

You've Probably Seen Yourself in Your Memories

September 01, 2022

Pick a memory. It could be as recent as breakfast or as distant as your first day of kindergarten. What matters is that you can really visualize it. Hold the image in your mind.

Now consider: Do you see the scene through your own eyes, as you did at the time? Or do you see yourself in it, as if you're watching a character in a movie? Do you see it, in other words, from a first-person or a third-person perspective? Usually, we associate this kind of distinction with storytelling and fiction-writing. But like a story, every visual memory has its own implicit vantage point. All seeing is seeing from *somewhere*. And sometimes, in memories, that somewhere is not where you actually were at the time.

This fact is strange, even unsettling. It cuts against our most basic understanding of memory as a simple record of experience. For a long time, psychologists and neuroscientists did not pay this fact much attention. That has changed in recent years, and as the amount of research on the role of perspective has multiplied, so too have its potential implications. Memory perspective, it turns out, is tied up in criminal justice, implicit bias, and post-traumatic stress disorder. At the deepest level, it helps us make sense of who we are.

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