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The relationship between susceptibility to false memories, dissociativity, and paranormal belief and experience

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Abstract

One hundred participants completed a News Coverage Questionnaire concerning personal memories of where they were, what they were doing and who they were with when footage of dramatic news events was first shown on television, as well as asking them to recall details of the footage itself. These news items included four events that are known to have been captured on film and one item concerning non-existent footage of the bombing of a nightclub in Bali. Overall, 36% of respondents reported false memories of the alleged footage of the Bali bombing. Participants reporting false memories were found to score significantly higher than those who did not report such memories on the Australian Sheep–Goat Scale, on various subscales of the Anomalous Experiences Inventory (Belief, Experience and Ability) and on the Dissociative Experiences Scale, supporting the hypothesis that believers in the paranormal may be more susceptible to false memories than non-believers.

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1. Introduction

In recent years a great deal of research has been carried out to investigate the phenomenon of false memory creation. Interest in false memory research largely began in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the explosion in cases of falsely recovered memories as a result of questionable therapeutic techniques (e.g., Loftus & Ketcham, 1994; Ofshe & Watters, 1994).

Experimental psychologists such as Loftus (e.g., 1993) have demonstrated the ease with which false memories of an event from childhood (e.g., being lost in a shopping mall) can be implanted. Such studies clearly show how fallible and susceptible to suggestion our memories can be. Researchers are currently developing new paradigms to investigate false memories. One such paradigm involves probing participants' memories for television footage of emotionally charged events. Crombag, Wagenaar, and van Koppen (1996), for example, questioned 193 people about the crashing of an El Al Boeing 747 into a block of flats in Amsterdam. The crash occurred on 4 October 1992, and respondents were questioned 10 months later. The crash was an extremely high profile and traumatic event and was headline news for many days on Dutch television. However, there was no recorded footage of the actual crash. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire about the crash and were told, "We want to test your memory for a particular detail of this disaster." The participants were told that they would be given three factual questions followed by "the test question" which concerned the length of time it took before fire broke out. The key question, however, (i.e., "Did you see the television film of the moment the plane hit the apartment building?") was presented as one of the factual questions. Crombag et al. found that 107 respondents (55%) reported that they had seen the actual crashing of the plane into the apartment block. Furthermore, 82% of respondents completed the fourth question relating to specific details about the fire.

Intrigued by this finding, Crombag et al. were able to replicate the results with a second questionnaire distributed to a new set of respondents. In this second study, participants were asked to complete questions relating to highly specific details about the crash, e.g., at what angle the plane crashed into the building, and what happened to the plane after impact. In this case they found an even higher percentage of false reports. Of the 93 participants, 66% responded that they had seen the film footage and most of these participants were willing to answer the detailed questions relating to the crash. For example, of the 61 participants who answered this question, 67% were willing to describe the angle at which the plane hit the building.

This phenomenon has become known as "crashing memories". In a similar experiment, Ost, Vrij, Costall, and Bull (2002) were able to replicate these findings using another traumatic and very public event. In 1997, Diana, the Princess of Wales, and her companion, Dodi Fayed, were killed in a car crash in Paris. No film footage of the actual crash has ever surfaced and it is unlikely that any exists. In line with previous findings, Ost et al. found that of the 45 participants who had been asked if they had seen the *actual video footage* of the crash in which Diana and Dodi died, 44% (i.e., $N = 20$) reported that they had seen the film.

It appears that almost any traumatic public event can be used to explore this phenomenon. Granhag, Stromwall, and Billings (2003), for example, found that 55% of respondents claimed to have seen non-existent film footage of the sinking of the Estonia Ferry. Ost, Hogbin, and Granhag (2006) found that 39% of respondents claimed to have seen non-existent CCTV footage of the explosion in a Bali nightclub in which many tourists were killed. Jelicic et al. (2005) found that

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