

PARAMNESIA

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PARAMNESIA

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology; Psychiatry; Cognitive Neuroscience

1. Core Definition of Memory Distortion

Paramnesia is defined as a significant distortion or **falsification of memory**, characterized by the confusion of actual past events with fantasy, suggestion, or imagined content during recollection. It encompasses various forms of memory error where the feeling of remembering is present, but the accuracy or origin of the memory is compromised. These memory distortions range from common, transient experiences found in healthy individuals to severe symptoms indicative of underlying psychiatric or neurological conditions. The underlying mechanism often involves a faulty **linkage of events**, where two or more distinct contents--originally arising at different times or in differing contexts--are fused together upon recall.

The psychological origin of simple paramnesia is frequently traced to **emotional reactions**. For instance, an individual might fuse the dramatic emotional impact of reading a newspaper account of an accident with the actual memory of the event, subsequently believing they were a direct witness. Similarly, the adoption of childhood stories recounted by elders as genuine, firsthand memories falls under simple paramnesia, particularly if those narratives are pleasant or flattering and reinforced through repetition. During this process of repetition, unconscious alterations often occur, further **embroidering the memories** to meet narrative or psychological needs, leading to secondary distortion.

2. Key Forms of Recognition Illusion

The most widely recognized form of paramnesia is the *déjà vu*, French for "already seen." This phenomenon is characterized by an **illusion of recognition** or identification, where a novel experience is encountered with an overwhelming, often mystifying, sense of familiarity, suggesting it has been experienced before. Although commonplace, the mechanism behind *déjà vu* involves a convergence or fusion of experiences that can be explained through several cognitive processes.

A related but less common phenomenon is *déjà raconté*, the illusion of "already told." This form of paramnesia occurs when an individual begins to describe an incident and experiences the distinct, false feeling that they have previously recounted the exact same story to the current listener. In a clinical setting, particularly within psychotherapy, *déjà raconté* is considered significant because it often implies that the material was close to conscious verbalization for some time but was actively **repressed**. Therapists pay special attention to such disclosures as they can provide crucial insight into the patient's psychological difficulties.

The converse of *déjà vu* is *jamais vu*, meaning "never seen." This involves a **false feeling of**

unfamiliarity in situations or environments that the individual has demonstrably gone through many times before. While *déjà vu* suggests an over-attribution of familiarity, *jamais vu* reflects a temporary breakdown in the recognition system for known stimuli, and both forms are frequently observed in specific neurological and psychiatric disorders.

3. Explanatory Hypotheses for Déjà Vu

The experience of *déjà vu* has stimulated various hypotheses concerning its origin, ranging from simple sensory processing errors to deep psychological explanations. One common explanation suggests that the present scene strongly resembles a location or set of characteristics encountered years prior--perhaps a town passed through fleetingly, or a scene viewed in a photograph or motion picture. The sense of familiarity then arises not from the current location itself, but from the **similarity to a previous, stored memory fragment**.

Another cognitive explanation focuses on sensory input timing. If an individual quickly glances at a scene and only processes the details fully moments later, the initial momentary glance might provide the subconscious foundation for the subsequent, stronger **sense of familiarity** upon close inspection. Furthermore, the contribution of senses beyond vision--such as similar sounds, smells, or tastes--can originate or bolster the feeling that an experience has been encountered before.

Psychodynamic interpretations, notably those suggested by Sigmund Freud, propose that the *déjà vu* experience sometimes results from the **actualization of a daydream**. Prior to arriving at a new location, an individual may have consciously or unconsciously pictured how the scene would appear, and if the actual location bears resemblance to this internal visualization, the feeling of previous experience occurs. This ties into the notion that the present scene might remind the individual of a complex **night dream**, explaining the air of mystery often surrounding these experiences, as they function as an echo of a dream rather than a direct memory.

4. Historical and Philosophical Interpretations

The profound feeling of familiarity inherent in paramnesia, particularly *déjà vu*, has been reported since antiquity and holds a significant place in philosophical and religious doctrines. In ancient belief systems, such experiences were often linked to doctrines such as **reincarnation** or rebirth after death (sometimes termed *déjà vécu*, or "already lived").

The Hindus, for example, believed that feelings of familiarity in entirely novel situations were genuine recollections of experiences from a **previous life**. Similarly, Plato offered a related theory, positing that human souls viewed basic ideas in a heavenly realm between incarnations. Consequently, all earthly knowledge is effectively a form of "**reminiscence**" or recollection of these fundamental ideas already imprinted on the soul. These early interpretations highlight the deep-seated human need to explain the phenomenon of recognizing something that logic dictates

should be completely new.

5. Paramnesia Induced by Suggestion

Paramnesia can arise powerfully through external **influence and suggestion**, demonstrating the malleability of human memory. If an external party, such as a family member or an authority figure, repeatedly insists that an individual made a specific statement or performed a certain action, the individual may begin to doubt their own recollection and eventually internalize the false information as a genuine memory.

This phenomenon is particularly critical in legal and forensic settings, where the risk of introducing **false memories** through leading questions is high. Legal procedures often rule out leading questions--such as, "Wasn't Mr. Smith walking with you at the time?"--because they contain suggestion that can distort the witness's memory and subsequent testimony. To mitigate paramnesia induced by suggestion, the proper protocol requires open-ended questioning, such as, "Where was Mr. Smith walking at the time?", thus avoiding the introduction of non-existent details into the witness's recall.

6. Clinical Manifestations in Psychiatric Disorders

While simple forms of paramnesia are common in the general population, many severe and persistent forms are strongly associated with underlying psychiatric and neurological disorders, often indicating significant disruption to memory encoding and retrieval systems.

Schizophrenia: Patients with schizophrenia frequently experience both *déjà vu* and *jamais vu*, reflecting a generalized difficulty in establishing a consistent sense of reality and recognition.

Epilepsy: Patients suffering from psychomotor epilepsy, particularly during the dreamlike "**twilight state**," often experience intense *déjà vu*. They may also experience "**panoramic memory**," a phenomenon where they feel they are suddenly remembering large, forgotten stretches of their lives, typically in rapid succession.

Confabulation (Korsakoff's Syndrome and Senility): A severe form of paramnesia where patients, notably those with Korsakoff's syndrome or advanced senility, unknowingly fabricate elaborate events to fill in genuine memory gaps. This is not conscious lying but an automatic, unconscious mechanism to maintain narrative continuity.

Retrospective Falsification: This involves memories being unconsciously **embroidered with imaginary details** to satisfy latent emotional or unconscious needs. While this occurs mildly in normal individuals, it manifests in its most extreme and pathological form among **paranoid patients**, whose memories are fundamentally altered to align with their delusional systems.

Further Reading

[Paramnesia \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Déjà vu \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[False Memory Syndrome \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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