



11-1-1985

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#### Recommended Citation

Nelson, Dennis E. (1985) "Combating Child Sexual Abuse: A Cautionary Essay," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*. Vol. 11 : No. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol11/iss2/10>

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# COMBATING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: A CAUTIONARY ESSAY

DENNIS E. NELSON, Ph.D.

Though seemingly diverse, hula-hoops, sensitivity training, pet rocks, tonsillectomies, and bustles all partake of a common element: to some extent each has been associated with the human proclivity to engage in fadism. To be sure, we usually associate fads with the more superficial aspects of life such as clothing, hobbies, leisure activities, or ancillary possessions, but students of historical bent can find passing fancies, phenomena we may refer to as being "in" or "out," within any area of knowledge or professional field as well. The health care professions evidence no immunity to this most "human" state of affairs. The aforementioned tonsillectomy, so familiar in the late 1940's and early 50's, and the recent reassessment of the commonplace Caesarean section deliveries of the 1970's provide two examples found in medicine. A similar long list of examples could be found in the Behavioral Sciences.

More than a few careers, some famous and others less well known, have been founded upon a topic, a research question, or point of view which happened to be popular, or was just beginning to emerge in the social fabric at the time. In some cases, progress has been retarded or delayed due to the vested interests of those involved in professional career building, or maintaining acquired position and power. Science is often no quicker than the masses in yielding up old truth for new. The words of Allen Bergin, spoken years ago as an aside during an AMCAP presentation, rather dogmatic in its behavior stance, seem appropriate. He remarked, "It's comforting to have the truth, even though you have it for only ten years."

Some twenty years ago, while working for a large private contract research firm in California while pursuing doctoral studies, it became a way of life and livelihood to become somewhat addicted to the Federal Register and similar publications, closely scrutinizing that key to continued income for both company and individual—the sacred RFP (Request for Proposal) from various government agencies. That period may have been the classic era of one form of fadism, at least in the behavioral sciences. It was, of course, during the tenure of Lyndon Johnson when the Great Society was trying desperately to flower, fertilized by bureaucrats with no end of ideas as to how to spend other people's money, and more than a few researchers willing to see each new RFP as touching some critical area of needed research, perhaps likely to lead to saving knowledge, or at least keep the project staff employed.

Adoption of such a view of the world was rather easy to acquire in the context of an academic community where research was religion and proposal writing a part of the liturgy. Though rarely admitted, often one's actual research interests gradually gave way to replacement by an acquired enthusiasm for the topics and issues of interest to contracting agencies, but with enough rationalization to preserve one's self-respect. Great time and effort was spent lobbying key people connected with the funding process at various agencies. Learning the emphases or elements in a proposal likely to catch the eyes of those decision makers who handed out the blessings was of vital importance. What slant should it have? What kind of approach to research was favored? What kinds of outcomes were hoped for? What was the power structure of the agency? Who was really going to select the proposals to be funded? What was the nature

of proposals funded by these individuals in the past? Grantsmanship was not to be taken lightly, and in the author's view, frequently caused the quality of research to suffer as well as defined with criteria of questionable relevancy that research which would be undertaken and how it was to be conducted.

This slice of subjective history illustrates that rather strong, broad, social variables significantly effect even "science." The acquisition of knowledge, what problems will be given attention, which are ignored and the kind and amount of attention given are all subject to fluctuation. Thusly, the "fads" of Behavioral Science are made.

In the world of psychological services, life is no different. Reference is not made here to the historical shift in emphasis among various schools of thought or therapeutic approaches. The change in dominance through the decades from Psychoanalysis and dynamic explanations of behavior with recommended therapeutic interventions to somewhat different kinds of insight related and client-centered therapies, thence to the social learning and behavioral emphases of the 60's, followed by the cognitive and the later cognitive-behavioral alliance of the 70's to the biological revolution in the 80's is real and well-documented! These developments are not fads in and of themselves though they often reflect changes in social thought and the spirit of the times as much as they reflect clear advancement in knowledge. My focus is on a less macro-cosmic phenomenon, more easily observable, much like the RFP experiences mentioned above.

While perhaps more numerous in the area of social work than in the office of the clinical psychologist, fadism is there none the less. Weight reduction, Type A behavior, run away children, adoption, and learning disabilities have all had their place in the sun during the last couple of decades along with teenage suicide, childhood alcoholism, and a score of other topics. Most problem areas follow a process of being "discovered," subsequently showered with media attention, suitable

public awfulizing about the problem, a trunkful of solutions hastily offered, considerable funding graciously provided (often from private sector sources as well as public) and then after the parade has marched onto another area of concern, diminished public notice, little follow up funding and almost no evaluation of amelioration effectiveness. Like cocktail party small talk, a few topics are perennials, such as stress related difficulties and interventions. Very few seem to maintain their popularity for a considerable number of years running. It needs to be made clear that all work in the aforementioned list of problems is not being disparaged, nor is it being recommended that knowledge about these problems be suppressed or ignored.

Increasingly, however, it seems that the "discovery" of such issues or topics and the subsequent attention and approach to them is being too heavily influenced by factors unrelated to scientific inquiry or sincere human compassion. Millions of starving Ethiopians have taken world center stage since their "discovery" by the media. This rising trend toward "media event" therapy or what we might cynically call the "problem of the month club," has serious pitfalls and ramifications. Among these are the framing of the difficulty in sensationalistic terms, oversimplified proposed solutions to the current "problem," short term over-reactions followed by a business as usual attitude and a vulnerability of a problem so defined to being exploited for the gain of various interest groups. This possible outcome is seen as reality with regard to the black civil rights movement of the early 1960's by James Meredith, the famed civil rights activist, in a recent Ohio speech in which he asserted that that very thing had been done by white liberal politicians with the cause celebre of integration. They cared not, in Meredith's view, about civil rights at all, but rather about acquiring a segment of votes for their own political agenda. As important as it is to gain an understanding of what is causing this tendency to find and attend to social problems on an irrational basis and

explicating the pitfalls, this paper will confine itself to a moderately detailed analysis of the negative possible ramifications of one current example of the phenomenological class, child sexual abuse.

If there were a slick paper magazine equivalent to *Time* in the bailiwick of the helping professions, the Topic of the Year Cover (equivalent to *Time's* Man of the Year Cover) for 1984 would surely be Child Sexual Abuse. (*Psychology Today* doesn't fully fit the analogy since its coverage is somewhat broad in regard to human behavior and such bias as political ideology and "selling" potential for advertisers' influence that selection as well as style.) The current year (1985) promises a renewal of the appropriateness of our hypothetical cover. Hardly a month goes by without a TV documentary related to the subject. Newspaper coverage of litigation on the matter (the McMartin case being the most prominent) is recurrent. Articles on the topic in the "Lifestyle" and "Family Living" sections of Metropolitan dailies abound. Programs to instruct children in avoiding or coping with potential, current or past sexual mistreatment are proliferating. Juvenile law related agencies are being presented with startling increases in allegations to investigate. Schools in some areas are rushing to implement classes, counseling groups, and other instructional programs on the topic. Printed material addressing the issue even includes a Spiderman Comic Book which has been distributed in the Sunday supplement of at least one metropolitan daily. A large department store chain in one major urban area is sponsoring an entire week of related activities for children and parents.

How can there possibly be any ill effects of such developments? One is tempted to give the whole movement an encouraging shout of blanket approval. Another national tragedy, an insidious injustice destructive to society has been disclosed and vigorous action taken to ameliorate the conditions. Through such efforts it can be argued that thousands of youthful lives will be saved from long term trauma, physical danger or perhaps worse.

Although risk to life and limb is recognized by stepping into the path of this instant social juggernaut, a few cautions and possible negative results of what is essentially a media based therapeutic model that has not been given adequate attention needs to be addressed. Such cautions are not suggested as being all inclusive, nor provided in order of priority. Some admittedly reflect the author's bias about what is healthy and desirable in people's lives:

1. An atmosphere may be created wherein authorities, whether child day-care center, juvenile protective personnel or others, make quick assumptions about the truthfulness of accusations when a topic is prominent irrespective of evidence discovered later to the contrary. Even intelligent professional people move quickly to conclusions about the truthfulness of an alleged event or its meaning, because of the repugnant nature of it, or current emphasis.

2. A significant number of falsely accused individuals are traumatized and marked for life, while in actuality being innocent. In a recent case that is not unique, the expenses to one so falsely accused included jail exposure to physical abuse from other prisoners, disruption to college education, a strong decline in college grades, an acquired fear of social gatherings (due to worry about who might have heard about his ordeal, and what parts they had heard), police rudeness—including the shouting of the charge throughout the jail so as to inform the other inmates, thousands of dollars in legal fees, and the closing of a family business due to adverse publicity and subsequent decrease in business revenue.

3. With this current topic of focus, as with so many others, the common error may again be made that information and publicity solve the bulk of the problem. Associated with the notion of economic free enterprise is the myth that truth will come out victorious in a free marketplace of ideas. This is, to put it bluntly, false, unless certain assumptions are made about the people in a particular society and about the length of time needed for truth

to be vindicated. What kind of information is really helpful in combating sexual abuse? How much of that information should be given to a particular age group? These issues have not really been investigated. As in the case with Sex Education, the real issue is not whether or not a child needs to be "educated," but by whom, with what information, in what sequence, with what values and with what underlying view of reality. Should the data or "facts" be interpreted intellectually or emotionally? Rare is the case where a sheer glut of attention and information bring significant, sustained change in behavior, even in clearly self-destructive instances. Individuals dying from lung disease as they puff merrily away on the disease producing substance serve, along with scores of other examples, as evidence of this fallacy in thinking.

4. In providing such intense "help" to children and pre-teens, they are also being given tremendous power for good or ill. This is a prime example of the principle that "knowledge can be power." By teaching the mechanics of sexual abuse in some detail, how it is done, (how to interpret human touch, for example), by publicizing how common abuse supposedly is and the likely sources from where it comes, by showing non-verbally and verbally how alarmed we are—almost paranoid about the possibility in some cases, we as adults are in danger of providing a means for young people to misuse their new knowledge for personal gain or self-destruction. Those who desperately seek attention have an effective way of getting it. Some who are angry with a step parent or natural parent have a new way of getting even. Members of the bright but bored set have a new way of manipulating the environment and watching the reactions of and effects upon others with little understanding of the deeper, subtle or long-lasting consequences for others. It seems a lesson from the Salem, Massachusetts witch trials of so long ago has been forgotten.

5. Current interventions seem to emphasize independent control over one's body and resisting any and all touch

deemed inappropriate by the child. Such emphasis brings the danger of blunting the positive effects of parent child physical affection by placing the seeds of alternative meanings on touching as a behavioral class, as well as fostering inner conflicts over physical closeness and warmth. In the minds of a generation of children who so deeply need more, not less, physical contact with adults, the desire for an evaluation of this aspect of life is clouded. Children are already too isolated from open, regular physical affection. Analytical recurrent interpretation might displace spontaneous physical affection, in the lives of both giver and receiver.

6. It is my view that initially all healthy children very early acquire, or perhaps blend neo-natal experience with something quasi-instinctual, a sensing of intent on the part of adults around them including the intent of the adult's touch. This may be a general feeling of discomfort, uneasiness, OK'ness or calmness, if you will. We spend considerable time as therapists attempting to get adults back in touch with their inward sensing mechanisms, to be in tune with their body, and to listen to what one might refer to as "the wise little person inside of them." It is possible that continued societal emphasis on protective training regarding sexual abuse may bring them to second guess those inward rules of discernment, heightened generalized anxiety and fear, and promote even further the tendency toward intellectualizing rather than feeling.

7. Certain concepts that seemingly are commonplace and desirable in therapeutic practice, virtual articles of faith, are on occasion with more reflection and study found to be destructive. Study is needed of just what concepts are useful to teach and what is incorporated mentally and emotionally by children as the result of the teaching of a particular concept. Two examples will suffice as representative. Is it necessary or desirable to give young children instruction in just what erogenous zones of the body are and where they are located? Do we know what is "learned" from such instructions? Controversies

already exist over "bright victims" having possibly picked up cues and being coached as the result of interviews conducted by agency employees in alleged child abuse cases.

Concerning the concept of body ownership, yes, my body is in at least one sense mine, and I have agency over it up to a point. Yes, if I don't wish to be touched, I have every social "right" to request that I not be touched. As is the case with manufactured legal "rights," once something attains that status it tends to dominate and sublimate behavior which has only the status of a choice. How is my right not to be touched reconciled and balanced with a mere choice to be touched. Is it preeminent, more important? Is receiving the comfort, warmth, and pleasure of physical touch and exploration from another, or the "right" to express myself with my body to give such benefits to another, an equal right? Is the body only a possession of mine, a machine, a stewardship, or more? What concept does the child have of his body after the intervention and instruction is given?

8. The philosophical questions raised above as well as other issues cannot be artificially separated from values. As is the case with any topic which impinges on the more personal, intimate aspects of life, and is complex in nature, and where "learnings" affect character, the teaching of values is implicit. That process is never absent, in spite of disclaimers to the contrary. The question is not whether or not values are taught, but which ones.

9. We may be projecting too many of our fears and personal agendas as adults onto our children. Though in some instances unconsciously done, and commonly carried on without malice, the effects of fear inculcation on children take their toll regardless. Already the "statistics" appear. One out of every 10 children suffer sexual abuse in some form. Can an article claiming 1 out of 8 be far behind. Does the danger lurk around every corner and just down the hall in our own home? By implanting so much fear about so many things, we pollute the new generation's ability to really take a fresh

approach to resolving society's problems and remake their childhood, shortening it and ripping it out of context. Just as subtle, and more perverse, is the possibility of vested interest group fear projections, like the techniques used by many hard asset newsletters, or the factions of the political left uncovering or manufacturing evidence that the nation's school children are running around the playground traumatized by the fear of nuclear war. Recruitment for future struggles over men's minds is at issue. We are naive if we fail to see that whole industries can develop from such beginnings, and spring from such non-noble motives.

10. Potential litigation will govern even more of our life decisions. Protection, not service, becomes the motto under such circumstances. What is best for a child slips to second place behind what might be the possible negative consequences legally for the service provider.

We chuckle about court cases in Sweden wherein a child sues his parents for being spanked, yet do we forget that laws usually serve to document the deterioration of character among the populace. Law substitutes for the inability or unwillingness of people to govern themselves. Further it is the weapon for forging social and political policy to the liking of various special interest groups, some of whom desire not goodness, but power and control over others for their own ends.

Undoubtedly, the nature of the concerns raised above will seem to some as alarmist, simply pessimistic or even bizarre. However, the intent has been to stimulate thought and research relative to the assertion that even intimate human problems and their remediation have become media events and processes and have determined and defined interventions employed according to often extraneous variables. Second, it is suggested that much more attention be given to thoughtful remediation efforts which would entail some consideration of the type of potential negative conclusions which have been discussed herein. Third, evaluation of

intervention effects needs to be a high priority—a concern which appears to be virtually absent in current programs

relating to prevention of sexual abuse. *Dennis Nelson is a psychologist in private practice in Houston, Texas.*

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