



False memories for aggressive acts

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ABSTRACT

Can people develop false memories for committing aggressive acts? How does this process compare to developing false memories for victimhood? In the current research we used a simple false feedback procedure to implant false memories for committing aggressive acts (causing a black eye or spreading malicious gossip) or for victimhood (receiving a black eye). We then compared these false memories to other subjects' true memories for equivalent events. False aggressive memories were all too easy to implant, particularly in the minds of individuals with a proclivity towards aggression. Once implanted, the false memories were indistinguishable from true memories for the same events, on several dimensions, including emotional content. Implications for aggression-related memory more generally as well as false confessions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

This research combines theories, methodologies, and applications from three different, closely related—but not normally interacting—areas of applied cognitive psychology: memory for aggression, false memory, and false confessions. In the present study we cross these boundaries to link together important overlapping areas from different subfields. Research on aggressive cognition has demonstrated that aggressive individuals have distinctive thought patterns that are likely to affect their behavior in aggressive contexts and their subsequent memories for that behavior. False memory research has demonstrated that it is often trivially easy to implant (or for people to generate their own) false memories for a variety of autobiographical events. And research on false confessions—particularly internalized false confessions—has demonstrated that people sometimes confess to acts that they did not perform. In the present study, we examined whether it would be possible to implant false memories for overtly aggressive acts without any of the complex context and evidence that is typically used in false confession research. We were also interested in whether aggressive individuals would be particularly likely to develop these false memories. This propensity, if real, would be a significant concern because it could make aggressive individuals (who may be vulnerable to arrest because

of their aggressive tendencies) particularly likely to make internalized false confessions and thus risk false conviction.

1.1. Aggressive cognitions

A growing body of theory and research evidence suggests that the distinctive cognitive habits that characterize aggressive people might well predispose them to false memories of an aggressive nature. One of the distinctive cognitive habits observed among aggressive people concerns how they process incoming information. A substantial number of experimental studies have shown that aggression-prone people demonstrate a *hostile attribution bias* (HAB; Dodge, 1980): perceiving others to hold aggressive intent where there may be none. For example, compared to less aggressive people, aggression-prone people rate others as more hostile, and report more hostile feelings, thoughts and potential retaliatory behavior towards others, when placed in a real or imaginary ambiguously hostile scenario (Allred & Smith, 1991; Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Epps & Kendall, 1995; Kirsh & Olczak, 2002). A second key aspect of aggressive cognition models is the distinctive set of hypothetical cognitive structures thought to underlie aggressive behavior. Theoretical models suggest that *aggression-related knowledge structures* or *schemata*—including ideas, objects, actions and emotions related to aggression—are organized as an associative network that is more extensive and elaborate in aggressive-prone people (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Berkowitz, 1990; Bushman, 1995; Huesmann, 1988). Moreover, in this group, such cognitive structures—and cognitive scripts—are thought to be more chronically accessible, and to operate automatically, leading to their

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overuse in the processing of incoming information and in choosing a behavioral response (for example, if someone insults me, I should respond by hitting them back; Seager, 2005).

Do these general cognitive biases set the stage for memory biases in particular? To investigate this question, Takarangi, Polaschek, Hignett, and Garry (2008) examined whether aggression-prone people would falsely remember aggression-related material. They exposed subjects with varying levels of trait aggression to a list of words that could be interpreted as having either a violent, or a non-violent (kitchen) theme (cut, whip, and mug) and then tested subjects' memory for the word list after a brief delay. Subjects who had scored high on trait aggression were more likely to falsely remember additional words that were hostile in nature (hit and stab) than less aggressive subjects. Another study found positive associations between bullying behaviors and false memories for insults and hostile words among adolescents (Vannucci, Nocentini, Mazzoni, & Menesini, 2012). These studies suggest that aggressive people may indeed "remember" aggressive information they never experienced. But we don't yet know whether such information might extend to more personal autobiographical events.

We do know, however, that past experiences help to construct and define one's present identity (e.g., Barclay & DeCooke, 1988; Barclay & Smith, 1993; Wilson & Ross, 2003). This process also works in reverse: one's current sense of self may affect the autobiographical memories that are retrieved and these memories may be reinterpreted to fit with the how the self is perceived in the present. For example, if one's current sense of self includes the label "aggressive," then one might be particularly likely to retrieve memories of past aggressive acts or reinterpret memories as aggressive.

One further point is worth noting. In general, men are more aggressive than women (Archer, 2004; Archer & Haigh, 1997a; Buss & Perry, 1992; Campbell, 2006; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Smith, Waterman, & Ward, 2006; but see also Archer, 2000). Men also tend to be aggressive in a different way; they score higher on measures of physical, direct, and instrumental aggression, while women seem to favor less direct more relational forms of aggression (Archer & Haigh, 1997a; Campbell & Muncer, 1987; Campbell, Sapochnik, & Muncer, 1997).

1.2. False memories

A separate area of research has shown that it is possible to come to believe, after various kinds and degrees of suggestions, that one has experienced entire events that one has not actually experienced (e.g., Loftus & Pickrell, 1995; Thomas & Loftus, 2002; Wade, Garry, Read, & Lindsay, 2002). Although originally motivated by the need to explain traumatic but evidently inaccurate memories appearing in courtrooms in the 1980s (Loftus, 2007; Loftus & Ketcham, 1994), most false memory research has since dealt with more mundane events, largely for ethical reasons (Bernstein, Laney, Morris, & Loftus, 2005; Wade et al., 2002).

The implantation of emotionally rich false memories has been a minor, but recurring theme (Heaps & Nash, 1999; Laney & Loftus, 2008; Loftus & Pickrell, 1995; Porter, Yuille, & Lehman, 1999). In particular, the study on which the current research is most closely based was designed to compare true and false memories for emotional childhood events. That study (Laney & Loftus, 2008) used the false feedback paradigm (Bernstein et al., 2005) to give some subjects false memories for being hospitalized overnight, catching their parents having sex, or witnessing a violent fight between their parents. These false memories were then compared to other subjects' true memories for the same events on a variety of dimensions, but with a special focus on the emotional content of the memories. Overall, true and false memories in the study could not be distinguished on measures of emotion. That is, counter to an apparent assumption on the part of jurors and others tasked with assessing memory accuracy, expressed emotionality is not a good predictor of memory veracity.

To date, implanted autobiographical events that are most similar to crime in the real world have tended to place participants as the

passive recipient of some experience, in the role of victim (for example being lost or attacked by an animal; Loftus & Pickrell, 1995; Porter et al., 1999). Put another way, these studies were not specifically designed to address the question of false memory for being the aggressor, or to compare false memory rates for victimhood to those for aggression. We do, however, observe false memories for pseudo-criminal acts in the false confession literature.

1.3. False confessions

Real criminal cases provide many examples of people who have come to believe their own false confessions for heinous and violent acts, often with severe consequences (such as long prison terms; see Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). Laboratory studies have also produced false confessions for relatively innocuous acts, sometimes with substantial potential consequences (Horselenberg, Merckelbach, & Josephs, 2003; Kassin & Kiechel, 1996; Nash & Wade, 2009). In one recent example, Nash and Wade (2009) had subjects complete a gambling task by answering questions on a computer and taking money from a pot. When they were later (falsely) accused of cheating on the task, all subjects were told that there was incriminating video showing them cheating, and half of the subjects were actually shown the (doctored) video. Every subject (in Experiment 1) falsely confessed to cheating, and two thirds of subjects who saw the video internalized their confessions (as did a majority of subjects merely told about the video). Nash and Wade argued that their falsified evidence was interfering with subjects' source monitoring decisions (cf. Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993). That is, people given "objective" evidence that they have committed a crime, like people who have prior beliefs that they are by nature aggressive, may use this evidence to conclude, incorrectly, that they have acted in a criminal or aggressive way in a particular case.

Further research inside and outside of the laboratory has identified various personal characteristics that make individuals more likely to falsely confess and/or to internalize those false confessions, including youth (Candel, Merckelbach, Luyen, & Reyskens, 2005; Redlich & Goodman, 2003), depression (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Asgeirsdottir, & Sigfusdottir, 2006), past victimization (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, & Asgeirsdottir, 2008) and greater respect for authority (Forrest, Wadkins, & Larson, 2006). To the best of our knowledge, trait aggression has not been studied as an individual difference leading to confession or internalization.

Although research on aggressive cognitions, false memories, and false confessions address related phenomena, they are not frequently studied together. We argue that this lack of cross-communication is a limitation worth addressing. Research on aggressive cognition can allow for hypothesizing about the mechanisms underlying how internalized false confessions might develop in people with particular characteristics, and false memory research can lend easily implemented methodologies.

1.4. Current research

We modified the methodology used by Laney and Loftus (2008). Instead of giving people false memories for emotional childhood events, we gave them false memories for aggressive adolescent events. We chose events that allowed us to compare false memories of victimhood and perpetration, as well as more masculine and more feminine types of aggression. We then examined the extent to which trait aggression could predict the adoption of those false memories. Finally, we looked at the resulting memories to see whether false memories could be distinguished from true memories on the basis of characteristics like confidence and emotionality.

2. Pilot study

We conducted a pilot study to find appropriate adolescent aggressive events to be used as critical items in the main study. The procedure

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