

Misleading and Confusing Media Portrayals of Memory Research

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Fitzpatrick's memory of James Porter: A documented case of recovered memory

Frank Fitzpatrick... began remembering having been sexually molested by a parish priest at age 12. ... Mr. Fitzpatrick's retrieval of the repressed memories began, he said, when "I was feeling a great mental pain..."

Mr. Fitzpatrick... slowly realized that the mental pain was due to a "betrayal of some kind," and remembered the sound of heavy breathing. "Then I realized I had been sexually abused by someone I loved," said Mr. Fitzpatrick.

But it was not until two weeks later that he suddenly remembered the priest, the Rev. James R. Porter.

The New York Times, 21 July 1992

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My initial research question

- Why and how would individuals remain unaware of (or forget) traumas they had experienced?
 - Proposed answer: Betrayal Trauma theory (Freyd, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2001)
 - See <http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/~jjf/defineBT.html>

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A different question often asked in the media:

“Are recovered memories accurate?”

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Frank Fitzpatrick's memory of prolonged child sexual abuse by Father James Porter was corroborated

- Fitzpatrick's personal investigation resulted in tape-recorded incriminatory statements by Porter
- Eventual identification of dozens of others victims
- Porter was prosecuted criminally in Fall River, Massachusetts, and he pled guilty.
- For an archive of this and other documented cases see: www.RecoveredMemory.org

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Confusing Controversy in the early 1990s

- In the early 1990s we lacked knowledge:
 - Fitzpatrick's and other's memories were corroborated
 - But in other cases there was little or no corroboration
- However, a decade later we now know a lot about these issues
 - For scientific analysis see:
 - Sivers, H., Schooler, J. , Freyd, J. J. (2002) Recovered memories. In V.S. Ramachandran (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of the Human Brain*, Volume 4. (pp 169-184). Academic Press.
 - Available at:
<http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/~jif/articles/recoveredmemories.pdf>

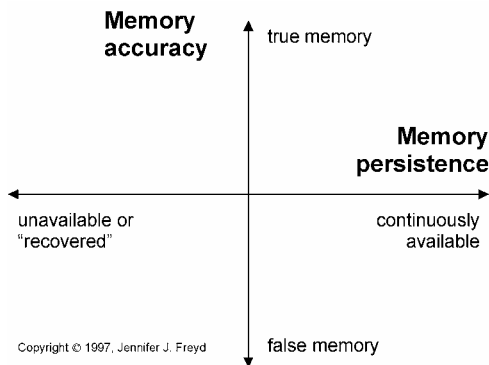
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Why is there still so much confusion and misinformation about memory for abuse?

- One problem is the conflating of 2 separate issues

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Memory accuracy vs. memory persistence

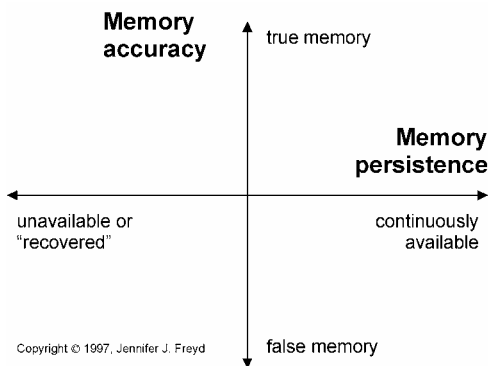


- Common conflation of memory accuracy with memory persistence
- But, these are separate dimensions (Freyd, 1998)

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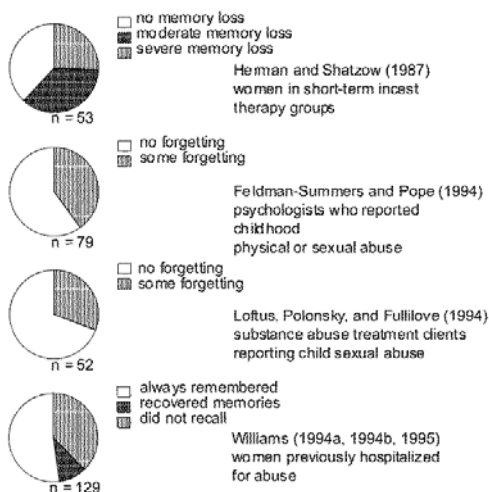
"False versus Recovered Memories" is a False Dichotomy



- **Dimensions are conceptually separate**
- **Empirically separate**
- Mental events occur in all 4 quadrants
- We can have memories that are largely true or false whether recovered or continuous

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A substantial minority of abuse victims report some forgetting



Rates of forgetting sexual abuse from three retrospective studies and one prospective study.

Forgetting occurs for many different types of trauma

- Elliot (1997)
 - Delayed recall reported by 32% of those who reported some form of trauma.
- Complete memory loss most common for:
 - victims of child sexual abuse (20%)
 - witnesses of combat injury (16%)
 - victims of adult rape (13%)
 - witnesses of domestic violence as a child (13%)

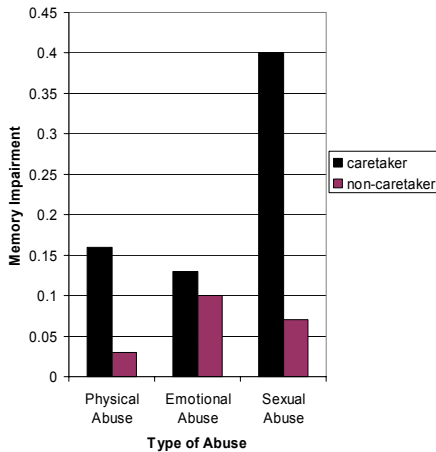
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What causes forgetting?

- According to Betrayal Trauma Theory (Freyd, 1996, 2001), an important reason people forget abuse is that it helps them stay attached to their abusive caregivers – and they need to be attached if they are dependent upon that person.
- Empirical tests of betrayal trauma theory include comparing memory for abuse perpetrated by a caregiver versus abuse perpetrated by a non-caregiver.
- See <http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/~jjf/defineBT.html>

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Memory Impairment related to Victim-Perpetrator Relationship (Freyd, DePrince, & Zurbriggen, 2001)



- College student population of 202 participants.
- Abuse perpetrated by a caregiver is related to less persistent memories of abuse.
- Caretaker status significant for sexual and physical abuse.
- Follow-up regression analyses: Age and duration of abuse did not account for findings.

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So we know

- Memory persistence is separate from memory accuracy
- Some recovered memories are corroborated
- A substantial minority of abuse victims report some forgetting
- Forgetting is related to victim-perpetrator relationship
- Why the continued confusion?
 - Overgeneralization of research results
 - Misleading and confusing term: "False Memory"

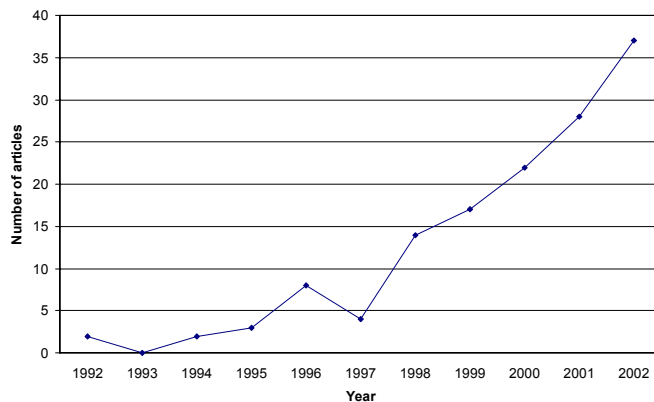
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"False memory" is not scientifically derived

- The phrase "false memory syndrome" had its origins in a social movement that questions the veracity of memories for childhood sexual abuse
- Shortly after the term "false memory" gained prominence in the popular media, the term was introduced to the scientific research literature to describe fairly subtle errors in memory:
 - Participants learned a list of words (e.g., bed, tired) and later were tested. Results: participants sometimes remembered a related, but not presented, item "sleep"
 - Originally Deese (1959) called this an "intrusion"
 - Roediger and McDermott (1995) renamed it "false memory"
- This use of the term has become very popular...

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Number of articles per year (1992-2002) from selected memory/cognitive journals that used the term "false memory/ies" to refer to subtle errors in memory (DePrince, Allard, Oh, & Freyd, tentatively accepted for publication pending acceptance of revisions)



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Critique of "false memory" term use in cognitive word-learning tasks (Freyd & Gleaves, 1996)

- It is predictable that participants who memorize a list with words such as: **shoe, hand, toe, kick, sandals** might think that **foot** was on the list
- But what does this really imply regarding the idea that people fabricate memories of *abusive events that never happened?*

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Bugs Bunny to "false memories": over-generalization (see <http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/~jjf/bugs.html>)

- Last year at AAAS meeting it was reported that some participants can be led to believe they saw Bugs Bunny at Disneyland
- This finding was reported very widely and almost always in the context of "false memories"
- By implying a connection between misremembering a cartoon character and situations of child abuse, and using the term "false memories" the issues are distorted
- Let's not to trivialize memory for child abuse

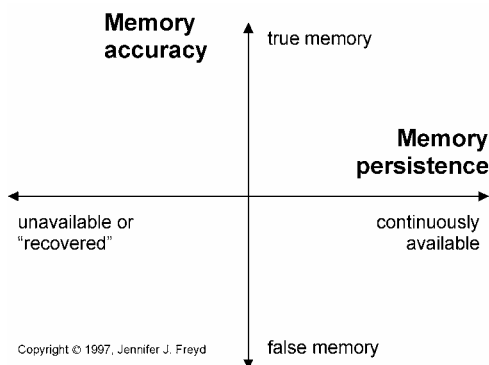
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Does this over generalization and imprecise use of language matter?



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New Study (Cromer & Freyd, in prep): Believability of Abuse Disclosures as a function of type of memory



- Remember: The scientific research provides no indication that memory accuracy is correlated with memory persistence
- Are people biased in their acceptance of abuse disclosures as a function of the type of memory?

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Cromer & Freyd (in prep)

- 327 undergraduates read vignettes
- Vignettes described a disclosure of childhood abuse
- 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 design: gender of victim x type of memory x type of abuse x closeness of perpetrator
- Each participant saw only one type of memory and one gender of victim
- Participants rated each vignette on judged accuracy and believability of victim's disclosure

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- None of the 4 factors we varied has been empirically related to the actual veracity of abuse claims
 - But would these factors bias willingness to believe abuse disclosures?

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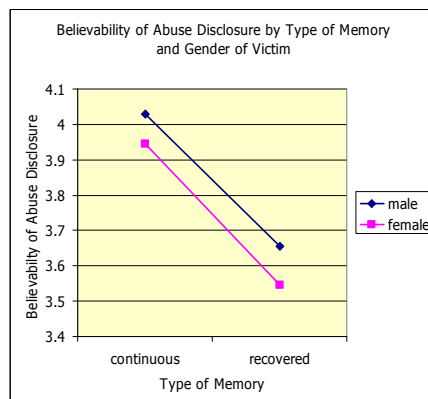
Example Vignettes

- Continuous Memory:
 - A college friend, David, confides in you that he was forced by his father to have sex with him when he was 9 years old. David tells you that he has **always remembered** this aspect of his childhood, **but** he has never told anyone until now.
- Recovered Memory:
 - A college friend, David, confides in you that he was forced by his father to have sex with him when he was 9 years old. David tells you that he has **only recently remembered** this aspect of his childhood, **and also** that he has never told anyone until now.
- Participants rated believability of David's report

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Cromer & Freyd (in prep) Results

- Type of Memory significantly predicted belief ratings
- Participants rated continuous memories as more believable than recovered memories ($p < .0001$)
- This bias suggests ignorance and confusion about memory for abuse



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In Conclusion: What we know so far

- Abuse and interpersonal victimization is a staggering problem
- Some people forget the abuse
- Forgetting is more likely when the perpetrator was a care giver
- Memory accuracy is separate from memory persistence
- People have unscientific and biased ideas about these issues

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Recommendations

- Our duty as scientists is to provide accurate information so we focus on the real problems – e.g. the devastation of child abuse
- The media has a duty to disseminate accurate information to the public

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What needs to change?

- We need to stop confusing the persistence of a memory with its accuracy
 - There is no compelling evidence that a memory is more or less accurate if it is continuous compared with recovered
 - There *is* evidence that memories are more likely to be forgotten if the perpetrator is a care giver

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Being responsible

- We need to resist sensationalizing research in order to make headlines
 - A subject misremembering the word "shoe" after seeing similar words, does not suggest that she would falsely remember being raped
 - The Bugs Bunny in Disneyland research is about an innocuous event, where subjects confuse which cartoon character they met when visiting a theme park
 - We sensationalize this interesting research when we generalize it to salient, personal, often painful betrayals such as child abuse

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In conclusion

- Let's keep doing good research
- Let's disseminate it responsibly
- Let's not sensationalize it or take it out of context
- Let's educate the public about the profound problem of child abuse, including its causes & consequences
- Let's not hurt victims more by not believing them just because they forgot for some period of time

Slides posted at my lab website:
<http://dynamic.uoregon.edu>

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