



What research paradigms have cognitive psychologists used to study “False memory,” and what are the implications of these choices?

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Abstract

This research examines the methodologies employed by cognitive psychologists to study “false memory,” and assesses if these methodologies are likely to facilitate scientific progress or perhaps constrain the conclusions reached. A PsycINFO search of the empirical publications in cognitive psychology was conducted through January, 2004, using the subject heading, “false memory.” The search produced 198 articles. Although there is an apparent false memory research bandwagon in cognitive psychology, with increasing numbers of studies published on this topic over the past decade, few researchers (only 13.1% of the articles) have studied false memory as the term was originally intended—to specifically refer to planting memory for an entirely new event that was never experienced in an individual’s lifetime. Cognitive psychologists interested in conducting research relevant to assessing the authenticity of memories for child sexual abuse should consider the generalizability of their research to the planting of entirely new events in memory.

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1. Introduction

One dark night, a drunk man was scurrying around under a street light at the end of an alley. A man walking by asked him what he was doing. The drunk man explained that he had lost his keys and was trying to find them. “Where did you lose your keys?” the man asked. “At the far end of the alley,” he responded. “So why are you looking at this end of the alley if you lost your keys down at the other end?” asked the man. “Because it’s too dark down there to see,” he replied.

There are cycles in scientific development. For scientific research to be progressive, the scientific community in a particular research area must agree on their goals, on the basic characteristics of the real world that are relevant to their topic of study, and on what the permissible research methods are for studying this topic. Kuhn (1970) called this shared view a *paradigm*. A shared paradigm allows scientists to analyze their topic from a collective, unified standpoint and an integrated body of knowledge is more likely to develop. Once established, however, paradigms can break down and be replaced, and the driving forces here are not always scientific forces. Kuhn emphasized that the scientific community is, after all, composed of social beings who operate in a changing historical and social context.

Boring (e.g., 1959/1963b, 1963a) proposed a similar view of scientific development, based on the concept of *Zeitgeist*. The *Zeitgeist* is the total climate in which a scientific idea is developed—the theories, problems, and methods within the scientific community as well as the values and attitudes of the scientists and the social context in which the work is conducted. The progress of scientific ideas and methods is both advanced and mired by these forces, producing cyclical changes in research paradigms.

In the past decade, there has been a veritable explosion of cognitive research on the topic of false memory. The fact that the research on this topic has been so prolific and has drawn the attention of so many researchers clearly conveys how important this concept is currently considered to be. The purpose of this study is to examine the research methodologies employed by cognitive psychologists to study the concept of “false memory,” and to assess if these methodologies are likely to facilitate scientific progress or perhaps constrain the conclusions reached.

This review is timely because cognitive research on false memory is in its infancy; this term was first cited in the cognitive research literature in 1994. The fact that false memory research is relatively new and that its emergence in journals produced a veritable explosion, gave us the opportunity to examine the “first wave” of methodological research tools used in this large set of studies. Although research on false memories will surely evolve in various directions over time, by looking at the “first wave” of research on this topic we can observe the relatively immediate methodological reactions that a large number of cognitive psychologists have brought to bare on the phenomenon of false memory. Specifically, we were interested in the proportion of these studies that involve planting memories for an entirely new event that was never experienced, as this was the intended use of the term false memory when it was coined.

The origin of use of the term “false memory” by cognitive psychologists can be traced to a symposium at the 1992 meeting of the American Psychological Society on the topic, “Remembering ‘Repressed’ Abuse: Initial Research, Theoretical Analysis, and Evaluation of the Claims” (“Remembering ‘Repressed’ Abuse”, 1992). Elizabeth Loftus served as the symposium discussant and presented her research on planting in adults, false childhood memories for being lost in a mall. She drew generalizations from this research to the real-world issue of assessing whether

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