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Freud's troubled children

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First it was parents, then social workers and teachers. Now it is clergy who have had accusations of child sexual abuse made against them, based solely on 'recovered' memories. But with psychologists still divided as to whether these recollections are genuine or not, how can a court investigating truth trust these shadows of the past?

Can the mind remember to forget? Behind this seeming paradox lies a debate that befuddles much discussion about child sexual abuse. Last month, Fr Stanislaus Hobbs, a 76-year-old priest at Ealing Abbey, London, became the latest person to be charged with sexual abuse when his accuser claimed to have remembered a forgotten incident. Fr Hobbs was acquitted after the claimant, a 30-year-old senior journalist, said that the monk had abused him when a teenager, the memory of which was said to have been triggered by a sexual experience many years later between the accuser and his girlfriend.

Such claims have been put down, at times, to the working of Freud's theory of repression, a defence mechanism that forces unpalatable experiences, which the mind cannot deal with, into the unconscious. The antithesis of this (and, indeed, of the whole idea that people can forget anything traumatic) has been stated bluntly by Professor Elizabeth Loftus, the American psychologist: "When people have been abused in their childhood, their problem is not that they can't remember, but that they can't forget."

Repression is now frequently dismissed by many clinicians, even those who disagree with Professor Loftus' general thesis. Dr Chris Brewin, Professor of Clinical Psychology at University College London, makes a distinction between "the observation that people forget" and the "theoretical mechanisms of dissociation and repression that are very difficult to prove". Suppressed memories are about events that are supposed to have occurred many years, even decades, in the past. Yet the accuracy even of memories that have always been conscious but refer back so far has led some to doubt their soundness. This is something occasionally raised when bringing alleged Nazi war criminals to trial.

How memory works is, after all, not straightforward. It can be unreliable and the most vivid and detailed memories can be based on inaccurate recall. When we do remember, it is not like a film re-running in our minds. Memory can work imperfectly, and can embellish and retell rather than bring forth an unvarnished version of the past. This is not to say that memory is not to be trusted; rather that its validity can be disputed when there is no corroboration through another's testimony or material evidence.

The British False Memory Society was established in 1992 in part to combat what it sees as the injustice of accusations (and sometimes wrongful convictions) suffered by those said, on the basis of recovered or repressed memories, to be guilty of sexual abuse.

The society claims that there are no corroborated cases. When it was put to Madeline Greenhalgh, director of the BFMS, that, in fact, hundreds of studies of corroboration have been published, she replied: "The alleged corroboration might be from a sibling but accepting this as evidence is flawed. I believe it is exceptionally difficult to measure the accuracy of any case which claims to be a 'recovered memory' case because of the problem of semantics, genuine recall difficulties and the ease with which

a vulnerable individual can come to believe in a history of abuse from a certain point in their lives and yet describe this as 'an always known' history, because they say they 'always knew something was wrong but didn't know what it was'."

There have, indeed, been "false memories" and injustices. Memories can be "recovered" as a result of implantation by therapists, as well as by malice. They can arise falsely (as well as genuinely) when supposedly triggered by events and by reading and seeing films or television programmes.

However, the BFMS is dismissive of all supposedly recovered memories, and approvingly refers to Professor Richard J. McNally of Harvard, whose book *Remembering Trauma* asserts that "the notion that the mind protects itself by repressing or dissociating memories of trauma, rendering them inaccessible to awareness is a piece of psychiatric folklore devoid of convincing empirical support". The controversy came to prominence in the 1980s, when child sexual abuse itself had been widely recognised for only 10 to 15 years. Professor Loftus' work has given substance to a deep scepticism about the whole notion that traumatic memories can be forgotten. She has never worked as a clinician but she has been responsible for 200 experiments with 20,000 individuals. Powerful as is her evidence that it is possible for people to testify to events that never happened by having the "memory" implanted, however, it does not negate the arguments that there can be genuine recovered memories or disprove the claim that memories can be suppressed.

Dr Chris Brewin says: "The normal response is for people to remember but there appears to be a subset of people who tend to forget. With those who were abused in childhood, forgetting may be a response which helps the child to cope in the short term because it is not safe for them to remember."

Child sexual abuse is a highly sensitive area, where accusations of abuse disrupt family relationships and cause immense distress. Those who tend most to doubt accusations are the families (and their advocates) who are accused or connected with the accused: the partners, brothers and sisters. Chris Freeman, consultant psychiatrist and psychotherapist at Royal Edinburgh Hospital, who routinely treats all kinds of trauma, suggests that there may be something different about memories of sexual abuse within families, which may be more likely to make them forgotten, repressed or avoided.

The atmosphere, then, is not conducive to calm and rational debate. Child abuse raises ambivalent responses; conviction rates are low and many people who are guilty either fail to be brought to trial or if accused are then found not guilty. In Orkney in 1991 and Shieldfield nursery, Newcastle, in 1993 false memory played a part in perpetrating gross injustices, in the one case to parents, in the other to two care workers.

The British Psychological Society, in a carefully worded report in 1994, drew attention to the problems of defining repression but found evidence of genuine recovered memory. However, in 1999 the Royal College of Psychiatrists published a report that found no "empirical evidence" to support repression or dissociation, although there is "much clinical support for these concepts". It also referred to "abundant evidence" that false memories do occur. But the opposition among psychiatrists meant that the College never accepted the report and it remains no more than the views of its four - albeit distinguished - authors.

Another aspect is drawn attention to by Dr Freeman: "I think one of the areas that causes confusion is that different levels of proof are needed in different situations," said Dr Freeman. "In a criminal court, beyond reasonable doubt; in a civil court, on the balance of probabilities; and in a clinical situation balancing the hierarchy of clinical responsibility to your patient, their family and to other children who might be at risk. The degree of proof that is required in a legal setting is simply not appropriate or achievable in most clinical settings."

Dr Adrian Skinner, clinical psychologist and expert witness, recognises the problem that such

memories do not easily lend themselves to the evidential demands of a court of law. But, he says, it is up to courts to test the validity of memories, making the obvious point that they play a vital role in all kinds of prosecutions. He personally does not believe that it is possible to invent something as "shattering" as child abuse.

Indeed, there is much evidence of suppressed memory in other areas, although even this is doubted by the BFMS. Madeline Greenhalgh told me: "There are numerous claims, alleged to have been recovered, of war atrocities, by individuals who have been shown not to have been involved in the war at all." But while, perhaps inevitably given the still-developing understanding of memory, there are some professionals who do not accept the idea of recovered memory, the great majority of those professionally involved tend to think otherwise. The real disagreement tends to be between them and advocacy groups like the BFMS and its several overseas equivalents.

The main issue is whether it is possible to forget something as traumatic as child sexual abuse. There are certainly false accusations and wrongful imprisonments. Certain vulnerable and suggestible people can attribute problems they experience in adulthood to childhood abuse, which did not in fact take place, if a therapist repeatedly suggests abuse as the cause of these problems. It is obvious, too, that those subjected to even true accusations will deny them. There are bizarre "memories" such as satanic abuse and alien abduction.

The fact is that memory can be unreliable and, at times, grossly inaccurate, while it can also reflect past reality. The weight of the evidence, professional opinion, common sense and everyday experience is that traumatic memories can be suppressed, but others can be false. This suggests the need for a balanced approach, which has been conspicuous by its absence.

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