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## People Believe it is Plausible to have Forgotten Memories of Childhood Sexual Abuse

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### Abstract

Pezdek, Blandon-Gitlin, and Gabbay (2006) found that perceptions of the plausibility of events increase the likelihood of imagination inducing false memories of those events. Using a survey conducted by Gallup, we asked a large sample of the general population how plausible it would be for a person with longstanding emotional problems and a need for psychotherapy to be a victim of childhood sexual abuse, even though the person could not remember the abuse. Only 18% indicated that it was implausible or very implausible, whereas 67% indicated that such an occurrence was either plausible or very plausible. Combined with Pezdek et al.'s findings, and counter to their conclusions, our findings imply that there is a substantial danger of inducing false memories of childhood sexual abuse through imagination in psychotherapy.

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Pezdek, Blandon-Gitlin, and Gabbay (2006, p.764) begin their abstract: “Previous studies have reported that imagination can induce false autobiographical memories. This finding has been used to suggest that psychotherapists who have clients imagine suspected repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse may, in fact, be inducing false memories for the imagined events.” They provide experimental results that suggest that although imagining plausible events can lead to false memories, imagining implausible events do not. To complete the argument they note that “childhood sexual abuse is a relatively implausible event for most children” (p.765, and again on p. 758), implying that claims of therapists inducing false memories should be called into question. Here we question the assumption that childhood sexual abuse is a relatively implausible event in people with emotional problems and a need for psychotherapy but with no memory of the abuse. According to logic and literature reviewed by Pezdek et al., the more plausible people find this scenario to be, the easier it should be to induce false memories of it.

What is the correct measure of plausibility? In order to answer this question, we have to consider Pezdek et al.'s design carefully and in some detail. The dependent variable in their study was the perception of *personal* plausibility – the participants were asked to rate how likely it is that they have personally experienced certain types of events before age 10. The independent variable in the study was the perception of *general* plausibility – the experiment manipulated how common the events are in a general population of students from which the participants were drawn. In the experiment, the dependent measure of personal plausibility was measured twice, once before and once after an imagination task for events that had their general plausibility manipulated. Pezdek et al. (2006) showed that ratings of personal

plausibility increased with the imagination task, but only for events that the participants had been led to believe had high general plausibility.

In order to assess the practical implications of these findings in relation to risks of inducing childhood sexual abuse memories in psychotherapy, we need a measure of Pezdek et al.'s independent measure of general plausibility as it applies to people who were likely to enter therapy without a memory of childhood sexual abuse. Both entering into therapy and not remembering childhood sexual abuse are prerequisites to the case to which we wish to generalize, which is having a memory of childhood sexual abuse recovered in therapy. We therefore asked a representative sample of adults how plausible it would be for a person with longstanding emotional problems and a need for psychotherapy to be a victim of childhood sexual abuse, even though the person could not remember the abuse. We did not ask respondents about the plausibility of experiences in their own lives, that is, personal plausibility, because that would have mimicked Pezdek et al.'s dependent measure. We asked a general population instead of asking individuals on a waiting list for psychotherapy or individuals in psychotherapy, because such a sample would be likely to interpret our general plausibility question as a personal plausibility question – i.e., *how likely is it that you were sexually abused, although you may not be able to remember*. Again, this would be the equivalent to the dependent measure in Pezdek et al., not the independent variable for general plausibility, which is what is of interest here.

Previous studies indicate that many people believe that repression and recovery of traumatic events are possible and quite common (e.g., Garry & Loftus, 1994; Golding, Segó, Sanchez & Hasemann, 1995; Naka & Maki, 2006; van Wallemdael, 1999; Yapko, 1994). However, these studies did not yield direct measures of the general plausibility needed here and sampled either college students, people training to become psychologists, or psychotherapists. Here we wanted to follow the logic and arguments of Pezdek et al. (2006) as closely as possible. We therefore examined the general plausibility of forgotten memories of child sexual abuse in a large representative sample of a general population.

## Method

### Respondents

A sample of 495 Danes (273 females) between 18 and 92 years participated ( $M = 47.3$  years;  $SD = 16.1$ ). Respondents were selected from all geographic areas of Denmark except Greenland and the Faroe Islands. All respondents were able to speak and understand Danish.

### Procedure

Data were collected as part of a telephone omnibus survey by TNS Gallup, Denmark. Respondents were informed that we were interested in “whether sexual abuse experienced in childhood may influence the person’s adult life. There are no correct or incorrect answers. It is your personal opinion that is important.” Respondents were asked to “Imagine a person with longstanding emotional problems and a need for psychotherapy. How plausible do you think it is that this person is a victim of childhood sexual abuse, even though the person is unable to remember the abuse?” The respondents rated the plausibility on a four-point rating scale: 1, very implausible; 2, implausible; 3, plausible; and 4, very plausible. A “do-not-know” option was not read to the respondents, but only used if the respondents stated to the interviewer that he or she did not know the answer to the question.

## Results

### Analyses

Age was grouped into 6 age categories (18 - 29; 30 - 39; 40 - 49; 50 - 59; 60 - 69; and 70+) as well as being considered as a continuous variable. In addition, gender and education (measured in terms of seven classes provided by Gallup, combining years and kinds of education) were included in the analyses.

### Do-not-know responses

There were 73 (14.7%) do-not-know responses. The frequency of do-not-know responses varied significantly among the six age groups ( $\chi^2(5)=25.5, p < .001$ ) reflecting that older respondents were more likely to endorse this response than younger respondents.

### Main findings

The results are presented in Table 1. Nearly 70% of the respondents (and nearly 80% of those who answered the question) thought that forgotten childhood sexual abuse was plausible or very plausible. T-tests and one way ANOVAs showed no effects of gender, education and age group on the ratings of plausibility for those respondents who answered the question. Treating age and education as continuous variables produced no significant correlations with plausibility.

## Discussion

Our results are important in their own right because they document a widespread belief in the general population of a Western society that an event as memorable as childhood sexual abuse can be forgotten and still have marked effects on current behavior. The results might differ for other countries, but probably not enough to affect our basic conclusions in countries where memories of childhood sexual abuse are recovered. Thus, most people seem to share the belief underlying much memory recovery therapy. In terms of the logic used by Pezdek et al. the general plausibility of this scenario is high.

It is not surprising that childhood sexual abuse is thought to be plausible. Elsewhere, Pezdek (Freyd et al., 2005, p.501) has noted that childhood sexual assault “has been reported by 20% of the women and 5 to 10% of the men worldwide. Surveys likely underestimate prevalence ... close to 90% of sexual abuse cases are never reported to the authorities.” Thus, it is not the plausibility of childhood sexual abuse that is striking, but the belief that many people have that it can be completely forgotten and at the same time cause severe emotional problems.

Pezdek et al. (2006) note that it is important that cognitive research on false memory “is generalized accurately to real world cases involving memory for childhood sexual abuse” (p. 765). Our findings help qualify which practical implications can be drawn from Pezdek et al.’s findings that it is easier to induce false memories through imagination for events that are high in general plausibility. We have shown that childhood sexual abuse in people with emotional problems, but no memory of the abuse, is considered as a highly plausible event. This leads to a conclusion opposite to the one implied by Pezdek et al.

The practical implications drawn by Pezdek et al. are questionable for other reasons. Above all, both the general plausibility manipulation and, as acknowledged by Pezdek et al., the personal plausibility manipulation conducted in some forms of psychotherapy is much stronger than the kind of manipulation conducted in Pezdek et al.’s experiment. Both therapist and client are invested in finding an explanation for the client’s problems and work

together to do so over an extended period. Some therapists involved in this process are inclined to believe that childhood sexual abuse may be the answer; they are not just doing a detached experimental manipulation. In some forms of therapy, clients with a variety of problems are told that it is common for people with their symptoms to have repressed memories of child sexual abuse (Claridge, 1992; Courtois, 1992). The same idea is stated repeatedly in various self-help books (Bass & Davies, 1988). Because people attending therapy are usually individuals in emotional pain, they may be especially susceptible to such suggestions and fantasies of childhood sexual abuse may serve as idioms of distress (Mulhern, 1991).

Pezdek et al.'s results are impressive in that the manipulation of general plausibility is modest and still produces significant results. The effort spent in therapy is much more intensive and prolonged. Given this, and the finding that forgotten memories of childhood sexual abuse are considered as plausible, Pezdek et al. (2006) add to the accumulating evidence that the risk of inducing false memories in psychotherapy is substantial.

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**Table 1**

Estimates of Plausibility (Percentages)

<u>Very Implausible</u>	<u>Implausible</u>	<u>Plausible</u>	<u>Very Plausible</u>	<u>Do not Know</u>
5.1	12.7	54.7	12.7	14.7

Note: N = 495