

Brown professor continues debate over recovered memory

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Fueling the debate over the controversial psychiatric disorder known as dissociative amnesia, or repressed memory, Brown University political scientist Ross Cheit is challenging claims by two Harvard University psychiatrists. At issue is how to prove whether the memories of trauma, such as childhood sexual abuse, can be repressed and then resurface later in life. Cheit's paper, co-authored by Rachel E. Goldsmith of Reed College and Mary E. Wood of University of Oregon, appears in the current issue of *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*.

Cheit is disputing a 2006 contest by Harvard University psychiatrists Harrison G. Pope and James Hudson, both well-known skeptics of repressed memory. They argued that if repressed memory were a genuine natural phenomenon that has always affected people, "then someone, somewhere, in the thousands of years prior to 1800, would have witnessed it and portrayed it in a nonfictional work or in a fictional character." They launched a contest, known as the "[Repression Challenge](#)," offering a \$1,000 prize to anyone who could identify a pre-1800 literary example of traumatic memory that has been repressed by an otherwise healthy individual, and then recovered.

In 2007, Pope and Hudson published their results in the journal *Psychological Medicine*, claiming that after reviewing more than 100 responses, none of them met the contest criteria, leading Pope and Hudson to conclude that "dissociative amnesia is not a natural neuropsychological phenomenon, but instead a culture-bound syndrome, dating from the nineteenth century." Their findings drew national media

attention.

Cheit said he repeatedly contacted Pope and the journal editors shortly after the article was published, requesting the data from Pope and raising questions about the contest methodology. Several months later, Pope and his team acknowledged on their Web site that the submitted example of *Nina*, a 1786 opera by the French composer Nicolas Dalayrac, fulfilled the contest criteria and that the \$1,000 prize had been awarded. However, Cheit said, they never published a correction, addendum, or retraction of their original article and its conclusions.

"The entire situation is remarkable to me. It's clearly a 'heads I win, tails you lose' situation," Cheit said. "Pope takes an extreme position in saying there's no such thing as recovered memory and I'm stunned that a scientist would be such an extremist. I'm also stunned that a scientist would be so willing to ignore evidence that contradicts him."

In the current *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* article, Cheit calls Pope's entire contest "a sham," accusing Pope's team of failing to provide a thorough account of all submissions and the process by which they were rejected, offering highly questionable literary analysis, and including several misrepresentations of the state of the science regarding memory for trauma. Cheit and his team offer additional literary examples and summarize some data that Pope and his team did not consider.

They conclude, "Literature can provide important information about human experience, but it cannot prove or disprove traumatic amnesia any more than it can prove or disprove the existence of bacteria or dragons. Literary passages and modern scientific data do reveal descriptions and data, respectively, that depict dissociative amnesia as a naturally occurring traumatic sequela."

Source: Brown University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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