



Romeo Vitelli Ph.D. Media Spotlight

Implanting False Memories

How reliable are memories of abuse "recovered" during psychotherapy?

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Attending a conference of the Committee of Scientific Inquiry recently held in Nashville, TN, one of the high points was a symposium on belief and memory. Moderated by Dr. Ray Hyman, a pioneer of the modern skeptical movement, the symposium featured presentations by James Alcock of York University (one of my professors from graduate school, by the way), *Miracle Detective* Indre Viskontas, and [Elizabeth Loftus](#) from the University of California, Irvine. While each of the speakers gave compelling talks, I decided to focus on what Dr. Loftus had to say, both because of her reputation as a forensic psychologist and the controversy surrounding false and repressed memories.

“I’m interested in the beliefs that we have about ourselves which can be true or false beliefs but at some point, these beliefs begin to feel like recollections, to feel like memories. If the beliefs are false then the memories are false.” Beginning her talk on how false memories can be implanted, Dr. Loftus admitted that she enjoyed collecting false memory stories “as they are occurring in the wild” and proceeded with three recent examples featuring Paul Ryan, Mitt Romney, and Hillary Clinton.

In the Paul Ryan example, he did a recent radio interview in which he reported having done exceptionally well in a marathon which he claimed to have completed in just under three hours. A follow-up investigation by *Runner’s World* showed that his actual performance was considerably longer. In a more significant memory lapse, Mitt Romney described his strong childhood memory of the Golden Jubilee marking the 50th anniversary of the automobile industry despite the fact that it actually took place nine months before he was born!

To be fair, Dr. Loftus also pointed out that Hillary Clinton was guilty of a similar memory malfunction when, during the 2008 presidential campaign, she described a visit to Bosnia during the civil war when she faced enemy snipers. Based on the recollections of the others who went with her to Bosnia (including her daughter, Chelsea), none of her vivid recollections of ducking gunfire actually happened. Confronted with this evidence, Senator Clinton denied lying about the incident. “I made a mistake. I had a different memory. That proves I’m human which for some people is a revelation.”

In providing these examples, Dr. Loftus pointed out that the intelligence, education and experience of all three politicians failed to protect them from having false memories of significant events in their lives. Despite the humorous examples of how memory can play tricks, not every example of false memory is so entertaining.

In 1990, winery executive Gary Ramona was stunned when his then-19 year old daughter Holly confronted him with accusations that he had repeatedly raped her over a lengthy period. Ramona vehemently denied the accusations and the resulting case led to the loss of his executive position, his marriage and his relationship with Holly and her sisters. In the subsequent lawsuit launched by Gary Ramona, he accused Holly's psychotherapist, Marche Isabella of "implanting" false memories in his daughter while Holly was being treated for bulimia. The lawsuit also named Dr. Richard Rose, chief of psychiatry at Western Medical Hospital in Anaheim, California. At Holly Ramona's request, Dr. Rose had conducted a sodium amytal session to verify the memories of abuse that had surfaced during therapy.

Although Holly Ramona and her mother insist that the memories of abuse are genuine, Gary Ramona was awarded \$500,000 in 1994 setting a legal precedent in the United States. Though far short of the eight million dollar settlement his lawyers had originally demanded, Gary Ramona declared the decision to be a major victory in recognizing the pseudoscience underlying memories of abuse recovered during psychotherapy.

"There is no credible scientific support for the idea that we can take eleven years of brutalization and banish it into the unconscious and then undergo some therapy which is going to make us aware of it," Dr. Loftus reported as she discussed the Holly Ramona case, "and yet these kinds of things were being introduced into court cases throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s and still today." While her outspoken opposition to recovered memory has led to her being targeted by feminist and victims' rights groups over the years (including the controversial "Jane Doe case"), Dr. Loftus continues to stand by her own research into false memory.

In describing that research, she identified two primary research paradigms that she studies in her memory laboratory at the University of California at Irvine. The first paradigm, which she calls the "misinformation" paradigm involves testing research subjects on a specific event and seeing how accurate their memory for that event is afterward. The second paradigm, focusing on implanting false memories, involves bringing subjects in and asking suggestive questions and seeing whether that influences recall of past events. As she concludes in describing her research, "we've done hundreds of experiments involving thousands of subjects showing that it's relatively easy to change people's memory of the details of an event that they've actually experienced."

Despite the ethical limitations imposed on laboratory studies of artificially created memories, research showed that creating false memories of a relatively benign childhood experience, i.e., becoming lost in a shopping mall as a young child was easily induced. In other studies, even much more extreme example of false memories (eg., spilling punch on the bride's parents at a family wedding or nearly drowning as a child) could be induced in as many as a quarter of the subjects tested. Even in subjects who failed to develop a complete false memory, partial recall could be induced in nearly half of all research subjects.

This phenomenon is commonly seen, not only in recovered memory cases, but in people who "recall" details of alien abductions or past lives which can be produced by improperly administered hypnosis or other psychotherapeutic methods. As Dr. Loftus pointed out in her talk, commonly used treatment approaches such as guided imagination, dream interpretation, hypnosis, and direct confrontation based on other people's memories are notorious for creating false memories in patients.

And the false memory phenomenon extends beyond therapeutic settings. A recent article by *Slate* magazine examining false memory did an informal study using online readers. Presenting a series of doctored and real photographs, at least 15 per cent of online readers reporting remembering doctored pictures of public events (including one photograph of President Obama shaking hands with the president of Iran). In studying their results, *Slate* found that political beliefs often matched these false memories (conservative readers were more likely to “remember” the Obama photograph, for instance).

While vulnerability to false memory seems positively correlated with intelligence (although the correlation is relatively low), suggestibility and vividness of imagination seem to be stronger predictors. Belief and memory also seem to be strongly linked and people are more likely to recall events that fit their own prejudices about the world around them.

So, how reliable can memory be considering possible contamination by overly enthusiastic therapists who allow their own biases to influence the people they are trying to help? Following the high-profile cases of false memory that have dominated courtrooms over the past few decades, accusations of implanted memories have become a common strategy used by defense attorneys. Even eyewitness testimony, usually regarded as ironclad proof by juries, has become more suspect as new research demonstrates how unreliable such evidence can be.

Aside from the very real legal consequences of false memory in the courtroom, there is also the tragic legacy that such accusations can leave behind. Despite his legal victory, Gary Ramona and his daughter are still estranged and his family has been permanently shattered as a result of the accusations of rape and brutality that were unearthed by his daughter’s therapists. Numerous high-profile cases such as the [McMartin preschool case](#) led to ruined lives and millions of dollars in court costs with no convictions.

As a “take-home” message from her talk, Dr. Loftus left her audience with this parting comment: “If I’ve learned anything from 40 years of working on these issues, just because a subject tells you that they have a detailed memory that’s very vivid, that doesn’t mean that it’s true.”

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