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Order effects in collaborative memory contamination? Comment on Gabbert, Memon, and Wright (2006)

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Gabbert, Memon, and Wright (2006) claimed evidence of an order effect in collaborative memory contamination, in which the collaborator who first spoke of a particular detail was more influential. The Gabbert et al. findings are ambiguous in this regard, because their analyses collapsed across (1) cases in which both collaborators reported the detail they had witnessed and (2) cases in which only one of the collaborators mentioned the detail s/he had mentioned. The latter cases do not evidence an order effect per se.

Gabbert, Memon, and Wright (2006) reported two studies in which pairs of participants who had viewed subtly different versions of a slide show collaborated on answering questions about the slides and later individually answered questions about them. This fine article is a valuable contribution to the literature on collaborative memory contamination, but I am puzzled by one aspect of their report. Specifically, Gabbert et al. emphasized that witnesses who mentioned a particular critical detail first during collaboration were more likely to influence other witnesses's final memory reports. I believe that interpretation of that finding is problematic, as explained below.

Consider participant P, who witnessed critical slide X, and whose collaborator participant Q witnessed corresponding critical slide X′. Excluding guessing, P can report X′ on the final test only if Q mentioned X′ during collaboration. The finding in question is that P was more likely to report X′ on the final test if Q described X′ first during collaboration. The problem arises from the fact that there were two qualitatively different kinds of cases in which Q did *not* describe X′ first during collaboration: One in which Q described X′ second (i.e., after P had described X) and one in which Q did not describe X′ at all. In the latter sort of case, Gabbert et al.'s "order effect" reduces to P being more likely to report X′ if Q mentioned X′ than if Q did not mention X′. That is evidence of collaborative contamination, but not evidence of an order effect per se. To test for an order effect, one must compare (1) cases in which P mentioned X and then Q mentioned X′ with (2) cases in which Q mentioned X′ and then P mentioned X. If a witness who reports a detail first has more influence than one who reports a detail second, then reports of X should be more common in Case 1 than in Case 2, and reports of X′ should be more common in Case 2 than in Case 1. There would be room to debate the meaning of such an effect, because order was not experimentally manipulated, but at least it could be described as an "order correlation." When Q does not mention X′, the "order" effect reduces to the legitimate but rather unsurprising finding that a person who was exposed to a misleading suggestion is more likely to be influenced by it than is a person who wasn't exposed to that suggestion.

AUTHOR NOTE

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