

PSYCHOLOGISTS ADDRESS SEXUAL ABUSE

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We are clinical psychologists (the second author is a graduate student in a doctoral training program) at the University of Nevada, Reno who have been treating sexual abuse victims (the first author for over 30 years). We have treated adults who were abused by priests when they were children; we have also been involved in cases where adults alleged that they were abused by priests, but where the priests deny any wrongdoing. Collectively, we have treated over 2,000 children who have been sexually abused, and also have worked on cases where children have falsely accused others of sexual abuse. As authors, we have published books and peer reviewed journal articles on this subject.

The facts are sometimes difficult to discern: these can be partially shrouded in the mists of history; people offer differing accounts; there are certainly motivations to lie or distort; there are also motivations to falsely accuse—individuals can gain significant sums of money in settlements; individuals may also can have a political agenda against the church; or individuals may even deny that they have abused when they actually have been, to avoid their feelings of shame or embarrassment—or even to protect their abuser. The reporting of abuse and deciding what actually has occurred is no simple matter.

When it comes to priests, we know from an analysis of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice study that a little less than half of the priests were found to be subject to unsubstantiated allegations. An unsubstantiated allegation was defined as “an allegation that was proven to be untruthful and

fabricated" as a result of a criminal investigation. This rate of false accusations is much higher than found in the general population. Additionally, 23% of the priests who were accused of abuse were identified as suffering from behavioral or psychological problems ranging from alcohol and substance abuse to depression and a past history of coercive sex, although most never received treatment for these problems.

More than half of the priests had only one allegation brought against them. Also, it is important to note that a few priests accounted for a disproportionate number of victims: 3.5% of priests accounted for 26% of victims. Even though an investigation was conducted almost every time a report was filed, only 217 or 5.4% of priests were charged with a crime by a district attorney. Of the 217 priests that had criminal charges brought against them, a substantial majority (64%) were convicted; but still a significant number were not found guilty. Most received probation (88%) and/or a prison sentence (73%), while 44% went to jail and 18% were fined.

The problem of the sexual abuse of minors is a national problem, involving the clergy of all religions, as well as public school teachers, coaches, et al. For example, 10% of Protestant clergy were involved in sexual misconduct, 2-3% of which committed sexual abuse. In 2007 Jehovah's Witnesses settled 9 lawsuits with victims alleging that the church's policies protected child sexual abusers. The Church Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints reported 3-4 yearly lawsuits over the course of the last 10 years, which translates to allegations in .4-.5% Mormon wards. The Jewish community has founded two sexual abuse survivors' organizations, Survivors for Justice and Awareness Center, the latter of which provides "the names of 107 rabbis accused of sexual misconduct and 279 other trusted officials (for example, parents and counselors), as well as 85 unnamed abusers."

Did abuse occur simply because somebody said it happened? The clear and simple answer to this question, is "No." Although we

do not know the exact percentage of false reports, it is our clinical experience and the consensus in the field that the majority of children reporting that they have been abused are telling the truth. It is clear that many children have been abused by adults, and this is morally reprehensible, a serious crime and effective measures need to be put into place to prevent this in the future. However, the matter is complex. Our field, for example, does not have clear statistics regarding the percentage of adults who allege that they have been abused as children and who are in fact telling the truth. It needs to be said that adults have unique pathways to false reporting (for example, they can be motivated by money or may be suffering from delusions).

What causes false reporting? Lies. Children and adolescents do not always tell the truth. In fact while we don't know exactly how often they lie about being sexually abused, research shows that those numbers are above zero. Furthermore, because children at times recant (meaning that they first state that they were abused and then later state they were not), we know that children sometimes claim that they have previously lied or at least were mistaken. A variety of factors can influence the likelihood of children making false allegations. For example, children may have been coached by a parent involved in a bitter custody battle to make false statements against the other parent, or may have had a personal vendetta against the alleged perpetrator. It's important to note that children can also lie by claiming that the abuse did not occur when in reality it did. This is more likely to happen if the child was threatened or coerced by the perpetrator.

Beyond lying, false memories can also be formed. In fact, well over 100 scientific research studies have shown that both children and adults can and do form false memories. This research was spurred by the infamous McMartin Day Care case in the 1980s Manhattan Beach, California in which over 360 children alleged that they were abused, often in bizarre ways

(for example, placed in planes and forced to watch babies being fed to sharks). In what was then the longest and most expensive criminal trial in California history, all parties were found not guilty. Dr. Michael Maloney examined the interviewing of the children and found that the interviewer used improper methods to question the children and that these were extremely suggestive, biased, and which lead to false memories on the part of the children. This spurred a number of academic research studies which attempted to understand what causes and how easy it is to form a false memory.

For example, in one study, young children were told that a visitor, Sam Stone, was clumsy and always broke thing that were not his. When "Sam" came to visit the children he did not touch or break anything. The next day the children saw a soiled stuffed bear and a torn book. Even though no child had seen Sam do anything, when asked a quarter of the children (25%) hinted that he might have had a part in the problem. Even though the children had not seen Sam do anything, their prior experience of being told that he was clumsy mixed in with their actual experience of observing him and they concluded that he might have had a part in the torn book and soiled bear.

In addition, over the next ten weeks the children were asked misleading questions/statements by the first interviewer such as, "I wonder if Same Stone got the teddy bear dirty on purpose or by accident?" On the tenth week, a second (seemingly independent) interviewer asked what had happened to the toys. The majority of children (72%) accused Sam of having ruined the toys, and nearly half of the children (45%) reported that they remembered seeing Sam do it. Thus the children's new experiences (being interviewed and having it suggested to them that Sam Stone dirtied the teddy bear) are mixed into the memory of the past event (when Sam Stone came to visit).

Adults may also form false memories. In fact, research has

demonstrated time and time again that eyewitnesses often confuse misleading post-event information with what they have witnessed, thus developing false memories. Elizabeth Loftus of the University of California, Irvine has consistently found that about 25% of adults are so suggestible that fairly simple suggestions result in significant false memories of events that in fact did not occur when they were children (e.g., that they were lost in a mall).

False memories are not identical to repressed memories. A repressed memory is a memory of some major event that while initially stored in memory is allegedly completely erased , often for decades; it then suddenly emerges often after some triggering event. Historically there has been much debate regarding the existence of repressed memories. However, there is a large amount of scientific evidence that clearly shows that repressed memories simply do not exist. Furthermore research studies involving traumatic events that have been verified indicate that people do not forget their trauma. Indeed, traumatic events are actually quite memorable.

Despite the scientific evidence, the legal system has used repressed memories to convict people, including priests, on charges of child sexual abuse. For example, the Massachusetts Supreme Court affirmed the conviction of Paul Shanley (a defrocked priest convicted of sexually abusing a child who claimed that for many years he repressed his memory of being molested) despite an amicus brief signed by almost 100 distinguished psychologists and psychiatrists essentially categorizing the repressed memory phenomenon as junk science.

It should be clear that children who have been abused by priests represent a terrible betrayal of trust, a serious injury to these children, and a criminal as well as a moral failing. However, an examination of the best studies suggest that the rate of priestly sexual abuse is about the same rate found in the general population. Furthermore, it is not clear that Catholic priests abuse children at a higher rate than

other clergy. Certainly, beliefs that “most priests abuse” or that priests are more risk to children than other individuals, are not justified. Second, the pattern of abuse is rather unique: individuals who are victimized by priests are more likely to be adolescents and males. Third, there is evidence that priests have a higher rate of false and unfounded allegations than adults in the general population: less than half of the allegations were found to be substantiated and even with those that were criminally prosecuted a large number—nearly a third—were found not guilty. All of this raises important questions about the phenomenon of false allegations.

We conclude by warning against a rush to judgment. Concern for past victims and intelligent prevention efforts to reduce the rate of abuse to zero, certainly must be a priority. But it should also be a priority to make sure that prejudices against priests do not come into play to demonize innocent individuals.

A longer version of this article, complete with citations and a bibliography, is available on our website under “Papers, Essays and Research.”