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The Recovered Memory Debate Continues in Europe: Evidence From the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, and Germany

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Patihis and Pendergrast (2018; this issue) presented evidence that in the United States, “the debate over repressed memories of childhood abuse is not resolved” (p. 3). 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 analyze a large database of cases from the United Kingdom in which the issue of false memory was raised. A random sample of 496 cases was analyzed from an archive of cases collected by the British False Memory Society (BFMS) since 1993 that contains more than 2,500 cases. The BFMS is similar to the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in the United States. 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 in which the accuser was a woman in her 30s who had attended psychological therapy and was accusing her now-elderly father (in his 60s) 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, counseling, 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 United Kingdom.

As early as 1997, Gudjonsson, in a study on the acceptance of recovered memories in the United Kingdom, concluded that “police, lawyers, judges and jurors appear reluctant to accept the testimony of accusers who claim recovered memories of sexual abuse” (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 of Sexual Abuse in Codependent Relationships” (Government of The Netherlands, 1999) 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 caution 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

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(*Werkgroep Fictieve Herinneringen*; J. W. Oosterkamp, personal communication, May 9, 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 therapy, to reincarnation therapy, to New Age therapy.

Furthermore, one case involving claims of 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 television show (Slort & Boersma, 2017) that she had discovered in therapy that she was sexually abused by her father from her fifth through her ninth years 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 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, such as France and Germany, seem even more likely to have high numbers of therapists suggesting to patients that they may have repressed memories of abuse and using recovered memory therapy. In line with this, criticism has recently been voiced about “how little French psychology and psychiatry experts know about memory” (Dodier, 2018, p. 158), and the dire need for qualified memory scientists in French courts to combat controversial beliefs about repressed memories. Further in support of this, there are a number of organizations that work almost exclusively with the issues of repressed memory therapy and recovered memories in France, including PSY-FMFrance, Alerte Faux Souvenirs Induits, and Mémoire Traumatisée et Victimologie. There is also an organization in Germany dedicated to this issue: False Memory Deutschland.

Despite the fact that the concept of repressed memories has been widely criticized by most scientists who study memory, there is evidence that assumptions about repressed memories and the use of memory-recovery

techniques among therapists remain prevalent phenomena in parts of Europe.


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J. Shaw and A. Vredevelde worked together on the entirety of the manuscript. Both authors approved the final manuscript for submission.

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