

New Study Shows False Memories Affect Behavior

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Do you know someone who claims to remember their first day of kindergarten? Or a trip they took as a toddler? While some people may be able to recall trivial details from the past, laboratory research shows that the human memory can be remarkably fragile and even inventive.

In fact, people can easily create false memories of their past and a new study shows that such memories can have long-term effects on our behavior.

Psychologists Elke Geraerts of the University of St. Andrews and Maastricht University, Daniel Bernstein of Kwantlen Polytechnic University and the University of Washington, Harald Merckelbach, Christel Linders, and Linsey Raymaekers of Maastricht University, and Elizabeth F. Loftus of University of California, Irvine, found that it is possible to change long-term behaviors using a simple suggestive technique.

In a series of experiments, the researchers falsely suggested that participants had become ill after eating egg salad as a child. Afterwards, the researchers offered different kinds of sandwiches to the participants, including ones with an egg salad filling. Four months later, the participants were asked to be in a separate study in which they evaluated egg salad as well as other foods. They were then given the same kinds of sandwiches that had been offered to them four months earlier.

Interestingly, participants who were told they had become ill as a child after eating egg salad showed a distinct change in attitudes and behavior towards this food after the experiment. They not only gave the food lower evaluations than participants who did not develop false memories or were in the control group, but they also avoided egg salad sandwiches more than any of the other participants four months later.

The results, appearing in the August issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, “clearly demonstrate that false suggestions about childhood events can profoundly change people’s attitudes and behavior,” wrote the authors.

These findings have significant implications for the authenticity of reports of recovered memory experiences. While previous research indicates that spontaneously recovered memories may reflect real memories of abuse, there is no such evidence for abuse memories recovered through suggestive therapy. The results might also influence obesity treatments and dieting choices. The authors suggest that it may be possible for people to learn to avoid certain foods by believing they had negative experiences with the food as a child. Overall, this study clearly demonstrates that false suggestions about childhood events can profoundly change people’s attitudes and behavior.