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## Characteristics of Recovered Memories: a Dutch Replication of Gudjonsson's (1997) British Survey

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### SUMMARY

A survey was conducted among members of the Dutch counterpart of the British False Memory Society (BFMS), the *Werkgroep Fictieve Herinneringen* (the Dutch False Memory Working Group; FMWG). FMWG members answered questions about the nature and circumstances of the allegations and provided information about the accuser. By and large, the results of this survey parallel those of the Gudjonsson (1997) survey among members of the BFMS. That is, most accusations were made by adult daughters about their biological fathers and arose in the context of psychotherapeutic treatment. Along with the survey among FMWG members, regional police forces were surveyed about the prevalence of recovered memory cases. Results yielded an estimate of 63 cases resulting in legal proceedings over the past two years. None of these cases resulted in a conviction. Copyright © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past five years or so, there has been an intense debate about cases involving recovered memories, in which adults claim to have retrieved long-buried memories of childhood traumatic experiences (see for reviews Bowers and Farvolden, 1996; Lindsay and Read, 1995). While some authors have argued that recovered memories of, for example, childhood sexual abuse may be quite accurate (e.g. Schefflin and Brown, 1996; Terr, 1994), others have pointed out that there is a serious possibility that such memories are the illusory by-products of risky treatment interventions (e.g. Loftus, 1993; Zola, 1997). In some respects, the debate about the accuracy of recovered memories has turned into a 'Memory War' (see, for example, Appelbaum and Zoltek-Jick, 1996). On the other hand, this controversy has served as a major impetus for experimental studies concerned with memory distortions (e.g. Hyman *et al.*, 1995; Merckelbach *et al.*, 1997).

It is obvious that progression in this area critically depends on detailed information about the prevalence of and circumstances under which recovered memories occur. A systematic survey of Gudjonsson (1997) among members of the British False Memory Society (BFMS) was one important step in that direction. That survey relied on individuals who claim being accused of child sexual abuse by a family member on the

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basis of pseudo-memories. While surveys of this type run the risk of being one-sided, the information provided by the respondents yielded a straightforward profile of the cases involved: most accusations appeared to have arisen in the context of therapy; the large majority of the accusers were adult women; and most of their accusations were directed at their biological fathers. Only a small minority of the accusations resulted in legal action.

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, we examined whether Gudjonsson's main findings can be generalized to members of the *Werkgroep Fictieve Herinneringen* (hereafter: False Memory Working Group; FMWG), which is the Dutch counterpart of the BFMS. Our study was aimed at investigating the nature, circumstances, and consequences of accusations based on recovered memories. Second, in order to get a more complete picture of the legal consequences of such cases, we also surveyed Dutch police forces and asked them how these cases are handled in criminal investigations and proceedings.

## METHOD AND RESULTS

A questionnaire was sent out to *all* 101 members of the FMWG. They were asked to answer a number of questions that addressed the prevalence and type of recovered memories. The questionnaire contained 16 items<sup>1</sup> of which the first seven were concerned with demographic characteristics of the accused and the accuser. The remaining items pertained to the nature of the allegations, the circumstances (e.g. whether the accusing person was involved in therapy at the time of making the allegations), and the legal consequences of the accusations (e.g. whether the allegations lead to criminal or civil proceedings). The questionnaire was a shortened version of the one used by Gudjonsson (1997).

Seventy-five of the 101 questionnaires (74%) were completed and returned. In the analyses only cases were included that involved 'recovered memory', i.e. cases in which the accuser for the first time in adulthood brought forward accusations of childhood abuse, without ever mentioning this before. One of the cases did not meet this criterion and was therefore excluded from the final sample.

By and large, Dutch cases are similar to the British ones (see Table 1). That is, the great majority of the accusations was directed against the biological father, often in combination with an accusation against the mother. The great majority of the accusers were adult women; 88% of them being the daughter of the accused. In most cases, the nature of the accusations were relatively unspecified. In those cases in which allegations could be specified, rape was relatively often reported (i.e. 14% of the cases). As in the Gudjonsson (1997) survey, satanic ritual abuse was mentioned by a small minority of respondents (7%). Forty per cent of the cases involved sexual abuse that allegedly started before the accuser was 3 years old. In 79% of the cases the accusation was made during therapy. A sizeable minority of cases (i.e. 32%) led to a report to the police. Most of these cases were subsequently closed in the course of legal proceedings and only one case (in the mid-1980s) led to a conviction. The suspect in this case confessed at the time, but later retracted his confession.

Parallel to the survey among members of the FMWG, a survey among Dutch police forces was carried out in order to assess how often criminal proceedings are

<sup>1</sup>A copy of the items can be obtained from the first author.

Table 1. A comparison between main findings of Gudjonsson's (1997) survey among members of the British False Memory Society (BFMS; *N* = 282) and the survey among members of the Dutch False Memory Working Group (FMWG; *N* = 74)

Characteristics	BFMS survey		FMWG survey	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Biological father accused <sup>a</sup>	140	50	31	43
Biological mother accused <sup>a</sup>	18	6	5	7
Both father and mother accused <sup>a</sup>	29	29	32	45
Accuser female <sup>b</sup>	276	87	66	92
Mean age (SD) of accuser <sup>c</sup>	29.6 (8.3)		29.2 (8.3)	
Allegations of child sexual abuse unspecified <sup>d</sup>	150	62	57	77
Allegations pertained to rape <sup>d</sup>	74	30	10	14
Satanic ritual abuse allegations <sup>d</sup>	20	8	5	7
Abuse started before age 3 <sup>e</sup>	36	19	14	40
Accusations made while accuser underwent therapy	199	71	58	79
Report made to the police <sup>f</sup>	71	26	24	32

<sup>a</sup>Both surveys: 2 missing cases.

<sup>b</sup>BFMS survey: 1 missing case; FMWG survey: 2 missing cases.

<sup>c</sup>BFMS survey: 8 missing cases; FMWG survey: 2 missing cases.

<sup>d</sup>BFMS survey: 37 missing cases.

<sup>e</sup>BFMS survey: 100 missing cases; FMWG survey: 39 cases missing.

<sup>f</sup>BFMS survey: 4 cases missing.

instigated on the basis of recovered memories. All youth- and vice departments of the 25 regional police forces in The Netherlands received a letter in which they were asked to provide information in cases involving recovered memories. In the cover letter, a general description of the recovered memory phenomenon was given. Then, the forces were asked to describe the cases involving recovered memories which occurred in the past two years in their district, how often a special investigation squad had been formed to handle such cases, and how often legal proceedings had ended in a conviction.

Fifteen out of 25 regional police forces were able or willing to provide information. Of these, one police force reported that it is regularly confronted with recovered memory cases, but that it was unable to give precise information due to retirement of personnel and so on. The other 14 police forces could enumerate these cases and describe each, but some forces said they could not exclude the possibility that there had been more of these cases. For these 14 regional police forces, the total number of recovered memory cases in the past two years was 39. In at least five cases (13%), a special investigation team has been formed. None of the cases resulted in a conviction; the cases are either not prosecuted or ended in an acquittal for the defendants.

## DISCUSSION

Our survey among members of the Dutch counterpart of the BFMS produced results that are strikingly similar to those reported by Gudjonsson (1997) and those reported in a New Zealand study that followed a somewhat different procedure (Goodyear-Smith *et al.*, 1997). That is, in a large majority of cases, accusations of child sexual

abuse came from adult daughters and were directed at their biological fathers. Furthermore, these daughters typically had undergone or were involved in some form of psychotherapy. Often, the accusations were unspecified. At the very least, these similarities demonstrate that recovered memories are a cross-cultural, rather than a strict Anglo-American phenomenon. Whether these similarities imply that recovered memory cases share a narrow range of key characteristics is more difficult to establish. Admittedly, from the perspective of the accused (i.e. members of the FMWG or BFMS), it appears that recovered memory cases do fit a single profile. Yet, due to methodological limitations that are inherent in surveys of this type (see Andrews, 1997 for a critique), it is impossible to rule out the possibility that the uniform characteristics of recovered memory cases are a product of the stereotypes of which the accused FMWG or BFMS members rely. One argument against the latter interpretation is that in both the current survey and Gudjonsson's study, satanic ritual abuse allegations were not found to be very common, although they have become part of the prototypical recovered memory case as it is often portrayed in newspaper articles.

Despite the similarities between the present survey and that of Gudjonsson (1997), there were some interesting differences that are worthy of note. For example, in the Gudjonsson survey, a substantial minority of cases (12%) involved accusations that were not based on recovered memories. By contrast, in the present survey, only one case did not follow a recovered memory scenario (1%), i.e. a period of amnesia for childhood abuse experiences that is followed by the total recovery of the memory for such experiences. More importantly, Gudjonsson (1997) found that 19% of the allegations pertained to child sexual abuse that would have taken place before the accuser was aged 3. In the current study, this type of allegations was considerably more prevalent (40%). To the extent that this percentage is based on correct estimates of the accused, it raises serious doubts about the veridicality of these recovered memories given the normal limiting factor of infantile amnesia that makes it impossible to remember events that happen prior to age 3 (e.g. Loftus, 1993, 1997; Zola, 1997).

Our survey among regional police forces indicates that, at least in The Netherlands, the prevalence of recovered memory cases resulting in legal proceedings may not be as high as has sometimes been suggested in popular articles about the topic. That is, fourteen police forces reported 39 cases over the past two years. The geographical areas of these forces cover a population of 9.5 million people. If the number of 39 cases is extrapolated to the whole Dutch population, at least 63 cases would occur in The Netherlands every two years. It should also be pointed out that in 5 out of the 39 cases reported by the regional police forces, special investigation teams had been formed. Thus, significant efforts were involved in those recovered memory cases that came to the attention of the police.

Our surveys, as well as Gudjonsson's (1997) survey lend credibility to 'prototypical' examples of recovered memories that can be found in the literature (e.g. Loftus, 1993; Yapko, 1994). For instance, in accordance with those prototypical examples, both surveys appear to indicate that most accusations based on recovered memories arise in the context of psychotherapy. This—in combination with surveys suggesting that psychotherapists often rely on problematic assumptions about memory (see also Merckelbach and Wessel, 1998; Yapko, 1994) and use risky interventions in therapy (e.g. Poole *et al.*, 1995)—shows that it is legitimate to explore under what conditions therapy may contribute to the development of illusory memories.

### AUTHORS' NOTE

The research described here is based on a report by the first author to the Minister of Justice.

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