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Emotional Valence of Narratives Is Preserved Across Multiple Retellings

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Abstract

Frederic Bartlett pioneered the research on serial reproduction in 1932 and suggested that the stereotypical or schematic form of narratives consists in rationalization, a causal connection within a story and its plot. We conducted the largest retelling experiment to date with two different studies (19,086 retellings; 12,840 participants) that both reach the conclusion that retelling of narratives is focused on the precise preservation of the story's degree of happiness and sadness, even when many other aspects related to coherence and rationalization of the story deteriorate. These findings, supported by a novel statistical model with Bayesian estimation, suggest that the happiness and sadness of a story operates as the anchor of stability for both reception-encoding and for reproduction-retrieval of narratives. We suggest that happiness and sadness in narratives function not simply as discrete emotions, but also as verdicts concerning the outcome of a story.