

# The false fame illusion in people with memories about a previous life

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## Abstract

The present study examined whether individuals with full-blown memories of highly implausible events are prone to commit source monitoring errors. Participants reporting previous-life memories and those without such memories completed a false fame task. This task provides an index of source monitoring errors (i.e., misclassifying familiar non-famous names as famous names). Participants with previous-life memories had a greater tendency to judge the names of previously presented non-famous people as famous than control participants. The two groups did not differ in terms of correct recognition of new non-famous names and famous names. Although dissociation, cognitive failures, sleep-related experiences, depressive symptoms, and signs of psychological distress were all significantly higher in participants with previous-life memories than in controls, these variables did not predict the false fame illusion.

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## 1. Introduction

A plethora of research has demonstrated that adults can create autobiographical memories for events that never occurred (e.g., Clancy, McNally, Schacter, Lenzenweger, & Pitman, 2002; Loftus & Pickrell, 1995; Mazzoni, Loftus, & Kirsch, 2001). According to Hyman and Kleinknecht (1999), the development of such false memories is dependent on different cognitive processes, which can interact with each other. For example, whether false memories occur is partly dependent on the plausibility of the suggested event (e.g., Pezdek, Finger, & Hodge, 1997; Scoboria, Mazzoni, Kirsch, & Relyea, 2004; Smeets, Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Jelicic, 2005). Once an event is perceived as plausible, individuals may start to believe that the event has happened to them. Another process in the road to a false memory is repetition or recognition of an assertion/plausible event which can increase the confidence in the truth of this assertion/event (known as “Illusion of Truth,” e.g., Bacon, 1979; Hasher, Goldstein, & Toppino, 1977; Hertwig, Gigerenzer, & Hoffrage,

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1997). A next possible step is that they interpret their thoughts and fantasies about the fictitious event as real memories (Mazzoni et al., 2001; see also Scoboria et al., 2004; Smeets et al., 2005). In the pathway to a false memory, source monitoring errors (i.e., failure to attribute the correct source to information) are a determinant factor and can creep in anywhere along the way (e.g., Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993).

Using well-researched laboratory paradigms to elicit false recall of e.g., words (the Deese/Roediger-McDermott task; see below), several studies have shown that women reporting recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse are more prone to memory distortions than control participants (e.g., Clancy, Schacter, McNally, & Pitman, 2000; Geraerts, Smeets, Jelicic, Heerden van, & Merckelbach, 2005). However, in studying these populations, it is very difficult to establish the ground truth, i.e., to determine whether the recovered memories in these samples are genuine or false. Thus, one can never be certain that their susceptibility to memory distortions is a function of cognitive impairments related to a history of abuse or the manifestation of a trait-like tendency to develop false memories (see also Clancy et al., 2002). For this reason, researchers have tried to find specific groups of people who report memories of events that seem very implausible to have happened. A case in point is a series of studies by Clancy and co-workers (2002; see also McNally et al., 2004; McNally and Clancy, 2005), who examined whether people claiming to be abducted by aliens are more susceptible to commit source monitoring errors than people without such memories. Participants with alien abduction experiences and control participants were given a variant of the Deese/Roediger-McDermott paradigm (DRM paradigm; Deese, 1959; Roediger & McDermott, 1995) to examine their propensity to falsely recall and recognize lure words that have never been presented. Briefly, in the DRM paradigm participants are given lists of semantically related words (e.g., bed, pajama) that refer to non-presented lure words (e.g., sleep). In subsequent memory tests, some participants claim to remember the non-presented lure words. The most likely explanation for this is that they mistake internally generated associations for memories of real words. Thus, the DRM task taps source monitoring errors. Clancy and colleagues (2002) found that participants reporting memories of alien abduction or the belief that they had been abducted exhibit a greater tendency to falsely recall and recognize non-presented critical lure words in the DRM paradigm than control participants. Specific cognitive characteristics like hypnotic suggestibility, depressive symptoms, and schizotypic features were found to be significant predictors of false recall and false recognition. Thus, there is reason to believe that people with this particular type of implausible autobiographical memories have source monitoring problems.

Another class of autobiographical memories that are highly implausible are hypnotically induced memories about previous-lives. Although spontaneous previous-life memories are in some countries part of a broad culture (e.g., Sri Lanka; Haraldsson, 2003), in modern Western societies such memories are often elicited under hypnosis (e.g., Spanos, Menary, Gabora, DuBreuil, & Dewhirst, 1991).

The current study aimed at a conceptual replication of Clancy et al.'s (2002) findings. Focussing on a different type of implausible memory and relying on a different type of source monitoring task (see below), we tried to replicate the basic findings of Clancy et al. (2002) that reports of implausible memories are associated with a tendency to commit source monitoring errors. To this end, we examined source monitoring errors in people reporting hypnotically induced previous-life memories and control participants. The paradigm we employed was the false fame paradigm (Jacoby, Kelley, Brown, & Jasechko, 1989). In this paradigm, participants are first asked to read out aloud a series of non-famous names. The next day, participants receive a list of names, consisting of the old non-famous names, new non-famous names, and also names referring to famous people (e.g., actors, writers, and politicians). Participants are instructed to make fame judgments for each presented name. A standard finding in this paradigm is that participants falsely identify previously studied (old) non-famous names as famous names (Jacoby et al., 1989). This illusion stems from participants' tendency to mistake the familiarity of an old non-famous name as an indication that the person must be famous.

A subsidiary aim of our study was to explore to what extent certain personality traits predict the false fame illusion. Previous research has shown that traits like absorption (Clancy et al., 2002), fantasy proneness (e.g., Spanos et al., 1991), dissociation (Eisen & Lynn, 2001), and sleep disruptions (McNally & Clancy, 2005) are more pronounced in people who are susceptible to false memories. To explore the relationship between these traits and source monitoring errors in participants with previous-life memories, we administered measures of dissociation, fantasy proneness, cognitive failures, sleep experiences, and general psychopathology to our sample.

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