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FALSE MEMORY

The use of the term *false memory* by psychologists can be traced to a symposium at the 1992 meeting of the American Psychological Society titled “Remembering ‘Repressed’ Abuse.” Elizabeth Loftus served as the symposium discussant and presented her research on planting in adults false childhood memories of having been lost in a mall. She drew generalizations from this research to the real-world issue of assessing whether memories for incidents of childhood sexual abuse may be suggestively planted and thus be “false memories.” This symposium was followed by a lead article on this topic in the *American Psychologist* in 1993. The False Memory Syndrome Foundation, which coined the phrase *false memory syndrome*, was also founded in 1992. In both the symposium and the subsequent article, the use of the term *false memory* was specifically intended to refer to memory for an entirely new event that in fact never occurred.

There have been several published literature reviews that have examined what types of research studies are being conducted under the term *false memory*. Although PsycINFO searches of the empirical publications using the subject heading “false memory” reveal several hundred publications since 1992, few researchers have studied false memories by studying the planting of memories for an entirely new event that was never experienced by an individual. The large majority of empirical studies published under the descriptor “false memories” have utilized what is called the Deese, Roediger, and McDermott paradigm. In this task, participants are presented a list of related words to study (e.g., *sandal, foot, toe, slipper*) in which at least one prototypical word (e.g., *shoe*) is not presented. When asked later to recall or recognize words in the presented list, participants frequently misremembered the related-but-not-presented word (e.g., *shoe*). Prior to the early 1990s these would be called intrusion errors, commission errors, or false alarms. However, in the wake of the false memory research bandwagon, these errors have been labeled “false memories.” Although numerous researchers have cautioned against generalizing from the Deese, Roediger,

and McDermott paradigm to contested memories for abuse, this caution is frequently ignored. Thus, the term *false memories* has come to refer to two very different research literatures that probably do not relate to the same memory processes.

By specifically examining the few studies that have investigated false memory as defined by the planting of an entirely new event in memory, one can see that several factors affect the probability of this occurring. False events are more likely to be planted in memory if an individual imagines him- or herself performing the event and if the suggestion is instantiated by presenting a picture of the individual (a) performing the false event, or even (b) in the context in which the false event is suggested to have occurred. However, in several recent studies, Kathy Pezdek has reported that false memories are less likely to be planted for implausible than for plausible events, and whereas imagining a plausible false event increases individuals’ belief that the event occurred to them, imagining an implausible event does not have this effect.

How does a suggested false event become planted in memory? If a suggested false event is judged to be true, then (a) generic information about the event as well as (b) specific details from related episodes of the event that the individual may have experienced are “transported” in memory and used to construct a memory for the false event. The degree of detail in the constructed false memory will be affected by the degree of relevant information already available in memory.

Controversy about the accuracy for abuse memories has been widely covered in the media. Within this controversy the term *false memory* has often been presented as the opposite of *recovered memory*, as in references to false versus recovered memories. However, this is confusing rhetoric; memories can be false and recovered, true and recovered, false and always-remembered, and true and always-remembered. In fact, Jennifer Freyd has reported that recovered memories are no more likely to be false than always-remembered memories.

Kathy Pezdek and Jennifer J. Freyd

See also Repressed Memory

Further Readings

DePrince, A. P., Allard, C. B., Oh, H., & Freyd, J. (2004). What’s in a name for memory errors? Implications and ethical issues arising from the use of the term “false

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FAMILICIDE

The word *familicide* refers to various forms of mass killing within familial or kinship networks or among those connected through bonds of sexual intimacy. The term is usually reserved for those killings that occur in a relatively short time period, often within 24 hours. However, it is conceivable that someone could kill a significant number of family members over a period of years and that such acts might be construed as a form of familicide. Compared with other forms of homicide, including those involving family members, familicides are relatively rare events. In part because of their rarity and in part because they offend common understandings of what families are supposed to be like, familicides attract considerable media attention. However, there is relatively little substantive research on this phenomenon.

Researchers recognize that perpetrators of familicide may or may not subsequently commit suicide. There is no agreed upon number of victims that a perpetrator must kill for the act to constitute a familicide. Indeed there is a great deal of variation in those forms of familial or kinship mass killings that potentially qualify as familicides. A few examples help illustrate this point.

One form involves a parent, nearly always the father, killing the entire family and then killing himself. For example, on January 12, 1999, Terry M. Jones of Anderson, Indiana, killed his wife and two children then committed suicide. He allegedly did so because he thought his wife was having an affair on the Internet. In this case the perpetrator had a previous conviction for domestic violence against his wife.

The historical record contains very few cases of women killing their families and then killing themselves. One such example is a familicide in Cadillac, Michigan, perpetrated by Mrs. Daniel Cooper who shot and killed her husband and six of her seven children before taking her own life. According to newspaper accounts, Mrs. Cooper had been “mentally unsound” for more than a year prior to the killings.

The concepts of familicide and homicide–suicide are sometimes used interchangeably. Some writers use the term *familicide* to describe, for example, a case where a parent kills his or her children and then commits suicide. Others might use the term *homicide–suicide* to describe the same killings. Some criminologists reserve the word *familicide* for only those mass killings in which all the children are killed. Others still use the term if only a proportion of the children are murdered. These inconsistencies speak to the range and complexity of some of the various forms of mass killing that occur within familial or kinship networks. At this point it is safe to say that the word *familicide* is usually used to describe mass killings where perpetrators kill a significant proportion of family members, to the extent that the family, as a unit or network, is no longer recognizable.

There is also some overlap between familicides and other forms of mass killing. Clearly, the term *familicide* includes cases where a perpetrator kills his current or ex-wife or partner, most or all of their children, and other relatives. However, it sometimes happens that the killing of kin accompanies the murder of community members, bystanders, or other persons significant to the perpetrator. The following examples illustrate this overlap.

On September 25, 1982, in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, George Banks killed five of his own children and four women with whom he had had intimate relationships. At the same time, relatives of these women and a passerby also were killed by Banks. In a comparable case, Mark Barton, angered by losing money through day trading on the Internet, murdered his wife and two children before opening fire at two Atlanta brokerage houses killing nine people and wounding twelve more before committing suicide.

The research into familicide is in its infancy and dwells mostly on male offenders. Margo Wilson and Martin Daly identify two types of male familicidal offenders. The “angry” perpetrator has various grievances against his female partner, many apparently associated with his perception of her sexual infidelity