

Many People's Earliest Memories May Be Fictional

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In a large survey of people's first memories, nearly 40% of participants reported a first memory that is likely to be fictional, according to [findings](#) published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

Current research indicates that people's earliest memories date from around 3 to 3.5 years of age. However, the [study](#) from researchers at City, University of London, the University of Bradford, and Nottingham Trent University found that 38.6% of 6,641 participants claimed to have memories from age 2 or younger, with 893 people claiming memories from age 1 or younger. This was particularly prevalent among middle-aged and older adults.

To investigate people's first memories, the researchers asked participants to detail their first memory along with their age at the time. In particular, participants were told that the memory itself had to be one that they were certain they remembered. It should not be based on, for example, a family photograph, family story, or any source other than direct experience.

From these descriptions, the researchers then examined the content, language, nature, and descriptive

detail of respondents' earliest memory descriptions, and from these evaluated the likely reasons why people claim memories from an age that research indicates they cannot be formed.

As many of these memories dated before the age of 2 and younger, the authors suggest that these fictional memories are based on remembered fragments of early experience – such as a pram (or stroller), family relationships and feeling sad – and some facts or knowledge about their own infancy or childhood which may have been derived from photographs or family conversations.

“We suggest that what a rememberer has in mind when recalling fictional improbably early memories is an episodic-memory-like mental representation consisting of remembered fragments of early experience and some facts or knowledge about their own infancy/childhood,” said Shazia Akhtar, first author on the study and Senior Research Associate at the University of Bradford.

“Additionally, further details may be nonconsciously inferred or added, e.g. that one was wearing nappy when standing in the cot,” Akhtar added. “Such episodic-memory-like mental representations come, over time, to be recollectively experienced when they come to mind and so for the individual they quite simply are ‘memories’ which particularly point to infancy.”

Akhtar and colleagues found that fictional very early memories were more common in middle-aged and older adults and about 4 in 10 of this group have fictional memories for infancy.

“When we looked through the responses from participants we found that a lot of these first ‘memories’ were frequently related to infancy, and a typical example would be a memory based around a pram,” explained Martin Conway, Director at the Centre for Memory and Law at City, University of London and coauthor of the paper.

“For this person, this type of memory could have resulted from someone saying something like ‘mother had a large green pram.’ The person then imagines what it would have looked like. Over time these fragments then becomes a memory and often the person will start to add things in such as a string of toys along the top,” he added.

“Crucially, the person remembering them doesn’t know this is fictional,” Conway noted. “In fact when people are told that their memories are false they often don’t believe it. This partly due to the fact that the systems that allow us to remember things are very complex, and it’s not until we’re 5 or 6 that we form adult-like memories due to the way that the brain develops and due to our maturing understanding of the world.”

Additional coauthors on the study include Lucy V. Justice of Nottingham Trent University and Catriona M. Morrison of the University of Bradford.

All data have been made publicly available via [Figshare](#). The complete Open Practices Disclosure for this article is available [online](#). This article has received the [badge](#) for Open Data.