

## **“How reliable are our memories?”**

Memories are very near and dear to us. They play a large role in making us who we are. If we didn't have our memories, would we be the same people? I don't believe so. But what if the memories we hold near and dear to us are not what we think they are? Just because we remember things does that mean they happened the way we do?

If we ask whether our memories are reliable, are we asking whether they are 100% correct all the time? In that case, I don't believe they are. Can we depend on our memories? Yes.

When we think about the reliability of our memories we can't assume that all memories are of the same type. Memories can be short term or long term. Memories can be about events that happened or about a memory of how to do something. Each type of memory has its own problems with reliability.

The most unreliable memories, however, are the ones we form when we witness events that are completely strange to us and formed during emotionally stressful moments.

In the article, *For Air crash detectives, Seeing Isn't Believing*, we see just how unreliable people's memories are when they report on what they saw during a plane crash. 52% of witnesses claim they saw a fire when there was no evidence in the wreckage or black box recorder to suggest that there was any fire present. People also reported conflicting information about a wing falling off or about which direction the plane turned. How can it be that hundreds of people witness an event and the sum of their eyewitness accounts offer close to nothing reliable? Much of our ability to interpret what we are seeing and form a reliable memory depends on our familiarity with what we are witnessing. If I am a teacher who reads student writing on a daily basis for years, I would probably have a good and reliable memory about a student's progress over the course of the year or even over the course of years because the activity is routine and my emotional state is normal. One might even say I have a “good” and “reliable” memory. However, take me and let me watch a massive multicar accident and my “good” and “reliable” memory may be of no use since I have not witnessed such accidents and my fear or discomfort at watching such an event might undermine the “proper” formation of my memories. Similarly, in the absence of context or experience, I may fill in the gaps or interpret the events based on what I've seen on tv or my own expectations, further undermining the formation of my memories.

We see something similar in the case of eye witness testimony of a police officer shooting a hammer wielding attacker in Manhattan. Eye witnesses reported seeing all kinds of different versions of the event. Some people reported seeing the suspect trying to get away from police while some reported the suspect lunging at them. One person even reported seeing the police officer shoot the suspect while handcuffed. All of these stories can't be true. How can people's memories be so unreliable? The event took only seconds to unfold and this is not a routine circumstance. People's first reactions would not be to stay calm and observe what was happening rather, emotion would take over, they would fear for their own safety and then take stock of the situation at which time the whole event had concluded and people were left to make sense of what they just saw and form memories. Accurate or inaccurate.

Ultimately when we think about the memories we have we have to look at them as useful and important but fallible. We should not be overly reliant on our memories particularly when they were formed under duress.