
Jane Doe's Memories: Changing the Past to Serve the Present

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David Corwin's tape of Jane Doe at 17 shows something remarkable: the very moment at which an emotional and memory-like experience bursts into Jane's consciousness. The experience is impressive, not only for Jane but for anyone who sees her go through it. Indeed, moments like this have convinced many psychotherapists (and many clients) of the genuineness of repression and recall. In this case, however, the available record includes much more: videotapes of three earlier interviews with Jane, conducted in connection with allegations of child abuse when she was 6 years old. The record as a whole points to a clear conclusion. Although Jane herself comes through as an honest and intelligent person with obviously genuine feelings, her two dramatically recovered memories are far from accurate. As we shall see, the first is entirely false and the second is substantially misleading.

The interview at age 17 finds Jane in an emotionally difficult situation. She is quite consciously looking for some sort of closure, some way to decide which of the competing versions of her unremembered childhood is true. Did her mother really hurt and abuse her, or not? That is why she is eager to see the tapes of her earlier interviews and readily agrees to the suggestion that she and Corwin watch them together. Jane's expectation that this would somehow stimulate her memory was probably heightened by Corwin's introductory remarks: He cautions her that the experience may be stressful, that she will need support to get through it and may want to see a therapist afterward. She accepts these warnings unquestioningly. Then, after some discussion of other matters, the interview takes a crucial turn. Corwin asks a direct question: "Do you remember anything about the concerns about possible sexual abuse?" (p. 105).

Jane's first response is preliminary: "No. I mean, I remember that was part of the accusation, but I don't remember anything—wait a minute, yeah, I do"

(p. 105). Then, with her own phrase "the accusation" seeming to act as a trigger, she has a "really, really weird" experience in which she recalls making *two* accusations. The first one is this: "I accused her of taking pictures of me and my brother and selling them" (p. 106). Although Jane obviously experiences this as a vivid memory, she is in fact mistaken. The videotapes are evidence that she made no such accusation in any of her interviews at age 6. Moreover, there is good reason to doubt that such an accusation was ever made: Had anyone even suggested it, the child abuse proceedings could hardly have let it go by.

It is interesting that Jane does not claim to remember actual photographic acts, only her own accusation. What that accusation means to her is not entirely clear. There seem to be two possibilities. On the one hand she may believe that the picture taking really happened (although she cannot now remember it), which would be a very serious charge against her mother. On the other hand, she may believe that she once accused her mother falsely, which would be a serious charge against herself. There is no compelling basis on which to choose between these interpretations, but I am inclined to credit the second rather than the first. Throughout much of the age-17 interview, Jane seems to be looking for ways to exonerate her mother of wrongdoing and even reproaches herself for making possibly false accusations; this may just be another example of that state of mind. Whichever interpretation is right, Jane has clearly "remembered"—and been very upset by—something that never took place.

How might such a confabulation have originated? At this point we cannot be sure. There are many plausible scenarios: Perhaps Jane just happened to see a TV or newspaper story on child pornography and somehow connected it to her own case. There is,

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however, one possibility that deserves special notice. Somebody did in fact "take pictures" of Jane as a child and is doing so again even as she speaks. For weeks, ever since Dr. Corwin called to schedule the interview, she has been thinking about herself as exhibited on his videotapes. She knows that he has shown the tapes to students in the course of clinical training; perhaps she even believes that in some sense he has been "selling" them. In such an agitated state of mind, the modest associative leap from one form of picture taking to another may have been fairly easy.

The second part of Jane's apparent memory experience is equally dramatic. At first it also appears as the recall of an accusation: "I accused her of—when she was bathing me or whatever, hurting me" (p. 106). Soon, however, it appears that she remembers not only the accusation but also an event that justifies it. "I only remember one instance, and she hurt me, she put her fingers too far where she shouldn't have, and she hurt me. But I don't know if it was intentional, or if it was just accidental" (p. 106). The memory itself is vivid and compelling: "It's like I took a picture, like a few seconds long, a picture of the pain, and what was inflicting the pain" (p. 106). But how accurate is this picture in fact?

The earlier videotapes show that Jane's mother did indeed molest Jane while bathing her, putting her fingers into Jane's vagina and asking, "That feel good?" She did this not once but many times, and Jane described it to Corwin in more than one interview. Jane clearly did not like it and asked her mother to stop. In the one tape from age 6 that I have actually seen, Jane gives this account in a somewhat embarrassed way and never specifically says that the intrusions "hurt" or were painful. She did, however, use that term in one of the other age-6 interviews. In response to Corwin's question, "What did you feel?" she said "It hurt! She puts powder on it and it hurts even more—it stings" (p. 94).

These passages suggest that what Jane remembers at 17 differs substantially from what actually took place during her childhood baths. The "picture" now

in her mind is of a single, deep vaginal intrusion, several seconds in duration and extremely painful. Her own reports at age 6 were of a repeated and unpleasant practice in which the pain of the vaginal intrusion itself was not always worth mentioning and was in any case less than the pain of subsequently putting powder on the irritated surface. The single dramatic event that appears so suddenly in Jane's memory at age 17 really represents—and misrepresents—a long series of unpleasant but relatively pedestrian childhood experiences.

Such distortions of memory are not unusual. A single, apparently clear recollection is often all that remains of a redundant series of related and individually unremembered events. Some years ago I coined the term *repisodic memory* for recollections of this kind: they represent a repetitive series of *episodes* (Neisser, 1981). It is important to realize that repisodic memories are not simply "averaged" across the series of original events themselves. One or more features of that series may be exaggerated or highlighted while others are suppressed, often in ways that serve the contemporary goals of the rememberer. Just this seems to have happened in Jane Doe's case.

What were those goals? Throughout much of the age-17 interview, Jane is evidently trying to think well of her mother, or at least as well as possible. Early on, for example, she repeats her mother's denial of any wrongdoing three times: "I never hurt you, I never hurt you, I never hurt you," and then says, "I don't want to deny her a part of my life" (p. 105). Immediately after describing the recalled memory of the vaginal intrusion, she goes on to say, "But I don't know if it was intentional, or if it was just accidental" (p. 106). Later in the interview she tries to downplay the importance of yet another accusation, one that she is aware of having made but cannot now confirm: "I do know that I made an accusation against my mom, that she threatened me not to tell my dad what I did to—what she did to me, but I don't remember that actually happening" (p. 107).

The same theme recurs near the end of the interview, after Jane has watched her age-6 videotapes. She

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now sees that her mother cannot be entirely blameless but is still looking for ways to excuse her mother and even to take some of the blame herself. "And I have to believe that to some extent my mom did hurt me. If it's that she doesn't remember that she hurt me, or that she just didn't see what she did as hurting me, on top of that I made it worse, as I told the story, as I made it seem worse and she said no I never did that, or that she did it and she never remembered" (p. 108).

On my reading of the record, both of Jane's memory distortions fit this theme. The first thing that comes into her mind when Corwin mentions "concerns about possible sexual abuse" is that *she herself* made an unjustified accusation—namely, accusing her mother of taking pictures and selling them. This entirely false memory, apparently constructed from other thoughts that happened to be available at the moment, may have helped to establish her mother's identity as victim rather than as perpetrator—the victim of an unjustified accusation.

The other part of Jane's powerful memory experience, the apparent recall of a single painful vaginal intrusion, also supports this interpretation. Instead of the actual series of many unpleasant intrusions continued over her own explicit protests, she now remembers a single act that may have been "accidental." But this creates a problem: How could one perhaps unintentional act have resulted in the serious allegations of child abuse that she knows were made? It must at least have been a very substantial act—for example, one that caused a great deal of pain. Here, then, is a possible explanation of the distortions in Jane's second memory. All those irritating and unpleasant bathtub episodes, clear examples of abusive behavior on her mother's part, have been transformed into a single episodic memory: one that is painful enough to deserve serious attention but unique enough to have perhaps been an accident. Maybe, then, her mother was not to blame after all.

In the context of the debate over recovered and false memories, Jane Doe's case is rather unusual. Most of the instances that have come to public attention are based on memories that accuse someone of something, often of sexual abuses committed long ago. Often, the therapist or counselor also has been expecting to find memories of just this kind, so that suggestion may have been a factor. The situation here is very different. Jane's sudden rush of memory, like many other things she says during the interview, seems intended to exonerate rather than to accuse. Her first and entirely false recollection—that she accused her mother of taking illicit pictures—may have functioned to shift part of the overall blame from her mother to herself. Her second and partially distorted

recollection of a single deep and prolonged pain rather than a repetitive series of unpleasant acts may also have served to get her mother off the hook: Perhaps it was all just a painful accident! We should also note that neither of these distortions was suggested in any way by Dr. Corwin—the initiative is entirely Jane's.

Some of what I have said here about Jane's motives is admittedly speculative. But on any interpretation whatever, these tapes support at least the following conclusions:

- It is indeed possible to experience what seem to be rushes of memory: sudden, unexpected, apparently unbidden images and recollections.
- Such *discovered memories* (to use a term introduced by Schooler, 1997 [this issue]) do indeed occur in clinical and quasiclinical settings, although presumably they may appear elsewhere as well.
- Memories of this kind may be entirely false, partly false, or somewhat distorted. Presumably, they may also be accurate, although that possibility is not illustrated here.
- What comes to mind in these rushes of memory typically serves the rememberer's own goals and motives, but just how it does so on any particular occasion may be difficult to determine.
- The content of these memories need not be suggested by a therapist (although presumably this may sometimes happen); often the rememberer is pursuing purposes that are entirely her own.
- There is no easy way to generalize from one case to another. The fact that Jane Doe's discovered memories were so far off the mark does not prove that all or even most such recollections are equally distorted; some of them certainly are, others may not be. It is never a good idea to jump to conclusions where memory is concerned.

Finally, this entire analysis was made possible only by the remarkable Jane Doe videotapes and the transcripts prepared from them. All students of human memory, whatever their views, have reason to be grateful to David Corwin and Erna Olafson (1997 [this issue]) for making this valuable material available.

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