### The recovered memory debate continues in Europe: Evidence from the UK, the Netherlands, France, and Germany

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<td>Abstract:</td>
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COMMENTARY:

The recovered memory debate continues in Europe:

Evidence from the UK, the Netherlands, France, and Germany
Patihis and Pendergast (2018) present evidence that in the US “the debate over repressed memories of childhood abuse is not resolved”. We supplement this statement and point to evidence that assumptions of repressed and recovered memories of childhood abuse are also still prevalent in Europe.

Primary research conducted by Shaw, Leonte, Ball, and Felstead (2017) helps to substantiate this claim. Theirs was the first study to systematically analyse a large database of cases from the UK in which the issue of false memory was raised. A random sample of 496 cases was analysed, from an archive of cases collected by the British False Memory Society since 1993 (BFMS) that contains over 2,500 cases. The BFMS is similar to the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in the USA. It is a charity that provides support to those who claim they have been falsely accused of a crime on the basis of a false memory, dealing mostly with claims related to historical child sexual abuse.

Claims of recovered memory occurred most often in cases where the accuser was a woman in her thirties who had attended psychological therapy and was accusing her now elderly father in his sixties of historical child sexual abuse. Analysis of the subsample of daughters accusing fathers (N = 153) revealed that 84.31% of the accusing daughters were reported to have undergone some sort of therapy. A wide range of therapy types was mentioned, including general psychotherapy, counselling, hypnosis, and regression. Occupations of both the accuser and accused were also varied, suggesting that claims of recovered memories of abuse are not restricted to specific social strata. The study demonstrated that recovered memory, particularly of historical child sexual abuse, is a significant issue in the UK.

Already in 1997, a study on the acceptance of recovered memories in the UK by Gudjonsson concluded that “police, lawyers, judges and jurors appear reluctant to accept the testimony of accusers who claim recovered memories of sexual abuse” (Gudjonsson 1997, p.
348). Although this sentiment appears to remain true, some of these cases still enter the
criminal justice system every year, often with experts and therapists being called to give
evidence on the reliability of memory.

In the Netherlands, most cases involving alleged recovered memories no longer make
it to court. This is probably a result of the governmental regulation “Investigation sexual
abuse in codependent relationships” (Aanwijzing Opsporing seksueel misbruik in
afhankelijkheidsrelaties) introduced in 1999, which states that, if a case involves a claim of
recovered memory, the prosecutor should consult the Dutch National Expertise Group on
Special Cases of Sexual Misconduct (Landelijke Expertisegroep Bijzondere Zedenzaken)
before deciding whether to prosecute or not. This recommendation also applies to cases
involving claims of memories of abuse before the accuser’s third birthday, and to allegations
of ritual abuse. The Expertise Group is keenly aware of the risk of questionable therapeutic
techniques resulting in the creation of false memories, and will therefore typically advise
cautions when it comes to these cases.

The fact that recovered memories no longer make it to court in The Netherlands does
not mean, however, that the problem does not exist there. From 2011 to 2018, 13 new cases
were reported to the Dutch equivalent of the BFMS, the Fictitious Memory Group
(Werkgroep Fictieve Herinneringen; J.W. Oosterkamp, personal communication, 9 May
2018). Ten out of 13 alleged victims of childhood sexual abuse had been in some form of
psychological therapy, ranging from Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing
(EMDR) Therapy, to Reincarnation Therapy, to New Age Therapy.

Further, one case involving recovered memories has recently received a great deal of
media attention in The Netherlands and Belgium. Belgian author Griet op de Beeck
announced on a popular Dutch TV show (Slort & Boersma, 2017) she had discovered in

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therapy that she was sexually abused by her father from her fifth to her ninth year of life. She claimed that she never remembered the abuse until her therapist pointed out that her depressive and anorexic symptoms were probably the result of repressed memories of childhood abuse. In public reactions to her appearance on the show, other claims of recovered memories have emerged on social media. It seems that the myth of recovered memory could be making a comeback in The Netherlands.

Countries in Europe where psychoanalytic therapy is particularly popular, like France and Germany, seem even more likely to have high rates of therapists suggesting to patients that they may have repressed memories of abuse, and to use recovered memory therapy. In line with this, criticism has recently been voiced about “how little French psychology and psychiatry experts know about memory” (p. 158) and the dire need for qualified memory scientists in French courts to combat controversial beliefs about repressed memories (Dodier, 2018). Further in support of this, there are a number of organisations that work almost exclusively with the issues of repressed memory therapy and recovered memories in France, including PSYFMFrance, Alerte Faux Souvenirs Induits, and Mémoire Traumatique et Victimologie. In Germany there is also an organisation dedicated to this issue: False Memory Deutschland.

Despite being widely criticised by most scientists who study memory, there is evidence that assumptions about repressed memories and the use of memory recovery techniques among therapists remain a prevalent phenomenon in parts of Europe.
References


