
Not the Last Word: Point and Counterpoint

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Child Sexual Abuse:

*What you see depends on where you stand, what you want to see,
and what you want to tell others you have seen.*

What you see depends on where you stand. It is all a question of our perspective, our world view. Attempting to understand other people's perspectives is said to be a mark of adulthood.

Journalists, on the other hand, are often asked to ensure that a narrow and local interest is catered for in stories. Thus we see stories of disasters where hundreds have been killed overseas, in a plane crash for example, and the cryptic sentence "No Australians were believed to be on board" appears in the text.

Richard Cohen, an American journalist, says that journalists call this the "Indian Bus Plunge Syndrome" (Cohen, 1988). Anyone who has been to India, and been on a long bus ride, and who has lived to tell the tale, will be aware that buses come close to sliding off cliffs and mountains every minute of every day. More importantly, India is far away so when a bus plunges off a cliff, as by the law of averages plunge one must, the story does not get played to page one. (According to Cohen, racism plays a part in this filtering of the news).

Sometimes this is taken to amusing lengths. Reading Geoff Maslen's excellent book review in *The Adelaide Advertiser* recently brought this home to me. Reviewing Alan Powell's book *The Shadow's Edge: Australia's Northern War* the article described the "ignomy" (sic) of the events surrounding Japan's bombing of Darwin in 1942. There was confusion amongst the tragedy of 243 deaths and people were accused of cowardice.

Alongside the review was a piece entitled "Adelaide's Taste of War" to provide local colour:

Like Darwin, the war touched Adelaide on August 22, 1944 when the city was "bombed" . . . by our Allies. A dozen homes in West Parkway, Colonel Light Gardens, became the target when the bomb bay doors of a US Liberator bomber opened accidentally. It was not explosives that rained down but crates of oranges, cartons of coke and bottles of beer. Luckily no one was hurt.

(*'Adelaide's Taste of War'*
Chris Moseley
The Adelaide Advertiser
5th November 1988)

Adelaide is a long way from Darwin but . . .

What you see also depends on how uncomfortable it makes you feel. Peter Carey's *Bliss* gives us that message. We don't always see what is there because if we did we would have to act.

David Hechler makes this point about child sexual abuse in a fascinating new book *The Battle and the Backlash: The Child Sexual Abuse War*. Hechler is an investigative journalist and the book makes stimulating reading. The skills and perspective of the investigative journalist provide us

in this case with a new way of looking at a complex area.

Denial of problems, as Hechler indicates with case examples, can leave us feeling more comfortable:

During an interview, a physician told of an allegation that a counsellor had sexually abused a camper at a summer camp owned and operated by a well-known national charity. The physician, who co-founded a hospital based program to identify and treat abused children, sits on the charity's advisory board. Following the allegation, the board met and asked the doctor for advice. What they wanted to know was not how they could protect children from abuse, but how they could protect counsellors from what they assumed to be false allegations.

(Hechler, 1988: 14)

More concerning still, according to Hechler, was the case of the paediatrician who had sexually assaulted some of his young male patients:

The doctor left the area after he was convicted but retained remarkable support within the community. Several patients interviewed on camera said they firmly believed in the man's innocence and would send their children to him again if he returned.

(Hechler, 1988: 14)

Hechler cites the abuse of children by staff in child care centres, by priests and by others in positions of trust and responsibility. The responses tended to be the same. The organisations involved appeared to be concerned with limiting the damage to their own image and protecting themselves rather than protecting vulnerable children. In few cases are there procedures in place to deal with the abuse of children by the staff of such organisations. Few cases are satisfactorily resolved. Another reason for inadequate responses, as Hechler points out, is that children ". . . simply do not have the knowledge or resources to demand competent service" (1988: 26).

This is not a purely American problem, of course. In recent months I have been asked for advice in similar cases involving a school teacher and a priest. Neither organisation involved appeared to have procedures in place to deal with the problem and thus denial and damage control became the organisational priorities.

(The attached *Sunday Telegraph* story (4th December, 1988) tells a similar tale).

But Hechler's book also covers an issue that has concerned me for some time: the issue of when a case of child abuse is "substantiated" or "unsubstantiated". The two cases that follow are taken from Hechler's book.

CASE A

A caseworker in Florida was sent out to investigate a report that children were being sexually abused at a baby-sitting service. The caseworker was investigating her first sexual abuse case, arrived at the service without warning and asked the woman who answered the door if she had been "sexually harassing" children. The house was immaculate, no "sexual harassing" appeared to be going on, and the complaint was thus reported to be unsubstantiated. The couple who ran the baby-sitting service were later to be convicted of "heinous crimes against numerous children" (Hechler, 1988: 128).

CASE B

A mother accused the father of sexually abusing their two children. This allegation was made before divorce proceedings and the wife wanted her husband to 'get help' and save the marriage. Two separate child protection investigations were conducted in the new year as was a police investigation. All three investigations resulted in the accusations being "unfounded". In the ensuing chaos, two paediatricians, nine psychologists, one gynaecologist, one physician, two social workers, one psychiatrist, four lawyers, one judge and, believe it or not, a state police trooper were involved in the case. After more than 40 witnesses had testified in court, custody was finally granted to the father because the mother had, according to the judge, "orchestrated the charges" and "falsely accused the father".

Hechler leaves us in no doubt that he believes justice was not done (Hechler, 1988: 176-177, 197-8).

Hechler's discussion of what the terms "unsubstantiated" or "unfounded" mean makes interesting reading. Substantiation rates are important. They have been used to argue that voluntary reporting of child abuse is better than mandatory reporting, for example, but there is disagreement over what the word means.

Unsubstantiated reports of child abuse can be taken to mean "inappropriately made", even "totally false" (Hechler, 1988: 133). And yet others have argued that unsubstantiated reports also include cases where abuse may have occurred. This is certainly true of at least one State in Australia where unsubstantiated can mean cases where abuse has occurred but the suspected perpetrator is no longer present.

American substantiation rates of child abuse reports are frequently quoted in Australia — and yet, as Hechler describes:

" . . . the term does not mean the same thing in all States. And there is often plenty of room for discretion within a State's definition. For example, in California "an incident can be unfounded only if it is proven

to be a false report, inherently improbable, an accidental injury, or not within the definition of child abuse'. This clearly allows a great deal of latitude. And a child protective administrator added that if an alleged child victim could not or would not talk to an investigator, the case would be unfounded, even though the child may have been abused.

(Hechler, 1988: 134)

What is more, Hechler states that in New York City, cases can be labelled unfounded even if there is medical evidence of child abuse because the system requires in some instances that an alleged perpetrator be named: "Thus, if a child has a venereal disease, but is not verbal, the case may be called unfounded" (1988: 134).

Arguments over substantiation rates ignore many of the finer points of child protection work. Family support agencies may refer a child and her or his family for assessment purposes, or to get a further opinion as to whether their services are functioning effectively for the child and family, or to get help in deciding whether further action, for example court intervention, is necessary. In some instances, and in some States, such cases may be classified as unsubstantiated — and yet they may represent perfectly legitimate child protection referrals. If these are recorded as unsubstantiated it does not mean they are inappropriate (or even, as some seem to believe, malicious referrals).

In my experience, few referrals are malicious. The tendency throughout is to minimise both the abuse and the continuing risk to the child. The result has been described as "the rule of optimism" (Dingwall et al., 1983: 79).

As Hechler cryptically notes, the terms unfounded and unsubstantiated require "clarification". Too often, like the Queen in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, we declare that words mean what we choose them to mean.

The helping professions are blighted by imprecision. The lives of children can be damaged by it. That is why it is important to recognise that what we see depends not only on where we stand but also on what we want to see; how we then describe what we see depends on what we want others to believe we have seen.

If you see what I mean . . .

From the Sunday Telegraph, 4th December 1988:

KINDY SEX ALLEGATIONS HIT A WALL

Allegations that a North Shore pre-school teacher sexually assaulted as many as 30 young children in his care are unlikely to be tested in a court of law.

The only evidence collected by police during a two-month investigation is verbal accounts from the children involved — considered insufficient evidence for prosecution.

The man involved has vehemently denied the allegations since the matter was first raised with authorities five months ago.

The children — boys and girls — were aged between three and four when the alleged offences occurred.

The man, then a teacher at a pre-school managed by the NSW Kindergarten Union, is now in a position where he has no professional contact with children.

Family and Community Services Minister Mrs Virginia Chadwick said her staff had referred statements by the children for psychiatric analysis in an attempt to determine the possibility that children had been coached, had "words put in their mouths" or had fabricated the allegations.

Mrs Chadwick said the analysis was vital to give her direction in what action, if any, she should take.

REFERENCES

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- Dingwall, R., Eekelaar, J., and Murray, T. (1983) *The Protection of Children: State Intervention and Family Life*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Hechler, D. (1988) *The Battle and the Backlash: The Child Sexual Abuse War*, Lexington, Massachusetts and Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington Books.



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