

CASE STUDY: Bartlett – The War of the Ghosts

How can we show the impact of prior knowledge or schematic knowledge on memory? Bartlett (1932) asked people to learn material producing a conflict between what was presented and the reconstructive processes based on knowledge of the world. If, for example, people read a story taken from a different culture, then prior knowledge might produce distortions in the remembered version of the story, making it more conventional and acceptable from the standpoint of their own cultural background.

In his 1932 study, Bartlett asked his English participants to read a North American Indian folk tale called “The War of the Ghosts”, after which they tried to recall the story. Part of the story was as follows:

One night two young men from Edulac went down 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 went but the other returned home ... [it turns out that the five men in the boat were ghosts and after accompanying them in a fight, the young man returned to his village to tell his tale] ... 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 ... He was dead. (p.65)

One of the subject’s recall of the story (two weeks later):

There were two ghosts. They were on a river. There was a canoe on the river with five men in it. There occurred a war of ghosts ... They started the war and several were wounded and some killed. One ghost was wounded but did not feel sick. He went back to the village in the canoe. The next morning he was sick and something black came out of his mouth, and they cried: “He is dead.” (p.76)

Bartlett found the participants’ recall distorted the content and style of the original story. The story was shortened, and the phrases, and often words, were changed to be similar to the English language and concepts (e.g., “boat” instead of “canoe”). He also found other

kinds of errors, including flattening (failure to recall unfamiliar details) and sharpening (elaboration of certain details).

A criticism of Bartlett's work was that his approach to research lacked objectivity. Some psychologists believe that well-controlled experiments are the only way to produce objective data. Bartlett's methods were somewhat casual. He simply asked his group of participants to recall the story at various intervals and there were no special conditions for this recall. It is possible that other factors affected their performance, such as the conditions around them at the time they were recalling the story, or it could be that the distortions were simply guesses by participants who were trying to make their recall seem coherent and complete rather than genuine distortions in recall.

Alternatively, one could argue that his research is more ecologically valid than those studies that involve the recall of syllables or lists of words. In recent years there has been an increase in the kind of research conducted by Bartlett, looking more at "everyday memory".

Reference

Bartlett, F.C. (1932). *Remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.