

See Why Don't Child Sex Abuse Victims Tell?

5 One of the things that child abuse deniers like the False Memory Syndrome Foundation focus on, besides child abuse apologist Elizabeth Loftus's irrelevant arguments about the unreliability of memory (more on that at the end of the post), is the fact that many adults who claim to have been victims of incest as children did not tell any other adults about it at the time the alleged incidents took place.

Some children do tell. So why wouldn't the others?

10 Many logical-sounding explanations have been advanced to explain why not. In an article in the December 2010 issue of *Psychiatric Times*, Richard Kluft lists several of them: incomprehension, shame, fear of retaliation, and the misperception that the child is to blame. He also mentions loyalty conflicts, but more on that shortly. The statistics listed in this article, as unreliable as they may be, say that only 30 percent of incest victims reveal their situations, and most of the revealers are the older children and adolescents. In almost half of these cases, the revelation is

15 accidental. Some of those who do reveal suffer negative consequences, such as being blamed for "seducing" the perpetrator or being accused of lying. One study showed that 52 percent of those who reported mistreatment to a parent were still being abused a year after the disclosure.

20 Many perpetrators do indeed threaten the victim that if he or she tells, they might kill someone in the family. Sometimes they say that the authorities will come in and break up the family – not an unlikely scenario if the child is believed and the parent who is told actually reports the perpetrator. Other victims are told that no one will believe them.

25 All of these are excellent explanations for why the children remain silent. However, I think that the reason that is talked about the least may be the most important of all: family loyalty. Family loyalty as a major determinant of human behavior was focussed on in psychotherapy circles most notably by family systems therapy pioneer Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy. It is also highly consistent with the biological evolutionary

30 concept of kin selection. The strength of family loyalty was illustrated by a patient I saw who had been raised by a female relative rather than by her mother because the mother was a deadbeat parent. In an initial interview, the patient impulsively blurted out, for the very first time in her entire life, that the husband of this female relative had

35 continuously molested her. She immediately burst into tears and could not stop crying for many minutes. One might assume that memories of the abuse had come flooding back to her and that this was the reason for the emotional breakdown, but as it turned out, that was not it at all. The woman kept repeating, "I can't believe I told someone! I can't believe I told someone!"

40 After I calmed her down by swearing by all that was dear to me that the session was confidential and no one outside the room would ever have to know what she had revealed, she admitted that her biggest fear was that the woman who raised her would be irreparably hurt by the revelation that her husband had done what he had done. The

45 patient could not bear the thought that this was what might happen. She owed the woman just too much. As Boszormenyi-Nagy stated in his 1986 book, *Between Give and Take: A Clinical Guide to Contextual Therapy*, "Even very small children are sensitive barometers; they know when their parents are overburdened with anxiety, guilt and mistrust. Moreover, they want to do something about it." (p.35). If important relatives are dependent in some way on the perpetrator, children are naturally reluctant to create problems for those

relationships. Many victims of incest dissociate, or zone out, when memories of the abuse surface. Most therapists just assume that this takes place because the incest survivor is

55 trying to avoid the pain associated with the memory. Undoubtedly this has something to do with it. However, I find that a much more important consideration with my patients is that they are following a family rule, and do not want to break it out of family loyalty. When the abuse took place, they were told by the perpetrator in so many words, "This never happened." When the survivor starts to think about the fact that the incest did indeed happen, they dissociate so that the memories begin to either take on an unreal quality or seem to disappear altogether. Dissociating may be a way of preventing the sort of accidental revelation to others that took place as described with my patient

60 above. I believe that, in general, so called defense mechanisms like dissociation have more

to do with avoiding violations of family rules than with controlling anxiety, as they are downright ineffective at the latter.

Family loyalty can be extremely powerful. Occasionally, as in the case of allegations made by the actress MacKenzie Phillips against her own father, "Papa" John Phillips (pictured above), incestuous sexual liaisons can even continue into adulthood. MacKenzie Phillip only went public after her father died.

Now of course it goes without saying that there are incidents in which false accusations of childhood sexual abuse are made by adults (I am leaving out the issue of young children. They can easily be coached to make stuff up in nasty custody battles, where false accusations are far more common, and will make up things to satisfy an overzealous social worker). Estimates are that about 5 percent of such accusations are not true. Of course, you have to ask, what kind of family behavior would induce a person to make such heinous false accusations against his or her own parent? I find that most incest victims minimize the trauma if anything.

But now back to Elizabeth Loftus. She correctly points out that memory fades with time, while all the time losing detail and accuracy as time goes by. Memories become increasingly vulnerable to "post-event information"—facts, ideas, inferences, and opinions that become available to a witness after an event is completely over. She conducted a study, for example, in which subjects watched a film of a robbery involving a shooting and were then exposed to a television account of the event that contained erroneous details.

When asked to recall what happened during the robbery, many subjects incorporated the erroneous details from the television report into their account. (Of course, many of the subjects did not do this). The erroneous details that were adopted by some of the experimental subjects were believed very strongly. These subjects typically resisted any suggestion that their richly detailed memories might have been incorrect or contaminated by the later information.

Of course memories fade and become less reliable over time. Of course memories of specific details of events can be wrong. Of course memories of events that are witnessed for the very first time are subject to observer biases, missed aspects of the events, and sensory information that is misinterpreted. However, the big picture is unlikely to be misremembered. None of the subjects in Loftus's experiment confused the robbery they had witnessed on film with a film of someone taking an uneventful trip to the mall. One is highly unlikely to get being raped mixed up with having watched pornography on a computer.

Furthermore, the identification of people or things being remembered becomes more accurate the more familiar those elements are to the observer. That should not come as a surprise to anyone who has an IQ higher than that of a stalk of celery, but at least one academic actually wasted his time doing a study that proved it.

Crime victims whose assailants are strangers have only seen the assailant one time. Victims of incest, on the other hand, usually live or have lived with their attackers and have been exposed to them countless times. Furthermore, child abuse takes place in a location in which only certain individuals usually make an appearance.

If an assailant were a complete stranger to whom the victim had never been introduced — someone who is not supposed to be where he or she is — that fact would stand out rather conspicuously. It is extremely unlikely that someone being sexually abused would, for example, misidentify an intruder as her stepfather. She might not correctly remember what he was wearing at the time, how long it went on for, the precise chain of events, or even the dates that it happened, but those details are not especially important.

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