

MEMORY: BARTLETT RECONSTRUCTIVE MEMORY

Aim: To investigate the effects of unfamiliarity on the recall of a folk story

Procedures:

- ❑ English participants heard an unfamiliar North American folk tale called “The War of the Ghosts”. The story contained words and ideas that would not have appeared in a conventional Western story.
- ❑ After 20 hours, participants were asked to recall as much of the story as possible
- ❑ Hereafter, participants were asked to retell the story many more times

Findings:

- ❑ The recalled story was distorted in a number of ways. Participants retold the story using language and narrative techniques that were influenced by their own cultural and literary background. Specifically, Bartlett found the following differences: rationalisations, omissions, changes in the order, alterations in the importance and distortions of emotions
- ❑ Distortions became even more pronounced over time, so that it increasingly resembled an ordinary English story

Conclusions:

- ❑ Memory for the folk tale continued being reconstructed over time and became less like the original story.
- ❑ The reconstruction made the story more coherent and so more easily remembered by the participants

Criticisms:

- ❑ This was an important study that drew attention to the way our schemas influence how we store memories
- ❑ The study has been criticised for being poorly designed and controlled. For example, Gauld and Stephenson (1967), in semi-replications of Bartlett’s story studies, found that errors were significantly reduced where participants were given explicit instructions that highlighted the importance of accurate recall.