

MEMORY CONFORMITY AND PARANORMAL BELIEF

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INTRODUCTION

An enormous amount of research has been directed towards understanding general factors affecting the reliability of eyewitness accounts (e.g. Loftus, 1979). Research has shown that memory and perception are active and constructive processes. As a consequence, eyewitness testimony can often be contaminated by incorporation of information presented after the witnessed event. A second strand of research has investigated conformity. Classic research (Asch, 1952) involved asking participants to make a simple perceptual judgement that, under normal circumstances, would always be done correctly. When several stooge respondents gave a clearly erroneous answer before the real participant's turn to respond, many participants gave the wrong answer.

Recent research (e.g., Gabbert, Memon, & Allen, 2003) has drawn these two strands together by showing that if multiple witnesses to the same event discuss what they saw, they may well influence each other's accounts. Gabbert et al. had participants watch a video of a staged crime (a young woman stealing some money) and subsequently tested recall for the event using both free recall and a questionnaire. Participants watched the video either alone or in pairs. Those who watched in pairs were under the impression that each had seen the same video but in fact the videos used were filmed from a slightly different perspective. Some details were therefore visible in the first video (e.g., the woman stealing the money) but not in the second and *vice versa*. Participants were encouraged in the co-witness condition to discuss the event prior to the final recall phase in which it was emphasized that they should only report information that they had actually witnessed with their own eyes. The majority of witnesses (71%) who had discussed the event with a co-witness went on to report items of information that they could not possibly have personally witnessed. Worryingly, 60% of witnesses in the co-witness condition who had not actually witnessed her act of theft were prepared to report that she was guilty of the crime.

The final strand woven into the current research programme is memory recall for ostensibly paranormal events (OPEs). Numerous studies have shown that eyewitness testimony for pseudo-psychic demonstrations, such as fake séances and fork bending, may be inaccurate and vulnerable to memory distortion. Wiseman and Morris (1995), for example, have presented evidence suggesting that believers in the paranormal had poorer memories for "pseudo-psychic" demonstrations (i.e., conjuring tricks) than non-believers. Furthermore, the memory differences between believers and non-believers were particularly marked for information that was crucial to explaining how a particular effect had been achieved. For example, the fact that a key disappeared from view during a metal-bending demonstration was critical because it was at this point that a straight key was switched for a bent key. Believers also tended to rate demonstrations of such pseudo-psychic feats as more "paranormal" than non-believers.

The current research programme aims to bring each of these strands together. It is the first programme to consider the degree to which recall of OPEs can be influenced by the accounts of fellow witnesses, and to also consider whether pre-existing belief in the paranormal is related to susceptibility to such memory conformity effects. The research has obvious and important implications. In both a forensic and anomalistic context, investigators will quite naturally give more evidential weight to accounts from multiple witnesses that broadly appear to mutually support each other. However, it is precisely when multiple witnesses have viewed an unusual real-life incident, such as a crime, or a possible ghost or UFO sighting, that they are likely to discuss the event prior to and during formal investigation. The risk of memory contamination is thus very

real and should be taken very seriously by parapsychologists involved in fieldwork or the collection of evidence relating to spontaneous cases.

METHOD

The first study was a direct replication of the Gabbert et al. (2003) paradigm, in an attempt to find memory conformity effects when participants viewed a video of a criminal act. The aims of this study were firstly to investigate the robustness of the effects reported by Gabbert et al. and, secondly, to investigate the possibility that believers in the paranormal might show greater susceptibility to such memory distortion effects even when viewing non-paranormal events. Each member of a dyad watched a video of a staged crime recorded from slightly different viewpoints in such a way that crucial details were not available on both recordings. Each tape included two critical items of information that were not visible on the other tape. Dyads in one condition discussed the events prior to recall while participants in a control condition did not. The first study also assessed whether believers in the paranormal (as assessed by the Belief in the Paranormal Scale; Jones, Russell, & Nickell, 1977) were more prone to such memory distortion even for a non-paranormal event. Participants (N = 40) were assigned to belief group on the basis of a median split.

RESULTS

A chi-square analysis revealed a significant association between experimental condition, i.e., individual witness vs co-witness, and the tendency to report critical (i.e. unseen) items of information in the recall test; ($\chi^2(1, 40) = 24.00; p < 0.001$), with participants in the co-witness condition being significantly more likely to incorporate at least one critical item into their recall compared to controls. Overall, 75% of witnesses in the co-witness condition (i.e., 15 out of 20) reported incorrect items of information that could only have been acquired during the discussion whereas no witnesses in the single witness group did so. Of the 15 participants reporting unseen items of information, 13 reported one item and two reported both items. However, there was no association between memory conformity and belief group (Fisher's exact $p = .114$). Seven out of ten participants who had not directly witnessed the theft were prepared to say that the young woman was guilty of the crime even though they could personally not have had direct knowledge of this from the videotape.

DISCUSSION

The study found that a significant proportion of witnesses who had discussed an observed event with a co-witness reported items of information that could only have been acquired during the course of that discussion. These results replicate previous findings and demonstrate a robust memory conformity effect. It was not found that believers in the paranormal were more susceptible than non-believers to memory distortion for a non-paranormal event.

A second study is currently running, using the same paradigm but with videotapes of two 2.5-minute clips of a pseudo-psychic performing a selection of apparently psychokinetic demonstrations. Both clips contain essentially the same sequence of events but each includes one important piece of information missing in the other clip, which gives an indication of how the effect was achieved. In the first clip for example, a fork used in a fork bending demonstration is clearly handled by the "psychic" and in the second, the fork clearly goes out of view. The focus of interest is the degree to which the participant's recall is distorted as a direct result of discussions with a co-witness, and whether this relates to pre-existing beliefs in the paranormal.

It is hypothesized that, in line with Wiseman and Morris (1995), in the individual witness condition, believers will be less likely to recall crucial pieces of information compared to non-believers. Since

susceptibility to memory distortion correlates with a number of variables that correlate in turn with belief in the paranormal (French, 2003), it is also hypothesized that believers may show a greater tendency for memory conformity in such ostensibly paranormal contexts.

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