

ORGANIZED FORGETTING

A DISORGANIZED CRITIQUE OF THE DISTINCTIONS AMONG VARIOUS TYPES OF MEMORY

Reprinted from The Organization of Recall, Proceedings of the Second International Interdisciplinary Conference on Learning, Remembering and Forgetting, The New York Academy of Sciences. Edited by Daniel P. Kimble.

Discussion leader:

H. B. BARLOW
*Department of Optometry
University of California
Berkeley, California*

After this day-long discussion I left the conference table with a sense of disappointment and confusion. These provide the headings for the first two sections of this critique, where I shall explain the reasons for these gloomy thoughts. However, such feelings did not survive for long when I returned to Californian sunshine, and in the later sections I shall explain how I rationalized a path of escape from them.

Disappointment in Plaster Casts and Attics

A physiologist's primary interest in learning, remembering, and forgetting lies in the light it may throw on the central question; how is information stored in the central nervous system? It has to be admitted that this discussion on the "organization of short-term memory" did not shed much light on the problem. Dr. Broadbent admirably summarized the concepts of interference and consolidation by reference to the plaster of Paris model of memory. Dr. Meyer pointed out to me that many of the features could equally well be epitomized in Conan Doyle's attic theory: Consolidation is the time-consuming process of moving the memorabilia up the attic stairway; interference is the consequence of the attic stairway being restricted in space, and of its being used as a temporary store pending time and energy to remove things upstairs. Dr. Broadbent's intriguing experiments on binaural presentation of information show us that there are separate stairways from each ear, but they join before entry to the attic. The picture evolves further with the necessity for separate stairways for material presented in male and female voices for each ear, and also for numbers and letters. One wonders in passing how the different categories are directed up their different routes, but the main purpose of presenting

