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### Sins of Omission

There are many parts of the brain that determine who a person truly is, but one of the most important is memory. In a way, memory defines who each person is as an individual: each experience in one's life acts as a building block, shaping their personality, thoughts, moods, perception, and more. We grow through experience and our past helps us learn how to do things differently in the future. We, as humans, rely on our memories every day; yet, despite memory's significance in the function of every human's daily life, it often times will fail us.

There are seven sins of memory: transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, suggestibility, bias, persistence, and misattribution (Schacter & Gilbert & Wegner, 2011, p. 143-146). All seven of these memory failures are extremely common and affect each of our lives, whether we are aware of it or not. These sins can be divided between commission-based failure, the incorrect encoding of a memory, and omission-based failure, the inability to remember something in particular (Schacter, 2001). Though commission-based memory failures (the latter four sins) are still very common, the most prevalent in the human mind are transience, absent-mindedness, and blocking, all of which are deemed the "Sins of Omission."

Through learning and researching this topic, I have recognized several instances where my own memory has failed me due to omission. Perhaps the most frequent memory failure I

have experienced throughout my life is transience. Transience is simply a memory that fades or distorts with time. It occurs “during the storage phase of memory, after an experience has been encoded and before it is retrieved” (Schacter et al., 2011, p. 144). It is quite common among elderly people, or with those with a damaged hippocampus or temporal lobe (Murray, 2003).

The first time my own transient memory became clear to me, so to speak, was when a group of my friends mentioned a time that we were all hanging out at my mom’s house. They told me about a joke I had made, of which I had no recollection of doing; yet my friends insisted that the story was true. As further proof of transience, I do not remember the joke that I had made, but I do remember being blown away that each of my friends had remembered this and I didn’t—even though I was the joker!

As time passes, memories of minute events or details that may have once been useful begin to fade. In my example above, my brain no longer needed to store that information—the joke—because it was no longer needed; I put that information in some far corner of my brain, where it had never been accessed again, and eventually was replaced with something else.

Another common form of memory failure is absent-mindedness. This is when one forgets to do something or when their attentiveness may falter. To adequately encode a memory, one must devote some level of attentiveness toward the event at hand. If one was to discover that their significant other had just died, he or she would be very attentive because that is an impactful event; however, if that person gets home after a long day and sets their keys on the couch while thinking about how nice it will be to relax, their lack of attentiveness will likely result in not remembering where he or she left the keys.

Absent-mindedness affects my life in all areas, but mostly in terms of where I have put any one of my possessions. Losing my keys is something I experience nearly every day of my life. In fact, when my keys are on the key holder, I am surprised. A fantastic instance of my unbelievable absent-mindedness would be a few years ago before I had acquired a smart phone and still had a cheap, Nokia “brick phone.” In one week, I had left my phone at three different places in Salt Lake City—Barnes & Noble, Coffee Break, and Applebee’s. Each time, I failed to pay attention to my phone because I had been preoccupied with what I was doing after I left each establishment—I was focusing on the prospect of having fun rather than what I was doing with my phone.

Forgetting my phone three times in one week serves as proof that a lack of attention can and probably will hinder memory’s potential. Though I did get my phone back every time, it was not the last time that it happened. Now, I have a much more valuable phone and I know that if I were to lose this one, it would not be returned. My attentiveness surrounding my Android has increased because it is of higher value to me and I consciously acknowledge where it is at all times, something I consistently failed to do with my Nokia.

Finally, the last “Sin of Omission” is that of blocking. Blocking is the temporary inaccessibility of a memory (Murray, 2003). Even though the memory is valid and one makes a conscious effort to bring the needed information forward, the encoded information is literally blocked by the brain. We have all experienced blocking, most notably through the “tip-of-the-tongue” feeling as we try to retrieve a memory. In my experience, this usually happens with the names of celebrities, as well as movie titles. Schacter et al. (2011) states that this often happens with names and titles because their “links to related concepts and knowledge are weak” (p. 146).

A great example of blocking recently occurred in my life in the midst of a philosophy exam. I began studying the material three weeks in advance and felt extremely well prepared for the test; however, when it came time to write the essay portion concerning philosophical Buddhist concepts, the information left me. I stared at the question for no less than ten minutes wracking my brain; I remembered the flash cards and the chapter concerning Buddhist philosophy, but all of what I truly needed to know had left me. I ended up choosing a different topic (of which I had studied significantly less) and was able to write about it just fine. It was on my way home that night that all of the information I could have used during the exam came flooding back to me.

This is a classic case of blocking because no matter how much I studied, how prepared I was for the test, or how hard I willed myself to remember, it was to no avail; that information was stuck behind a mental barrier. Of course, the memory was still alive, encoded, stored, and well, and I can continue to use that information today, just not when I needed it the most.

Overall, the three sins of omission, transience, absent-mindedness, and blocking, play active roles in each of our lives. They can make you forget a joke that you told, cause you to lose your car keys, or be the catalyst in determining whether or not you will get an 'A' on an exam. Ultimately, humans are not perfect, and neither are our brains. Despite the brain's imperfection, these memory failures can not detract from the magnificence of the human mind. Memory, though flawed, is still an aspect of our everyday, forgetful lives that we should be thankful for.

Works Cited

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