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Child Sexual Abuse

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BOOK REVIEWS

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: NEW THEORY AND RESEARCH. By *David Finkelhor*. New York: Free Press, 1984. Pp. xii, 260. \$22.50

Over the past two decades awareness of child sexual abuse among academics and professionals has grown from several convergent trends: the "discovery" of child abuse in the 1960's, concern by feminists over sexual assault and rape, increasing reports to law enforcement and child protective service workers of sexually abused children, and the general "deprivatization" of the family. More recently, general public awareness of child sexual abuse has followed well-publicized cases of child molestation in day-care centers, nationwide concern over pornography and its subsequent links to teenage prostitution, and runaway youth, delinquency, and family violence among adults.

Child Sexual Abuse, by David Finkelhor (with several co-authored chapters), promises at the outset to summarize and consolidate the empirical knowledge developed within the relatively short history of this field. The timing of the book's publication presents it with a unique opportunity to serve as a guide for intervention theory and practice, as well as empirical research. Its goals are to advance theory and research by raising new issues and recasting current knowledge in new theoretical frameworks. Unfortunately, despite an ambitious topical agenda, the book falls somewhat short of these goals. Nevertheless, *Child Sexual Abuse* provides a thorough overview of a relatively new body of theory and knowledge.

The first five chapters culminate in the construction of a theory of child sexual abuse. Building a problem definition from both social and ethical perspectives, the early chapters cite broad societal contingencies and cultural norms on sexual behavior and families. Presumably, the social forces which gave new recognition to child sexual abuse also shaped its epidemiology and contributed to its occurrence. The significant contributions of feminists in framing the issue in the context of sexual exploitation and aggression, and rapid shifts in family structure (through divorce and remarriage or single

parenthood), all locate child sexual abuse within broader social trends in families and sexual mores.

Finkelhor overlooks, however, other important trends of the past two decades: increasing attention to victims in theory, research, and policy and the general deprivatization of the family. Until the mid-1960's, when public policy began to look behind the closed doors of family life, the home was considered to be a peaceful domain.¹ The revelation of a battered child syndrome, and research detailing the incidence and severity of violence toward children, changed these views.² With the new revelations of family problems came increased legal and social interventions in family life, including incest. In the mid-1970's, the emergence of rape crisis programs, together with the growing child protection activities and new interest in victim services, focused attention on non-stranger child sexual victimization. Once the stereotype of the child molester was discarded, new knowledge of child sexual abuse rapidly came to public attention which illustrated the physical and emotional risks to children from sexual contact by adults.

Finkelhor emphasizes the moral component of child sexual abuse. He contends that moral issues form normative attitudes and beliefs on child sexual abuse. Moving quickly over cross-cultural considerations, Finkelhor builds a moral argument based on consent—children are incapable of consenting to sex with adults and lack the ability to consent based on their lack of information and power. Few would argue with the need to protect children from adult sexual demands, especially since children usually cannot protect their own interests. The emotional, physical and social risks of child sexual abuse mandate special measures to protect children. The lively debate in the field over the conditions and appropriate types of intervention is briefly mentioned. The argument that criminal intervention is appropriate in many cases, and state intervention in some form in all cases, is widely accepted.

Finkelhor's efforts to reinforce the moral argument raise several difficult questions. He equates ethical positions on slavery with sex between adults and children. Later, he claims that sexual ethics are rapidly changing, resulting in "moral confusion" (p. 22) which may be partially responsible for child sexual abuse by neutralizing external restraints and sending ambiguous moral signals. The solution proffered is "ethical clarity."

¹ Wardell, Gillespie & Leffler, *Science Against Wives*, in *THE DARK SIDE OF FAMILIES* (1983).

² D. GIL, *VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN* (1970).

Ecological fallacy notwithstanding, Finkelhor's argument raises a giant empirical question. Child sexual abuse was recently "discovered," but its occurrence has been noted regularly in historical works.³ The association with changes in sexual norms may be confounded by increased reports as well as increased incidence. It will take several years of careful study to sort out the reasons for increased reports of child sexual abuse, particularly whether the reports reflect actual increases or simply growing public awareness and inclination toward disclosure.

Finkelhor's theory draws upon data from victims and perpetrators, as well as broader social and moral contingencies. Using 1979 data from a sample of college students, the correlates of victimization are reduced to eight predictors which explain 32% of the variance. These are largely epidemiological locators, such as social status and family composition. Some measures of family sexual dynamics are also included. Sampling issues threaten the validity: if lower income and educational attainment are correlated with child sexual abuse, the sample likely underrepresents these groups. Nevertheless, the results are an important step toward the theory which emerges. Finkelhor again raises moral concerns and social displacements as risk factors—divorce exposes children to dates and stepfathers, while social isolation removes potential deterrents to sexual abuse. The author seems to have made up his mind about the risks to children of a changing moral milieu, but overlooks alternative explanations. For example, divorce has severe economic consequences for women which may diminish their resources as caretakers. These alternative explanations need to be explored.

The book's discussion of perpetrators moves more quickly toward theory, identifying four factors which describe motivation toward sexual behavior. Social learning theory undergirds these processes, with much discussion of the gratifying aspects of sexual arousal. But social learning explanations have been elaborated upon and tested in the domains of both family and sexual violence.⁴ Pornography is raised as a reinforcer, but no better evidence is offered here than in the recent *sturm und drang* from presidential commissions. The resulting explanations of child sexual abuse incorporate both incest and pedophilia, resulting in a "unified" theory. The framework integrates theories of behavior with theories of victim selection. But in so doing, it leaves unanswered several ques-

³ Gordon, *Child Abuse, Gender, and the Myth of Family Independence: Thoughts on the History of Family Violence and Its Social Control, 1880-1920*, 12 N.Y.U. REV. L. & SOC. CHANGE 523 (1983).

⁴ M. PAGELOW, FAMILY VIOLENCE (1984).

tions: Why does childhood sexual victimization lead to pedophilia for some, but physical child abuse or assaults on adults for others in later years? Why do some perpetrators select their own children while others victimize strangers? Why do behaviors range from savage attacks to fetishism or voyeurism? Do some perpetrators assault more than one type of victim, engage in other forms of violence, or a range of sexual behaviors? Are these patterns immutable over time? Moreover, the factors do not address the violent component of some victimization. Though one does not expect the model to address all such questions, these questions clearly should be placed in a future research agenda.

The resulting model is based on four preconditions. It has both the strengths and weaknesses of many theoretical integrations, including situational, individual and cultural factors. Finkelhor states that the model encompasses several types of abuse. As such, Finkelhor runs the risk of explaining everything and nothing at the same time. While attempting to integrate sociological and psychological theory, the "four preconditions" model at times simply grafts together constructs from different disciplines. An example proceeds from arousal (through frustrated sexual needs) to disinhibition (from alcohol) to counterdeterrence (from lack of maternal supervision) to opportunity (from a child's lack of resistance). For example, cognitive processes are needed to describe how pornography overcomes other social controls to "permit" the abuse of children. The linear sequence of this model carries forward the limitations of each successive stage, and overlooks possible interactive or reciprocal effects. Also, it is unclear whether the preconditions are additive, or what threshold must be achieved for abuse to occur. The major limitation of this model is the substitution of correlates for causes. The links which translate cultural norms into behavior need to be specified to begin the process of theory testing and refinement.

Nevertheless, *Child Sexual Abuse* advances existing theory. Further advances will occur when Finkelhor's model integrates prior empirical and theoretical knowledge on aggression, sexual deviance, and addictions. The persistent, compulsive nature of some forms of child molestation raise parallels with other repetitive deviant behaviors. If child sexual abuse spans the theoretical domains of both violent and sexual offenses, integration of theory should borrow from both disciplines.

The balance of *Child Sexual Abuse* reviews findings from several research efforts. These chapters highlight important issues ranging from public awareness and perceptions to reporting of disclosed in-

cidents. The analysis of professionals' responses to reported abuse illustrates the diversity and fragmentation of official responses, as well as the competing philosophies of intervention. Not enough attention is given to preventive effort. The chapter on longer term consequences of child sexual abuse is particularly well done. It leaves unanswered, however, the question of why inter-generational "transmission" is more common among male victims. The brief discussion of the long-term effect of homosexuality would have been better left untouched, in light of the voluminous literature in this area.

The final chapter of *Child Sexual Abuse* calls for future research, but is somewhat limited in identifying other theoretical orientations or disciplines for possible integrations. For example, little attention is given to deviance/social control perspectives or assorted theories on aggression. Also, Finkelhor calls for further theory development based on new developments within the field. Perhaps a second strategy is needed in a still relatively emerging area: the merging of empirical knowledge and theory from separate but related disciplines to move this area forward. For example, other authors have examined sex offenses from an interdisciplinary perspective to integrate explanations of violent sexual assaults with pedophilia and other sex crimes.⁵ Similar attention is needed here.

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DELINQUENCY AND COMMUNITY: CREATING OPPORTUNITIES AND CONTROLS. By *Alden D. Miller* and *Lloyd E. Ohlin*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1985. Pp. 208. \$—

In 1960, Richard A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin published *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs*. The book was dedicated to Robert K. Merton and Edwin H. Sutherland. The dedication is significant because it highlights the book's attempt to integrate two distinct theoretical traditions. Merton, following Durkheim, attempted to account for the societal pressures that led to deviance. Sutherland, following such people as Shaw and McKay, focused on how certain features of the social structure led to the selection and evolution of particular forms of deviant behavior.

⁵ D. WEST, *Sex Offenses and Offending*, in 5 *CRIME AND JUSTICE: AN ANNUAL REVIEW OF RESEARCH* (1985).