
NOTE FROM THE FIELD

A Historical Note on False Traumatic Memories



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Unhampered by current ethical standards and human subject committees, H. Bernheim (1889) created a false memory of a horrific traumatic event. Bernheim also demonstrated his subject's willingness to discuss the implanted memory with a representative of the law. Bernheim's work represents the first documented case of an implanted false traumatic memory, with direct relevance to contemporary debates. © 2003 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *J Clin Psychol* 60: 137–139, 2004.

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More than a century ago, Burnham (1889a, 1889b, 1889c, 1889d) reviewed theories and experimental findings on memory. In the third article of this series, Burnham (1989c) discussed the phenomenon of pseudoreminiscences or paramnesias:

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Simple Paramnesia: In this form of paramnesia, the images of the imagination, as they spontaneously arise in consciousness, appear as memories. Even among normal individuals, as Kraepelin has said, pure inventions of the fancy may assume the aspect of reminiscences. This is especially noticeable among children and aged people. If complete scenes and stories are not manufactured by the imagination and made to counterfeit true memories, yet details are filled in and related with evident sincerity. More commonly, these

figments of the imagination do not at first appear as things remembered, but gradually by repetition the pseudo-remembrance is developed. (p. 434)

Burnham's (1889c) discussion of paramnesias calls to mind recent and contentious debates over recovered memory therapies and the creation of false trauma memories. Early studies (Munsterberg, 1908) and better controlled studies in the 1970s (Loftus & Hoffman, 1989) showed that false details of an event can be planted through suggestive questioning, or other postevent exposures. Subsequent research has demonstrated that even an entire event can be fabricated in memory (Loftus, 1997; Porter, Birt, Yuille, & Lehman, 2000). Despite such studies, which demonstrate that memory, like silly putty, can be molded to support entirely false beliefs, recovered memory therapists consider such findings unimpressive if not trivial. These critics of false memory phenomenon argue that research has failed to demonstrate the planting of truly horrific, traumatic memories. Experimentalists know that this is not an easy thing to do: Although potentially clever means to accomplish the goal could be devised, such methods would be barred by ethical/human subjects considerations. Critics of false memory phenomenon also fault current research designs for their demand characteristics and question if experimental subjects really believe what they report to investigators. Meeting the demands of an experimental condition by reporting to a research assistant, so the argument goes, is not equivalent to believing a traumatic memory to the point of filing charges against an offender.

As it turns out, our ability to accept the construct validity of false traumatic memories is enhanced by certain observations from the past. In the same year that Burnham published his extensive review on the history and experimental status of memory, an English translation of H. Bernheim (1884/1889) recounted what may be the first documented instance of an implanted trauma memory:

I have proved that true retroactive hallucinations may often be developed. We can suggest to subjects that at some period, now

past, they saw such and such an act committed, and the image created in their minds seems like a living memory, which governs them to such an extent as to appear an incontestable reality.

For example, here is the case of a somnambulist, Marie G . . . I gave her the following suggestion: "On August 3 at three o'clock in the afternoon, you went into the house where you live. When you reached the first floor, you heard cries coming from a room. You looked in through the keyhole. You saw the old bachelor committing rape upon the largest little girl; you saw it. The little girl was struggling, she was bleeding, and he gagged her. You saw it all, and you were so distressed that you went to your apartment and did not dare to say anything. When you wake up you will think no more about it. I have not told the story to you; it is not a dream; it is not a vision I have given you during your hypnotic sleep; it is truth itself." (pp. 164-165)

Three days after the suggestion of this horrific false memory, and unaware of modern committees for the protection of human subjects, Bernheim asked a friend and distinguished lawyer to question Marie G, enacting the role of a judge deputed to examine her. Bernheim recounted these events:

She related the facts to him in my absence, giving all the details, the names of the criminal and the victim, and the exact hour of the crime. She gave her evidence energetically. She knew the gravity of her testimony. If she was summoned before the assizes, she would tell the truth in spite of her feelings. If it were necessary, she was ready to swear before God and man! . . . As I approached her bed after her evidence was given, the lawyer, assuming the privilege of a magistrate, made her repeat the evidence before me. I asked her if it was really true; if she had not been dreaming; if it was not a vision like those I was in the habit of giving her during her sleep. I tried to persuade her to doubt herself. She maintained the truth of her testimony with immovable conviction. (p. 165)

Bernheim's (1884/1889) demonstration of an implanted memory is significant, not

only for the traumatic nature of the suggested event but for his subject's willingness to affirm the false belief to a designated representative of the law. If clinical psychologists keep this historical case in mind, alongside contemporary findings (McNally, 2003), perhaps the construct of false traumatic memories will cause less dissension in today's debates.

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