Misconceptions about Eye Movements: Part 2

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In our last column we began a discussion of eye movements and their relationship to memory and creation of information. Memory is still very much a mystery, and many researchers consider it a process where bits and pieces from the mind and body help recreate the event in the mind.

For years researchers believed that all memories were held within the brain. Later it became apparent that memories could be triggered using any of the senses and the central nervous system (Gazzaniga 1988). Surprisingly, memories can even be stored in the muscle tissue to protect the brain from intensely painful memories. This apparently protects the mind from the depth of the emotional trauma. This phenomenon may be why transplant recipients report craving certain foods that they never liked previously.

There are some experiences that are easily recovered from our memory while others, the more mundane, are more difficult to retrieve from the mind. It seems that the more senses engaged during the memories construction, the easier it will be for an individual to recall the event. Those memories that have greater intensity also are more easily retrieved. Unique and emotional events increase the likelihood of a strong memory being created.

Memory and Theft

Highly emotional events and those relating to survival will be remembered more easily than everyday events. Consider the mental state of an individual who is about to steal. Their survival instinct triggers emotional, psychological, and even financial impacts on the mind and body as they commit the theft. Imagine what it must be like to be asked about a theft and have those emotional and psychological memories flood back into consciousness. Reliving the memory and the survival instinct requires time, and thus an observable delay by the individual.

Sometimes it requires an individual to use gestures or eye movements to help locate memories. In one research study participants were asked to watch a video and then tell the researchers about the stories content and flow. Then the participants had their arms restrained during the observation of the video. In the second observation it was difficult for the participants to remember parts of the story. It seems that the inability to use the hands and arms concealed some of the memories of the recently observed video.

The deceptive subject needs time to sort out the real memory and then construct a logical alternative that will not contradict any story he had previously told. Most people will communicate using three of the five senses—visual, auditory, and feelings.

An individual's communication using visuals requires the construction or retrieval of the mental picture and spatial awareness of the memory. When constructing a lie, visually there will be less detail and contradictions of spatial placements. However, a true visual memory will have details, colors, spatial arrangement, and point of view as part of the recall. If you have to construct a mental image of a room from scratch, imagine the complexities of this mental task.

Eye Movement Cues

An interviewer should track an individual's eye movements during the early stages of the conversation while going through biographical questions and development of rapport to establish where the eyes go during creation and recall. In a study we conducted with over 500 people we found that 71 percent of the participants looked to their left when recalling, 21 percent looked to their right, 5 percent had no identifiable norm, and 3 percent unfocused their eyes during recall.

About 7 to 12 percent of the population is left-handed. In our study 9 percent of the people were left-handed and 76 percent of the left-handers looked to their left when recalling information.

What kinds of questions might be useful to establish the recall or creative eye accessing cues? Clearly, any questions used by an interviewer to establish the pattern of eye movement needs to make sense in the context of the interview. Asking a subject what the offspring of a zebra would look like would require creation of the new creature, but there would be almost no context where this question would be appropriate.

Asking relevant questions that mask the interviewer's purpose can create an important behavioral reaction that, when placed in the context of testing a story, can determine whether the individual is recalling or creating information.

The following are some examples of questions that would require an individual to recall information: Who were the first three people you saw when you arrived at work this morning? What is your date of hire? What is a major intersection near your home?

Once you have established the dominant side of the brain for recall, you will have already established the creative side as being the opposite.

Developing Admissions

So, how might we use our knowledge of recall and creation during an interview to develop admissions?

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First, we have to understand the context of the question and whether or not it makes sense for an individual to create an answer or simply recall it. If a person was asked to list three things that would make him more effective at his job and his eyes go to recall, we could surmise that the question had been asked of him before or he had prepared the answer in advance. For most people we would expect them to have to create a response.

As the questions moved to a discussion about a story, alibi, or development of an admission, our observations make it easier to determine if a response should be created or recalled.

For example, a young woman was questioned by one of the authors regarding the theft of loose diamonds. During the biographical questioning, it was determined that she recalled by looking to her left. Her responses during the interview indicated she was unlikely to have been involved in the theft, but the company felt she may have been using illicit drugs on the job. The questioning moved from the diamonds to experimentation with drugs and resulted in the following dialog:

INTERVIEWER: What types of drugs have you ever just experimented with?
SUBJECT: [looks to her left—recall] Well, ah…I have tried meth a couple times, coke once or twice, and, of course, marijuana.
INTERVIEWER: When was the last time you used any of those during working hours?
SUBJECT: [looks to her right—creation] Ah…about six months ago.
INTERVIEWER: And what was it that you used?
SUBJECT: [looks to her left—recall] Marijuana.
INTERVIEWER: I meant when was the very last time you used marijuana on the job?
SUBJECT: [looks to her right—creation]
INTERVIEWER: I mean the very last time.
SUBJECT: [looks to her right—creation]
INTERVIEWER: I mean the very last time.
SUBJECT: *[looks to her left—recall] Just before I came in.*

The subject's eye movements during this exchange helped in gaining an admission. Since marijuana was recalled and spontaneously said, it was likely a truthful response, but the timeframe for its use was created. In this case the six-month admission was a lie of minimization, which left additional development to be done. When the employee was asked again when the last time she used drugs during working hours, her eyes went to creation, which was likely to be another minimization. By stopping her from answering the question with another lie, it increased her belief that the interviewer must know the last time she used marijuana on the job.

Creation is not always a deception, and recall is not always the truth, but if one examines the context of the question, it can help sort out potential deceptions. This technique becomes less valuable in situations where the stories or alibis have been told multiple times. When a lie is created, it is simply moved to a memory and then is retrieved in the same way as something that was experienced. However, created lies almost always do not have the same level of detail, colors, emotions, or spatial awareness as a real memory. As the interviewer drills down into the details, it will require the liar to create information to fill in the gaps. ■