Lack of precision, misleading implications, and ethical issues arising from the use of the label "false memory" for errors in word memory.

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Introduction

• The term "false memory" has been used to refer to suggestibility experiments in which whole events are apparently confabulated and in media accounts of contested memories of childhood abuse.
• Since 1992, psychologists have increasingly used the term "false memory" when discussing memory errors for details, such as specific words within word lists.
• Use of the term to refer to errors in details is a shift in language from other terms used historically (e.g., "memory intrusions").
• We empirically examine this shift in language and discuss implications of the new use of the term "false memory".

Historical Use of the Term "False Memory"

• The term "false memory" initially gained prominence in reference to contested memories of childhood sexual abuse on family members. Article titles such as "You Must Remember This: How the Brain Forms False Memories" reflect this media frame (Beckett, 1996, p. 12).
• In the 1990s, the term "false memory" was introduced to the cognitive literature.

New Term for an Old Phenomenon: The Deese Paradigm

Deese (1959) used the term "false memory" to describe errors in recall for details or parts of events. For example, in experiments in which participants were asked to recall a word not previously presented in a list of related words (e.g., misremembering 'bed' when sleep-related words had been presented) or experiments in which participants were asked to recall a detail within more complex stimuli (e.g., when shown a video of a robbery, the participant erroneously recalled that the robber had her hands in her pockets at a certain point in the video).

The paradigm was designed specifically to elicit a specific type of memory error: intrusions of words that were related to a list of words presented in the laboratory.

Deese's work was based on the Deese, Roediger and McDermott (1995) paradigm, in which participants were asked to recall a list of words (e.g., bed, sleep, tired), and later tested for their memory of a related, but not presented, item (e.g., sip).

Roediger and McDermott (1995) characterized this error as a "false memory" whereas Deese (1959) called this an "intrusion". The paradigm was designed specifically to elicit a specific type of memory error: intrusions of words that were related to a list of words presented in the laboratory.

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Re-discovering the Deese Paradigm

In 1995, Roediger and McDermott reported on a new experiment that employed Deese's (1959) paradigm, but used new terminology to discuss the results.

Participants were asked to recall a list of words (e.g., bed, sleep, tired) and later tested for their memory of a related, but not presented, item (e.g., sip). Consistent with Deese (1959), participants did sometimes misremember the related, but not presented, item as having occurred in the list studied.

Roediger and McDermott (1995) characterized this error as a "false memory" whereas Deese (1959) called this an "intrusion".

Since the publication of the Roediger and McDermott (1995) article, follow-up articles using similar paradigms have continued to use the term "false memory" in their titles and discussions (e.g., Roediger & McDermott, 1999; Miller & Woford, 1999).

Other Uses of the Term "False Memory"

Non-empirical. Term is used to refer to confabulation of an entire event. The majority of non-empirical papers (88%) used the term to refer to confabulation of an entire event.

Empirical. Term is used to refer to errors in details or parts of events. The final ratings matched for all but five of the articles, on which raters disagreed only in the term usage dimension, resulting in 98.7% agreement and excellent interrater reliability, Cohen’s k (1, N = 390) = .85, p < .001, was achieved.

In the specific case of the use of the term "false memory" to describe errors in details in laboratory tasks (e.g., in word-learning tasks), the media and public are set up all too easily to interpret such research as relevant to "false memories" of abuse because the term is used in the public domain to refer to contested memories of abuse.

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For related research, please visit http://www.du.edu/~udeprieb/labs.html or http://dynamic.usu.edu/~fitzbrub/.

Table 1. Articles Rated by Type and Use of the Term "False Memories"

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Discussion

• Discrepant ratings between coders initially occurred in 28 of the 390 articles. These discrepancies were for 28 term usage ratings and 7 empirical status ratings.

• For the term usage rating, an initial 92.8% agreement and high interrater reliability, Cohen’s k (1, N = 390) = .85, p < .001, was achieved.

• Among the many ethical responsibilities facing scientists is the fair interpretation and representation of data to both colleagues and the public.

Table 2. Articles Rated by Type and Use of the Term "False Memories"

<table>
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References