

## International Society of Polygraph Examiners

### Research Digest

James Allan Matte, Editor

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The following is a summary of a study by Julia Shaw, University of Bedfordshire and Stephen Porter, University of British Columbia, published in *Psychological Science*, February 3, 2015 online before print January 14, 2015, doi: 10.1177/0956797614562862, which was reprinted in full by permission of SAGE Publications in *Research Digest* in May 2015 with *Research Digest* Editor's Comment at the end of the study and this Summary.

### Constructing Rich False Memories of Committing Crime.

#### Summary:

This laboratory study consisted of sixty students from a Canadian University, who were each subjected to three interviews using suggestive memory-retrieval techniques that induced the students to generate criminal and noncriminal emotional false memories which were compared with true memories of emotional events. The three interviews, each lasting about forty minutes, were administered at one-week intervals. During these interviews, the participants were told to practice visualization of the false event each night at home. Results of the three interviews showed that 70% of participants were found to have had false memories of committing a crime involving larceny, assault or assault with a weapon in early adolescence involving the police, providing a detailed false account of the fictitious criminal event. 76% of participants assigned to the noncriminal condition were classified as having false memories involving animal attack, accident involving an injury, and losing a large sum of money. This study suggests that false memories may be recalled in a manner similar to the retrieval of real events, which is consistent with neuroimaging research revealing that false and true memories evoke similar patterns of brain activity. Hence, the difference between true and false memories in the real world may prove most difficult without independent corroboration. The full text of aforesaid laboratory study may be found in the above cited *Journal of Psychological Science* and in *Research Digest*, ISOPE, Volume 2, Number 3, 2015.

**R.D. EDITOR'S COMMENT:** The applicability of the above study to confessions obtained during a polygraph examination are limited to the post-test interview due to the requirement that no accusatory or interrogative approach can be used during any portion of the pretest interview and collection of the physiological data. Most confessions occur during the post-test phase of the examination when the examinee has been informed that the results of his examination revealed Deception Indicated to the target issue. The above Shaw, et al study is a laboratory study in which sixty undergraduate students were subjected to three interviews regarding events that had occurred in their early adolescence and "told to practice visualization of the false event each night at home." This scenario does not replicate the post-test interview in a polygraph examination wherein the incident or crime in question is usually a recent event that should be easily recalled by a guilty

examinee who is not afforded overnight practice to visualize the event, especially a fictitious one. The authors of the study recognized that “unlike in a regular police interrogation, there were probably no perceived negative consequences of confessing to the criminal or noncriminal event in the present study. This leads to questions regarding the applicability of this study to real-world policing situations.” The authors also admit that “we did not distinguish between false memories and false beliefs.” “It has been argued that false beliefs are qualitatively different from false memories.” A successful method of acquiring legitimate confessions by polygraphists is to withhold *critical* information known only to the guilty examinee and the polygraphist which can be used in a Guilty-Knowledge or Concealed Information Test. Furthermore, the confession should include that *critical* information provided exclusively by the guilty examinee which will confirm the legitimacy of the confession, which can be verified through the mandatory video/audio recording of the entire examination including the post-test interview. Polygraphists for law enforcement agencies should inform their department investigators about the importance of non-disclosure of *critical* information to suspects in the acquisition of confessions, and its potential use in polygraph examinations. A primary reason innocent people sometimes give false confessions is the excessive length of an interrogation lasting three or more hours, wherein the suspect, tired, hungry, thirsty and isolated from the world, feels that the only way he can get out of the room is to confess to a crime he did not commit, believing that since he is innocent, the evidence will eventually prove his innocence. People who score high on the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale (GSS) are most susceptible to coercive interrogation techniques.

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