Why do we remember?

Memory is typically associated with remembering our past experiences. Yet humans spend only a minority of time reminiscing about the past; the majority of our thoughts involve imagining and fantasizing about experiences we have never had. The constituent elements are drawn from prior memories, but the product is something novel. These thoughts are often episodic in nature—those that concern imagining a specific event unfolding within a particular time and place. It has thus been argued that a central purpose of episodic memory is to provide the building blocks that allow us to forecast future contingencies. This idea has two implications: First, experiences that are relevant to our survival and fitness are more likely to be remembered. Second, prior experiences should directly influence future-oriented adaptive behaviors, such as planning or decision making. With these ideas in mind, my talk focuses on the manner in which we use episodic memory adaptively. I will additionally consider circumstances in which episodic memory can paradoxically be maladaptive for humans. Behavioral and neuroimaging data from healthy individuals as well as neuropsychological data from patients with severe memory disorders will be discussed.

Thursday, January 28, 4 pm
Refreshments served at 3:45
108 West Village G