BOOK REVIEWS  by Daniel L. Schacter

Memory Wars


A debate is raging—in courtrooms, in journals and in the popular press—about the validity of recovered memories of past events. Because these memories often involve sexual abuse and other horrible experiences, the dispute has stimulated broad interest in what is known about how the mind records events. Fascination with the workings of memory is nothing new, of course. Aristotle offered a wide-ranging discourse on memory more than 2,000 years ago, and numerous philosophers since have pondered the mind’s capacity to travel backward in time. But, as recent events reaffirm, science has long had a hard time grappling with that remarkable ability.

Serious research into the nature of memory did not begin until 1885, when the German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus applied scientific method to the analysis of memory. The past decade has been particularly exciting, as scientists from a number of disciplines have begun to develop a thorough understanding of memory. The new analyses range from detailed models of how experiences are recorded to broader theories about the brain systems involved in various forms of memory.

Those of us studying human memory feel optimistic that we are finally at the threshold of understanding some of the deepest enigmas of the mind. Yet this exploration has also developed a dark side. During the past half a dozen years, there has been an explosion of cases in which adult men and women—most frequently, young women undergoing psychotherapy—have seemingly remembered childhood sexual abuse that they had forgotten for years or even decades. Those memories include everything from single episodes of inappropriate touching to years of rape and torture; parents or other close family members are typically recalled as the perpetrators. Patients frequently become overwhelmingly convinced of the reality of their recovered memories; the accused often deny the memories with equal fervor.

Are these memories accurate recollections of terrible traumas or phantoms of events that never happened? Have therapists developed effective new memory-retrieval techniques, or have they employed misguided procedures that actually help to create the memories? And are the patients who recover memories of sexual abuse being empowered to speak out, or are they being diverted from the problems that brought them to therapy in the first place?

These questions have sparked passionate, sometimes acrimonious disputes. Memory researchers have been astonished to find their world of experiments, theories and laboratory paradigms intertwined with high-profile issues of incest, new-age psychotherapy and even satanic cults.

The books discussed in this review delve into the recovered-memories debate from diverse perspectives. Richard Ofshe (Making Monsters, co-authored with writer Ethan Watters) is a social psychologist who has studied and published about social influences and cults. Elizabeth Loftus (The Myth of Repressed Memory, co-authored with writer Katharine Ketcham) is a memory researcher who has made numerous pioneering contributions to the cognitive study of memory distortion and suggestibility. And Mark Pendergrast (Victims of Memory) is a writer and journalist who is himself an accused parent. Despite their disparate backgrounds, the authors share a critical view of what they refer to as recovered-memory therapy.

Ofshe and Watters adopt the most confrontational approach. The scathing tone of Making Monsters surfaces in the first paragraph of its preface: “Our goal is to prove beyond doubt that devastating mistakes are being made within certain therapy settings.... This work is intended as an exposé of a pseudo-scientific enterprise that is damaging the lives of people in need.” Ofshe and Watters lay the blame squarely at the feet of incompetent, even morally reprehensible therapists. “If, for no defensible reason,” they write, “some therapists are causing the same emotional and psychological trauma as an actual rape or sexual assault, then they, like those who physically victimize people, deserve moral condemnation.”

These are serious charges. In support
of their case, Ofshe and Watters begin with a cursory review of experiments showing that suggestive influences can alter a memory and that people can have vivid recollections of events that never happened.

No laboratory studies have ever attempted to demonstrate the possibility of implanting false memories of sexual trauma. Indeed, it seems safe to assume that such studies never will, because it would be unethical for a researcher to attempt to do so. Ofshe and Watters consider perhaps the closest analogue, an experiment published in 1991 by the late Canadian researcher Nicholas Spanos in which he hypnotized his subjects, "regressed" them to "past lives" and suggested to some that they could have been abused in a past life. Spanos found that those who received this suggestion were later more likely to "remember" being abused than those who had not.

The authors of Making Monsters also examine the controversial memory-retrieval techniques (including hypnosis and visualization) advocated by some recovery therapists. Ofshe and Watters discuss the mounting evidence that hypnosis offers a potent method for inducing compelling but inaccurate pseudomemories. They also effectively criticize therapy techniques that involve visualizing or imagining abusive incidents as a first step toward remembering them. Ofshe and Watters argue that a therapist who believes in the reality of forgotten abuse can help validate imagined experiences as bona fide memories.

Therapists sometimes infer that forgotten abuse has occurred based on symptoms that advocates of recovered memory consider telltale signs of abuse—attributes ranging from low self-esteem and depression to avoidance of mirrors and the desire to change one's name. As Ofshe and Watters assert, there is little evidence to link such behaviors to a history of actual abuse. Moreover, many of the alleged signs of abuse are observed in people who were almost certainly not abused.

Ofshe and Watters also draw on wrenching case studies of patients who have recovered memories in therapy, some of whom later retracted those memories. We will probably never know what truly happened in these situations, so their usefulness as scientific data is questionable. Ofshe and Watters examine the most extreme cases, in which patients recount memories of extended, horrific abuse only after coming under the influence of a therapist who uses suggestive techniques to hunt for repressed memories. Such recovered memories, the authors judge, are most likely spurious.

They make this point most convincingly when discussing recovered memories of satanic ritual abuse, which they characterize as "the Achilles' heel of the recovered memory movement." Many therapists have reported on patients who have clearly recalled savage acts carried out by satanic cults: rapes, murders, cannibalization of fetuses and related atrocities. Yet in most instances, no memories of ritual brutality existed prior to therapy, and no one has produced hard evidence of such acts. Ofshe and Watters note that investigations by the Federal Bureau of Investigation of more than 300 cases have failed to turn up any proof.

The lack of empirical support does not necessarily mean that no satanic cults exist or that no ritual abuse has ever occurred. But Ofshe and Watters's central claim—that recovered memories of ritualistic horrors are very likely to have been created during therapy—is convincing. They also link therapist-induced pseudomemories with the recent explosion in diagnoses of multiple-personality disorder, which was once thought to be exceedingly rare. The authors claim that such personalities are often fabricated in therapy and discuss a case in which a therapist supposedly discovered that a patient was suffering from multiple personalities and repressed memories of satanic-ritual abuse. Once the patient ended therapy, she retracted her memories and abandoned her personalities.

In an attack on the underpinnings of recovered-memory therapy, Ofshe and Watters attempt to discredit the notion that there is a special mechanism, which they label "robust repression," that could cause someone to forget completely about years of repeated sexual trauma. The authors distinguish robust repression from the weaker mental repression (which some psychologists refer to as suppression) that occurs when people consciously avoid thinking about unpleasant experiences. The idea that people sometimes deliberately put aside painful recollections is not controversial. Such conscious avoidance could decrease the likelihood that someone would later remember the unpleasant experience, because it would not benefit from the postevent rehearsal—thinking and talking about the past—that ordinarily strengthens memories. But the mere lack of rehearsal probably cannot produce profound amnesia for traumatic events that happen repeatedly for years. A more potent mechanism is required; this is where the concept of robust repression comes in.

Ofshe and Watters effectively criticize the concepts of robust repression advanced by several advocates of recovered memory. The authors refer to a review article by David Holmes of the University of Kansas that concludes that there is no good experimental evidence for repression. The laboratory studies considered by Holmes necessarily use relatively sterile manipulations, however. It is difficult to convince even a laboratory researcher such as myself that these studies bear more than a remote relation to real emotional traumas.

There is also some information notably missing from Making Monsters. Ofshe and Watters do not discuss the extensive literature on psychogenic amnesia, whereby traumatic events temporarily blot out certain memories, ranging from single episodes to an individual's entire personal past. In addition, because the authors focus on extreme cases that involve forgetting years of ongoing trauma, they say little about the possibility that a person could forget and recover memories of a single abusive episode or a few such episodes. They touch on this important question...
only in an appendix. Moreover, Ofshe and Watters do not seriously address forgotten memories of abuse that may be recovered outside of therapy. Ofshe and Watters apply their conclusions broadly, indicting the entire “recovered-memory movement” of faulty reasoning and hazardous practices. The judgment is justified when applied specifically to the material in the book. The authors’ grand generalization is unconvincing, however, because they never define exactly who is part of the recovered-memory movement, nor do they provide much evidence that their conclusions deserve such wide application. Even if some recovery therapists have engaged in dangerous practices, it is possible that genuine cases of forgetting and recalling sexual abuse do exist.

Loftus and Ketcham’s book, in contrast, is entirely devoid of the contemptuous tone adopted by Ofshe and Watters. The Myth of Repressed Memory is written in Loftus’s first-person voice and frequently takes on an autobiographical quality as she relates her experiences as an expert witness, memory researcher and participant in recovered-memory debates. Her outspoken views on the malleability of memory have made Loftus something of a lightning rod in these disputes. At a memory symposium held in Boston last year, a group of incest survivors picketed her appearance. Yet in The Myth of Repressed Memory, Loftus comes across as genuinely interested in trying to understand the other side of the issue.

In a revealing interlude Loftus recounts a meeting with Ellen Bass, co-author of the controversial “bible” of the recovery movement, The Courage to Heal. This book has been disparaged by virtually every critic of recovered memory for its sweeping and unsubstantiated claims (such as an extraordinary admonition to those who have no memory of abuse: “If you think you were abused and your life shows the symptoms, then you were.”) Nevertheless, Loftus’s account of her conversation with Bass reflects a good-faith attempt on both sides to consider the perspective of the other. Although the exchange ends at something of an impasse, it illustrates the kind of dialogue that is needed to resolve the controversies surrounding recovered memories.

Loftus also uses her encounter with Bass to make a crucial point. Loftus states that she does not dispute the validity of abuse memories that have never been lost, nor does she rule out the possibility that people can forget and later reclaim some memories of abuse. She is concerned primarily with the lack of scientific evidence that extensive, severe sexual trauma can be pushed into the unconscious through a special mechanism of memory repression. Clinical and laboratory research indicate that emotionally traumatic experiences tend to be well remembered.

Loftus does briefly consider the phenomenon of psychogenic amnesia, describing a case that my colleagues and I reported some years ago, which involved a young man who temporarily forgot almost all his personal past after a traumatic experience. She correctly points out several differences between this kind of amnesia and the kind of forgetting implicated in cases of recovered memory—differences that limit the extent to which one can serve as a model for another. In a disappointing omission, however, Loftus fails to discuss the studies specifically concerning loss of memory of sexual abuse, even though she lists several in her bibliography and has published such a study herself.

The Myth of Repressed Memories is most effective when it delves into substantive topics in depth. For example, Loftus gives a detailed critique of the memory-retrieval techniques advocated in a popular book by recovery therapist Renee Fredrickson. These techniques include hypnosis and visualization, as well as methods for contacting “body memories” (memories that are alleged to have been stored in body tissue) and procedures such as a “quick list,” in which patients jot down whatever comes to mind when pondering possible abuse without attempting to assess the accuracy of the retrieved thoughts. Loftus notes that there is no scientific documentation of the efficacy of these techniques but good reason to believe that they pose a danger because they encourage patients to blur the line between imagination and memory. Indeed, I was so surprised that a therapist would advocate such techniques that I checked the original source to determine whether Loftus had portrayed Fredrickson’s approach fairly; she had. I would have welcomed more such thorough treatments of the key issues in the recovered-memories debate. Although the autobiographical material in The Myth of Repressed Memories and Loftus’s moving descriptions of families shattered by recovered memories make for gripping reading, they tend to crowd out the kind of rigorous analyses of central disputes that are sorely needed in this minefield.

Personal experience lies at the very core of the third book, Mark Pendergrast’s Victims of Memory. Pendergrast attempts to integrate an insider’s account of the recovered-memories controversy with a scholarly analysis of it. He begins the task with two daunting strikes against him: he has been accused of unspecified abuse by his two daughters—charges he denies—and he is a journalist who has no credentials in psychology or psychiatry. He is therefore readily perceived as someone who has an ax to grind and little else to offer. In an impressive display of scholarship and sheer determination, Pendergrast has surmounted these obstacles to write a comprehensive treatment of the recovered-memories controversy.

Victims of Memory covers much of the same territory as do the other two books and offers many of the same arguments, but Pendergrast offers a broader portrayal of the social and cultural contexts of the recovered-memories phenomenon. His treatment is also distinguished by some welcome historical perspective. For instance, he describes the evolving role of therapeutic suggestion in the genesis of multiple-personality disorder, and he exhibits throughout a flair for digging out relevant quotes from pioneering psychologists and psychiatrists.

Pendergrast demonstrates a laudable ability to lay out all sides of the argument. He analyzes evidence for and against repression, carefully acknowledging the limitations of laboratory research but offering a thoughtful examination of studies concerning the forgetting of sexual abuse. He also considers several cases in which memories of abuse resurfaced without therapy. Citing the literature on psychogenic amnesia, Pendergrast concludes that people can sometimes forget traumatic experiences. But he rightly points out that evidence from such cases must be treated cautiously because in some instances
amnesia may be feigned deliberately.

Much of *Victims of Memory* is devoted to interviews with incest survivors, therapists, retraction and accused parents. Although it is difficult to draw general conclusions from a small and selected sample, Pendergrast allows the reader to see the issues from a variety of perspectives. Despite the author's personal situation—his daughters' allegations originated in therapy—Pendergrast renders a sympathetic portrayal of recovery therapists as well-intentioned but misinformed players in a drama that has veered out of control.

In the end, however, Pendergrast's critique of recovered-memory therapy is no less damning than that of Ofshe and Watters. He extends his discussion of suggestion-induced false recollections to include bizarre but fascinating cases in which people "remember" being abducted by aliens, which demonstrate the power of hypnosis to induce intense but inaccurate memories.

Pendergrast also links the way that therapists interpret patients' symptoms with contemporary research on implicit memory—that is, nonconscious effects of experience on subsequent behavior and cognition. Some therapists have cited this research (which is a major focus of my own work) as justification for interpreting their patients' fears, dislikes or attractions as unconscious "memories" of abuse. Although such an interpretation could possibly be valid in some cases, inferring the existence of implicit memories is a complex process, so alternative explanations need to be scrupulously considered. As Pendergrast notes, the fact that implicit memory has been established in controlled experiments "does not mean that a woman who hates bananas is necessarily reacting subconsciously to a memory of her father's erect penis, as many trauma therapists believe."

Pendergrast occasionally misses his targets. In a section entitled "Scientists as True Believers," he critiques an article co-authored by the eminent neurobiologist Eric R. Kandel that considered possible neurobiological bases for repressed memories. Kandel acknowledged, however, that false memories can be created and is hardly a "true believer" in recovered-memory therapy. Fortunately, Pendergrast is rarely so sloppy. The book concludes with a moving letter to his daughters (he no longer knows where they live or what their names are); the reader cannot help but hope that reconciliation is still possible.

Where does all this leave us in attempting to make sense of an important and painful issue? Perhaps the key point is that the standard depiction of this debate—proponents of recovered memory versus advocates of false memory, winner take all—is simplistic and needlessly divisive. Understanding the current situation requires distinguishing among several intertwined questions.

First, there is the question of whether false recollections can originate in therapy. Extensive laboratory research indicates that suggestion and other factors can lead to memory distortion. A startling number of patients "recover" memories of satanic-ritual abuse despite an absence of evidence for such abuse. Hypnotically based therapy has helped induce recollections of exceedingly improbable events (such as past lives and alien abductions). And a growing number of people have retracted their recovered memories. Taken together, these considerations lead inexorably to the conclusion that some recovery therapists have helped create—probably un-
rate memories of abuse, several credible cases have been reported.

Further clarification of the recovered-memory controversy will require systematic study of memory processes. Some investigators have claimed that traumatic memory operates in a fundamentally different manner than does nontraumatic memory, yet there is little experimental support for this assertion. Basic psychological research is just beginning to uncover the memory mechanisms that underlie intense false recollections. There are solid indications that a phenomenon known as source amnesia (in which a person forgets the source or context in which a memory originated) renders people vulnerable to memory distortions. When people cannot remember the source of a memory, they are apt to confuse whether it reflects an actual event, a fantasy or something that was said or suggested. The role of source amnesia in therapeutically induced false recollections remains to be explored.

The stakes here extend far beyond improved understanding of the mind. Research and effective communication are needed to minimize the possibility that people who were not abused will come to the psychologically devastating conclusion that they were. It is also imperative to avoid false accusations that can fracture lives and shatter families. And a better awareness of the workings of memory will bolster the credibility of the memories reported by survivors of sexual abuse.

One unacceptable outcome of the present situation is that the memories of genuine incest survivors may be called into question. The only way to avoid this travesty is to encourage all participants to adhere to rigorous standards of scientific inference and logic. Neglect of science has contributed to the present difficulties. In an interview with Ellen Bass, Ofshe and Watters asked the co-author of *The Courage to Heal* if she could cite any scientific support for her ideas. She responded candidly: “Look, if we waited for scientific knowledge to catch up, we could just forget the whole thing. My ideas are not based on any scientific theories.”

The events of the past several years suggest that the price of not waiting for scientific knowledge may be disastrously high. It is imperative that all involved in this debate work hard to ensure that the standards of science, not rhetoric or pseudoscience, constitute the framework for future discussion.

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