

# 'Victims of Memory': An Exchange

To the Editors:

In his two-part article, "The Revenge of the Repressed" [*NYR*, November 17 and December 1, 1994], Frederick Crews offered a cogent critique of many aspects of the "recovered memory movement." Crews quite rightly denounces the naive use of diffuse "symptom checklists" and very broad definitions in the diagnosis of a childhood history of incest; reliance upon "therapeutic" modalities with no support in the empirical literature; insistence on unquestioning belief in patients' tentative emerging memories, no matter how bizarre; and the poor training and marshy theoretical basis of some practitioners in this field. Crews argues reasonably against the presumed therapeutic benefits of unearthing and "abreacting" all traumatic experiences, and trenchantly analyzes the shortcomings of the Freudian concept of repression, which authorizes the irresponsible assertion that the lack of memory for trauma is itself evidence of trauma.

Because we share Crews's belief in the necessity of a measured and well-informed response to adults' allegations of sexual abuse in childhood, we regret that Crews himself strayed so far from the empirical evidence on which he rightly insists we all rely, and reserved his skepticism for those who make or believe allegations of childhood incest. We wish to correct the misimpressions Crews's intemperate article may have left regarding (1) the criminal justice system response to allegations of sexual abuse in childhood, (2) the standard of therapeutic practice in this field, and (3) the concept of repression. First, however, we would like to point out how egregiously Crews commits the very sin he finds most damning in others: that of credulity.

Crews praises the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF)—most of whose members are parents who have been accused of incest by adult daughters—for making "steady progress in public enlightenment" on the issue of adult recollections of childhood incest. The cruel fact for all parties to such accusations is that both the wrongly accused and the rightly accused vociferously and convincingly deny the accusations against them. Crews acknowledges, "Pedophiles will undoubtedly try to portray any accuser as deluded by a trick of memory" (52, II). When Crews refers to the members of FMSF as "slandered relatives of survivors" (50, II), he claims an access to wisdom that Solomon himself would envy (not to mention the thousands of American judges who, according to Crews's caricature of the judicial system's response to child sexual abuse allegations, are doing so lamentable a job of adjudicating these cases).

Crews displays a similar credulity in bestowing lavish praise upon a forthcoming book by a Mark Pendergrast, both of whose grown daughters have accused him of incest. Crews lauds Pendergrast's 603-page compilation of interviews and lore (to be issued by the obscure "Upper Access" publishers) as "the most ambitious and comprehensive, as well as the most emotionally committed, of all the studies before us" (51, II). While Pendergrast may be innocent of the charges against him, Crews applies very different criteria in assessing his work than in assessing that of "survivor" therapists. Whereas Crews finds "confirmatory bias" in the beliefs of alleged survivors and their therapists, in Pendergrast's book he finds a thoroughly laudable emotional commitment.

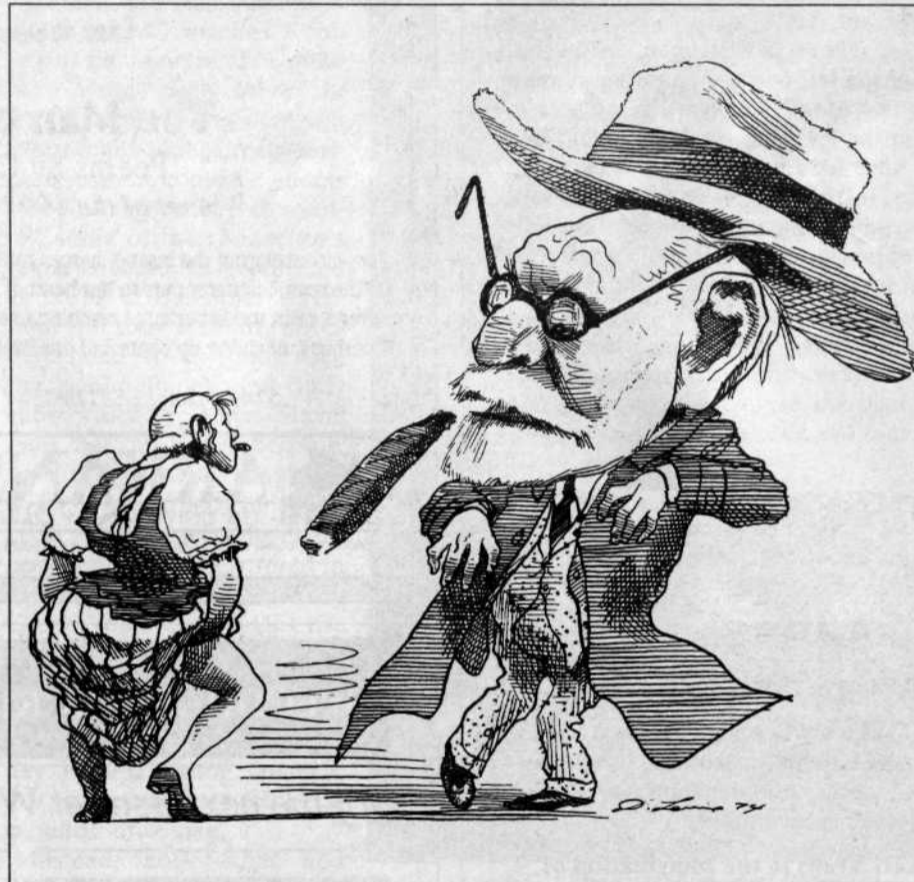
Crews's credulity for one set of claims is reflected in significant bias throughout the article. Among the empirical knowledge Crews flouts is that regarding the operation of the criminal justice system in cases of child sexual abuse and adult recollections of incest. Certainly, we would all have a great deal to worry about were in fact ac-

cusations launched by "a vengeful or mentally unhinged adult... immediately believed by police and social workers" (59, I), or "draconian sentences... being served and plea bargains... being coerced in the face of transparently clear signs that the charges are bogus" (49, II). However, empirical data regarding the operation of the child protective services and criminal justice systems do not support these crude caricatures.

In fact, a large percentage of reports of child sexual abuse—up to 60 percent in some states—are not substantiated by child protective services workers. Only 42 percent of sexual abuse allegations that have been substantiated by child protection authorities or reported to the police are actually forwarded for prosecution, according to a study by the American Bar Association. Moreover, because sexual abuse

heavily overrepresented in clinical therapeutic populations. Since several empirical studies indicate that 40 percent to 85 percent of psychotherapy patients suffered abuse in childhood, we are somewhat distressed to learn that only 20 percent of psychotherapists may be willing to help their patients explore this possibility.

More important, Crews leaves the impression that modal practice in this field is carried on by wild-eyed zealots. Of course bad practice occurs in the field of child maltreatment, as in any other. We fully agree with Crews that bad practice in this field can have tragic results, and should energetically be opposed. But no empirical evidence suggests that the practice displayed on *Geraldo* is typical. Child interview guidelines distributed by such major organizations as the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (1985)



is so frequently a crime without other witnesses or physical corroboration, and prosecutors are concerned about children's credibility, people arrested for sexual offenses against children are somewhat less likely to be prosecuted than are other violent offenders. One detailed study of allegations of sexual abuse in day care found that 82 percent of such allegations were dismissed by investigators. When prosecutions do occur, the majority—about 75 percent according to one study—result in convictions. However, most of these convictions (over 90 percent) result from guilty pleas and plea bargains. Sexual abusers are convicted somewhat more frequently than other violent offenders, probably because prosecutors are so selective in the cases they take to trial. Even when convicted, however, child sexual abusers receive light sentences. Three studies suggest that 32 percent to 46 percent of convicted child sexual abusers serve no jail time at all. Only 19 percent receive sentences longer than one year, which is about the same as those convicted of other violent crimes.

Crews's depiction of the standard of practice among therapists working with women who recall a childhood history of incest is similarly skewed. Crews cites with indignation the results of an unnamed "survey" indicating that "well over 50,000" of America's 255,000 licensed psychotherapists are now "willing to help their clients realize that they must have endured early molestation." Victims of childhood physical and sexual abuse are, not surprisingly,

and the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (1990) specifically recommend against the coercive and suggestive questioning practices that Crews suggests are the rule. The writers and lecturers on "adult survivor" therapy who are most admired and sought after by professionals in this field caution against the use of hypnosis and sodium pentothal, and against the tenet that remembering and "working through" all traumatic material is necessary or positive. Given this and other evidence that modal professional practice is thoughtful and responsible, Crews's vitriol against professionals is hard to understand, and his depiction of zealous incompetence as the rule is indefensible.

Finally, Crews very effectively demolishes the naive concept of repression in which memories are hermetically sealed and stored intact for future revelation. However, he fails to shed any light on the processes that are at work in the very well-documented phenomenon of imperfect recall of traumatic events. His categorical statement, "Reputable scientific research... offers no support to the concept of repression even in its mildest form" (49, II), is misleading. A vast scientific literature on memory offers no consistent definition of repression, but a great deal of information about variously defined memory lapses. Full or partial amnesia for traumatic events has been well-documented in combat veterans, people who have survived natural disasters and other traumas, and people who have experienced physical and sexual abuse in childhood. Saying that

such amnesia does not conform to the naive depiction popularized on talk shows and in some books or to the very narrow, specific definition of repression used by Crews does nothing to explain how such amnesia does occur, how once-forgotten or faded memories re-emerge, or how to assess the veracity of such memories.

The most conservative data available on the prevalence of father-daughter incest suggest that 1.3 percent of American women will experience it. These data are from upper-middle-class white college students in the Northeast responding to a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Everything we know about differential prevalence rates and the efficacy of different methods of information-gathering suggests that this prevalence estimate is low. However, even at this low estimate, 1.6 million American girls and women are now or have been victims of father-daughter (or stepfather-daughter) incest. A number of factors have converged in the last several years to encourage these women to speak out about their victimization, including a greater attention to child sexual abuse generally and a feminist reinterpretation of father-daughter incest as, like rape, a victimization rather than a shameful secret.

These allegations challenge us intellectually and emotionally. Like many allegations of child sexual abuse, allegations by adult women of childhood incest often pit one person's word against another's. In response to such extraordinarily difficult epistemological situations, a natural impulse is to make a summary judgment in favor of the least painful alternative. For the vast majority of Americans, that alternative is to believe that adults do not victimize children in the ways now being alleged. It takes the greatest discipline for individuals and for the society to fairly weigh the veracity of these reports. Crews very effectively chronicles the failure of some people to maintain this discipline. We regret that he was not able to serve the readers of *NYRB* better by maintaining such discipline himself.

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To the Editors:

As psychoanalytically trained clinicians who work with adults who were sexually molested and abused as children, we welcome Frederick Crews' healthy skepticism about the claims made by the currently fadish recovery movement. There is no doubt that some overly zealous, ideologically driven practitioners have, from time to time, shown poor judgment and most likely done a therapeutic disservice to some of their clients. Insufficiently trained therapists may fail to take into account the complexity of the intermingling of fantasy and memory and the way the human mind actively constructs rather than passively registers perceptions. They may also disregard the potential suggestibility of people, or the way in which a vulnerable person's identity can become unfortunately organized around a sense of self as victim. Therapists who insist, through a variety of pressuring and suggestive techniques, on convincing their clients of abuse, are enacting a subtle form of abuse themselves.

Unfortunately, however, Crews' obvious hostility toward Freud has led him to erroneously equate psychoanalysis with the worst elements within the recovery movement and has blinded him to the ways in which analytic thinking has evolved since Freud first postulated his notion of repression.

In Crews' zealous attempt to debunk