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Original article

Beliefs about memory among psychology students and their professors in psychodynamic clinical and experimental study programs



Les croyances des étudiants en psychologie et de leurs enseignants à propos de la mémoire

C. Mirandola^{a,*}, E. Ferruzza^a, C. Cornoldi^a, S. Magnussen^b

^a Department of General Psychology, University of Padova, Italy

^b Center for the Study of Human Cognition, Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Norway

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 June 2012

Received in revised form 22 May 2013

Accepted 20 July 2013

Keywords:

Memory

Eyewitness testimony

Beliefs

Psychology students

Psychology professors

Mots clés :

Mémoire

Témoignage

Croyances

Étudiants de psychologie

Professeurs de psychologie

ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Research has shown that lay people, and even psychologists, may have distorted knowledge about memory functioning. May different study programs in psychology influence their ideas?

Objective(s). – The study was aimed at evaluating psychology students' and psychology professors' knowledge about memory and factors potentially affecting the accuracy of episodic memory reports in clinical and legal contexts.

Method. – A questionnaire was administered to introductory and advanced students of psychology enrolled at different curricula – experimental psychology and clinical psychology with a psychoanalytical orientation – and to professors teaching the courses in the same curricula.

Results. – Results showed that advanced students and professors in experimental psychology have higher general knowledge of factors influencing memory performance than their peers, including memory issues of particular relevance to clinical psychology; no difference between the curricula was found for the introductory students.

Conclusion. – The results are discussed in terms of the risks that the lack of knowledge on memory functioning of the psychologists with a psychodynamic orientation may have in producing wrong reports in forensic contexts.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – Le fait de suivre un cursus particulier de psychologie peut-il affecter les croyances à propos du fonctionnement de la mémoire ?

Objectifs et méthode. – De manière à évaluer les connaissances que possèdent les étudiants en psychologie et leurs professeurs à propos de la mémoire et des facteurs susceptibles d'affecter l'exactitude des informations rappelées dans des contextes cliniques et judiciaires, un questionnaire a été proposé à des étudiants débutant leur cursus et à des étudiants avancés suivant soit un cursus de psychologie expérimentale, soit un cursus de psychologie clinique avec une orientation psychanalytique. Les professeurs intervenant dans ces différents cursus ont également rempli le questionnaire.

Résultats. – Les résultats indiquent que les étudiants avancés inscrits dans un cursus de psychologie expérimentale et leurs enseignants ont une connaissance plus élevée des facteurs qui affectent les performances mnésiques des témoins, en comparaison des étudiants avancés inscrits en psychologie clinique psychanalytique et des professeurs de ces derniers. Cette différence porte également sur des aspects de la mémoire qui concernent directement la psychologie clinique. Pour les étudiants débutant leur cursus, on n'observe pas de différence en fonction de l'orientation choisie.

* Corresponding author. Department of General Psychology, University of Padova, Via Venezia 8, 35131 Padova, Italy.

E-mail address: chiara.mirandola@unipd.it (C. Mirandola).

Discussion. – Les résultats sont discutés en termes de risques encourus dans le contexte judiciaire lorsque les psychologues qui interviennent ne possèdent pas de connaissances suffisantes à propos du fonctionnement de la mémoire.

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1. Introduction

Issues of human memory are of great interest both to the general public (Herculano-Houzel, 2003) and to academic professions, which deal with questions of memory as part of their professional work. Professionals in such diverse disciplines as history, social anthropology, law, and psychology are frequently confronted with issues of episodic memory when deciding whether the tales of their informants, witnesses or clients, are reliable or influenced by memory-distorting biases. Such decisions would seem to require at least some knowledge of autobiographical and episodic memory, and of factors challenging memory truth. However, except for psychologists, an introduction to the study of memory is not a part of the professional training.

A number of recent surveys carried out in Canada, China, Estonia, Norway, Sweden and USA have probed the general public about general issues of memory (Magnussen et al., 2006; Simons & Chabris, 2011), and probed both lay samples (Benton, Ross, Bradshaw, Thomas, & Bradshaw, 2006; Desmarais & Read, 2011; Magnussen, Melinder, Raja, & Stridbeck, 2010; Wise & Safer, 2010) and legal professionals (Benton et al., 2006; Granhag, Strömwall, & Hartwig, 2005; Kask, 2011; Magnussen et al., 2008; Wise, Gong, Safer, & Lee, 2010; Wise & Safer, 2004; Wise, Pawlenko, Safer, & Mayer, 2009; Wise, Safer, & Maro, 2011) about specific issues of eyewitness testimony. The results of these surveys show that, in general, the knowledge of attorneys, judges and police officers of episodic memory and of memory distorting factors is quite limited and is similar to that of the general public. On a number of memory issues large minorities in all samples harbored positively incorrect beliefs. Thus, naïve theories about memory do not seem to agree with memory science.

Psychologists are faced with questions of episodic and autobiographical memory in a wide range of professional contexts, in clinical and counseling work, and as expert witnesses in court, sometimes in the double role of therapist and expert witness. The results of a recent survey of a large sample of Norwegian licensed practitioners, designed to probe memory issues relevant in both clinical and legal contexts (Magnussen & Melinder, 2012), showed that psychologists as a group were marginally more knowledgeable than legal professionals and the lay public on questions common to the surveys, despite their training in the science of memory. On important and sensitive questions that may turn up in therapy and in court, large minorities of the psychologist sample either did not know or gave an incorrect answer, according to current memory science. For example, a sizable minority of the psychologist sample believed that most of the recovered memories in psychotherapy – i.e., memories of events of which the patient had no previous recollection – were real rather than false memories, whereas the available evidence suggests they are not (Loftus & Davis, 2006; Piper, Lillevik, & Kritzer, 2008). Likewise, a similar sizable minority believed that violent offenders' claims of amnesia for the violent act represent real memory losses rather than malingered as believed by most scientists (Christianson, 2007). Both of these issues are related to ideas of "repression" or "dissociation" of traumatic memories, associated with theories inspired by Freud and Janet, which have little support from current memory research (Davis & Loftus, 2009; Piper et al., 2008).

Discrepancy between psychological folklore and the science of memory on the one hand, and between psychological scientific

sub-cultures, on the other hand, may have implications in professional contexts. For example, in some well-known Italian trials, notably the recent case of Rignano Flaminio's kindergarten where kindergarten teachers were accused of massive abuse of children in their custody, psychologists with a psychoanalytic orientation acted as experts and inevitably conveyed points of view that could be different from those of memory researchers. What is the impact of study programs in psychology on the knowledge and beliefs about autobiographical and episodic memory? Does the response profile of the psychologist sample surveyed by Magnussen and Melinder (2012) reflect the clinical training of the majority of practitioners or does it reflect a gradual evaporation of scientifically based knowledge in psychological practice? In an analysis of the current status of clinical psychology, Baker, Mcfall, and Shoham (2009) concluded that the practice of US clinical psychologists was more governed by personal experience and clinical traditions than by scientific research. The results of Magnussen and Melinder's study (2012) give some support to both positions, showing mild effects of both age and occupation, with psychologists in private clinical practice scoring lower than psychologists combining practice with an academic affiliation. The present study investigates the possible effect of different University study programs.

In Italy, most universities maintain separate curricula for experimental psychology and clinical psychology, where psychoanalysis, or more generally psychodynamic psychology, dominates or is even the only offered type of clinical training. Indeed, the preponderant presence of the psychodynamic training programs and of clinician psychologists who have followed this type of training is a peculiar characteristic of Italy, but also of many other countries, especially in Southern Europe and Southern America (Ben Plotkin, 2012). Given the distinction between psychodynamic and experimental curricula, it is possible to evaluate whether psychology students following the different curricula have different beliefs and knowledge about memory and eyewitness testimony, and to evaluate whether their professors in the respective curricula differ in their knowledge and beliefs, and whether their beliefs are in harmony with current memory science.

2. The questionnaire

At the University of Padova, one of the largest psychology campuses in Italy, students register to either clinical or experimental psychology programs when enrolling at the University. We surveyed introductory and advanced students in experimental and clinical (psychodynamic) study programs and their professors, using a translated version of the Magnussen and Melinder's questionnaire (2012). We decided to employ this particular questionnaire as it resulted useful for examining different beliefs in different professional groups, including psychologists, and also because – due to its clarity – it could be administered to naïf people such as students enrolled in introductory courses. The brevity of this questionnaire implies the limitation that only some clinical contexts are taken into consideration, but also the advantage that the considered clinical contexts are the ones that can be easily understood by novices.

We surveyed six samples of academic participants:

- introductory students ($n = 100$) of the psychology course, enrolled one month prior to the administration of the questionnaire, half

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