Cognitive Psychologist Endel Tulving Shed Light on How Human Memory Functions

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University of Toronto psychologist Endel Tulving came up with numerous paradigm-shifting theories about how memory functions, and backed them up years later using human studies.

“He was one of the very top scientists of memory in the last hundred years,” says his colleague Fergus Craik, a neuropsychologist and University of Toronto professor emeritus. “He got us to understand memory in the way we think of it today.”

In his most-cited work, a chapter from the 1972 book *Organization of Memory*, which he co-edited, Dr. Tulving wrote about episodic and semantic memory, which he described as “two parallel and partially overlapping information processing systems.”

Episodic memory, a term he coined, relates to how we remember personal experiences tied to specific moments in time. This type of long-term memory is delicate and susceptible to being changed or lost. His explanation of episodic memory is important today in our understanding of the impact of dementia and stroke on memory. For instance, research he did well after his official retirement showed that the loss of episodic memory from a brain injury did not change a person’s ability to understand the feelings and intentions of others.

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