

Lateral Eye Movements, EMDR, and Memory Changes: A Critical Commentary on Houben et al. (2018)

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To the Editor:

Recently, Houben, Otgaar, Roelofs, and Merckelbach (2018) implied that because they found that eye movements similar to those used in eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy can facilitate accepting false information about an event, then EMDR as a therapy has drawbacks. This conclusion ignores research incompatible with their findings and goes beyond their data by failing to take into account contextual differences between the laboratory and other settings.

An example of the ignoring of incompatible findings is another study that used a very similar design that found significant effects in the opposite direction (Parker, Buckley, & Dagnall, 2009). Lateral eye movements were associated with increased true memory for the event and increased recollection and decreased the magnitude of the misinformation effect.

Second, the implications of any finding need to be considered in context. In the two laboratory studies cited above, the memory researchers deliberately introduce misinformation. In EMDR, the clinician is trained to be supportive and to refrain from interjecting information (Shapiro, 2017). That is not to say that memory change does not occur. On the contrary, evidence-based trauma-focused therapies such as imagery rescripting or EMDR take advantage of the fact that human memory is not a literal reproduction of the past but a constructive and reconstructive process that is prone to error and distortion. Many researchers have identified that the potential for these distortions often reflects an adaptive process and that the reconstruction serves an important function in being able to utilize past experiences to better deal with future events (Finnie & Nader, 2012). For those who suffer from the effects of exposure to traumatic events, the challenge of clinical practice is to help disrupt the reconsolidation of memory so that the degree of associated distress and other symptoms are altered (for a review, see Iyadurai et al., 2018). However, in a different context, disrupting memory consolidation would not be good psychological practice,

such as in a forensic setting when eliciting a statement from a witness. Understanding contextual differences helps us to be appropriately circumspect in extrapolating laboratory findings to other settings.

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Action Editor

Scott O. Lilienfeld served as action editor for this article.

Author Contributions

All authors independently wrote separate critiques of the article we have commented on. Rather than submit three separate pieces, we combined our versions into a single piece. All the authors approved the final manuscript for submission.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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