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Affective false memories in Dementia of Alzheimer’s Type

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Abstract

This study examined the production of inferential false memories for complex pictorial stimuli and the implications of affective content in Alzheimer’s disease (AD). A group of 24 AD patients and a group of 24 healthy older adults studied a sequence of pictures depicting stories that included positive, negative or neutral consequences of an unseen action, and then completed an old-new picture recognition test. The number of causal errors was higher in healthy older adults compared to AD patients but affective content attenuated the effect. Causal errors increased in AD patients when stories included affective (positive or negative) outcomes. In addition, negative content produced a larger number of errors than positive content across groups. This data confirms that although memory processing is poorer in AD, it is sensitive to affective content. Accordingly, the nature of affective false memory errors suggest the need to consider the use of affective information in the development of new cognitive training procedures.

Keywords: Alzheimer’s disease, affective content, false memories, aging

1. Introduction

Studies on human memory have widely confirmed that since memories are “reconstructions”, they are susceptible to distortions, often deviate from what actually happened and are not without errors (e.g., Schacter, 1999; Bartlett, 1932; Conway, 1997; Johnson et al., 1993; Roediger, 1996; Schacter, 2001). These errors, or false memories, are particularly interesting because studies on them have led to important contributions to our understanding of normal memory function (e.g. Schacter et al., 1998), memory failure in specific brain diseases (e.g. Balota et al., 1999) and clinically relevant memory distortions in certain patient populations (e.g. Budson et al., 2000). Moreover, these studies underline the importance of considering the qualitative features
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