



RECONSTRUCTIVE MEMORY

Bartlett (1932)

The key idea which Bartlett proposed this theory upon was that *memory is not like a tape recorder*. Bartlett, and many other psychologists, have suggested that a memory is not perfectly formed, perfectly encoded and perfectly retrieved. This is somewhat supported by the **levels of processing** framework which states that coding and retrieval depend on how well an event is processed.

Schema -

an idea or script about the world (for example an “attending a lesson” or “going to the cinema” script) which paint a certain expectation of the event and outline rules of what to do

Bartlett started by thinking that past and current experiences of the individual reflect how an event is remembered. He notes that there would be **input**, which is the **perception** of the event. This is followed by the **processing**, which includes the *perception and interpretation* of the event; this involves previous experiences and **schemata**.

The memory of an event derives from information from specific memory traces which were encoded at the time of the event, and ideas that a person has from knowledge, expectations, beliefs and attitudes. Remembering involves retrieving knowledge that has been altered to fit with knowledge that the person already has.

War of the Ghosts

The origins of Bartlett’s theory came from a game of Chinese whispers. He decided to construct his own experiment, which was based around the idea of the game. He used a Native American folk story called *War of the Ghosts*. He used such a story because it was very unfamiliar to them, being in a different style and from a different culture, therefore not slotting into their usual schemata. First of all, Bartlett would read the participants the story, and then ask them to repeat the story back to him, which prompted several different accounts.

There were several more occasions where Bartlett met with the participants to hear what they could remember of the folk tale. They were able to recall less and less each time as time went on, so the story became shorter. However, it tended to make more sense, compared to the original story, which to them made no sense whatsoever.

After about six recall sessions, the participants’ average stories had shortened from 330 words to 180 words. Bartlett noticed that people had **rationalised** the story in parts that made no sense to them, and filled in their memories so that what they were recalling seemed sensible to them.

This means that the participants had reconstructed their memories of the story. Bartlett hereby concluded that memory is **reconstructive**, not *reproductive*.

Elizabeth Loftus

A leading psychologist and expert on human memory, Loftus has done a lot of work in the area of reconstructive memory. She agrees with Bartlett and has taken his ideas one stage further in her work.

Loftus’ work includes looking into the reliability of **eyewitness testimonies**. As a leading expert into criminology and psychology, eyewitness testimonies were a particular interest, and her work has influenced cognitive processes behind law practices today, such as guiding the police not to use leading questions.

You will see more about eyewitness testimonies in the Key Issue for Cognitive

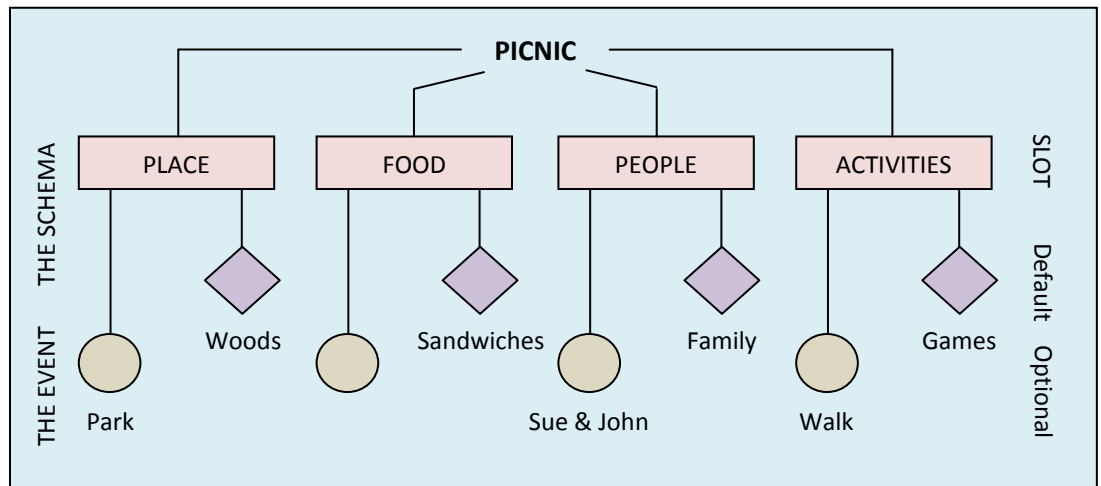
Rationalisation -

altering something to make it make sense to you

Confabulation -

making up certain parts to fill in a memory to make it make sense

The diagram to the right shows a picnic schema as given by Cohen (1993). Cohen pointed out five ways in which schemata can help influence memory – by providing or aiding selection and storage, abstraction, integration and interpretation, normalisation and



retrieval. This means that there are going to be both advantages and disadvantages of schemata in memory. One of the main advantages is that they enable us to store the central meaning or gist of new information without necessarily remembering the precise details (abstraction, selection and storage), unless perhaps the details were particularly unusual: this saves memory resources. Schemata also help us to understand new information more readily (integration and interpretation, normalisation), or fill in or guess missing parts of it using default values (retrieval). This makes the world more coherent and predictable.

However, some of the drawbacks arise with information that does not fit in well with our normal schemata may be forgotten or ignored, especially the minor details (selection and storage), or distorted (normalisation), so as to make better sense to us. This links back to Bartlett's *War of the Ghosts*. This may cause inaccurate, stereotyped and prejudiced remembering.

RECONSTRUCTIVE MEMORY THEORY: AN EVALUATION

- ✓ The theory is backed by much support, including Bartlett's *War of the Ghosts* Chinese whisper-style experiment, as well as the work of Elizabeth Loftus, who has studied the unreliability of eyewitness testimonies
- ✓ It can be tested by experimental method because the independent variable can be operationalised and measured: a story can have features that can be counted each time it is recalled and the changes recorded, so up to a point, the theory can be scientifically tested
- ✗ The study which used *War of the Ghosts* had a Native American folk story which made no sense to the participants, therefore it might be argued that they altered the story to make it make sense because they were being asked to retell the story
- ✗ There could have also been demand characteristics for the study, where the participants anticipate what is the intended answer and try to give that: this would make the findings unreliable
- ✗ It does not explain *how* memory is reconstructive: this is a theory of description, not an explanation