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# The Politics of Credibility: Stories and the Fate of Storytellers in Contexts of Human Rights Violations

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**Abstract.** This article highlights the contrast between the expectations about accurate and truthful memory of political officials and the scientific psychology of memory and narrative in the assessment of alleged human rights victims.

An alleged witness to and sole survivor of a mass execution in a village in Kosovo has told his story. But will he be believed? Two diplomats and a human rights researcher have stated that they find his story convincing "in part because of its consistency, coherence, and detail." And--as written in Shakespeare's *Henry V*--in this is "what rub or what impediment there is."

The psychology of memory and narrative suggest that even the most honest attempts at imparting what has actually transpired may well harbor inconsistencies, incoherencies, ellipses, and condensations. A story that is consistent in all respects--if evaluators can agree on what those respects may be--may well be intentionally constructed towards some material goal in conflict with one's sense of the truth. Attentional processes must necessarily miss some of life's detail and thus propagate gaps in a story. Moreover, stories may spontaneously change with time as memories are affected by the temporal, salience, and relevance aspects of other contextual memories, need states, and the hypothesized processes of proactive and retroactive interference, decay, and consolidation. Stories that seem impervious to spontaneous change may be quite pervious to and indicative of falsehood.

Moreover, another body of research on the psychological consequences of trauma--the kind of trauma often salient to human rights violations--often mitigates against consistency, coherence, and rich detail as expectations for accurate and truthful memory. Memories and narratives often are denied, repressed, fragmented, and rendered into confusing asymmetries. Add to this quite realistic fears of retribution for speaking the truth as one knows it--from one's potential saviors and from the rights violators of the past--and one should be surprised and amazed at finding stories that hang together as expected to don the mantle of accuracy and truthfulness.

Yet the expectations of political authorities as to what characterizes accuracy and the truth may be as impervious to change as some apocryphal stories. Many of these authorities seem ready to pounce on the least bit of seeming inconsistency or narrative problem as a smoking gun of deception. On this they may be correct, for they may be deceiving themselves. (See Bloom, S.L. (1996). Dissociation and the fragmentary nature of traumatic memories: Overview. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 12, 352-361; Perlez, J. (October 8, 1998). Milosevic releases villager who reportedly saw mass execution. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Shakespeare, W. *Henry V*, Act II, Scene II, l. 33; Shobe, K., & Kihlstrom, J.F. (1997). Is traumatic memory special? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 6, 70-74; Whitfield, C.L. (1995). The forgotten difference: Ordinary memory versus traumatic memory. *Consciousness and Cognition: An International Journal*, 4, 88-94.) (Keywords: Human Rights, Memory, Narrative, Trauma.)