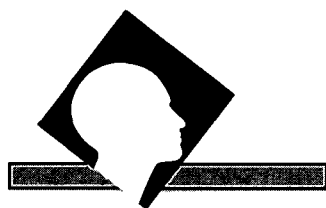


Notes of a Fringe-Watcher



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■ *The False Memory Syndrome*

In March 1992, a group of distinguished psychologists and psychiatrists, including CSICOP's Ray Hyman, banded together to form the False Memory Syndrome (FMS) Foundation. The organization is headquartered in Philadelphia under the direction of educator Pamela Freyd. Its purpose: to combat a fast-growing epidemic of dubious therapy that is ripping thousands of families apart, scarring patients for life, and breaking the hearts of innocent parents and other relatives. It is, in fact, the mental-health crisis of the 1990s.

The tragic story begins with Freud. Early in his career, when he made extensive use of hypnotism, Freud was amazed by the number of mesmerized women who dredged up childhood memories of being raped by their fathers. It was years before he became convinced that most of these women were fantasizing. Other analysts and psychiatrists agreed. For more than half a century the extent of incestuous child abuse was minimized. Not until about 1980 did the pendulum start to swing the other way as more solid evidence of child sexual abuse began to surface. There is now no longer any doubt that such incest is much more prevalent than the older Freud or the general public realized.

Then in the latter 1980s a bizarre therapeutic fad began to emerge in the United States. Hundreds of poorly trained therapists, calling themselves "traumatists," began to practice the very techniques Freud had discarded. All over the land they are putting patients under hypnosis and subtly prodding them into recalling childhood sexual traumas, memories of which presumably have been totally obliterated for decades. Decades Delayed Disclosure, or DDD, it has been called. Eighty percent of the patients who are claimed to experience DDD are women from 25 to 45 years old. Sixty percent of their parents are college graduates, 25 percent with advanced degrees. More than 80 percent of their parents are married to their first spouse.

Here is a typical scenario. A woman in her thirties seeks therapy for symptoms ranging from mild depression, anxiety, headaches, or the inability to lose weight, to more severe symptoms like anorexia. Her therapist, having succumbed to the latest mental-health fad, decides almost at once that the symptoms are caused by repressed memories of childhood abuse. Profoundly shocked by this suggestion, the woman vigorously denies that such a thing could be possible. The stronger her denial, the

more the therapist believes she is repressing painful memories.

The patient may be hypnotized, or given sodium amytal, or placed into a relaxed, trancelike state. Convinced that a childhood trauma is at the root of the patient's ills, the therapist repeatedly urges the woman to try to remember the trauma. If she is highly suggestible and eager to please the therapist, she begins to respond to leading questions and to less obvious signs of the therapist's expectations.

After months, or even years, images begin to form in the patient's mind. Shadowy figures threaten her sexually. Under continual urging, these memories grow more vivid. She begins to recognize the molester as her father, or grandfather, or uncle. The more detailed the visions, the more convinced both she and the therapist become that the terrible truth is finally being brought to consciousness. To better-trained psychiatrists, these details indicate just the opposite. Childhood memories are notoriously vague. Recalling minute details is a strong sign of fantasizing.

As the false memories become more convincing, the patient's anger toward a once-loved relative grows. The therapist urges her to vent this rage, to confront the perpetrator, even to sue for psychic damage. Stunned by their daughter's accusations, the parents vigorously deny everything. Of course they will deny it, says the therapist, perhaps even suppress their own memories of what happened. The family is devastated. A loving daughter has inexplicably been transformed into a bitter enemy. She may join an "incest survivor" group, where her beliefs are reinforced by hearing similar tales. She may wear a sweat-shirt saying, "I survived."

No one doubts that childhood sexual assaults occur, but in almost every case the event is never forgot-

ten. Indeed, it festers as a lifelong source of shame and anger. 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 a memory means to completely forget the experience without any conscious effort to do so); they try unsuccessfully to forget them. That traumas experienced as a child can be totally forgotten for decades is the great mental-health myth of our time—a myth that is not only devastating innocent families but doing enormous damage to psychiatry.

In the past, when juries found a parent guilty of child incest, there has been corroborating evidence: photos, diaries, letters, testimony by others, a history of sexual misconduct, or even open admission of guilt. Juries today are increasingly more often judging a parent guilty without any confirming evidence other than the therapy-induced memories of the "victim."

Patients as well as their families can be scarred for life. They are led to believe that bringing suppressed memories to light will banish their symptoms. On the contrary, the symptoms usually get worse because of traumatic breaks with loved ones. Moreover, this treatment can also cause a patient to refuse needed therapy from psychiatrists who have not fallen prey to the FMS epidemic. Pamela Freyd has likened the traumatists to surgeons doing brain surgery with a knife and fork. Others see the epidemic as similar in many ways to the great witch-hunts of the past, when disturbed women were made to believe they were in Satan's grip. The Devil has been replaced by the evil parent.

FMS takes many forms other than

parental sexual abuse. Thousands of victims are being induced by traumatists to recall childhood participation in satanic cults that murder babies, eat their flesh, and practice even more revolting rituals. Although there is widespread fascination with the occult, and an amusing upsurge in the number of persons who fancy themselves benevolent witches or warlocks, police have yet to uncover any compelling evidence that satanic cults exist. Yet under hypnosis and soporific drugs, memories of witnessing such rituals can become as vivid as memories of sexual abuse.

Thousands of other patients, highly suggestible while half asleep, are now "remembering" how they were abducted, and sometimes sexually abused, by aliens in spaceships from faraway planets. Every year or so victims of this form of FMS (assuming they are not charlatans) will write persuasive books about their adventures with extraterrestrials. The books will be heavily advertised and promoted on talk shows, and millions of dollars will flow into the pockets of the authors and the books' uncaring publishers. Still another popular form of FMS, sparked by the New Age obsession with reincarnation, is the recovering of memories of past lives.

Pop-psychology books touting the myth that memories of childhood molestations can be suppressed for decades are becoming as plentiful as books about reincarnation, satanic cults, and flying saucers. Far and away the worst offender is a best-seller titled *Courage to Heal* (Harper & Row, 1988), by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis. Although neither author has had any training in psychiatry, the book has become a bible for women convinced they are incest survivors. Davis thinks she herself is a survivor, having recalled under therapy being attacked by her grandfather. A survey of

several hundred accused parents revealed that in almost every case their daughters had been strongly influenced by *Courage to Heal*. (See box for some of the book's more outrageous passages.)

From the growing literature of FMS cases I cite a few typical horrors. A 28-year-old woman accuses her father of molesting her when she was six months old. "I recall my father put his penis near my face and rubbed it on my face and mouth." There is not the slightest evidence that a child of six months can acquire lasting memories of any event.

Betsy Petersen, in *Dancing with Daddy* (Bantam, 1991) tells of being convinced by her therapist that she had been raped by her father when she was three. "I don't know if I made it up or not," she told the therapist. "It feels like a story," he replied, "because when something like that happens, everyone acts like it didn't."

In 1986 Patti Barton sued her father for sexually abusing her when she was seven to fifteen months old. She did not remember this until her thirty-second therapy session. She recalls trying to tell her mother what happened by saying, "Ma, ma, ma, ma!" and "Da, da, da, da!"

Geraldo Rivera, in 1991, had three trauma survivors on his "Geraldo" television show. One woman insisted she had murdered 40 children while she was in a satanic cult but had totally forgotten about it until her memories were aroused in therapy. Well-known entertainers have boosted the FMS epidemic by openly discussing their traumas on similar sensational talk shows. Roseanne Barr recently learned for the first time, while in therapy, that she had been repeatedly molested by her parents, starting when she was three months old! Her story made the cover of *People* magazine. Barr's parents and sisters deny

Passages from *Courage to Heal*, the "Bible" of Incest Survivors

"You may think you don't have memories, but often as you begin to talk about what you do remember, there emerges a constellation of feelings, reactions and recollections that add up to substantial information. To say, 'I was abused,' you don't need the kind of recall that would stand up in a court of law. Often the knowledge that you were abused starts with a tiny feeling, an intuition. . . . Assume your feelings are valid. . . . If you think you were abused and your life shows the symptoms, then you were."

"If you don't remember your abuse you are not alone. Many women don't have memories, and some never get memories. This doesn't mean they weren't abused."

"If you maintained the fantasy that your childhood was 'happy,' then you have to grieve for the childhood you thought you had. . . . You must give up the idea that your parents had your best interest at heart. . . . If you have any loving feelings toward your

abuser, you must reconcile that love with the fact that he abused you. . . . You may have to grieve over the fact that you don't have an extended family for your children, that you'll never receive an inheritance, that you don't have family roots."

"If your memories of the abuse are still fuzzy, it is important to realize that you may be grilled for details. . . . Of course such demands for proof are unreasonable. You are not responsible for proving that you were abused."

"If you're willing to get angry and the anger just doesn't seem to come, there are many ways to get in touch with it. A little like priming the pump, you can do things that will get your anger started. Then once you get the hang of it, it'll begin to flow on its own."

"You may dream of murder or castration. It can be pleasurable to fantasize such scenes in vivid detail. . . . Let yourself imagine it to your heart's content."

it and have threatened legal action. A former Miss America, Marilyn Van Derbur, has been in the news proclaiming her decades-delayed recollection of abuse by her father, now deceased.

It is an alarming trend that a dozen states have revised their statute-of-limitations laws and now permit legal action against parents within three

years of the time the abuse was *remembered*! In 1990 the first conviction based on "repressed memory" occurred. George Franklin was given a life sentence for murdering an 8-year-old in 1969 almost entirely on the basis of his daughter's memory, allegedly repressed for 20 years, of having witnessed his murdering her friend. A year later a Pennsylvania

man was convicted of murder on the basis of a man's detailed account of what he had seen when he was five, but had totally forgotten for 16 years.

Although therapists usually deny asking leading questions, tapes of their sessions often prove otherwise. If no memories surface they will prod a patient to make up a story. After many repetitions and elaborations of the invented scenario, the patient starts to believe the story is true. One therapist, who claims to have treated 1,500 incest victims, explained her approach. She would say to a patient: "You know, in my experience, a lot of people who are struggling with many of the same problems you are have often had some kind of really painful things happen to them as kids—maybe they were beaten or molested. And I wonder if anything like that ever happened to you?" Another traumatist says: "You sound to me like the sort of person who must have been sexually abused. Tell me what that bastard did to you."

The FMS epidemic would not be so bad if such therapists were frauds interested only in money, but the sad truth is that they are sincere. So were the doctors who once tried to cure patients by bleeding, and the churchmen who "cured" witches by torture, hanging, and burning.

Better-trained, older psychiatrists do not believe that childhood memories of traumas can be repressed for any length of time, except in rare cases of actual brain damage. Nor is there any evidence that hypnosis improves memory. It may increase certitude, but not accuracy. And there is abundant evidence that totally false memories are easily aroused in the mind of a suggestible patient.

A two-part article by Lawrence Wright, "Remembering Satan" (*New Yorker*, May 17 and 24, 1993), tells the tragic story of Paul Ingram, a

respected police officer in Olympia, Washington, who was accused by his two adult daughters of sexually abusing them as children. Ingram's family are devout Pentecostals who believe that Satan can wipe out all memories of such crimes. Ingram remembered nothing, but after five months of intensive questioning, he came to believe himself guilty. Psychologist Richard Ofshe, writing on "Inadvertent Hypnosis During Interrogation" (*International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 11:125-155, 1992), tells how he fabricated an imaginary incident of Ingram's sexual abuse of a son and daughter. After repeated suggestions that he try to "see" this happening, Ingram produced a written confession!

Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist, tells of his vivid memory of an attempted kidnapping when he was two. The thief had been foiled by Piaget's nurse, who bravely fought off the man. When Piaget was in his teens the nurse confessed that she made up the story to win admiration, even scratching herself to prove there had been a struggle. Piaget had heard the story so often that it seeped into his consciousness as a detailed memory.

Paul McHugh, a psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins University, in "Psychiatric Misadventures" (*American Scholar*, Fall 1992), writes about a woman who under therapy came to believe she had been sexually assaulted by an uncle. She recalled the exact date. Her disbelieving mother discovered that at that time her brother was in military service in Korea. Did this alter the woman's belief? Not much. "I see, Mother," she said. "Yes. Well let me think. If your dates are right, I suppose it must have been Dad."

Although the incest-recall industry is likely to grow in coming years, as it spreads around the world, there are some hopeful signs. Here and there

women are beginning to discover how cruelly they have been deceived and are suing therapists for inducing false memories that caused them and their parents great suffering. They are known as "recanters" or "retractors."

Another welcome trend is that distinguished psychologists and psychiatrists are now writing papers about the FMS epidemic. I particularly recommend the book *Confabulations* (Social Issues Research Series, Boca Raton, Fla., 1992) by Eleanor Goldstein, and the following three articles: "Beware the Incest-Survivor Machine," by psychologist Carol Tavris, in the *New York Times Book Review* (January 3, 1993); "The Reality of Repressed Memories," by Elizabeth Loftus (psychologist, University of Washington), scheduled for publication in *American Psychologist*, and "Making Monsters," by Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters, in *Society* (March 1993). Most of this column is based on material in those articles. Copies can be obtained, along with other literature, from the FMS Foundation, 3401 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. The phone number is 215-387-1865, Fax: 215-387-1917.

The FMS Foundation is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to seek reasons for the FMS epidemic, to work for the prevention of new cases, and to aid victims. By the end of 1992, only ten months after its founding, more than two thousand distressed parents had contacted the Foundation for advice on how to cope with sudden attacks by angry daughters who had accused them of horrible crimes.

I trust that no one reading this column will get the impression that either I or members of the FMS Foundation are not fully aware that many women are indeed sexually abused as children and that their abusers should be punished. In its newsletter of January 8, 1993, the

Foundation responded to criticism that somehow its efforts are a backlash against feminism. Their reply: Is it not "harmful to feminism to portray women as having minds closed to scientific information and as being satisfied with sloppy, inaccurate statistics? Could it be viewed as a profound insult to women to give them slogans rather than accurate information about how memory works?"

The point is not to deny that hideous sexual abuse of children occurs, but that, when it does, it is not forgotten and only "remembered" decades later under hypnosis. Something is radically amiss when therapist E. Sue Blume, in her book *Secret Survivors*, can maintain: "Incest is easily the greatest underlying reason why women seek therapy. . . . It is my experience that fewer than half of the women who experience this trauma later remember or identify it as abuse. Therefore it is not unreasonable that *more than half of all women* are survivors of childhood sexual trauma."

As Carol Tavris, author of *Mismeasure of Women*, comments in her article cited above: "Not one of these assertions is supported by empirical evidence."

This marks the beginning of Martin Gardner's second decade as a regular SKEPTICAL INQUIRER columnist. His first column, "Lessons of a Landmark PK Hoax," appeared in our Summer 1983 issue. Many of his columns have been reprinted (often with postscripts) in his books The New Age (Prometheus, 1988, 1991) and On the Wild Side (Prometheus, 1992). Some appear in the SI anthologies Science Confronts the Paranormal (Prometheus, 1986) and The Hundredth Monkey and Other Paradigms of the Paranormal (Prometheus, 1991).