

SOCIAL ISSUES

U-TURN ON MEMORY LANE

by Mike Stanton

Pamela Freyd seems more like the mother and grandmother she is than a revolutionary. But as a founder of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, she has in fact helped revolutionize the way the press and the public view one of the angriest debates in America — whether an adult can suddenly remember long-forgotten childhood abuse.

The subject of memory has always been a slippery one for journalists. While there is a documented body of knowledge showing that people can forget horrific events and recall them years later, memory is not an exact science like nuclear physics, but rather an emotional arena of violent disagreement.

Yet in the 1980s and early '90s, repressed memories were all the rage among reporters and talk-show hosts as the media uncritically focused on accounts of abuse so dramatic and terrible that they must have been true. Some, it eventually became clear, were exaggerations or fabrications.

Now, thanks largely to the efforts of the Philadelphia-based False Memory Syndrome Foundation, the pendulum has swung equally far in the other direction. Formed as a support group for accused parents, the foundation has sought primarily to persuade the media of the dangers of psychotherapy in creating "false memories." Indeed, today there is open skepticism and outright hostility toward the idea that lost memory can be recovered. But often there has been no more hard-news reporting than before, leaving the issue essentially unexplicated in the press.

Mike Stanton heads the investigative team at The Providence Journal-Bulletin, where he shared a 1994 Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting. He wrote a 1995 series on Professor Ross E. Cheit of Brown University, whose recovered memory of childhood abuse drew national attention. Stanton studied recovered memory last year on a John S. Knight Fellowship at Stanford University.

A study published last year by a University of Michigan sociologist, Katherine Beckett, found a sharp shift in how four leading magazines — *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *People* — treated sexual abuse. In 1991, more than 80 percent of the coverage was weighted toward stories of survivors, with recovered memory taken for granted and questionable therapy virtually ignored. By 1994, more than 80 percent of the coverage focused on false accusations, often involving supposedly false memory. Beckett credited the False Memory Syndrome Foundation with a major role in the change.

Pamela Freyd (rhymes with "tried") started the foundation in early 1992 with her husband, Peter, a University of Pennsylvania mathematician. He had been accused by their grown daughter Jennifer, a respected University of Oregon psychologist and memory researcher, of childhood sexual abuse, the memory of which she said she recovered as an adult. Since then, journalists across the country have felt the wrath of what Stephen Fried, a writer for *Philadelphia* magazine, calls "the most influentially dysfunctional family in America."

It wasn't Jennifer Freyd, but her parents, who made her allegations public. Pamela Freyd revealed the accusations, which neither she nor her daughter has ever specified publicly, along with personal details about her daughter's life, in an article that she wrote anonymously for a small journal sympathetic to accused parents. She later identified herself to reporters as the author.

The Freyds blame their daughter's therapist for her memories of abuse. But Jennifer Freyd denies that her memories surfaced, as newspaper articles and her mother have suggested, through hypnosis or any of the other therapeutic practices the FMSF attacks.

Rarely has such a strange and little-understood organization had such a profound effect on media coverage of such a contro-



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versial matter. The foundation is an aggressive, well-financed p.r. machine adept at manipulating the press, harassing its critics, and mobilizing a diverse army of psychiatrists, outspoken academics, expert defense witnesses, litigious lawyers, Freud bashers, critics of psychotherapy, and devastated parents. With a budget of \$750,000 a year from members and outside supporters, the foundation's reach far exceeds its actual membership of about 3,000. The Freyds and the members know who we are, but the press knows less than it realizes about who they are, what drives them, or why they've been so successful.

Pamela Freyd, who is the foundation's executive director, wrote in its first monthly newsletter, "We had to find ways to get people to hear our story." From the beginning, she encouraged accused parents to tell their stories to reporters and to appear on talk shows, to put a human face on this "serious health crisis" and satisfy the media's "craving for human drama."

It worked. As controversial memory cases arose around the country, FMSF boosters contacted journalists to pitch the false-memory argument, more and more reporters picked up on the issue, and the foundation became an overnight media darling. The story line that had dominated the press since the 1980s — an underreported toll of sexual abuse, including sympathetic stories of adult survivors resurrecting long-lost memories of it — was quickly turned around. The focus shifted to new tearful victims — respectable, elderly parents who could no longer see their children and grandchildren because of bad therapists who

implanted memories not only of sexual abuse but also of such bizarre things as satanic cults, past lives, and alien abductions.

In fact, there was irresponsible therapy being practiced, people did concoct memories of things that never happened, and frightening lawsuits devastated those falsely accused. Such cases were covered with great zeal.

But the reporters who rushed to explore the Freyds' juicy new angle ignored equally essential facts — for example, that there is no way to document the prevalence of bad therapy versus good therapy, or of true memories versus false memories, and that it is nearly impossible to know whether the accused parents, the Freyds included, are telling the truth. The foundation is part of a larger movement that questions the recent increase in sexual-abuse allegations, not only by adults claiming recovered memory but also by children who, sometimes under coercive questioning, produce lurid accusations involving their parents or day-care personnel and adult "sex rings."

Within six months of the foundation's creation, so many positive stories had appeared that Pamela Freyd wrote in her newsletter: "The biggest change has come in the press. One year ago there was literally nothing written about FMSF (indeed, it did not even have a name). There are now many well-documented professional and popular articles about FMSF."

By the end of 1993, Pamela Freyd reported that media cover-

Peter and Pamela Freyd started their foundation to tell their side of the story and to satisfy the media's "craving for human drama"

Why the press changed course on whether lost memories of childhood abuse can be recovered

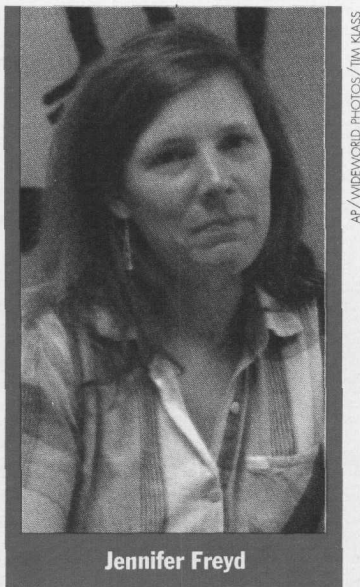
age had changed public attitudes toward false memory, and that news articles "are the primary vehicle for the dissemination of information." And "false memory syndrome" — a catchy slogan invented by the Freyds but not scientifically accepted — became implanted in our collective consciousness, complete with its own heading in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Many reporters don't realize that the FMSF's impressive array of sci-

entific advisers represents just one part of the broad spectrum of psychological thought. The board is dominated by research psychologists and biologically oriented therapists — inclined to seek physical reasons for problems and treat them with drugs — along with older, psychoanalytically oriented psychiatrists. There are few younger female therapists.

The two most prominent FMSF experts, who pop up repeatedly in news articles and as consulting witnesses in lawsuits, are a University of Washington psychologist, Elizabeth Loftus, and a University of California at Berkeley sociologist and cult specialist, Richard Ofshe. While both have done work and published books that are an important part of the recovered-memory debate, too many reporters accept their theories uncritically, seemingly unaware that there are countering scientific views or that neither's expertise is in traumatic memory.

As the story unfolded in the '90s, reporters relied increasingly on FMSF experts and propaganda. A November 29, 1993 *Time* article by Leon Jaroff — who calls himself *Time*'s longtime "resident skeptic" — quoted several foundation advisers and conveyed the impression that "literally thousands" of people were coming forward with false memories induced by therapists. Jaroff says he was introduced to the topic by another FMSF adviser, Martin Gardner, who was active in another group that Jaroff helped found, the Committee for the Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. The committee debunks all forms of "quackery," says Jaroff, from flying saucers to recovered



Jennifer Freyd

memory. "As a journalist you have to write a balanced story, but within reason," he says. "You have to make a judgment. I'm convinced that so-called 'recovered memory' is largely illusory." The FMSF hailed the *Time* piece as "a landmark in public awareness."

Even earlier, in a July 21, 1992, *New York Times* story, the science writer Daniel Goleman, a psychologist, became one of the first journalists to pop-

ularize the foundation's contention that accusations based on recovered memories were modern-day witch-hunts. The article opened with the question "Is it Satan or Salem?" and the witch-hunt metaphor proved irresistible for other reporters. But Goleman failed to consider that the FMSF might represent an alternative witch-hunt — a backlash by a society fed up with celebrity incest survivors like Oprah and Roseanne and a culture of victimization. His story did not make clear the role of accused parents in starting the foundation, quoted several of its advisers without revealing their affiliation, and misidentified Pamela Freyd as a psychologist.

Major series on false memory appeared in *The San Diego Union-Tribune* in the fall of 1992 and the *San Francisco Examiner* in the spring of 1993. The San Diego series presented as typical of this new hysteria the bizarre case of a woman who claimed a memory from the womb of her mother trying to abort her. The six-day *Examiner* series devoted reams of copy to the emotional but unverified tales of accused parents, but quoted only one alleged victim. The series provoked an outraged response from many therapists and women's and survivors' groups. The foundation, in its next newsletter, eagerly advertised reprints of the *Examiner* series "that has created such a stir across the country."

Highly publicized cases provided reporters with grist for the mill. In 1991, a California wine executive, Gary Ramona, sued his daughter's therapists over her claims of recovered memory of sexual abuse and ultimately won a landmark malpractice case. (The daughter is

now suing Ramona for the cost of her therapy and for punitive damages.) In 1993, Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago was accused in a lawsuit of having molested a young man some years earlier; the man later said his memories were unreliable and withdrew his suit. The incident provoked a wave of indignant columns and a move in the Illinois legislature to ban recovered-memory suits.

The recovered-memory debate sprawls into legal cases beyond sexual abuse. In 1995, the nation's only murder conviction based primarily on a recovered memory was overturned. The suspect, a former firefighter in San Mateo, California, George Franklin, was freed after evidence emerged that his daughter, who had testified against him in his 1990 trial, lied when she denied that she had remembered the murder while under hypnosis. Testimony derived from hypnosis is inadmissible under California law.

The case of Paul Ingram, a Washington state sheriff's deputy and fundamentalist Christian who confessed to recovered memories of molesting his daughters and satanic ritual abuse, became the focal point of a two-part series by Lawrence Wright in *The New Yorker* in the spring of 1993. The articles, which won a National Magazine Award and were published as the book *Remembering Satan*, attracted widespread attention to the phenomenon of false memory while virtually ignoring the many documented instances of recovered memory.

Wright made a compelling case that Ingram confessed to many of his crimes after coercive questioning by the police and his minister. But then, relying on the controversial theories of the prominent FMSF experts Loftus and Ofshe and with no real documentation, Wright said Ingram was representative of "thousands of other people across the country who have been accused on the basis of recovered memories." He added, "Perhaps some of these memories are real; certainly many are false."

The foundation received an even bigger boost with the airing of the 1995 PBS *Frontline* documentary "Divided Memories," produced by Ofra Bikel. A watershed media event in the recovered-memory debate, "Divided Memories" purported to be a balanced examination of the issue and, to uninformed viewers, seemed to summarize where the matter stands today. In truth, it was a four-hour

polemic, including an interview with the Freyds, that gave short shrift to confirmed cases of recovered memory. The program spent most of its time skewering fringe therapists who helped patients recover memories — with *Frontline* cameras rolling — of satanic abuse, past lives, and, in one case, being stuck in a fallopian tube. The documentary ignited an angry firestorm among therapists, medical experts, and groups representing women and survivors of sexual abuse.

Sherry Quirk, president of the American Coalition for Abuse Awareness, wrote to *Frontline* to express outrage “at the heavily weighted slant you have given a subject which is

‘The biggest change has come in the press,’ Pamela Freyd wrote with satisfaction

already sinking under the weight of confusion and misinformation.” A Harvard psychiatrist, Bessel A. van der Kolk, a leading memory expert interviewed by Bikel, wrote to accuse her of glossing over the intricacies of trauma and memory and ignoring national figures documenting the magnitude of sexual abuse. The U.S. Department of Justice’s bureau of justice statistics estimates that 250,000 children a year are sexually molested.

Bikel says she and her researchers looked at hundreds of cases, but could find just one corroborated instance of recovered memory, mentioned briefly near the start of the four-hour documentary. But Ross Cheit, a Brown University professor of public policy who confirmed his own recovered memories of abuse by obtaining a tape-recorded confession from the perpetrator, assigned one of his students to look through electronic databases. In just a few hours, Cheit wrote PBS, the student turned up six cases of recovered memory that were verified by confessions or testimony from other victims. Bikel and her researchers, in fact,

knew about Cheit’s own case, and another involving a woman who successfully sued her father based on a recovered memory, but did not include their stories. Bikel says she didn’t feel their cases were relevant.

Some press critics raved about “Divided Memories.” *The Wall Street Journal’s* Dorothy Rabinowitz, a Pulitzer Prize finalist last year for her columns questioning sexual-abuse accusations by children in day-care cases, called Bikel’s work “grimly captivating, occasionally hilarious, plainly masterful” — “a killer assault” of “extraordinary texture” that “deserves all the awards around.” The FMSF was pleased with the results. The documentary, says Peter Freyd, was “openly an advocate for our side.”

“Divided Memories” capped a sensational run for the foundation. By the end of 1994, more than 300 articles had been published on “false memory,” with headlines like “Beware the Incest-Survivor Machine” (*The New York Times Book Review* on several books dealing with recovered memory) and “Cry Incest” (*Playboy*). Even the comic strip *Doonesbury* joined in: Mark the disc jockey underwent “on-air repressed-memory-hypnosis therapy” by a “leading guru for the recovered-memory movement,” who attempted to induce memories of space-alien abduction.

In her study of the four news-magazines’ pendulum-swing on coverage of sexual abuse, Katherine Beckett noted that the foundation has been “particularly successful” in redefining the issue of child abuse, adding, “The success stems, in part, from the fact that the FMSF identified influencing media coverage as its most important objective.”

The FMSF builds much of its case against recovered memory by attacking a generally discredited Freudian concept of repression that proponents of recovered memory don’t buy, either. In so doing, the foundation ignores the fifty-year-old literature on traumatic, or psychogenic, amnesia, which is an accepted diagnosis by the American Psychiatric Association. In his 1996 book *Searching for Memory*, the Harvard psychologist and brain researcher Daniel L. Schacter — who believes that both true and false memories exist — says there is no conclusive scientific evidence that false memories can be created. The FMSF acknowledges that it’s impossible to distinguish true memories from false ones,

but then dismisses incontrovertible cases like Ross Cheit’s as aberrations. The foundation and its backers “remind me of a high school debate team,” says the Stanford psychiatrist David Spiegel, an authority on traumatic amnesia. “They go to the library, surgically extract the information convenient to them and throw out the rest.”

A *Harvard Law Review* article in January 1996 argued that while scientific evidence proves the existence of delayed memories, biased reporting has helped create a social climate in which people, including some judges, have come to believe just the opposite. “Stories highlighting dubious-sounding or clearly mistaken memories have replaced reports of more plausible recollections,” two Northwestern University law professors, Cynthia Grant Brown and Elizabeth Mertz, wrote in the *Review*. “The abusive parents of earlier media accounts have been replaced as the villains of the story by self-serving therapists,” they said, and wondered “why it is apparently so difficult to contemplate the obvious but more complicated possibility that there are both accurate and inaccurate claims of remembered sexual abuse. . . . To the degree that the media has an effect on public opinion,

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including legal professionals' opinions, there is cause to doubt that the public is hearing this more balanced message."

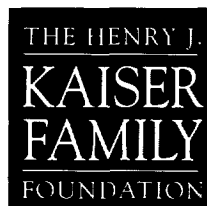
A reporter making an honest effort to tell both sides finds it difficult to penetrate a world where many victims are reluctant to surrender their privacy. Instead of digging the story out for themselves, reporters take a soft-news approach — just as many did earlier with implausible stories of victimization — and allow themselves to be swayed by tearful parents, leaving the FMSF to package the hard news in a slick press kit.

It's surprising how few stories explore the question whether accused parents are

guilty or innocent. The foundation's own survey of member families indicated that 11 percent had been accused by more than one child and that, of a smaller sample that took a lie-detector test, 14 percent failed and another 11 percent declined to disclose the results.

Many therapists, like their patients, hesitate to speak out. Recently, though, they have begun to make a more concerted effort to mobilize a response. One of the most outspoken critics of the false-memory movement is a Seattle therapist, David Calof, editor until last year of *Treating Abuse Today*, a newsletter for

therapists. He has identified what he calls the movement's political agenda — lobbying for more restrictive laws governing therapy and promoting the harassment of therapists through lawsuits and even picketing of their offices and homes. Calof himself has been the target of picketing so fierce that he has been in and out of Seattle courtrooms over the last two years, obtaining restraining orders. He was spending so much time and money fighting the FMSF supporters' campaign against him, he says, that he was forced to stop publishing the newsletter last year. He recently donated the publication to a victims' rights group in Pennsylvania.



Announces THE KAISER MEDIA INTERNSHIPS IN URBAN HEALTH REPORTING FOR 1997

An internship program for young minority journalists interested in specializing in urban public health reporting

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation is again sponsoring summer internships, starting June 1997, at six major metropolitan newspapers and at three local television stations, for young minority journalists interested in reporting on urban public health issues. The interns are selected by the newspapers/TV stations.

The nine 1997 Kaiser Media Interns and their host newspapers/TV stations are:

Mohamad Bazzi -- *The Washington Post*
Erika Chavez -- *The Oregonian*
Jessi de la Cruz -- *The Detroit Free Press*
James Hill -- *WAGA-5, Atlanta*
Tomoko Hosaka -- *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*
Laura Lane -- *The Dallas Morning News*
Erin McKinney -- *KTVI-2, St. Louis*
Camille Mojica -- *The San Jose Mercury News*
Erika Dawn Randle -- *KDFW-4, Dallas*

The Kaiser Internship Program provides an initial week-long briefing on urban public health issues and health reporting at the National Press Foundation in Washington, D.C. Interns are then based for ten weeks at their newspaper/TV station, typically under the direction of the Health or Metro Editor/News Director, where they report on health issues. The program ends with a 3-day meeting and site visits in Boston. Interns receive a 12-week stipend and travel expenses. The aim is to provide young journalists or journalism college graduates with an in-depth introduction to and practical experience on the specialist health beat.

To apply for the 1998 program, write to:

Penny Duckham
Executive Director, Kaiser Media Fellowships Program
Kaiser Family Foundation
2400 Sand Hill Road, Menlo Park, CA 94025

The Kaiser Family Foundation is an independent health care philanthropy and is not affiliated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.

A Frontline documentary was "openly an advocate for our side," says Peter Freyd

which has resurrected it as *Trauma*. The new publisher says that he views part of its mission as reporting on FMSF, since the mainstream media don't.

Among journalists, perhaps the most relentless critic of the foundation is Michele Landsberg, a *Toronto Star* columnist. In 1993, she says, an Ontario couple, claiming to have been falsely accused, contacted her and asked her to write about their case. Unconvinced, she declined, and eventually started writing instead about the foundation. She attacked its scientific claims and criticized the sensational media coverage. She described how a foundation scientific adviser, Harold Merskey, had testified that a woman accusing a doctor of sexual abuse in a civil case might in fact have been suffering from false memory syndrome. But the accused doctor himself had previously confessed to criminal charges of abusing her.

Landsberg also challenged the credentials of other foundation advisers. She noted that one founding adviser, Ralph Underwager, was forced to resign from the foundation's board after he and his wife, Hollida Wakefield, who remains an adviser, gave an interview to a Dutch pedophilia magazine in which he was quoted as

describing pedophilia as “an acceptable expression of God’s will for love.” Landsberg also wrote that another adviser, James Randi, a magician known as The Amazing Randi, had been involved in a lawsuit in which his opponent introduced a tape of sexually explicit telephone conversations Randi had with teenage boys. (Randi has claimed at various times, she said, that the tape was a hoax and that the police asked him to make it.)

“Why haven’t reporters investigated the False Memory Syndrome Foundation?” she asks. “It’s legitimate to examine their backgrounds — here are people who really do have powerful motivation to deny the truth.”

Last year, a free-lance writer, Katy Butler, learned what can happen when a journalist crosses swords with the foundation. Butler, who covered the Ramona trial for the *Los Angeles Times* and is a consulting editor for *Family Therapy Networker* magazine, was asked by *Newsweek* to write a story assessing the backlash against recovered memory, including the role of the FMSF. The foundation got wind of the assignment and swung into action. The Freyds, unhappy that her previous articles had challenged foundation assertions, complained to *Newsweek* editors that Butler was biased. Peter Freyd also enlisted Richard Ofshe and another foundation adviser, Frederick Crews, a retired professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley.

Ofshe had been unhappy with Butler over her partly negative review in the *Los Angeles Times* of his book *Making Monsters*. He wrote a letter to *Newsweek*’s editor-in-chief, Richard Smith, calling Butler “a zealot masquerading as a journalist.” Crews has written harsh articles for the *New York Review of Books*, in which he combines attacks on Freud with efforts to discredit recovered memory. He contends that there are “hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions” of questionable allegations based on recovered memory. Butler, he warned *Newsweek* in a letter, is “well known not only as a journalist in this area but also as a strong advocate” for recovered memory.

The FMSF correspondents say they were seeking accuracy, not censorship. A *Newsweek* senior editor, John Capouya, viewed their letters as “a well-organized action” to block the story or at least discredit Butler. Ultimately, the foundation’s

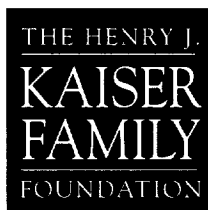
opposition helped persuade *Newsweek* not to do the story. Says Capouya, “We weren’t too sanguine about getting into a huge pissing match with these people.”

While the False Memory Syndrome Foundation and its claims warrant more press scrutiny, *Philadelphia* magazine’s Fried argues that critics should not demonize the group for simply being effective advocates. It’s the media’s job, he told an Investigative Reporters and Editors conference in Providence last summer, to present a more intelligent, balanced discourse on recovered memory. As Butler, who was a panelist at the IRE ses-

sion, says: “I’ve worked very hard to tell both sides of this story. What’s interesting to me about all this is that telling both sides has started to seem like a dangerous and risky act.”

The best a reporter can do in such circumstances is to be a reporter. Don’t be seduced by people who cry or experts claiming to have all the answers. Resist the temptation to think you can solve the mystery of memory; embrace the virtues of subtlety and ambiguity.

This is a story with many voices beyond the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. All of them need to be heard. ♦



Announces THE KAISER MEDIA FELLOWS IN HEALTH FOR 1997

Six journalists have been selected as 1997 Kaiser Media fellows:

Debra Gordon, medical writer, *The Virginian-Pilot*

Project: Community coalitions—tracking grass root efforts to address child and maternal health problems

Jon Hamilton, freelance health policy writer

Project: An in-depth look at states that have implemented experimental Medicaid managed care programs

Leslie Laurence, syndicated health columnist, and writer, *Glamour* magazine

Project: The impact of urban hospital closings on local communities

Christopher Ringwald, demographics and mental health reporter,

The Times Union (Albany, NY)

Project: The challenges and debate facing alcoholism and addiction treatment programs—what works, why, and how to measure results

Joanne Silberner, health policy correspondent, National Public Radio

Project: How public health research becomes health policy—from academia to the streets

Tammie Smith, health reporter, *The Tennessean*

Project: How the major black medical colleges in the U.S. are faring in a changing health care environment—focused on Howard, Meharry, Morehouse, and Drew

In 1998, the Kaiser Media Fellowships Program will again award up to six fellowships to print, television and radio journalists and editors interested in health policy, healthcare financing and public health issues. Applications for the 1998 program will be available shortly, for submission by March 1998. The aim is to provide journalists with a highly flexible range of opportunities to pursue individual projects, combined with group briefings and sitevisits on a wide range of health and social policy issues.

For more information, or to apply for the 1998 awards, write to:

Penny Duckham
Executive Director of the Kaiser Media Fellowships Program
Kaiser Family Foundation
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Menlo Park, CA 94025
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