

AT ISSUE:

25 Years of APSAC—A Personal Historical, Law Enforcement Perspective

Kenneth V. Lanning, MS

In May 1970, I began my 30-year career as a special agent with the FBI. Early in that career, I also became involved as an instructor in the FBI's field police training program. After 10 years as a field investigator and part-time police instructor and getting my Master's degree, I was transferred to the FBI Behavioral Science Unit (BSU) at the FBI Academy in Quantico. I was assigned to this Unit from January 1981 until I retired from the FBI in September 2000. Although the BSU was part of the FBI's Training Division, its work involved more and more research and operational case consultation as well as training.

As a junior member of the BSU, I was at first given a wide variety of miscellaneous assignments. Soon fellow unit member Roy Hazelwood approached me. Roy was the unit expert in what was then referred to as sex crimes. He explained that the key to success was to have a unique and important specialty. He suggested we team together in the area of sexual crimes—a topic I had been teaching since 1973 as a field police instructor. We would divide up the sexual crimes; he would specialize primarily in adult victim cases, and I would specialize primarily in child victim cases. This made sense. "Crimes against children" was an area that I thought was important and rewarding. I believe that this conversation and my resulting decision is one of the keys to understanding a central point of my involvement with APSAC and my ability to maintain professional objectivity.

I quickly tried to do everything possible to improve and expand my expertise in the specific area of the sexual victimization of children. I was soon regularly interacting not only with criminal justice professionals but also with social workers, doctors, nurses, and mental health professionals. I learned a great deal from this interaction and developed a greater appreciation and understanding of other perspectives. I came to recognize the importance of and need for a multidisciplinary response to the problem of child sexual abuse. As my expertise and reputation grew, I consulted on an ever-growing number of cases and was frequently invited to do presentations at national and regional training conferences on the topic.

My focus on the sexual victimization of children intensified during the 1980s, and I soon recognized the changing and

evolving attitudes about the issue. During this time, most of the new training materials, articles, and books on the topic referred to child sexual victimization primarily in terms of intrafamilial father-daughter incest. From my work, however, I knew that the sexual victimization of children included far more than this. Intrafamilial sexual abuse between an adult and child may be a common form of child sexual victimization, but it is not the only form. This emphasis on intrafamilial child sexual abuse by many professionals is still common today. Many of the policies, protocols, and procedures developed to deal with one-on-one intrafamilial sexual abuse, however, may have limited application to cases involving sexual molestation by acquaintances, such as in the recent allegations at Penn State University or sexually motivated child abduction. These variations and differences were often not adequately understood or addressed by interveners or at training conferences.

It was important for professionals dealing with child sexual abuse to recognize and learn to manage the common denial associated with this serious problem and to encourage society to deal with, report, and prevent the sexual victimization of children. Some professionals, however, in their zeal to overcome denial and increase awareness tended to exaggerate and misrepresent the problem. It seemed to me that true professionals should cite reputable and scientific studies and note the sources of information. If they did not, their credibility and the credibility of the issue could be damaged.

At many of the conferences I attended in the 1980s, I also recognized what seemed to be a zealous aspect to many of the presentations and discussions. The need to believe the children and eliminate laws requiring corroboration was often communicated as part of an impassioned crusade. At one child abuse conference, a nationally known keynote speaker, when asked why she always referred to victims as "she" and offenders as "he," responded that she was concerned about the forest and couldn't worry about a few trees. At conferences, shopping bags with crayon drawings by young children were distributed to carry handout material. These are just a few small examples of what I came to sense about the emotional nature of much of the response to child abuse, even on the part of so-called professionals.

I also remember hearing from the experts that most child molesters were victims themselves. This was essentially presented as a documented fact. The only thing that varied was the exact percentage. I wondered how this had been determined. As time went on, I got up the courage and confidence to ask these experts, whom I then held in awe, and was told that the percentage had been determined by research studies in which such offenders were asked about their victimization. I then asked how these responses were verified or corroborated. The most common answer I got was, “Why would they lie?” Few in law enforcement would ask such a question. These experts should have more accurately stated that most offenders *claim* to be victims. Interestingly, there is now some research suggesting that when sex offenders are confronted with the use of a polygraph and real consequences for their answers, the percentage claiming to be victims drops to about the same as that in the general population.

My skepticism has only increased for research concerning human behavior that is overly reliant on self-reported information. It began with my doubts about the claim that most sex offenders are victims themselves. This skepticism may be due in part to a



professional lifetime spent interviewing and talking with individuals who repeatedly lie about, misrepresent, and rationalize their behavior for a wide variety of reasons. Although behavioral research is highly regarded in some circles, my opinions and analysis were not based on such uncorroborated, self-reported information. I typically operated from a law enforcement bias that tends to assume people are lying unless you know otherwise.

Because I was simultaneously doing training, research, and case consultation, I increasingly began to recognize the importance of defining terms. This recognition was reinforced through my interaction with academic researchers such as Dr. David Finkelhor. When we use basic or common terms (e.g., *child*, *sex*), we rarely define them. Apparent disagreements are often due to the confusion created by calling different things by the same name and the same thing by different names. A dictionary or layperson’s definition of *mental disorder* (e.g., “pedophilia”) may not be the same as a psychiatric or mental health definition. Legal definitions of *sexual assault* may not be the same as societal attitudes or religious beliefs.

There was also a problem with the consistent use of definitions. When case volume was wanted, *children* were more likely to be defined as “anyone younger than 18 years old.” When impact was wanted or specific examples were needed, *children* quickly became “anyone younger than 12 years old.” The definition problem seemed most acute when professionals from different disciplines came together to work or communicate about the sexual victimization of children. I realized that definitions are especially important whenever discussing, researching, and writing about the nature and scope of the problem.

The most significant occurrence that changed my professional perspective concerning allegations of sexual victimization of children was the claim of what came to be called Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA). In early 1983, when I first began to hear about cases involving what sounded like satanic or occult activity in connection with allegations of extreme sexual victimization of children, I tended to believe that they had occurred. Soon I was dealing with hundreds of victims alleging that thousands of offenders were severely abusing and even murdering tens of thousands of people as part of well-organized groups, and there was little or no corroborative evidence. A few of these cases could have been well-founded, but not all or even most of them were. The very reason many experts cited for believing these allegations—many victims, who had never met each other, reporting the same events—was the primary reason I began to question at least some aspects of these allegations.

As more and more of these cases came to my attention, I progressively became more concerned about the lack of physical evidence and corroboration for many of the more serious allegations. There was a lack of corroborative evidence when there should have been

corroborative evidence. Many of the unsubstantiated allegations just did not seem to have occurred, or in some cases, could not have occurred. These cases appeared to call into question the credibility of victims and raised controversies over complex topics such as the reality or reliability of recovered repressed memories and the suggestibility of children. This included debates over how the human brain stores and recovers memories, how easily children of different ages can be led and influenced by questioners, and confirmation bias.

When I decided to publicly communicate my concerns and doubts about these cases, some claimed I had gone to the “dark side.” I did not anticipate the antagonistic reaction of some of my professional colleagues, such as those who believed the allegations couldn’t produce any real evidence while offering ever-expanding explanations for why there was no evidence. When I began to consider alternative explanations for some of the allegations, I found that many child abuse experts had no real answers. They seemed more concerned that questioning some allegations might mean one had to question all allegations.

I spoke out and published on this issue because I was concerned about the credibility of the sexual victimization of children. I was certainly troubled that innocent people might be falsely accused. But I was also concerned that guilty people might be getting away with molesting children because we could not prove they were satanic devil worshippers. I did not want the controversy over these extreme, overzealous cases to cast a shadow upon and fuel the backlash against the validity and reality of child sexual victimization and the need for objective investigation.

Many of these anecdotal but repeated experiences suggested to me that the field I had chosen to specialize in often had an excess of emotion and a deficiency of professionalism. This emotionalism seemed to have the potential to increase the motivation of interveners but decrease their ability to be objective.

In May of 1986, I attended and presented at the National Conference on Sexual Victimization of Children in New Orleans, Louisiana. While there, several of my new colleagues from different disciplines approached me. They inquired about my interest in being a founding member of a new organization to be called the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC). This was to be a multidisciplinary organization that would encourage and support professionalism and interaction in the field. I remember that one of the early debates back then was whether this new organization would address primarily sexual abuse of children or child abuse in general. The eventual decision to address the broader issues seems to have been the right one.

The word that was most appealing to me in the name of this new organization was *professional*. I therefore enthusiastically agreed to join and become a founding member of the Board of Directors of



APSAC and later a member of its Advisory Board. I tried my best to represent a professional law enforcement perspective during many APSAC discussions and meetings concerning controversial issues such as allegations of SRA, forensic interviewing, repressed memory, Internet exploitation of children, compliant child victims, and the focus and nature of publications.

I eventually authored four articles published in the *APSAC Advisor*: “Sexual Homicide of Children” (1994); “The ‘Witch Hunt,’ the ‘Backlash,’ and Professionalism” (1996); “Cyber ‘Pedophiles’: A Behavioral Perspective” (1998); and “A Law Enforcement Perspective on the Compliant Child Victim” (2002). I was a guest coeditor with Lucy Berliner for a special issue of the *APSAC Advisor* on the topic of Compliant Child Victims from five different professional perspectives in 2002. The *Advisor* agreed to publish these articles when other child advocacy groups did not want to confront this uncomfortable reality. I also authored chapters titled “Criminal Investigation of Sexual Victimization of Children” in the first (1996) and second (2002) editions of *The APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment* and presented at seven of the early APSAC Colloquiums between 1993 and 2001.

I consider my article on “The ‘Witch Hunt,’ the ‘Backlash,’ and Professionalism” to be one of the most significant of my 36 publications. In this article, I set forth ten characteristics that the seemingly opposite perspectives of the “witch hunt” and “backlash” have in common. They are in fact two sides of the same coin of emotional zealotry. I then made some recommendations for a more professional response.

I also discussed my realization that complex problems such as the sexual victimization of children are typically addressed from three major perspectives: personal, political, and professional. The personal perspective encompasses the emotional: how the issues affect individual needs and wants. The political perspective encompasses the practical: how the issues affect getting elected, obtaining funding or pay, and attaining status and power. The professional perspective encompasses the rational and objective: how the issues affect the problem and what are the most effective ways to address it. I found that the personal and political perspectives tended to dominate emotional issues such as child sexual abuse. In this article, I expressed my opinion that sexually victimized children need more people addressing their needs from the professional perspective and fewer from the personal and political perspectives.

Two of the personal highlights of my professional career involve APSAC. In 1996, I received the APSAC Outstanding Professional Award. The dedication by the editors of *The APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment, 2nd edition* (2002) stated: “This book is dedicated to Kenneth V. Lanning. Ken, you are one of the pioneers. You led the way. You opened our eyes. You taught us. You were always one step ahead. You’re the coolest FBI agent we know. You’ve done more than we can count to protect kids. Thanks.”

I am proud of my involvement with APSAC and support its efforts to advance professionalism and interdisciplinary cooperation. Although my experience with APSAC was generally a positive one, there were times when I felt that the law enforcement perspective was not equally respected. For example, I once worked with other law enforcement members on a subcommittee to develop the law enforcement track for that year’s APSAC Colloquium. After completing our work, however, we were told that APSAC Board members from other disciplines would have to approve our decisions concerning law enforcement training. As far as I knew, nobody in law enforcement got to approve the training track for other disciplines. Law enforcement members who then succeeded me on the APSAC Board of Directors communicated to me similar experiences, which suggested that what they sometimes felt indicated a lack of equal consideration and recognition for their views. I assume this concern has by now been addressed.

In my opinion, working together as part of a multidisciplinary team means coordination, not abdication. Each discipline performs a function for which it has specific resources, training, and experience. Although each discipline must understand how its role contributes to the team approach, it is equally important that it understands the respective responsibilities and limitations of that role. The team approach is therefore a two-way street. Just as medical and psychological professionals are charged with evaluating and treating the victimized child, law-enforcement investigators are responsible for conducting criminal investigations. Just as law-enforcement officers need to be concerned that their investigation might further traumatize a child victim, therapists and

physicians need to be concerned that their treatment techniques might hinder the investigation.

In striving for professionalism, I often have considered why, when I evaluated cases of sexual victimization of children, I was usually able to maintain my objectivity as a professional fact-finder. Why was I so often able to maximize the professional perspective and minimize the political and personal perspective when dealing with such emotional topics? I came to the conclusion that the two biggest factors are (1) how I came to my job and expertise and (2) my basic background and personality.

As I mentioned, I came to specialize in cases involving the sexual victimization of children for somewhat practical and selfish reasons. My work was rewarding, important, and fulfilling, but I was not drawn to it for sentimental or altruistic reasons. I had no agenda. I was just an FBI agent doing his job. The FBI paid me the same salary every two weeks. It made no difference to me financially in which direction the evidence led. In addition, I had been a well-trained and experienced investigator for 10 years before I ever came to the BSU. My work experience had taught me to be skeptical and desensitized me to many aspects of these cases. My threshold of bizarre was different from that of most people. I am proud of this objective law enforcement perspective and believe it has an important role to play in society’s response to child abuse.

APSAC was part of my effort to strive for professionalism in my work, communicate my opinions, and learn from others. I congratulate the organization on its 25th anniversary. I would also like to recognize the other law enforcement APSAC Board members with whom I have worked—Rick Cage, Mike Hertica, Dana Gassaway, Bill Walsh, Donna Pence, and Mike Johnson—and to thank Theresa Reid, the first APSAC Executive Director from 1988 to 1997, for her support of my participation.

About the Author

Kenneth V. Lanning was a special agent with the FBI for more than 30 years and was assigned to the FBI Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI Academy for 20 years. He received the 1996 APSAC Outstanding Professional Award, the 1997 FBI Director’s Annual Award for Special Achievement for career accomplishments in connection with missing and exploited children, and the 2009 Lifetime Achievement Award for Outstanding Service from the National Children’s Advocacy Center. He has consulted on thousands of cases and lectured and trained tens of thousands of criminal justice professionals. Contact: caconsultants@earthlink.net