

The malleability of autobiographical memory: research, applications and some puzzling results

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For several decades research has shown that human memory is both basically reliable but also highly malleable. Here in the first part I will review the data on the malleability of autobiographical memory (ABM), and outline its implications for applied situations (e.g. eyewitness testimony), providing some examples from court cases. In the second part I will shift gear, and critically discuss the reconstructive approach to memory retrieval in ABM in light of three sets of studies. I will examine whether studies comparing generative and direct retrieval might pose a challenge for the reconstructive idea, and what the apparent predominance of involuntary memories can tell us about retrieval processes in ABM. The results of a few studies on people who have a truly exceptional form of autobiographical memories will also be reported and discussed in light of the reconstructive approach, examining if they, along with some additional neuroimaging evidence, might tell a rather very different story about how autobiographical memory works.