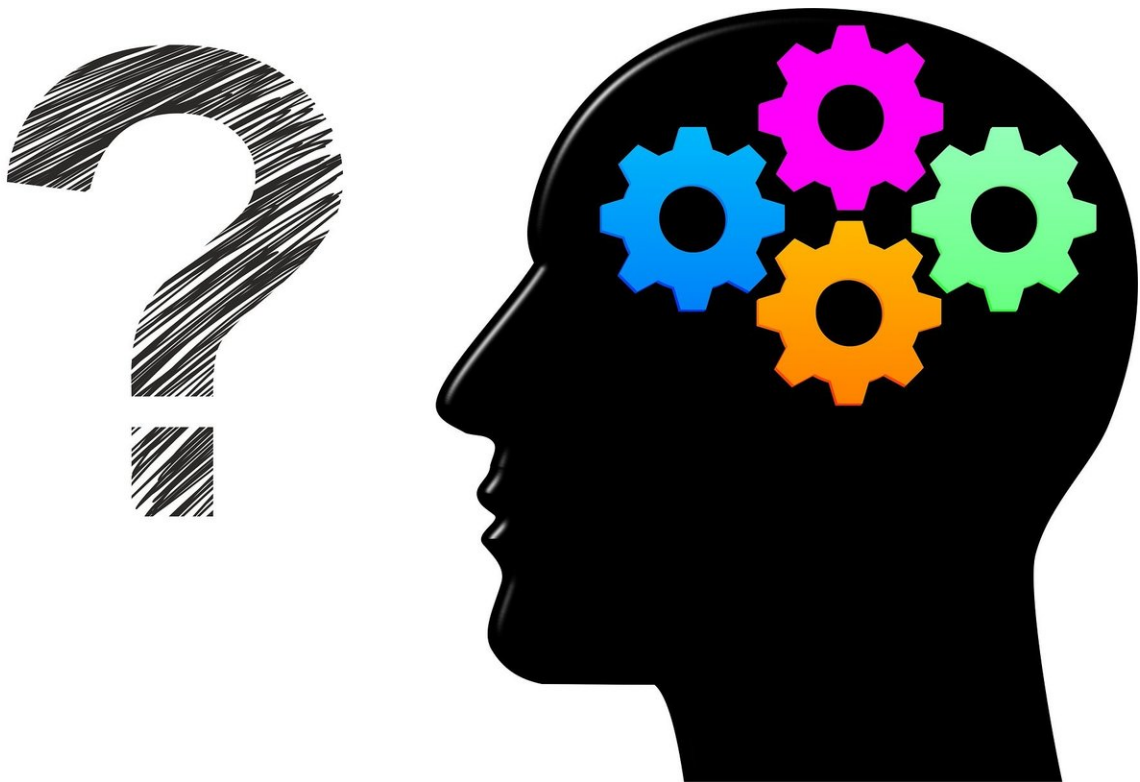


# Forty percent of people have a fictional first memory, says study

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Researchers have conducted one of the largest surveys of people's first memories, finding that nearly 40 per cent of people had a first memory which is fictional.

Current research indicates that people's earliest memories date from around three to three-and-a-half years of age. However, the study from researchers at City, University of London, the University of Bradford and Nottingham Trent University found that 38.6 per cent of a survey of 6,641 people claimed to have memories from two or younger, with 893 people claiming memories from one or younger. This was particularly prevalent among middle-aged and older adults.

To investigate people's first memories the researchers asked participants to detail their first memory along with their age at the time. In particular, participants were told that the memory itself had to be one that they were certain they remembered. It should not be based on, for example a family photograph, family story, or any source other than direct experience.

From these descriptions the researchers then examined the content, language, nature and descriptive detail of respondents' earliest memory descriptions, and from these evaluated the likely reasons why people claim memories from an age that research indicates they cannot be formed.

As many of these memories dated before the age of two and younger, the authors suggest that these fictional memories are based on remembered fragments of early experience—such as a pram, family relationships and feeling sad—and some facts or knowledge about their own infancy or childhood which may have been derived from photographs or family conversations.

As a result, what a rememberer has in mind when recalling these early memories is a mental representation consisting of remembered fragments of early experience and some facts or knowledge about their own childhood, instead of actual memories.

Over time, such mental representations come to be recollectively experienced when they come to mind and so for the individual they quite simply are 'memories' with content strongly tied to a particular time. In particular, fictional very early memories were seen to be more common in middle-aged and [older adults](#) and about 4 in 10 of this group have fictional memories for infancy. The study is published in the journal *Psychological Science*.

Dr. Shazia Akhtar, first author and Senior Research Associate at the University of Bradford said:

"We suggest that what a rememberer has in mind when recalling fictional improbably early memories is an episodic-memory-like mental representation consisting of remembered fragments of early experience and some facts or knowledge about their own infancy/childhood.

"Additionally, further details may be non-consciously inferred or added, e.g. that one was wearing nappy when standing in the cot. Such episodic-memory-like [mental representations](#) come, over time, to be recollectively experienced when they come to mind and so for the individual they quite simply are 'memories' which particularly point to infancy."

Professor Martin Conway, Director Centre for Memory and Law at City, University of London and co-author of the paper, said:

"In our study we asked people to recall the very first memory that they actually remembered, asking them to be sure that it wasn't related to a family story or photograph. When we looked through the responses from participants we found that a lot of these first 'memories' were frequently related to infancy, and a typical example would be a memory based around a pram.

"For this person, this type of memory could have resulted from someone saying something like 'mother had a large green pram'. The person then imagines what it would have looked like. Over time these fragments then becomes a [memory](#) and often the person will start to add things in such as a string of toys along the top.

"Crucially, the person remembering them doesn't know this is fictional. In fact when people are told that their memories are false they often don't believe it. This partly due to the fact that the systems that allow us to remember things are very complex, and it's not until we're five or six that we form adult-like memories due to the way that the brain develops and due to our maturing understanding of the world."

Provided by City University London

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