Hirst presented the results of a 10-year longitudinal study of what witnesses to the September 11, 2001 attacks remembered from that day. He introduced and questioned the term “flashbulb memory,” coined by Brown and Kulik (1977), which referred to a memory of the circumstances in which one learned of a public, emotionally charged event. The 4-phase survey interviewed participants one week, 11 months, 35 months and 119 months after the attack. Key findings showed that 1) emotions towards 9/11 changed over time; 2) an inconsistent memory often leads to the formation of a canonical story; 3) accuracy declines with time, but confidence remains high.

Phelps explained that memory follows a three-step process: encoding (information coming in), storage (retention) and retrieval. Emotions aid attention and perception for emotional events; however, they capture attention and impair perception (as when drivers watch a car accident and thus slow the traffic down). The odd paradox of retrieval is that we have a strong conviction in the accuracy of our memories, although our recollection is often wrong on many details.
Discussants

Bradley Evans, International Studies, University of Bristol

Evans mentioned a number of avenues for further thought: the affect and politics of emotions, and the need to find a new political category; the concept of living in and through history; and the role of senses in memory (smell, sound, touch). He also asked what makes an event a global event, and whether 9/11 a global event, an event for all.

Clifford Chanin, National September 11 Memorial and Museum

Chanin observed that the forthcoming 9/11 Museum will include personal objects, stories, and voices from survivors and first responders. He added that the museum is designed to appeal to a diverse range of visitors, 40 percent of which are expected to come from abroad. He also noted that some emotions, such as anger, are expressed more often now than at the time of the 9/11 attacks.