



## Introduction

### What factors determine whether a report of abuse is likely to be believed? Gender? Victim/Perpetrator Relationship? Memory Pervasiveness?

- There is no empirical evidence that any of these factors are predictive of the **objective** truth of an abuse allegation.
- Variations of detail, based on popular stereotypes, seem to influence **subjective believability** of abuse accounts.
- Jury studies indicate that factors impacting jury decisions are:
  - age when abused & victim race, with Caucasians believed more (e.g. Bottoms, Davis & Epstein, 2004)
  - gender of victim, with males believed more (O'Donohue, Elliott, Nickerson, & Valentine, 1993)
  - amount of time between event and disclosure, delay decreasing beliefs (Golding, et al., 1999),
  - relationship of perpetrator and victim (e.g. McCauley & Parker, 2001)
  - number of times of an assault, with more assaults leading to more convictions (Golding, et al, 1999)
  - and expert testimony, which decreases belief in victims' reports (Griffith, Libkuman & Poole, 1998)

• Males are less likely to convict an accused perpetrator of child abuse than are females (e.g. Bottoms, Davis & Epstein, 2004; ForsterLee, Horowitz, Ho, ForsterLee & McGovern, 1999).

• Additionally, a review of the literature tells us that variation in the nature of the memory is likely the most controversial factor that influences believability of child sexual abuse allegations (Pope, 1996).  
The problem is the conflation of **Memory Accuracy** (the degree to which a memory is historically true) and **Memory Persistence** (the degree to which a memory has remained available to conscious recall over time).

### Rationale

- > The present study examines believability bias against child abuse reports.
- > Unlike the mock juror studies which intuitively have legal ramifications to abuse reports the present two studies focus on social ramifications by asking whether participants believe a college roommate.

## Method

### Participants

- > 342 Intro Psych students (96 males, 241 females, 5 unidentified) at the U of Oregon
- > Mean age = 19.75, SD=3.49 years (range=17- to 32 - years-old).
- > Ethnicity: mostly Caucasian (85.1%) and Asian (9.8%).

### Materials

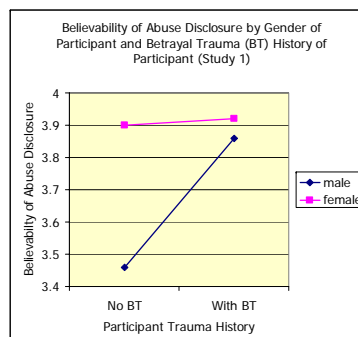
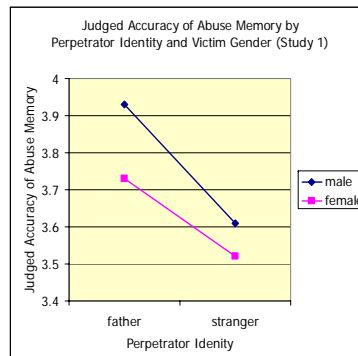
- > The Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS; Goldberg & Freyd, under review).
- > Vignettes: e.g. "A college friend, Susan, confides in you that she was forced by her father to have sex with him when she was 9 years old. Susan tells you that she has always remembered this aspect of her childhood, but she has never told anyone until now."
- > Underlined items in vignette were varied in order to manipulate independent variables.

### Design

2 (type of memory) x 2 (victim gender) x 2 (type of abuse) x 2 (closeness of perpetrator)

### Procedure

- > Data collection occurred as part of a larger packet of paper and pencil questionnaires
- > Questionnaires were in 16 different randomized orders and were randomly assigned to subjects. Because of this randomization, participants were unaware that the two measures used in these analyses, were in fact, in the same study.
- > Participants rated the believability of 4 vignettes (i.e. 4 within subject var.) that described abuse reports There were 4 between subject conditions.



### References

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## Results

### Main Effects

- **Memory:** continuous memory was judged to be more believable  $F(1,324)=17.45$ ,  $p<.0001$  than recovered memory.
- **Participant Gender:** females believed abuse accounts more than did males ( $F(1,308)=3.61$ ,  $p=.058$ ).
- **Type of perpetrator:** memories of abuse by a father were believed more ( $F(1,308)=43.129$ ,  $p<.001$ ) than memories for abuse by a stranger.
- **Type of abuse:** memories for "being made to have sex with" were rated as more believable ( $F(1,308)=14.05$ ,  $p<.001$ ) than memories for being "beaten with a belt."

### Significant Interactions

- **Type of perpetrator x type of abuse:** being "beaten with a belt" by a stranger was rated as less believable than sexual abuse by a stranger and any abuse by a father ( $F(1,308)=6.95$ ,  $p<.01$ ).
- **Type of perpetrator x abuse type x participant gender:** female participant ratings of believability of sexual abuse by a stranger was far higher than the other stranger x abuse ratings ( $F(1,308)=6.18$ ,  $p=.01$ ).
- **Type of perpetrator x abuse type x gender of victim:** females were believed far less than males when the vignette was about physical abuse by a father, and sexual abuse by a stranger ( $F(1,308)=7.13$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

### Gender Interaction with Trauma History

- **Analysis:** ANOVA with planned orthogonal contrasts (3,-1,-1,-1) for males/no BT, males/BT, females/no BT, females/BT  
Finding: males with no Betrayal Trauma rated believability significantly lower than the other three groups,  $t(312)=2.93$ ,  $p<.01$ .

## Discussion

- Subjects believed continuous memory more than delayed memories
  - suggests that there is a conflation of memory persistence and memory accuracy in conventional belief although there is no definitive research to support the conflation of these two factors.
- In contrast to mock trial studies, where "innocent until proven guilty" is the basis for decision making, and the default is "not guilty" when there is empirical ambiguity about the nature of memories for abuse, the present study which involves no judgment about the guilt or innocence of a perpetrator, but rather the believability of abuse that happened to a friend,
  - suggests the presence of a stereotyped bias about abuse.
  - It suggests that we believe abuse must be salient and memorable if it really occurred.
  - This is contrary to Read's (1997) "trauma forgetting hypothesis" which states that the public believes that if there is a gap in memory that could be accounted for by normal forgetting, that there is an automatic bias towards assuming abuse occurred.
  - In testing the presence of reported abuse with a forgetting and not forgetting condition, we demonstrate a "trauma remembering bias" for believing victims.
- Of particular interest is the interaction of gender with participants' own trauma histories.
  - Males with no trauma history believed abuse reports significantly less than did males with a history of high betrayal trauma (e.g. sexual abuse by someone close), and females with and without high betrayal trauma histories.
  - While it may seem intuitive that one who has not had a traumatic experience may be more likely to doubt others' reports of such experience, this was not the case for females with no high betrayal trauma experiences.

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