

Why Alan Alda Hates Eggs: A Clarification

June 24, 2005

My students got a kick out of reading about our joint research on false food memories in the APS *Observer's* April article, wonderfully titled, "Making Memories." But they also knew that one piece of the story was not quite right and were compelled to clarify and elaborate.

As noted in "Making Memories," we attended a picnic at University of California, Irvine with Alan Alda, and he did refuse to eat hard-boiled eggs when they were first offered to him. But, contrary to the report, he did not tell us he remembered getting sick as a child, nor did he provide details about getting sick to our research group. Since we know a lot about how false beliefs can get transmitted, we thought it best to tell *Observer* readers what Alan Alda actually did and didn't do. That way, psychologists who want to use the Alda anecdote to illustrate a claim will have the facts straight.

Alan Alda came to UCI to film segments about new memory research for his educational TV program, "*Scientific American Frontiers*." To illustrate the methodology and findings of our new research of false food memories, we demonstrated a mini-version of our study with Alan as the "subject." In the real study, published this year in *Social Cognition*, subjects were led to believe that as children they had gotten sick eating a particular food (dill pickles, for some, hard-boiled eggs, for others). They were led to this false belief by being told that previously collected data had been subjected to computer analysis, and their childhood food profile indicated that the bad experience had happened.

Many people accepted the suggestion and adopted the false belief or memory. They increased their confidence that they had gotten sick in this way, and they also told us they had an actual memory or belief that this had happened to them. To see whether the false belief had consequences, the subjects were asked to imagine themselves at a barbeque and to indicate how much they wanted to eat particular foods. Those who believed they had gotten sick on the eggs wanted eggs less, and those who believed they had gotten sick on pickles wanted pickles less.*

To demonstrate the study for Alan, we had him fill out some questionnaires about a week before he visited the lab. The forms were ostensibly to gather information about his life-history with food and his personality. Once he came to the lab, we used false feedback from a "very smart computer" to try to convince him that when he was a child he had gotten sick eating too many hard-boiled eggs. After the manipulation, he showed a slight increase in confidence that he had gotten sick eating hard-boiled eggs. But he never came to describe a getting-sick event in detail.

An hour or so later, Alan had a picnic in the park with students, postdocs, other faculty, and staff, and he could eat what he wanted from the fancy spread of food. When I handed him a plate of hard-boiled eggs, he refused to eat them, and had a funny scrunched up look on his face. When I wrote about this anecdote, I emphasized that his reluctance to eat a hard-boiled egg at that particular picnic could be due to many causes.

So “Making Memories” got things mostly right, but ended up giving the impression that Alan developed a rich false memory, when in fact he did not.

Misdescriptions of this research have occurred in other publications. In one case, a writer for a prominent newspaper wrote: “... a study from UC Irvine that showed what many of us have long suspected: Most people who claim to have food allergies are, quite frankly, making it up.” Where did the idea of allergies come from? Maybe the writer wasn’t referring to our research. But read on: “The researchers told a study group (falsely) that they were allergic to certain foods. When they called the subjects later, lo and behold, they were regaled with heartfelt tales of how those foods had made the consumers turn purple and explode, or some such reactions.”

Colorful, but we actually didn’t say anything about allergies, and we didn’t have any people tell us they exploded.

These experiences have got me thinking about how psychologists should respond when their work is misdescribed, in large or in small ways? Misdescriptions are often innocent and well-meaning, and probably too numerous to respond to each and every time they occur. So I didn’t write to the purple allergy lady. But in the interests of trying to insure that stories about Alan Alda get transmitted correctly, I thought it important to write this time.

*See Bernstein, Laney, Morris & Loftus, 2005 for the study, also located on the author’s Web site: www.seweb.uci.edu/faculty/loftus.