

Memories Are What You Make Them

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Memories feel like video clips we're replaying mentally. But they're not. If memories were like videos, we should be able to point to places in the brain where these video-like mental records exist. We can't.

Memories of experiences are reconstructions from bits of information. Different bits of information are stored in separate parts of the brain.

When we "remember" something that happened to us, we are actually pulling together the various fragments to form a "whole" memory. So, there is always the possibility that the pieces are being put together in a way that doesn't quite reflect what really happened.

We've probably recalled some childhood experience while attending a family gathering, only to find that others don't recall the event the same way.

"It wasn't a bicycle," your sister says, "it was a tricycle." Or, "It wasn't your Aunt Pam, it was your Aunt Sheila," your parent reminds you.

Who's right? Both parties may be convinced of the accuracy of their own memory of the event, but without some outside corroboration, it is impossible to know whose

memory is more correct.

If someone is remembering the event inaccurately, how can that person still feel convinced that the memory is correct?

Chances are the person has thought of the event at different times before the family gathering. That person's version of the memory feels right because it's easy to picture by now.

We tend to use the ease with which we can remember something as an indication of how accurate that memory is (even though it's not).

Maybe the best way to think of memories is as little programs created by our brains to be able to picture something. If we have had a certain experience, it should be easier to picture that experience than if it never occurred. That ability to easily picture the event is our memory of it.

The potential problem with these mental programs is that they are also created when we vividly imagine something. Later it may become difficult (or impossible) to distinguish whether something actually happened or whether we can "remember" it easily because we imagined it vividly at some point.

As a dramatic example,

an elementary school guidance counselor shared the following incident. As a school bus picked up children at one stop, a teen came out into the front yard and shot himself in the head. The bus driver called for help and eventually continued her route.

The counselor later met with each student who had witnessed the suicide. One such boy described in detail what he remembered of the incident. Only later, in cross-referencing with bus route information, did the counselor learn that the boy was picked up AFTER the suicide.

How could this boy swear that he had seen the gruesome incident? It seems likely that the children who witnessed the suicide were talking about it in great detail afterwards. The boy heard the details, vividly imagined what the incident looked like, and later believed he too had witnessed it.

The bottom line is that memory is more reconstruction than it is simply replaying events. This fact has sobering implications for eyewitness testimony or accusations based on memories of events from years earlier.