



Traduction PsyFrance

Le point de vue du sociologue sur les faux souvenirs

Why do women identify themselves as victims of childhood sexual abuse?

Pourquoi les femmes s'identifient-elles comme des victimes d'abus sexuels dans l'enfance?

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2010/mar/10/women-victims-childhood-sexual-abuse>

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La sociologue **Jo Woodiwiss** soutient qu'une culture omniprésente d'auto-assistance a amené les femmes à se tourner vers leur passé pour trouver les causes de leurs troubles, et parfois en déduire qu'elles ont été victimes d'abus sexuels simplement en consultant une liste de symptômes.

Sociologist **Jo Woodiwiss** argues that a pervasive self-help culture has led women to look to the past for the causes of their troubles, sometimes inferring childhood sexual abuse from no more than a checklist of symptoms.



Les auteurs du livre *The Courage to Heal*, destiné aux victimes d'abus sexuels dans l'enfance, redéfinissent la «mémoire» pour y inclure des symptômes comme la tristesse ou l'anxiété. Photo: Getty

The authors of *The Courage to Heal*, aimed at victims of childhood sexual abuse, redefine 'memory' to include symptoms such as sadness or anxiety. Photograph: Getty

The fierce debate over "recovered memories" of childhood sexual abuse was rekindled last week when an open letter from the scientific advisory board of the British False Memory Society was sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury requesting

that the Church of England withdraw support for *The Courage to Heal*, a self-help book aimed at victims of such abuse.

Professor Chris French's follow-up article on the science of memory is interesting, but it would be potentially more productive to explore why and how women (it is largely women) turn to self-help or therapy in an attempt to explain and/or improve their lives, and ultimately come to identify themselves as victims of childhood sexual abuse (CSA).

Chris French and the British False Memory Society (BFMS) are right to be concerned about *The Courage to Heal* and similar texts that encourage readers to identify themselves as victims of CSA. However, these texts do not necessarily help "victims" to uncover memories of sexual abuse (false or otherwise), but rather they redefine memory to include a range of experiences that most of us would not consider to be memories at all.

These "alternative" or "recovered" memories can take the form of physical or bodily experiences, feelings such as sadness or anxiety, and a whole range of other events or difficulties experienced in adulthood. They are often displayed in self-help literature as checklists of symptoms that the reader is encouraged to identify in their own lives, and include the following taken from *The Courage to Heal*:

Do you have trouble feeling motivated?

Can you accomplish things you set out to achieve?

Do you feel you have to be perfect?

Do you often feel taken advantage of?

Do you find your relationships just don't work out?

Can you say no?

Do you often have sex because you want to, or only because your partner wants it?

Are you satisfied with your family relationships?

Have you ever been rejected by your family?

Such "alternative" memories can be neither proved nor disproved, but rely instead on a leap of faith. We therefore need to move the debate beyond the truth or falsity of memories if we are to understand why readers choose to engage with these ideas about CSA.

The writers of *The Courage to Heal*, Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, have removed from more recent versions the controversial statement: "If you are unable to remember any specific instances ... but still have a feeling that something abusive happened to you, it probably did." But this does little to alter the book's underlying message.

Like the writers of many self-help texts aimed at adult victims of CSA, Bass and Davis construct victims as not only "damaged", but damaged for life, unless they are able to undo the effects of their abuse through healing.

This is combined with a failure by the authors to recognise the social, economic and material conditions that impinge on women's lives and restrict their opportunities, and fails to acknowledge that many of the symptoms listed in texts like *The Courage to Heal* are not the result of CSA – whether or not the reader was sexually abused.

My own research while at the University of York involved women who identified themselves as having been victims of CSA, based on "continuous", "recovered" or "false" memories. The research demonstrated that the women base their conclusion not on what most of us consider to be memories (ie "concrete" or "recall" memories),

but on a correlation of symptoms (redefined as "buried" or "alternative" memories) that they perceive to indicate sexual abuse in childhood.

In other words, they identify themselves as victims of sexual abuse not because they uncover a buried memory from childhood but because they believe their adult lives show evidence of such abuse.

The study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, found that the majority of these women had entered adulthood with no knowledge or concrete memories of CSA, but at some point identified themselves as victims of CSA. Not all had seen a therapist, but the majority had read *The Courage to Heal* and based their identification on the kinds of "recovered" or "alternative" memories promoted in this text. Among the symptoms on which they based their identifications were a lack of sexual desire, being overweight, and/or stressful family lives – surely experiences with which many (abused and non-abused) women can identify?

These victim identities are formed in the context of a pervasive therapeutic/self-help culture that places greater and greater emphasis on looking inward (and increasingly to the past) for the possible cause, and solution, for any troubles.

The implication is that those who are unhappy or dissatisfied with at least some aspect of their lives can find solace and the promise of a better, brighter future, if only they can be cured of the effects of their unremembered abuse.

Much of the debate around "recovered" versus "false" memories of CSA centres on the nature and aetiology of recovered memories: are they planted in the minds of weak and vulnerable victims, or are they actually the result of sexual abuse in childhood? Within this debate, the role of the women themselves is often missing, or they are constructed as victims of either malicious or misguided therapists, or the ongoing effects of CSA.

However, as this and other research has shown, women themselves play an active role in constructing life stories based on CSA. In doing so, they do not simply adopt "ready-made" scripts or victim identities, but engage with a body of literature that helps them to make sense of their lives and plan for the future. That they ultimately construct themselves as victims of CSA tells us more about society, and the lack of alternative, social explanations for unhappiness, than it does about CSA, or indeed the science of memory.

Women, whether or not they have been victims of CSA, would be better served if we questioned the basis on which alternative memories are based, and challenged the idea promoted by the writers of *The Courage to Heal* that victims are "programmed to self destruct".

In doing so, we must not dismiss the wrongfulness of CSA, but equally we should not equate unhappiness in adulthood with assumed sexual abuse in childhood.

Cependant, comme d'autres recherches et celle-ci l'ont montré, les femmes jouent elles-mêmes un rôle actif dans la construction des récits de vie basés sur les abus sexuels infantiles (CSA). En agissant ainsi, elles ne se contentent pas d'adopter des scripts « tout fait » ou des identités de victimes, mais elles s'engagent avec un corpus de littérature qui leur permet de donner un sens à leur vie et planifier l'avenir. Le fait finalement qu'elles se construisent comme victimes de CSA, nous en dit plus sur la société, et sur l'absence d'alternatives, et d'explications sociales sur l'absence

de bonheur des personnes, qu'il ne nous en dit à propos des abus sexuels, voire de la science de la mémoire.

Les femmes, victimes, ou pas, d'abus sexuels seraient mieux servies si nous les avions interrogées pour savoir sur quelle base sont fondés les souvenirs alternatifs, et si nous avons contesté l'idée promue par les auteurs de *The Courage to Heal*, que les victimes sont "programmées pour s'autodétruire».

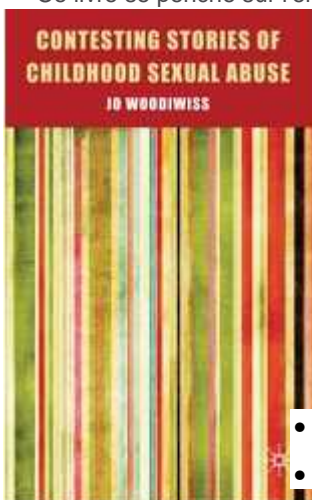
Ce faisant, nous ne devons pas écarter le caractère illégitime des abus sexuels, mais il ne faut pas assimiler le fait de ne pas être heureux à l'âge adulte avec l'abus sexuel supposé dans l'enfance.

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Dr Jo Woodiwiss est maître de conférences en sociologie à l'Université de Huddersfield, et auteure de l'ouvrage « Contestation des histoires d'abus sexuels durant l'enfance », qui est basé sur la recherche décrite dans cet article

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Ce livre se penche sur l'engagement des femmes avec des interprétations contemporaines d'abus sexuels dans l'enfance. Il explore le rôle des femmes dans la construction de leurs propres récits d'abus sexuels en fonction de ce qu'elles définissent comme des souvenirs continus, retrouvés, ou faux. S'appuyant sur les débats autour **des guerres de la mémoire retrouvée et de la littérature sociologique et féministe, le livre examine la place de son enfance dans la vie adulte. Ce faisant, il offre un aperçu unique de la relation des femmes avec une culture de plus en plus thérapeutique / d'auto-assistance. Basé sur de nouvelles données empiriques générées à partir des entrevues en profondeur avec des femmes adultes, ce livre explore les notions d'identité, biographie, et bien-être. Il sera d'intérêt pour les étudiants et les universitaires en sociologie, en psychologie, les travailleurs sociaux et les « Gender Studies » les études du genre, ainsi que ceux qui travaillent dans le domaine des abus sexuels.



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