

OPINION

Children's Suggestibility: Reflections on the Tone of the Dialogue

-by Mark Chaffin

Adversarial controversies, particularly when they involve sex abuse and witch hunts, have good entertainment value. Indeed, jumping into the fray on this issue is to virtually submit one's application for a spot on *Geraldo* or the lead article in a popular weekly, providing of course that the opinion proffered is sufficiently polemic, unencumbered by caveats, and makes for a good sound bite. Good entertainment, however, does not always make for good argument. When it comes to the debate on children's suggestibility in the area of sexual abuse, I would argue that the polemic tone of at least some of the literature has transformed the interchange into more of a spectator sport than a vehicle for knowledge to inform practice. Unfortunately, real people and real lives are at stake.

Our response to child sexual abuse has been, and remains, reactive--both against generations of secrecy and denial, and against the slogans of "believe the children" or the notion that sexual abuse is ubiquitous and responsible for any given mental health symptom or social ill. Ours is not the first generation to struggle with these vicissitudes, as Olafson, Corwin and Summit (1993) have clearly described. Judging by past cultural cycles, it would seem fairly clear that some retrenchment is currently under way. The growing body of research on the suggestibility of children and the suggestiveness of child interviewing is evidence of this retrenchment.

What was once considered simply a cheap legal maneuver of attacking the interviewer because attacking the child might offend juries, is now, given some of the data on suggestibility, a legitimate and fair concern. The issue is complex, and because no laboratory manipulation can ethically achieve complete ecological validity, the data are almost universally open to caveat, alternative explanations, and questions about generalizability. Although important questions remain about the *science* of the issue, I would argue that it is the *tone* of the dialogue which poses a potentially destructive

problem.

This is a tone that has been frankly *ad hominem*, not so much directed at a particular individual as at a class of individuals--child sexual abuse specialists, therapists and interviewers. No longer limited to the excoriating personal attacks leveled by essayists and critics of the field like Richard Gardner (1991, p.48-53), elements of this tone have now found their way into the broader scientific community and empirical research reports. Consider, for example, this passage from a recent literature review, commenting on therapists and law enforcement personnel who interview allegedly molested children:

We reiterate, however, that the conditions cre-

ated in these studies differ markedly from those that occur in actual therapy or in law enforcement investigations: these latter two contexts are seldom as sanitized of affect and free of motives as those in the research setting. In some cases, children are interviewed and reinterviewed under emotionally charged circumstances, entailing the use of bribes and threats, and often in the presence of highly distressed parents; under such conditions, some children may finally utter reports that are simply consistent with the interviewer's expectations (Ceci and Bruck, 1993, 16).

Continuing to address the issue of ecological validity in laboratory research, the same article later states, "It is highly unlikely that we will ever mimic [in the laboratory] the assaultive nature of some acts or interviews perpetrated on child victims and witnesses" (p.16). The authors seem here to suggest that interview practice and actual sexual assault are fairly comparable in their maliciousness.

The problem with these statements is not necessarily the existence of the phenomena they describe. Bad practice in the field of sexual abuse investigations and treatment is a reality, just as it is in all other fields. The problem is stereotyping. Bad practice has been so loudly decried by critics that an accepted popular perception has arisen, based entirely on anecdotal evidence, that bad practice is modal practice. As with any stereotype, once established, it is extremely difficult to dispel. Even scientists who would otherwise never equate anecdote with prevalence can be swayed by the widespread acceptance of such a stereotype. To be a child sexual abuse investigator or therapist is to be automatically known in some circles as a "child-saver," "zealot," or "brainwasher." The fact is, we do not empirically know modal practice, what is typical or what is rare. While interviewer practices are sometimes explicated when they are problematic or egregious, I am aware of no data objectively coding representative practices of a representative sample of child sexual abuse interviewers or therapists.

What we do know, however, is that well circulated practice guidelines exist (AACAP, 1985; APSAC, 1990) which are clear in their recommendations. Neither has endorsed, and in fact both have specifically recommended against, the sorts of coercive and suggestive practices which the stereotypes suggest are the rule. The guidelines of the major professional organizations in the field are the best reflection available of what a majority feel is codifiable good practice: why would that majority espouse one standard when their practice embodies the opposite?

Perhaps these harsh critics have a sampling problem. Perhaps their work exposes them disproportionately to extremely poor and biased practices.

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I am usually asked to evaluate interviewer or therapist practices when there has been a problem or controversy. If these cases formed the sole sample from which I extrapolated my perception of the world, I suspect my opinion of practice in the sexual abuse field would be largely negative. My experience being other than this (the majority of cases I see being ones in which sexual abuse is eventually confirmed by admission of the abuser), I tend to think that most interviewers and therapists are far removed from the witch hunting stereotype.

The danger here is not so much that professionals who practice in the area of child sexual abuse will be disparaged by stereotyping. That's not pleasant, but they can probably weather it. The real danger is that the *ad hominem* tone of the children's suggestibility discourse will be so personally offensive to so many professionals in the field that they will be tempted to dismiss a body of important empirical data about children's suggestibility as simply "backlash literature."

A second concern about the tone of recent suggestibility literature is its implicit emphasis on false allegations as the sole outcome of interest. For example, the article cited earlier (Ceci and Bruck, 1993), examines the child suggestibility research with an eye towards its implications for children's interviewing, policy, and expert testimony, and provides a thoughtful and well reasoned examination of many of the scientific and methodological aspects of our current knowledge base. Nowhere, however, is there even a token acknowledgement that suggestive processes can be exerted on children to deny bona fide abuse. The entire focus is on the vulnerability of children to suggestive processes which might create false statements of abuse where none actually occurred. Yet aren't children also exposed to interviewers and other adults single mindedly biased towards finding *no* abuse? What about the use of implicit or explicit coercion, up to and including threats of death, used to enforce secrecy and gain recantation, or repeated suggestions to believe that "Nothing happened" or "You misunderstood," which are described as common experiences among abused children (cf. Myers, 1992, p. 134-136)? If young children are relatively

more vulnerable to suggestion, doesn't it seem reasonable to consider that this vulnerability may lead to false negatives as well as false positives? In fact, false negatives have been documented as common and related to the biases of significant adults in the child's life (Lawson and Chaffin, 1992; Sorenson and Snow, 1991). Again, the danger here is that the dialogue on children's suggestibility becomes polarized and focused on

a hollow contest between those who investigate abuse and those who investigate "hysteria."

There is no litmus test for the validity of a sexual abuse allegation, and there never will be. Some cases may be independently confirmed (e.g., videotaped abuse, admission of the abuser), but most will not. In the absence of clear independent confirmation, professionals must make judgments based upon interview data. We cannot ignore the necessity or shirk the responsibility of making these judgments. Like all human judgments, even when informed and impartial, some will be wrong. When the wrong judgement is made, people can be hurt--children's fearful and hesitant disclosures can be discounted and they can be placed, with official blessing, at the mercy of their molesters. Conversely, innocent people can lose their freedom, their reputations, and their children, while the children can be torn from their families and incorporate a false tragedy as part of their personal history. Either outcome is unacceptable, yet probably inevitable. Some techniques may increase the probability of one type of error while reducing the probability of the other. Others are designed to increase accuracy although possibly reducing the volume of information. Yet others (e.g., bribes) clearly have no place in professional practice. In order to inform practitioners of the risks and benefits of any of these practices, and to suggest when and with whom they can appropriately be used, it is critical that our overall knowledge base be balanced in the aspects and outcomes of suggestibility it addresses as well as the tone taken.

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