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# The Women's Quarterly

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## Sex, Lies, and Audiotapes

*Rael Jean Isaac explains why we've been so willing to believe  
fantastic tales of sexual abuse*

There is a widespread belief that sexual abuse of children is endemic to society. This is a relatively new notion. In fact, it can be traced to a particular moment in history: April 17, 1971.

On that day the New York Radical Feminists, a group that at its height boasted no more than 400 members, held a groundbreaking conference on rape in New York. For two days, women held forth on a subject long considered taboo. Susan Brownmiller, who would go on to write *Against Our Will*, a classic in the literature of rape, later described a speech given by Florence Rush as the highlight of the event.

"I have been to many feminist meetings," Brownmiller recalled, "but never before, and not since, have I seen an entire audience rise to its feet in acclaim. We clapped. We cheered."

Rush was an unlikely star for such a gathering. A middle-aged social worker, who had never been raped, she outlined statistical studies suggesting that sexual abuse of children, including incest, was a more widespread problem than was generally recognized. It was Rush's conclusion that electrified her audience: "The family itself is an instrument of sexual and other forms of child abuse," Rush declared. She added that this abuse "is permitted because it is an unspoken but prominent factor in socializing and preparing the female to accept a subordinate role.... In short the sexual abuse of female children is a process of education that prepares them to become the wives and mothers of America."

Many women at the gathering had backgrounds in the New Left of the 1960s. They felt their male comrades had exploited them, relegating them to making coffee, typing, and sex.

Now they could show that feminists had uncovered the great American secret: Behind the picket fences,

hidden by those starched suburban curtains, fathers were raping daughters to prepare them for their proper role in society. Beyond racism, imperialism, and capitalism lay the true root of evil<sup>3/4</sup>patriarchy.

Before Rush's speech, feminists had given little thought to incest. Author Andrea Dworkin recalled that before the conference "we never had any idea how common it was." In the decades following Rush's talk, feminists more than made up for their earlier unawareness, competing with each other in elevating the number of victims.

Catharine MacKinnon, the law professor who helped develop the legal definitions of sexual harassment, announced (absent any evidence) that 4.5 percent of all women are victims of incest by their fathers and, if brothers, stepfathers, uncles, and family friends are thrown in, the figure rose to 40 percent. "In fact," wrote MacKinnon, "it is the woman who has not been sexually abused who deviates." Seemingly scholarly studies by feminists-with-credentials such as Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman bolstered the case for widespread incest. Herman dedicated her 1981 book, *Father-Daughter Incest*, to the women "estimated by us to be in the millions, who have personally experienced incestuous abuse." No wonder Andrea Dworkin wrote that, for a woman, the home is the most dangerous place in the world!

As the feminists saw it, bringing incestuous rape out of the closet would finally vindicate the truth of women's experience. Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychotherapy, had believed early in his career that sexual abuse was the cause of his female patients' neurotic symptoms. Later, however, Freud dismissed such testimony from his female patients as fantasy. According to Herman, Freud simply could not confront the reality that incest "is an inevitable result of patriarchal family structure."

Believe the women. Believe the children. These refrains became the mantra of the incest movement. While the women's movement would be enormously successful in turning sexual abuse-including incest-into a major public issue, women, ironically, would become the chief victims of the hysteria it generated.

The obsession with this supposedly rampant sexual abuse played out in two ways: "Believe the women" became the repressed memory hysteria. "Believe the children" turned into the daycare hysteria.

At the time of the conference, psychiatric textbooks estimated the rate of father-daughter incest at one to two for every million women in the United States. If that figure was accurate, it was not surprising that incest attracted little public attention. On the other hand, if, in fact, fathers were sexually abusing millions of daughters, why did no one know of it?

The theory of "repressed memory" provided the answer. A woman was so traumatized by being molested by her father, the theory said, that she banished the memory from her conscious mind. Paul McHugh, head of the Department of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Medical School, is skeptical of repressed memory. McHugh sees the development of the concept as one of the "misadventures" of the last thirty years that show "the power of cultural fashion to lead psychiatric thought and practice off in false, even disastrous, directions."

However poorly grounded in science, the theory helped explain why so few women remembered their incestuous experiences until they entered therapy. According to the theory, the intact, repressed memory festered in a special part of the brain producing, as psychiatrist Lenore Terr put it, "signs and symptoms" that disrupted the woman's life. While Terr and Herman were important in lending a cloak of medical legitimacy to the idea of repressed memory, the most influential work was *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, neither of whom had training in psychiatry. Published in 1988, *The Courage to Heal* has sold more than 700,000 copies.

The book asked such questions as: Do you have difficulty expressing your feelings? Problems trusting your intuition? Have an eating disorder? Feel different from other people? Feel powerless, like a victim? If you answered "yes" to these or exhibited any of a host of other "symptoms," *The Courage to Heal* said that it was time to consider the possibility that you had been sexually abused as a child.

Convinced sexual abuse was endemic and seeing such symptoms as "evidence," therapists of all types, from psychiatrists on down, set out to "help" patients unlock their buried memories. They used a variety of methods, including hypnosis, injections of sodium amytal ("truth serum"), guided imagery, dream work, participation in "survivor groups," even massage therapy to recover "body memories" of abuse. Yet as social psychology professor Richard Ofshe points out in *Making Monsters*, the scientific grounding for all this was absent.

Indeed, studies on memory show that intense emotional experiences are the least likely to be forgotten. Ironically, Dr. Terr's reputation was based on her study of twenty-six children who had been kidnapped from a school bus in Chowchilla, California, and entombed in a truck trailer. She found that years after the traumatic experience each child retained detailed memories of the event. Nor is there any evidence that traumatic memories are stored in pristine form in a special part of the brain. On the contrary, as forensic psychologist Dr. Terence Campbell points out, brain-imaging studies show memory and imagination involve the same areas of the cerebral cortex<sup>3/4</sup>it is hard to separate the two.

As for hypnosis (and sodium amytal), the American Medical Association's Council on Scientific Affairs states: "Contrary to what is generally believed by the public, recollections obtained during hypnosis not only fail to be more accurate but actually appear to be generally less reliable than non-hypnotic recall." The American Psychiatric Association guidelines note that "no specific unique symptom profile has been identified that necessarily correlated with abuse experiences."

While feminists always assumed the abuser was male, Florence Rush found in her work with (genuinely) abused children that these young victims frequently focused their rage on their mothers. Rush argued that it is men, not women, who actually rape our young and it is time for them, not women, to be held responsible. Or, as feminist writer Robin Morgan succinctly put it, "Kill your father, not your mother." Still, a 1993 survey of over a thousand cases by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, the Philadelphia-based organization that has been in the forefront of exposing problems with recovered memory therapy, found that in fully a third of cases, the mother was accused of active sexual abuse.

Even those daughters who identified their fathers as the abuser blamed their mothers for failing to

protect them. Some remembered the mothers' holding them down while their fathers raped them. That is what Beth Rutherford claimed happened. Rutherford, after two years in therapy, "remembered" her minister-father twice impregnating her and then performing a coat-hanger abortion (never mind that a medical examination showed she was a virgin). Rutherford convinced her sisters that they were also in danger of being murdered by their father. One sister actually went into hiding, and all three cut off any communication with both parents. Beth Rutherford has since recanted the accusations and written about her family's ordeal.

While it may be hard to summon up much sympathy for the daughter who rips apart her family because of therapist-induced delusions, in many cases she is clearly the biggest victim of all. As therapy proceeds, she produces ever more lurid memories. Indeed, in an estimated 15 percent of cases, the repressed memory patient develops memories of satanic ritual abuse. Increasingly satanic cult "survivors" are realizing they were victims of their therapists and are suing them for malpractice. The evidence of therapist misconduct is so impressive, and jury verdicts have been so high that many insurance companies now settle during the trial.

Dr. Bennett Braun's insurance company settled for \$10.6 million the day his trial was to begin. Dr. Braun's patient, Patricia Burgus, had, through therapy, become convinced that she had been the high priestess of a satanic cult. Hospitalized for over two years, Burgus "remembered" lit torches pushed inside her and having to eat body parts of 2,000 people in one year.

While under the care of Dr. Kenneth Olson, Nadean Cool became convinced that she had 120 personalities (including that of a duck), had knifed babies in the heart and passed them around to other cult members to eat. The psychiatrist even performed an exorcism on Cool while she was tethered to a hospital bed. In the Cool case, the insurance company settled for \$2.4 million after fifteen days of testimony.

If "believe the women" produced the nightmare of repressed memory therapy, "believe the children" led to something arguably more horrific, the daycare trials. Many convicted of sexual abuse of children in their care during the 1980s and early 90s, when the hysteria was at its height, have since appealed their cases and are now free. Gerald Amirault, who has been in prison since 1986, has not been so fortunate. Amirault, whose family operated the Fells Acres Day School in Malden, Massachusetts, was convicted of abusing children with a magic wand while wearing a clown costume.

Amirault's then sixty-year-old mother, Violet, was convicted of raping children and assaulting them with a butcher knife (there were no scars). Gerald's younger sister, Cheryl, was supposed, among other things, to have slaughtered bluebirds and cut off the leg of a squirrel in front of the children. Violet Amirault was released from prison before her death in 1997. In Cheryl's case, a judge revised and revoked her sentence. A condition of Cheryl Amirault's release was that she promise to undertake no further legal efforts to prove her innocence.

The Amirault case did not involve "recovered" memories but rather the testimony of small children. Florence Rush once made the valid point that, traditionally, investigators had been too quick to dismiss children's accounts of abuse. Rush argued that children differentiate between make-believe and reality

"often more accurately than adults."

Indeed, a number of judges and juries have found defendants guilty on the assumption that children could not make such things up. What they have failed to recognize is the role of therapists in evoking stories of hideous abuse from little children, who recount their stories with such conviction on the witness stand. In *Jeopardy in the Courtroom: A Scientific Analysis of Children's Testimony*, psychology professors Stephen J. Ceci and Maggie Bruck examined hundreds of transcripts of therapist interviews of small children in the daycare cases.

They described the mechanisms by which children who initially denied that anything bad had happened were led eventually to recount lurid tales of abuse. These children had been subjected to, among other things, repeated questioning by multiple interviewers who refused to take "nothing happened" for an answer and selective reinforcement-children were rewarded with police badges in exchange for incriminating statements and berated when denying that abuse occurred.

There was also peer pressure (the children were told what other children had supposedly revealed and were told they could help their friends by saying the same things). The children also had to answer leading questions. The use of special anatomical dolls with enlarged genitalia also provided ample opportunities for misinterpretation. Ceci and Bruck point out that a child may insert a finger into a doll's genitalia simply because of its novelty, just as a preschooler, given a doughnut, is likely to put a finger into the hole.

One of the worst stories is that of Kelly Michaels. Ceci and Bruck devote special attention to the questioning of children in the Michaels case. Freshly graduated from a small Catholic college near Pittsburgh, Michaels was arrested in 1986, charged with sexually abusing dozens of children at the Wee Care daycare center in New Jersey. After a lengthy jury trial, Michaels was sentenced to forty-seven years in prison. Ceci and Bruck filed an amicus brief in her appeal. Signed by forty-six child psychologists, the brief argued that testimony had been elicited from children in "a shocking manner" by frightening and bullying them and through sexually explicit interviewing.

It is worth noting that in the Michaels case, as in the other daycare cases, the improbability of the entire scenario disturbed not judge, jury, or media. Michaels was accused of raping almost all the children in the daycare center with knives, forks, spoons, Lego blocks (one child testified she had forced the socket end of a light bulb into her vagina)-all during regular school hours for a period of seven months. Audiotapes of the children's original testimony showed that some children testified their parents were present during these goings-on. One child asserted that the head teacher had walked in as Kelly was penetrating the children with assorted utensils, took the silverware, and put it in her briefcase. The prosecution disposed of such inconvenient testimony by explaining that these were "rescue fantasies."

No member of the staff (including the head teacher) at Wee Care had noticed anything amiss in all those months and no child had complained to his parents. So, while, in his summing up, Judge William Harth adjured the jury to "use your common sense," neither he nor the jury showed much of that vital commodity. Michaels had been imprisoned for five years before the appeals court threw out her conviction on the grounds that the children's testimony had been tainted by improper interviewing

techniques.

As for the women with "repressed memories" who cut themselves off from their parents, even going so far as to sue them in civil or criminal court, many have recanted their accusations or reestablished ties without saying they were wrong. Many families remain permanently estranged. Many of the women convicted in the daycare or sex ring cases have by now been released (the men are another story). But the lives of all those involved were shattered, and it is hard to put Humpty Dumpty together again.

The feminists who rallied around Florence Rush believed that they could end child abuse by abolishing the patriarchal family, which was its "cause." Instead they launched a child abuse hysteria in which pseudo-science has flourished. Both men and women have been its victims.

~Rael Jean Isaac is most recently co-author of *Madness in the Streets: How Psychiatry and the Law Abandoned the mentally Ill* (Free Press).

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