

Effects of prior knowledge and expert statement on belief in recovered memories: An international perspective[☆]

Israel Nachson^{a,*}, J. Don Read^b, Sheila M. Seelau^c, Felicity Goodyear-Smith^d,
Brenda Lobb^e, Graham Davies^f, Joseph Glicksohn^a,
Michal Lifschitz^a, Elizabeth Brimacombe^g

^a Department of Criminology, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 52900, Israel

^b Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada

^c Forensic Program, Chatham College, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

^d Department of General Practice and Primary Health Care, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

^e Department of Psychology, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

^f School of Psychology, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

^g Department of Psychology, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada

Abstract

We tested the hypothesis that beliefs in the purported attributes of recovered memories of child sexual abuse (CSA) are associated with knowledge of the “recovered/false memory debate”, and that such beliefs will be related to assessments of the credibility of statements made by participants in a vignette about CSA. Participants from five countries (the United States, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Israel) responded to a questionnaire regarding beliefs about recovered memory as well as self-reported exposure to and knowledge of the debate. In addition, they assessed the credibility of statements made by a daughter (reporting recovery of memories of sexual abuse by her father), her father (denying the allegation and accusing the daughter’s therapist of implanting in her false “memories” of abuse), and two experts (each supporting one of the two protagonists). We found that prior knowledge of the debate across countries was linked to beliefs in specific attributes of recovered memories and to a subset of the credibility assessments of statements made by the protagonists and their experts. For individuals, however, credibility assessments were unrelated to knowledge of the debate, but they were related to beliefs about memory recovery. Finally, credibility of the protagonists’ statements was differentially associated with those made by the daughter’s and the father’s experts. The results suggest that whereas familiarity with the debate does not affect the credibility of the statements made by the complainant and the accused, expert testimony does, as has been found in prior research. The psycholegal implications of this conclusion are discussed. © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Knowledge; Expert; Belief; Recovered memories; Child sexual abuse

[☆] This study was designed while the first author was a visiting scholar at the Department of General Practice and Primary Health Care, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand; the Department of Psychology, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada; and the School of Psychology, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK. The study was completed while the third author was at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +972 3 531 8221; fax: +972 3 535 2114.

E-mail address: nachsi@mail.biu.ac.il (I. Nachson).

The purpose of the present study was to test the interactive effect of prior knowledge of the “recovered/false memory debate” (RFMD) and of expert testimony in cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) on the credibility of the arguments made by the two protagonists in these cases.

Studies of credibility of the protagonists’ arguments in cases of CSA began in 1993 when Loftus, Weingardt and Hoffman examined the credibility of repressed memories among potential United States jurors. They presented mock jurors with a narrative of a case in which a woman accused her father of abusing her in childhood. The father denied the allegations. There were two versions of the story that differed only in terms of whether the memory of the abuse had either been continuously present, or had been repressed. In both versions, the memories were disclosed, or recovered, during therapy when the daughter was about 20 years old. Overall, the participants tended to believe the daughter’s accusations; yet they (especially the males) were more skeptical about the truth of the repressed than of the non-repressed memory. Participants who did not believe the daughter’s accusations considered the allegations to be deliberate lies when the memories were not repressed, and honest mistakes when they were repressed. Loftus et al. attributed this pattern of responses to the influence of the media and popular writings about repressed memories.

Loftus et al.’s (1993) study was followed by additional studies which have yielded, however, mixed results (see Table 1): Some showing greater believability in non-repressed than in repressed memories, while others showing no differences between the two. Golding et al. (1995) who belong to the latter group, highlighted a number of methodological differences between their and Loftus et al.’s (1993) study, two of which are relevant to the present study: Firstly, in Loftus et al., the father simply denied the daughter’s allegations, whereas in Golding et al. (1995) the father also accused the therapist of influencing his daughter’s memory. Second, Loftus et al.’s study was conducted before the onslaught of media coverage concerning repressed memories, so it is not surprising that judged credibility of the daughter’s allegations was lower than it was for the mock jurors in Golding et al.’s (1995) study. Like Loftus et al., Golding et al. considered the extent of media coverage to be important to the outcomes of mock juror studies because “lay people’s implicit or intuitive theories about repressed memories guide society’s thinking on this topic” (pp. 570–571). That beliefs of the public have had such an effect is evident in changes in the statutes of limitations in a number of United States regarding the accuracy of recovered memories of CSA (Key et al., 1996).

Regardless of whether the memories were repressed or non-repressed, a consistent gender difference emerged in most studies: Compared to male participants, female participants more frequently favored the female complainant over the male defendant in both credibility and verdict (Buck & Warren, 2000; Clark & Nightingale, 1997; Crowley, O’Calaghan, & Ball, 1994; ForsterLee et al., 1999; Gabora, Spanos, & Joab, 1993; Golding, Sanchez, et al., 1999; Golding, Sego, et al., 1999; Golding et al., 1995; Griffith, Libkuman, & Poole, 1998; Key et al., 1996; Kovera, Levy, Borgida, & Penrod, 1994; Loftus et al., 1993; Scherr, 1997; Sugarman & Boney-McCoy, 1997).

In light of the conflicting results, the question of whether recovered repressed memories of alleged CSA are more or as credible as delayed but non-repressed memories remains open. A frequent confound in these studies has been the

Table 1
Believability in repressed and non-repressed memories of CSA in mock juror studies

Study	Believability
Loftus, Weingardt, & Hoffman (1993)	Plaintiff’s accusation was believed more when memories of CSA were non-repressed than repressed ^a
Golding, Sego, Sanchez, & Hasemann (1995)	No differences between repressed and non-repressed conditions in believability of the plaintiff’s accusation and the amount of damage award
Key, Warren, & Ross (1996)	Plaintiff’s accusation was believed more under non-repressed than repressed condition ^a
Scherr (1997)	Plaintiff’s accusation was believed more under non-repressed than repressed condition ^a
Clark & Nightingale (1997)	Plaintiff’s accusation was believed more under non-repressed than repressed condition
Sugarman & Boney McCoy (1997)	No difference between repressed and non-repressed conditions in believability of plaintiff and defendant
Golding, Sanchez, & Sego, 1999; Golding, Sego, & Sanchez, 1999	Believability under repressed and non-repressed conditions either differed as a function of sex, or was about the same
ForsterLee, Horowitz, Ho, ForsterLee, & McGovern, 1999	More compensation was rewarded to the plaintiff who remembered the abuse than the one who recovered lost memories
Stewart, Whiteside, & Golding, 2000	Participants were equally skeptical of delays in reporting CSA due to alleged repression and other reasons

^a Erroneous accusations under the repressed condition were considered “honest mistakes”.

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