

Memory and Sexual Assault

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By Louise

The following studies are taken from an article titled "Repressed Memory: What the Science says" (From "Accuracy About Abuse" May 1997):

Professor Alan Schefflin, Santa Clara University Law School and Dr. Daniel Brown reviewed 25 recent studies (spring 1996) on Amnesia for childhood sexual abuse. They state:

"No study failed to find it...Amnesia for childhood sexual abuse is a robust finding across studies using very different samples and methods of assessment. Studies addressing the accuracy of recovered memories show that recovered memories are no more or no less accurate than continuous memories for abuse".

Some stats:

- *Herman & Schatzow (1987)*: 53 women - 36% always remembered, 64% some amnesia; 36% mild to moderate amnesia; 28% "severe memory deficits". 74% found corroboration, with 40% getting confirmation for perpetrators, other family members, physical evidence and 34% from siblings or other victims.
- *Albach (in press)*: 97 women with a history of CSA and a matched control of 65 non-abused women. 35% in the sexually abused group reported amnesia at some time, compared to 1% in the control group who reported amnesia for nontraumatic unpleasant childhood experiences. Psychotherapy was not typically reported to be the cause of recovering the abuse memory.
- *Roe & Schwartz (1996)*: 52 women, hospitalized for sexual trauma. 88% reported history of csa. 77% not remembered for significant time (3 to 45 years)
- *Bernet et al (1993)* : 624 undergraduates reported at least one experience of sexual abuse prior to age 15. 36% reported no memory for a time. Only 30% had been in

therapy so "unlikely that they remembered their abuse as a consequence of psychotherapy"

- *Belicki et al (1994)*: 55.4% of abused students in study reported disrupted memory. "Subjects reporting no abuse responded significantly differently than the other three groups with respect to definitions of sexual abuse, psychiatric symptoms and sleep and dream behaviour. There were no significant differences in response to the questions between those who reported and those who did not report corroboration of abuse. There were also no significant differences in response to the questions between those who had disrupted memory and those who had continuous memory for childhood sexual abuse. Those who had recovered memories were just as likely as those who had a continuous memory to have corroborative evidence for the abuse.
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- *Van Der Kolk & Fisler (1995)* : 46 adults in in depth interview. Of the 36 subjects with childhood trauma 42% had suffered significant or total amnesia at some time. Corroborative evidence available for 75%. Williams (1994) : 129 women who had been sexually abused as children. 38 % failed to report or were amnesic for childhood sexual abuse though it was clearly documented in medical records 17 years earlier. 32% said they were never abused. "Amnesia for sexual abuse in a community sample is not an uncommon event. There was a tendency for women with the clearest evidence of abuse to be more amnesic"
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- *Widom & Morris (in press)* : Court substantiated abuse and child-neglect cases. 39% of the sexually abused failed to report the documented child abuse. "We have also found substantial under-reporting of sexual abuse among known victims of sexual abuse. This is particularly impressive since these are court substantiated cases of childhood sexual abuse"
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- *Spiegel*: "Memories in dissociate amnesia are not so much distorted as they are segregated from one another."
- *Williams*: In general, women with recovered memories had no more inconsistencies in their reports than women who had always remembered....their retrospective

reports were remarkably consistent with what had been reported in the 1970's....the stories were in large part true to the basic elements".

- *Dalenberg (1996)* : "Memories of abuse recovered in psychotherapy were no more or no less accurate than memories of abuse that had always been remembered. The overall accuracy rate of both continued and recovered memories of abuse was quite high (70%) Just over half the patient sample significantly improved their accuracy for their abuse memories in the course of psychotherapy".

Repressed memory in war vets or holocaust survivors has been a long acknowledged phenomena. Add to this that many survivors of adult rapes (the author included) have also forgotten chunks of their experiences. It was only when it began to be about child sexual abuse that it generated the current painful polemic.

It is no doubt true that certain therapeutic praxis may do more harm than good. But even bad therapy does not necessarily a false memory make. There is the well-known case of Jill Christman (From Freyd, "Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse") Christman attended therapy for some personal problems, and began to recover memories of childhood sexual abuse. The memories involved the presence of another child and were recovered in a confusing, cloudy way. Christman, who was aware of the memory polemics raging at the time, felt that the therapist was pushy and suggestive, and so abandoned therapy, deciding that her memories were "false". Later, she was sought out by the other victim who in fact corroborated what Christman had remembered in therapy.

The False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) have disseminated much damaging misinformation including simplistic views about ways in which they claim false memories are produced. Are these methods really very common? The FMSF claims that the therapeutic creation of "false memories" is an "epidemic." However, based on careful analysis of how the FMSF counts and collates - inflates - its statistics, this claim appears to be without foundation.(Whitfield, C, Memory and Abuse)

Another simplistic FMSF view is that women are all too anxious to blame sexual abuse for all their problems. Among other things, any reading of this board can show that we are often reluctant to identify the abuse that lies behind many of our sufferings. Many of us self-berate for not being "stronger".

Thinking of theories which accuse women of fantasizing about sexual abuse is nothing new either, this has it's roots in Freud's "Electra Complex", a theory which has damaged and invalidated women for over a century. Jeffrey Masson, in *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*, concluded that Freud may have coined this term due to professional ostracism - it was too difficult for Viennese society to accept that that respectable Viennese fathers could rape their own daughters.

And so we come full circle. But the Electra Complex has at least gained some respectability (however dubious) while "False Memory Syndrome" is not and has never been a recognized psychiatric phenomena. As a matter of fact it the term was coined by one Ralph Underwager, a known supporter of paedophilic sexuality.

Of course it's awful to imagine anyone being convicted on dubious evidence. But by far the problem for victims of rape/child sexual abuse is the lack of justice executed by courts, particularly, thanks to the FMS, if the case is based on recovered memories.

Links:

[101 Corroborated cases of Recovered Memory](#)

[The Recovered Memory Project](#)

[False Memory Syndrome Facts](#)

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