

Reconstructive Memory

Bartlett's theory of reconstructive memory is crucial to an understanding of the reliability of eyewitness testimony as he suggested that recall is subject to personal interpretation dependent on our learnt or cultural norms and values, and the way we make sense of our world.

Many people believe that memory works something like a videotape. Storing information is like recording and remembering is like playing back what was recorded. With information being retrieved in much the same form as it was encoded. However, memory does not work in this way. It is a feature of human memory that we do not store information exactly as it is presented to us. Rather, people extract from information the gist, or underlying meaning.

In other words, people store information in the way that makes the most sense to them. We make sense of information by trying to fit it into schemas, which are a way of organizing information.

Schemas are mental 'units' of knowledge that correspond to frequently encountered people, objects or situations. They allow us to make sense of what we encounter in order that we can predict what is going to happen and what we should do in any given situation. These schemas may, in part, be determined by social values and therefore prejudice.

Schemas are therefore capable of distorting unfamiliar or unconsciously 'unacceptable' information in order to 'fit in' with our existing knowledge or schemas. This can, therefore, result in unreliable eyewitness testimony.

Bartlett tested this theory using a variety of stories to illustrate that memory is an active process and subject to individual interpretation or construction.

In his famous study 'War of the Ghosts', Bartlett (1932) showed that memory is not just a factual recording of what has occurred, but that we make "effort after meaning". By this, Bartlett meant that we try to fit what we remember with what we really know and understand about the world. As a result, we quite often change our memories so they become more sensible to us.

His participants heard a story and had to tell the story to another person and so on, like a game of "Chinese Whispers".

The story was a North American folk tale called "The War of the Ghosts". When asked to recount the detail of the story, each person seemed to recall it in their own individual way.

With repeating telling, the passages became shorter, puzzling ideas were rationalized or omitted altogether and details changed to become more familiar or conventional.

For example, the information about the ghosts was omitted as it was difficult to explain, whilst participants frequently recalled the idea of "not going because

he hadn't told his parents where he was going" because that situation was more familiar to them. For this research Bartlett concluded that memory is not exact and is distorted by existing schema, or what we already know about the world.

It seems, therefore, that each of us 'reconstructs' our memories to conform to our personal beliefs about the world.

This clearly indicates that our memories are anything but reliable, 'photographic' records of events. They are individual recollections which have been shaped & constructed according to our stereotypes, beliefs, expectations etc.



The implications of this can be seen even more clearly in a study by Allport & Postman (1947).

When asked to recall details of the picture opposite, participants tended to report that it was the black man who was holding the razor.

Clearly this is not correct and shows that memory is an active process and can be changed to 'fit in' with what we expect to happen based on your knowledge and understanding of society (e.g. our schemas).