

False memories can be very persistent. Imagine that I were to read aloud a list of words such as *candy*, *sugar*, *honey*, and *taste*. Later, I ask you to recognize the presented words from a larger list. If you are at all like the people tested by Henry Roediger and Kathleen McDermott (1995), you would err three out of four times—by falsely remembering a nonpresented similar word, such as *sweet*. We more easily remember the gist than the words themselves.

Memory construction helps explain why 79 percent of 200 convicts exonerated by later DNA testing had been misjudged based on faulty eyewitness identification (Garrett, 2008). It explains why “hypnotically refreshed” memories of crimes so easily incorporate errors, some of which originate with the hypnotist’s leading questions (“*Did you hear loud noises?*”). It explains why dating partners who fell in love have overestimated their first impressions of one another (“*It was love at first sight*”), while those who broke up underestimated their earlier liking (“*We never really clicked*”) (McFarland & Ross, 1987). How people feel today tends to be how they recall they have always felt (Mazzoni & Vannucci, 2007; and recall from Module 4 our tendency to *hindsight bias*). As George Vaillant (1977, p. 197) noted after following adult lives through time, “It is all too common for caterpillars to become butterflies and then to maintain that in their youth they had been little butterflies. Maturation makes liars of us all.”

### Children’s Eyewitness Recall

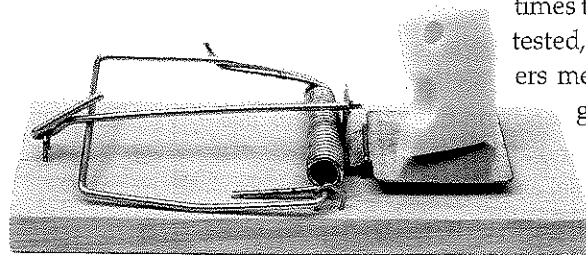
**33-3** How reliable are young children’s eyewitness descriptions, and why are reports of repressed and recovered memories so hotly debated?

If memories can be sincere, yet sincerely wrong, might children’s recollections of sexual abuse be prone to error? “It would be truly awful to ever lose sight of the enormity of child abuse,” observed Stephen Ceci (1993). Yet Ceci and Maggie Bruck’s (1993, 1995) studies of children’s memories have made them aware of how easily children’s memories can be molded. For example, they asked 3-year-olds to show on anatomically correct dolls where a pediatrician had touched them. Of the children who had not received genital examinations, 55 percent pointed to either genital or anal areas.

In other experiments, the researchers studied the effect of suggestive interviewing techniques (Bruck & Ceci, 1999, 2004). In one study, children chose a card from a deck of possible happenings, and an adult then read the card to them. For example, “Think real hard, and tell me if this ever happened to you. Can you remember going to the hospital with a mousetrap on your finger?” In interviews, the same adult repeatedly asked children to think about several real and fictitious events. After 10 weeks of this, a new adult asked the same question. The stunning result: 58 percent of preschoolers produced false (often vivid) stories regarding one or more events they had never experienced (Ceci et al., 1994). Here’s one of those stories:

My brother Colin was trying to get Blowtorch [an action figure] from me, and I wouldn’t let him take it from me, so he pushed me into the wood pile where the mousetrap was. And then my finger got caught in it. And then we went to the hospital, and my mommy, daddy, and Colin drove me there, to the hospital in our van, because it was far away. And the doctor put a bandage on this finger.

Given such detailed stories, professional psychologists who specialize in interviewing children could not reliably separate the real memories from the false ones. Nor could the children themselves. The above child, reminded that his parents had told him several times that the mousetrap incident never happened—that he had imagined it—protested, “But it really did happen. I remember it!” In another experiment, preschoolers merely overheard an erroneous remark that a magician’s missing rabbit had gotten loose in their classroom. Later, when the children were suggestively questioned, 78 percent of them recalled actually seeing the rabbit (Principe et al., 2006). “[The] research leads me to worry about the possibility of false allegations. It is not a tribute to one’s scientific integrity to walk down the middle of the road if the data are more to one side,” said Ceci (1993).



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Does this mean that children can never be accurate eyewitnesses? No. When questioned about their experiences in neutral words they understood, children often accurately recalled what happened and who did it (Goodman, 2006; Howe, 1997; Pipe, 1996). And when interviewers used less suggestive, more effective techniques, even 4- to 5-year-old children produced more accurate recall (Holliday & Albon, 2004; Pipe et al., 2004). Children were especially accurate when they had not talked with involved adults prior to the interview and when their disclosure was made in a first interview with a neutral person who asked nonleading questions.

### Repressed or Constructed Memories of Abuse?

The research on source amnesia and the misinformation effect raises concerns about therapist-guided “recovered” memories. There are two tragedies related to adult recollections of child abuse. One happens when people don’t believe abuse survivors who tell their secret. The other happens when innocent people are falsely accused.

Some well-intentioned therapists have reasoned with patients that “people who’ve been abused often have your symptoms, so you probably were abused. Let’s see if, aided by hypnosis or drugs, or helped to dig back and visualize your trauma, you can recover it.” Patients exposed to such techniques may then form an image of a threatening person. With further visualization, the image grows more vivid. The patient ends up stunned, angry, and ready to confront or sue the remembered abuser. The accused person (often a parent or relative) is equally stunned and devastated, and vigorously denies the accusation.

• Critics are not questioning most therapists’ professionalism. Nor are they questioning the accusers’ sincerity; even if false, their memories are heartfelt. Critics’ charges are specifically directed against clinicians who use “memory work” techniques, such as “guided imagery,” hypnosis, and dream analysis to recover memories. “Thousands of families were cruelly ripped apart,” with “previously loving adult daughters” suddenly accusing fathers (Gardner, 2006).irate clinicians have countered that those who argue that recovered memories of abuse never happen are adding to abused people’s trauma and playing into the hands of child molesters.

In an effort to find a sensible common ground that might resolve psychology’s “memory war,” professional organizations (the American Medical, American Psychological, and American Psychiatric Associations; the Australian Psychological Society; the British Psychological Society; and the Canadian Psychiatric Association) have convened study panels and issued public statements. Those committed to protecting abused children and those committed to protecting wrongly accused adults have agreed on the following:

- **Sexual abuse happens.** And it happens more often than we once supposed. Although sexual abuse can leave its victims at risk for problems ranging from sexual dysfunction to depression (Freyd et al., 2007), there is no characteristic “survivor syndrome”—no group of symptoms that lets us spot victims of sexual abuse (Kendall-Tackett et al., 1993).
- **Injustice happens.** Some innocent people have been falsely convicted. And some guilty people have evaded responsibility by casting doubt on their truth-telling accusers.
- **Forgetting happens.** Many of those actually abused were either very young when abused or may not have understood the meaning of their experience—circumstances under which forgetting is common. Forgetting isolated past events, both negative and positive, is an ordinary part of everyday life.
- **Recovered memories are commonplace.** Cued by a remark or an experience, we all recover memories of long-forgotten events, both pleasant and unpleasant. What many psychologists debate is twofold: Does the unconscious mind sometimes *forcibly repress* painful experiences? If so, can these experiences be retrieved by certain therapist-aided techniques? (Memories that surface naturally are more likely to be verified [Geraerts et al., 2007].)

- **Memories of things happening before age 3 are unreliable.** We cannot reliably recall happenings from our first three years. As noted earlier, this infantile amnesia happens because our brain pathways have not yet developed enough to form the kinds of memories we will form later in life. Most psychologists—including most clinical and counseling psychologists—therefore doubt “recovered” memories of abuse during infancy (Gore-Felton et al., 2000; Knapp & VandeCreek, 2000). The older a child was when suffering sexual abuse, and the more severe the abuse, the more likely it is to be remembered (Goodman et al., 2003).
- **Memories “recovered” under hypnosis or the influence of drugs are especially unreliable.** Under hypnosis, people will incorporate all kinds of suggestions into their memories, even memories of “past lives.”
- **Memories, whether real or false, can be emotionally upsetting.** Both the accuser and the accused may suffer when what was born of mere suggestion becomes, like an actual trauma, a stinging memory that drives bodily stress (McNally, 2003, 2007). Some people knocked unconscious in unremembered accidents know this all too well. They have later developed stress disorders after being haunted by memories they constructed from photos, news reports, and friends’ accounts (Bryant, 2001).

So, does *repression* of threatening memories ever occur? Or is this concept—the cornerstone of Freud’s theory and of so much popular psychology—misleading? In Modules 55 and 56, we will return to this hotly debated issue. For now, this much appears certain: The most common response to a traumatic experience (witnessing a loved one’s murder, being terrorized by a hijacker or a rapist, losing everything in a natural disaster) is not banishment of the experience into the unconscious. Rather, such experiences are typically etched on the mind as vivid, persistent, haunting memories (Porter & Peace, 2007). As Robert Kraft (2002) said of the experience of those trapped in the Nazi death camps, “Horror sears memory, leaving . . . the consuming memories of atrocity.”

## Before You Move On

### ► ASK YOURSELF

Could you be an impartial jury member in a trial of a parent accused of sexual abuse based on a recovered memory, or of a therapist being sued for creating a false memory of abuse? Why or why not?

### ► TEST YOURSELF

How would source amnesia affect us if we were to remember all of our waking experiences as well as all of our dreams?

*Answers to the Test Yourself questions can be found in Appendix E at the end of the book.*