
**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.

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.

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*See also* Repressed Memory

**Further Readings**

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 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 familialidal offenders. The “angry” perpetrator has various grievances against his female partner, many apparently associated with his perception of her sexual infidelity...