

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Memory

Art asked Ron to loan him a book. When Ron asked to look something up in the borrowed book, Art told Ron that he had placed it in his mailbox in the central office. Art said that he could “see” his hand placing it in the box. Ron let it go at that, knowing that the book would probably turn up because his name was written in it. A few days later when he entered Art’s office, Ron noticed the book sitting on top of Art’s filing cabinet. How could that be?

Chris taught in the local international school, and she taught several different grades during her decade of service. When a new administration came to the school, she was not happy, especially with the new principal. She did not say anything in public, but she voiced her increasing disappointment with the school repeatedly to her closest friends and asked to change to a different type of service, one with national women in the church. Over time most of her friends transferred to different fields. A decade later, while catching up with one of her friends, Chris mentioned how wonderful the school was and how she had enjoyed her time teaching there. How could that be?

These situations can be explained by considering the nature of memory. During the last half of the 20th century neuropsychologists found that previously accepted concepts of memory may be wrong.

Classical view of memory

Early experiments on memory showed that when individuals learned a fact or had an experience, most of the forgetting took place during the first few hours or days, a time called

the consolidation period. When this period ended most psychologists assumed that the memories remaining were stable and permanent. They thought these memories remained unchanged for unlimited periods.

Such memories can be thought of as something like the books in one’s book cases, books which can be opened and read, and perhaps even highlighted. Then the book can be placed back on the shelf with the original material unchanged. The next time a person takes the book off the shelf the material in the book is the same as it was previously.

Current view of memory

During the 1960s neuropsychologists found that these memories do not always remain unchanged. They could literally see that neural connections in the hippocampus of the brain could be changed each time those memories were brought into consciousness. Unfortunately, the classical view was so widely held that these findings were largely ignored. However, around the turn of the century, people began to accept these new facts.

Apparently any time an old (consolidated) memory is recalled, it may become open again to changes and additions so that the original memory actually changes. Of course, it can go through reconsolidation again and again changing some each time

From this view memories are like files saved in a computer. They can be opened, read, and if they are changed, they can be saved again in that changed form. The changes then become part of the document, and the original form is gone. The memory itself is different, and even the author does not have the original.

Each time the memory is recalled, it may be changed a bit until the reconsolidated memory is quite different from the original one.

False Memories

In their research on memory psychologists have created false memories of events that never happened, such as adding an event in a person’s childhood, getting lost in a mall, or even being attacked by a dog. Although the event never occurred, people believe it did and recall details of what happened and how they felt.

False memories occur in real life as well. A woman identified psychologist Donald Thompson as the man who raped her. However, Thompson was on a live TV show at the time of the rape. Apparently the woman was watching him on TV just before the attack occurred, and associated Thompson’s face with the rape.

Art, in the first paragraph, probably had planned to put Ron’s book in his box in the office then confused that thought with an actual event creating a false memory.

Modified Memories

As noted in the current view of memory, whenever an existing memory is brought into consciousness, it may be modified before it is reconsolidated. A familiar example is a fisherman describing the fish that got away. Each time he tells the story showing the length of the fish between his hands, the fish gets longer. Is he lying?

When Hillary Clinton visited Bosnia in 1996, she and others emerged from the plane. A decade later after repeatedly telling the story, she recalled running off the plane

under sniper fire. However, 2008 news footage of the event showed her and other passengers smiling as they walked off the plane. She may have been worried about sniper fire at the time, or she may have confused it with another event, and it became part of this memory. Of course, she may just have lied. A similar incident occurred with newscaster Brian Williams who saw a helicopter shot down in Iraq in 2003. By 2007 he said his helicopter was under fire, and by 2013 he said his helicopter was shot down. Either he lied or his memory was modified when recalled.

In the second introductory example Chris modified her memory of teaching at the school. When parents of her former students thanked her for what she had done for their children and her former students also expressed their gratitude, those events became part of her memory and made the memory of teaching much more positive.

Metamemory

Metamemory refers to what people know or believe about their own memories. Most people, including missionaries, believe that their memories do not change over time and that their memories are correct. They often think that, after all, they were there when events occurred so they certainly saw and heard what happened. They have vivid memories of what they personally experienced, but they may not understand that the memories have changed.

What does the Bible say?

The Bible is not silent on the subject of memory. In fact, when people look at a concordance or search a digital file for a

given word, they find hundreds of verses about words related to memory.

The word “memory” comes from the Latin word *memor*, and it is the root of memorable, memorial, memories, remember, remembrance, remind, reminder, and other similar words in modern translations.

The Old Testament is filled with different Hebrew words commanding the Israelites not to forget their heritage through people such as Abraham, prophets such as Isaiah, and kings such as David.

Likewise, in the Greek New Testament gospels Jesus urges the apostles to remember their Old Testament history as well as events recorded Acts and the epistles.

In Luke 22:19 Jesus told the apostles to take communion to remember him, and ended by saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” Then in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 Paul repeated Jesus.

An extended passage on memory is in 2 Peter 1:12-15, “So I will always **remind** you of these things....I think it is right to **refresh your memory** as long as I live in the tent of this body....And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to **remember** these things.”

Implications

Two missionaries who believe that their memories are unchanging and who both believe that their own memory is correct are likely to, at some time, find differences between what they “remember.” Fortunately, this usually involves minor things such as the color they chose for paint or the route they were going to follow. However, it may also involve important issues such as the availability of car seats for children or differences in salary to be paid. These cases may lead to misunderstanding and conflict.

Believing that their own memories are correct, either or both missionaries may come to the conclusion that the other is lying. This may occur between missionaries from the same culture and may be even more likely on multicultural teams or between missionaries and the nationals they serve. Having different memories does not mean that either is lying. Such differences may occur because of a misunderstanding at the time the memory was formed or because memories of either or both may have changed over time. Discussing the differences is far better than confrontation.

Missionaries need to give each other the benefit of the doubt when differences occur. They must remind themselves that different memories may be formed during the event, or they may occur over time as they recall the original memories in different situations. In fact, field directors’ memories may change more than those of persons they lead because similar situations may occur repeatedly so field directors have more opportunities to modify their memories. The following suggestions may be helpful in preventing misunderstandings.

- Put things in writing and give copies to all individuals involved.
- Taking pictures of people present is easy with smart phones.
- Take videos of the events.
- All keep personal journals of activities and decisions reached.

Finally, all missionaries who have to raise funds or prayer partners when on home ministry assignments need to realize that, unless they have their presentations memorized and never change, their stories may change. Each time they think about an event they may change their own memories of that event.

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