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The Memory War Jennifer Freyd accused her father of sexual abuse. Her parents' attempt to discredit her created a defense for countless sex offenders.

By Katie Heaney @KTHeaney

Pam and Peter Freyd *(left)* in 2010. Jennifer Freyd today. Photo: Photograph by Andreas Laszlo Konrath for New York Magazine

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The last time Jennifer Freyd saw her parents was in December 1990. At 33, Jennifer was a tenured professor of psychology at the University of Oregon and the mother of two young boys. Her folks, Peter and Pamela Freyd, were coming for a visit over Christmas. In years past, Jennifer's sister, Gwen, would have been there too. But that fall, a few months before their parents were scheduled to arrive, Gwen had called Jennifer to say she wouldn't be coming. Something, she said, was deeply wrong with their family.

By then, Peter Freyd, a renowned mathematician, had been through rehab at Silver Hill, an elite psychiatric hospital in Connecticut favored by the famous and the wealthy. Still, Peter's years of heavy drinking weighed especially on Gwen, who is six years younger than Jennifer. She had lived at home, without her sister, for the worst of it.

Jennifer tried to talk Gwen into coming, but she refused. It wasn't that the sisters didn't recall the same things; they agreed that their father's behavior had been strange, even inappropriate, at times. But then Gwen said something that prompted a recontextualization in Jennifer's mind — something that made her see her entire childhood in a new light. "You know our father was sexually abused, right?" Gwen asked her.

"That was like an earthquake for me," Jennifer recalls 30 years later. "It was the first time those words were put to our family in any way."

There were things about her father that Jennifer had previously written off as jokes or exaggerations: his repeated, prideful references to his onetime status as a "kept boy" of a prominent artist; how he always wanted to talk about *Lolita*; the pin-art impression of his penis that was displayed in the family's living room. But after what Gwen said, Jennifer suddenly saw these things differently. What had once been a low-grade anxiety in the presence of her father became intolerable.

Jennifer started seeing a therapist. In their second session, the therapist asked her a series of clinical intake questions: whether she smoked, how much she drank, whether she had ever been sexually abused. To the last question, Jennifer gave a thoughtless "No."

Later that day, she began to remember.

Jennifer has never publicly described what she says her father did to her; she sees no benefit in recounting the details. If pressed to give it a name, she says he molested her. In her earliest memory of it, she recognizes the bathroom in the house where the family lived when she was 3 years old; in her latest, she is a teenager, meaning the abuse would have spanned at least a decade. The memories didn't arrive all at once but were staggered, resurfacing with special intensity after her parents came for their visit.

The plan was just to get through it. Jennifer had told her husband, JQ, about her memories, and she thought she could temporarily set them aside. After all, she had lived without them well enough for years. But when her parents showed up, Jennifer found she couldn't stop worrying about her sons. That first night, she asked her husband to sleep on a camping mat in the hall outside their bedroom. It wasn't enough. In the middle of the night, Jennifer wrested her family from where they slept, and the four of them fled to the home of a colleague who had answered her panicked midnight call.

In the morning, at Jennifer's request, JQ called her parents and told them they had to leave. Pam, blindsided, demanded to know why. Eventually, JQ blurted it out: *Jennifer says Peter molested her as a child, and we can't have him around our children.* Peter denied his daughter's claims, but JQ found his response unsettling. He was neither

disoriented nor outraged but oddly prepared, almost as though he had been expecting it. Pam and Peter left, cutting their visit short.

How should a parent respond to allegations of decades-earlier abuse from an adult child? If you believe yourself — or your spouse — to be innocent, how should you sound on the phone? What should you do in the days and weeks after a bombshell like that? You might believe your child, or you might not. You could try to support her either way. You could cut her out of your life.

Pam and Peter Freyd retaliated. In the wake of Jennifer's disclosure, they formed an organization called the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. Through the nonprofit's work, they popularized a term — *false memory* — that became one of the most effective tools to instill doubt not only about allegations of child sex abuse but in all forms of sexual violence. Between 1992, when the foundation was launched, and December 2019, when it abruptly shuttered, it bolstered the defense strategy employed by countless sex offenders, from Michael Jackson to Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein. Today, the notion that one's own memories of sexual violence are unreliable is owed, in large part, to how the Freyds responded to their daughter.

Jennifer in the fourth grade. Years later, when she accused her father of molesting her, her mother responded by writing an academic article titled "How Could This Happen? Coping With a False Accusation of Incest and Rape."

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colleague of Jennifer's told the Freyds that Jennifer had identified herself as a "survivor"

in her classes — something Jennifer strenuously denies. Even now, she isn't particularly comfortable with the term. To publicly use it to describe herself at that time, she says, would have been "career suicide."

As tensions grew, Jennifer wrote her parents to ask for a brief break in communication. She was not, she assured them, attempting to sever their relationship; she just needed a little space to allow her to process. Pam ignored the request, and Jennifer felt something shift. "The content of your letters … suggests to me that you are putting effort into a legal defense," she wrote her mother in a letter dated September 6, 1991. "I do not have any intention of attempting to use the legal system to heal wounds from years ago."

Jennifer's suspicion was correct: Her parents were, in fact, developing a legal defense and then some.

About ten months after Jennifer confronted her parents, Pam anonymously published an academic article in a small journal** called *Issues in Child Abuse Accusations.* Using pseudonyms (Jennifer is "Susan"), Pam describes her daughter's claim against her husband and outlines her defense. Her daughter "had done lots of experimenting with drugs when she was a teenager," she writes, speculating about whether that might explain the mistaken memories. Other potential explanations: her daughter's marital problems (including a lackluster sex life), new motherhood, career stress, nursing her son for too long, jealousy of her mother's professional success, a history of anorexia, a feminist therapist, and *The Courage to Heal* — a book then gaining prominence in feminist and trauma-therapy circles — which Pam calls "slop."

Jennifer didn't know her mother was writing the article until a stack of copies showed up at her place of work. Jennifer was, at the time, under consideration for promotion to full professor. At least one of the copies contained a note from her mother, identifying herself as the author and Jennifer as the subject. The article was titled "How Could This Happen? Coping With a False Accusation of Incest and Rape."

A month later, Pam's article was covered by her hometown newspaper, the Philadelphia *Inquirer.* In a piece headlined "Accusations of Sex Abuse, Years Later," reporter Darrell Sifford recounted the Freyds' version of events, including a claim that Jennifer had recovered her memories through hypnosis. (Jennifer denies undergoing hypnosis, then or ever.) Sifford went on to publish three more stories on so-called recovered memories, some of which were syndicated by the *Inquirer*'s then-parent company, Knight-Ridder, in newspapers nationwide. According to Pam, Sifford said he had never seen a response like it. He told Pam he wanted to help all the accused parents who wrote to him, to direct them to some sort of resource, but there was nothing he could find.

So the Freyds — both proud academics — built one themselves. On the heels of the national panic over satanic-ritual child abuse in the 1980s, the False Memory Syndrome Foundation helped shift cultural sympathies from alleged victims to the accused, portraying survivors as casualties of radical-feminist therapists who "implanted" memories of child abuse in gullible patients. The theory the Freyds promoted made its way into college textbooks, syndicated talk shows, and Supreme Court confirmation hearings. With the help of Ralph Underwager and Hollida Wakefield, married psychologists who had gained prominence as expert witnesses for defendants accused of satanic-ritual abuse, the Freyds recruited a highly credentialed advisory board. Among the members were Paul McHugh, known in recent years for insisting that transgender people suffer from a psychological disorder, and Elizabeth Loftus, a psychology professor who testified on behalf of Ted Bundy in his 1976 trial, before he escaped and went on another killing spree.

What we know for sure about memory is that there's a lot we don't know. There is no truth serum one can administer to be sure that what a person remembers really happened as they state it; there is no way to look inside a person's brain and see what they see when they picture something that happened to them. Neuroimaging scans show the same parts of the brain lighting up when a person recounts a true memory as when they recount a false one, so long as the person doing the remembering *believes* the false memory to be true. Vivid memories and vivid

fantasies, it turns out, look very similar: Did you really turn off the oven before leaving the house, or are you just very good at picturing yourself having done it?

Perhaps no one alive has been harder on memory's reputation than Loftus. In 1974, the Department of Transportation awarded Loftus — then a newly minted Ph.D. in psychology — a grant to study memory distortion among eyewitnesses of car accidents. That same year, she used her findings to assist a public defender in a murder trial; the defendant got off, and Loftus has had no shortage of work as an expert witness ever since.

In the early '90s, she took a particular interest in cases involving allegations of child sex abuse. She testified for the defense in the infamous case of George Franklin, who was charged with murder after his adult daughter Eileen claimed she had recovered memories of watching him rape and kill her childhood best friend. Susan Nason had been found dead at 8 years old, her body left on a hillside off California Highway 92, partly obscured by a worn mattress. Little physical evidence remained, and the case had gone cold. But in 1990, more than two decades after Nason was killed, Franklin was sentenced to life in prison for the crime, largely on the basis of his daughter's memories. He went free after Eileen's sister, Janice, revealed that Eileen had recovered her memories of Nason's murder through hypnosis, which both sisters had denied at trial.

Loftus believed that Eileen's memories were entirely false and suspected her hypnosis might have been to blame. She wanted to figure out if (and how) it was possible to implant a seed of false memory that might then grow into a richly detailed fabrication. "At some point," she says, "I came up with the idea: Why don't we try to make people believe and remember that they were lost in a shopping mall — that they were frightened and crying and ultimately rescued and reunited with their family?" Loftus, then a professor of psychology at the University of Washington, offered this challenge to her undergrad students in cognitive psych as an extra-credit assignment. It was worth five points.

Jim Coan, one of Loftus's students, thought the idea sounded fun. His subject would be his 14-year-old brother, Chris. With the help of their mother, Jim described four events Chris had supposedly experienced as a child. Three were true, but one was false: that Chris had gotten separated from his mother in a shopping mall at age 5 and was lost for a while before being rescued by an elderly man. Chris was asked to journal about these four "memories" over five days and to add any details he might remember.

Over those five days, Chris recalled specific moments about being lost in the mall. He remembered being afraid he would never see his family again. He remembered the man who rescued him as "really cool" and that he was wearing a blue flannel shirt and glasses. Asked to rate his confidence in each memory from one (not clear) to 11 (very clear), Chris gave the mall memory an eight. Jim then told Chris that one of the four memories had never happened and asked him if he knew which one. Chris selected one of the real memories. Through the power of suggestion, Chris apparently believed he had experienced something he hadn't.

Encouraged by the result, Loftus repeated the procedure with 24 subjects interviewed by her research assistant. The assistant relayed three true events the subjects had experienced between the ages of 4 and 6, and one false one: that they had been lost in a mall. In each case, the subjects were provided with corroboration from a relative ("Your mom told me that X happened to you when you were 5"). They were then asked to write about the experiences, to add details as they resurfaced, and to rate their confidence in their memories. At the conclusion of the experiment, the interviewer told the subjects that one of the memories they had been given was false and asked them to identify which one it was. Nineteen correctly chose the mall. Only six "fully or partially" believed the false memory.

Over the years, critics have pointed out a number of significant methodological flaws in what has become known as the "Lost in the Mall" study. First, it's unclear what counts as a "full" or "partial" memory. The mean clarity rating among subjects who believed the false memory was only 3.6 out of ten, compared to 6.3 for true memories. In addition, it's unclear whether any of the subjects who believed the mall memory would have continued to do so over time; in adherence to ethical guidelines, researchers revealed

the false memory after the study was finished. Key to the study, too, is the role of the older relative who serves as an "eyewitness" to the fake incident — something no therapist, however talented at hypnotic suggestion, could claim.

Today, Loftus is irked by her critics' fixation on the mall study, which has been cited 579 times since its publication in 1995. "This study was 25 years ago," she tells me, "and so much good work by other people — and a little by my group, too — has been done since then to tell a picture of the nature of memory." But it is Loftus herself who perpetuates the study. When we spoke last January, she was awaiting the trial of Harvey Weinstein, who had hired her as an expert witness. In her testimony, Loftus, now 76, explained how false memories could be implanted and believed, citing the mall study as evidence. She has also cited it in many of the more than 300 trials in which she has served as an expert witness and in the TED Talk she gave in 2013, which has been viewed 6.6 million times. When Loftus says "about a quarter" of people can be made to believe false memories that are externally implanted, she is citing a figure that originated with the six subjects in the mall study.

It's true that this figure has been borne out by a handful of similar studies. In 2017, a mega-analysis of eight peer-reviewed false-memory experiments found that 30 percent of subjects appeared to develop varying levels of false memory, from "robust" to "partial," as defined by the researchers. In addition, another 23 percent of subjects accepted the false event as true "to some degree," even though they did not actually remember it having happened.* Crucially, however, none of the experiments involved convincing subjects they had been sexually abused as children. Getting lost in a mall is not — as Loftus implicitly suggests by citing her study — analogous to incestuous abuse. In a variation on the mall study published in 1997, researchers sought to emphasize this distinction by presenting subjects with one true memory and two false ones: being lost in the mall and receiving a rectal enema. The hypothesis was that the less plausible event, the enema, wouldn't create false memories so easily. Three of 20 subjects "remembered" having been lost in the mall. Zero remembered the enema.

"The typical response was 'No fucking way. That didn't happen,' " says Kathy Pezdek, a cognitive psychologist and an expert in eyewitness memory, who conducted the

experiment.

Coan, Loftus's former student and now a neuroscientist and psychology professor at the University of Virginia, has decidedly mixed feelings about the experiment he inadvertently spearheaded. "I'm slow enough on the uptake that it took me a while to realize that the study I was doing was making people who had been sexually abused feel like I was their enemy," he tells me. "That was completely devastating to me." Although he has been asked to testify about false memory in countless court cases, Coan has always refused. He just doesn't think the mall study is sufficiently relevant. In her excitement, he thinks, Loftus may have "mischaracterized" what started out as an undergraduate assignment for extra credit.

"I got five points," Coan says. "Five points and decades of grief."

Jennifer and Peter in 1965. “No one can know what happened in my childhood,” she says, “given that every single memory I have is me alone with my father.”

Pam and Peter Freyd are husband and wife; they are also stepsiblings. They met as children in Providence, Rhode Island: Pam’s mother married Peter’s father when Pam was 12 and Peter was 14. Their married parents settled in New York

while Pam and Peter stayed behind in Providence — she lived with her father and stepmother, and he lived with his mother. They attended the same high school, where Pam was still a student when they began dating.**

Before they became intimate, Peter told Pam about his involvement as a younger boy with a much older male artist, then famous in Providence. The man taught weekend art classes to children, a number of whom became his victims. The artist began sexually abusing Peter from when he was around 7 to 11 years old.**

Pam and Peter married in 1957, when she was 18. He was a student at Brown University, and she was at Pembroke College, Brown's school for women. Their first child, Jennifer, was born nine months later.

Pam was ambitious, but her career goals were thwarted by the era in which she came of age. Both she and Peter were aspiring academics, but it was his work that determined the course of their life together. While Peter studied for his Ph.D. in mathematics and pursued faculty jobs, Pam followed him from Princeton to Columbia to the University of Pennsylvania. Pam applied to law schools, but she gave up on the idea after one sent her a letter saying it wasn't appropriate for someone with a young child to enroll. "I was so mad I threw it away," Pam says. Instead, she took a job teaching in the Philadelphia school system. "I'd never intended to be a teacher," she says. "That was the last thing on my agenda. I decided teaching was a perfectly fine thing to do if you've made babies that needed to be raised." Eventually, she began studying at Penn, earning her Ph.D. in education.

Peter's career allowed him to take a number of sabbaticals, and over the years, the Freyds traveled extensively: to Iran, Mexico City, Zurich, Rome. Everywhere they went, the family explored, walking together for miles. "They were great kids," says Pam. "Fun to be with. Jennifer especially had a sense of adventure."

At home in Philadelphia, however, the family's life was constrained. As Jennifer recalls it, Peter spent most of his waking hours working from the Eames chair in the living room. Around the house, he often wore a robe with nothing underneath and sat with his legs spread wide. His drinking grew worse as the girls got older. Peter was garrulous and

boastful, Jennifer says, prone to proclamations about the superiority of their family to "normal" ones. "My father was always giving speeches about how we weren't the kind of family that would eat iceberg lettuce," she says. "We were the kind of family that ate romaine." He had opinions on everything, none of them especially original for an affluent white man: Meat tasted better when you killed the animal yourself (though Peter didn't hunt), Indian food was disgusting, pop music was inferior to classical.

Former colleagues say Peter enjoyed pushing people's buttons. "He liked tweaking his fellow left-of-center types by staking out positions slightly out of the mainstream for the American left, either seriously or just as a devil's advocate," recalls David Yetter, a mathematics professor at Kansas State University who knew Peter well in the '80s.

A former student I'll call Stephen, who grew close to Peter, describes the provocations differently. Peter, he says, was "always pretending to be a sociopath." Peter bragged about having cheated on a test at Brown — not because he needed to but because he wanted to know what cheating felt like. In 1974, after enrolling as a graduate student in mathematics at Penn, Stephen met Peter at a party, and the two quickly became friends. Stephen and a fellow student began visiting Peter at the Freyds' home. "We'd spend a lot of time over there drinking and watching Peter get absolutely fucking plastered," says Stephen. "We just thought he was the most brilliant guy in the world." While Peter held court, Pam and the children remained in the background. "Pam would hang out for a while and then she would retreat upstairs, and that would be the last you would hear from her," Stephen says.

With Pam out of earshot, Peter often shifted the conversation to his sexuality. He acknowledged that he was gay and tried to convince Stephen that he was, too. "No, you really are," Stephen recalls him saying. "You have that wounded-stag look about you." A few years later, Stephen says, Peter propositioned him after a night of drinking. When Stephen declined, Peter began going through the kitchen drawers and pulling out knives before finally backing off. (This account is consistent with an email Stephen wrote to Jennifer in 2002, when he contacted her to express remorse over having once been friends with the man she had accused of abuse.)

Peter admits to having propositioned Stephen, though he says he did so only because he felt Stephen had been wanting it for so long. “It’s no secret he is one of the few people I ever inquired about whether he was interested in having a relationship,” Peter tells me. He assumed Pam knew, since he had always been open about being attracted to men as well as women.

Later in the same conversation, Pam tells me she did not know Peter had made sexual overtures to Stephen or other young men. “I didn’t see it,” she says. “It could easily be I didn’t want to.” Those dozen words, as it happens, are essentially the ones Jennifer has longed to hear from her mother for the past 30 years.

Pam says she never questioned Peter’s faithfulness or harbored any resentment about his sexuality. “For people who are married to mathematicians,” she says, “the competitor is mathematics.” To hear Pam tell it, her daughter’s allegations are the singular stain on her otherwise idyllic marriage — not even a stain as much as a speck of dirt, easily brushed away.

Jennifer, however, recalls a mother who was seethingly, often justifiably, angry: “She did all the chores. She did everything.” Some of the anger, Jennifer says, was spurred by Peter’s drinking. “But most of the time I didn’t really know what she was angry about.” Once, when Jennifer was up late talking to friends on her Princess telephone, her mother came into her bedroom and yanked it out of the wall so hard that plaster came with it. The incident, Jennifer says, was unusually physical for Pam; her mother’s rage was more often telegraphed via a raised eyebrow. (Jennifer’s sister, Gwen, declined to be interviewed for this story.)

As Jennifer matured, Pam withdrew further. “My mother didn’t like to touch me,” Jennifer says. When she was a teenager, Jennifer would massage her mom’s feet just to have physical contact with her. Pam attributes any distance to her exhaustion as a parent, but as Jennifer recalls it, Pam grew even colder in the presence of her father. Once, on a rare night out as a family, Jennifer remembers her mother exploded at her over something trivial. “I don’t know if I walked in front of her or sat in a seat she wanted, but she got very angry at me,” says Jennifer. “I experienced it as jealousy” —

something about the way her father had interacted with her versus the way he interacted with his wife.

Peter was always interested in Jennifer's sex life. On one occasion, when kissing a high-school boyfriend while seated on her bed, Jennifer caught her father watching them from her open doorway. Another time, she found him reading her diary; he accused her of purposely leaving it out where he could see it. Jennifer felt an enormous relief when she left for college at age 16, though visiting home for the holidays made it clear that little had changed: When guests came over for dinner and drinks, Peter told them the family's toy poodle, Carbon, humped people to whom Jennifer was sexually attracted.

In the '80s, after Gwen left home, Peter agreed to check himself into Silver Hill for a monthlong treatment he recalls completing in two or three weeks. "I didn't mind being there," he says, "but I thought there were better places to be, if you know what I mean." His drink of choice was Scotch; Pam says that, prior to entering rehab, Peter would consume half a bottle a day. She told me her husband has remained sober ever since his treatment. Peter said he resumed drinking moderately in 1995, having disavowed the total sobriety espoused by most rehab programs.

After 64 years of marriage, Pam is comfortable speaking for her husband. She told me, on several occasions, that Peter didn't want to talk to me. When she finally put him on the phone, I had been reporting this story for nearly a year. While I was speaking with him, she was in and out of the room, overhearing some things but not others. It didn't seem to matter to Peter whether she was listening or not.

There's a question that has bothered me ever since I learned of the Lost in the Mall study: How did researchers know that what the subjects were describing was a genuine "false memory" and not just a story they agreed with? If prompted, I too can imagine myself as a child lost in a shopping mall, looking frantically for my mother. I can make myself see it, and if my mother told me it happened, I'd probably believe her. But does that really count as a memory, or is it just a mental

picture — something I can see in my head? How can anyone outside my brain tell the difference unless they were there?

The consensus among memory scientists is that you can't. This is one of the fundamental weaknesses of studies that model the Lost in the Mall methodology, says Chris Brewin, a clinical psychologist and professor at University College London. "Judgments about whether somebody's got a false memory or not are almost always made by the experimenters and not by the person themselves," he says. "Almost never have they actually asked the person, 'How convinced are you that this actually happened to you and that the pictures you have in your head correspond to that event?' " The Loftus mall study asked subjects to rate the *clarity* of their memory — how vivid the picture in their head was — as well as their confidence that they'd be able to remember more detail if given more time. Is that the same thing as measuring one's *belief* in a memory, the feeling that it actually took place in the way one remembers it?

Most people, says Brewin, are very aware of their uncertainties. Jennifer Freyd is one such person. She is not equally confident in every memory she has of abuse; some are clear, others hazy. "I am confident to the extent I can be when I have no physical proof and the only other person in the room denies it," she says. Whether hedged or inconsistent memories render an alleged victim's account dismissible likely depends on your personal and political sympathies; certainly, they have worked in the favor of numerous defendants supported by her parents' foundation. There is a fundamental question at stake here: If something *really* terrible happened to you, wouldn't you always remember it?

Memory researchers like Loftus — who has no clinical experience working with patients — insist there's little to no evidence to support the notion that trauma can be repressed and later recovered. Richard McNally, a psychology professor at Harvard, says traumatic events are rendered especially memorable by the hormones the body releases while under duress. Peripheral details (like what a perpetrator was wearing) may be forgotten, but the trauma's central features are necessarily retained.

Therapists and social workers, however, say their experiences with patients tell them it isn't that simple. Jim Hopper, a clinical psychologist at Harvard Medical School, has studied trauma for 25 years. The fact that traumatic memories are stored by your brain, he points out, doesn't mean you have automatic or consistent access to those memories. "You can encode something into your brain short-term, and you can store it away very strongly," Hopper says. "That is an entirely different question from whether you retrieve it." In other words, just because the memory exists doesn't mean you'll always be able to find it.

A number of studies underscore the complexity and messiness of retrieving actual memories. Jonathan Schooler, a professor of psychological and brain sciences at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has identified several cases in which people appeared to genuinely gain access to "new" memories of abuse, as well as corroborating evidence that suggested those memories depicted true events. But in some cases, the memory wasn't new at all — the person had previously told someone about the abuse or had written about it in their journal. They thought they were remembering something they had forgotten; in reality, what they had forgotten was that they had previously remembered it.

Loftus and others involved in the False Memory Syndrome Foundation blame many accusations of child sexual abuse on therapists who adhere to Freud's theory of repression — the idea of a psychological defense mechanism by which we hide shameful and traumatic memories from ourselves. But Schooler's work suggests that memories of childhood sexual abuse aren't so much repressed as mischaracterized. Victims often remember what happened to them as children; they just don't have the tools to understand it, let alone explain it to others. Once they gain information that casts the experience in a new light, as Jennifer Freyd did with her father, what was previously considered weird or uncomfortable is recognized as abuse.

Brewin, the clinical psychologist, calls the entire debate over repression a red herring. "It's not clear that anybody has ever claimed that people forget traumatic events because of this notion of unconscious repression," he observes in a recent paper published by *Perspectives in Psychological Science.* He offers a simpler explanation of why memories

of childhood abuse sometimes resurface in adulthood. “People can forget things, and they can later come back to mind,” he says. It’s a rare point of agreement between psychologists and those in the false-memory camp. Even Loftus acknowledges that memories sometimes resurface because of “ordinary forgetting and remembering.”

But for survivors of sexual abuse, the argument over repression versus forgetting is largely beside the point. Most victims are primarily concerned with *what* they remember, not how. Jennifer Freyd doesn’t claim to know why her memories resurfaced or by what mechanism. She knows only that she didn’t remember being abused by her father until she did.

In the archives of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, housed in the Center for Inquiry near Buffalo, New York, there are filing cabinets full of letters from “FMSF families,” more than 2,000 individuals and couples accused by one or more of their adult children of child sex abuse. The organization attempts to protect their identities, though the files are poorly censored and it’s easy to read most of the names through stripes of black marker. Pam Freyd’s letters in reply to these parents are warm and personal. Some correspondences span years, and in those cases, Pam often asks after the accusing children — whether they have answered any calls lately or granted any visits to grandchildren. She shares occasional updates on Peter’s work or the couple’s vacations. Though a founder in name and responsible for the FMSF’s mission, Peter had minimal involvement with the organization. It wouldn’t exist without Pam.

Pam blames Jennifer’s allegations for ending her career in teaching, which she had quit by the time the foundation went public. “I was not going to be, nor have I been, anywhere near children since this all broke,” she says. “You’d feel people looking at you, worrying about you.” Pam tends to confess the barest hint of a feeling before reeling it all the way back; when I ask if it was hard for her to leave her job, she tells me, “Well, I had many good years.”

Pam insists that the FMSF does not discount the prevalence of child sex abuse; she describes her husband’s own experience of abuse as a child in Providence as a sort of

valuable (if unwanted) tutorial on what is and is not appropriate between adults and children. Nobody, she says, knows more about the damage done by child sex abuse than Peter Freyd. Where he differs from his daughter, according to Pam, is his attitude about it. “You can let experiences in life turn you into a victim, or you can take the approach that you’re going to be above it,” she says. “He wasn’t going to let it destroy his life.” Even in his experience of child sex abuse, it would seem, Peter is superior to others.

Peter, in fact, professes to be nonchalant about what the older artist did to him when he was 11 years old. It was “technically abuse,” he tells me, but he isn’t angry or upset about it. “Studies have been done,” he insists, that show “many, many people aren’t terribly bothered” by the sexual abuse they suffered as children. He and Pam entertained the artist who molested him as a guest in their home, and Peter says he was “quite open” about it with Jennifer and Gwen when they were children. “This was an extremely important person to him,” Jennifer recalls. “Maybe his most important person.”

Yet somehow — despite Peter’s own experience, and even though no one in the false-memory camp denies that child sexual abuse is widespread — every single parent who reached out to the FMSF over the years was presumed innocent. All of their children’s allegations, by the same token, were presumed to be false, even if the child had *always* remembered the abuse but confronted their parents only as an adult. Sexual violence is often rendered in the passive voice: Women are raped; children are sexually abused. But these are not crimes without perpetrators; someone, somewhere must be responsible. In the foundation’s newsletter dated February 29, 1992 (not included in its online archive), in an article titled “How Do We Know That We Are Not Representing Pedophiles,” Freyd explained why she thought it unlikely that the group’s hundreds of members included any perpetrators: “We are a good-looking bunch of people, graying hair, well dressed, healthy, smiling; just about every person who has attended is someone you would surely find interesting and want to count as a friend.”

That “you,” of course, is subjective, and the foundation’s desired non-pedophile image took some effort to maintain. A year after the organization was founded, an interview Ralph Underwager and Hollida Wakefield had given in 1991 to a Dutch pro-pedophilia magazine called *Paidika* came to light. In it, Underwager argues that pedophiles are too

defensive about their sexual orientation, which he likens to homosexuality and heterosexuality. Pedophilia, he wrote, is a "responsible" choice, an "acceptable expression of God's will for love and unity among human beings." Underwager was removed from the board, but Wakefield was allowed to remain. Now 80 years old, she continues to work as an expert witness for the defense in sex-abuse trials, though she's thinking about quitting to write a memoir.

On December 31, 2019, the False Memory Syndrome Foundation abruptly announced it would dissolve. In some ways, this wasn't surprising. Pam and Peter Freyd are both in their 80s, and nearly half the group's board members are listed as "deceased." The FMSF had raised more than $7.7 million since its founding, but the donations and dues tapered off over the years, and it ceased publishing its newsletter in 2011. The foundation gave birth to a number of offshoots; its Australian counterpart is also defunct, while the British False Memory Society remains active. The Satanic Temple, a religious group with chapters in 21 states, has a vocal false-memory subgroup called the Grey Faction. The temple's co-founder, a 43-year-old man named Doug Misicko (who uses the pseudonym Lucien Greaves), earns a living creating content for 1,097 fans on Patreon. If the FMSF are the genteel, gray-haired grandparents, the Grey Faction are their online, cult-obsessed sons.

But while the foundation may be gone, its legacy is likely to be long-lasting. Stories of brainwashed daughters falsely accusing their parents have become a staple of popular culture, from talk shows like *Sally Jessy Raphael* to PBS documentaries like *Divided Memories*. "I was just astounded that this big lie could be perpetrated with impunity and with great success across all major media," says Hopper, the Harvard psychologist. The concept of false memory does more than provide child sex abusers with a pseudoscientific defense — it offers a perversely reassuring explanation for anyone who wants to believe that such abuse is less common than it actually is. While statistics vary by source, an epidemiological overview of worldwide data estimates that 8 percent of boys and 20 percent of girls are sexually abused before the age of 18. And contrary to the FMSF's claims, most victims of child sex abuse are extremely reluctant to share their abuse with others or reporting it to the police.

The false-memory narrative and the Lost in the Mall study have also made their way into many of the most popular introductory psychology textbooks. After required freshman writing courses, intro psych is the most frequently taken college class in the United States. Coan, the grad student whose extra-credit assignment launched the mall study, says it has attained an almost mythological status. “It shows up still in 101 textbooks because the story is compelling,” he says. “But the evidence is not that compelling.”

Jennifer Freyd sees her own experience of child abuse as rather ordinary. It was what happened to her as an adult that felt unbelievable. Lost in the fixation on false memories is the deeper and more disturbing truth that the FMSF camp and trauma therapists do agree on. Child sex abuse isn’t rare — it happens all the time. It’s unlikely that every single allegation of child sex abuse is fact; it’s unlikely that they’re all made up. Between those two extremes is a broad and troubling spectrum of possibility.

“No one can know what happened in my childhood, given that every single memory I have is me alone with my father,” Jennifer says. “To me, it makes sense to document what we can know and live with some amount of uncertainty otherwise.”

Thirty years after their estrangement, Jennifer still thinks about her parents. “I wish them well,” she says. “I wish they would take responsibility for what happened and make amends, but I don’t think they will.” She was surprised and relieved to hear the FMSF had dissolved — a fact that, like most information about her parents, she found out indirectly, after being alerted by a well-meaning acquaintance. But Jennifer doesn’t expect the false-memory narrative to die out with her parents’ organization. A few months ago, she saw it employed as a plot device in an episode of the CBS series *Picard*, which stung a little for a self-described Trekkie.

Like her parents, Jennifer Freyd is an academic first and foremost. She approaches her own memories from a scholarly distance; as such, belief isn’t especially important to her.

Belief is personal, unscientific. When Jennifer watched Christine Blasey Ford offer her account of being sexually assaulted by Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, she believed her instinctively, but she never confused that belief for objective truth. "I didn't feel like I believed her as a scientist; I felt like I believed her as a human being," she says. "I wouldn't say I can prove it. I can't prove it." She winces whenever she sees a respected colleague lean into the "Believe women" mantra. "I don't feel we should tell people what to believe," she says. "I want an open mind, I want facts, I want to know what the base rates are. What's the probability that somebody would say something like that that's not true?"

After the Kavanaugh hearings, Jennifer got in touch with Blasey Ford, and the two became friends. Blasey Ford has since joined Jennifer's new organization, the Center for Institutional Courage, as an adviser. The center, which conducts scientific research into sexual violence, earned its nonprofit status right around the time the False Memory Syndrome Foundation announced its dissolution.

Pam and Peter Freyd are disinclined to eulogize their organization. Its website, they point out, lives on. In my brief conversation with Peter, I asked him whether he has any mixed feelings about the foundation — whether he might respond to Jennifer's allegations differently if he had a second chance. "I never thought about that," he said. "Nothing comes very much to mind." And with that, he handed me back to Pam.

For Pam, the foundation provided both a community and a career — a way to make sense of something she couldn't or wouldn't understand. She wouldn't use the word *regret,* but she has considered an alternate world in which she never went public with Jennifer's allegations. "There's an awful, tearing feeling that if we had not gotten involved with the foundation and things had been quieter, perhaps there would have been a greater probability that our family might've gotten back together again," she says. "But when I see what's happened to so many thousands of families, there would've been no guarantee."

She still has a pile of Jennifer's and Gwen's letters and childhood belongings. In the early years of their estrangement, she occasionally mailed them odds and ends from the house

in Philadelphia — sometimes with a note, sometimes without. Neither daughter ever replied. Now, Pam thinks, she'll probably just throw their stuff away.

**This article has been updated to include more context about the 2017* Memory *mega-analysis and to reflect the correct name of the Center for Inquiry.*

***This article has been updated to clarify the timeline of Peter Freyd's childhood abuse and his and Pam Freyd's relationship and to correct an erroneous reference to Pam Freyd's publishing history.*

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5 MINS AGO

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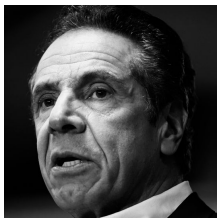

7 MINS AGO

These Are the Names of the Atlanta Spa-Shooting Victims

Q&A | 1:05 P.M.

***Coming 2 America* Had 800 Different Looks** The film's costume designer, Ruth E.

Carter, talks multicultural influences, African royalty, and that gigantic wedding dress.

By Sangeeta Singh-Kurtz

12:43 P.M.

We Tried the Viral TikTok Breakfast Bowl, 'Nature's Cereal'

12:28 P.M.

Grammy Winner Blue Ivy Carter Shows Off Her New Gold Sippy Cup

12:15 P.M.

6 Asian Women Killed in Horrific Shooting Rampage

11:58 A.M.

This Influencer Conspiracy Will Make You Question Everything

11:32 A.M.

Things That Could Be 'The Snyder Cut'

¡HOLA PAPI! | 11:10 A.M.

'I Want to Be More Latino. Is That a Thing?' We've been conditioned to couple lived experience with "authenticity"; there are a set number of things a "real Latinx" must do.

By J.P. Brammer

11:10 A.M.

20 Things on Sale You'll Actually Want to Buy: From Fenty Beauty to Sony

11:07 A.M.

The 10 Best Full-Body Workout Videos

ASK A COOL PERSON | 9:30 A.M.

What Are the Best Jeans for Women? Straight legs, wide legs, skinnies, and raw denim.

By Lori Keong and Hilary Reid

9:10 A.M.

Yet Another Elderly Asian Woman Was Viciously Attacked

8:00 A.M.

A Model, a Singer, and an Entrepreneur on Intersectionality

YESTERDAY AT 6:40 P.M.

The Artist Who Ties Hundreds of Knots

YESTERDAY AT 5:39 P.M.

Armie Hammer Has Been Accused of Rape

YESTERDAY AT 4:49 P.M.

This 'Historic' *Bachelor* Season Was a Total Flop

YESTERDAY AT 3:54 P.M.

Wait, Has Billie Eilish Been Blonde This Whole Time?

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The Indian Model Breaking Colorism Barriers

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Finally! Rachel Comey Will Open a Pop-Up Shop In Brooklyn

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