

How memory is made

Is it possible that a person could experience years of hideous physical and sexual abuse and then forget all about it? If so, could such lost memories be found again during a course of psychotherapy? For many American therapists, who claim to be experts at retrieving these "recovered memories", the answer is yes. They argue that someone may embark upon treatment without any knowledge of years of the trauma of rape, incest, and humiliation.

In a new book, *Making Monsters*, Professor Richard Ofshe, a sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley, and Ethan Watters, a journalist, counter that these memories are, in fact, created during psychotherapy. If a police officer can, in a single night, cause someone to confess to a crime they didn't do, they argue, then how much more powerful is a kind, caring therapist? A troubled person meets a warm, persuasive professional who possesses the key that will make sense of unhappy lives. How easy it is for the two of them to collaborate on producing a new narrative to fit with the therapist's own preconceptions, and for the patient to come to identify with the new role.

But therapy should offer uncritical empathy, and not psychic detection. Therapists have no training or education in judging the literal truth. Memories recalled under intense therapy or hypnosis are complex, dream-like creations, belonging not to the past, but to the present. *Making Monsters* shows what happens when therapists confuse empathy with literal truth.

Such therapists seem oblivious to doubt and uncertainty. One bestselling book claims that the author's suspicion that someone was abused *always* led to confirmation of those suspicions. Therapists claim that poor body image, excessive drinking (or abstinence), lack of career success, low self-esteem or having headaches are signs of sexual abuse. Those who have experienced sexual abuse can, and do, show all of the above, but such complaints are dangerously common.

Simon Wessely

on the

dangerous

search for

childhood

trauma

The usual defence offered by believers is that professionals working with disturbed people wrongly denied the reality of sexual abuse in the past. True, but the scenario was different. Then women told their therapists that they knew they had been abused, even though they would rather forget it. The analysts told them that their memories were fantasies and explained them in Freudian terms such as penis envy and

oedipal rivalry. Today's patients deny that they have been abused, but the still dogmatic therapists do not believe them. Texts quoted by Ofshe and Watters urge that the more a patient denies such interpretations, the more assiduously should the therapist search for the evidence. Both interpretations are precisely that — interpretations, not truths — and thus influenced by the prevailing concerns of society. Just as Freud cannot be separated from the culture of fin-de-siècle Europe, so recovered memory is part of American culture at the end of this century.

But the consequences of the two are far from similar. Believing that your problems stem from penis envy and oedipal rivalry is harmless in itself. Believing that they are the result of incest with your father is a devastating conclusion, whose consequences can hardly be exaggerated. Convictions for murder and rape have been obtained in America solely on the basis of recovered memories.

People who have been abused or raped do require therapy — not to help them to remember the rape, but usually to stop that memory interfering with every moment of their existence. Uncovering hidden "memories" of abuse is not just a well-meaning attempt to explain human emotions, but a dangerous excursion into uncharted territory.

● *Making Monsters: False memories, psychotherapy and sexual hysteria* by Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters (Charles Scribner's, \$23.)