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A REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

Myths about Memory

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Human Memory Works like a Tape Recorder or Video Camera, and Accurately Records the Events We've Experienced

When people attend reunions or get together with childhood friends to swap “old war stories,” they’re often impressed with a simple fact: Their recollections of many events differ, in many cases dramatically. One person recalls a lively discussion about politics as a friendly debate; another recalls the identical discussion as a heated argument. This kind of observation should be sufficient to challenge the widespread belief that our memories work like video cameras or DVDs. If our memories were perfect, we’d never forget a friend’s birthday, where we misplaced our iPod, or the exact date, time, and place of our first kiss.

Yet despite the sometimes all-too-obvious failings of everyday memory, surveys indicate that many people believe that our memories operate very much like tape recorders, video cameras, or DVDs, storing and replaying events exactly as we experienced them. Indeed, about 36% of us believe that our brains preserve perfect records of everything we’ve ever experienced (Alvarez & Brown, 2002). In one survey of over 600 undergraduates at a midwestern university, 27% agreed that memory operates like a tape recorder (Lenz, Ek, & Mills, 2009). Surveys show that even most psychotherapists agree that memories are fixed more or less permanently in the mind (Loftus & Loftus, 1980; Yapko, 1994).

These popular beliefs are in part residues of Sigmund Freud and others’ convictions that forgotten, often traumatic, memories reside unperturbed in the murky unconscious, neither distorted by the passage of time nor by competition with other memories (Wachtel, 1977). But contrary to these claims, our memories are far from exact replicas of past events

