

What's Behind *Crashing Memories*? Plausibility, Belief and Memory in Reports of Having Seen Non-Existent Images

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SUMMARY

The present study investigated the precise nature of *crashing memory* reports: Are they truly memories or are they based on beliefs? We asked 88 individuals whether they had seen non-existent footage of the Pim Fortuyn assassination and conducted thorough post-experimental interviews. Two-thirds of our participants falsely reported having seen the footage, while less than 10% also reported details that they could not have seen. Moreover, plausibility ratings of having seen the images were higher than false belief ratings, which in turn were higher than false memory ratings. After having been fully debriefed, 81% of the participants who reported crashing memories attributed their false report to their lack of a full understanding of the critical question. Another 10% of this subsample stated that they truly remembered the images (i.e. false memories). Thus, only a small subset of crashing memory reports seems to be induced by false beliefs and/or false memories. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Several studies have shown that people are willing to come up with false reports of having seen images of non-existent video footage of highly exposed public events. In the first such study, Crombag and co-workers sought to investigate whether people would claim to have seen footage of the 1992 crash of a large jumbo jet in Amsterdam, the Netherlands (Crombag, Wagenaar, & van Koppen, 1996). These authors found that 55% of their participants reported to have seen the footage, which is remarkable given that there is no footage of the moment the airplane crashed into the buildings. This so-called *crashing memory* method has been used to investigate people's 'memory' of non-existent footages of a wide range of public events (Granhag, Strömwall, & Billings, 2003; Jelicic, Smeets, Peters, Candel, Horselenberg, & Merckelbach, 2006; Ost, Hogbin, & Granhag, 2006; Ost, Vrij, Costall, & Bull, 2002; Wilson & French, 2006). For example, Ost et al. (2002) found that about one in every two participants falsely reported that they had seen video footage of the 1997 fatal crash of Diana, Princess of Wales. Similarly, Jelicic et al. (2006) found that over 60% of Dutch undergraduate students falsely claimed to have seen footage of the assassination of famous Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn.

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False reports obtained in crashing memory studies are often said to support the view that it is relatively easy to induce full-blown *false memories* in healthy people. However, one major problem with this type of interpretation is that we cannot be certain that those people who claim to have seen the footage are truly *remembering* it (Scoboria, Mazzoni, Kirsch, & Releya, 2004; Smeets, Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Jelicic, 2005). Thus, a more parsimonious explanation for crashing memory reports is that participants are eager to please the researchers and, hence, provide socially desirable answers without really believing them. Alternatively, they may misread the critical question and believe that it relates to existing television images depicting the aftermath of the various events. Two recent studies have looked at whether it is the ambiguous or suggestive nature of the assessment procedure that serves as the crucial antecedent of reports of non-existent film fragments of tragic public events (Ost, Granhag, Udell, & Roos af Hjelmsäter, 2008; Smeets, Jelicic, Peters, Candel, Horselenberg, & Merckelbach, 2006). Smeets et al. (2006) asked four groups of people whether they had seen video footage of the Pim Fortuyn murder. In each group, the exact wording of the critical questions was varied so that they differed with regard to their ambiguity and the extent to which they conveyed misleading information. The authors showed that by phrasing the critical question in an unambiguous manner, that is specifically articulating that the footage participants were probed about related to the incident itself and not its aftermath, dramatically reduced the rates of false reports. This suggests that at least a subgroup of people endorsing false reports in the crashing memory paradigm is simply being misled by the ambiguity of the assessment procedure. In a similar vein, Ost et al. (2008) investigated reports of having seen the non-existent footage of the explosion of the No. 30 bus in Tavistock Square in London on 7 July 2005. These authors differentiated between participants with false memories of the non-existent images and those who merely based their false reports on false beliefs. This differentiation was done by looking at whether participants claimed to remember that the bus was moving at the time of the explosion. If they did, this was taken as an indication that participants had a false memory rather than a false belief. Ost et al. found that the majority of all false reports came from participants who held false beliefs without any accompanying detailed images of the event. However, still about a third of the false reports involved false memories of the event.

The present study was designed to further investigate the nature of false reports obtained within the crashing memory paradigm. To this end, we differentiated between the plausibility of having seen the non-existent images, false beliefs and false memories by using the Autobiographical Belief and Memory Questionnaire (ABMQ; Scoboria et al., 2004). The ABMQ measures the constructs of general plausibility (e.g. 'at least some people may have seen these images'), personal plausibility (e.g. 'I personally *could* have seen these images'), autobiographical belief (e.g. 'It is quite likely that I personally did in fact see these images') and autobiographical memory (e.g. 'I actually remember seeing these images'). Based on the notion that general plausibility, personal plausibility, belief and memory are overlapping, but distinct constructs, that is the nested construct model of false memory creation (Scoboria et al., 2004; Scoboria, Mazzoni, Kirsch, & Jimenez, 2006), the following predictions were made: ABMQ ratings of general plausibility were expected to be higher than those of personal plausibility, which in turn should receive higher ratings than those of false beliefs. False memories were hypothesized to yield the lowest ratings. Furthermore, the current study extends previous research by conducting extensive post-experimental interviews. That is, after being fully debriefed, we interviewed participants so as to examine the grounds on which they answered the crashing memory questions (see below).

METHODS

Target event

The current study employed the assassination of the famous Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn as the target event (see Jellicic et al., 2006; Smeets et al., 2006). Pim Fortuyn was an intriguing right wing representative who gained national publicity with his opinions on immigration control and the systematic integration of foreigners already residing in the Netherlands. He was the person heading the list of candidates for a new political party called 'List Pim Fortuyn' in May 2002, and opinion polls for the upcoming Dutch general elections had shown that his party would gain a considerable number of seats in the Dutch parliament. On 6 May 2002, Pim Fortuyn was shot and killed by animal rights activist Volkert van der G.¹ The Pim Fortuyn assassination shocked many people both inside and outside the Netherlands and was front page news in national and international newspapers. For many months, the Dutch media extensively covered the murder and its aftermath, thereby also showing images and video footage of the dead body. There is, however, no video footage of the actual moment Fortuyn was shot.

Participants

Our sample consisted of 88 individuals (40 men and 48 women) selected at random from the community. All participants reported they were local residents and lived in the Netherlands at the time Pim Fortuyn was killed. Participants signed a written informed consent and were asked to report on background characteristics such as age, gender and level of education (following Verhage, 1964; rank order ranging from 1 = *less than secondary education* to 7 = *university degree*). Their mean age was 34 years (SD = 13.1); mean educational level was 6.13 (SD = 0.97).

Materials

Crashing memory questionnaire

Participants completed the crashing memory questionnaire, which contained questions about the assassination of Pim Fortuyn. Participants were first required to provide some personal background characteristics, after which they were asked about factual information such as 'What date was Pim Fortuyn killed?' and 'Where did the assassination of Pim Fortuyn take place?' The next question was the critical *crashing memory* question probing for knowledge of the Pim Fortuyn shooting. Specifically, they were asked 'Did you see the amateur film of the Fortuyn shooting?' The critical question was answered in a 'Yes, I remember that film'/'No, I do not remember such a film'/'I can't remember or I'm not sure' format. If participants indicated having seen the non-existent footage, they were asked to write down in as much detail as possible whatever they could remember from the footage. These data were scored dichotomously (0 = *without details*; 1 = *with details*). That is, we focussed on whether or not participants came up with specific details (e.g. shots being fired, Fortuyn collapsing, etc.) that they could not have seen (i.e. for which no actual footage exists). If they did, a 1 was scored. Yet, details derived from what was shown in the media, that is details pertaining to the events surrounding the assassination (e.g. the first aid team and police officers, the dead body) were scored as 0.

¹As the suspect of the Pim Fortuyn assassination was consistently referred to as Volkert van der G. in Dutch media, this alias was used in the crashing memory questionnaire that was developed for this study.

Next, participants were asked to complete a set of ABMQ questions (Scoboria et al., 2004, 2006) which were centred around the Pim Fortuyn assassination. Thus, the following questions were asked: (1) 'How plausible is it that at least some people saw the amateur film of the Fortuyn shooting?' (anchors: 1 = *Not at all plausible*; 8 = *Extremely plausible*); (2) 'How plausible is it that you personally saw the amateur film of the Fortuyn shooting?' (anchors: 1 = *Not at all plausible*; 8 = *Extremely plausible*); (3) 'How likely is it that you personally did in fact see the amateur film of the Fortuyn shooting?' (anchors: 1 = *Definitely did not happen*; 8 = *Definitely did happen*) and (4) 'Do you actually remember seeing the amateur film of the Fortuyn shooting?' (anchors: 1 = *No memory of event at all*; 8 = *Clear and complete memory of event*).

Post-experimental interviews

Participants were given a detailed written debriefing that contained information about the true purpose of the crashing memory questionnaire. They were informed that there is no footage of the actual moment Pim Fortuyn was shot by Volker van der G., but that images of the dead body and the medical personnel at the crime scene do exist. Participants were told that it is not unusual for people to claim that they saw the images of the Fortuyn murder. They then were made clear that our primary research interest was to find out why people would claim to have seen non-existent images and that there could be numerous valid reasons for doing so.

Evidently, the post-experimental interview investigating the antecedents of the false reports only had to be completed by those participants who claimed to have seen the images (i.e. responded with 'Yes, I remember that film') or those who were not sure about whether they had seen the images ('I can't remember or I'm not sure'). It was strongly emphasized that they were to contemplate why they answered affirmatively or said they were unsure and to honestly answer to the post-experimental interview questions. Participants then were given the opportunity to state the reasons for their false or can't remember/not sure report. They were given ample opportunity to freely discuss whatever reason(s) they had for claiming to have remembered the non-existent images or being unsure about that. In addition, when struggling to come up with an explanation themselves, participants were given a piece of paper stating some examples of possible reasons, including 'It was unclear to me which images were referred to by the critical question (e.g. I remember images concerning the aftermath/surroundings like the medical personnel or the body, or I remember reconstruction footage)', 'I tried to answer the questionnaire as complete as possible and didn't want to let the researchers down by stating I couldn't remember the images' and 'I really do remember the images of the moment Pim Fortuyn was shot.' At the end of the post-experimental interview, they were again asked to answer the critical crashing memory question while keeping in mind that the non-existent images pertained to the moment Pim Fortuyn was shot by Volkert van der G. This was primarily done to check whether those individuals who claimed that they really remembered the non-existent images were so convinced of their false memory, that even fully debriefing them would not affect their *memory* (see for examples of such robust false memories, Ceci, Huffman, Smith, & Loftus, 1994).

Procedure

Data collection took place about 4 years after the Fortuyn assassination. Clients of a local shopping venue were approached and asked whether they would be willing to participate in

Table 1. Means (standard deviations) for background characteristics of participants reporting to have seen the footage ('Yes'; $n = 58$), participants without such claims ('No'; $n = 20$) and participants who were unsure/could not remember ('Unsure/Can't remember'; $n = 10$). The number of participants that provided specific details of the Pim Fortuyn murder they could not have witnessed is also shown for each group

	'Yes'	'No'	'Unsure/Can't remember'
Age in years (SD)	34.6 (13.4)	34.6 (13.1)	30.4 (12.2)
Male/female ratio (%)	27/31 (47/53%)	9/11 (45/55%)	4/6 (40/60%)
Mean educational level* (SD)	6.02 (0.9)	6.15 (1.1)	6.70 (0.5)
Number of participants providing specific details (%)	6 (10%)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)

*Scale ranging from 1–7.

a study on memory for emotional events. In total, 102 individuals agreed to participate, of which 88 completed all ABMQ and post-experimental interview questions and were included in the analyses. Participants gave written informed consent and were then asked to carefully read and complete the crashing memory questionnaire. Afterwards, participants were fully debriefed and the post-experimental interviews were conducted. The entire test protocol was approved by the standing ethical committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience of Maastricht University.

RESULTS

Fifty-eight participants (66%) said that they had seen non-existent footage of the Fortuyn assassination, 10 (11%) said they were not sure or could not remember whether they had seen the footage, and 20 (23%) claimed not to remember such images. Background characteristics and gender distribution of these participants can be found in Table 1. There were no differences between the groups with regard to age [$F(2,87) = 0.44$; $p = .64$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$], gender distribution [$\chi^2(2, N = 88) = 0.15$; $p = .95$] or level of education [$\chi^2(2, N = 88) = 12.4$; $p = .29$]. As can be seen, 10% of the participants who claimed to have seen the non-existent images remembered details they could not have witnessed.

A within-subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that ABMQ ratings (mean \pm SE) for general plausibility (6.97 ± 0.2), personal plausibility (6.23 ± 0.2), autobiographical belief (5.43 ± 0.3) and autobiographical memory (4.40 ± 0.3) differed significantly across all participants [$F(3, 261) = 15.94$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.16$]. Differences in responses to the four questions were all found to be significant (with $ps < .05$). Mean ABMQ ratings of all participants are depicted in Figure 1. ABMQ ratings were then subjected to a Group ('Yes' vs. 'No' vs. 'Unsure/Can't remember') \times ABMQ Question (general plausibility vs. personal plausibility vs. autobiographical belief vs. autobiographical memory) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor. No main effect of Group [$F(2, 85) = 0.69$; $p = .50$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$] or a Group \times ABMQ Question interaction [$F(6, 255) = 1.39$; $p = .22$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$] was found.²

²However, in line with our *a priori* expectations, exploratory follow-up *t*-tests showed a trend towards higher scores on the ABMQ question measuring Autobiographical Memory in the 'Yes' group compared to the 'No' ($p = .05$) and 'Unsure/Can't remember' ($p = .25$) groups.

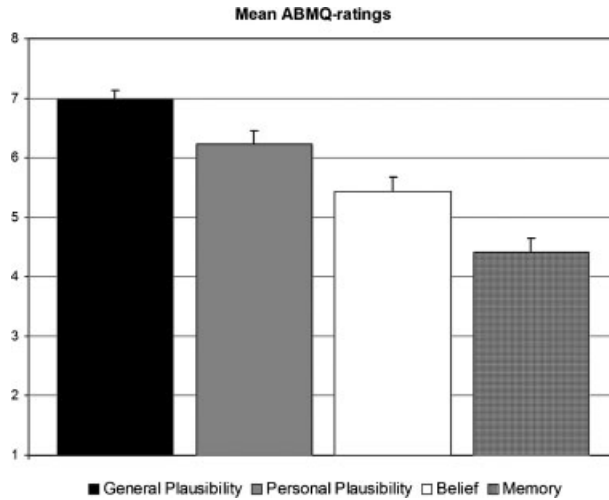


Figure 1. Mean ABMQ-ratings for all participants ($N=88$). General Plausibility > Personal Plausibility ($p < .05$); Personal Plausibility > Belief ($p < .05$); Belief > Memory ($p < .05$)

The post-experimental interview revealed the following pattern. Of the 58 participants with false reports, 47 (i.e. 81%) immediately stated that when having read the question, they automatically assumed that it referred to the images of the aftermath of the murder rather than the shooting itself. Three participants (5%) with false reports admitted that they had tried to be constructive and compliant by stating that they had answered the questionnaire as complete as possible and that they did not want to let the researchers down by stating that they could not remember the footage. One participant claimed that he saw so many images that he could not any longer remember what he saw and what he did not see, while another subject claimed to believe he had seen a picture of the moment Fortuyn was shot.³ Importantly, six participants (10%) maintained that they truly *remembered* the footage of the assassination of Pim Fortuyn. Upon being asked to answer the critical crashing memory question once more, these six participants maintained their original answer (i.e. said that they remembered seeing the video footage). All other participants changed their answer to 'No, I do not remember such a film' ($n = 43$) or 'I can't remember or I'm not sure' ($n = 9$). Moreover, the six participants who maintained their false *memory* did not differ on any of the background characteristics or on ABMQ ratings (all $ps > .12$) from participants who changed their answer or from participants without false reports.

DISCUSSION

The main results of the current study can be summarized as follows. Well in line with previous work showing that the crashing memory paradigm is a powerful procedure to elicit false reports (e.g. Crombag et al., 1996; Jelicic et al., 2006; Ost et al., 2002, 2006, 2008; Smeets et al., 2006), about two-thirds of the current sample falsely reported to have seen images of the Pim Fortuyn assassination. The present study extends this line of work

³Note that this statement reflects a false belief, as there are no pictures of the actual shooting.

by distinguishing between false reports consisting of plausibility judgements, false reports based on false beliefs and full-blown false memories. As predicted and in line with the nested constructs model (Scoboria et al., 2004, 2006), general plausibility ratings were higher than those for personal plausibility, which in turn were higher than those of autobiographical belief. Autobiographical belief ratings were also higher than autobiographical memory ratings. In contrast to what one would expect, no differences in ABMQ ratings were found between participants claiming they had seen the non-existent footage, those who said they were not sure or couldn't remember, and those who claimed not to have seen the images. Thus, collectively these data suggest that the nested constructs model also apply to false reports in that high plausibility and an autobiographical belief of having seen images that could not have been witnessed, do not necessarily imply an autobiographical false memory.

Up until a few years ago, the false memory literature did not differentiate autobiographical belief from autobiographical memory (Smeets et al., 2005; see also Ost, 2003; Pezdek & Lam, 2007; Scoboria et al., 2004; Wade et al., 2007). Specifically, despite the diversity in methodologies and results, it often remains unclear whether participants in false memory studies actually remember the suggested false event or merely believe they experienced it. Nevertheless, as we have argued before (Ost, 2003; Smeets et al., 2005), it is important to differentiate between belief and memory. For example, McNally, Clancy, Schacter, and Pitman (2000) found subtle differences between patients with recovered memories of abuse and patients with beliefs about childhood abuse in that patients who merely believed in that they had been abused scored higher on measures of absorption and dissociation compared to patients with recovered memories of abuse, who in turn scored higher than patients who had always remembered their abuse. Moreover, as noted by Scoboria et al. (2004, p. 792) '*. . . people hold many autobiographical beliefs for events that they cannot remember. For example, people believe that they were born, without remembering being born.*' Evidently, as evidenced by vivid memories of alien abduction episodes (Clancy, McNally, Schacter, Lenzenweger, & Pitman, 2002) or the detailed accounts some people give of their memories of previous life experiences (e.g. Peters, Horselenberg, Jelcic, & Merckelbach, 2007), false memories do exist. Distinguishing between autobiographical beliefs and memories is not purely of theoretical significance, but also can be important in applied settings. In legal settings, for example, eyewitness testimony is considered to be among the most compelling types of evidence. That is, whereas eyewitness accounts can be accurate when based on a well-retained memory of the criminal event (e.g. Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Yuille & Cutshall, 1986), these testimonies may be erroneous when based on beliefs based on inferences and judgments (see Scheck, Neufeld, & Dwyer, 2001 for the far-reaching consequences that these errors might have).

The post-experimental interview revealed that more than 80% of the participants endorsing false reports claimed to have misunderstood the critical question and believed that it related to images of the aftermath of the shooting. Their type of false memory report probably reflects the general tendency of respondent to infer the pragmatic rather than the literal meaning of questions (Schwarz, 1999). In only a small proportion of false reports (i.e. 10%), participants claimed to truly remember the non-existent images. These participants also maintained their original answer when given the opportunity to answer the critical question once more. This subgroup of participants is interesting, because so far, the phenomenon of participants who cling tenaciously to their false memory accounts has only been described in studies on false memory development in children (Ceci et al., 1994).

Some notes on the potential limitations of the present study are in order. First, an obvious limitation of the crashing memory paradigm is the possibility that a subsample of participants may have come to believe having seen the non-existent footage as a side-effect of the crashing memory procedure itself. Thus, it is impossible to determine whether participants who come up with false reports do so in response to being interviewed or do endorse false beliefs or false memories that they had developed long before. Second, even though no incentive was given to participants for completing the post-experimental interview and even though they were explicitly instructed to react honestly to its questions, demand characteristics may have influenced the outcome of the interview. Indeed, in their classic review paper, Nisbett and Wilson (1977) argued that people have trouble providing adequate explanations for their behaviour. Specifically, people find it hard to self-report on higher order cognitive processes that underlie their responses. This may imply that participants in the present study may not have been able to accurately state the origins of their false reports. Third, our study relied on a community sample that voluntarily took part in our survey. Thus, it cannot be entirely ruled out that those individuals who were willing to participate are in some way different from people who declined to participate (e.g. in assertiveness). Also noteworthy is the fact that in a recent study by Scoboria and co-workers (Scoboria, Lynn, Hessen, & Fisico, 2008), ratings of plausibility and autobiographical belief, but not memory, were affected by having been provided with a rationale normalising the forgetting (i.e. reasons why they did not remember) of certain childhood events. However, as the potential origins of the false reports in the present study were provided after the ABMQ ratings had been obtained, ABMQ ratings in this study could not have been influenced by rationalising about the critical event during the post-experimental interview. Finally, one cannot exclude the possibility that participants who continued to claim that they truly remembered the non-existent images after having been debriefed may have done so because they felt as though the experimenter was trying to mislead them once again.

Summing up, extending previous work by Smeets et al. (2006) and Ost et al. (2008), the present study suggests that *crashing memories* in large part are fuelled by the ambiguity of the critical question rather than arising from false beliefs or false memories. Nevertheless, 10% of the participants with false reports claimed to actually remember seeing the images of Fortuyn's assassination, provided false details, and even maintained that they remembered the non-existent video footage after being fully debriefed. These results underscore the fact that false memories may account for a subset of false reports as previously obtained through the crashing memory paradigm.

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