Imagine 20 years ago that you bandaged up a deep wound, and now you peel back the bandages to find that only part of the wound had healed and that, in fact, a raging infection persists. That is analogous to the situation that Mark Pendergrast describes in *Memory Warp*.

In the early 1990s one of psychology’s most important debates arose between some psychologists who argued that the recovery of repressed memories was valid, and skeptical researchers who thought they were confabulations. The theory of repressed memory, first proposed by Sigmund Freud in 1895, states that traumatic events are often so threatening to the psyche that the mind encapsulates them, rendering them inaccessible for years, only to be recalled later in a safer environment (for example, a therapist’s office).

Many experimental memory researchers, such as David Holmes and Elizabeth Loftus, argued that there is no credible scientific evidence for repressed memory. A growing band of psychology researchers became suspicious that some practitioners were actually creating false abuse memories in clients.

It was a bitter and personal argument at times, but thankfully all seemed to calm down to a degree around the turn of the century—the ameliorative bandages seemed to be working. An American Psychology Association committee came to an uneasy compromise on the issue. Related high profile court cases seemed to decrease in number—those where psychotherapy clients would sue parents, clients would retract their memories and sue therapists, or parents of clients would sue therapists. Multimillion-dollar verdicts against psychotherapists made most counselors far more cautious about seeking to unearth purportedly repressed abuse memories.

Many in the beleaguered profession heaved a sigh of relief when the story faded away—and coverage in newspapers and television documentaries dwindled. However, a 2014 *Psychological Science* article ([http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797613510718](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797613510718)) found that many practicing psychologists, even mainstream ones, tended to believe in repressed memories more than do researchers, and that the vast majority of the public still believes in the theory. Perhaps psychology’s largest wound has not in fact healed.

In *Memory Warp*, his unflinchingly bold new book, Mark Pendergrast warns that repressed memory recovery, and accompanying memory distortions, are still a major problem in contemporary society. The book is essential reading for all because it offers valuable protection from the most damaging of psychology’s modern practices. In *Memory Warp*, Pendergrast articulately and thoroughly explains the history and the dangers of therapies that uncover purportedly repressed memories of trauma. He meticulously describes past and current research and explains how beliefs in repressed memories still predominate in today’s society. For example, he provides evidence refuting the claims of *The Keepers* ([https://www.netflix.com/title/80122179](https://www.netflix.com/title/80122179)), a documentary released on Netflix in 2017 involving the case of a murdered Catholic nun and a priest accused of sexual abuse, which he argues has fallaciously re-enforced a belief in repressed memories in households across the nation.
The book consists of nine chapters. In Chapters 1–3, the reader is given an overview of how an increasing realization of the horror of real incest led to the practice of repressed memory therapy and how individuals became victims of false memories of childhood sexual abuse. His second chapter is a virtual master class in how human memory actually works, while the third explores hypnosis, panic attacks, dream interpretation, and other methods for creating a belief in recovered abuse memories. Chapter 4 goes into detail about how the multiple personality diagnosis and belief in satanic cults were politicized by therapists, and how the power of suggestion makes an individual more prone to developing false memories. The fifth chapter recaps the related day care sex abuse hysteria cases. In Chapter 6, Pendergrast explores the history of mistaken psychological beliefs, from the Great Witch Craze to Charcot, Freud, and the origins of the beliefs of multiple personality diagnosis and repressed memories. In Chapters 7–8, he provides the reader with cultural contexts and “religious” cult-like views that have allowed for the rise and continued belief in repressed memories. In Chapter 9, Pendergrast gives his final summary, providing good evidence that the belief in repressed memories is still prevalent in society, and that the practice of repressed memory therapy continues. He provides recommended legal and organizational changes that could possibly fix the issue. He ends by giving advice to torn families and therapists.

Pendergrast, an independent scholar and science writer, explains how the pseudoscientific fad of repressed memory recovery has impacted millions of families throughout the world. By his account, the rise in recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse stemmed largely from the publication of pseudoscientific books, most notably The Courage to Heal (https://www.amazon.com/dp/0061284335/?tag=skepticcom20-20), by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis (first published in 1988, with the most recent edition in 2008). These authors, he argues, created a whole new generation of followers who believed that children who were sexually abused often repressed their memories. Pendergrast presents a convincing argument that these authors, and others writing similar material, inspired widespread echoing of such ideas in television shows, research articles, books, and national and international organizations. He makes an elegant argument that repressed memories of abuse are impossible and implausible.

Pendergrast presents remarkable insights that we have not read elsewhere. As just one of many examples, he discusses how late-19th century Austrian culture molded Freud’s work. Pendergrast relates how, in part, the problematic sexual attitudes and behaviors towards children of that culture led to Freud’s theories. Pendergrast argues this era gave rise to the theory of repressed memory of underage sexual activity or conflict, and to subsequent malpractice that has shaped some modern therapeutic theories and practices.

Child sexual abuse is a real and disturbing problem in society that is well worth more research, discussion, and corrective measures. Nevertheless, it is also an important matter to discuss false memories and accusations that can arise from flawed therapeutic and interviewing methods. Pendergrast provides an unbelievable transcript of such a case where a social worker used persistent suggestion towards a child that they were sexually abused (p. 221).

Pendergrast argues that some clinicians have brought about heartbreaking devastation by using suggestive therapy techniques, politicizing their agendas, and popularizing a new terminology, such as the push for multiple personality disorder (now known as dissociative identity disorder) to be included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980. He posits that this is one way that clinicians and researchers who support the theory of repressed memory continue to push their
flawed beliefs. Their argument is that childhood sexual abuse can give rise to different personalities within one individual as some sort of coping mechanism. Pendergrast maintains that these therapists actually lead their patient into such a belief through suggestive techniques such as hypnosis.

Religion has also had some influence on the misguided belief of repressed memories. During the 1970s some Christian psychologists brought their religious beliefs about the threat of satanic influence into their psychological practices. In one example, Pendergrast describes how a woman began to see a Christian psychologist for therapy and consequently developed what appears to be false memory of abuse by her father, then disowned her parents and became dependent on her therapist. She then began to recall being a victim of a purported satanic cult. This example is not an isolated case: many books claimed that these satanic cults existed in the shadows of society for the sole purpose of degrading and sexually abusing children for ritualistic purposes. There is no evidence that such satanic cults exist or ever existed.

Overall, Pendergrast demonstrates how belief in the existence of repressed memories, and the corresponding practice, has come at a great cost. Many families have been destroyed by recovered therapy practices with millions of people coming to believe that they had repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse. The worst transgression, Pendergrast argues, is the destruction of families in pursuit of a biased agenda—rather than allowing sound empirical research to guide them.

This book is a must read for lay-persons, but especially for all those entering the field of psychology, law, or social work. Of particular benefit would be the next generation of therapists who have not been exposed to the story of repressed memory malpractice that arose in previous decades but continues today. The book provides a history lesson on the pseudoscience that has plagued the field of psychology, specifically in the belief that inaccessible unconscious and traumatic memories can be recalled as exact representations of the past. Pendergrast eloquently criticizes that position and uses years of extensive research on the topic to offer a comprehensive picture. When there is accumulating evidence refuting your position, one must be willing to accept the supported evidence, in the name of good science and the public good.

Finally, in 2017 Mark Pendergrast published a related book to Memory Warp. The Repressed Memory Epidemic: How It Happened and What We Need to Learn from It (https://www.amazon.com/dp/3319633740/?tag=skepticcom20-20) (Springer, 628 pages, $139) is an academic textbook version with chapter abstracts and discussion questions, and an appendix with Pendergrast’s verbatim interviews with therapists, “survivors,” the accused, and retractors conducted in the early 1990s. These interviews, along with full endnotes and bibliography, are also available for download (https://bit.ly/2DIvZf).

About the Authors

Mario E. Herrera is a doctoral student in cognitive psychology at the University of Southern Mississippi, were he focuses on false memory and memory for emotions. He earned his Bachelors of Arts degree in Psychology from California State University, Northridge.

Lawrence Patihis is a socio-cognitive tenure-track Assistant Professor at the University of Southern Mississippi. He received a doctorate from the University of California, Irvine, where he was advised by the memory researchers Elizabeth Loftus and Linda Levine.
