the dissertation defense.

Those final days in Orange County were a whirlwind. I defended my dissertation on a Thursday; on Saturday my partner and I flew to New York City; and on Tuesday I taught the first session of a Psychology and Law seminar to a group of graduate students. One week earlier I had been a graduate student too, and now I was being addressed as “Dr.”

Now I am back on the job market, hoping that I can line up an academic position for the fall of 2016. Among graduate students and postdocs searching for their next position, fear spreads like a highly infectious disease. “There are more recent PhDs than there are jobs,” “I’m never going to get a job with this publication record,” “I’ll be lucky if I can get a job as a tutor in this job market” — I have heard variations on all of these themes repeated ad infinitum.

Nonacademics also can relate to this kind of anxious uncertainty, and I wonder about its psychological

consequences: According to research in social psychology, the experience of uncertainty about the future might represent a kind of threat to one of our most basic human needs — that is, the need to maintain an understanding of the world as coherent and meaningful (for a review, see Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). Perhaps most importantly, we seem motivated to understand *ourselves* as meaningful pieces of the puzzle — valuable contributors to the big picture. When our understanding of ourselves in the world is threatened by some deeply uncertain future, we seek strategies for self-enhancement and for reaffirming our sense of belonging; we look for ways to maintain meaning and to restore that sense of purpose. Studies have demonstrated that when people are seeking closure and certainty, they are especially likely to cling to their beliefs and worldviews (McGregor & Marigold, 2003), defend members of their in-groups (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983), and recall social events in a way that is consistent with stereotypes (Dijksterhuis, van Knippenberg, Krulanski, & Shaper, 1996). Knowing all of this, it has occurred to me that my anxieties about an unpredictable future might even change the way I relate to memories of the past.

In my own work, I have come to understand memory as a dynamic, reconstructive process. We reimagine our past experiences not by playing them back in our minds, but by piecing them together using many sources of information (e.g., Frenda, Nichols, & Loftus, 2011). Our memories change each time we think and talk about them; they can transform so radically that we end up remembering something entirely different than what actually happened. We even are capable of recalling whole events that never happened at all, sometimes with vivid perceptual and emotional detail. This is especially true for false events that confirm our prior beliefs and expectations about our in- and out-groups (e.g., Frenda, Knowles, Saletan, & Loftus, 2013), and it is more likely to happen when we are impaired in some way (e.g., when we are sleep deprived; Frenda, Patihis, Loftus, Lewis, & Fenn, 2014). In my dissertation work, I found evidence that writing deceptive stories can facilitate the formation of false and distorted memories. In telling lies, we sometimes create mental content that later can be mistaken for a true recollection. This is the mischief of human memory — total fabrications can *feel* as real as a home video playing in our mind's eye.

Research shows that imagining past and future events can increase the subjective feeling that those events are likely to occur in the future. For example, in one study (Gaesser & Schacter, 2014), participants read about another person's struggle and later indicated how likely they would be to help the person. A subset of participants engaged in an imagination exercise, either recalling a time they helped someone in need, or imagining a future scenario in which they helped. Compared with control conditions, participants who engaged in the imagination exercises were more likely to say that they would help the person they read about. Perhaps unfortunately, the same principle applies to negative future possibilities — in a similar study, participants who imagined being arrested in the future were more likely to believe it might actually happen (Gregory, Cialdini, & Carpenter, 1982). With this phenomenon in mind, my anxieties about what will happen next not only seem like a waste of time, but also could dampen any feelings of possibility and optimism. Instead of being too concerned about the future, perhaps we should just try to accept that it is unpredictable and remain focused on imagining whatever outcomes we hope will manifest.

I have a confession to make, reader. At the beginning of this essay, I told you a complete lie. Beth Loftus never told me a story about rescuing a cat in a tree. However, the two of us spent several years implanting this memory in the minds of hundreds of research participants by asking them to write a fictional story about having that very experience. And in reconstructing the narrative of my visit to UCI,

I have now embedded this tidbit of fiction into the patchwork quilt of my memory. Strangely, I find this new “memory” soothing in the face of stress about the unpredictability of my future — because it weaves together some true details and genuine emotions. Perhaps years from now, wherever I am in my career, I’ll reflect again on my first meeting with Beth, and this bit of fiction will still be there.

References

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