Recovered Memory Project

www.RecoveredMemory.org  www.brown.edu/PublicPolicy/Reovmem
THE RECOVERED MEMORY PROJECT
Case Information & Scholarly Resources

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Purpose
The purpose of this project is to collect and disseminate information relevant to the debates over whether traumatic events can be forgotten and then remembered later in life. That debate has focused on recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse. But the phenomenon extends to other traumas, including physical abuse or witnessing a murder. Almost everyone would agree that such traumas are normally remembered. That is, most people who experience such a trauma are likely to remember it, perhaps vividly and to the point of being intrusive. But do some people forget completely? A variety of scientific sources say "yes." The purpose of this website, then, is to bring together the extensive and growing evidence of cases ignored or overlooked by self-described skeptics of various sorts.

Academic and Clinical Studies
While much remains unknown about this phenomenon, there are still those who claim that traumatic childhood events simply cannot be forgotten at the time only to be remembered later in life. In an article promoting the so-called False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF), for example, Martin Gardner asserted:

"Studies show that among children who witnessed the murder of a parent, not a single one repressed the terrible memory. Not only do victims of child incest not repress such painful memories (to repress means to completely forget the experience without any conscious effort to do so), they try unsuccessfully to forget them." (Gardner, 1993, p. 372)

Gardner failed to cite any specific studies in support of the claim about incest. And there is only one study of children who witnessed the murder of a parent. But that study (Malmquist, 1986) is based on sixteen children, all of whom had extensive contacts with police, social workers, and family members about the tragic events they later reported as invasive. FMSF Advisory Board members have repeatedly cited the Malmquist study (see e.g., Underwager & Wakefield, 1996; Ofshe & Watters, 1994; Loftus, 1993). The Malmquist study is also cited in legal briefs filed by the FMSF. Indeed, the New Hampshire Supreme Court, the only court to side with the FMSF's stated desire to ban recovered memory testimony from court, cited the Malmquist study with approval (State v. Hungerford, 1997). But one would never expect children to block out the memory. More likely, it would be cases where there were not social workers and other support mechanisms in place, supporting and reinforcing the memory. The relevant comparison would be children who witnessed a murder and, as occurs often with sexual abuse, were told in some manner not to tell anyone. Such cases exist. Enterpriseing reporters or others interested in testing the existence of such evidence could explore various murder cases that are not included in this archive.

Dr. Paul McHugh, a psychiatrist and False Memory Syndrome Foundation Advisory Board member, echoes this untempered position, claiming that "severe traumas are not blocked out by children, but are remembered all too well" (Washington Post, 1993). When asked point blank "Can a child forget sustained sexual abuse?" on CNN (Transcript 302-1; May 3, 1993), Dr. McHugh replied "no" — apparently basing his conclusion on children he had observed at Johns Hopkins with continuous memory. Fellow psychiatrist and FMSF Advisory Board member John Hochman similarly claims that "memories of emotionally charged events are among the least forgettable memories we have" (Hochman, 1994b, p. B3). "For those who were in Nazi concentration camps or underwent torture as POWs in Vietnam, this can become a serious lifelong problem" (Hochman, 1994a, p. 17).

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Project Director
Professor Ross E. Chait
Taubman Center for Public Policy & American Institutions
at Brown University
67 George Street
Box 1977
Brown University
Providence, RI 02912
Tel: 401-863-2201
Fax: 401-863-2452

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Of course, nobody contests the existence of invasive memories for some, even most, victims of severe trauma. The question is whether that phenomenon eliminates the possibility of the opposite reaction: no conscious memory of the trauma until later in life.

False-memory partisans avoid the question with a rhetorical sleight of hand. Retired English professor and FMSF Advisory Board member Frederick Crews, for example, has constructed a "logic" whereby corroborated cases of recovered memory cannot exist in reality because that contradicts his theories about Freud. Cognitive psychology professor Jennifer Freyd demonstrated the circularity of this position (Freyd, 1996, pp. 12-14). Less extreme "skeptics," who allow that cases of recovered memory might exist, often report finding few, if any, actual cases. For example, Loftus (1993, p. 524) notes that "claims of corroborated repressed memories occasionally appear in the published literature." She proceeds to cite one case from 1955 that she finds less than convincing. In a similar vein, psychology professor John Kihlstrom, a former FMSF Advisory Board member, rejects cases cited in support of the trauma-memory argument because of "the general lack of independent verification of the ostensibly forgotten memories" (Kihlstrom, 1995, p. 63). PBS producer Ofra Bikel reached a more extreme conclusion, reporting that after almost a year of research she could find "only one case where a claim of recovered memory could be backed up by anything more substantial than a woman and her therapist believing it so" (Johnson, 1995). That claim caused the launch of this website.

References


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