

Amnesia in '50 First Dates'

How much of this movie is Hollywood hogwash?

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Except for my post on *Twilight*, readers of this blog seem to prefer when I write about older movies, like *A Clockwork Orange* or *Remember the Titans*. So today I'm going to analyze a movie that's a bit older, and my first "romantic comedy" film – *50 First Dates*, starring Adam Sandler and Drew Barrymore. The basic plot of the film revolves around Barrymore's character, who has a form of amnesia that the film describes as "loss of her short-term memory." As a result, her memory only lasts one day; as soon as she falls asleep, her brain "reboots" back to the day the amnesia began. Sandler's character falls for her, but must continually introduce himself over and over, thus making each of their "dates" their "first date," essentially. So, what about this movie is valid, and what is total Hollywood hogwash? Let's start with the hogwash.

Parts of the Film that are Total Crap...

... I mean, besides Sandler's juvenile humor and Rob Schneider's typically racist character. In terms of psychology, some parts of the film are simply not accurate portrayals of amnesia. First, Barrymore's character has a brother and a father who look after her every day and spend their lives helping her live the delusion that time has stopped. They go through elaborate schemes to "trick" her into avoiding the reality of her condition. Most amnesia



patients don't have this luxury, or family members who can stop their own lives to devote all of their time exclusively to the patient.

Second, Barrymore's character supposedly has a form of amnesia called "Goldfield's Syndrome." This is totally made up by, apparently, the film's writers and/or director. There's no such thing as Goldfield's Syndrome. The fake term annoys me, as there really is a form of amnesia that exactly matches Barrymore's character. So why didn't they just call her condition what it's really called, which would be "anterograde amnesia" (see below)?

These points aside, however, the movie did actually contain quite a bit of validity on other points, relevant to psychology.

Parts of the Film that Were Surprisingly Correct

As mentioned above, there really is a condition called "anterograde amnesia" which pretty closely matches the situation portrayed in the film. With anterograde amnesia, it's typically caused when a person has some kind of brain damage, most often to the hippocampus region (a portion of the brain at least partially responsible for the storage of memory). In the film, Barrymore's character has permanent brain damage due to a car accident. When people have this condition, they really are, essentially, "stuck in time." Their brains are able to encode new memories and store those memories, but the memories are made *inaccessible* to that person. In other words, the person doesn't *realize* that the memories exist. He or she will perpetually believe that it's the day when the amnesia started, just like in the film.

Another reality portrayed in the film is that most people who have severe amnesia are forced to live in a hospital setting. There, the patients can be closely monitored and protected. You can imagine how stressful it would be to have a condition such as anterograde amnesia, and how confusing the world might become. Any new invention would scare you, as would your own reflection in the mirror as time continued to pass.

One of the film's funnier moments, which also happens to be accurate, is the character nicknamed "10 Second Tom." While Barrymore's character can remember new events for a total of one day before "rebooting," the character Tom can, of course, only remember new events for 10 seconds. This is also accurate. The type and extent of brain damage causing anterograde amnesia can vary, which leads to large discrepancies between individuals for how long memories can stick before fading away. If it seems like 10 seconds is ludicrous, I assure the readers that this point is, unfortunately, very real. Perhaps one of the most famous amnesia patients is an English man named Clive Wearing, who could essentially only remember things for 7 seconds. Because the film is a comedy we see the "lighter side" of anterograde amnesia. However, the actual condition is extremely hard on the patient and his or her entire family. In Clive Wearing's case, his children chose to stop visiting him as he aged, because he did not recognize them or acknowledge any of their past visits. They came to the realization that visits were stressful and unhappy memories for them, but had no long-term effect on their father at all. So why keep going through that pain, over and over?

But What About that Hollywood Film Ending?

The final point I'd like to make about the surprising validity in this fairly stupid movie is relevant to the end (spoiler alert!). Sandler's character first decides that he should give up the relationship, as Barrymore's character can never truly love him. However, after he leaves she shows that somewhere in her mind, her feelings for him have "sunk in" because she continually paints pictures of him, even though she doesn't recognize who he is. This seems like a really fake, cheesy end to the movie.

While it is, admittedly, super cheesy, there is actual validity to this ending. I said before that with anterograde amnesia, new memories *are* in fact being encoded and stored in the brain; the problem is that the patient can't access those memories. However, we know that amnesia patients can still be *affected* by these memories, in surprising and interesting ways.

For example, Clive Wearing didn't recognize his children. However, he did continue to recognize his wife, in spite of her aging twenty or thirty years. And he never showed surprise that she had aged when she visited. He never showed surprise when he looked in the mirror and saw that he had become an old man. Note, when his condition was *new* this was not the case. Wearing was continually angry, scared, and forlorn. However, years into his condition, he seemed to kind of "get used to it."

Wearing was told by his amnesia doctors that he should keep a journal of his thoughts. When asked about the journal, he denied that it existed. However, he knew where it was kept. Perhaps the most amazing part of Wearing's case is that he could be interviewed and answer questions *about what it*



was like to have anterograde amnesia. If he had anterograde amnesia, how the heck did he even know that he had it?? And how could he remember what it was like to live with the condition? Yet, in spite of the irony of his case, Wearing could describe his life. It was depressing, but it was real.

So back to the movie – could Barrymore's character somehow, unconsciously, remember Sandler's character and her feelings for him? Surprisingly, the answer appears to be yes. Sure, it's super cheesy and the film is pretty bad, all things considered. But the portrayal of anterograde amnesia is actually not horribly wrong.

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