

A COGNITIVE CORROBORATIVE CASE STUDY APPROACH FOR INVESTIGATING DISCOVERED MEMORIES OF SEXUAL ABUSE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, memory researchers have convincingly illustrated the dangerous role that suggestion may play in inducing fabricated memories of childhood trauma. Although post-event suggestion had long been known to alter the recollection of details of events (e.g., Loftus, Miller, & Burns, 1978; Schooler, Gerhard, & Loftus, 1986), recent research has demonstrated that experimenter suggestions can cause the vivid recollection of events that never occurred (Ceci, Loftus, Leichtman, & Bruck, 1994; Hyman, 1995; Loftus & Ketcham, 1994). Suggestions can even cause individuals to falsely recall being repeatedly exposed to negative situations that are unlikely to have ever happened (see Lindsay, this volume). The documented power of suggestion to induce memories of experiences that never occurred is especially alarming in light of the suggestive techniques that a minority of therapists are known to use with their clients in pursuit of forgotten memories of abuse (e.g., Polusny & Follette, 1996; Poole, Lindsay, Memon, & Bull, 1995; Yapko, 1994). If individuals can be induced to recall false memories under the modest persuasive pressures used in the laboratory, one can only imagine the dangers of therapy settings in which potentially unwarranted suggestions of abuse are made: 1) by a trusted authoritative figure; 2) over potentially years of sessions, and; 3) with a patient who may be particularly suggestible either due to hypnosis (cf. Lynn, this volume) or as a natural consequence of their dissociative tendencies (cf. Hyman & Billings, 1995) which are commonly associated with patients "diagnosed" as likely victims of abuse.

The alarming dangers of suggestion-induced memories of trauma have caused many memory researchers to sound the alarm, alerting the field and, in particular, clinicians of

the potential risks of certain therapeutic practices (e.g., Ceci, Loftus, Leichtman, & Bruck, 1994; Lindsay & Read, 1994, 1995; Loftus, 1993). Such warnings are gravely needed, and indeed, of such priority that it is understandable that memory researchers have focused their efforts on further illuminating the risks of suggestion. Nevertheless, we believe that the time has come for basic memory researchers to also begin to investigate the other side of the issue; namely, how individuals may sometimes discover memories corresponding to actual trauma. As we have noted in the past (Schooler, 1994; Schooler, Bendiksen, & Am-badar, in press), such an endeavor will necessarily require the adoption of methodologies and sources of data that lack the rigor we have grown accustomed to in the laboratory. However, although perfectly suited for certain memory questions, the laboratory also has its costs, sacrificing ecological validity for control (cf. Neisser, 1978). Recollections of seemingly forgotten memories of sexual abuse are, for a host of pragmatic, ethical, and possibly scientific reasons, unlikely to ever be fully reproducible in the laboratory. As a result, examination of these types of memories requires that we investigate actual cases in which recollections of allegedly forgotten trauma have been reported. This chapter reviews our recent efforts to examine such cases. Our approach draws on cognitive principles and uses as much methodological rigor as possible, but, it ultimately relies on the imperfect sources of data that cases afford.

1.1. Discovered Memories

Before discussing our cases, it is important to clearly define the phenomenon under investigation. Our goal has been to characterize and corroborate recollective experiences in which individuals discover memories of seemingly forgotten abuse. Much confusion has arisen over the name for this alleged phenomenon. Such recollections have been characterized as recovered (e.g., Pezdek & Banks, 1996), repressed (e.g., Loftus, 1993), delayed (e.g., Harvey & Herman, 1994), exhumed (e.g., Kihlstrom, 1996), and re-instated (Shimamura, this volume). However, in our opinion none of these terms are entirely adequate. The term repressed implies a highly questionable set of mechanisms by which the memories were forgotten and later remembered. The terms recovered, delayed, and re-instated all imply that the memories were lost and then found, a claim which is problematic if the actual authenticity of the experience and the extent of forgetting is unknown. Exhumed, besides possessing an inherently negative connotation, presumes that the memories were retrieved through some extensive digging rather than spontaneously, as is often reported. Although we recognize that any new name will undoubtedly also be vulnerable to criticism, we nevertheless suggest that the term "discovered memories" (and variants such as "memory discoveries" and "discovered memory experiences") may have real merit. First and foremost, the term discovery focuses us on what we believe to be the defining characteristic of these experiences, namely that *the individual has the strong sense of discovering something important in their memory that was not appreciated before*. Second, it does not imply any specific mechanism of forgetting or conditions of recollection. Finally, it encourages patients, clinicians, and indeed the field as a whole to treat such recollections with both the gravity and caution appropriate to all major discovery claims. A memory discovery may be as accurate as that of the double helix or as groundless as the discovery of cold fusion. It may also be, like Columbus' discovery of America, very significant but not at all what it first seemed to be—Columbus, after all, thought he had found India!

1.2. Authenticating the Components of Discovered Memories

In investigating the reality of discovered memories three distinct issues arise, each deserving of separate consideration. First there is the *reality of the event*, that is, whether the discovery corresponds, in at least a general sense, to an actual event or set of events. Second, there is *the reality of the forgetting*, that is whether the individual was in fact unaware of the existence of the memory prior to its discovery. Third, there is *the reality of the discovery experience*, that is, whether the individual actually had an experience of discovering memories of which they believe they were previously unaware. In short, memory discovery experiences should not be considered as black and white cases, either factual or false. Rather, each component of each case must be assessed on its own merit.

2. A CORROBORATIVE INVESTIGATION OF FOUR CASES

In the last few years, we became acquainted with several cases of discovered memories of sexual abuse for which corroborative evidence was available. Our approach to assessing these cases has been relatively straightforward. We first queried the individuals regarding: 1) the discovery experience; 2) their perceptions regarding the prior extent of forgetting; 3) the existence of any sources of corroboration for the event, and; 4) the existence of any sources of corroboration of the forgetting. Following our interviews, we attempted to contact other individuals who could corroborate the event and/or the extent of prior forgetting. These cases are described in greater detail in Schooler, Bendiksen, and Ambadar (in press). In the following discussion we briefly review the characteristics and corroboration of the cases (see Schooler, Bendiksen, & Ambadar, in press, for a more detailed description).

Case 1. The first case was brought to our attention by a colleague of the first author. It involved JR, a 39-year-old male who, at the age of 30 remembered being fondled by a parish priest when he was 12 years old. Subsequent to this initial recollection, JR recalled additional episodes of abuse spanning several years.

Case 2. The second case came to the attention of the second author (a practicing clinician) as a result of a referral from a patient. It involved WB, a 40-year-old female, who at the age of 37 recalled being raped while hitchhiking at age 16.

Case 3. The third case was brought to our attention through a colleague of the first author. It involved TW, a 51-year-old woman, who at the age of 34 recalled being fondled by a family friend while on vacation in Jamaica at age 9.

Case 4. The fourth case involved DN, who brought her case to the attention of the first author following a colloquium presentation that he gave on this topic. DN was a 41-year-old female, who at the age of 35 recalled having been raped and successfully convicting her attacker at age 22.

2.1. Characterization of the Memory Discovery Experiences

Two striking features emerge when we compare the memory discovery experience in each of these four cases. First, in each case the memory "trigger" had some significant

correspondence to the original experience. Second, in each case the discovery was accompanied by marked shock and surprise.

Case 1. JR's experience of discovering a memory of having been abused by a priest occurred after he watched a movie in which the main character grapples with sexual abuse. He reported great shock at the discovery of the memory which occurred "fairly suddenly" with great vividness. As JR described it "I was stunned, I was somewhat confused you know, the memory was very vivid and yet... I didn't know one word about repressed memory."

Case 2. WB's experience of discovering a memory of being raped while hitchhiking occurred the morning after a male friend made an off-hand remark about the virginity of a young woman (WB had been a virgin when she was raped). She also reported great shock at the recollection of this memory noting "complete chaos in my emotions." As she put it "I awoke the next morning with a sudden and clear picture: "My God... I had been raped!! I was 16, just a kid! I couldn't defend myself."

Case 3. TW's experience of discovering a memory of being molested at age 9 occurred after she was invited to see a talk on sex abuse. TW characterized her reaction to the discovery experience as follows, "When I first remembered it, I was surprised. Completely taken back by it. Then I.. I don't even remember speaking... I was completely out of it."

Case 4. DN's experience of discovering a memory of being raped and going to court occurred while driving home thinking about her group therapist's remark that survivors of childhood sex abuse are often also abused as adults (DN had always been aware of her childhood abuse). As with the others, DN was completely taken aback by the memory. As she recounted it: "I had to just sit there for a while because it was just this extreme emotion of fear and total disbelief. Disbelief that it happened, disbelief that I could have forgotten something that traumatic."

2.2. Characterization of the Prior Forgetting

In each case, the individuals were asked several questions regarding their beliefs about their knowledge of the trauma prior to their memory discovery experiences. Three of the four individuals were quite confident that they would not have recalled the experiences even if they had been asked about them directly. However, one individual (WB) was less confident on this question.

Case 1. JR was completely unambiguous in his account of his perceived awareness of the memory prior to discovery, observing

"If you had done a survey of people walking into the movie theater when I saw the movie...asking people about child and sexual abuse "have you ever been, or do you know anybody who has ever been", I would have absolutely, flatly, unhesitatingly, said no!"

Case 2. In response to the question of whether she would have denied the experience even if asked about it directly, WB was a bit more uncertain, noting

"I actually think this is the case. When I wrote my story about rape [WB is a novelist] I can honestly say I had absolutely no connection to the fact that it had been a personal experience. I was writing it "on behalf of others." I thought this is what it must be like for those who experienced rape. I am really uncertain how I would have responded if someone had asked me directly."

Case 3. As with JR, TW also believed that she had no knowledge whatsoever about the existence of the memory prior to its discovery. As she put it, "the state of my memory in that period was none.. non-existent."

Case 4. DN also characterized herself as being completely unaware of the existence of the memory prior to her memory discovery experience, stating

"It's like how could I forget this. As horrible as it was having to go to court ...and having to tell what happened and everything. how could I forget that? I had no idea when I did forget it but I really feel that it had been totally forgotten until that night."

2.3. Corroboration of the Abuse

In each case, efforts were made to identify independent corroborative evidence supporting the individuals' claims regarding their abuse. Although in no case was it possible to find absolutely incontrovertible evidence that documented the precise details of the abuse (e.g., pornographic photos) in each case we were able to find at least reasonably compelling independent sources of support that some type of abuse did occur.

Case 1. In addition to JR's report that he confronted the priest who admitted the abuse, we also independently acquired corroborative evidence in the form of an interview with another individual. This individual reported that he had also been the victim of sexual advances by the priest (a memory which he reported he had never forgotten).

Case 2. We interviewed WB's ex-husband who had talked with WB the day after the alleged rape occurred. He indicated that she initially reported having had a "bad experience" in which she had sex "involuntarily" but had not protested and that a few days later she had described it as "something like rape".

Case 3. As with WB, TW also discussed her experience with her former husband prior to her memory discovery experience. In an separate interview, TW's husband reported that she had mentioned the abuse incident several times over the course of their marriage (which ended prior to the discovery).

Case 4. Because DN's case was actually taken to trial, corroboration was relatively straightforward. In a telephone interview, her lawyer at the time (who is now a judge) verified that the case did in fact go to court, and that the accused was found guilty of rape.

2.4. Corroboration of the Forgetting

All aspects of discovered memories are inherently difficult to substantiate, but, the actual extent of prior forgetting is perhaps the most difficult of all. Indeed, even scientifically speaking it is not always entirely clear what is meant by the construct of complete forgetting. Does it mean not recalled for an extended period of time, or not recalled even

under conditions that might be expected to cue it (whatever those might be), or actually lost from memory, that is, unavailable under any circumstances? As Tulving and Pearlstone (1966) noted years ago, a memory can be available (i.e., in principle retrievable given the appropriate cuing conditions) even if it is not currently accessed (i.e., recalled under the present cuing conditions). These subtleties illustrate that the notion of complete forgetting is a hypothetical construct which is really quite difficult to define and even more difficult to demonstrate. Nevertheless, in two of our cases we do have suggestive evidence that the memories of the experiences may have been less accessible at certain points in their lives. For example, a former therapist of JR's indicated that JR had discussed many other embarrassing experiences but had never mentioned being abused by a priest (note the issue of sexual abuse was never mentioned during therapy). Similarly, when DN entered therapy for victims of sexual abuse, she was given an initial interview to assess her history of abuse. During this interview (as revealed in hospital records made available to the first author), DN described, in detail, her abuse as a child, but did not mention her rape experience.

Although some degree of forgetting is suggested in two of our cases in two other cases, we have rather compelling evidence suggesting that the prior forgetting was not as great as our cases believed. Both WB and TW discussed their abuse experiences with their husbands during a time in which they believed that they had forgotten about the events. They both reported being shocked to learn that they had talked about their abuse experiences with their ex-husbands. In recounting her reaction to learning that she had told her ex-husband about it, DN said she "felt like falling over. Absolutely shocked and floored that it [telling her husband] happened. And I still am. . . I can't remember telling him. I can't think of anything about the memory before [the discovery], and it's very disturbing, actually."

3. WHAT CAN WE EXTRACT FROM THESE CASES?

As we have noted in the past (Schooler *et al.*, in press), the precise conclusions that one draws from the above cases is likely to be influenced by one's a priori beliefs about the phenomenon. If one believes that discovered memories might, at least sometimes, correspond to actual events, then the above cases may seem quite compelling. Alternatively, if one is skeptical that memory discovery experiences ever correspond to actual traumas, then there are certainly ways of dismissing the above cases. We respect the differences in opinion that such a priori beliefs will, and indeed, should cause. We note, however, that a priori beliefs might also lead to skepticism regarding the applicability of laboratory research to this issue. If one is highly doubtful that memories of abuse could be suggested, they might reasonably question the generalizability of suggested memory experiments which, for obvious reasons of ethicality, cannot involve experiences as severe as those mentioned here. We, as noted at the outset, are deeply committed to the view that experimental evidence does have important implications for this issue. Our point is simply that applying laboratory findings to discovered memories of trauma also requires a step between data and conclusion. Although this step is of a different nature (and perhaps magnitude) than that involved in the case studies reported here, it nevertheless illustrates that inferences can be warranted even with imperfect mappings between data and conclusions. In this context, we suggest that the above cases provide reasonably compelling evidence that discovered memories of sexual abuse may sometimes correspond to actual events. In addition, they may offer some useful clues into the nature of discovered memories, in par-

ticular: the conditions under which they occur, their phenomenological quality, and the manner in which they may distort estimations of prior forgetting. We briefly review these three issues.

3.1. The Conditions of Recollection

One notable characteristic of the above cases is the cues that elicited the discovered memories all had some significant correspondence to the original experience: a movie about sexual abuse, an off-hand remark about the virginity of a young woman, the prospect of seeing a talk on sexual abuse, and the observation that survivors of childhood abuse are often abused as adults. This correspondence between retrieval conditions and the original experience suggests the possible involvement of the *encoding specificity principle* (Tulving & Thompson, 1973) which suggests that the probability of retrieval is maximized when the retrieval conditions correspond to encoding conditions. Accordingly, memory discovery experiences may be most likely to be prompted by cues that have some correspondence to the original trauma.

3.2. The Phenomenology of the Discovery Experience

A second striking quality of the above cases is the sudden unpacking and affective on-rush associated with the discovery experience. As WB put it "like a flood, the locks were opened." TW characterized this experience as "like a... a package of some sort... something there that's completely unwound instantly." In this context, the term memory discovery seems particularly applicable because it highlights the parallels between discovering memories of trauma and other types of cognitive discoveries. A well known correlate of cognitive discoveries in the context of problem solving is the "aha" or insight experience in which individuals have a sudden realization followed by an emotional on-rush (Gick & Lockhart, 1995; Schooler, Fallshore, & Fiore, 1995). Although the affective valence of discovering a traumatic memory is obviously quite different from that of discovering a solution to a problem, there still may be important parallels between the surprise and affective on-rush of problem solving and memory discoveries. If so, then the insight processes associated with problem solving discoveries (cf. Sternberg & Davidson, 1995) might have some important relevance to discovered memories.

3.3. Misconstruing Prior Forgetting

A third noteworthy quality of at least two of the cases described here is that they suggest one can forget about a period in which a memory had been remembered. Both WB and TW appeared to be astounded to discover that they had told their husbands about the incidents at a time in which they thought the memory had been forgotten. Such underestimation of prior knowledge has not been well documented before, however the overestimation of prior knowledge certainly has. Research on hindsight biases such as the "knew-it-all-along effect" (e.g., Fischhoff, 1982) has demonstrated that receiving new information on a topic influences individuals' assessments of their prior knowledge such that they overestimate what they previously knew. It seems quite possible that a process analogous to the knew-it-all-along effect, which we have termed the "*forgot-it-all-along-effect*" (Schooler et al., in press), may occur in the context of some memory discovery experiences. Accordingly, if individuals assess their prior degree of forgetting on the basis of their current state, then the emotional agitation at the time of retrieval may cause them

to underestimate their prior knowledge about the event in question. They may reason on the basis of their implicit theories regarding the consistency of psychological attributes (cf. Ross, 1989) "If I am this shocked and surprised now, then I must have previously completely forgotten about the experience." While the memory might be perceived to have been recalled for the first time in years, in reality it may have been recalled previously but without as much emotional punch, perhaps with a less negative interpretation. Indeed, both WB and TW's husbands reported that their wives earlier discussions of their experiences had been "emotionally flat". Of course, it is not clear that this forgot-it-all-along effect is involved in all memory discovery cases, and indeed, it does not seem to fit well with some of the cases described here. However, it does seem at least partially applicable to two of our cases in which the abuse was found to have been remembered at a time in which it was believed to have been forgotten.

4. SUMMARY

Although fraught with challenges, the cognitive corroborative case study approach to investigating discovered memories of abuse has proven to be a useful endeavor. Through such investigations we have found further evidence that memory discovery experiences can correspond to actual incidents of abuse. We have also been able to identify several characteristics of the cases that hint at possible mechanisms. The striking matches between the abuse experiences and the retrieval conditions indicates a possible role of encoding specificity. The "aha" like quality of the memory discovery experience suggests the possible involvement of insight like processes. And the misconstrual of prior forgetting suggests a new type of hindsight bias, termed the "forgot-it-all-along effect," whereby, in the context of emotional recollective experiences, individuals may underestimate their prior knowledge of the memory. We must emphasize that these cases should not be construed as countering the serious risks of suggestive therapy techniques, and more importantly, none of these cases occurred in the context of aggressive recovered memory therapy. Moreover these cases simply do not speak to the relative frequency with which discovered memories are apt to be authentic, fabricated, or some combination of the two. Despite these important limitations, at least one strong conclusion is warranted at this time: A corroborative case study approach, grounded in an understanding of basic cognitive mechanisms, is likely to provide an important tool for furthering our understanding of how individuals can have the shocking experience of discovering memories of seemingly unknown trauma.

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