

Lost in the Mall Technique

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The "Lost in the Mall" technique is an experimental procedure that was used to demonstrate that confabulations can be created through suggestions made to experimental subjects. It was first developed by psychologist Elizabeth Loftus in an effort to explain how normal people can claim to have recovered memories of improbable experiences.

Study methodology

Loftus and her student Jacqueline Pickrell performed an experiment in which they gave participants four short narratives describing childhood events, all supposedly provided by family members, and asked them to try to recall them. Unbeknownst to the participants, one of the narratives, describing a time when the subject was lost in a mall when they were a child, was false. The narrative described an instance when the subject was five or six years old lost in a shopping mall for an extended period of time before finally being rescued by an elderly person and reunited with his or her family. The narrative was based upon actual family shopping trips and incorporated plausible details provided by the relative. In the study, 25% of the participants reported to be able to remember this event even though it never actually occurred. Many people were able to provide embellishing details that were not supplied by the investigators. Loftus interpreted this to mean that the act of imagining the events led to the creation of false memories. The lost in the mall experiment has been replicated and extended with different ages of subjects.

Criticisms of methodology and conclusions

Some conclusions drawn based on the lost in the mall technique (specifically that leading questions can create false memories of child sexual abuse) have been criticized. In an extension of the experiment, Pezdek, using the subjects' family members to do the interviewing, was able to replicate Loftus' findings that memories of being lost in the mall could be created and were more likely to occur in young children, but a much smaller number of children reported false memories of a painful and embarrassing enema. Kenneth Pope questioned the comparability of the technique's ability to generate a false memory with the ability of a therapist to create a pseudomemory of child rape, as well as possible confounding variables within the study. Lynn Crook and Martha Dean question the application of the study to the creation of false memories during therapy and criticize the study for methodological errors.

Loftus has responded to Crook and Dean's criticisms, pointing to the exaggerations, omissions and errors in the description of the technique, the general lack of scientific competence of their reply and mis-statements about the actual findings of her study, describing Crook and Dean's article as a "partisan essay." Loftus also states that Crook's article follows a long series of efforts to discredit her work publicly and personally.