

Competition question

To what extent does psychological research suggest that memory is reconstructive rather than an accurate record of the past?

Student exemplary essay: 1000 words, 2 hours

Memory often feels like a recording of an event which can simply be replayed later. However, psychological research suggests that remembering is more active than this. When people recall an event, they may combine what actually happened with expectations, later information and details supplied by other people. This is described as reconstructive memory. Although much evidence supports this view, memory is not always inaccurate, and some research may exaggerate how easily it can be distorted.

Bartlett's study of *The War of the Ghosts* was one of the earliest demonstrations of reconstructive memory. British participants read an unfamiliar Native American story and later reproduced it several times. Their accounts became shorter and more conventional. Details such as "canoes" were sometimes changed to more familiar ideas such as "boats", while supernatural elements were left out or altered. Bartlett argued that participants used schemas: organised packages of knowledge formed through experience. Because the story did not fit their existing cultural schemas, they unconsciously changed it into something that made more sense to them.

This supports the claim that memory is not a literal copy of the past. Participants did not simply lose random details; their errors followed a pattern. They reshaped the story according to what they expected a story to contain. This is important because it explains why two people can experience the same event but remember it differently. Their previous experiences and expectations may lead them to reconstruct the event in different ways.

However, Bartlett's procedure lacked control. Participants were not always given identical instructions or tested after the same delay, making it difficult to know exactly why their memories changed. The story was also deliberately strange to British participants. It may therefore have produced more distortion than an ordinary event would. Even so, the study has strong real-world relevance because daily life rarely involves memorising carefully controlled lists. People usually remember complex events that have personal and cultural meaning, so Bartlett's research may reflect normal remembering better than highly artificial laboratory tasks.

Later research has shown that memory can also be reconstructed using information received after an event. Loftus and Palmer showed participants films of car accidents and then asked them to estimate the speed of the vehicles. The verb used in the question affected their answers. Participants who were asked how fast the cars were going when they "smashed" into each other gave a higher average estimate than those who were asked when they "contacted" each other. In a second experiment, participants exposed to the word "smashed" were also more likely to report seeing broken glass, even though there was none.

One explanation is response bias: the wording may have influenced how participants answered without actually changing the memory itself. Yet the false reports of broken glass suggest a deeper effect. Loftus and Palmer proposed that the leading question became integrated into the original memory, creating a revised version of the event. This has serious implications for eyewitness testimony. A witness may be honest and confident but still give an inaccurate account if they have been exposed to leading questions.

The study was conducted in a laboratory using film clips, so the participants did not experience the shock or personal consequences of a real accident. They may also have paid less attention because they knew the event was staged. This limits ecological validity. On the other hand, laboratory control allowed the researchers to isolate the wording of the question as the main difference between conditions. The findings have also been supported by other research into post-event information, suggesting that the effect is not limited to one experiment.

Memory can also be reconstructed through discussion with other witnesses. Gabbert and colleagues placed participants in pairs, with each person seeing a slightly different video of the same crime. After discussing the event, many participants reported details that had only appeared in their partner's video. This is known as memory conformity. People may accept another person's account because they believe it is more accurate, or the new information may become confused with their own memory.

This is especially relevant because witnesses are often able to speak to one another before giving formal statements. It shows that distortion does not require a deliberately misleading interviewer. Ordinary conversation can alter what a person later believes they saw. However, not every participant in Gabbert's research conformed, which suggests that memory is not automatically rewritten whenever new information is introduced. Individual differences in confidence, attention or memory ability may make some people more resistant than others.

There is also evidence that eyewitness memory can remain accurate, particularly when an event is distinctive and personally important. Yuille and Cutshall studied witnesses to a real shooting in Canada. Their accounts several months later were generally accurate and showed little effect from misleading questions. This challenges the idea that memory is highly fragile. The emotional intensity of the event may have made the central details more memorable than the details of a short laboratory film.

Nevertheless, real-life evidence is harder to control. The witnesses may have repeated the story to others or followed media reports, and the researchers could not know exactly what each person originally noticed. High accuracy for central details also does not mean every part of the memory was correct. A witness might accurately remember that a weapon was used while being mistaken about the offender's clothing or the order of events.

Overall, psychological research strongly supports the view that memory is reconstructive. Schemas can reshape unfamiliar material, leading questions can introduce post-event information, and discussion can create memory conformity. These findings make it difficult to treat recall as a perfect recording. However, reconstructive does not mean completely unreliable. People often remember the main features of important events accurately, and laboratory studies may make distortion easier than it is in real life. Memory is best understood as an active reconstruction based on genuine information, but influenced by knowledge, expectations and later experience.