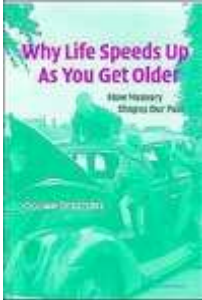


Finding Memory in Hard-to-Reach Places

A review of



Why Life Speeds Up as You Get Older: How Memory Shapes Our Past

by Douwe Draaisma

(A. Pomerans & E. Pomerans, Trans.) New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 276 pp. ISBN 0-521-83424-4. \$28.99

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— Douwe Draaisma has written a delightful book about some intriguing aspects of memory. Although it is primarily a study of autobiographical memory, the book covers episodic memory more generally as well as implicit memory. The focus is on memories that are not easily studied by traditional methods, challenges that should pique the interest of experimentalists. In addition to the question implied in the title, *Why Life Speeds Up as You Get Older: How Memory Shapes Our Past*, the book probes other of memory's mysteries, such as why déjà vu occurs, how savants remember, and the role of smell in memory. Most of the topics will be familiar to memory researchers, although the historical, literary, and anecdotal support will not.

— The fact that this book was not written by a cognitive psychologist means that it has a unique perspective, with novel descriptions of familiar topics, such as childhood amnesia and reminiscence. For example, in the chapter "The Memory of a Grandmaster: A Conversation With Ton Sijbrands," Draaisma writes on expertise and memory. Instead of summarizing the empirical literature, he offers, almost verbatim, an interview that he conducted with an expert draughts (checkers) player. The expert was able to play 20 different games at once without looking at any of the boards. Without relying on the standard citations, Draaisma shows that the expert did not have a superior memory in general but rather had a domain-specific ability that allowed him to play multiple games simultaneously. This chapter succeeds in giving a very personal look inside the memory of an expert, and the reader gains some knowledge that he or she cannot learn through conventional experimental psychology.

— The book also includes topics not normally covered in memory's top journals, raising interesting questions that may cue an experimentalist to

think about studying these issues. Smell and memory (Chapter 3), memory for humiliations (Chapter 4), and the use of photographs and other external memory aids (Chapter 11) are all interesting problems that have not been fully captured in the lab. The chapter "I Saw My Life Flash Before Me" is the most extreme example; in this section, Draaisma describes the memories reportedly retrieved by people in the moment they are facing death. It is fascinating to read Rear Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort's assertion that he remembered a shipwreck and his schooldays during his near-drowning experience and Albert Heim's claim that he saw a series of images from his life in the moments after falling more than 60 feet on a mountainside. The case studies are nicely paired with possible explanations, including both the biological and the more cognitive. Particularly appealing to us (as researchers of memory error) is the observation of a common depiction of predeath experiences in novels and films (suggesting there may be a schema available to guide reconstruction of these kinds of experiences).

☛The book does not provide a comprehensive account of memory; rather, it is a sampling of some of the fascinating topics in the field. Even within the domain of autobiographical memory, the author omits interesting topics, such as dating memories in time, implanting false memories for entire events, and the organization of autobiographical memories. The problems selected are very engaging ones, although the coverage of the topics is uneven and transitions are somewhat lacking. Consider the chapter on memory for humiliations, which clocks in at a mere 3 pages, in contrast to the chapters on *déjà vu* and near-death memories, which are over 30 pages apiece. Because the book was first published in Dutch in 2001 but was translated into English more recently, it is not the most up-to-date description of the science of memory. For example, since the book's initial publication, the field has advanced in its knowledge of *déjà vu* (Brown, 2003) as well as the brain basis of autobiographical memory and its relation to other forms of memory (Cabeza et al., 2004). However, it is not clear that coverage is the author's goal; instead, he succeeds in the goal of fascinating readers, especially those who are new to memory research.

☛There are a few places in the book where the linking of empirical findings to anecdotes may confuse rather than enlighten the reader. For example, Draaisma describes the reminiscence effect as "the fact that, as we approach the age of 60... our associations tend to turn to our youth" (p. 4). Although it is true that older adults remember a disproportionate number of memories from their 20s (Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986), it is not that they have a "dearth of memories of the last few years" (p. 176). Chapter 13 links laboratory findings on reminiscence to an interesting analysis of the distribution of memories described in the autobiography of Willem van den Hull. Although this approach richly illustrates many empirically supported conclusions about autobiographical memory, it does differ in many ways (in

both methods and results) from the typical word-cuing experiment conducted in the lab.

—A cognitive psychologist may not agree with all of the conclusions reached in the book. At the very least, some of the assertions will prove thought provoking. For example, the very first chapter is titled “Memory Is Like a Dog That Lies Down Where It Pleases.” Although an explicit intention to remember is not as important as, for instance, elaborative processing, it is misleading to think of memory as beyond our control. Another assertion on the very first page may make the cognitive psychologist pause and think: “Autobiographical memory obeys some mysterious laws of its own” (p. 1). Although it is true that Ebbinghaus-type methods did not predict such autobiographical memory results as infantile amnesia, much of what we remember about our lives can be explained by the same mechanisms as are used to explain memory for more mundane stimuli. For example, memories of unique life events can be modeled with the isolation paradigm (e.g., see Hunt, 1995), in which people better remember a target (e.g., QXK) if it is dissimilar to other list items (e.g., numbers) than if the list content is homogenous (e.g., other letter trigrams).

—The parallel between distinctiveness effects in the laboratory and personal memories for unusual events returns us to the theme of the book, namely whether there are memories that do “not fit into our type of research” (p. 13). Draaisma’s argument is that a complete picture of memories in hard-to-reach places requires one to look beyond the confines of the laboratory, to examine the provinces of neurologists, psychiatrists, novelists, poets, historians, and philosophers. We applaud Draaisma’s identification of hard-to-reach places and hope that this book will challenge experimental psychologists to develop flexible new methodologies.

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