

RUNNING TITLE: RESHAPING MEMORIES

**Reshaping memories through conversations: Considering the influence of others on  
historical memories of abuse**

Jo Saunders<sup>1</sup> & Robyn Fivush<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Psychological Sciences and Health, University of Strathclyde

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychology, Emory University

Address for correspondence:

Jo Saunders

School of Psychological Sciences and Health

University of Strathclyde

40 George Street

Glasgow

G1 1QE

Email: [j.saunders@strath.ac.uk](mailto:j.saunders@strath.ac.uk)

Tel: +44 (0) 141 548 2576

Fax: +44 (0) 141 548 4001

As readers of *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, we are all familiar with the controversies of the ‘*memory wars*’ of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (see, e.g., Davies & Dalgleish, 2001; Ost, 2013; Patihis, Ho, Tingen, Lilienfeld & Loftus, 2014; Read & Lindsay, 1997, for reviews). While some of us believe firmly that this controversy was resolutely resolved others maintain that there remains many unanswered questions. At the very least, for the individuals and their families directly caught up in this battle, the result was ultimately a pyrrhic victory. In the last few years, however, the issues surrounding memories of abuse have resurfaced, but in a new form: while in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the battle was contained within families, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the battle has taken on a much more public nature. Specifically, celebrities, politicians and high profile individuals have found themselves publically accused of molesting children in previous decades, sometimes as long ago as half a century, and are referred to as ‘*historical memories of abuse*’ (e.g., recent allegations against Jimmy Savile in the UK and Bill Crosby in the US).

It is especially interesting that the ‘*memory wars*’ have been reshaped in this way – from the level of the family to the public – which, in a way, parallels the increasingly public way we live our lives. Given that we now live in the ‘*digital age*’ we share, and shape, our public identity with the world through social media and, in a fashion, we are reshaping ourselves and our histories through a conversation with the world. It is perhaps, then, unsurprising that the ‘*memory wars*’ would also be reshaped in this manner with individuals ‘going public’ and engaging in a dialogue with the world. As there is no evidence in this current controversy that the alleged victims forgot their abuse in the intervening decades – although several celebrities have been questioned but not charged – the old question of the ‘*memory wars*’ of ‘*how do we know that this memory of abuse is genuine?*’ does not necessarily seem to be the most salient issue and a strictly cognitive approach is insufficient to aid in our understanding of historical memories. However, we can ask how alleged victims

may have dealt with their memories in the intervening decades: how this conversation between alleged victims and the public, as well as how dialogue with the self and small groups come to shape, and reshape, the former's increasingly aged memories.

Although the current wave of accusations of celebrities has brought the issue of historical memories front and centre in the public consciousness, it has, of course, always been of direct relevance to individuals subject to maltreatment closer to home. Maltreated children engage in conversations with their abusers (e.g., a maltreating parent), as well as with other individuals, such as a non-maltreating parent, and these instances of conversational influences can affect a child's memory of abuse, as well as the development of their memory in general. It is, thus, clear that if we wish to investigate historical memories we need a much broader approach than a strictly cognitive, or memorial, one on which we have relied in the past. A more complete approach must also encompass social, developmental, cultural and psychopathological techniques and processes.

To that end, we are presenting a set of review articles with commentaries and empirical papers exploring the impact of conversations on the short- and long-term retention of memories with specific application to the current debate concerning historical memories of abuse. We have been particularly fortunate to elicit contributions from the US, New Zealand, Canada and Denmark, including experts drawn from developmental (including psychopathology), social, cultural and cognitive psychology, which allows us to present a unique Special Issue containing varied and broad perspectives on this issue. What is clear is that victims of abuse or maltreatment do not exist in a bubble and that their interactions – particularly those that are verbal in nature – are critically important in reshaping memories of abuse as well as the development of memory in general.

We present two review articles with accompanying commentaries that provide diverse approaches to the topic of conversational influences on memory in both children and adults. Firstly, Salmon and Reese provide an extensive review of the influence of parent-child conversations on children's memory for negative events and psychological well-being by taking a welcome multi-theoretical approach integrating socio-cultural, attachment and developmental psychopathological approaches. The commentators (Valentino & McDonnell, Bauer) note that such an approach provides a new perspective through the consideration of a broader range of influences on children's memories than is typically considered within developmental research. The commentators are in broad agreement with Salmon and Reese that the characteristics of parents are important in determining the memorial outcomes of maltreated children. Bauer further underscores the importance of forgetting as a basic cognitive function within the remembering literature, and points out that forgetting is accelerated in early childhood. Valentino and McDonnell approach the issue from a developmental psychopathology perspective, and discuss the broader implications of reminiscing conversations between maltreating parents and their children.

In our second review, Fagin, Cyr and Hirst consider how the context of conversations affect the content, and availability, of memories, in both the short- and long-term. Specifically, they note that conversations concerning abuse can occur with oneself, within a small group, and with a larger audience, such as the public. While conversations are most likely to reshape memories in the shorter-term, Fagin and colleagues emphasise that "going public" introduces cultural artefacts which have the potential to destabilise previously stable memories. The commentators (Barber, Koppel & Berntsen) stress that Fagin and colleagues' review provides an excellent platform for inspiring future research but that we have only begun to scratch the surface on an area that remains littered with unanswered, and often difficult, questions. Barber adds to the mechanisms discussed by Fagin and colleagues by

focusing on the verbal overshadowing, a phenomenon that might occur as one discusses an event with others. Koppel and Bentsen turn inwards, and discuss how involuntary memories, memories that come into one's consciousness might affect subsequent recalls. Thus, both individual and group reminiscing's can affect what is remembered.

In addition, we also have two empirical articles; firstly, Peterson provides rare and valuable long-term longitudinal data on adolescents' memories for a painful and distressing serious injury ten years previously that required emergency room treatment, and finds high accuracy and few effects of having been interviewed during the intervening period on memories for the injury and the hospital visit and treatment. Secondly, Pasupathi and Oldroyd examine the impact of a listener's attentiveness on a speaker's memory for conversations further highlighting the collective and interactive, rather than individualistic, nature of memory. Given that both speakers *and* listeners have their own goals and desires – which may be particularly salient and possibly in conflict in situations concerning familial sexual abuse – it is vitally important that future research continues to pursue this valuable line of research and consider listeners to be of equal importance in reshaping others' memories.

What is clear from reading the articles contained in this Special Issue is that the multi-theoretical approaches taken here provides a unique view into the social and cultural components of individual memory than that previously taken by more traditionally cognitive approaches and advances the area in interesting and diverse ways. Thus, the future directions of investigations into historical memories of abuse will continue to be an exciting and fast moving field.

### *References*

Davies, G.M. & Dalgleish, T. (2001). *Recovered Memories: Seeking the Middle Ground*. Wiley: Chichester, UK.

Ost, J. (2013). Recovered memories and suggestibility for entire events. In A.M. Ridley, F. Gabbert & La Rooy, D.J. (Eds.), *Suggestibility in Legal Contexts: Psychological Research and Forensic Implications*. Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd, pp. 107-128.

Patihis, L., Ho, L.Y., Tingen, I.W., Lilienfeld, S.O. & Loftus, E.F. (2014). Are the “memory wars” over? A scientist practitioner gap in beliefs about repressed memory. *Psychological Science*, 25, 519–530.

Read, J.D. & Lindsay, D.S. (1997). *Recollections of Trauma: Scientific Evidence and Clinical Practice*. Plenum: New York.