False memory creation in children and adults: Theory, research, and implications.  
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Review by Harald Merckelbach and Ineke Wessel

Over the past 10 years or so, the issue of false (recovered or delayed) memories has been addressed by numerous monographs, journal specials, and edited volumes. And here is the next, but certainly not the last book in this long series: False Memory Creation in Children and Adults. It is based on a conference held in February 1998 at Florida Atlantic University, and the contributing authors are all leading researchers in the field of memory. Alas, that is no guarantee that the reader is offered new or exciting insights. Indeed, to a large extent, this volume reiterates what has been said many times, on many occasions, and by many authors. Our prediction is therefore that it will not achieve a place in the ranks of frequently cited books on the topic.

The book opens with a chapter by Brown and colleagues on the “History and Zeitgeist of the Repressed—False Memory Debate.” To be sure, this is an ambitious and eloquent title and thus it is not unreasonable that the reader expects a broad and scholarly review. While the authors briefly cite the pioneering work of 19th century European memory researchers Stern, Lipmann, and Binet, they soon turn to Freud arguing that his work is central to the false memory debate. But is it? Many clinicians in the field of trauma-related disorders would argue that for them, Pierre Janet and his theory on dissociation rather than Freud and his repression serve as historical anchors. A more serious point is that the authors adopt a rather one-sided perspective in their “Zeitgeist” analysis. In their view, Freud, radical feminists, and new age therapists are the bad guys who set the stage for recovered memories, whereas the memory researchers are the good guys. Thus, Brown et al. explain the sharp decline in court cases involving recovered memories after a peak in the mid 1990s as follows: “What turned the tide was scientists becoming involved in the social discussion” (p. 24). Although we don’t want to underestimate the contribution of these scientists, we seriously doubt whether they are the only good guys that deserve to be mentioned. As far as we can see, prominent clinicians who sided with the memory scientists played a role here, as did clever lawyers who took legal action against irresponsible therapists.

Chapter 2 (Current Directions in False-Memory Research) by Tsai and colleagues and Chapter 3 (The Changing Face of Memory and Self) by Oakes and Hyman both address recent experimental work on false memories. The perspective taken in Chapter 2 is that of the paradigms currently used to elicit false memories in healthy participants. Unfortunately, the authors come up with a review that is heavily biased by their own work and, therefore, far from complete. They discuss misinformation procedures, imagination inflation techniques, and dream interpretation paradigms, the results of which lead the authors to conclude that “false memories have been created in the laboratory” (p. 43). We fully agree, of course, but we also find this conclusion a bit meagre. What about underlying mechanisms? And why is it that these manipulations produce false memories in only a subset (i.e., about 30%) of the participants? Who are these people? And is it possible to convince participants that an event did not happen, while, in fact, it did? This chapter does not even raise these questions. In contrast, Oakes and Hyman employ a more theoretical approach. These authors point out that autobiographical memory feeds our self-concept and vice versa. Against this background, they formulate a framework for understanding the development of false memories. According to their framework, plausibility judgments, memory construction, and source-monitoring errors precede false memories. With this three-staged model, the authors go beyond the experimental phenomena and paradigms, a quality for which they should be recommended.

Chapter 4 by Pezdek and Taylor is concerned with tools and techniques that may discriminate between “accounts of true and false events.” The authors review literature on the Criteria Based Content Analysis (CBCA) and the source-monitoring approach. In doing so, they avoid “much of the research comparing accounts of true and consciously fabricated false events” (p. 71). As far as the CBCA is concerned, this choice reflects a poor understanding of what this technique is about. After all, the CBCA intends to differentiate between truthful stories and lies and the in-
strument was developed before pseudo-memories were recognized as a third and very serious option. That is precisely why many authors argue that the CBCA fails as a forensic tool. In more general terms, we find Pezdek and Taylor’s use of the term “false event” highly confusing. Memories may be true or false, but it is a category mistake to apply such qualities to events. It is also a serious omission that the authors do not discuss important studies in which CBCA and source-monitoring techniques were directly compared with each other (e.g., Sporer, 1997).

In Chapter 5 (Fuzzy-Trace Theory and False Memories), Brainerd and colleagues argue that in most court cases, expert testimony about recovered memories is preoccupied with lab demonstrations of false memory phenomena. This preoccupation raises obvious questions about the limitations and ecological validity of such demonstrations. The authors rightly note that expert testimony about false memory cases would profit from broadly accepted theoretical principles that cross paradigmatic borders. One good candidate in this context is Brainerd and Reyna’s fuzzy trace theory. It is based on the empirically sound assumption that individuals store two types of memory traces about events: verbatim traces and gist traces, with the former becoming more quickly inaccessible than the latter. In terms of signal detection, verbatim traces support hits (i.e., true memories), while gist traces may produce false alarms (i.e., false memories). The authors do an excellent job in reviewing the empirical merits of the fuzzy trace theory and its implications for the courtroom. Unfortunately, the forensically interested reader is left with one urgent question: how broad are gist traces? Suppose false memories of child abuse are indeed based on gist traces, is it then possible that a patient with such memories has had a perfectly happy childhood? Or does fuzzy trace theory dictate that such a patient must have been the victim of some sort of maltreatment (i.e., the gist)?

Chapter 6 (The Cognitive Neuroscience of Constructive Memory) by Schacter and colleagues offers an impressive review of recent neuropsychological work on intrusions, confabulations, and false recognitions. The chapter not only addresses experimental studies on neurological patients, but also brain imaging studies on memory illusion in healthy individuals.

Like Chapter 6, Chapter 7 (The Suggestibility of Children’s Testimony) by Ceci and co-workers provides a well-written exposition of a technically complex issue. Ceci et al. discuss how certain interview techniques may undermine the accuracy of children’s reports. In their view, a confirmatory bias of the interviewer acts as the driving force behind conditions producing inaccurate reports in child interviewees. What makes this chapter attractive is the mix of elegant experimental studies and well-known court cases. Yet, at times, the discussion remains superficial. For example, the authors say that much has been learned about individual differences in suggestibility, but they hardly address this highly relevant point.

The final chapter (Remembering the Distant Past) by Ornstein and colleagues also takes a developmental approach. The authors systematically describe their research programme on children’s memory for medical procedures. They emphasize how factors operating over extended time intervals (e.g., knowledge accumulation, intervening experiences) may affect memory reports of old events. In this way, the authors succeed in making it plausible that their developmental perspective is relevant to the issue of adults who recover childhood memories.

To sum up, this book contains a number of highly readable and interesting contributions. Nevertheless, our overall impression is not very favourable. As said before, the main problem of this book is that it adds little to what has been said already on the topic. For example, Hyman and Loftus (1998) previously published an excellent paper in Clinical Psychology Review describing the three-staged model of Chapter 3. Likewise, Schacter and colleagues themselves note that their Chapter 6 is an update of their Annual Review of Psychology article (Schacter, Norman & Koutstaal, 1998), and there is also substantial overlap with other review papers from this productive research group (e.g., Schacter et al., 1997). Perhaps the book would have been more of a page-turner had the editor invited some real believers to contribute. That they are still out there is nicely demonstrated by the hilarious case study of Loftus and Guyer (2002).

References


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