

**Examining to What Extent the Notion "You Don't Remember What
Happened but What You Remember Becomes What Happened" is True
Through the Lens of Reconstructive Theory**

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Abstract

The quote "You don't remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened" encapsulates the essence of the reconstructive theory of memory, which suggests that memory can be reconstructed due to the influence of various factors. This paper explores the stages of memory processing and how it can be distorted. The reconstructive theory, originally proposed by Bartlett, suggests that memories are actively reconstructed based on cues and information, rather than being exact replicas of past events. The theory is supported by studies demonstrating memory modifications and false memories. While there are alternative explanations, the reconstructive theory remains the most widely accepted and reliable explanation for the nature of memory.

Key words: Reconstructive theory, Memory, Memory Distortion

Introduction

Human memory is a complex and far from trivial process that plays a crucial role in our daily lives. It can be described as representations of past experiences stored in the brain (Klein). These representations can be retrieved and recalled to subconsciously influence our present behaviour and decision-making. Nevertheless, the accuracy and reliability of our memories can be called into question due to a variety of factors. These factors include how long ago the event occurred, cognitive biases, and other impacts from external factors. In other words, it is up to the brain's interpretation of how certain events or knowledge are stored and remembered. The quote, "You don't remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened," by John Green implies that memories are not an objective representation of events but rather a subjective interpretation of those events. It is an impactful statement that perfectly sums up reconstructive theory, which is the nature of memory.

How Memory Is Processed

Before discussing reconstructive theory, it is crucial to understand the key idea of how memory is processed. Memory operates in three consecutive stages: encoding, storage, and retrieval (Melton). However, the process is not as straightforward as it seems, and the accuracy of retrieved memories can be called into question for a plethora of reasons. One of those is the passage of time, which translates into memory decay. As time passes, memories become more susceptible to distortion and error, resulting in false memories or confabulations (Schmolck,

Buffalo and Squire). "You don't remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened" proposes an interesting question as to whether these confabulations should be perceived as really happening due to the distortion of memory. Some would argue that this may be due to the limitation of the sensory information one can take in at a time. Only things that one was aware of became what they remember. People may claim that things they did not see or hear did not "actually happened" since in their minds, there was no recollection of that.

This means that information or "what happened" may not be encoded, stored, and retrieved exactly as the event occurs. Instead, what the brain remembers becomes what it is retrieved or what the brain considers as "what happened", which is exactly what the quote suggested.

Furthermore, memories can be modified or distorted by the introduction of new information that is independent of the original memory. This can lead to the memory updating phenomenon, where new information is integrated into existing memories, leading to a modified or updated version of the original memory (Hupbach et al.). Similar to memory distortions, it is interesting to consider whether these updated versions are true events merely because the memory of this event has become distorted. If memory is described as how brains store past experiences, then even the distorted one is still considered the true memory because "What you remember becomes what happened", even though it may not be an accurate picture of the event. This strengthens how the quote is strongly linked to the nature of the memory since it means that the memory has been modified before we access the information from the memory bank.

The Reconstructive Theory and Its Origin

Due to progressive change and variation in how memory is stored in our brains, a theory that attempts to explain this phenomenon was proposed in the 1930s by Sir Frederic Bartlett. The reconstructive theory of memory states that when people retain information about something, they are not simply retrieving a stored memory, but are actively reconstructing a memory based on various cues and information (Friedman). The study that led to this newfound theory is the "War of the Ghosts" experiment, where Bartlett asked participants to read a story that was unfamiliar to them (Roediger).

Bartlett found that as participants recalled the story, they tended to alter or "reconstruct" and simplify events, leaving out details that did not fit with their cultural expectations. Bartlett called this phenomenon "reconstructive memory." Subsequently, Bartlett proposed a theory called "schema", which explains why memories are stored differently depending on what made sense to each individual, and their past experiences.

The story could be modified subconsciously to fit the norm or common sense before passing on that story as if it is "what happened" when it is just how we "remember it". In my opinion, the underlying reason for the simplification of the story, by aligning it with the old knowledge and understanding, is to reduce the effort to grasp the new concept. This may be similar to how learners make connections and build on new knowledge from the prior knowledge (Peters and Besley), meaning that one will modify what happened to fit the familiar schema by default to minimise the effort to remember.

Bartlett's explanation supported the essence of the quote that the memories from past events are not entirely how it occurred, but rather a reconstruction of the memory with the help of other factors mentioned. The reconstructed memory becomes what we remember as what happened and passed it on when asked to retrieve it. Nevertheless, if we re-evaluate the result of the experiment, alternative explanations arise, such as social desirability bias (Krumpal), or the pressure to answer a certain way thinking that it would give them a sense of acceptance by the experimenter. Other explanations could include not hearing the answer properly or intentionally undermining the experiment by giving a false statement. Both cases contradict the statement that "you don't remember what happened" because they did remember but choose not to present that information for various reasons. However, there is a consistent modified pattern in the participants' responses, which makes Bartlett's conclusion more reliable and widely accepted, which affirms the quote further.

Another classic study that helped to support Bartlett's reconstructive nature of memory was Loftus-Palmer. In this study, participants were shown a video of a car accident and found that participants who were asked the "smashed" question reported higher collision speeds than those who were given the "hit" question, even though the same video was shown to these two groups. This demonstrates how the use of wordings, leading questions, and suggestive techniques can reshape the memory of the event and result in false testimony when asked "what we remember". Alternatively, other theories could potentially explain the outcome of the experiment, which in turn explains the nature of the quote. Firstly, the response-bias theory (McGrath et al.), postulates that the wording of the question influences the guess participants were making because

participants could not remember what it was like. This still supports that “You don’t remember what happened” yet it is not due to the reconstruction of memory, it is simply building up a new response because there’s no previous memory to be reconstructed. Secondly, the familiarity principle (Liao, et al., 43), suggests that participants may be influenced by the unequal familiarity with the words. Therefore, in this case, it is not that “you don’t remember what happened”, it is simply the lack of understanding of the wording that is responsible for the mistake, not whether memory is reconstructed.

Regardless, the reconstructive theory still holds the most accountable since it has been repeated and supported by other experiments to confirm the validity, as well as other studies concluding that memory is prone to distortion and manipulation. Therefore, the reconstructive theory is still the most appropriate explanation of the deep meaning of the quote. This illustrates that “what we remember” or what memory we choose to present to others as “what happened” may be greatly influenced by external factors such as, in this case, the wording of the question. Hence, “what happened” as individual claims may not be “what actually happened”.

Exceptions to “You Don’t Remember What Happened”

Even though the reconstructive nature thoroughly explains the deep meaning behind how “what you remember becomes what happened”, one could argue that sometimes you “do” remember what happened, disagreeing with the notion that “you don’t remember what happened”. For example, memory associated with strong emotions could remain vivid in one’s mind and be less prone to deviate. Tyng et al. found that emotions help encode or retrieve

information more efficiently. Facilitated by fMRI neuroimaging techniques, which found rigorous activation in the hippocampus and amygdala. The stimulation in both parts indicates the enhancement in memory building and recollection. The study concludes that emotions have an enhancing effect on memories, meaning not all memories would be biased or distorted. The quote suggests that all memories will be distorted, which is true in a lot of cases yet evidently not all, as this example crucially illustrates. This is supported by the “flashbulb memories” where people can recall major events accurately even after a long period. For instance, Hirst et al. found that participants can recall where they were when they heard about 9-11 attack, and some can even add details displaying long-lasting vivid recollection. This usefully provides another example to highlight that there are occasions when people can remember what happened without distortion, hence the quote is not applicable in every circumstance.

Moreover, seeking out additional sources, such as written records or photographs, can help people accurately remember events to reduce the impact of emotional and cognitive biases. This could help individuals remember “what actually happened” and turn it into “what they remember” by narrowing down the gap and diminishing the opportunity for the memory to be reconstructed, so what happened may be what you “do” remember in this case. Barasch et al. supports this by adding that photographing shifts one’s focus to visual memorisation instead of auditory, which makes the picture in their mind clearer and last longer even without revisiting the photos. Accordingly, additional tools can aid people to “remember what happened”, which highlights how there are even mechanisms people can utilise which would reduce the likelihood of them not remembering “what happened”, providing further evidence against the quote.

Nevertheless, in most cases, “you don’t remember what happened” since our brains are very biased and susceptible to manipulation. Hence, for the vast case of events, there is a significantly higher chance that the memory will be reconstructed in some way due to numerous factors that could interfere with memory processing such as personal beliefs, cognitive biases, and leading questions, despite some cases such as emotional events and the aid from additional sources that “you do remember what happened”. Therefore, the quote still holds, and “what you remember becomes what happened” accurately states the nature of memory since it is just another way of explaining the reconstructive theory by claiming that the modified memory one remembers ends up becoming what one would recall, so it is true throughout all cases.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the quote "You don't remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened" is a powerful statement and can be viewed through the lens of the reconstructive nature of memory. The reconstructive theory of memory proposed by Bartlett and supported by numerous studies introduced the idea that memories are not fixed, objective records of the past, yet are malleable and subject to change. Even though there are alternative explanations to the findings in these studies as well as how the first part of the quote is not always true, the reconstructive theory still holds valid after considering all the explanations and other studies in favour of the finding. This means that memories can be influenced by a range of factors, including expectations, beliefs, emotions, and the context in which the memory is being recalled. Therefore, the reconstructive theory of memory is an interesting concept with far-reaching and profound implications in many areas of life.

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