

Altering false reports via confederate influence

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The present experiment examined the effects of confederate influence on the likelihood that participants would claim to have witnessed non-existent footage of a highly charged public event. A total of 48 participants completed a questionnaire, in the presence of a confederate, concerning their memory for (non-existent) closed circuit television (CCTV) footage of an explosion in a Bali nightclub. Overall, 19 participants (39%) claimed falsely to have seen this non-existent footage. Furthermore, participants increased or suppressed their false reports in line with confirmative or disconfirmative social influence exerted by the confederate.

Psychologists have long been interested in memory distortions (Stern, 1910). The most influential modern research in this area found that subtle changes in wording (e.g., “hit” vs “smashed”) could alter *details* of participants’ eyewitness reports (e.g., the speed a car was travelling when it was involved in an accident; Loftus & Palmer, 1974). This approach to studying memory distortions is usually referred to as the “misinformation” method and the effects have been replicated extensively, although there is disagreement concerning the exact causes, and extent of, the resulting memory distortion (see McCloskey & Zaragoza, 1985). More recently, research has begun to address the question of whether it is possible for individuals to come to report *entire events* that did not occur (Lindsay, Hagen, Read, Wade, & Garry, 2004; Loftus & Pickrell, 1995). The focus of this recent research has been to address concerns about both the reliability of eyewitness testimony

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(Hyman & Loftus, 2002), and the veracity of claims of childhood trauma that are made by adults (Brandon, Boakes, Glaser, Green, MacKeith, & Whewell, 1997; Davies & Dalgleish, 2001; Ost, 2003).

The most influential method is that devised by Loftus and Pickrell (1995) who used reports provided by participants' parents to construct interviews in which their participants were asked about "real" and "false" childhood events. Loftus and Pickrell (1995) found that after repeated interviewing and "diary work", a number of their participants came to report remembering an *entire event* (being lost in a shopping mall as a child) that, according to their parents, had never happened. Subsequent studies using this "parental misinformation" method have replicated these findings several times with different types of event (Hyman & Billings, 1998; Hyman, Husband, & Billings, 1995; Ost, Foster, Costall, & Bull, 2005; Pezdek, Finger, & Hodge 1997; Porter, Yuille, & Lehman, 1999). More recent work has found that even the seemingly harmless task of showing participants old school photographs that were contemporaneous with a false childhood event led a high number of those participants to report that they could remember the event (Lindsay et al., 2004; see also Wade, Garry, Read, & Lindsay, 2002, for similar effects using doctored photographs). Hyman and Loftus (2002) have proposed a three-stage model to account for the creation of such false reports. First they argue that individuals must believe the event occurred, second they must generate an image of the event, and finally they must make a source-monitoring error and misattribute their generated image of the event as being a personal memory. However, this model tends to focus on cognitive factors and downplay the equally important role that social factors can play in the creation of false reports.

SOCIAL CONSENSUS AND MEMORY REPORTS

A growing number of studies of social consensus¹ have examined whether other people (usually confederates of the experimenter) might be able to influence participants' memory reports (see Bless, Strack, & Walther, 2001). For example, Roediger, Meade, and Bergman (2001) asked participants to study slides of common household scenes and then recall them with a confederate who, unbeknown to the participant, would occasionally incorrectly recall items from the scene. When participants were subsequently asked to recall the items from the scene, they made errors in their recall that were consistent with the misinformation provided by the confederate (see

¹ This more specific term is used in the social influence literature (Pratkanis, in press). However, in the memory literature this effect has also been referred to as "co-witness influence" (Gabbert, Memon, & Allan, 2003; Shaw, Garven, & Wood, 1997) or "social contagion" (Meade & Roediger, 2002).

also Meade & Roediger, 2002). Similar effects have also been found with other stimulus materials (see Betz, Skowronski, & Ostrom, 1996; Hoffman, Granhag, Kwong See, & Loftus, 2001; Wright, Self, & Justice, 2000) and in contexts more akin to those in a typical eyewitness scenario. Shaw et al. (1997), for example, found that participants reported incorrect information about a video-presented criminal event they had recently witnessed when that incorrect information was presented as having been corroborated by another witness (Shaw et al., 1997, experiment 2; see also Gabbert, Memon, Allan, & Wright, 2004). Kassin and Kiechel (1996) found that innocent participants were more likely to falsely confess to damaging a computer (by hitting the “ALT” key on a computer keyboard) when a confederate of the experimenter stated (incorrectly) that they had seen the participant hit the key than when the confederate claimed not to have seen anything.

Conformity even occurs in the absence of deliberate misinformation from a confederate. Gabbert et al. (2003) asked two participants to watch a video of a criminal event (a theft). Unbeknown to the participants, there were two versions of the video, each shot from slightly different angles. In only one version of the video was the theft clearly visible. Nevertheless, Gabbert et al. (2003) found that after discussing the video with a co-witness, 71% of participants went on to mistakenly recall non-witnessed items that had been acquired during the discussion (see also Gabbert et al., 2004). Taken together, these studies suggest that social influences on memory can be powerful. Furthermore, a recently developed method has shown that these effects also occur with real-life, rather than laboratory-presented, events (see also Nourkova, Bernstein, & Loftus, 2004).

THE “CRASHING MEMORIES” METHOD

In a novel twist on the misinformation paradigm, Crombag, Wagenaar, and van Koppen (1996) distributed a questionnaire asking whether participants had seen the (in fact non-existent) film of an air crash in Amsterdam. They found that 66% of participants stated that they had seen the non-existent film and gave further information (e.g., the angle that the plane hit the building, at what point fire broke out, and the final resting position of the remains of the plane). They also found that female participants were more likely than male participants to report having seen the non-existent film. Ost, Vrij, Costall, and Bull (2002) replicated this finding using a different non-existent film and found that 45% of their participants claimed to have seen a film of the car crash in Paris in which Diana, Princess of Wales, Dodi Fayed, and their driver were killed. Thus, the findings of Crombag et al. (1996) and Ost et al. (2002) suggest that the “crashing memories” method produces robust false reports of real-life events (see also Jellic, Smeets,

Peters, Candel, Horselenberg, & Merckelbach, in press, and Wilson & French, 2005, for further recent examples).

Granhag, Strömwall, and Billings (2003) extended the crashing memories method by investigating whether social consensus could affect the likelihood of a participant claiming to have seen a non-existent film. Drawing on the work of Asch (1951), Granhag et al. (2003) asked two participants (one of whom was a confederate of the investigators) to complete a questionnaire about their memory of a non-existent film of the sinking of the ferry *Estonia* in 1994, a disastrous accident in the Baltic Sea where almost 900 people lost their lives. There were three experimental conditions and the confederate behaved differently in each condition. In the “positive social influence” condition, the confederate stated out loud “Estonia – I remember that film.” In the “negative social influence” condition, the confederate stated aloud “Estonia – I do not remember such a film.” In the “no social influence” condition the participant completed the questionnaire alone.

Granhag et al. (2003) replicated the findings of Crombag et al. (1996) and Ost et al. (2002) and found that, even in the “no social influence” condition, 52% of participants still claimed to have seen the non-existent film. However, the more noteworthy finding was that positive and negative influence appeared to cause participants to increase, or suppress, their memory reports of the non-existent film. In the positive social influence condition, 76% of their participants claimed to have seen the non-existent film, compared to 36% in the negative social influence condition. It therefore appears that, although the “crashing memories” effect is robust, the magnitude of the effect can be moderated by the social influence exerted by a confederate. The aims of the present experiment were to attempt to replicate the findings of Granhag et al.

METHOD

The “false” footage

The “false” film footage chosen for this experiment was closed circuit television (CCTV) footage of the moment of the explosion in the Sari nightclub in Bali on 12 October 2002. News coverage of the Bali attacks was broadcast immediately after the event and footage showing the aftermath of the explosions continued to be the main news item for several days, consisting of outside shots of the nightclub and debris from the explosion. Despite the fact that no footage showing the actual moment of the explosion was broadcast, pilot data indicated that participants were nevertheless likely to claim that they had seen such footage. A questionnaire was therefore devised asking whether participants had seen CCTV footage capturing the moment of the explosion in the Sari nightclub in Bali.

Design

This experiment employed an independent groups design. A confederate was used to manipulate social influence (which was either positive, negative, or neutral—see below for details of the manipulation). The dependent variable was whether participants claimed to have seen the non-existent CCTV footage of the explosion in the Sari nightclub. In order to control for the possibility of order effects found by Granhag et al. (2003), an identical questionnaire was included asking participants whether they had seen the televised footage of the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Aside from examining possible order effects, no further analyses were conducted with these data.²

Participants

A total of 48 participants (29 males and 19 females) aged between 18 and 48 years ($M=21.7$ yrs, $SD=4.5$ yrs) took part in the experiment. The participants were university students (non-psychologists) approached by the investigator in the University of Portsmouth's Student's Union. Participants were systematically assigned to conditions (i.e. the first participant was assigned to condition one, the second participant was assigned to condition two and so forth).

Procedure

Participants were approached and asked whether they would be willing to participate in an experiment examining their memory for highly charged public events. They were then taken to a room in the Student's Union where the confederate was already seated. Participants were then told that they were going to be asked to complete two questionnaires concerning their memory of recent highly charged public events. The confederate was introduced as another participant who had agreed to take part in the experiment.

In line with the methodology devised by Granhag et al. (2003), the two questionnaires (World Trade Center and Bali—presentation of which was counterbalanced) were presented to both the participant and confederate, and the confederate then subtly monitored the participants' progress. When the participant was about to complete the questionnaire about the Bali bombing the confederate did one of three things, depending on condition. In the positive social influence condition the confederate stated out loud "Bali – I remember that footage"; in the negative social influence condition the

² Not surprisingly, all 48 participants claimed that they had seen this footage.

confederate stated out loud “Bali – I do not remember that footage”; and in the neutral social influence condition the confederate remained silent.³

It is important to note that, although the confederate spoke aloud, she did not address the participant directly—rather it was as if she was talking to herself. There was no discussion between the participant and the confederate. The confederate then proceeded to complete the Bali questionnaire. Once this was completed the participant was carefully debriefed about the nature of the experiment and the deception was revealed to them. Interestingly, during debrief, none of the participants reported that they remembered the confederate saying anything at all.⁴

RESULTS

How many participants reported that they could remember the false event?

Consistent with previous research, 19 participants (39.6%) claimed to have seen the non-existent CCTV footage of the moment that the bomb exploded in the Sari nightclub (Crombag et al., 1996; Granhag et al., 2003; Ost et al., 2002). Analysis indicated that the order in which participants completed the questionnaires did not have an effect on whether they claimed to have seen the non-existent CCTV footage, $\chi^2(1, N = 48) = 0.09, p > .05$. In addition female participants were no more likely to claim to have seen the CCTV footage than male participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 48) = 3.04, p > .05$.

Were participants’ reports of the “false” event altered in line with confederate influence?

As shown in Table 1, ten participants (62.5%) in the positive social influence condition claimed to have seen the non-existent film, compared to six (37.5%) in the neutral social influence condition, and three (18.75%) in the negative social influence condition. As the dependent variable was dichotomous (yes/no) and resulted in a large number of tied ranks between the three conditions, a Kruskal-Wallis test was not appropriate. Therefore this analysis followed the Meddis Unified Analysis of Variance of Ranks Test (Meddis, 1984) that bases its assumptions about sampling distribution on the existence of such ties. The difference between the numbers of participants who claimed to have seen the non-existent CCTV footage as a function of confederate influence was statistically significant ($H_2 = 7.67$,

³ Note that there was no attempt to exert influence whilst the participant was completing the World Trade Center questionnaire.

⁴ This informal observation requires further research. The inquiry was made in a casual manner and responses were not recorded or systematically examined.

TABLE 1
 Number of participants who claimed to have seen the non-existent footage as a function of social influence (positive, neutral, or negative)

<i>N=48</i>	<i>Positive social influence</i>	<i>No social influence</i>	<i>Negative social influence</i>
Saw footage	10	6	3
Did not see footage	6	10	13

$p < .05$). The direction of the pattern (positive > neutral > negative social influence) was confirmed by a trend test (Page's $L = 2520.00$, $p < .005$).

DISCUSSION

The first noteworthy finding is that this experiment replicated the findings of previous studies that have adopted the crashing memories method (Crombag et al., 1996; Granhag et al., 2003; Jelacic et al., in press; Ost et al., 2002; Wilson & French, 2005). The finding that people can be misled to report that they have seen non-existent film footage appears to be robust, as over a third of participants (39.6%), irrespective of social influence, claimed to have seen the non-existent CCTV footage of the moment of the explosion in the Sari nightclub. Second, the present experiment replicated the findings of Granhag et al. (2003) showing that even subtle influence exerted by a confederate can both increase or suppress participants' reports of having seen a non-existent film. Furthermore, contrary to the findings of Crombag et al. (1996), male and female participants in the present experiment were equally likely to claim to have seen the non-existent footage. There were also no order effects in the present experiment. This is contrary to the findings of Granhag et al. (2003) who found that participants were more likely to claim to remember a "false" event if asked about a "real" event first (see also Porter et al. 1999).

Interestingly, during the debriefing none of the participants spontaneously reported that they remembered the confederate speaking. However, as the experimenter inquired about this in a casual manner and participants' responses were not systematically investigated or recorded, we can make no strong claims about the possible reasons for participants' lack of memory for the confederate's remarks. There are, of course, a number of reasons why a participant might claim not to remember the confederate's remarks. For example, the participant might not have mentioned anything for fear of getting the confederate into trouble. Alternatively, as the inquiry was phrased in a casual manner during debrief, participants may not have assigned any real importance to the query and thus their apparent lack of memory may simply be due to a report bias. Finally, participants might not

have admitted hearing the confederate speak because to do so in the presence of the experimenter would have been an explicit admission that they had been swayed by what the confederate had said.

Future research should include a more formal manipulation check to determine the extent of participants' awareness of the process of influence. One way to accomplish this would be to include an extra experimental condition in which the confederate speaks out loud but, instead of completing a questionnaire concerning their memory of an event, participants complete a filler task instead. Participants' willingness to report that they remember the confederate's remarks could then be compared between conditions where the participant is asked to commit to a certain response in line with the confederate's remarks (e.g., "I can/cannot remember the film") and when they are not.

Future work

Whilst this experiment confirmed that social influence could lead participants to either increase or suppress their reports of CCTV footage that *did not* exist, it did not examine the other side of the coin. Can social influence lead individuals to suppress reports of events that *did* occur? This is an equally important question and one that has yet to be satisfactorily addressed by research (Wright, Mathews, & Skagerberg, 2005). Wright et al. (in press) have shown that it is easier to lead participants to report events that they have not witnessed than it is to lead participants not to report events that they have witnessed. This apparently asymmetric effect of social influence is an important line of research for future studies.

Another important question concerns the longevity of these effects. Did participants just go along with what the confederate said without actually believing they had seen the film (public acceptance), or did they truly come to believe the responses they gave (private acceptance)? There is only limited evidence that social influence can indeed produce an enduring *change* in memory reports. For example, Shaw et al. (1997) found that participants incorporated incorrect co-witness information into their own accounts of a video-presented robbery, and this effect persevered in a memory test 48 hours later. In other words, participants in Shaw et al.'s study reported incorrect details when not in the presence of the co-witness, demonstrating not only public acceptance but also a degree of private acceptance of the misinformation they were exposed to.

Related to this point is that, although a number of participants in the current experiment appear to have been swayed by the social influence exerted by the confederate, it is not clear *why* they complied (see also Gabbert et al., 2003). Did participants initially make reports in line with those of the confederate because of the social pressure of not wishing to

appear to contradict the confederate (normative influence), or because they assumed the confederate provided the correct answer and wanted to do so themselves (informational influence)? In the present study the issues of normative versus informational influence were difficult to disentangle. As participants in the present study were not required to state their choices out loud (cf. Shaw et al., 1997) but to write them down on a questionnaire in the presence of a confederate, this would suggest that their responses were due, in part, to informational processes (Campbell & Fairey, 1989; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) or that participants' reports were the result of erroneous source-monitoring decisions (Crombag et al., 1996; Ost et al., 2002). This explanation would also be consistent with the results of previous studies where no confederate influence was exerted (Crombag et al., 1996; Ost et al., 2002; Jelacic et al., in press; Wilson & French, 2005). However, the effect of the confederate influence condition on the number of positive responses suggests that normative processes were also clearly at work. It could be argued that participants who claimed to have seen the non-existent footage succumbed to normative influence because they did not want to appear deviant by claiming not to be able to remember, in the presence of the confederate, the tragic events in the Bali nightclub (Campbell & Fairey, 1989; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Likewise, participants in the "negative social influence" condition may have thought they remembered the film, but may not have reported this because they too did not want to appear deviant by contradicting the confederate. In order to determine the extent of normative versus information influence further research is necessary.

The existing literature suggests that there are several ways to explore some of these issues. First, as mentioned above, a delay could be incorporated into testing (Shaw et al., 1997). This would show whether participants at a later date, in the absence of any influence from a confederate, still report that they remember seeing the non-existent film. If their responses on the delayed test were different from the responses they made in the presence of the confederate then this might be evidence to support the role of normative influence, and public, rather than private, acceptance.

A second way to test this would be to ask participants to make two sets of confidence judgments, one in the presence of the confederate and a second in private (Wright et al., 2000). Again, discrepancies between these two ratings would indicate whether confidence expressed in public (i.e., in the presence of the confederate) also held when the confederate was not present. A third method, following the work of Meade and Roediger (2002) would be to ask participants to make source-monitoring judgments. Participants could be asked to state whether they "remember" the film, or simply "know" that they have seen it or could be given the opportunity to attribute the source of the information to the confederate, rather than their own

memories. Again, there is evidence that under certain circumstances such source-monitoring tests can provide evidence of private acceptance of misinformation (Meade & Roediger, 2002).

A final method to test the degree of private versus public acceptance would be to adopt the method used by Kassin and Kiechel (1996). They found that participants were willing to repeat to a third party their false confession that they had indeed pressed the key that caused the computer to crash. If participants in the present study had been willing to report their memory of the non-existent film to a third party, this again would have indicated a degree of private acceptance (or “internalization”; Kassin, 2005; Kassin & Kiechel, 1996) of their false belief.

The issue of the social influences on remembering has implications for many applied areas: the reliability of multiple witnesses to a crime (Gabbert et al., 2003; Shaw et al., 1997); police interrogations of suspects (Kassin, 2005; Kassin & Kiechel, 1996); or clients remembering episodes of past trauma in support groups (Ost, 2006). There are also many tactics, other than social consensus, which could be explored with regards to the social influences on remembering (Cialdini, 2001; Pratkanis, in press). Therefore the degree to which people are influenced (and in some cases come to believe) misinformation provided by other people remains an important question to be addressed by future research.

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