

Molding memories to fit our life stories

By Lisa Capps and Robert A. Bjork

Over the last several days, we as a nation were audience to a televised drama in which Judge Clarence Thomas and Professor Anita Hill — two esteemed, credible Americans — offered drastically different accounts of the same events. Because their testimonies were based on recollection of events that occurred 10 years ago, making sense of this discrepancy may hinge on understanding certain dynamics of human memory.

Memories are not mere snapshots of experience. Rather, experiences are stored in memory in association with the meaning that we ascribe to them. They comprise an ongoing story about our lives. The goal of these narratives is internal cohesion, rather than objective truth. The retrieval of autobiographical memories, then, is a reconstructive process. It invokes a web of associations that are consistent with and further solidify our narrative.

Conflict arises when episodes in our lives contradict what we believe to be true about ourselves and the world — when our autobiographical narrative cannot accommodate an episode in our experience.

In this case, we might repress recollection of contradictory events until they can be integrated and reconstructed in a way that preserves internal cohesion, or we may embellish, add, or invent in a way that supports our narrative. The flip side of repression, then, is reconstruction; we reconstruct events in our lives such that our narrative is coherent.

Several of these dynamics may be relevant to understanding the discrepancies between Hill's and Thomas' testimonies. First, details are remembered selectively; different people are likely to attend to different aspects of the same situation. We remember what fits our personal story. Furthermore, we may remember aspects of past experience differently over time, as new experience alters our point of view. The recollection or reconstruction of an event from memory involves activating new associations and ascribing new meaning.

In addition, stored experience is intentionally retrieved when it can be integrated, and not before. We remember episodes in our lives as we ascribe their meaning. Many Vietnam War veterans, for example, were



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unable to recall their experiences in Vietnam prior to developing a culturally legitimate narrative that would accommodate these memories.

Professor Hill's account suggests a painful contradiction between her experience of Judge Thomas, and her beliefs both about the way she deserved to be treated, and the character of those who represented the nation she served. After years of virtual silence, she recounted his behavior according to the narrative of a victim of sexual harassment.

Professor Hill's rendition of Judge Thomas stands in direct opposition to the traits that are associated with the august tradition of the Supreme Court. Similarly, there is a contradiction between his expectation about this process and what has transpired over the last 107 days.

Not surprisingly, he has vehemently dissociated himself from her sordid account of his behavior, an account completely divorced from his narrative. Moreover, he reinvoked a narrative in which to store and recall this experience, that of a black man being falsely accused and subsequently lynched over sexual allegations.

Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill will bear the most direct effects of these proceedings; their lives and their narratives will be unalterably marked by these public testimonies.

However, they are not the only participants in the process. Each of us — the sena-

tors called on to render their judgment, the other witnesses who shared their stories, and indeed the millions of viewers — are driven to generate a coherent version of this story. We have been given a national projective test. Our interpretation of the proceedings may say as much about each of us as it does about the actual testimonies.

We will integrate these events with our personal narratives, and our narrative about America.

For some observers, this integration will be clear-cut. For many victims of sexual harassment, for example, Anita Hill's story will forever constitute a narrative that is all too familiar.

Her account will prove so compelling as to obscure other elements of the story.

Likewise, for those who have been the target of irreparably damaging allegations for which there was no means of rebuttal, Clarence Thomas' narrative is likely to overwhelm all others.

The rest of us — both as individuals and as a nation — will have to create our own account. The meaning that we ascribe will not only designate the context in which these events will be remembered. It will influence the story around which we organize and integrate future experiences.

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