

Myths and Misconceptions about Human Memory

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Abstract

This study examined a number of myths specifically about human memory. In all 405 adult participants completed a 46-item questionnaire in which they rated to what extent they thought various statements/facts about memory were True or False. A large number of these myths were rated as True (Definitely or Partly). Of the nine myths, over 25% admitted that they did not know the answer. There were few significant demographic correlates of the total correct score (determined by rating the myth as False). Implications of layperson ignorance about different aspects of memory are discussed, and implications are considered. Limitations of this kind of myth study are noted.

Keywords

Myths, Misconceptions, Psychological Knowledge, Memory

1. Introduction

How much do lay people know about human memory? What myths do they endorse which we know to be false? Do they recognize “those established empirical facts” to be true? Have things changed over the years? This study examines popular myths about memory and their correlates, which seem to be dominated by those interested in legal psychology and criminology (Bornstein, 2017; Lane & Karam-Zanders, 2014; Magnussen et al., 2006; Magnussen & Melinder, 2012; Melinder & Magnussen, 2015). However, there is also a very interesting debate in what has been called the “memory wars” between clinical psychologists on the nature of repressed memories (Brewin, 2021; Brewin et al., 2019; Otgaar et al., 2019, 2020, 2021).

There has long been an academic interest in psychological myths and misconceptions for nearly a hundred years (Amsel et al., 2011; Benedek et al., 2021; Curtis

& Kelley, 2021; Gaze, 2014; Hughes et al., 2013; Kowalski & Taylor, 2009; Meinz et al., 2022; Taylor & Kowalski, 2004; Tupper & Williams, 1986). Many studies in this area have concentrated on student's psychological knowledge (Arntzen et al., 2010; Gardner & Dalsing, 1986; Griggs & Ransdell, 1987; Standing & Huber, 2003; LaCaille, 2015; Hughes et al., 2014) though there has been an increase of studies using "general population" samples (Furnham & Horne, 2021; Furnham & Robinson, 2022).

The best-known study in this area is that of Lilienfeld et al. (2010), who wrote *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology* which reviewed and dispelled 50 myths. This stimulated a number of studies (Furnham & Hughes, 2014; Furnham, 2018) as well as a series of recent books (Hupp & Jewell, 2015; Jarrett, 2014). Lilienfeld's book also encouraged researchers to develop new scales such as those of Gardner and Brown (2013) and Bensley et al. (2014).

Most of the studies on myths have looked at issues of concern to applied, clinical and developmental psychology. This study looked at myths about issues primarily in cognitive psychology, specifically memory. Indeed, in Lilienfeld et al. (2010) there was a short section on memory myths. They discussed in detail four myths: "*Human memory works like a tape recorder or video camera, and accurately records the events we've experienced*"; "*Hypnosis is useful for retrieving memories of forgotten events*"; "*Individuals commonly repress the memories of traumatic experiences*"; "*Most people with amnesia forget all details of their earlier lives*". They also list nine related myths they believe worth exploring: "*Some people have true 'photographic memories.'*"; "*With effort, we can remember events back to birth*"; "*Memory is chemically transferable*"; "*The suggestibility of memory is only a problem for pre-schoolers*"; "*People who can't recall what they had for lunch yesterday have a poor 'short-term memory'*"; "*Rote memorization is the best way to retain information*"; "*Almost all forgetting is due to decay of information in our brains*"; "*Ginkgo and other herbal remedies improve memory in normal individuals.*"

Over a decade ago in a population survey Simons and Chabris (2011) found, in a study of six memory myths, that many Americans agreed with statements that conflict with expert consensus: Amnesia results in the inability to remember one's own identity (83%); Unexpected objects generally grab attention (78%); Memory works like a video camera (63%); Memory can be enhanced through hypnosis (55%); Memory is permanent (48%); and The testimony of a single confident eyewitness should be enough to convict a criminal defendant (37%).

However, there is growing and important literature in the memory research area on myths and misconceptions, particularly in criminology and the law. There are two main reasons for this interest. First, knowledge about memory clearly affects lawyers and jury's beliefs and decisions (Benton et al., 2006; Bornstein & Greene, 2017; Magnussen et al., 2008, 2010; Melinder & Magnussen, 2015; McAuliff et al., 2009; Neal et al., 2012; Wise & Safer, 2004). Thus, if they hold

serious misconceptions about memory, they may make very bad and important consequential decisions and judgments. Second, there remain passionate debates in the academic community about such things as repressed memories, which spill over into the popular press and stimulate a belief in this area (Otgaar et al., 2019, 2022; Patihis et al., 2013, 2014).

One important aspect of the repressed memory debate for this and other similar studies concerns subtleties in the wording of myths. For instance, Brewin (2021) has noted: “Conclusions have typically been based on the fact that large numbers agree with a single questionnaire item such as “*Traumatic experiences can be repressed for many years and then recovered*”... This item does not specifically identify the unconscious form of repression that remains unsupported by empirical evidence... Perhaps most importantly, it does not throw light on people’s understanding of the term repression and whether this term is anything more than a synonym for motivated forgetting. In a recent survey, Brewin, Li, Ntarantana, Unsworth, and McNeilis (2019) supplemented the original repression item of Kassir et al. (2001) with an alternative: “*Traumatic experiences can be deliberately blocked out for many years and then recovered.*” Respondents agreed with this item at the same rate as they did with the original item. There are several possible explanations for this finding: “Respondents may specifically endorse a belief in conscious repression, may endorse both conscious and unconscious repression, or may not feel equipped to make a meaningful distinction between the two” (pp: 446-448). This draws attention to the wording of statements about memory which can be rated true or false.

2. This Study

This study examined the extent to which people endorse popular myths about memory. The study was inspired by Bornstein’s (2017) book, which discusses a number of myths and divides them into various sections. He noted that he took most of the items from peer reviewed papers on lay beliefs and memory myths (Della Salla, 2007; Garry et al., 1994; Magnussen et al., 2006; Read & Desmarais, 2009).

In that book, he presented data from 175 students, $\frac{3}{4}$ of whom were women. They responded on a five-point agree-disagree scale. Unlike many of the above studies, many of the statements were essentially true and based on sound and replicated empirical research. He found that over 80% could correctly identify such statements as “*When an eyewitness is questioned about an event, the wording of the questions can influence the testimony*” (92% agreed correctly), yet less than a $\frac{1}{4}$ got the statement “*The more members of a lineup resemble the suspect, the more likely that the witness’s decision is accurate*”.

This study set out to replicate this study on a much more representative, non-student, population. It also differed in the response scale which allowed for a “Don’t Know” response. We were also interested in determining if there were any systematic individual differences that correlated with these scores, such as sex or age effects.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total of 405 participants completed the questionnaire: 202 were men and 203 were women. They ranged in age from 18 to 67 years, with a mean age of 38.93 years ($SD = 11.11$ years). Less than 5% were students. All had secondary school education, and 55% of them were graduates. In total, 24.8% were single and 48.1% were married/cohabiting, and 48% had no children. They were all fluent in English and most came from Europe.

3.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire, which has 46 questions and 8 sections, was taken from Bornstein (2017) (See Table 1). There were 9 questions on *General Memory Process* (Q1-Q9), 9 questions on Age Effects (Q10-Q18), 6 questions on the *Biological Basis* (Q19-Q24), 5 questions on Hypnosis/Recovered memories (Q25-Q29), 3 questions on *Mnemonic Techniques* (Q30-32), 4 questions on *Retrograde Amnesia* (Q33-37), and 10 questions on *Eyewitness Testimony* (Q37-Q46). The instructions were: “Researchers have studied lots of aspects of memory. Read each short statement below and then indicate (by ticking) if you personally believe it is:

Definitely True (DT): There is good scientific evidence to support the statement; Probably True (PT): There is enough evidence pointing to the fact that it is more-or-less correct; Probably False (PF): There is little good scientific evidence to support the statement; Definitely False (DF): There is no evidence to support the statement and indeed the opposite may be true; Don't Know (DK): You have personally no idea whether it is true or false.

The “Don't Know” option improves upon some previous tests as participants could indicate a lack of knowledge, rather than guessing, using a mid-point response or leaving items unanswered (Arntzen et al., 2010).

The questions were presented in the order given in the table. However, they were interspersed at five different points with different questions on human happiness to increase attentiveness.

3.3. Procedure

Data was collected on the Prolific Platform, where “survey workers” are compensated for their participation based on time spent completing the survey. Participants were employed adults who completed anonymous, non-invasive questionnaires, entirely voluntarily. They are always at liberty to stop at any point and not answer any particular question. Data inspection followed data collection.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the results. Note that those items in *italics* are regarded as false, whereas the others are true according to Bornstein's judgement about expert consensus.

Table 1. Results from the 46 myth statements. Statements in italics, according to Bornstein (2017), are where expert consensus is disagreeable (namely false).

	Statement	DT	PT	PF	DF	DK
1	Of the total information that a person will eventually forget about an event, the greatest amount of forgetting will occur relatively soon after the event	27	237	88	23	30
2	The less time a person has to observe an event, the less well he or she will remember it	118	212	46	10	19
3	<i>Sensations of smell are remembered better than visual and auditory impressions</i>	77	160	75	12	81
4	<i>“Flashbulb” memories—memories of an occasion when we heard an important piece of news—are more accurate than memories for ordinary events</i>	62	178	88	16	61
5	<i>People can remember information presented to them while they are asleep</i>	21	102	142	75	65
6	<i>People who are better at remembering past events are also better at remembering things they have to do in the future (e.g., appointments)</i>	29	185	85	25	81
7	<i>People can remember information that they perceive subliminally (i.e., without realising it)</i>	86	250	33	7	29
8	<i>Subliminal information affects the way people act (e.g., a subliminal message in advertising can influence consumer behaviour)</i>	146	191	30	14	24
9	<i>Photographic memory is a real phenomenon</i>	189	149	28	8	31
10	Young children are more easily influenced than adults by interviewer suggestions, peer pressure and other social factors	138	178	53	6	30
11	Young children are less accurate as witnesses than are adults	33	124	153	38	57
12	Elderly witnesses are less accurate as witnesses than are younger adults	26	164	115	28	72
13	When small children recount events they have experienced, they remember worse than adults	13	116	138	38	100
14	When talking about memories from their early childhood years, people generally cannot remember events before age three	142	210	27	10	16
15	Age-related memory decline usually starts around age 65 years	37	211	75	20	62
16	Remembering past events gets worse with age, especially in elderly adults	106	198	53	16	32
17	<i>Remembering things we have to do in the future (e.g., appointments) gets worse with age, especially in elderly adults</i>	104	242	28	6	25
18	<i>If you live long enough, you will get Alzheimer’s Disease</i>	3	26	111	184	81
19	Alcohol intoxication impairs one’s later ability to recall persons and events	217	156	12	6	14
20	Just as physical exercise makes the body stronger, it is possible to train memory like a muscle	180	175	27	5	18
21	<i>There is a limit to the amount of information the brain is able to store in memory</i>	40	136	112	41	76
22	Damaged brain tissue cannot repair itself the way other body tissues can	49	141	81	31	103
23	<i>It is possible to “implant” memories in a person’s mind, for things that they did not actually experience, by brain surgery</i>	19	63	106	126	91
24	<i>People who receive organ transplants (e.g., heart, liver, cornea, etc.) can have memories for things that the organ donor experienced</i>	7	65	94	180	59
25	When people undergo hypnosis, they are more easily influenced by leading and misleading questions	67	219	36	13	70

Continued

26	Memories people recover from their own childhood are often false or distorted in some way	30	224	83	12	56
27	<i>Hypnosis increases the accuracy of a person's reported memory</i>	8	102	127	24	144
28	<i>It is possible to tell the difference between true and false memories</i>	18	98	155	46	88
29	<i>Traumatic experiences can be repressed for many years and then recovered</i>	203	170	17	7	8
30	<i>Mentally repeating something (e.g., an address or phone number) over and over is a good way to keep it in short-term memory</i>	206	179	9	4	7
31	Chunking (i.e., grouping items together) is an effective way to store information in memory	100	190	35	8	72
32	Imagery (i.e., forming a mental picture) is an effective way to store information in memory	160	214	13	5	13
33	<i>After head injury, people can forget who they are and not recognise others, but be normal in every other way</i>	181	160	22	11	31
34	<i>Sometimes a second blow to the head can help a person remember things that were forgotten</i>	19	58	109	90	129
35	<i>How quickly a person recovers from a head injury depends mainly on how hard they work at recovering</i>	10	81	136	110	68
36	Complete recovery from a severe head injury is not possible, no matter how badly the person wants to recover	16	75	144	69	101
37	Eyewitnesses are more accurate when identifying members of their own race than members of other races	43	176	66	28	92
38	The presence of a weapon held by a criminal makes it more difficult for the eyewitness later to identify the person's face accurately	42	214	58	11	80
39	An eyewitness's confidence in his or her identification is not a good indicator of the accuracy of the identification	58	168	104	12	63
40	Witnesses are more likely to misidentify someone when presented with a simultaneous lineup (all members shown at once) than when presented with a sequential lineup (members shown one at a time)	23	120	87	19	156
41	Eyewitnesses sometimes mistakenly identify as a culprit someone they have seen in another situation or context	62	273	25	2	43
42	The presentation of a single person or photo instead of a selection of people or photos increases the risk an eyewitness will identify the wrong person	27	183	60	8	127
43	The more that all lineup members match a witness's description of a culprit, the more accurate an eyewitness's decision is likely to be	13	136	112	22	122
44	The more members of a lineup resemble the suspect, the more likely that the witness's decision is accurate	13	103	152	24	113
45	Very high levels of stress impair the accuracy of eyewitness testimony	126	226	22	6	25
46	The more quickly a witness identifies someone in a police lineup, the more accurate he or she is likely to be	24	160	125	27	69

General Memory Processes: The first nine statements were described general memory processes. Most were judged true, particularly items 8 and 9, which according to Bornstein (2017) are false. Interestingly, just over 80 participants (20%) claimed to not know the answers to items 3 and 6. The item most rated "true" was

item 7: “*People can remember information that they received subliminally*”.

Age Effects: Statements 10 to 18 were labelled as age effects. The first seven were true/correct yet the majority thought items 11 and 13 (“*When small children recount events they have experienced, they remember worse than adults*”) were rated as probably false.

Biological Basis: Statements 19 to 24 were classified as biological basis, of which three were classified as true and three false. There was strong and correct agreement (truthfulness) about 19 and 20, and correct disagreement (untruthfulness) about 23 and 24. There was less variance in the answers to questions in this section, though relatively high “Don’t Know” responses to statements 22 (true) and 23 (false).

Hypnosis/Recovered memory: This referred to statements 25 - 29, the first two of which were regarded as “true” and the remaining three “false”. The majority of responses were correct with the exception of 29, where a vast majority believed the statement “Traumatic experiences can be repressed for many years and then recovered”.

Mnemonic Techniques: These were three statements, one false (30) and two true (31, 32). Overall, the participants believed all the statements to be true, particularly the idea that imagery is an effective way to store information in memory.

Retrograde Amnesia Myths: These referred to statements 33 to 36. The majority of the participants were wrong about 33 and 36, with a high number expressing ignorance (Don’t Know) of 35.

Eyewitness Testimony: All 10 items were referred to in this well-researched area, and all the statements were true. The majority of the participants were indeed correct in labelling each as true (particularly item 45), with the exception of item 44. More interestingly, some of these statements (40, 42, 43, 113) attracted some of the highest “Don’t Know” responses.

Correlates

The total (true when true, false when false, don’t know) as well as subscale scores were then computed which were correlated with the participant’s age, sex and education, as well as religious and political beliefs. There were fewer than chance significant results, suggesting no clear relationship between these demographic and ideological variables and beliefs about memory.

5. Discussion

The study of myths in psychology has been conducted for many reasons, including seeing how formal education reduces myths, as well as a way to draw attention to a particular area of research (Lyubomirsky, 2013). It has been recognized that popular beliefs have an impact on an individual’s behaviour, such as their choice of educational courses, parenting and choice of therapy. Perhaps the area where false beliefs have the most impact is in the courtroom, where judges, jurors and lawyers have to make critical decisions based on memory-based evidence. Myths have also

been used as a tool, taking the form of “fake news”, in political discussions and elections. This can have drastic consequences on the democratic process and individual political decision making.

However, there are very important issues for this study and those like it (Benton et al., 2006). The first concerns the veridicality of the classification (True vs False) of myth statements. That is, do experts in the area agree that the available evidence suggests that a particular statement is essentially true or not. It is quite possible that experts disagree, except on a very limited number of items. Secondly, and related to the first, is the issue of nuanced statements (Brewin, 2021). That is, the subtlety of the wording is all important and many statements used in this study could be challenged by researchers for their ambiguous or unclear wording. Whilst these issues could be seen to be problematic in all the studies on psychological myths (Furnham, 2018; Furnham & Robinson, 2022; Lilienfeld et al., 2010) it could be argued that they are more important in the area of memory because of their potential consequences in courtrooms.

This study was part replicative using a different, bigger and more representative population and a different rating scale. The results were interesting, surprising and potentially worrying. In all greatest agreement (over 75%) were items 30 and 29, both rated incorrectly true (definitely and completely) and items 19, 32, 20, 45 and 14 which were correctly judged as true. Overall, looking at **Table 1** it appears there was a tendency to agree with that statements despite 20/46 being false. For relatively few of the statements, the majority were confident enough to record Definitely True (statements 9, 19, 20, 29, 30, and 33) only two of which were true. The two items that attracted the most incorrect endorsement were: 29. “*Traumatic experiences can be repressed for many years and then recovered*” and 30. “*Mentally repeating something over and over is a good way to keep it in short term memory*”.

Of the various sections, the participants seemed most accurate in their responses to the eyewitness questions (37 - 46), though they also attracted some of the highest *Don't Know* responses. Why this high level of accuracy occurred clearly warrants further investigation. It may be that the topic of eyewitness interviewing is something participants knew more about, through personal experience in the courtroom or through watching forensic or “true crime” programs, which are becoming increasingly popular (Sherrill, 2020).

A clearly important question for this area of research is how to educate the general public about memory processes. Many myth researchers attempt to highlight a smaller number of myths (around a dozen) and then attempt to explain the actual facts in popular articles, blogs, and books. There are numerous examples from the psychology of happiness (Eysenck, 1990; Lyubomirsky, 2013).

Like all studies this had a number of limitations. First, the sample was heterogeneous but not fully representative in terms of age, religious views, marital status and educational attainment. It was also relatively small. As aforementioned, it may have been interesting to know if any of the participants had legal training, had

ever sat on a jury or had any other experience of the law. These factors may be related to their knowledge of the area. More importantly, there will be memory experts who disagree with the classification of essentially True and False. This may be because there is new data to challenge the theories or that the items are not subtle enough to specify what we do and do not know.

Future research resulting from this study may want to focus on why people do, and do not, believe the myths investigated here. Factors such as social desirability (Carifio, 1994), source credibility and consistency with held beliefs (Schwarz et al., 2016) have all been implicated as reasons why people believe information, both true and false. A qualitative analysis of participant's justification for their answers could help researchers understand what factors they have to appeal to, in order to educate people and debunk popular myths.

Studies such as this provide useful historical data on psychological myths prevalent in society. They nearly always provide the "shocking truth" about the widespread acceptance of myths which concerns experts and educationists who call for attempts to dispel or debunk those myths. The current study has shown that memory myths are abundant and persistent as well as potentially harmful and socially divisive. Hence, the interest in myth-debunking campaigns designed around refutational methods like those used by Kowalski and Taylor (2009), Liliensfeld et al. (2010), and LaCaille (2015) have the potential to reduce levels of misconception. The current study may be used to identify memory myths and misconceptions in need of refutation.

Data Availability

This is obtainable from the first author upon request.

Registration

This paper was not pre-registered with the journal.

Ethics

This was sought and obtained.

Informed Consent

Participants gave consent for their anonymised data to be analysed and published.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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