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Forced Confabulation: A Brief Review

By Jerrod Brown, Ph.D. and Erik Asp, Ph.D.

Confabulation occurs when a person incorporates inaccurate information into a memory of an event or misremembers a real memory out of correct temporal order or appropriate context (Pezdek, 2008). The hallmark of confabulation is belief in the fabricated memory; individuals provide information that is false without intending to lie. This is done without any intention or will to manipulate or deceive others with this false memory. The magnitude of confabulation can range from minor alterations in the memory of a real event to the large-scale creation of a nuanced memory for an event that never took place. While the term “confabulation” has historically been used to describe a pathological sign of patients with brain damage (e.g., Moscovitch, 1989), believed false memories are common in healthy adults (Loftus & Pickrell, 1995) and “confabulation” has recently been used in the eyewitness testimony literature to refer to believed memory fabrications in the general population (e.g., Pezdek, Lam, & Sperry, 2009). One type of confabulation of great concern in criminal justice and forensic settings is forced confabulation (Stolzenberg & Pezdek, 2013).

A growing body of research has investigated the phenomenon of forced confabulation. In particular, laboratory paradigms are at the forefront of this work. Here, participants are typically (1) exposed to an eyewitness event, (2) questioned in a suggestive, leading manner, and (3) subsequently complete a memory test (Chrobak, Rindal, &

Zaragoza, 2015). During the questioning, the participant is pressured into describing something that was inaccurate. For example, the participant could be asked to identify the type of car a thief was driving away from the scene of the crime, despite the fact the thief fled on foot. This requires the participant to create the inaccurate information for themselves rather than being told the inaccurate information. If the participant resists providing an answer to such questions, a leading interviewer may proceed to ask the participant to simply provide their best guess, thus ensuring the creation of a fabricated mental representation of the event. Findings from these studies indicate that participants do incorporate the self-generated information into their memories of the initial event (Chrobak, Rindal, & Zaragoza, 2015; Frost, Lacroix, & Sanborn, 2003; Memon, Zaragoza, Clifford, & Kidd, 2009; Zaragoza, Payment, Ackil, Drivdahl, & Beck, 2001).

Transitioning from the laboratory to the real world, forced confabulation is typically precipitated by an authority figure asking suggestive questions or pressing a person to respond to a question in spite of hesitance or uncertainty (Pezdek, Sperry, & Owens, 2007). For example, after stating they cannot remember or do not know what happened, the witness might be asked to speculate or imagine what happened (Pezdek, Lam, & Sperry, 2009; Chrobak, Rindal, & Zaragoza, 2015). Such interpersonal exchanges can lead to the incorporation of inaccurate information into the person’s memory of the initial event (Gombos, Pezdek, & Haymond, 2012). The likelihood of forced confabulation is exacerbated when interviewers suggest a specific answer is the correct

response (Pezdek, Lam, & Sperry, 2009). Like other forms of confabulation, these instances of forced confabulation may vary from minor inaccurate details to the creation of entirely new, elaborate false memories (Ackil & Zaragoza, 1998; Chrobak & Zaragoza, 2008; Hanba & Zaragoza, 2007). Forced confabulation could be particularly problematic in police interviews, police interrogations, and forensic interviews where people often experience thorough and persistent questioning (Pezdek, Sperry, & Owens, 2007).

Research is revealing individual differences in the susceptibility to false memory. Children (Bruck & Ceci, 1999), older adults (Johnson & Raye, 1998), and individuals with low IQ (Zhu et al., 2010), traumatic brain injury (Dockree et al., 2006), chronic psychoactive drug use (Riba et al., 2015), or who have been sleep deprived (Frenda, Patihis, Loftus, Lewis, & Fenn, 2014), among others, have all been shown to have an increased vulnerability to accepting false memory relative to the general population. Clearly, criminal justice and forensic professionals should be sensitive to these individual differences and their own investigative interviewing techniques when preparing to question eyewitnesses or suspects.

Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research on the susceptibility to confabulation in justice populations. Several factors likely make this type of research rare. First, justice populations can be more difficult for researchers to access. Second, there are often additional regulatory considerations needed for research institutional review boards regarding justice populations. Finally, from an ethical perspective, the acceptance and belief of a false memory during a research protocol must be completely negated prior to the individual's research termination. These cumbersome issues notwithstanding, the estimated incidence rate of wrongful convictions (Zalman, 2012), some cases of which can be traced to forced confessions and eyewitness misidentification, demand further research in this domain.

Despite the possibility of severe miscarriages of justice (e.g., false confessions and wrongful convictions), forced confabulation and confabulation more broadly remain poorly understood by many criminal justice and forensic mental health professionals (Cutler & Penrod, 1995; Poole & White, 1995). As mentioned above this lack of familiarity has been perpetuated by a lack of research in applied settings beyond the laboratory and limited options for measuring confabulation (Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 1996). In fact, existing measures of confabulation are hamstrung by psychometric limitations including poor stability (Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 1996). Going forward, advanced education and training in the area of forced confabulation can play an integral role in creating greater awareness of this issue among criminal justice and forensic mental health professionals (Brigham & Wolfskeil, 1983; Pezdek, Sperry, & Owens, 2007).

IMPORTANT TAKE-AWAYS:

- Confabulation is the incorporation of inaccurate information into a memory of an event without the intent to deceive others.
- Confabulation can range from minor memory alterations to the creation of a nuanced memory for an event that never took place.

- One type of confabulation is forced confabulation, which is typically precipitated by an authority figure asking suggestive questions or pressing a person to respond to a question.
- Laboratory research studies investigate forced confabulation by (1) exposing participants to an eyewitness event, (2) questioning them in a suggestive manner, and (3) subsequently testing their memory.
- Laboratory studies show that participants do incorporate self-generated inaccurate information into their memories of the initial event.
- Forced confabulation is a great concern in criminal justice and forensic settings, particularly during police interviews, police interrogations, and forensic interviews.
- Certain populations are more susceptible to confabulation and false memory including children, older adults, and individuals with TBI, chronic drug use, or who have been sleep deprived.
- Forced confabulation may contribute to severe miscarriages of justice, including false confessions and wrongful convictions.
- Forced confabulation remains poorly understood by most professionals working in criminal justice and forensic settings.
- There is a strong need for research on the measurement of forced confabulation and its nature in applied settings.
- Criminal justice and forensic professionals will benefit from advanced education and training in the area of forced confabulation.

Author Biographies:

Jerrold Brown, Ph.D., is an assistant professor, program director, and lead developer for the Master of Arts in Human Services degree with an emphasis in Forensic Behavioral Health for Concordia University, St. Paul in Minnesota. Brown has also been employed with Pathways Counseling Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, for the past 16 years. Pathways provides programs and services benefiting individuals impacted by mental illness and addictions. He is also the founder and CEO of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS) and the Editor-in-Chief of Forensic Scholars Today (FST). Brown is certified as a youth fire setter prevention/intervention specialist, Thinking for a Change (T4C) facilitator, fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) trainer, and a problem gambling treatment provider.

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University of Iowa's Psychiatry Iowa Neuroimaging Consortium Group, researching functional connectivity abnormalities in schizophrenia.

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