



Review

What if you went to the police and accused your uncle of abuse? Misunderstandings concerning the benefits of memory distortion: A commentary on Fernández (2015) ☆



Henry Otgaar ^{a,b,*}, Mark L. Howe ^{a,b}, Andrew Clark ^{a,c}, Jianqin Wang ^a, Harald Merckelbach ^a

^a Maastricht University, The Netherlands

^b City University London, UK

^c University of Portsmouth, UK

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ABSTRACT

In a recent paper, Fernández (2015) argues that memory distortion can have beneficial outcomes. Although we agree with this, we find his reasoning and examples flawed to such degree that they will lead to misunderstandings rather than clarification in the field of memory (distortion). In his paper, Fernández uses the terms belief and memory incorrectly, creating a conceptual blur. Also, Fernández tries to make the case that under certain circumstances, false memories of abuse are beneficial. We argue against this idea as the reasoning behind this claim is based on controversial assumptions such as repression. Although it is true that memory distortions can be beneficial, the examples sketched by Fernández are not in line with recent documentation in this area.

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1. Introduction

In a recent paper, Fernández (2015) claims that under certain circumstances, distorted memories might be beneficial. Although we generally agree with the view that memory distortions can have positive consequences, we argue that the

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* Corresponding author at: Clinical Psychological Science, Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, Maastricht University, PO Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands. Fax: +31 43 3884196.

E-mail address: Henry.Otgaar@maastrichtuniversity.nl (H. Otgaar).

reasoning and examples used in Fernández's paper are not in line with recent documentation concerning the functions of memory and its illusions. In our view, the incorrect reasoning in his paper might contribute to misunderstandings in the field of memory (distortion), misunderstandings that might affect theory and practice altogether.

In this commentary, we articulate several points of contention concerning Fernández's (2015) speculations about the positive aspects of memory distortion. Specifically, we will first elaborate on the ambiguous and loose use of concepts (i.e., *belief* and *memory*) in his paper. Second, we will explain that his fictional example of fabricated memories of abuse being sometimes beneficial rests on flawed assumptions. Third and finally, we argue that Fernández's review of the benefits of memory distortion not only overlooked much of the literature in this area but also does not align well with recent evidence in this field.

2. Belief versus recollection¹

In the paper, Fernández (2015) frequently resorts to the concept of *belief* to explain the positive effects of memory distortion. We applaud the use of this concept in the context of memory. Whereas previous memory research has often focused on instances in which belief and recollection are confounded (Smeets, Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Jelicic, 2005), an increasingly large corpus of empirical research reveals that belief and recollection are two distinct concepts (Otgaar, Scoboria, & Mazzoni, 2014). *Recollection* refers to a mental re-experience accompanied by perceptual and emotional features that are perceived as indicative of the original experience (Brewer, 1996; James, 1890/1950; Rubin, 2006; Tulving, 1989). *Belief*, on the other hand, is a non-memorial judgment that is predominantly affected by social influences (Clark, Nash, Fincham, & Mazzoni, 2012; Mazzoni, Scoboria, & Harvey, 2010; Otgaar, Scoboria, & Smeets, 2013). Memory researchers often adopt the term *belief in occurrence* to refer to the truth value attributed to whether an event happened or not, regardless of whether the event is recollected (Mazzoni et al., 2010; Scoboria, Mazzoni, Kirsch, & Relya, 2004).

The distinction between belief in occurrence and recollection for an event is crucial. The majority of memory research focuses on *believed memories*; that is, instances in which research participants have both a recollection of and a belief in the previous occurrence of an event. However, on other occasions, researchers report that they tapped into participants' recollections when in fact they measured their beliefs (see for an extensive discussion: Mazzoni & Kirsch, 2002; Scoboria et al., 2004). It is therefore relevant that memory scholars are aware of the precise intricacies underlying belief in occurrence and recollection and recognize the differences and commonalities between them.

In the paper by Fernández (2015), the concepts of belief and recollection are frequently used in an ambiguous manner thereby potentially confusing the memory field even further. Specifically, in our opinion, this author makes the following three mistakes. First, it appears that Fernández is assuming that in order to form a belief, one must first have a recollection. For example, Fernández argues (p. 2) that “[h]aving a memory may allow the subject to form a belief about the past which has a certain instrumental value for her”. Furthermore, he argues (p. 3) that “[o]n the basis of my memory, I form the belief. . .”.

However, research paints a different picture of the chronology of beliefs and recollections. According to the Nested Model proposed by Scoboria et al. (2004), in most instances, memory is nested within belief. The model stipulates that memory implies belief, thereby indicating that when a person recollects an event, he/she will have to – at least initially – believe in the occurrence of the event. So, it is not the case that beliefs are being formed after someone remembers an event, as the memory is already embedded in belief in the occurrence of the event. It is remarkable that the philosopher Fernández overlooked the point because the idea that beliefs are fundamental to – and indeed must precede – comprehension is essential in the work of Baruch de Spinoza (e.g., Gilbert, 1991), a primary author in the philosophical canon.

Second, besides espousing an ambiguous chronological order of belief and recollection, Fernández (2015) is not very sensitive – perhaps unintentionally – to various forms of beliefs: *Belief in occurrence* of an event and *belief in accuracy* of event (Scoboria, Talarico, & Pascal, 2015). The distinction between *belief in occurrence* and *belief in accuracy* is the difference between wondering whether an event occurred and whether an event is remembered in the way it occurred (Scoboria et al., 2015). To see how these types of belief are blurred in the paper, consider the following examples. Fernández (p. 3) writes phrases such as “. . .believing in the content of that memory” or “. . .beliefs about her past”. The first obviously refers to *belief in accuracy*, while the latter is more in line with how *belief in occurrence* is viewed. In his paper, Fernández frequently employs the overall term “*beliefs*”, without explaining what type of belief he is referring to. Although Fernández was probably unaware of the difference between these types of beliefs, differentiating between them is important. Recent research has shown that these types of belief are distinct and can independently contribute to autobiographical remembering (Scoboria et al., 2015).

Third, Fernández (2015) suggests that some forms of beliefs are relatively stable and are difficult to undermine. For example, he writes that (p. 2) “*justified beliefs confer a certain stability upon them.*” Again, it is unclear what type of belief the author specifically has in mind. Moreover, recent experimentation shows that belief in the occurrence of events can quite easily be undermined and can even lead to a phenomenon called nonbelieved memories (Otgaar et al., 2014). Nonbelieved memories refer to memories of events of which the belief that the event occurred is relinquished. Studies concentrating on nonbelieved

¹ In the present paper, we will mainly use the term “recollection” instead of “memory”. The reason is that memory (or autobiographical memory) stands for the entire experience of recalling events happening to the self in the past (Scoboria et al., 2015). Fernández (2015) probably used the term “memory” to refer to “recollection” or the mental re-experience of an event.

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