

## Recovered memories or delusion?

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By Tim Klass Associated Press writer

For Julie Alley it was all too real.

In early 1991 a man shouted at the 32-year-old computer analyst in an airplane. She recalled her father yelling at her before she turned 8. Next came nightmares of sexual assault of her father naked.

In therapy her recollections became more vivid. She sued her father William D. Alley a retired Seattle dentist. Her mother brother and three sisters testified for her in Seattle's King County Superior Court. Two sisters said the father also sexually abused them. In mid-1994 a jury awarded Julie \$600000 in damages.

For Ross E. Cheit too it was all too real.

In the summer of 1992 hearing that his nephew was joining a boys chorus the Brown University political science professor suddenly recalled being molested 25 years earlier by William Farmer administrator of the San Francisco Boys Chorus summer camp.

Mr. Cheit tracked down Mr. Farmer in Scio Ore. Mr. Farmer confessed saying others also were victimized that other adults joined in the abuse. Mr. Cheit sued. The chorus accepted responsibility and settled for \$35000 in 1994.

For Patricia Rice it only seemed real.

The 47-year-old Vancouver Wash. housewife sought hypnotherapy in March 1992 to quit smoking and lose weight. Three months later certain that her parents had raped and tortured her and made her eat a barbecued baby in a satanic ritual believing a "good witch" was now guiding her she drove into a head-on collision. The other driver died.

Placed under mental health supervision for 20 years Ms. Rice accused therapist Regina Gamage of implanting false memories and filed suit. Three months ago Ms. Gamage's insurance company settled with Ms. Rice for \$425000 plus \$1570 a month for life.

Reality also proved elusive to Steven Cook.

At age 34 the Philadelphia drug-abuse counselor filed a \$10 million lawsuit in late 1993 claiming he was molested by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and the Rev. Ellis Harsham as a teen-age pre-seminarian in Cincinnati.

Three months later Mr. Cook dropped Rev. Bernardin from the suit saying his memory might have been tainted by hypnosis in therapy. Rev. Harsham and the Cincinnati Archdiocese headed by Rev. Bernardin in the 1970s settled for an undisclosed sum in April 1994. Rev. Harsham subsequently left the priesthood. Mr. Cook died of AIDS in September 1995.

Recovered memory repressed memory buried memory delayed memory robust repression traumatic dissociation -- by any term the issue bedevils mental health experts lawyers judges and society at large.

In February 1993 the American Psychological Association formed a nationwide blue-ribbon scientific panel to seek consensus the most exhaustive attempt at a scientific resolution to date.

Early this year the group issued 14 pages of conclusions followed by 226 pages of point-counterpoint argument. By then the best-known member University of Washington psychologist Elizabeth F. Loftus a pioneer in demonstrating the fragility and malleability of memory had quit the association and been named in two ethics complaints which were rejected.

Bereft of scientific bedrock on which to base legal principles for unsnarling a growing tangle of lawsuits courts have taken varying tacks on issues as basic as whether to allow recovered memory testimony.

Chuck Noah a former construction worker whose daughter accused him of abuse persuaded the Washington state Health Department last year to suspend the license of Linda Rae MacDonald the therapist who treated the daughter.

Meanwhile he spends his retirement years picketing therapists who support recovered memory theory. One of his trailers was torched in Olympia Wash. in 1994. "I was very thankful that they didn't burn my RV (recreational vehicle) too" he said.

This year the picketing forced David L. Calof a Seattle hypnotherapist and author of the bimonthly publication Treating Abuse Today to relocate in another part of town.

In Philadelphia Pamela Freyd is executive director of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. She and her husband Peter Freyd a University of Pennsylvania mathematics professor became co-founders after their older daughter Jennifer Joy Freyd accused her father in 1991 of raping her as a child. They have not spoken with her in more than four years.

At the University of Oregon in Eugene Jennifer Freyd a psychology professor memory specialist and mother of three young children is publishing a book "Betrayal Trauma The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse" this fall. Out of therapy now she still believes in the therapist she saw five years ago and in the reality of her recollections.

Even so "I have come to be more aware of many ways that therapists have historically and currently I think harmed people" she says. "One thing I'm sure about is that a lot of (childhood abuse) survivors have rotten therapists.

"They really are survivors and they really have rotten therapists."

Here is the issue

Can people perhaps millions of people block out having been fondled raped and otherwise violated repeatedly as children -- some in rituals that include bestiality -- and regain those memories as adults?

Some long-forgotten incest and other molestation is well documented. Research indicates as many as 38 percent of adult women and 10 percent or more of men were subjected to some contact sexual abuse as children. Other studies suggest a third or more of all childhood sexual abuse including forcible rape may be forgotten years later.

Yet even the most seemingly complete impressions of childhood horror can be a counterfeit mental currency coined unwittingly from news reports talk shows books and movies spread by incompetent unscrupulous or well-intentioned but misguided therapists accepted at face value by the gullible often tortured souls in search of psychological healing.

Which is the greater reality? Childhood nightmares reborn? Or unsettling pseudo-memories of horrors that never were?

"Some patients describe the recovery of memories as 'getting back my mind' while others feel that they are 'losing my mind.'

"The questions Is this true? Did this really happen? plague everyone who doesn't have continuous uninterrupted memories of their past" writes Sue Shapiro director of the Center for the Study of Abuse and Incest at the Manhattan Institute of Psychoanalysis in New York in the book "Sexual Abuse Recalled."

Without a confession witness medical report diary entry supporting recollections by others questionable behavior by the accused or some other corroboration it's impossible to know.

Doubters such as Ms. Loftus a \$400-an-hour expert witness in recovered memory trials and author of the book "The Myth of Repressed Memory False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse" believe the answer lies outside reality.

"It's a steady diet of suggestion" she says. "It's not usually a therapist you know coming out with a specific false fact but leading you -- it's almost more insidious -- leading you to that conclusion almost indirectly and making you think it's your idea.

"The more times something happens the better your memory. The longer ago it was the worse your memory. Memories can be contaminated with interfering information misinformation post-event suggestion."

More than enough instances have been validated to prove that the phenomenon is real even if the mental mechanism remains a mystery insist supporters such as Judith L. Alpert a psychoanalyst New York University applied psychology professor and editor of "Sexual Abuse Recalled."

"It is poor judgment to think that delayed incest memories can be explained away by pointing to bad therapy" Ms. Alpert wrote in her overview of the book. "Rather than focus our revulsion on therapy we need to face the overshadowed issue which is that many children in this society are abused."

The issue echoes one of the earliest controversies in psychotherapy.

In 1896 Sigmund Freud suggested that neurosis typically arose from incest and other childhood sexual abuse that had been blocked from conscious memory.

Facing a firestorm of opposition and outrage within the new and rapidly developing profession Freud abandoned the "seduction theory" nine years later.

Instead he proposed that neurosis indicated unresolved conflict over repressed sexual fantasies Oedipus and Electra complexes in which boys supposedly wish to do away with their fathers and girls their mothers to marry the other parent.

As post-traumatic stress disorder gained official recognition as a diagnosis in 1980 some therapists suggested that buried memories of sexual abuse might be the source of similar symptoms.

In perhaps the first significant legal case Tyson vs. Tyson still cited in court rulings the Washington state Supreme Court held in 1986 that the statute of limitations barred a recovered memory suit.

The majority cited the “imprecise” and “subjective” nature of psychology and psychiatry. Four dissenters denounced that as unfair to mental health professionals and dismissive of child sexual abuse.

One of those in the majority wrote that the dissenters’ arguments “are most compelling” but felt the Legislature should decide what to do about the statute.

In 1988 the Legislature passed the nation’s first law to make a specific exception in the statute of limitations for recovered memory suits. At least 28 states now have such statutes including 25 modeled after the Washington law.

The many hundreds of ensuing civil cases began with suits such as those filed by Ms. Alley and Ms. Tyson against parents and others accused of long-ago abuse.

In 1990 Washington became the only state which by law specified payment from the crime victims compensation fund in repressed memory cases.

More limited provision is made in Massachusetts and a few may be covered by general statutes in other states said Dan Eddy executive director of the National Association of Crime Victim Compensations Boards.

In Washington 682 repressed memory claims have been filed since the law took effect and 325 have been allowed. Average payout on those claims is \$10000 -- four times the average for all accepted claims.

By many accounts a big wave of new cases followed highly publicized “I-am-an-incest-survivor” accounts by comedian Roseanne Barr and former Miss America Marilyn Van Derbur Atler in 1991.

In November of that year the late Darrell Sifford of the Philadelphia Inquirer wrote the first of a series of columns on people whose lives and families had been shattered by what they said were false claims of recovered memory. The next month Peter Freyd was accused of long-ago abuse after he and his wife flew to Eugene to spend Christmas with their daughter’s family.

The False Memory Syndrome Foundation was organized the next March. Chuck Noah was an early member. Beth Loftus was on the board. Soon there were regular newsletters an active World Wide Web site and growing chapters around the country.

The courthouse spotlight shifted to Rice-type suits asserting that bogus beliefs were implanted or fostered in therapy and to third-party claims against therapists by those accused of being abusers.

For months Mr. Noah and his supporters picketed the offices of David Calof the hypnotherapist.

Ms. Loftus is a leading lightning rod for the other side. A prosecutor once accosted her in a courthouse hallway and called her a whore. Upon learning who she was a lecturer on surviving childhood trauma who was seated next to her on an airplane began swatting her with a newspaper and yelling "You're that woman!"

Ms. Loftus former president of two of the psychological association's divisions and Ms. Alpert were among six experts three from each side who were chosen to form the Working Group in Investigation of Memories of Childhood Abuse.

With Ms. Loftus were Peter A. Ornstein a University of North Carolina developmental psychology professor and Stephen J. Ceci a Cornell University psychologist who has done much of his research on children.

With Ms. Alpert were Laura S. Brown a clinical and forensic psychologist University of Washington professor and frequent expert witness for recovered memory claims and Christine A. Courtois director of clinical training in post-traumatic and dissociative disorders at The Psychiatric Institute in Washington D.C. and author of the influential book "Healing the Incest Wound Adult Survivors in Therapy" in 1988.

They were supposed to review and reconcile research on memory function and breakdown especially in the passage from childhood to adult life the specialty of the academics with studies on the impact of trauma on memory storage and recall the specialty of the clinicians.

A unified report was quickly ruled out. They did join in conclusions listing five areas of agreement starting with the pervasiveness and lack of adequate acknowledgement of child sexual abuse as a social problem.

In January a month before the report was accepted Ms. Loftus resigned from the association. A Toronto columnist suggested she resigned to duck ethics complaints by Jennifer Hoult and Lynn Crook who accused Ms. Loftus of misrepresenting the cases in which they won recovered memory suits. The complaints were found to be baseless.

The uproar over recovered memory centers on a memory storage and recall mechanism far more complex than recording and playing videotape.

Some frightful experiences -- earthquakes storms wild-animal attacks torture and rape -- may never be consolidated in long-term memory. Perhaps it's a defense mechanism a way to avoid becoming mentally unhinged. Inability to recall a single horrendous event is usually called traumatic amnesia.

At the other extreme searing memories may intrude as recurring nightmares and waking flashbacks in post-traumatic stress disorder.

What is unknown is how memory of repeated horrors could be lost and then regained in full detail years later -- the phenomenon called repression.

There is also the vexing problem of distinguishing between memories of imaginings or fantasies and recollections of actual events and perceptions. Both are activated by the very same places in the brain.

Initially the strength of a mental fabrication is typically about half that of an actual perception but some of the first parts of a memory to fade are time place and source.

Thus concentration on generating a certain kind of image may produce what seems a true memory but is actually a false or distorted impression as in the case of frequent liars who convince themselves they are telling the truth.

Jennifer Freyd's betrayal trauma theory described in a scientific paper two years ago suggests that repression or dissociation in childhood sex abuse cases may be a more specific survival mechanism.

Young children cannot survive without adults especially parents so they block from explicit memory traumatic experiences that threaten their ability to remain in that relationship she suggests.

Thus a child in an otherwise stable secure home would be more likely to repress or dissociate repeated molestation by a close relative than one in a severely dysfunctional family.

Compounding the matter she adds is the typical warning of severe punishment or misfortune if the abuse is revealed because memories tend to be reinforced by conversation and erode if unrecalled for long periods.

Her theory also includes an almost Freudian aspect the possibility that "recovered memories for contact abuse may sometimes be metaphorical for emotional abuse."

Not always she stressed.

“People kind of jump to that and say ‘Well it’s all metaphor’ and that I don’t believe” Ms. Freyd said.

“I don’t think any memory is likely to be purely accurate or purely metaphorical. Probably all of our memories have some degree of distortion and metaphor in them.

“I do think it’s pretty unlikely that very many people have very many memories that are just out of thin air.”  
CLARIFICATION Aug. 29 1996 By The Associated Press In a report on the debate over recovered memory The Associated Press reported that ethics complaints against Elizabeth Loftus by Jennifer Hault and Lynn Crook were found to be baseless. Complaints by the two women to the American Psychological Association were never investigated because Loftus resigned from the organization and therefore no findings issued. Crook also complained to the University of Washington in Seattle where Loftus is a psychology professor. The Psychology Department chairman Michael Beecher said he found nothing in Crook’s claim to merit an investigation by the university. The AP also reported that a Toronto columnist suggested Loftus a leading critic of recovered memory resigned to duck the complaints. Loftus denies knowing about the complaints at the time she resigned.

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