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“False Memory Syndrome” vs. Lying Perpetrator Syndrome: The Big Lie

When I was in grade school, I learned about the big lie technique used by the Nazis. If you tell a big enough lie often enough and loudly enough, people will believe it. This is happening today with the supporters of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. In order to back their claims that parents accused of sexual abuse by adult children who didn't always remember the abuse are innocent, they attack the existence of “repressed memories” or traumatic amnesia. This is annoying to a person who has talked to a lot of combat veterans who don't remember parts of their tours.

The first big lie is that there is no such thing as forgetting trauma. In every type of trauma, from rape and battering to combat, from incest to torture, from fire to earthquake, survivors often lose part or all of their memory. Not only is it one way of dealing with trauma especially if it is overwhelming, physically violent and caused by humans, it's so common it's one of the diagnostic criteria for PTSD.. The fact that you can't prove the existence of repressed memories in a laboratory setting is used by FMS supporters as proof that repression doesn't exist. I suppose at one time, these FMS supporters would have insisted that the earth was flat. Well, you can't prove repression exists in a lab not because it doesn't exist, but because you can't rape and torture people in labs. The “scientific proof” fallacy annoys me. Remember DDT? There was no “scientific proof” that it

was harming the ecology when *Silent Spring* was published, but it was. Proof was found later.

Most repressed memories are brought back by an event triggering a memory often in the form of pain, a feeling of terror, the sound of a voice, a smell, or seeing a visual image, like a flash of a scene. These usually make people feel pretty crazy. Elizabeth Loftus (a memory researcher who backs the FMSF) writes about such characteristic traits as bodily memories, which therapists have observed in countless trauma survivors—survivors who repressed all their memories and ones who have only forgotten parts—as “interesting but unprovable theories” in her book as if the only things that were real today had scientific laboratory proof today. Stupid, unscientific thinking.

The second big lie is that laboratory studies apply to traumatic memories.

In these studies people are told about or watch a videotape of some supposed trauma and are then given misleading information and asked about it. In the lab people make a lot of mistakes about what they saw. However, in a study of people who actually witnessed a murder, their memories were “detailed, accurate and persistent,” (Yuille and Cutshall, 1989). Real trauma leads to “quantitatively different memories than innocuous laboratory events.”

“You cannot rape or torture someone in a laboratory and ask them half an hour later what it was like to be raped or tortured,” Bessel van der Kolk, MD, a Harvard Medical School psychiatrist and professor says. To say that laboratory studies apply to traumatic memories is about as scientific as saying that studying the common cold will make you an expert on lung cancer.

No one is claiming there is a “false memory syndrome” except the accused parents of child sexual abuse survivors and their earnest but ignorant “scientific” advisors, most of whom have based their

academic reputation and life work not on the study of trauma but on the study of non-traumatic laboratory-experiment-induced memories. They have no expertise in the field of trauma.

What kind of people would be so heavily invested in being right (academic reputation) that they can't see the difference between creating a memory in a laboratory and the real memory of trauma pain and degradation at the hands of a parent? I suspect they are rather normal people who can't comprehend trauma—as most people can't—and don't want to believe traumatic things happen in “nice” families. The nature of trauma, the reason why it causes memory disturbances, is that it is so overwhelming it can't be taken in. We're not talking lost in a shopping mall here. We're talking about the agony of anal rape on a little boy, about the weight of a father's body on a small girl, the tearing pain of penetration, and the fear evoked by the words, “If you tell, I'll kill you.”

The third big lie is that the people who study trauma are all in a big plot to plant false memories in everyone's head to make more business for themselves by telling clients they were abused.

Despite the FMS stories of lunatic therapists who say to new clients, “You were sexually abused. I can tell,” (and there are some), there is plenty of work in the trauma field. None of the big names whose scientific studies are regularly trashed by the FMS people are telling people they were sexually abused to get more clients. Anyone who does that is not doing a good job.

On the other hand, any good therapists should ask about trauma including sexual abuse so the client knows it is a topic the therapist will be willing to discuss. Ethical therapists are bound to ask about such issues especially in the light of the massive amount of denial which surrounded trauma, particularly incest, for most of this century. Therapists were trained to believe incest never happens. Little girls make it up because they want their daddies. They were taught to blame the victim (She really wanted it) and to minimize the

impact (It's less damaging if it is your dad). They were also trained to believe trauma couldn't really affect a normal person. Until 1980, there was no diagnosis for someone suffering the long term affects of trauma. Then the diagnosis of PTSD was established although the symptoms of PTSD had been accurately described as far back as Homer and Shakespeare. This is one of those professional black holes which FMS's PhD psychologist supporters like to gloss over.

The journalists who have latched onto the FMS point of view interview some lunatic therapist as if what the lunatic is doing is common and accepted therapy—on one recent *Frontline* there was someone using past-life stuff and another therapy team wouldn't let one husband and wife talk to each other for five years, living in the same house, (a therapy cult). The implication was that this stuff was common and approved by all therapists who deal with incest survivors. *Frontline* cut back and forth between the lunatics and such experts as Judith Lewis Herman, MD, as if they used identical methods.

Frontline also glossed over the fact that people who have the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder need to remember, at their own rate and time, what happened to them so they can heal. Often it's childhood sexual trauma.

The fourth big lie is that none of the research done on trauma can be trusted because it is done by people who will say anything to back up their "theory" that people commonly forget trauma. People do commonly forget all or parts of their traumatic experiences. The people who will say and believe anything to make their point despite massive research and clinical information to the contrary in scientific journals all seem to be on the FMS side.

The FMSers accuse trauma researchers of "incestuous" research because they cite each others papers and statistics. Guess what? So do they! All scientific research in every field of science is based on the work of others. That is called the scientific method.

The fifth big lie is that “False Memory Syndrome” is a scientific term. False memory syndrome is not a scientific term based on years of scientific research like traumatic amnesia. “False memory syndrome” is a phrase created by pissed off parents who have been accused of child abuse. They use anecdotal evidence derived from accused perpetrators who say they are innocent and people who say they were brainwashed into believing they were sexually abused. How do we know they aren’t claiming that because they’ve been brainwashed by their perpetrators? Which claim is true?. There’s no way to know. More research is needed.

The sixth big lie is that you can tell if someone is an abuser by talking to him and looking at him (or her) especially if he or she says convincingly that he or she is innocent. Almost every convicted child molester is totally against child molestation, but they will also sincerely deny that what they did was that crime. What they did was something else—in their minds. This is a big part of “lying perpetrator syndrome,” a phrase invented by Frank Fitzpatrick, a survivor of abuse by convicted child sexual predator Father Porter. That’s why they can convincingly pass lie detector tests. How they think: “I knew she wanted it, Mike. She got up on my lap without her diaper on.” Those words were spoken by a convicted child molester to a friend of mine. She was two. She was also lucky he was caught and convicted.

Molesters don’t look or act like abusers. They often get close to kids by being nice. Often they are youth ministers, Sunday school teachers, Boy Scout leaders.

Perpetrators are always aided by denial. “Yes, her dad french kissed her,” a mother says, “but that’s not sexual abuse.” Yes it is.

The seventh big lie is that a parent always knows what is going on in their home. Right! The only people who believe this don’t remember childhood too well.

One of the funnier examples of this is Pamela Freyd, founder of FMSF itself. According to *First* magazine, April 18, 1994, “Who’s Telling the Truth?” Peter Freyd “an active alcoholic,” during Jennifer Freyd’s childhood admits he “said and did things that were inappropriate.” Pamela Freyd however has such godlike powers she knows her husband didn’t do anything bad even when she wasn’t there. Since her FMS Foundation recently had to ask one man to resign from the board of directors because he said in an interview that it was okay to have sex with children, her powers don’t appear to me to be all that godlike.

The eight big lie is when someone retracts accusations of child sexual abuse now they are telling the truth. In the absence of physical evidence, there is no way to know the truth. It’s just as likely the retractor has been brow-beaten or shamed into retracting. Lying perpetrators specialize in threats and emotional blackmail (you’re killing your mother!) To earn a parent’s love in current court cases where the perpetrator has been caught red handed, little girls often take on the burden of protecting the family by lying for daddy. So do grownups.

The ninth big lie is that the media is covering this in an impartial manner. When *Frontline* or *20/20* put together fast paced investigative reports or when you’re reading Loftus (*The Myth of Repressed Memory*) or Prendergast (*Victims of Memory*), they are interested in grabbing a lot of viewers, selling a lot of books.

If they were interested in truth, justice, etc., instead of sensational reporting on a few wiggled out psychotherapy cults, they would also be interviewing survivors who have been helped by remembering what happened to them and there are many more of them than there are “retractors.” Presenting a balanced picture just isn’t sensational enough.

Thousands of people in this country need to know about the long term affects of trauma and how to get help. There’s a real epidemic

of PTSD and co-epidemics of drug and alcohol abuse. Responsible reporting could help.

Forgetting When It Is Too Painful To Remember

Traumatic Memories

In a video tape called *True/ Not True: When Memories Can Be Trusted*, Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., a highly respected Harvard psychiatrist and researcher in the field of PTSD explained how traumatic memories are different than normal memories. They are fragments of experience not encoded as verbal memories which can be easily manipulated by lab experimenters. Instead they are visual images, bodily sensations, feeling states (like terror) or odd pieces of behavior (like committing the same act every year on the anniversary of a trauma).

History doesn't lie

Perhaps the most impressive example of a repressed memory is that of Hugh Thompson. Mr Thompson was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam. On March 16th, 1968, he was flying his scout helicopter around a town called Pinkville. He kept seeing dead civilians. Whenever he called in that a wounded civilian needed help, he would see them dead when next he flew over. He didn't understand what was going on. He became angry and desperate. Finally he landed and called in help for one group, having his crewchief and gunner aim their weapons at the Americans to stop them. Later his crewchief waded into a ditch full of bodies and pulled out a small wounded child. They flew the child to a local hospital. The kid was the age of Hugh Thompson's own

son at home. The whole experience was extremely traumatic for him.

Two years later, when the Army investigators came to interview him about what he was doing on March 16, 1968, they got really angry at him and thought he was “giving them the runaround,” as he put it in a recent phone inter-view with me. At that time he remembered nothing. He knew he had been in Vietnam on that date, that was all. “They said they had my flight records. Finally they asked me if I remembered hitting a tree with my helicopter. ‘Oh, yeah. I remember that.’ I said. Then things started coming back.” He had a vague memory of pulling a gun on an American officer and thought he was in trouble for that.

He had forgotten the whole My Lai Massacre. All of his heroic actions are documented in the US Army’s report on My Lai. Over the course of several days of questioning by Army investigators it all came back to him, the horror, the dead women, children and old people, the fact that at the time of the My Lai massacre, none of the authorities would listen or investigate. They told him to forget it or else. He had repressed the memory. He still does not remember all the details. The helplessness and horror he felt at what he saw were clear in his voice as he spoke about it last year at Tulane University at a conference on My Lai.

Even the US Army and the Nixon Administration never used the “no such thing as repressed memories” defense when they were trying to cover up My Lai.

Unfortunately not all repressed memories have such a body of hard historical evidence to back them up.

The Human Face of Denial

Stacy Miller wrote an article called “The Human Face of Denial” in *Treating Abuse Today*, July/ August, September/ October 1995. She had no memories of childhood sexual abuse until her middle forties when she was in a train wreck. She read the questions in *The Courage to Heal* while waiting for the train to be moved and remembered incidents connected to eight of the twelve questions [How Can I Know If I Was A Victim Of Child Sexual Abuse] on page 21 of that book. This is an example, I think, of what is called ‘state-dependent’ memory since being in a state of upset because of the train wreck helped her remember upsetting things which she had repressed.

The article goes on to tell how she doubted and minimized these small blips of memory although they included being shown her father’s erect penis and semen, feeling uncomfortable being cuddled in the lap of a father with a hard on, and being given long yucky lingering kisses full on the lips. [All of these are sexual abuse.]

She also sometimes had a feeling of terror, heard the sound of someone breathing in the dark, and had intense pain between her legs. She went into therapy, but still doubted, and her parents accused her of jumping on the incest bandwagon. Then her father, who was a Harvard PhD and nationally known in his field, got cancer. He wrote her a letter in which he admits to having “slipt my hand, as gently as possible so as not to wake you, between your legs and attempted to stretch your vaginal opening... I do not consider that I in any way ‘molested’ you...” His explanation was that he was trying to stretch her hymen so she wouldn’t have a bad wedding night.

Like most other perpetrators, in his mind that wasn’t molesting a child. He was helping! Here’s more proof, if proof

were needed that being educated doesn't make you aware of the abusiveness of your actions or of your own motivations and denial. She found later that three other relatives also were molested by her father. No doubt for their own good, too.

Frank Fitzpatrick

A third example of a repressed memory returning is that of Frank Fitzpatrick, the founder of Survivor Connections, an organization which keeps a perpetrator database. It published a very helpful introductory packet and quarterly newsletter.

Frank was 39, married to a good wife, had a good job, nice house, wonderful kid, but he wasn't happy. He couldn't understand why. He told his story at The Gainesville Commission on the Status Of Women's annual workshop last year. (1994) He was lying on the bed, depressed when he had an auditory flashback of some- one breathing hard and he knew it was someone behind him having sex with him. Eventually he remembered being drugged and raped at the age of 12 by a very popular young priest whom he had loved and admired, Father Porter.

Eventually Frank found 130 other survivors of Father Porter's attentions who were willing to take action against him. Father Porter is currently in jail. Frank Fitzpatrick had repressed the memory for 27 years.

How often do people forget?

Linda M. Williams did a study of 129 women with documented hospital report histories of child sexual abuse, 38% of them did not remember the abuse 17 years later. In a further study, Williams found that 16% of the women who currently remembered the abuse had had periods when they did not remember it. Recall was caused by triggers such as seeing the

perpetrator or someone like him, by subsequent sexual assault, or by seeing a TV show or reading an article.

A new national survey revealed that 20% of severe trauma survivors forget the entire experience for a period of time and another 20% forget important details of the trauma for periods of time. Black, white, hispanic, male and female, people in therapy and people who have never seen a therapist, all report having repressed memories of trauma and most of them regained their memories not in therapy, but because some event triggered the memory. Only 14% of the survey subjects had memories come back in therapy. More common triggers were news stories, lovemaking, events similar to the forgotten event, conversations, dreams, nightmares, and further violence.

Diana M. Elliott of the UCLA School of Medicine was the director of the survey which was presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in New York City, August, 1995.

In “Neurobiology of PTSD,” Bremner, Davis, Southwick, Krystal and Charney in *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder A Clinical Review*, Sidran Press, 1994, it says: “One peculiar characteristic seen in patients with PTSD is the capacity of neutral environmental stimuli to trigger memories, which have often been previously forgotten, of traumatic events from the past. For example, one veteran reported getting onto an elevator on Ash Wednesday and seeing a woman with a spot of ash on her forehead. The patient immediately had a flashback to the memory of someone who had been shot in the head, with the bullet hole looking very similar to the spot of ash on the forehead. The patient had not thought of this event or even been able to remember it since he had been in Vietnam more

than 20 years ago. This memory was accompanied by an increase in heart rate, feelings of subjective anxiety and fear, rapid respiration, sweating, and a desire to escape the situation.”

I suspect that repression and denial also work for perpetrators. They forget what happened or they use denial. I'm sure a lot of perpetrators really do not believe that what they did was sexual abuse.

The Twelve Steps: A Way Out, a workbook for Adult Children of Alcoholics, discusses types of denial. Simple denial is pretending that something doesn't exist. (I/he didn't molest her). Minimizing is when you acknowledge a problem but say it isn't that bad when it is that bad. (So what if I squeezed her tits). Blaming is when there is a problem but it's not your fault. (You're so pretty. I can't help myself.) Excusing is “I did it because your mother wouldn't sleep with me.” Generalizing: Child abuse is terrible but it didn't happen in our family. Dodging is changing the subject (lets talk about what a bad kid you were). Attacking is what the FMS people do when they say people don't forget.

There is a picture of my husband standing at Plei Me the day after the VC tried to overrun the place. Behind Bob are eviscerated bodies. Bob looked sick when he saw the picture, but even today he doesn't remember that picture being taken or the bodies.

That is a repressed memory, traumatic amnesia, forgetting all or part of what happened, a symptom of PTSD listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association. When people tell you it doesn't exist, point out to them that it's so well known that it's been in the last three editions of the DSM.

A Good Therapist:

1. should ask you about trauma including child sexual abuse.
2. should not say “I can tell you were sexually abused.” Sexual abuse is not the only trauma children suffer.
3. works on safety and trust first. Traumatic memories are processed as they come up naturally.
4. does not ask leading questions or push you to remember.

Remember, there is no rush in recovery.

Trust is earned over a period of time during which a healthy person evaluates what is going on.

Gullibility is when someone says “trust me” and you say “duh, okay” and do.

Program saying”

Adult Children of Alcoholics don't trust anyone but they will believe anything.

It applies to trauma survivors, too.

How to Identify a Cult

Although cults are thought of as religious, there are political, commercial, and psychological cults.

Here is what to look for

Cults have charismatic leaders who have the answers and center veneration on themselves. “Only I can help you.” Some therapists have this attitude. Good therapists have what is called supervision. They consult with others in the field about their cases. They also refer patients to others.

Cults have an authoritarian power structure. You have to do it their way.

Cults claim to be chosen, select or special. “We know the one right way. Only we can help you.”

Cults have a double set of ethics. Deception is okay in a good cause

Cults have a program of persuasion designed to get you to believe what they believe. Everyone has to think alike. An example would be a therapist who insists you are denying you were sexually abused.

Cults want you to give up your life to do what they do. Isolation from others is preferred. A therapist who doesn't want you talking to anyone else verges on this. Cults want your money. They want you to recruit new people.

When Books Are Bad

The Myth of Repressed Memory, by Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, St Martin's Press, N Y, 1994, [use the library]

In my opinion, Elizabeth Loftus had the same complaint incest survivors have had. People don't believe her.

Elizabeth works so hard, part of a small circle of dedicated scientists fighting a world gone mad, doing experiments which she is certain can be generalized from the little pseudo traumas (lost in a mall) she creates in the lab to a 180 lb. man sexually abusing a 30 lb child repeatedly and telling the child not to tell **or else**. It's all the same to her.

Somehow Elizabeth winds up the victim of all this mass-hysteria victim-mentality. Well she's got it: victim-mentality. In my opinion, she also exhibits, in a phrase lifted from a psychology paper about Vietnam vets, “a profound and

pervasive narcissistic sense of entitlement” best expressed as “You should believe me. I know the truth. I’m a scientist!”

People who work to heal trauma survivors find plenty of evidence of people forgetting all or part of their traumatic experiences, especially if they went on for a long time and were horrific. It is common for Vietnam combat veterans to have forgotten large parts of their tours, the names of their friends who were killed, and particularly horrific experiences. Loftus tosses this out with the comment that she can’t find a definition of repression, so it doesn’t exist.

Elizabeth uses the devices of victim blaming, slanted writing (survivors are always described as whining, complaining, blaming others for their problems) comparing (I was abused and I’m fine), minimizing, sarcasm, self-righteous self-pity and many others to paint a picture of a noble band of loving parents whose children have gone astray in the devilish clutches of a universal coven of therapists-gone-mad.

Loftus’ point of view is so skewed that at one point she is aghast that a mother won’t let an accused dad be alone with the one daughter of three he’s not accused of abusing. She has no idea that it’s a parent’s duty to provide safety for a kid, nor, apparently, is she aware of how likely it is that a perpetrator will do it again. Dumb!

A well researched book on how to identify a therapy cult—and there are such things—would have been helpful. Pretending all therapists who work with trauma survivors are evil is a disservice to society, but Elizabeth trashes the good with the bad.

Not recommended unless you are studying propaganda techniques.

