

Study Shows How Easily False Memories Can Be Planted to Frame Individuals for Crimes

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Global Research, February 02, 2015

[Natural News](#) 1 February 2015

Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

Is it possible that you could one day be convinced to confess to a crime you never committed — because you don't remember you *didn't* commit it?

How could you *not* know that you *didn't* commit a crime? Perhaps because your mind was altered to prohibit you from remembering that you're innocent.

If that sounds confusing or bizarre, this will only add to the bizarre, confusing nature of such an event: New research suggests that this very thing may have *already* happened, and the implications are profound.

A press release from the Association for Psychological Science said that new research published in the organization's journal, *Psychological Science*, discovered evidence from some cases of wrongful conviction that suspects can be questioned by authorities in a way that could lead them to falsely believe in, and confess to, crimes they didn't really commit.

The organization said the new research is providing "lab-based evidence for this phenomenon, showing that innocent adult participants can be convinced, over the course of a few hours, that they had perpetrated crimes as serious as assault with a weapon in their teenage years."

Researchers said data suggests that participants in such cases had come to internalize stories they were told, then provided illustrative detail about them even though they were contrived.

Many study subjects convinced they had done it

"Our findings show that false memories of committing [crime](#) with police contact can be surprisingly easy to generate, and can have all the same kinds of complex details as real memories," psychological scientist and lead researcher Julia Shaw, of the University of Bedfordshire in the United Kingdom, said.

"All participants need to generate a richly detailed false memory is 3 hours in a friendly interview environment, where the interviewer introduces a few wrong details and uses poor memory-retrieval techniques," she added.

Shaw, along with the study's co-author, Stephen Porter, of the University of British Columbia in Canada, received permission to make contact with primary caregivers of university students who participated in the [study](#), the organization said. In turn, the caregivers were

tasked with filling out a questionnaire about specific events that study participants may have experienced between the ages of 11 and 14, giving as much detail as they could.

In all, researchers identified 60 students who have not been involved in any of the [crimes](#) that had been labeled as false memory targets for the study and who also met the criteria for the study. The participants were then brought to a lab for three 40-minute interviews that were conducted about a week apart.

As noted in the press release:

In the first interview, the researcher told the student about two events he or she had experienced as a teen, only one of which actually happened. For some, the false event related to a crime that resulted in contact with the police (assault, assault with a weapon, or theft). For others, the false event was emotional in nature, such as personal injury, attack by a dog, or loss of a huge sum of money.

Importantly, the false event stories included some true details about that time in the student's life, taken from the caregiver questionnaire.

The potential for abuse is astounding

Participants were then tasked with explaining what happened in each of the two events. When they would experience difficulty in explaining the false event, the interviewer would encourage them to nonetheless try, saying that if they would use specific memory strategies it was possible they could recall more details.

In the follow-up interviews, the researchers would again ask students to recall in as much detail as possible both the true and the false events. The students would describe certain aspects of each memory, like how vivid it was and how sure they were about it.

The results were stunning:

Of the 30 participants who were told they had committed a crime as a teenager, 21 (71%) were classified as having developed a false memory of the crime; of the 20 who were told about an assault of some kind (with or without a weapon), 11 reported elaborate false memory details of their exact dealings with the police.

A similar proportion of students (76.67%) formed false memories of the emotional event they were told about.

Read the full accounting of this research — which has tremendous potential for abuse — [here](#).

Sources:

<http://www.psychologicalscience.org>

<http://benswann.com>

<http://www.newseveryday.com>

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