

False Memory Creation In Parental Alienation Cases

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One of the hardest elements of parental alienation is when allegations are made by both children and parents. Professionals have a duty of care to investigate and gather evidence. But how reliable are the memories being recalled?

It has long been accepted that false memories exist and there are countless studies which confirm how easy it is to "implant" a memory (which we will look into later) but for a practitioner involved in a parental alienation case, it can be hard to identify real from false memories and therefore recall confabulation can result in prosecution for the "abuser", possibly jail and definitely the loss of the relationship with their child.

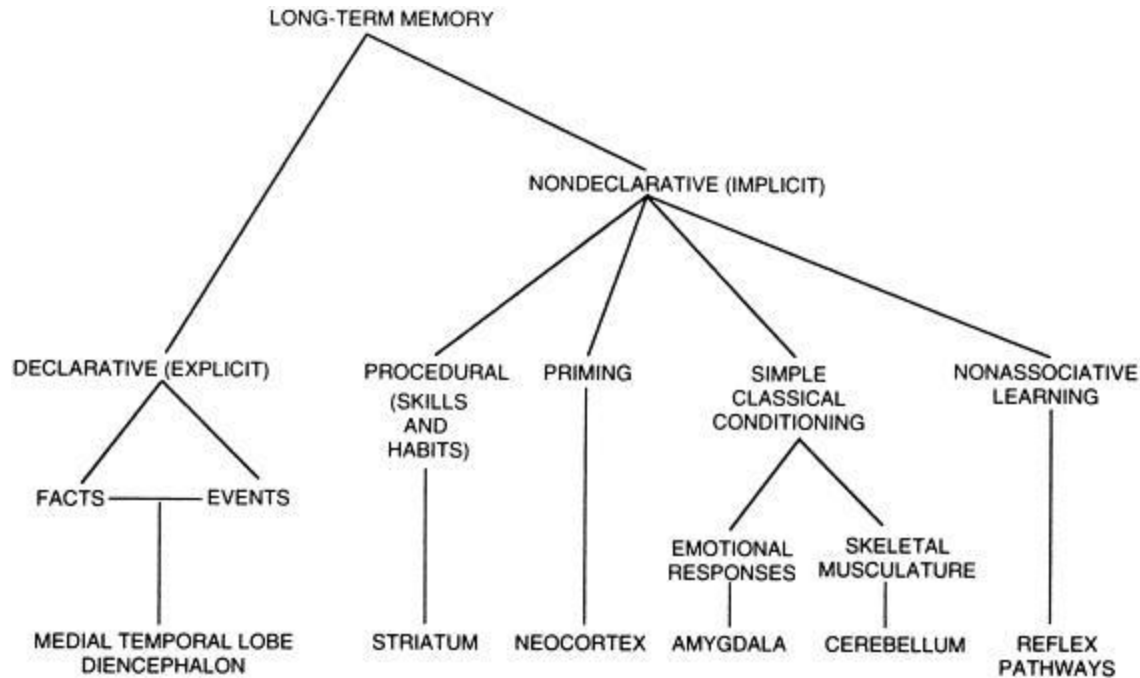
It is therefore important that we understand what memory is, how it is stored and how false memories can occur.

What is memory?

Bartlett (1932) describes memory as "imaginative reconstruction" meaning that memories consist of numerous elements, pieced together and replayed in a format familiar to the teller.

The first two elements are:

- Declarative
- Nondeclarative



A taxonomy long-term memory. As illustrated, declarative memory can be further divided into memory for facts (semantic memory) and memory for events (episodic memory). From Squire and Zola-Morgan (1996)

Semantic memory refers to the facts involved in the memory which you just know and are not from personal experience. For example, the names for colours. Craik and Lockhart (1972) found that complex semantic processing produced better recall than simple semantic processing. Meaning it's the details which help with the recall.

Episodic memory refers to the unique experience linked to the time and place in our lives. Rogers et al (1977) found that episodic memory was more reliable than semantic in recall situations. Meaning we remember things better which have a personal and emotional connection to us. A study by Hayne and Imuta (2011) found that by the age of 3, children exhibit rudimentary episodic memory skills, and that strict reliance on verbal recall may underestimate their episodic memory ability.

Interestingly, more recent findings have suggested that it is the ability to retain, as opposed to form, episodic memories that may be the source of the advantage inferred through age in older

children, with 3-year-old children demonstrating good retention of episodic recollection across short but not long delays (Scarf et al., 2013).

Nondeclarative memory, also known as procedural memory, is the repository of information about basic skills, motor (muscular) movement, verbal qualities, visual images, and emotions. It is our unconscious memory based on what we have been taught and experienced in the world around us.

Conditioning plays an important role in procedural memory and two main conditioning elements have been identified: classic and operant.

- Classic conditioning theory was developed by Pavlov following experiments with dogs. He found that you could associate a behaviour to a previously non-associated action through classic conditioning. He rang a bell and the dogs did not respond. He showed them food, they salivated (required response). He then gave the food and rang the bell at the same time, dogs salivated (required response). Finally he rang the bell on it's own and the dogs salivated (required response). The dogs had been conditioned to associate the bell and food.
- Operant conditioning was developed by Skinner (1948) and Thorndike (1905). They both found that animals would repeat the same action if the outcome was pleasant (positive reinforcement) and would stop an action if the outcome was negative (negative reinforcement). The animals learnt this through trial and error. This became known as the "law of effect"

Both are behavioural theories but these responses becomes procedural and so form part of our long term memory.

In order for memory to be developed, we also need the cognitive abilities to piece it all together. Jean Piaget (1932) developed 4 cognitive stages of childhood development:

1. Sensorimotor Stage: Birth through about 2 years. During this stage, children learn about the world through their senses and the manipulation of objects.

2. Preoperational Stage: Ages 2 through 7. During this stage, children develop memory and imagination. They are also able to understand things symbolically, and to understand the ideas of past and future.
3. Concrete Operational Stage: Ages 7 through 11. During this stage, children become more aware of external events, as well as feelings other than their own. They become less egocentric, and begin to understand that not everyone shares their thoughts, beliefs, or feelings.
4. Formal Operational Stage: Ages 11 and older. During this stage, children are able to use logic to solve problems, view the world around them, and plan for the future.

"Six-month-olds have a memory span of no more than about 24 hours, which gradually expands to up to a month by 9 months. In the new study, 13-month-old babies could not remember events they had witnessed and mimicked four months earlier -- a task that came easily to their elders, ages 21 months and 28 months."

(<https://www.upi.com/Older-children-remember-longer/47801036004400/>)

Using this and the previous studies mentioned, we can see how memory develops in children and the ages at which specific types of memory develop alongside their cognitive and language abilities.

How memory is stored

Information comes flooding into the brain and is processed through our senses (visual, audio, kinaesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory). Information selected from this process is then stored in our short term memory, where it stays for approximately 15 and 30 seconds (Peterson and Peterson 1959). However this can be lengthened through rehearsal. Long term memories can be stored for a lifetime and are encoded as a semantic memory.

The main parts of the brain involved in memory are the medial temporal lobe (specifically the hippocampus) and portions of the parietal and pre-frontal cortices (AR Preston and Eichenbaum 2013). Studies of human brain development have shown that the hippocampus and surrounding

cortices are formed relatively early in gestation (Seress & Abraham, 2008) meaning young children have the capacity to form memories. However natural maturation means their functions grow and refine as the child ages.

Children develop memory very early on in life.

"Late in the first year of life, the medial temporal lobe structures are functionally mature, and there are increases in the density of synapses in the prefrontal cortex. This corresponds to the improved recall abilities of infants near the end of the first year of life. Further improvements in the reliability of recall occur throughout the second year of life, corresponding to the continued increases in synapse formation in both the prefrontal cortex and dentate gyrus."

(<http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/brain/according-experts/memory-and-early-brain-development>)

How false memories can be created

Freud (1923) first identified that likelihood of false memory, naming it confabulation and reconstruction.

Confabulation is the unintentional manufacturing of information to fill in the missing details during recall. It's usual purpose is to make the story more coherent and can occur under conditions of high motivation or emotion.

In 1997 Coan found that "our recollection of memories can be manipulated and even entire sets of events can be confabulated".

Reconstruction involves the distortion of the original memory through a series of filters including our past experiences, beliefs, schemas and stereotypes.

Elizabeth Loftus and Cara Laney (2013) found that the verbage used to frame a question when trying to illicit a memory recall can impact false memory recollection. For example, asking "did you see THE dog?" was more likely to get a false memory recollection than asking "did you see A dog?"

Nicholas Spanos (1996) found that 50% of participants were led to construct complex, vivid and detailed false memories using a process called "guided mnemonic restructuring" which involves active encouragement.

Loftus and Laney also found that imagination inflation can occur as the more a subject visualises/images the event, the more "real" it becomes.

In the same paper three key elements which impact the forming of false memory were identified as:

- social pressure
- encouragement
- individual encouraged not to consider if the memory is true or not

Implications for parental alienation

In studies adults have been shown to be very susceptible to suggestion and manipulation to create false memories if they are encouraged to by someone they have an interpersonal relationship with meaning children, who are much more susceptible to their parent's influence, could easily "create" memories which they retain through rehearsal.

Attachment System Suppression and Phobic Anxiety Toward a Parent

The child's symptoms evidence a selective and targeted suppression of the normal-range functioning of the child's attachment bonding motivations toward one parent, the targeted-rejected parent, in which the child seeks to entirely terminate a relationship with

this parent (i.e., a child-initiated cutoff in the child's relationship with a normal-range and affectionally available parent). (Childress 2015)

A child who previously had a positive and secure attachment to the alienated parent, suddenly hates them and vilifies them for everything they do and have done.

They have no good memories of the alienated parent. The age of the child is important as is how long the child has been separated from the parent. However, we know that children are capable of storing and recalling memories from a very young age and so for there to be a complete absence of any good memories, may suggest manipulation or conditioning. For example a child could say they love the alienated parent and get shouted at (negative reinforcement) so they stop saying it and instead say "I hate them" and get rewarded (positive reinforcement). Following the law of effect, the child would make more negative statements towards the alienated parent in order to receive more rewards. There is also the added dimension here of the attachment style of the parent. If they were previously rejecting-neglecting the child, there is even more motivation for the child to say negative things as they will get their primary needs met as well.

Fixed False Belief

The child's symptoms display an intransigently held, fixed and false belief regarding the fundamental parental inadequacy of the targeted-rejected parent in which the child characterizes a relationship with the targeted rejected parent as being somehow emotionally or psychologically "abusive" of the child. While the child may not explicitly use the term "abusive," the implication of emotional or psychological abuse is contained within the child's belief system and is not warranted based on the assessed parenting practices of the targeted-rejected parent (which are assessed to be broadly normal range) (Childress 2015).

In some instances there may be a genuine reason the child feels angry towards the alienated parent. But the reaction is still disproportionate to the incident which has made them angry. As an ex child protection social worker I have witnessed contact between abusive parents and their

children and in almost all cases, the child will interact with the parent and the relationship will return to its previous state. Obviously here the age of the child is important though. An adolescent child may demonstrate more anger due to their increased understanding and their own interrupted emotional state as they go through puberty. A younger child however, whose memory is still developing, would struggle to recall memories from over two months ago. Therefore it is important for practitioners to remember that a child will have both good and bad memories of the alienated parent. Bad events do not delete good ones. If a child is unable (or unwilling) to recall positive memories, this could indicate manipulation or conditioning. It may also be possible that false memories have been implanted and cemented through rehearsal, ensuring that the child thoroughly believes their accusations.

Splitting

The child evidences polarized extremes of attitude toward the parents, in which the supposedly “favored” parent is idealized as the all-good and nurturing parent while the rejected parent is entirely devalued as the all-bad and entirely inadequate parent. (Childress 2015)

The child has a very "black and white" view of their parents. One is all good, the other all bad. No positive qualities can be recalled for the alienated parent and no negative ones for the alienator.

Memory is very rarely erased (except in amnesia cases) and instead fade over time. So for a child to be unable (or unwilling) to recall any positive qualities in their parent, suggests that conditioning has taken place. For example, the alienating parent could classically condition the child into believing the alienated parent is all bad by associating all bad memories with that parent. "We can't go on holiday this year because of your mother/father". If this process is repeated often enough, the child will be conditioned to believe the alienated parent is all bad. Diversely, the alienating parent will be telling the child that they are the only one who loves them and understands them, conditioning the child to see them as all good.

Role-Reversal Dynamic

In alienation, a child's psychological boundaries may be compromised, and differentiation from that parent may not occur. Instead, the child becomes infused with the mindset of the pathogenic parent and alienated from the normal-range parent through covert psychological manipulation on the part of the pathogenic parent. (Childress 2015)

The child will adamantly deny that anyone has influenced their decision.

Again, age will be an important factor here. Does the child have the cognitive ability (as outlined above) to make these statements? Do they understand the consequences? It is therefore important the practitioner explores the child's understanding of what the statements mean and uses memory recall exercises to confirm this. For example, a child who states that they have decided they never want to see their parent again could be asked "what about at Christmas? Do you not want a present from them?" and explore "what did you get from them last year?". Future and past tense exercises can help bypass the possibility of false memories because it is unlikely (and impossible) for someone to have rewritten their entire history or talked about the future with the child.

Absence of Empathy

The child displays a complete absence of empathy for the emotional pain being inflicted on the targeted-rejected parent by the child's hostility and rejection of this parent. (Childress 2015)

The child will feel justified in their actions and cold towards the alienated parent.

According to Erikson's Psychosocial (1950, 1963) stage theory, around age three and continuing to age five, children assert themselves more frequently. They will play independently, make up games and initiate activities with others. This is the Initiative v's Guilt stage. Therefore it is important when a child is expressing that they are using their own initiative, that

this behaviour is observed in other settings as well. Does the demonstrate the ability to think independently about other subjects? Any inconsistency may suggest manipulation.

Grandiosity

The child displays a grandiose perception of occupying an inappropriately elevated status in the family hierarchy that is above the targeted-rejected parent from which the child feels empowered to sit in judgment of the targeted-rejected parent as both a parent and as a person. (Childress 2015)

The child will always side with the alienating parent. The child does not want to hear the alienated parent's point of view.

This demonstrates elements of concrete thinking. i.e. seeing something as fixed and certain. It is evident in very young children but as children age they begin to develop logical and eventually abstract thinking as well (see Piaget's development stages above). The absence of logical thinking, which would be developmentally appropriate for their age, suggests either developmental delay or manipulation.

Transgenerational Trauma and the Trauma Reenactment

This is the process by which differentiation between family members across generations affects individuals and their personal differentiation process. The transmission occurs on several levels involving both conscious teaching and unconscious programming of emotional responses and behaviors. Due to the intricacies of the relationship dynamics, some children develop more of a differentiated “self” than others. (Childress 2015)

The child may make accusations against the alienated parent which phrases and scenarios which are inappropriate for their age. For example, a child might say "I hate mum/dad because they made up homeless" but when you ask them what homeless means they have no understanding of it.

Whilst not all allegations are false, those which use language which isn't congruent with the child's natural speech, would suggest that false memories have been implanted. As outlined in the above section on "how false memories are implanted", this is relatively easy to do and children will be highly sensitive to this kind of manipulation from a caregiver. Especially if it is coupled with condition behaviours.

Avoidance of Parent

The child seeks to avoid exposure to the targeted parent due to the situationally provoked anxiety or else endures the presence of the targeted parent with great distress. (Childress 2015)

Anyone associated with the alienated parent will be rejected by the child for little or no reason.

Using Erikson's psychosocial development model again, the crisis of trust vs mistrust occurs during the first year or so of life. During this stage, the infant is uncertain about the world in which they live. To resolve these feelings of uncertainty, the infant looks towards their caregivers for stability and consistency of care. This forms the attachment.

Initially Bowlby (1969) believed that a child formed one primary attachment which superseded all others. However later research has shown that children form multiple quality attachments to a range of caregivers, including grandparents, aunts and uncles (Furnivall 2011). Therefore it is important when a child is rejecting whole families or those associated with alienated parent, that a practitioner explores early attachment and experiences with the wider family through taking family history. The child is unlikely to have forgotten those experiences and, unless severe abuse has taken place, it is unlikely the memories have been repressed. Therefore the child may have been conditioned and manipulated into "forgetting".

Conclusion

Both memory and parental alienation are complex theories and we have to draw upon many additional theories in order to give a comprehensive picture of what is going on. However I hope that this paper has demonstrated the important role that memory and memory manipulation plays in parental alienation syndrome and provided some practical advice on what to look for.

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