

Bartlett (1932)

Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology

This study is used to answer questions on:

Schemas
Reconstructive memory

Abstract

Bartlett constructed a series of experiments to test his theory of schemas and reconstructive memory. A number of British participants were asked to read a Native American story called 'War of the Ghosts'. The story contained strange vocabulary and grammar for a British person. The participants were then asked to recall the story either through repeated reproduction or serial reproduction. Repeated reproduction involved the participant recalling the story after different lengths of time such as a few minutes after reading, a few days, weeks, months or years. Serial reproduction involved participants telling the story to another person who then told the story to another person. This was repeated until the 10th person was asked to recall the story. It was found that the story was changed in several ways including having unfamiliar references removed or changed, the story shortened and simplified, and small additions made. It was concluded that memory is reconstructive and that schemas affect how we store and recall memories.



Aim

- To test the effects of schemas on memory
- To investigate the theory of reconstructive memory

Method

Participants

The participants were British and of a variety of different ages and backgrounds. Bartlett conducted this experiment at different times, in different situations and with different participants. There was less focus on giving precise details about the sample used in experiments in 1932.

Procedure

Participants were given a Native American story called 'War of the Ghosts'. The story used strange vocabulary, grammar and events for a British person at that time with unfamiliar place names and descriptions. The participants were asked to read the story twice and then recall it either through serial reproduction or repeated reproduction.

Repeated reproduction

The participant read the story and then was asked to recall it after different periods of time. This included being asked to recall the story directly after hearing it, the next day, a week later, a month later and even years later.

Serial reproduction

In this method, the participant heard the story and then told it to another participant. They then told another person, and this continued until the story had been passed along 9 times. The 10th participant then recalled what they could about the story.

Results

Bartlett made several observations about the reproductions of the story including:

- Omission/Simplification: Details that were unfamiliar to the participants (e.g. strange to their way of thinking) were removed from the story.
- Simplification: The story was shortened, and complex sections of the story were simplified. The basic form and events of the story were unchanged.
- Rationalisation: Some aspects were added to the story to make it flow more smoothly in line with the participant schemas e.g. motivations of the characters.
- Transformation: Unfamiliar objects or names were changed to something more familiar to the participant e.g. *canoe* was changed to *boat*.

Conclusion

Memory is a reconstructive process. Memories are rebuilt using our schemas to fill in any gaps. Our schemas reinterpret events, so they make more sense to the individual.

War of the Ghosts

One night two young men from Egulac went down to the river to hunt seals and while they were there it became foggy and calm. Then they heard war-cries, and they thought: "Maybe this is a war-party". They escaped to the shore, and hid behind a log. Now canoes came up, and they heard the noise of paddles, and saw one canoe coming up to them. There were five men in the canoe, and they said:

"What do you think? We wish to take you along. We are going up the river to make war on the people."

One of the young men said, "I have no arrows."

"Arrows are in the canoe," they said.

"I will not go along. I might be killed. My relatives do not know where I have gone. But you," he said, turning to the other, "may go with them."

So one of the young men went, but the other returned home.

And the warriors went on up the river to a town on the other side of Kalama. The people came down to the water and they began to fight, and many were killed. But presently the young man heard one of the warriors say, "Quick, let us go home: that Indian has been hit." Now he thought: "Oh, they are ghosts." He did not feel sick, but they said he had been shot.

So the canoes went back to Egulac and the young man went ashore to his house and made a fire. And he told everybody and said: "Behold I accompanied the ghosts, and we went to fight. Many of our fellows were killed, and many of those who attacked us were killed. They said I was hit, and I did not feel sick."

He told it all, and then he became quiet. When the sun rose he fell down. Something black came out of his mouth. His face became contorted. The people jumped up and cried.

He was dead.

Evaluation

Generalisability

- The study used British people only so cannot be generalised beyond Britain.
- There are few specific details about the sample so age ranges and gender cannot be confirmed.

Reliability

- Bartlett was not specific about the length of time when participants were asked to recall the story. Each participant was asked at different times with no set periods.
- The participants were not given the same standardised instructions and so they may have been affected by the time, situation and phrasing of how they were told to complete the task.

Application to life

- Understanding that memory is reconstructive greatly influences how we view memories and reliability of memories.
- Knowing memory may be unreliable has caused the cognitive interview to be developed to be used by police when interviewing eye witnesses to events.

Validity

- The study was conducted in 1932 and it is possible the many changes in society such as the internet, mobile devices and expanded travel mean the findings no longer reflect current cognitive processes.
- The task was artificial (and in an artificial setting of a laboratory) and so the realism can be questioned (the ecological validity).

Ethics

- There were no apparent ethical issues in the study although the commitment to repeat the story over an extended period could be considered a slight issue for participants.

