
Child Sexual Abuse: Awareness and Backlash

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Abstract

This article reviews the historical development of awareness about child sexual abuse and the counterreaction that this increasing awareness has often triggered. In particular, Conte discusses the current backlash against awareness of child sexual abuse, a reaction that he describes as characterized by extreme positions with lack of supporting data and near total rejection of knowledge and experiences of child sexual abuse. He urges all those who work professionally in the area of child sexual abuse to ensure that their opinions and actions are based on sound research and directed toward improving the lives of abused children.

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Although contemporary awareness of widespread sexual abuse of children dates back only to the late 1970s, child sexual abuse is a social problem that has been of concern during earlier historical periods. For example, French physician Ambroise Tardieu worked in the late 1880s to call attention to the plight of thousands of child victims of sexual abuse.¹ Within a year of Tardieu's death, however, skeptics were attacking his accounts, warning that these children had fantasized their reports of sexual abuse.² Tardieu's concern for the plight of sexually abused children, and the backlash his efforts generated, exemplify the historical cycle of recognition and suppression of child sexual abuse. This cycle appears to be at work again today, as more and more critics cast doubt on allegations of child sexual abuse and attack the system that responds to it.

This article briefly reviews (1) the historical prevalence of child sexual abuse in the United States and cross-culturally, (2) trends in societal attention to the problem, (3) the current backlash against efforts to protect sexually abused children, and (4) issues for the next decade.

Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse

It is difficult to identify historical and cross-cultural trends in the prevalence of child sexual abuse. Until recently, research has

not focused on this issue. Most early literature concentrated not on prevalence, but on the incest taboo, or on mental health consequences for victims of child sexual abuse.

The publication of five books from 1978 to 1984 had a significant impact on raising modern awareness and stimulating interest in documenting the prevalence and effects of child sexual abuse. To a considerable degree, current interest can be traced to these pioneering works: *Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest* by Butler;³ *Sexual Assault of Children and Ado-*

lescents by Burgess, Groth, Holmstrom, and Sgroi;⁴ *Sexually Victimized Children* by Finkelhor;⁵ *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* by Rush;⁶ and *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse, Sexual Harassment* by Russell.⁷ These landmark documents were followed by countless stories about sexual abuse in the print and electronic media, by an explosion in research and other scholarship in the social and behavioral sciences, and by increased attention from health, mental health, social service, and legal professionals.

Today, interest in the problem of child sexual abuse is greater than ever before. There are at least four annual national conferences with a focus on childhood sexual abuse. The *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* is in its second year of publication, and many professional conferences have at least some topics dealing with childhood sexual abuse. In 1987, The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children was founded as this nation's first interdisciplinary professional society focused exclusively on child abuse. (See the appendix in this journal issue.)

This explosion of interest has been accompanied by an increase in knowledge about the prevalence of child sexual abuse. Among the books published during the pioneering period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, David Finkelhor's 1979 survey of college students stands out. In that study, Finkelhor estimated that one in four females and one in five males had experienced forced sexual contact before the victim reached age eighteen.⁵ Finkelhor's classic study was followed by a number of national studies. In 1986, Peters, Wyatt, and Finkelhor reviewed the literature on prevalence and reported estimates of prevalence ranging from 6% to 62% for females, and from 3% to 31% for males.⁸ In this journal issue, Finkelhor provides a comprehensive review of the most up-to-date information on prevalence in the United States. Finkelhor has also recently published a review of 20 studies from developed countries outside North America. These studies show a

prevalence range of 7% to 36% for women and 3% to 29% for men.⁹

Cross-Cultural Research on Child Sexual Abuse

There has been very little cross-cultural research on the sexual abuse of children.¹⁰ Korbin has written an important article in which she discusses some of the reasons for this shortage.¹¹ One of the main barriers to cross-cultural understanding of child sexual abuse is the lack of a common definition. Korbin suggests that, from a cross-cultural perspective, child sexual abuse can be defined as proscribed *sexual conduct* between an adult and a *sexually immature child* for purposes of the adult's *sexual pleasure* or for economic gain through child prostitution or pornography. But she also points out that there is considerable cross-cultural variation in how each of the italicized concepts is defined. For example, in some societies, sexual conduct with prepubertal children is not considered inappropriate. Sexual pleasure is also not a simple concept to define cross-culturally, and not all sexual conduct with children can be called abuse from a cross-cultural standpoint. For example, sexual contact between children and adults may occur in religious or ceremonial events. (For example, ritualized homosexuality is a component of male initiation rites in some New Guinea societies.) Also, sexualized behaviors such as fondling or kissing genitals occur in some societies as part of daily, normative child rearing practices.^{12,13}

Definition is not the only barrier to cross-cultural research. Korbin notes that anthropology has tended to devote far greater research attention to the regularities of cultural behavior than to deviance. Anthropological efforts have been devoted primarily to explaining the origins and persistence of incest taboos; less attention has been given to studying the circumstances under which proscribed sexual conduct within the family occurs. Moreover, if child sexual abuse occurs in secrecy, it is unlikely to come to the eth-

nographer's attention, and rapport in the field is difficult to establish and maintain when studying such behaviors.

Nevertheless, Korbin finds that the ethnographic record shows sexual conduct with children in a range of cultures and some limited evidence that it occurs outside of culturally accepted contexts. Korbin reviews examples of this evidence but acknowledges that information on either adherence to, or deviation from, cultural proscriptions regarding sexual conduct with children is woefully inadequate for comparative purposes.¹⁴

Societal Attention to the Sexual Abuse of Children

As discussed above, our best knowledge, which is limited both cross-culturally and historically, is that child sexual abuse has been a problem both over time and across cultures. Nonetheless, however, many commentators have documented that societies have varied both over time and within themselves in their levels of awareness of the problem and commitment to address it. One of the most comprehen-

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sive discussions of the history of awareness is a recent article by Olafson, Corwin, and Summit.¹⁵ Their review identifies a "discovery—push from awareness—rediscovery cycle" in the mental health field's response to child sexual abuse. Reviewing materials from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, the authors have found a considerable body of literature, extant a century ago and abundant after 1971, that describes both the occurrence and the damaging effects of child sexual abuse. They also find, however, that this information was often not well received by the public or professionals of the time.

Olafson and colleagues detail numerous instances in which accounts of sexual abuse were suppressed and the victims, or

those who wrote or spoke on their behalf, were ostracized and subjected to suspicion and criticism. They also discuss a number of interesting psychological issues, including the historical and cultural use of denial, minimization, and rationalization of child sexual abuse.

In this cluster of reactions to child sexual abuse, victims are relabeled as "sex delinquents" or "participating victims." Sexual abuse comes to be defined as a problem of the victim's perception, not a real trauma to the victim. For example, in 1953, Kinsey documented that one quarter of his female respondents reported that they had been approached sexually during childhood by a man who was at least five years older, and 80% of these women reported having been frightened by the experience. But Kinsey dismissed these fears, writing that "it is difficult to understand why a child, except for its cultural conditioning, should be disturbed at having its genitalia touched."¹⁶ In essence, Kinsey's comment focuses not on the fear the women felt and how it could have been avoided, but rather on whether their feelings of fear were valid. Such approaches, which tend to minimize the impact of abuse on children and instead place responsibility for the experience of sexual abuse on the victims themselves, appear to have come to the fore as social changes took place in society.

A number of other social historians have analyzed the ebb and flow in this country's willingness to acknowledge and respond to the problem of child sexual abuse. Costin, for example, traces the nineteenth-century discovery of child abuse in urban industrial centers and the decline in attention to the problem during the early twentieth century.¹⁷

Although late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century social workers recognized sexual abuse as a serious problem, efforts to respond to it met with limited success. Moreover, changing social conditions during the early decades of the twentieth century led to decreased attention to sexual victimization of children. Costin attributes this decline in part to a decline in feminism.

At the turn of the century, feminism was closely linked to child welfare, and as feminism went through a period of relative dormancy, attention to child welfare also faltered. Furthermore, during the 1920s and 1930s social welfare leaders

identified a wide range of social problems facing children (“new” forms of abuse were discovered such as inadequate food, shelter, clothing, living conditions, and exposure of children to immoral conditions). Costin argues that as this happened “dependency, neglect, and delinquency melded together, relegating ‘abuse’ into near obsolescence.”¹⁸ Other factors that Costin believes affected the amount of attention paid to childhood sexual abuse include: the weakening of the juvenile court owing to the lack of social services to support it; ideological and service conflicts between family-focused agencies; the rise of psychoanalytic theory, which disfavored protective work; and widespread social and economic dislocation during the 1930s.

Gordon’s 1988 book *Heroes of Their Own Lives; The Politics and History of Family Violence* provides further insight into cyclical societal awareness of child sexual abuse.¹⁹ Gordon links the “push from awareness” to a decline in feminism lasting from the 1920s to 1960. Gordon characterizes family violence, including child sexual abuse, as a political issue, writing that the “very meanings of family violence” are politically determined and have changed through history.

Clearly, complex psychological, cultural, and political processes are involved in recognizing and responding to childhood sexual abuse. Turning from the societal level to the individual level, the idea that individual experience, psychological problems, or other psychological processes influence a person’s willingness to entertain the possibility that many children are sexually abused is consistent with current understanding in psychology about how individuals deal with anxiety-producing ideas or experiences.

There is little doubt that the issue triggers anxiety. Recognition that children in general are at risk for sexual abuse, or that a specific child has been abused, is distressing for many adults because of their own histories as victims or victimizers; because of the affection adults feel for children; or because abuse involves emotionally-laden issues of relationships, sexuality, coercion, and other difficult intra- and interpersonal processes. Thus, because child sexual abuse stirs up strong emotions, denial, minimization, and rationalization have always played a central role in the societal response to child sexual abuse.

The Current Backlash Against Efforts to Protect Sexually Abused Children

The historical, cultural, political, and personal factors described above have all contributed to the rise of a modern “backlash” against efforts to address the sexual abuse of children. Myers defines the current backlash as “the escalating chorus of criticism directed against professionals working

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to protect children.”²⁰ The types of criticism vary. Several authors in the recent collection *The Backlash: Child Protection Under Fire*, describe what they perceive as evidence of the societal reaction. Finkelhor, for example, describes the backlash as including wide-ranging attacks in the media and among politicians against the field of child welfare advocacy and some of its leaders. He notes that, increasingly, newspaper stories have reported instances of miscarriages of justice in child welfare practices, and critics have begun to describe the child protection system as a self-serving industry, social workers as zealots trampling the rights of innocent citizens, and courts as the locus of hysterical witch-hunts against innocent victims.²¹

Pizzini also sees manifestations of the backlash in a tendency to blame social workers for implementing laws they did not write. Furthermore, she perceives that some critics of child protective services use the agency as a target upon which to vent society’s collective guilt and frustration at not being able to protect every child.²²

Myers has a very interesting chapter in this book, on the literature of the backlash. He cites a myriad of books, journal articles, and media stories that present the overarching themes and rhetorical devices of an emerging backlash literature. These themes include assertions that the child protective system is out of control; that child protection is on a witch-hunt;

that child abuse hysteria is rampant; that child protection professionals are comparable to Nazis, McCarthyites, KGB agents, and so on; and that professionals are the problem.²³

It is clear from reading these authors, that the term backlash is applied to a wide range of ideas and arguments. It is important that they not all be viewed as the same. As Myers writes, it is important to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate criticism of the child protection system.²⁰ Not every criticism, warning, or expression of concern about current child abuse knowledge, practice, or objectives is part of the backlash.

It may help to more fully catalogue the range of backlash phenomena. In this author's view, there are some obvious examples of backlash allegations. The backlash is manifest in categorical statements that young children cannot accurately report experiences, despite an increasing body of research evidence that young children can when properly interviewed give quite accurate testimony. Similarly, the suggestion that adult memories of childhood experiences can easily be manipulated by psychotherapy is not legitimate when data on the effectiveness of psychotherapy fail to demonstrate the

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power of most therapies to make such radical changes in clients' understanding, behavior, or emotions. Finally, it is part of the backlash to make a blanket claim that thousands of families are falsely accused of child abuse and as a result permanently damaged by the process of investigation, even though no data exist documenting such horrible consequences in large numbers of cases.

In general, the backlash consists of:

- extreme positions or points of view that challenge concerns about sexually abused children, and that nearly always have the purpose of defending adults accused of sexual abuse, or that otherwise minimize,

rationalize, or deny the realities of childhood sexual abuse;

- lack of supporting research data for extreme positions or points of view; and

- near total rejection of the knowledge, experience, or realities of childhood sexual abuse.

Myers asserts that the backlash is fueled by (1) the strong emotions generated by adults' feelings about children, sex, and victimization, (2) society's blind spot about sexual abuse, and (3) the faults of the child protection system. He contends that "fifty percent of the backlash is a self-inflicted wound" visited upon child protection professionals by the failings of the child protection system.²³ These failings include exaggerated statements such as that children never lie about abuse, the failure of professionals to learn from criticism, and the tendency to let child advocacy get ahead of knowledge (for example, employing poor interviewing techniques to "save" children).

Finkelhor adds considerably to understanding of the backlash through a social problem analysis.²⁴ He suggests that social problems can be understood as products of social movements. Thus, the success of the child protection effort is a social movement resulting from a coalition of the professions of education, public health, medicine, law, and mental health that have benefited from child protection concerns, and from the fact that child abuse taps into a strong nexus of psychological and social concerns (such as the vulnerability of children, relationships between the genders, the changing character of the family, and the current preoccupation with crime and justice). The backlash against child protection is a reaction to the success of that "movement" in capturing public attention and mobilizing resources.

Finkelhor gives the backlash little chance of long-term success because it is inherently reactive and oppositional, has a single issue focus, and draws membership mainly from two groups that lack real power: (1) accused parents and other caretakers of children, and (2) attorneys. These groups are assisted by occasional allies in the ranks of academics, professionals, legislators, and the media.

Although the backlash is characterized by extreme positions, lack of supporting research data, and near total re-

jection of the knowledge and experiences of childhood sexual abuse, there is often an element of truth in its critique. Valid criticism should be encouraged; it is essential to continually improving both professional and societal response to the problem of child sexual abuse. Indeed, critical analysis has been a part of child welfare practice in this area since the 1970s, when professionals began to doubt the popular notions of the time that large numbers of children fantasized sexual contact with adults and that adult sexual use of children was generally benign.

In this field of professional practice, both the knowledge of accumulated research and the wisdom gained from clinical experience have changed dramatically over the last decade or so. We know and do things today that we could not envision a few years ago. We also believed things in the past that we know now were not accurate. To the extent that decisions were based on those ideas, it is likely that errors were made. For example, not all that long ago professionals believed that "behavior proves abuse." It was thought that certain childhood behaviors (such as fearfulness, nightmares, and acting younger than one's developmental age) were proof that the child had been abused. It is now generally acknowledged that these behaviors are indicative of stress or anxiety and not diagnostic of child abuse. Decisions based on the belief that a child had been sexually abused and interventions that arose from this belief may have been in error when based on the notion that "behavior proves abuse."

Such evolution in knowledge and response is ongoing. One of the important areas of current debate concerns adults remembering incidents of sexual abuse as a child. In this author's view, blanket dismissals of these accounts as part of some "false memory syndrome" is an example of the backlash. Descriptions of this "syndrome" have been disseminated to the public and professionals through the popular press and through unpublished, unreviewed, and largely unsupported papers. The basic notion is that adults enter psychotherapy with no memories of childhood abuse and that the therapists, because they are incompetent, survivors of abuse themselves, or seek to make large sums of money from the client, proceed to create memories of childhood abuse through suggestion, manipulation, hypnosis, contamination of the client by ex-

posure to other "victims of child abuse" through survivor groups or books such as *The Courage to Heal*, and differential reinforcement of elements of "abuse memories." This syndrome has become a popular defense against personal injury lawsuits in which an adult sues for damages resulting from childhood sexual abuse.

As this article is written, however, scientific data are limited on both sides of the debate. Scant data exist to indicate that, for most clients, psychotherapists or psychotherapy are sufficiently powerful to create memories of experiences that the individual did not in fact have. On the other hand, few data exist about the frequency, or mechanism, of repressed memory.

It is likely that in time it will become clear that there are elements of truth in the criticism of certain therapies for some individuals with particular psychological

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characteristics. For example, there is anecdotal evidence of certain questionable "therapies" that employ highly suggestive techniques such as praying for prolonged periods of time, spirit exorcisms, induced visions, and use of powerful authority from the therapist and the church to confirm abuse. It is possible that exposure to such therapies may confuse past and present reality for certain highly distressed and suggestible clients.

Concern about determining the accuracy of client reports and finding ways to assist while empowering the client are not new to therapy or to most professionals who work with child sexual abuse. Continued attention to these concerns is essential. But there is a danger in exaggerated attacks on all people who recall instances of child sexual abuse. The harm is greatest not for professionals, but for children, those who love them, and those who may have been abused in childhood. Avoiding this harm requires those in the child protection field to distinguish constructive ideas from the negative ones of the backlash.

Issues for the Next Decade

The analysis in this article suggests a number of steps that individuals concerned about child sexual abuse might consider taking to prevent or at least reduce the risk that awareness of childhood sexual abuse will fade or be suppressed. First, there needs to be a new discussion involving all segments of society about the history of child abuse and child protection, the costs to society of child abuse, and the various ways in which child protection, treatment, and prevention of abuse can take place. Such an energetic, coordinated, and com-

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prehensive discussion has not occurred since the passage of the child abuse reporting acts in the United States during the 1970s. At present, the public is bombarded with inaccurate and semi-accurate information, often with no real analysis or rebuttal. Child abuse issues are often argued as surrogates for other political and cultural issues such as those involving the nature of the American family, the role of women, or efforts to limit state expenditures and interventions.

Child abuse has received public attention and concern for some time. Perhaps now more than at any time in previous history, a large number of professionals and segments of the public have an awareness of child abuse. Although this awareness is not always based on the latest knowledge, and many personal and cultural biases may be played out in the positions taken about child abuse, and although consensus will be difficult to reach in the short run, the effort to build such a consensus will be important in dealing with the backlash and setting an agenda for research, policy, and intervention.

Second, there is a great need for research on public attitudes toward a number of key issues related to child protection. It is of considerable importance to understand current perspectives on child

sexual abuse portrayed in the media and the arts, and to more adequately understand what impact (if any) these portrayals have on public attitudes and on the attitudes of individuals directly involved with child sexual abuse (that is, victims, offenders, and professionals). The attitude of the public and the willingness of the public to support policy influencing child sexual abuse are often thought to be major obstacles to more effective social policy in this area. The public's attitudes toward rehabilitation, punishment for individual wrongdoing, the role of the state in child protection and treatment, and many other issues have not been documented. Nor have factors that influence these attitudes (such as personal experiences with child abuse, the impact of public awareness campaigns, and media accounts of serious cases) been examined.

Third, more research is also needed on the operation of the justice, mental health, and social services systems. There are few data that describe how these important systems operate in response to child sexual abuse, whether they obtain the goals sought for the abused children and adults involved in these cases, and whether more good than ill results from abused children's involvement in these cases. The immediate and long-term effects of these systems (for example, child protection and rehabilitation of offenders) are not known. These effects, how cost-efficiently they are obtained, and whether they do in fact improve society are critical in evaluating current efforts to help sexually abused children.

Fourth, efforts to merge the consideration of child sexual abuse with that of other childhood problems should be resisted. It is inappropriate to compare the suffering of children when they are experiencing different types of problems. It is even less appropriate to prioritize their sufferings, suggesting that one type of problem is more deserving of attention than another. The problems of childhood are complex. What is needed is a wide range of responses, and an equally broad range of professionals and disciplines to address *all* the problems of childhood.

Finally, and perhaps most critically for the short term, professionals in the field of child sexual abuse must make every effort to assure that what they believe, what they know, and what they do is based on sound research evidence and works di-

rectly to improve the lives of abused children. Science is a demanding taskmaster which requires that knowledge be tested and demonstrated. Sexually abused children, and those who touch and influence their lives, deserve professional interventions that are based on well-established principles and ideas.

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10. For a sampling of cross-cultural literature, see La Fontaine, J.S. Preliminary remarks on a study of incest in England. In *Child survival*. N. Scheper-Hughes, ed. Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1987, pp. 267-90; Goodwin, J. *Sexual abuse: Incest victims and their families*. Boston: Jon Wright PSG, 1982; Korbin, J.E. Child sexual abuse: A cross-cultural view. In *Understanding and managing child sexual abuse*. R.K. Oates, ed. Sydney, Australia: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990, pp. 42-58; and Quinsey, V.L. Sexual aggression: Studies of offenders against women. In *Law and mental health: International perspectives*. Vol. 1. D. Weissstut, ed. New York: Pergamon, 1984, pp. 84-121.
11. Korbin, J.E. Child sexual abuse: Implications from the cross-cultural record. In *Child survival*. N. Scheper-Hughes, ed. Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1987, pp. 247-65.
12. Thus, Korbin suggests that in cross-cultural research, instead of labeling specific conduct as "abuse," it would be more helpful to ask to what extent the conduct violated family roles/status, was coercive, was nonconsensual, was secret, and/or involved age discrepancy. Korbin notes that even these criteria are not absolute determinants of whether the behavior was abusive in a particular culture, but they are helpful guidelines.
13. Korbin also notes that definitional issues plague estimates of incidence and prevalence even when the focus is exclusively on the United States. Certainly, our understanding of child sexual abuse would be aided by greater understanding about the range of sexual behaviors generally regarded as acceptable in families, and how behavior varies by culture and subgroup. Families vary in attitudes about nudity, privacy, touching, and kissing. In this author's view, however, in most of the cases that come to the attention of law enforcement or child welfare services, definitional concerns are not great because the behavior alleged clearly violates a widespread consensus in this country that such behavior constitutes sexual abuse (for example, having a small child sit on an unclothed penis and rock back and forth). However, there are some cases for which cultural norms are of considerable importance in deciding whether certain behaviors constitute sexual abuse; inappropriate behavior, perhaps even representing poor judgment; or simply a variation within acceptable bounds. Such decisions will shape how our society responds to the problem.
14. Korbin also suggests that it is not realistic to expect valid and reliable rates of incidence or prevalence for cross-cultural comparison, and that, at present, it would be more fruitful for cross-cultural research to examine the circumstances in which the deviation occurs rather than try to determine its frequency.
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24. See note no. 21, Finkelhor, p. 20.