Finding a new narrative: Meaningful responses to 'false memory' disinformation
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Introduction

> You cannot take someone's story away without giving them a new one. It is not enough to challenge an old narrative, however outdated and discredited it may be. Change happens only when you replace it with another. When we develop the right story, and learn how to tell it, it will infect the minds of people across the political spectrum. Those who tell the stories run the world (Monbiot 2017, p 1).

In the 1980s, journalists around the world began telling a new story about child sexual abuse. Beginning in the United States, and followed by Europe and Australia, the media climate changed dramatically from disinterest to widespread, high-profile coverage. Child abuse was, according to the news, a 'hidden epidemic' of extraordinary proportions (Beckett, 1996). Only ten years later, the media position on abuse had undergone an almost complete inversion. By the early 1990s, the new 'hidden epidemic' was not widespread abuse, but 'false memories' of abuse, encouraged by collective neurosis and the malfeasance of therapists and social workers (Jenny Kitzinger, 2004). In response, mental health professionals, abuse survivors and their advocates presented research data on abuse, trauma and memory, and sought to clarify misrepresentations and misunderstandings about therapeutic practice. While these efforts were laudable, they failed to dislodge the 'false memory' story from its hegemonic position in the mass media and public imagination. Accurate information, alone, could not compete with the emotional appeals of 'false memory' advocates.

This chapter draws from George Monbiot's (2017) thoughts on the political power of storytelling. He emphasizes that stories function as schema through which people organize information and develop a sense of order and purpose. It is a mistake, he warns, to try to rely on data to challenging a misleading story since '[t]he only thing that can displace a story is a story' (Monbiot, 2017, p 3). In short, information is not sufficient to challenge disinformation: we must also supply a meaningful framework in which that information makes sense. In this chapter, I suggest that the success of 'false memory' was due, largely, to its compelling narrative features. False memory advocates were skilled at retelling the story of child abuse as a drama with heroes (people falsely accused of abuse and their allies) and villains (therapists, social workers, feminists) locked in a battle of good (science, reason, rationality) against the forces of darkness (dogma, fantasy, hysteria). Attempts by experts in trauma and dissociation to counter this story with data have, at times, struggled for purchase, since they have not challenged the affective foundations of the 'false memory' narrative.

In this chapter, I argue that we have the opportunity to tell a new, and more hopeful, story about abuse and trauma. While the 'false memory' story persists, it has been destabilized by revelations of widespread clergy and institutional abuse, and its valorization of staunch individualism and devaluing of health and welfare services has lost much of its sheen. At the same time, the conceptual apparatus of trauma has taken on increasing social and political as well as psychological significance as a descriptor for the violation of human relationality and

the restorative power of care and support. Increased public interest and understanding of trauma provides much of the material for counter-narratives that oppose the alienating individualism and cynicism promoted by 'false memory' advocates. As public and professional interest in trauma grows, 'storifying' trauma in principled and solutions-focused ways offers a genuine alternative to the outmoded narratives of the past.

The meaning of abuse

The exponential increase in media coverage of child sexual abuse in the 1980s can leave the impression that sexual abuse was discovered only forty years ago. In fact, historical scholarship shows that child sexual abuse has been the subject of sustained media interest and public anxiety throughout the modern period (Finnane & Smaal, 2016). However, while an incident of child sexual abuse might have been deplored, what child sexual abuse meant – what it signified or symbolized – was quite ambiguous prior to the 1980s. Notions of 'sin' and moral degeneracy attributed blame and stigma to the child victim as well as the perpetrator. Pseudo-Freudian theories of childhood sexuality suggested that children fantasied about and desired sexual contact with adults (Shengold, 2000). Such arguments were recast as scientific truth from the 1950s within the libertarian milieu of the science of 'sexology', where researchers such as Alfred Kinsey documented a high prevalence of child sexual abuse but suggested it was harmless or even beneficial (Olafson, Corwin, & Summit, 1993). In short, the social construction of child sexual abuse has been messy, incoherent and morally ambivalent.

Intersecting feminist and child protection concerns in the 1970s proposed a simpler and emotionally moving formulation: that child sexual abuse was common, harmful and the fault of the adult not the child. Feminist consciousness-raising evolved alongside improvements in paediatric expertise during the 60s and the 70s, generating new knowledge and evidence for the frequency and effects of child abuse. Changes to legislation and family law, including the advent of mandatory reporting legislation, drove an unprecedented increased in abuse reports and investigations in the 1980s. These new cases vividly illustrated claims of child abuse as a 'hidden epidemic', resulting in mass media coverage of child sexual abuse as a significant, but suppressed, social problem from the early to late 1980s (Beckett, 1996). Abuse stories included multiple dramatic elements that enhanced their newsworthiness and public salience: sexual predators, innocent children, descriptions of sexual violence, and suggestions of a widespread 'conspiracy of silence'. This formulation of child sexual abuse has remained a point of reference in public imagination and political discourse ever since.

Conservatism, neoliberalism and the story of 'false memories'

While mental health, child protection and law enforcement agencies grappled with an unprecedented number of sexual abuse cases, the political trend of the 1980s was towards *dis*investment in welfare and support agencies (Campbell, 2018). The defunding of social supports was legitimized by a partnership between social conservatives and economic neoliberals who shared, albeit for different reasons, a dislike for state intervention in private life, and a focus on the restoration of family privacy (Cooper, 2017). This political backdrop had two interlinked effects on responses to child abuse. The first was material. Child protection and health services found themselves tasked to respond to child sexual abuse as a major priority without an equivalent increase in funds or personnel. Indeed, in some cases, welfare and health budgets were *shrinking* even as agencies were faced with an increasing number and complexity of sexual abuse cases.

The second effect was discursive. In such a political climate, where state agencies were routinely characterised as incompetent and oppressive, difficulties in child abuse investigations were liable to be blamed on services and professionals rather than systemic problems, such as a lack of resources and personnel. Those accused of child abuse found a sympathetic hearing where they linked the allegations against them to state over-reach or incompetence (Hechler, 1988).

The inevitable result was described by Campbell (2018) in her analysis of the Cleveland case in England in the late 1980s, where a large number of children were removed from their families due to suspicion of sexual abuse. The local children's hospital and welfare services experienced an influx of vulnerable children in the midst of a resourcing crisis caused by budget cuts, triggering a systemic failure that was blamed on individual professionals. The case has become widely remembered in the United Kingdom as an example of 'false allegations' encouraged by professional malpractice, despite significant evidence of sexual abuse amongst the group of children removed by social services (B. Campbell, 2018; Donaldson & O'Brien, 1995).

This pattern was evident throughout the Global North during the 1980s, as child protection and law enforcement were confronted with unexpectedly complex and severe allegations of abuse. A number of high-profile cases included allegations of multiple victims and multiple perpetrators, and descriptions of sadistic abuse, ritual abuse and the manufacture of child abuse material (Salter, 2013). In the absence of adequate training, personnel or policy frameworks to facilitate interagency cooperation, these complex cases tested partnerships between child protection and law enforcement, who faced clashing professional cultures and competing imperatives in their work with children. These cases also highlighted the barriers faced by young and traumatised witnesses in the criminal justice system, with children subject to hostile cross-examination and forced to confront their alleged abuser/s directly in court. Difficulties in investigating or prosecuting these cases were highlighted by influential journalist as evidence of a rising tide of false abuse allegations, driven by zealous state agencies and the incompetence of feminized 'caring' professions, such as therapy and social work (R. Cheit, 2014; Salter, 2018).

The media focus on 'false allegations' only accelerated during the 1990s. As legislative changes in many US states enabled adults abused as children to pursue civil suits or criminal charges against their abusers, adults accused of abuse organized a counter-movement under the banner of 'false memory syndrome' (Brown, Scheflin, & Hammond, 1998). This 'syndrome' described the development of false memories of childhood abuse by adults, often with the encouragement with a therapist. The 'false memory' movement combined appeals to scientific authority with gripping stories of happy families torn apart by therapists who supposedly manipulated clients into 'recovering memories' of incest that never took place. 'False memory' advocacy proved to be extraordinarily successful in influencing the media debate, with journalists amongst the most vocal champions of the 'false memory' position (Kitzinger, 2004). According to the mass media, the threat to public safety was no longer men who abused children, but rather those professionals who purported to respond to child abuse and its effects. Therapists and child protection workers, in particular, were characterized as obsessed, incompetent and perverse in their focus on abuse.

Campbell (2003) argues that the 'false memory' narrative was grounded in the liberal opposition between the idealized figure of the rational, autonomous individual, and the

devalued figure of the emotional, dependent person unable to think for themselves. 'False memory' advocates described trustworthy and 'true' memories as explicit, cognitive, persistent and recalled by individuals in isolation from other people. In contrast, untrustworthy memories involved any memory that departed from this standard, particularly where there was discontinuity in memory, where memory took implicit, embodied or affectively intensive forms, or where memory recollection was in some way 'triggered' or facilitated by other events or people. These simple binaries of true/false, rational/emotional, continuous/discontinuous and independent/dependent were highly gendered and used to mischaracterize women seeking mental health care, in particular, as easily manipulated and incapable of judgement or independent thought (Gaarder, 2000).

These binaries were particularly salient in the 1990s during a period of neoliberal ascendency, in which individual self-sufficiency was valorized and dependency on others was pathologised. Sexual and civil libertarians accused the state and advocates for survivors of child abuse of exaggerating the problem, and the 'false memory' narrative became the dominant child abuse 'story' globally (Beckett, 1996; Jenny Kitzinger, 2004). Media bias was so widespread as to permanently distort the public record. For instance, lax regulation and oversight of the rapidly expanding daycare and childcare sectors had created new opportunities for sexual abusers to access children (Finkelhor & Williams, 1988). In some cases, centres were established for the explicit purpose of sexually exploiting children. In their zeal to advance an argument about false allegations and social hysteria, the forensic and other evidence for this chilling phenomena was pervasively misreported and suppressed (R. Cheit, 2014). Today, many believe that the 1980s and 1990s was a period of "day-care sex-abuse hysteria" (as one Wikipedia entry puts it), rather than a time where legal and policy failures exposed children in institutional settings to sexual violence and exploitation.

Mental health professionals, academics and advocates have attempted to right the record through strategic research and dissemination, as well as a critical questioning of 'false memory' claims. Research into amnesia, dissociation and treatment for the effects of child abuse burgeoned during the 1990s (Brown et al., 1998), providing the basis for effective and evidence-based treatment of complex trauma. Researchers, clinicians and advocates documented flaws in the conduct of 'false memory' research and its application to child abuse (e.g. Pope, 1996). Media misrepresentations of cases of extreme abuse (such as organized or ritual abuse) were disputed by child protection and mental health professions working with profoundly traumatized clients (e.g. Sinason, 1994). It is telling, however, that this scholarship was almost wholly ignored by journalists and researchers aligned with the 'false memory' position. There was no enthusiasm in the mass media for new research findings on trauma and abuse, or the debunking of previous journalistic claims about traumatic amnesia. To the contrary, 'false memory' advocates were provided with extensive media and professional opportunities unrestrained by the accumulating evidence of exaggerations, over-generalisations and self-contradictions. Meanwhile, academics and professionals expressed their fear of speaking out against the 'false memory' position, anticipating a public backlash (J. Kitzinger, 1998).

The disruption of the 'false memory' narrative

Ultimately, what disrupted (although it did not displace) the false memory narrative was not science or data; it was another story. In 2002, the Boston Globe published a series of articles about clergy sexual abuse of children in the local Catholic diocese, triggering intense media coverage that eclipsed even the height of 'false memory' reporting during the 1990s (R. E.

Cheit, Shavit, & Reiss-Davis, 2010). In direct refutation of 'false memory' claims about social over-reaction to child sexual abuse, revelations of widespread clergy abuse were indicative of pervasive disinterest and inaction in relation to child sexual abuse, as well as high-level complicity amongst authorities. Subsequent scandals regarding the elite sexual deviance of UK entertainer Jimmy Savile, US coach Jerry Sandusky and other high-profile figures and celebrities (including those named in the current #MeToo movement) only underscored the degree of social toleration for child sexual offending.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis (GFC), the liberal notion of the sovereign individual so central to 'false memory' discourse has been challenged in significant ways. The GFC revealed the catastrophic narcissism of neoliberal individualism as well as the dense interconnectivity of economic and social relations, which operated to instantaneously transmit the consequences of the crisis around the world. In a post-GFC world, the ideal of the self-determining individual is now the terrain of significant social conflict. The 'false memory' marriage of liberal individualism with scientism (in which the vocabulary and authority of science is appropriated for ideological or political purpose) was, in many respects, the forerunner to more explicitly reactionary contemporary movements (with varying labels, including overlapping bands of so-called 'sceptics', 'new atheists', 'men's rights activists' and the 'alt-right') in which a dogmatic positivism and individualism camouflages attempts to wind back the gains of the feminism, civil rights and other progressive social movements. Against this, a resurgent left asserts more socially embedded and accountable conceptualizations of individuality.

While its central tenets have been undermined, the 'false memory' narrative remains an important journalistic touchstone. The tone of mass media coverage is generally more sympathetic to claims of child sexual victimization than in the past, although journalists routinely warn against a return to the 'satanic panics' and 'witch hunts' of the 1980s and 1990s. This formulation seeks to retain the 'false memory' narrative by 'historicizing' it, and re-imagining the 1980s and 1990s as a period of sexual neurosis that contemporary society has transcended and overcome, but must remember as a cautionary tale (Richardson, 2015). Arguably, this re-envisioning attempts to reconcile the contradictions between the popularity of the 'false memory' narrative, and the accumulated evidence rendering that narrative untenable. As a result, the 'false memory' story now co-exists uneasily alongside a renewed understanding of child sexual abuse as widespread, hidden and harmful.

Changing the narrative

It is important to ask why the false memory story was so influential for so long. Research offers some explanations. Kiztinger (2004) highlights the masculine culture of journalism, and suggests that, by the early 1990s, many (largely male) journalists and editors were already skeptical about abuse allegations and sympathetic towards accused men. Furthermore, she suggests that child abuse had become a 'boring' and repetitive issue for journalists, who found the 'false memory' story novel and appealing (Kitzinger, 1996). It is also useful to take political economy into consideration. The political climate of the 1980s and 1990s was, as previously explained, hostile to state services and intervention, and promoted a neoliberal ideology of personal autonomy that characterized childhood trauma as an 'excuse' for poor life outcomes. The figure of the adult woman 'dependent' on a therapist was contrary to the ideal of the independent, autonomous individual that was implicitly championed in 'false memory' science (Campbell, 2003) and in social and political discourse more broadly.

It is no accident that the 'false memory' movement and narrative drew on these tendencies and sympathies. The brokers of this narrative, including people accused of abuse, and their academic and journalistic allies, were savvy in developing a story that 'made sense' to the contemporary context. In doing so, they popularized a schema, or a way of making sense of the world, that did not supply new information about child abuse as much as it provided a new way of understanding child abuse altogether. In his book on the politics of storytelling, Monbiot (2017, p 2) explains that:

> [w]hen we encounter a complex issue and try to understand it, what we look for is not consistent and reliable facts but a consistent and comprehensible story. When we ask ourselves whether something 'makes sense', the 'sense' we seek is not rationality, as scientists and philosophers perceive it, but narrative fidelity. Does what we are hearing reflect the way we expect humans and the world to behave? Does it hang together? Does it progress as stories should progress?

Child abuse was undoubtedly a complex issue about which little was known when it became a major media focus in the 1980s. The ubiquity of sexual abuse did not 'fit' with community understandings of the benevolence of foundational social institutions, such as families, churches and schools. The undeniable predominance of male child sex offenders could be, and was, interpreted as an implicit critique of male sexuality, prompting defensiveness and claims of a feminist conspiracy amongst some men (Jenny Kitzinger, 2004). The bounds of journalistic and public credulity were stretched and ultimately exceeded by the controversial multi-perpetrator, multi-victim abuse cases of the late 80s and early 90s (Salter, 2013, 2018). As these child abuse cases accumulated, they disrupted what Monbiot (2017) called 'narrative fidelity' or 'common sense' logic of the dominant story of child abuse as a 'hidden epidemic'. In its place, people accused of child abuse and their allies offered a story that seemed to progress much more sensibly, in which the severity of child abuse had been exaggerated, with many purported survivors suffering instead from 'false memories'. This story was embedded within, and consonant with, a broader set of beliefs and principles about individual autonomy and self-sufficiency that spoke to those collective anxieties evident during the period in which 'false memory' claims were ascendant.

The scientific basis of the 'false memory' narrative has always been poor. Fervent appeals to science and rationality in 'false memory' discourse have not been matched with an equivalent commitment to scientific rigor (Pope, 1996). A recent review has demonstrated the extent to which 'false memory' research findings have been exaggerated, misapplied and over-generalised (Brewin & Andrews, 2017). It has been the narrative, rather than scientific, framework of 'false memories' that explains both its enduring appeal and remarkable persistence in light of contradictory information. Monbiot (2017) asserts that, once people believe a story that helps them make sense of the world, they will cling to this story even when shown that it is fictitious. He observes that '[a]ttempts to refute such stories tend only to reinforce them, as the disproof constitutes another reiteration of the narrative' (p 2). His book includes numerous such examples: theories that American politicians orchestrated the disaster of September 11, or that scientists are inventing climate change data for money, or that the private sector is more efficient and innovative than the public sector. Contrary evidence has not dislodged these narratives because they are part of a broader framework of meaning that has significance in people's lives. In the case of child abuse, the 'false memory' narrative provided a façade of scientific justification for the appealing belief that child abuse was not as serious as victimized children and adults would suggest.

Of course, it is often necessary to specifically refute the points made to justify these exculpatory narratives, however refutation is, alone, an insufficient response. Indeed, constant refutation transforms the disingenuous narrative into the grounds upon which debate takes place, and reinforces and disseminates (and strengthens) the narrative even more. Responding to the 'false memory' narrative, then, walks a fine line between refutation and inadvertent reinforcement. Too much focus on contesting the claims of 'false memory' advocates risks narrowing the discussion to 'memory suggestibility' and the prevalence of false allegations, thus obscuring the broader social and political obstacles to the prevention, detection and treatment of child abuse. Rather than trying to counter stories with data, Monbiot (2017) emphasizes the need for countervailing stories that give new coherence and meaning to the available information, and finds common cause amongst multiple actors and perspectives.

Trauma: a new story

It is interesting to note that, despite the prominence of the 'false memory' narrative, the concept the concept of 'trauma' has become more – not less – salient over the last thirty years. While there are legitimate critiques of the manner in which the concept of 'trauma' pathologises suffering and grief, it is also the case that traumatic diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative identity disorder describe a shared array of human responses to degradation and dehumanization (Good & Hinton, 2016; Ross, 2011). Trauma provides an accessible way of describing, and relating, to the universality of loss and betrayal and its impacts on human wellbeing, which has given the concept a great degree of resonance across the spectrum of personal and professional experience. The growing alliance and interweaving of neuroscience with trauma treatment and psychodynamic theory has fascinated the public, as evident in the runaway success of Van Der Kolk's (2015) bestselling book *The Body Keeps the Score*. Frameworks of 'trauma-informed' practice have expanded beyond mental health services to a range of settings, including education, development and international aid, law enforcement and alcohol and drug services. Trauma has also become an important political concept. The expanding vocabulary of intergenerational, collective and historical trauma has provided Indigenous and First Nations movements with ways of speaking about the ongoing impacts of colonization, dispossession and genocide. In short, trauma is on the public agenda as never before.

The public understanding of trauma has developed to the point of offering a compelling, and ultimately, hopeful, counter-narrative to 'false memory' disinformation. For a political narrative to be effective, Monbiot (2017, p 13) says that it must be 'simple and intelligible', 'resonate with deep needs and desires', 'explain the mess we are in and how to escape it', while being 'firmly grounded in reality' and realistic solutions. All of these elements are evident in the contemporary field of trauma studies and treatment. As a concept, trauma speaks to the centrality of relationships to human flourishing, and what happens when that connectedness is interrupted, misused or broken. This deep need for mutual, nurturing relationships is made all the more acute within a social and economic environment that remains profoundly atomizing and competitive. It might be said, with Alford (2016), that within a consumer culture that offers few resources to speak about or acknowledge suffering, 'trauma' has become a crucially important placeholder for human vulnerability and loss. The very fact that 'trauma' runs counter to the compulsory and exhausting optimism of a neoliberal focus on individual responsibility, competition and success may, at least partially, explain its increasing cultural footprint. 'Trauma' reminds us of our fundamental dependence

upon and openness towards others, and the subtle or overt wounds of misrecognition and maltreatment: whether due to misattunement or abuse between caregiver and child, or the dominations of misogyny, racism, class, imperialism and other axes of inequality.

Trauma treatment, research and discourse has affirmed the importance of emotionally rich, but not overwhelming or retraumatising, relationships as the optimum condition for human flourishing, and for relational repair and restoration. This focus on intersubjectivity is, perhaps, the key 'missing piece' of previous stories about child abuse. In the past, child abuse has been a problem without a solution, with distressing case after case accumulating in public awareness without apparent end. At least the 'false memory' narrative offered a potential, if illusory and damaging, resolution to this intolerable situation, in the (re)suppression of victim complaints. However, there are now a number of promising pathways towards the prevention, detection and treatment of child sexual abuse amongst a host of other social problems. Congruent with the focus of trauma discourse on the strengthening of relationality, prevention efforts include parenting education and family support, child-safe institutions, community organizing and strengthening, well-resourced health, welfare and educational systems, and the promotion of economic and social equality, all of which reduce the risk of child sexual abuse amongst other forms of violence and maltreatment (Quadara, Nagy, Higgins, & Siegel, 2015). Trauma-informed responses to at-risk, victimized and/or perpetrating groups have a robust evidence base, and a crucial role to play in the amelioration of a range of social problems beyond child abuse. Major epidemiological studies such as the Adverse Childhood Experiences study have established the traumatic origins of social issues from crime and substance abuse to intergenerational disadvantage. In this sense, 'trauma' does not only describe a problem but, increasingly, points in the direction of much-needed solutions.

Conclusion

The 'memory wars' of the 1990s were a 'trial by fire' for still-nascent attempts to develop evidence-based treatment of trauma and dissociative disorders. After a period of sustained media interest in child sexual abuse in the 1980s, 'false memory' advocates were successful in reframing evidence of widespread sexual abuse as evidence of false allegations. In this process, the vocabulary of liberal individualism and scientific rationality was deployed in highly ideological ways against adults disclosing sexual abuse in childhood, and those mental health professionals who provided them with care. The narrative of 'false memories' was based upon the public political impulses of the day, and provided journalists, academics and the public with a way of explaining the sudden increase in allegations of sexual abuse, particularly where those allegations challenged 'common sense' understandings. A key advantage that 'false memory' advocates enjoyed over their opponents was that research into child sexual abuse, and its traumatic effects, was in its infancy, whereas 'false memory' advocates were championing a tradition of 'scientific' disbelief in women's and children's allegations of sexual violence that dates back centuries. This tradition provided the 'false memory' story with an appealing resolution: a return to familiar skepticism and silencing of sexual abuse complaints.

Advocates for child abuse survivors and trauma-informed treatment are often warned not to 'go beyond the data' in asserting the credibility of abuse disclosures and therapeutic practice. While accurate information is a necessary part of the response to 'false memory' disinformation, it is not sufficient on its own. The 'false memory' story has persisted to the present day, albeit in a battered and somewhat revised form, because it has yet to be

confronted by a counter-narrative of equivalent emotional and explanatory power. In this chapter, I've argued that psychological and political discourses of trauma provide the 'raw material' for the construction of just such a narrative. In lay as well as professional understandings, trauma is being 'storified' in a manner that appeals directly to our first-person experiences of relational connection and betrayal, affirming our deepest needs for attachment and human recognition. This narrative suggests that many individual and social problems originate in the neglect and abuse of human vulnerability, which must be repaired and protected. These claims are grounded in strong moral and empirical foundations and they point to realistic solutions. Whereas the child abuse story has typically been one of despair, and the 'false memory' narrative has been one of cynicism, the story of 'trauma' is, increasingly, one of hope. Hopefulness emerges as a critically important principle for those seeking to inform the public not only about the problem of child abuse but also its solutions.

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