The role of belief in the regulation and reporting of memories

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Abstract

Recent research demonstrates that believing that an event occurred and recollecting an event are distinct components of remembering the past. The over-arching aim of this thesis was to examine whether omission errors in memory reports can be explained by the attenuation of belief in those memories. Specifically, we examined whether omission errors are characterised by lower belief ratings. Previous research suggests that omission errors can be elicited using suggestive and misleading post-event information. Factors such as social feedback, contradictory evidence and event implausibility are also commonly reported reasons for people attenuating their belief that events in their past actually occurred. In **Experiments 1 and 2**, we sought to elicit omission errors using a procedure adapted from Wright et al. (2001). Participants saw a number of scenes, each showing a collection of household items. After a free recall test where participants had to recall as many items as they could from each scene, participants were either re-presented with the scenes (Expt. 1) or the experimenter read aloud to the participants the items they had recalled (Expt. 2). In these re-presented scenes, some of the items which were originally presented to the participants were withheld. The results showed that re-presenting participants with either the original stimuli (Expt. 1) or repeating back to participants the items they had recalled (Expt. 2) with some items withheld, did not result in participants attenuating their belief that they had previously seen these items. Furthermore, we did not find substantial evidence that these items were even omitted (at a higher rate) as predicted from previous research (Wright et al., 2001). In **Experiments 3 and 4**, participants' memories of items (Expt. 3) or actions (Expt. 4) were challenged by a confederate (Expt. 3 & 4), or by the experimenter (Expt. 4) providing social feedback. The results showed that social feedback resulted in omission errors and the attenuation of belief. However, we also found that memory ratings for omitted memories were lower than reported memories. In the discussion of our results, we highlight the important link between social feedback, omission errors and the attenuation of belief.