
Research Note

The Complexity of Ignorance

Robert F. Belli and Howard Schuman*

We examine the kinds of mistakes that are frequently made when the general public is asked to identify political symbols from the past half century. A particularly striking phenomenon is inversion: the event is recalled backwards, so that Rosa Parks is remembered for having given up her seat on a bus to a white person. A second type of error occurs by linking a name to the wrong person, as when John Dean is identified as a movie actor (James Dean). Still another type of mistake involves a correct substantive categorization but with temporal displacement, for example, the Tet Offensive is said to have occurred during the Korean War. In each of these cases we are able to speculate about the social and psychological processes that have led to the misremembering. However, not every error is lodged in respondents: we initially treated as incorrect all answers that did not fit our own expectations; but we were soon forced to recognize that other frames of reference could be brought to the task and lay equal claim to the truth.

KEY WORDS: collective memory; knowledge; surveys; methods.

The conception of memory as a collection of accurate records of past events has long been questioned by both psychologists and sociologists (Bartlett 1932; Halbwachs [1950] 1980) and is now largely abandoned. Initially, the "recordings" themselves are inevitably incomplete due to the impossibility of capturing literally what occurs with even the simplest event. Next, what is remembered over time is likely to be increasingly simplified, with subtle connections lost, broad characterizations sharpened, and some merging of similar or related memories. There is also differential recognition and acceptance of one's ignorance, so that when invited to report the past, people vary considerably in their willingness to use associations and

*Names are alphabetical and authorship is equal.
Direct correspondence to Howard Schuman, HC31 Box 477, Phippsburg, ME 04562.

imagination to supplement, or even guess entirely about happenings of a few days, months, or years ago. All these factors making for inaccuracy are compounded by the fact that for complex occurrences remote from current interests there may be only casual attention to all sorts of significant features and no great concern to assess critically what springs to mind in response to a question about the past.

The deficiencies of memory on the part of respondents to a survey, and to some extent on the part of serious investigators as well, were nicely demonstrated in a follow-up to a larger study of the collective memories of Americans. A representative sample of over a thousand adults from the Metropolitan Detroit area were asked in 1991 to tell briefly what they knew about a number of names and other symbols important to the political life of the United States during the past half century. The primary focus was on constructing a test of knowledge that could be related to generational and structural locations of Americans, on the assumption that knowledge of recent history is grounded in personal experience (Schuman, Belli, & Bischooping, forthcoming). The symbols were introduced with the following instructions:

This next section concerns a few words and names from the past that come up now and then, but that many people have forgotten. Could you tell me which ones you have heard of at all, and, if you have, what they refer to in just a few words?

Interviewers were instructed to record verbatim the explanation offered for each symbol.

In this article we will be concerned primarily to illustrate the kinds of mistakes that people made when they did not answer correctly in terms of the investigator's expectations. No detailed quantitative analysis is attempted; our goal is to identify and conceptualize the major ways in which responses went astray, particularly those ways that reflect more than idiosyncratic mistakes.

The name on the list with which we will be especially concerned was that of Joe McCarthy, though several other symbols from the past (the Tet Offensive, John Dean, Rosa Parks, the W.P.A.) will be drawn on also. Following the approach of a large-scale survey, answers were first scored numerically as to correctness, using a three-point scale. For Joe McCarthy the scoring was as follows:

- 2 points: *Correct*: Must indicate that he hunted communists (or was reputed to do so), e.g., "He went after communists." "Part of the red scare."
- 1 point: *Partly correct*: Mentions communists or politics but not very clear, e.g., "Conducted hearings after World War II."
- 0 points: *Says Don't Know*. Or gives a clearly *incorrect answer*.

Initially, little attention was given to the nature of the zero scores beyond treating them as incorrect, and no distinction was made between those that contained substantive content—however wrong—and those where the respondent simply said he or she did not know. At a later point, however, we decided to examine the nature of the zero answers that indicated ignorance and found them to be of considerable interest. This article describes what can be learned from a careful qualitative examination of such "mistakes." We are also developing a quantitative analysis that will attempt to link mistakes to generational location (Belli, Schuman, Blixt, & Jackson 1995), as part of larger research on collective memory (Schuman & Scott 1989).

WRONG ANSWERS THAT WERE RIGHT

First, and somewhat humbling, a number of answers turned out to have been scored as incorrect due to the initial narrow vision of the Principal Investigator, rather than to the ignorance of the respondents. Starting from the assumption that the only possible correct answer to "Joe McCarthy" had to concern the Wisconsin Senator who claimed to pursue communists but was later censured for making wild and unsubstantiated accusations, coders were instructed to treat as wrong any description that did not connect at all to this characterization. Yet in retrospect it is clear that the response "Manager of the New York Yankees" identified a well-known figure from the past half century and thus was an entirely legitimate answer that should have been scored as correct for the five people who gave it. Nothing in the question required the name to involve matters of state or of politics. Our first lesson thus had to do with a kind of ignorance of our own.

A little further from national life and indeed not even within the ken of the Principal Investigator at the time were two media personalities from the Metropolitan Detroit area. "J. P. McCarthy," a radio host and disk jockey on a local station was obviously well known, for a relevant description was given by 22 respondents, for example, "Yes, radio announcer." Although this McCarthy was ordinarily identified by his first two initials, the "J" does stand for "Joseph" or "Joe," so it is difficult on reflection to treat such an answer as wrong.

Less obviously, "Jack McCarthy," a local television newscaster referred to by seven people, should probably not be regarded as entirely incorrect, since "Jack" might possibly be thought of as a variant of "Joseph." (An additional nine people provided descriptions that left ambiguous whether

they were about J. P. McCarthy or Jack McCarthy, but that obviously dealt with one or the other, not with the late senator from Wisconsin.) Both of the local McCarthy celebrities were given as answers primarily by respondents who were on the young side—and definitely younger than the Principal Investigator—as well as living within the Detroit area, rather than in the insulated setting of Ann Arbor. Was their mention a mark of the lack of worldliness of the respondents, or was the initial zero scoring better treated as a sign of the academic provincialism of the researchers?

WRONG ANSWERS THAT WERE WRONG BUT....

Most of the other answers are more clearly wrong, even when we broaden our latitude of acceptance, yet on closer examination we found that they carry important meanings about the past and about how it is transformed by memory and thus communicated to the present and the future. Such answers, as we will see, do not deserve to be relegated to a code of zero, nor perhaps to any numerical code at all, lest their qualitative richness be lost entirely.

Inversions. Perhaps our most interesting discovery was the frequency with which people had some knowledge of a symbol but the knowledge was “backwards” in a way that led to a more glaring error than even a plea of “don’t know”—commission rather than omission. Thus, nine people knew that Joe McCarthy was connected to communism, but inverted the connection in a way that would have amazed the Senator were he alive today. Here were their responses:

“Yes, a Senator accused of being a communist.”

“Yes, Red communist Senator.”

“Indicted for communism, a Senator?”

“Yes, communism, a Senator accused of communism.”

“Yes, Joe McCarthy was a communist.”

“They thought he was a communist but it was never proven.”

“Communist leaning.”

“Yes, Senator, communist.”

“Communist of the movie industry.”

These answers provide vivid testimony to the danger that history presents of its own kind of guilt through association. The name Joe McCarthy and the negative term “communist” have been preserved, but changed into a positive identification that is quite unlike the original more complex negative relationship between the two terms. Evidently there is a real risk in being repeatedly linked to a negative symbol like “communist,” no matter

the nature of the relationship. The true character of the linkage may be lost over time, even though the symbol lives on and retains its negative tone.

This type of inversion is reminiscent of a story told about Senator McCarthy, whether apocryphal or not. McCarthy was holding a committee hearing on the menace of communism in America and began to berate a witness almost before the poor man had a chance to say a word. One of McCarthy’s aides leaned over and whispered to the senator that this particular witness had been invited to testify because he was widely known as an anti-communist. To which McCarthy is said to have replied: “I don’t care what kind of a communist he is!” And the senator went on hectoring the witness. More generally, being defended as *not* a “racist” or *not* a “sexist” (or *not* something else) may have some of the same long-term danger as being attacked directly as a racist or a sexist, for all that may remain in the minds of a later generation is the association to the term “racist” or “sexist,” not the context in which it occurred.

Inversions were also common with other symbols that we presented in this assessment of knowledge. The “Tet Offensive” was often correctly associated with the Vietnam war, but described as an offensive by the U. S. Army against the Communist enemy, rather than the other way around—perhaps because Americans tend to think of their own military as always the dominant force in war. A different type of inversion occurred when “Rosa Parks” was identified by five respondents as a black woman who gave up her seat on a bus, rather than refusing to move from her seat. All five of these inverters were white, and four of them were old enough (two were in their 80s) to have grown up in a time when blacks were assumed to be submissive in such a situation. Our large black sample made a smaller proportion of errors on Rosa Parks generally and no inversions at all, probably because it was the dramatic *action* that Rosa Parks took that made the event memorable for them.

Name Associations. Although interviewers always read the full name of a figure we asked to have identified, frequently only part of the name was seized on and used to develop a response. Fifteen people identified McCarthy as a World War II general, and we believe they had Douglas MacArthur in mind. MacArthur’s fame overlapped in time that of Joe McCarthy, since MacArthur played a leading role in the Korean War in the early 1950s, as well as earlier during World War II. Hence respondents—all in their 20s and 30s—had the right period, more or less, just the wrong man. “MacArthur” and “McCarthy” are close enough to invite such a mistake by those vague about an earlier period of history, even if “Joe” and “Douglas” are rather far apart. (We should acknowledge that interviewers may have pronounced names in ways that allowed them to be

heard differently than intended, though this cannot account for overall differences involving first as well as last names.)

Also close in sound to Joe McCarthy was the name "Paul McCartney," identified clearly by three respondents (e.g., "Singer with the Beatles"), and Eugene McCarthy, referred to by six people ("He ran for president in the '60s"), the latter being the only one where the last name was exactly the same. We should note that here as elsewhere there is good reason to believe that the mistakes our interviewers recorded reflect associations that these respondents are likely to carry through life and are not limited to the survey interview context. We would expect that when any of these people hear the name "Joe McCarthy" on television or come across it in a newspaper, they are likely to make much the same connection as in our interview. Thus they bring to the experience a very different set of ideas than had been intended by the television speaker or newspaper writer.

In the same vein a number of people identified "John Dean" as a former Secretary of State, presumably based on the association of "Dean" to either "Dean Acheson" or "Dean Rusk," perhaps in these cases aided by the vaguely correct sense that all the names had something to do with the government. Further afield in terms of vocation, though not in wording, were frequent characterizations of John Dean as an actor who died young (James Dean), or a little less often as a singer (Jimmy Dean). The name Dean may be distinctive enough to make respondents think the person must be someone they are familiar with, unlike names like "Smith" or "Jones," and thus to assume that whatever Dean comes to mind is apt to be correct.

Temporal Displacements. Some of the errors noted above also involved temporal mistakes, as when Eugene McCarthy, a man of the sixties was substituted for Joe McCarthy, a man of the fifties. A variant of the same kind of error occurred when foreign sounding words were asked about, and respondents tried to keep the same exotic frame of reference but displaced it to another time and place. Thus the Tet Offensive was identified by a number of respondents as having occurred during the Korean War. As part of our larger analysis, we are able to show that such respondents tended to be old enough to have reached adolescence during the Korean War period, so their error was in line with the generational theory that had guided our analysis of correct answers.

Other More Distant Responses. There were some 40 other answers that seem to be more clearly wrong—but are noteworthy for the degree to which people try to make sense of a name said to be well-known but not known well by them. Here are some samples in response to Joe McCarthy: "Director of the FBI at one time."

"Yes, mayor of Detroit."

"Yes, boxer."

"Prosecuting the mafia, the mob."

"Yes, beginning of anti-civil rights movement"

"Yes, film industry"

We have not been able to figure out the origin of each of these particular errors, but it is entirely possible that even in these cases there is some meaningful connection to the name McCarthy that will occur to readers.

Finally we found that the term W.P.A. seemed to invite people to come up with words that fit the letters, though we doubt that much more than guesses were ever involved:

"World Peace Association"

"World War II Workers Party"

"We pay afterwards' plan for people needing help."

"The Women's...No, I guess I don't really know."

The last example represents a reasonable start, followed by a kind of self-restraint that is lacking in the following bold attempt by an imaginative respondent to explain the Tet Offensive:

"The line in football where you have three backs and you split a wide receiver to the right. A handoff to the running back."

CONCLUSIONS

Knowledgeable academics tend to assume that the meaning a symbol carries for themselves is much the same for others. In particular, someone fascinated by politics and beyond a certain age may think that the name of Joe McCarthy must represent a symbol to others with essentially the same meaning as it does for oneself. With a little experience at listening to those who are younger and not especially schooled in history, one comes to realize that many people are poorly informed about a name or other symbol that resonated widely at one time within one's own circle. But even then it is apt to be surprising to learn some of the associations exemplified here. That "Joe McCarthy" could go down in history as a senator who was a communist is probably the greatest paradox, but only a little more so to those immersed in political life than is his being overshadowed today in the minds of some by the 1950s Manager of the New York Yankees, or indeed the senator's reemergence as a member of the Beatles.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Steven Blixt played an important role in the development of the larger research on which this paper is based; a career move made his later participation impossible, but we wish to acknowledge his invaluable help. We also acknowledge support from the National Institute of Aging (AGO-8951) and to Howard Schuman for research on collective memory.

REFERENCES

- Bartlett, F. C. 1932. *Remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Belli, Robert F., Howard Schuman, Steven Blixt, & Benita Jackson. "The Misremembering of Important Past Events." Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, May, 1995.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. [1950] 1980. *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper.
- Schuman, Howard, Robert F. Belli, & Katherine Bischoff. (forthcoming) "The Generational Basis of Knowledge." In J. W. Pennebaker, D. Paez, & B. Rime. *Collective Memories of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Schuman, Howard, and Jacqueline Scott. 1989. "Generations and Collective Memories." *American Sociological Review*. 54: 359-381.