

# What's in a Name for Memory Errors? Implications and Ethical Issues Arising From the Use of the Term “False Memory” for Errors in Memory for Details

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The term “false memories” 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 away 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 memories.” Use of the term presents serious ethical challenges to the

data-interpretation process by encouraging over-generalization and misapplication of research findings on word memory to social issues.

Keywords: ethics, false memory, memory errors, cognition, abuse

Language is a powerful tool in shaping and constructing the intellectual environment in which psychologists carry out their research. The language used by psychologists drives conceptualization and categorization of research information (for a review of issues related to the social construction of language, see Crawford, 1995). Further, the language used by psychologists provides a framework by which the lay public and media interpret research findings. Given how important language choice is to the research process, we examine the recent application of the term "false memory" to memory errors in the learning and memory literature.

### HISTORICAL VIEW OF "FALSE MEMORY" TERM USE

The term "false memory" initially gained prominence in reference to contested memories of sexual abuse. The term became widely used and popularized in conjunction with the introduction of the phrase "false memory syndrome" around 1992. The phrase "false memory syndrome" had its origins in a social movement that questions the veracity of memories for childhood sexual abuse. The entrance of the term "false memory" into the lexicon in North America, Europe, and Australia reflects a culture increasingly fascinated by issues of memory, illustrated by the range of articles in popular magazines and fiction books questioning the accuracy of childhood abuse memories.

Whether the media reflect or encourage a cultural fascination with memory, particularly memory for abuse, they play a central role in framing how the public receives information about the topic. Analyzing the ways in which the media portray stories about child sexual abuse, Beckett (1996) offered interesting insight into the increased use of the term "false memory" in the popular press. Beckett (1996) noted that the media began portraying the majority of stories about sexual abuse from a "False Accusation" framework between 1985 and 1990. During this period, media articles focused on the suggestibility of children and the role of social services in generating false allegations. Between 1992 and 1994, Beckett (1996) noted a shift in media presentation of sexual abuse stories to false memories, whereby the media focused on the inaccuracy of memories and the effects of false allegations on families wrongly accused. She cites titles of articles depicting these themes, including "Lies of the Mind," "Memories Lost and Found," "Was it Real or Memories?," "You Must Remember This: How the Brain Forms False

Memories” (Beckett, 1996, p. 12). Beckett noted that the false memory framework has remained the dominant way in which child sexual abuse is covered in the popular press.

Shortly after the term “false memory” gained prominence in the popular media, the term was also introduced to the cognitive research literature. We will review the use of the term in the cognitive research literature and present data on the increased use of the term since 1992. Further, we will examine contexts under which the term is used to refer to errors in details (e.g., in list-learning paradigms) versus confabulations of whole events (e.g., research in which memories for entire events are examined). As noted by Schacter (1999),

During the 1990s, there has been renewed interest in memory errors and distortions, sparked at least in part by a heated debate concerning the accuracy of traumatic memories recovered in psychotherapy ... It is in the context of this debate that the term “false memory” has come into common usage in psychological research. False memories refers to recollections that are in some way distorted or, in extreme cases, involve remembering events that never happened at all. (p. 193)

We will argue that the use of the term “false memory” to describe errors in details not only muddles important constructs in human memory research, but also increases the risk that research findings will be over-generalized in ways that seriously threaten ecological validity. Such threats affect not only researchers’ ability to generate and test theories, but also the interpretation of research by the media. As Beckett (1996) demonstrated, the media use the term “false memory” to refer to false allegations of whole traumatic events, such as sexual abuse; research on memory errors using the term “false memory” is ripe for over-generalization by the media as applicable to whole events. The risk of over-generalization by the media requires researchers to grapple with the ethics of how to talk about their research in a way that reduces opportunities for misinterpretation.

### NEW TERM FOR AN OLD PHENOMENON

Researchers have long used memory errors to examine human memory mechanisms. For example, Posner and Keele (1968) illustrated that participants will classify patterns they have never previously seen as members of a learned category so long as the never-presented stimulus is prototypical. Freyd (1987) illustrated that participants will misremember the location of an object in the direction of implied motion, a phenomenon known as representational momentum. Research on memory errors is not new; such research has been essential for increasing our understanding of human memory generally. However, researchers using the term “false

memory” have reintroduced at least one experimental paradigm, the Deese paradigm, designed to elicit memory errors in a different light.

Deese (1959) demonstrated that one form of memory error—intrusion—occurs in recall in predictable ways. Participants in Deese’s (1959) research were asked to study a list of related words (e.g., *sandal, foot, toe, slipper*) in which at least one prototypical word (e.g., *shoe*) was not presented. Deese found that participants frequently included the related-but-not-presented word (e.g., *shoe*) when asked to recall the list. Deese (1959) referred to this specific type of memory error as an “intrusion.” Further, he noted that he “tried to construct lists which would yield a particular word as an intrusion nearly always” (Deese, 1959, p. 20). Though this paradigm clearly offers a venue for understanding basic questions of memory, 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 now classic study was not well cited and did not raise much attention at the time.

In 1995, Roediger and McDermott reported on a new experiment that employed Deese’s (1959) paradigm, but used new terminology to discuss the results. The authors used a similar methodology in which participants were asked to learn a list of words (e.g., *bed, night, tired*) and later tested for their memory of a related, but not presented, item (e.g., *sleep*). Consistent with Deese, participants did sometimes misremember the related, but not presented, item *sleep* as having occurred in the list studied; Roediger and McDermott (1995) characterized this error as a “false memory,” whereas Deese called it 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., Miller & Wolford, 1999; Roediger & McDermott, 1999).

Research using the Deese (1959) paradigm has increased exponentially since the Roediger and McDermott (1995) study, raising the questions as to why the paradigm became interesting to researchers after so many years and why Deese’s original term “intrusion” was changed to “false memory.” Bruce and Winograd (1998) provided some context for the shift from “intrusion” to “false memory” in terms of modern social–political interest in memory for child sexual abuse. Bruce and Winograd (1998) noted that Deese’s paradigm for studying memory intrusions had to be viewed as pertinent to a current social issue to be revisited. They argued that current interest in “false memories” of child sexual abuse provided a reason to rediscover Deese’s paradigm that had otherwise been largely ignored by the scientific community. Indeed, a PsychInfo literature search using the keywords “false memory” and “false memories” found only seven noncommentary articles prior to 1990 that used the term “false memory” (see Appendix A for list). Consistent with Bruce and Winograd’s (1998) argument, the term’s sustained and increased use in the research literature occurs only when memory for sexual abuse was presented as an important and controversial social issue in the media.

## CRITIQUE OF “FALSE MEMORY” TERM USE IN COGNITIVE WORD-LEARNING TASKS

Freyd and Gleaves (1996) argued that there are at least two critical differences between Roediger and McDermott's (1995) laboratory findings and contested memories of abuse that make a generalization from one to the other inappropriate: (a) the units of analysis (individual words versus whole events) and (b) the relatedness of “false” and “true” items. Freyd and Gleaves' first critique points to the important difference between memory errors for words and memory errors for whole events. It is not the case that Roediger and McDermott's (1995) participants remember reading word lists that never happened (a whole event); rather, they correctly remembered reading word lists, but misremembered which words were on the list. The second critical dimension of difference refers to the relatedness of the critical items or events. Roediger and McDermott's (1995) participants falsely recalled words related to words that were studied. It is not surprising that if asked to memorize a list with words such as *shoe, hand, toe, kick, sandals*, and so on, that participants might incorrectly think that *foot* was on the list.

These dimensions are critical to consider in critiquing the use of the term “false memory” as applied to errors in word-learning tasks. As the term “false memory” entered the lexicon in reference to contested memories of abuse, use of the term to describe errors for memories other than entire events conflates two separate memory issues. Given the historical backdrop of the term “false memory,” Roediger and McDermott's (1995) reference to their laboratory results as “dramatic evidence of false memories” (p. 812) increases the risk that some readers might well understand this to mean dramatic evidence for the concept of false memories of abuse, particularly given that their opening paragraph discussed false memories of abuse. Though Roediger and McDermott (1996) stated in a response to Freyd and Gleaves that they did not say their results generalized to false memories of abuse, critical analysis of the differences between laboratory findings and contested memories of abuse illustrates, in part, why use of the term for errors in word-learning tasks easily allows for over-generalization of laboratory findings.

### OTHER USES OF THE TERM “FALSE MEMORY”

In the nonempirical literature, hundreds of articles discuss “false memories” from a clinical standpoint. Nonempirical articles using the term tend to grapple with the complexities of memories for whole events—such as abuse—and the accuracy of those memories. In addition, a large literature on suggestibility has emerged to examine factors that might influence under what conditions a person could develop memories for events that did not occur (e.g., see Pezdek, 2001; Oates & Hyman, 2001). Within the suggestibility literature, the term “false memory” is used to refer

to the apparent confabulations of entire events never actually experienced but that were suggested in a laboratory task. We are not critiquing the use of the term “false memories” for suggestibility or confabulation research in which whole memories for entire events are allegedly implanted (however, for critical reviews of such studies, see Carstensen et al., 1993; Freyd, 1997, 1998; Gleaves & Pope, 1996, 1997); rather we raise concerns with the most recent use of the term in the cognitive literature on learning and memory.

## THIS STUDY

We sought to assess the frequency of the use of the term “false memory” to refer to errors in details. We conducted a literature search of journal articles containing the terms “false memory” or “false memories” from 1992 through August 2003. The term’s frequency in empirical and nonempirical papers and how the term was used was assessed to determine the extent of the generalization of the term.

## METHOD

### Procedures

Targeting the time period of 1992 to August 2003, we conducted a PsychInfo search of title and abstract fields using the keywords “false memory” and “false memories”; the search was limited to journal articles. Out of the initial 487 items that were identified, editorials, commentaries, responses to other articles, book reviews, and errata were excluded, resulting in 374 articles. To confirm that none were overlooked, a search of articles citing the inaugural Roediger and McDermott (1995) study of recall and recognition errors during the period of 1996<sup>1</sup> to August 2003 was conducted using Web of Science. This resulted in the detection of an additional 16 articles, increasing the total number to 390.

Journal articles obtained from the literature search were rated on two dimensions. First, abstracts were rated as either empirical (including experiments, meta-analyses of experiments, and case studies) or nonempirical. Second, abstracts that used the term “false memory/ies” to refer to errors in details were identified. Raters referred to article titles and abstracts to assign ratings; in 28 cases the full article was reviewed because not enough information was available in the abstract. Authors C. A. and H. O. rated the articles. Each brought different theoretical and research backgrounds to her ratings: One conducts research of clinical interventions for and psychosocial correlates of child abuse; the second focuses on research on memory errors.

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<sup>1</sup>The earliest date available in Web of Science citation search utility is 1996.

### Criteria for Identifying Abstracts Using the Term “False Memory/ies” to Refer to Errors in Details

Abstracts using the term “false memory/ies” to refer to errors in details were identified based on the following criteria:

1. When the term referred to errors in recall for details or parts of events. For example, experiments in which participants erroneously recalled 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 erroneously recalled a detail within more complex stimuli (e.g., when shown a video of a store robbery, the participant erroneously recalled that the robber had her hands in her pockets at a certain point in the video).
2. When the term referred to errors in recognition for details or parts of events. For example, experiments in which participants erroneously recognized an item that had not been previously presented in any sensory modality (e.g., pictures of objects, spoken words).

Articles that did not use the term “false memory/ies” to refer to errors in details involved suggestibility for, or confabulation of, entire events. These articles described reports of memories for entire events that did not occur, and not just parts or peripheral details of events. Examples of articles that fell into this category include experiments in which participants were shown a video of a store robbery and erroneously recalled a heated discussion between a customer and a store clerk rather than a robbery or experiments in which participants recalled autobiographical events that were not believed to have occurred. Articles using the term “false memory/ies” to refer both to errors in details and confabulation were included in the error in details tally.

Two examples from articles categorized and reported in Appendix B are offered here to illustrate the coding criteria. Bremner, Shobe, and Kihlstrom (2000) reported on false recognition of critical lures presented to women with abuse, with abuse and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and with no abuse or PTSD. Participants were presented lists of words with a critical lure missing (e.g., *thread* and *eye* were presented, but *needle* was not). The frequency with which participants' erroneously indicated having previously seen lures such as “needle” was reported. Term usage in this article was categorized as error in detail. Hyman and Billings (1998) asked college students to recall several true events and one false event that had not occurred (as reported by students' parents). Participants who could not remember events (whether true or false) were prompted to try to relate the event to other self-knowledge and to imagine the event. Approximately 25% of participants provided some recall of the false event in a follow-up interview the following day.

Term usage in this article did not involve errors in details; rather, the term referred to confabulation of an entire event.

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  $\kappa(1, N = 390) = .85, p < .001$ , was achieved. The initial empirical rating agreement was also high at 98.2%, as was its interrater reliability, Cohen's  $\kappa(1, N = 390) = .96, p < .001$ . Coders reviewed and discussed the articles for which there were initial discrepancies and agreement was reached through consensus for a majority of them. 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  $\kappa(1, N = 390) = .97, p < .001$ .

## RESULTS

Of the 390 articles collected, 219 (56.2%) were empirical reports (see Table 1). The majority (approximately 70%) of the empirical articles were rated as using the term "false memory/ies" to refer to error in detail, whereas the majority of nonempirical papers (87.7%) used the term to refer to confabulation of an entire event. These articles are listed, by rating category, in Appendix B.

The vast majority of research articles that used the term "false memory" to refer to errors in details were based on the Deese, Roediger, and McDermott (DRM) paradigm, in which participants incorrectly recall or recognize having read a word from a previously presented list. Generally, the word recalled is one whose meaning is consistent with or even prototypical of other words in the presented list. Recent variations of the DRM word lists include collections of visual and auditory items. The term has also been applied to many studies of eyewitness memory accuracy in which participants often falsely recall one or more de-

TABLE 1  
Articles Detected by Literature Search and Rated by Type  
and Use of the Term "False Memory/ies"

<i>Term Used to Refer to Errors in Details</i>	<i>Article Type</i>		<i>n</i>
	<i>Empirical</i>	<i>Non-Empirical</i>	
Yes	153	21	174
No	66 <sup>a</sup>	150	216
<i>N</i>	219	171	390

<sup>a</sup>Eighteen research articles that did not use the term to describe errors in details were not aimed at creating false memories, but studied factors thought to be related to false memories (such as hypnotizability).



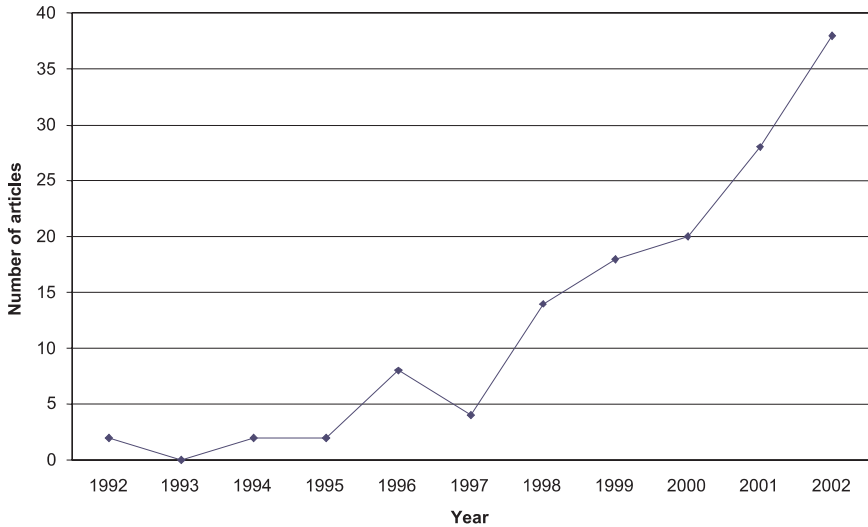


FIGURE 1 Number of articles per year (1992–2002) that used the term “false memory/ies” to refer to memory errors in details or parts of events in laboratory experiments.

tails (e.g., color of a car) from a video or slide of a neutral or pseudo crime scene. The number of empirical articles per year that use the term to refer to errors in details is shown in Figure 1. The number of empirical articles that employ the term “false memory” for cognitive learning and memory tasks has increased steadily and substantially over time.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this literature investigation reveal a potent trend in the usage of the term “false memory” in the scientific literature, which only seems to be increasing in strength. It is important to note that, though a minority of the nonempirical articles evaluated used the term to refer to confabulation of entire events, the majority of the empirical articles evaluated used the term to refer to errors in details. The use of the term to refer to errors in details in a substantial number of research articles conflates the empirical support for false memories for entire events.

### Effects of Term Use on Theory Development

The use of “false memory” to refer to distinct phenomena, (i.e., word learning errors and confabulations of life events) weakens the development of theory. In a re-

cent review, Kopelman (1999) discussed several types of memory errors that are currently referred to as “false memories” in the cognitive and cognitive neuropsychology literature, including

spontaneous confabulation in brain disease, false recognition cases, delusional memories and other delusions in psychosis, “confabulations” in schizophrenia, “internalized” false confessions of crime, apparently false or distorted memories for child abuse, pseudologia fantastica, the acquisition of new identities or scripts following fugue or in multiple personality disorder, and momentary confabulation in healthy subjects. (p. 197)

The use of the same term for distinct phenomena implicitly assumes that they share cognitive and/or neuropsychological underpinnings in a theoretically meaningful way. Errors in word learning (in which words similar to study words are incorrectly remembered) may or may not have much to do with confabulation of life events; however, the assumptions implicit in the language used have inhibited a thorough comparison of these phenomena.

An analogy can be drawn using the medical phenomenon of “chest pain.” Laypersons may describe “chest pain” but medical professionals must differentiate types of pain to diagnose and treat patients appropriately. Based on subtle differences in symptoms (e.g., constant pain versus pain that changes with movement; presence, or absence of simultaneous pain in the left arm), medical professionals use precise terms, such as cardiac and pleurisy, to discriminate between different types of “chest pain.” Once professionals differentiate the precise type of pain, critical decisions about treatment can be made. Pleurisy is a non-life-threatening irritation of the chest lining, whereas cardiac pain is related to a heart attack that may be fatal. In the field of psychology, differentiation and precision in language for terms associated with memory fallibility facilitates recognition of differences in the presentation (e.g., memory errors of studied word lists versus confabulated life events) and underlying mechanisms. If we were to call everything from word-list intrusions to errors arising from representational momentum examples of “false memories,” we would be tempted to confuse quite different phenomena.

### Conflating Politics and Science: Problems With the Current Use of “False Memory” in Cognitive Tasks

In addition to the theoretical issues that remain ambiguous with the new use of the term “false memory,” important issues related to ecological validity must be considered. The use of the term “false memory” to refer to memory errors reflects the influence of a sociopolitical context in which the veracity of survivors’ memory has been challenged and leads to the tacit assumption that laboratory findings for

memory errors can be generalized to current discussions about false memories for abuse. Many cognitive paradigms simply lack the ecological validity to make such claims. As scientists, we must be cautious that the language adopted to describe results does not lead to over-generalization beyond the data.

Sometimes the generalization of findings from laboratory studies of word memory to confabulation of life events is explicit when the term “false memory” is used to describe both occurrences. Roediger and McDermott (1995) began their pivotal article as follows: “False memories—either remembering events that never happened, or remembering them quite differently from the way they happened—have recently captured the attention of both psychologists and the public at large” (p. 803). In the opening paragraph, Roediger and McDermott (1995) explicitly framed their study against the backdrop of memory errors for whole events although their study focused on memory errors in details. Although the term “event” can be used to describe a single stimulus or a list of stimuli in research studies, it is memory for autobiographical events that has captured the attention of professionals and laypeople.

In light of the current political climate surrounding memory for traumatic events, a characterization of research on word list intrusions with the term “false memory” has the potential to mislead the reader. In the politics of the recovered/false memory debate, references to “false memories” in the laboratory differ significantly in their meaning compared to the more accurate characterization that memory errors occur in laboratory tasks. Given the origin of the phrase “false memory” to refer to contested memories of abuse (often contested recovered memories), the use of the same term to refer to memory errors in cognitive tasks changes the intellectual environment in which psychological research is conducted.

The new use of the phrase tacitly supports the notion that research on errors in word memory upholds a claim that false memories for traumatic events can be implanted into memory. For example, a 1996 *Newsweek* article (Begley) reported on positron emission tomography (PET) results showing various patterns of brain activation for recognition of words from a studied list and similar (but not studied) items. The article set the context for this study in questions about the historical accuracy of “recovered memories” of abuse. Confusing the issues of memories for abuse and recognition of word lists, the article concluded “when someone imagines a pseudo-event over and over, she often implants sensory data about it in the mind. She can actually see or hear or feel an event that never occurred” (p. 64). Separate from the truth or falsity of the quoted claim, the claim is not supported by the word list errors that were the focus of the article. The imprecise language and over-generalization in the *Newsweek* article suggested an interpretation of the study that was generalized well beyond the data. A further leap one often sees in popular depictions of psychological research involves impeaching recovered memories based on research that does not involve recovered memory, but instead

memory accuracy. In other words, memory accuracy is often conflated with memory persistence—dimensions of memory that are, as far as we know, conceptually distinct and empirically uncorrelated (see Freyd, 1998, 1999).

### Ethical Responsibility in Data Interpretation and Use of Scientific Authority

As we reviewed, use of the term “false memory” as used in the cognitive literature increased exponentially after “false memory syndrome” was introduced and gained popularity through the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. The terms “false memory” and “false memory syndrome” have been criticized for their effects in legal and social arenas. Raitt and Zeedyk (2003) argued that the concept of false memories has been increasingly used in the legal system as a means to discredit women and children who report abuse, not unlike other efforts to discredit rape survivors. They argued that the field of psychology has dealt with the debate over false memory syndrome by focusing on memory processes, thus grounding discussion of “false memories” in psychology’s long tradition of studying memory errors (Raitt & Zeedyk, 2003). Though the importance of empirically examining memory for trauma and memory errors is not at issue, the process by which this research occurs and the language used to describe this research is at issue. Raitt and Zeedyk (2003) argued that the current framing of the empirical examination of memory processes has removed the social context of the abuse from the dialogue. In turn, Raitt and Zeedyk (2003) further argued that, as the social context of abuse is removed and the term “false memory” is imbued with scientific authority, the credibility of child and women victims of violence is threatened. Decreasing the credibility of victims can limit this population’s access to justice.

We propose that use of the term “false memory” to describe errors in memory for details directly contributes to removing the social context of abuse from research on memory for trauma. As the term “false memories” has increasingly been used to describe errors in details, the scientific weight of the term has increased. In turn, we see that the term “false memories” is treated as a construct supported by scientific fact, whereas other terms associated with questions about the veracity of abuse memories have been treated as suspect. For example, “recovered memories” often appears in quotations, whereas “false memories” does not (Campbell, 2003). The quotation marks suggest that one term is questioned, whereas the other is accepted as fact. Accepting “false memories” of abuse as fact reflects the subtle assimilation of the term into the cognitive literature, where the term is used increasingly to describe intrusions of semantically related words into lists of related words. The term, rooted in the controversy over the accuracy of abuse memories recalled during psychotherapy (Schacter, 1999), implies generalization of errors in details to memory for abuse—experienced largely by women and children (Campbell, 2003).

Are victims of abuse actually impacted by these issues of terminology? What real effect does it have on the lives of victims of abuse to call all memory errors “false memories”—be they details or confabulations of whole events? This remains an important empirical question, albeit a difficult question. Relevant recent research suggests that young adults who read vignettes about abuse survivors are less likely to believe stories when the protagonist had some period of memory impairment for the event (Cromer & Freyd, 2004). Though there are many sources of information that may influence young adults’ beliefs about the veracity of memories for child abuse, research to date has not shown that abuse memories that were previously unavailable are inherently less accurate than abuse memories that were continuously available. We are concerned that this belief that memories that were previously unavailable are less accurate may be, at least in part, related to the prevalence of research stating that “false memories” occur with regularity when the research focuses on errors in details for relatively neutral information.

Scientists are awarded tremendous authority to define the scope of knowledge in any given field. With this authority comes both privilege and responsibility. Among the many ethical responsibilities facing scientists is the fair interpretation and representation of data to both colleagues and the public. The language chosen by researchers to describe, interpret, and generalize findings sets the context for interpretation by other researchers, the media, and the public. Researchers, thus, bear an incredible ethical responsibility to accurately interpret the scope and generalizability of findings.

Researchers working in areas that apply to hotly contested social issues (e.g., abuse) carry an acute responsibility to carefully choose language to reflect their findings. 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. Because the term “false memory” is inextricably tied in the public to a social movement that questions the veracity of memories for childhood sexual abuse, the use of the term in scientific research that evaluates memory errors for details (not whole events) must be evaluated in this light. Given the potential for the misapplication of research on memory errors for details described as focusing on “false memories” to social and policy issues, we urgently recommend that the term not be used in this context.

## CONCLUSION

The notion that memory is fallible has never been seriously contested in psychology—a long and rich research literature tells us that humans make errors of commission and omission in memory (Freyd, 1996, 1998). Many questions about

memory errors remain unsolved and we applaud research in this area. However, it is imperative that research on human memory occurs in an intellectual environment that acknowledges and considers the political, ethical, and theoretical implications of the language used. This article has noted a transformation in the language used to describe memory fallibility. In addition, we have discussed implications of the new use of the term “false memory” for the progress of science more generally. Recent changes in language to use the term “false memories” may reflect the influence of a sociopolitical agenda on science. Though science is always necessarily affected by politics because of the biases we each bring to the research domain, the increase in inappropriate extensions of the term “false memory” to laboratory memory errors must be halted. Precision in language, especially around a topic as heated as memory for trauma, will help us fulfill our ethical responsibility to avoid generalizing beyond the data. With the use of more precise and differentiated terminology for specific types of memory errors, theory development will thrive.

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## APPENDIX A

### Articles Using the Term “False Memory/ies” Prior to 1990

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## Appendix B

### Articles Using the Term ‘False Memory/ies’ From 1990 Through August, 2003, by Article Type and Term Usage.

#### Article Type: *Empirical*

#### Term Used to Refer to Error in Details: Yes

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Term used to refer to error in details: *No*

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