

# Repressed and recovered memories of childhood abuse



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Abuse can come in many forms including physical, mental, emotional, financial, neglect, sexual, and exploitation. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on abuse experienced during childhood and how the memories of this abuse are recalled. Studies exist that question the validity of memories that have been repressed and then recovered regarding whether the recalled memories are true memories or false memories suggested through therapeutic intervention.

Repression, which effectively renders a memory inaccessible to a person’s conscious thought, is one of a variety of possible psychological defenses employed in traumatic situations (Tetford & Schuller, 1996). The controversy over the last two decades concerning the validity of the recalled memories still remains in the psychology community. As more victims of childhood abuse come forward to seek civil suits against their abusers it has become the job of clinical psychologists to prove whether the memories are in fact true repressed memories or false memories fabricated through suggestion during therapeutic sessions to recall abusive events.

This paper will attempt to utilize research and adult patient cases that have experienced abuse as a child and the process by which psychologists must go through in order to determine whether true abuse had occurred and the degree of accuracy the memories recalled are to the actual event.

But You Have to Remember...

A woman sees a story on the news about a 6-year-old child involved in a sexual abuse case victimized by her stepfather. In the coming months, the woman begins having dreams which over time become more vivid and provide more details into the memory of sexual abuse that she experienced herself as a child. This woman had repressed the memories of her abuse.

Why do traumatic memories become repressed? Many would think that if something traumatic truly occurred to a person, especially as a child, that even into adulthood the memories would be hard to escape. At the same time, on the opposite end of the spectrum, some may assume that an event is so traumatic that the body's natural defense is to submerge the memory as far into the subconscious as possible in order to lessen additional trauma.

So the next question we try to answer is "why now"? Why have the memories of the event surfaced now and what triggered their recall?

Researchers have attempted to answer these questions when working with persons who have repressed memories of childhood abuse. Even in cases when a group of women were asked to recall memories of their own abuse reported 17 years earlier, more than half of the women interviewed denied that anything traumatic had happened to them despite being previously reported (Tetford & Schuller, 1996). With some of the women unable to recall <https://assignbuster.com/repressed-and-recovered-memories-of-childhood-abuse/>

the traumatic abuse they had experienced, how do researchers then convince these women that the events reported actually happened, in addition to making them remember the details of the abuse?

This paper will discuss true and false memories, suggestive therapy, and Freud's theory of repression. The purpose is to attempt is to understand what the argument is and why it is important to decipher the difference between truth and false perceptions especially when there lies a accusation of child abuse.

## **True & False Memories**

In order to define what a true memory is versus a false memory one must consider what aspects of each can be used as a determinant. Researchers believe that the more vivid the details of a memory can be recalled the more likely the memory is false. This is due to the person's ability to recollect what they believe as true (Loftus, Joslyn, & Polage, 1998). However, the same could be said for true memories. Loftus, Joslyn, and Polage explain that sensory imagery can work the same for both true and false memories and vivid imagery can be mistaken for actual events. Colangelo (2009) states that repression has three elements, which include

“ 1) Selective forgetting of materials that cause pain, 2) not under voluntary control, and 3) material is not lost but stored in the unconscious and can be returned to consciousness if the anxiety associated with the memory is removed”.

This idea includes that a memory can be retrieved from decreased recall not because of vivid imagery but by the removal of interference and not <https://assignbuster.com/repressed-and-recovered-memories-of-childhood-abuse/>

repression. One may be perplexed with the lack of distinction between true or false memory; however, the idea is to know that a difference exists. If the retrieval of memories is suspected to be false, one must analyze the root of the created details in the recovered memory.

## **Suggestive Therapy**

One such idea is the theory of suggestive therapy. The woman who saw the media coverage of the child who was abused may have begun having the dreams she was having because of the suggestion given in the media and her willingness to accept the abuse as true for herself. The same would apply if the woman had sought counseling after the first dream had convinced her that she had spontaneously recovered a repressed memory. Researchers have sought to disprove the validity in the method of therapeutic intervention in order to recover repressed memories due to the possibility that the memories were constructed from suggestions made by the therapist.

Some recalled accounts of childhood abuse have been printed in articles by known scholars and psychologists which suggest that the accounts of the victims were in fact true to their description however, skepticism arises accusing “ the therapeutic process for the creation of false memories” (Reisner, 1996). It depends on how questions are formed and selective ideation that becomes a part of the victims reality. These are the false memories in which victims create over time by embellishing actual accounts of abuse with suggested detail provided by the therapist.

## **Freud's Theory of "Repression"**

In order to come up with a clear distinction between a true repressed memory and one that was produced from variables that exist in the environment one must consider the proposal of repression. Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist, believed that by talking through problems patients would be able to locate and release emotions that had been hidden in the unconscious mind. He came to call this phenomenon of denied emotions as "repression". While Freud is often surrounded with skepticism he had concluded that repressed memories are that of truth and of falsified memories (Colangelo, 2009). In Colangelo's (2009) findings, he reported that Freud theorized that childhood memories could in fact be " indisputably false and sometimes equally correct" and quite possibly and more often than not, a mixture of the two combined. Freud described repression as, " the dynamic and compulsive but completely unconscious forgetting of unbearable, threatening, or disturbing experiences". Freud's theory adds to existing definitions and theories about repression; however, a clear distinction of whether repressed memories are in fact true or false is yet to be clearly defined.

## **Conclusions**

There appears to be no clear cut answers to whether or not repressed memories are true recollection of actual events or in reference to the details that emerge from its existence. One must consider that despite countless arguments revolving around the validity of the details, Freud's theory of "repression" as a combination between true and falsified recollection is most likely the more accurate take on things. As the old adage goes, " there are

always two sides to every story; your side, and my side. But somewhere in the middle lies the truth". Psychologists may be in for another few decades of theorizing and further research before a clear-cut distinction can be made as to whether repressed memories are created solely from true events.

It may be wise for psychologists to identify a set of guidelines when questioning victims of child abuse that can eliminate the possibility of suggestion. Freud said that the only way to free the emotions that have been denied freedom from our unconscious is to let the patient speak. This must occur without interference or proposition. Until this has been achieved, the controversy shall continue.