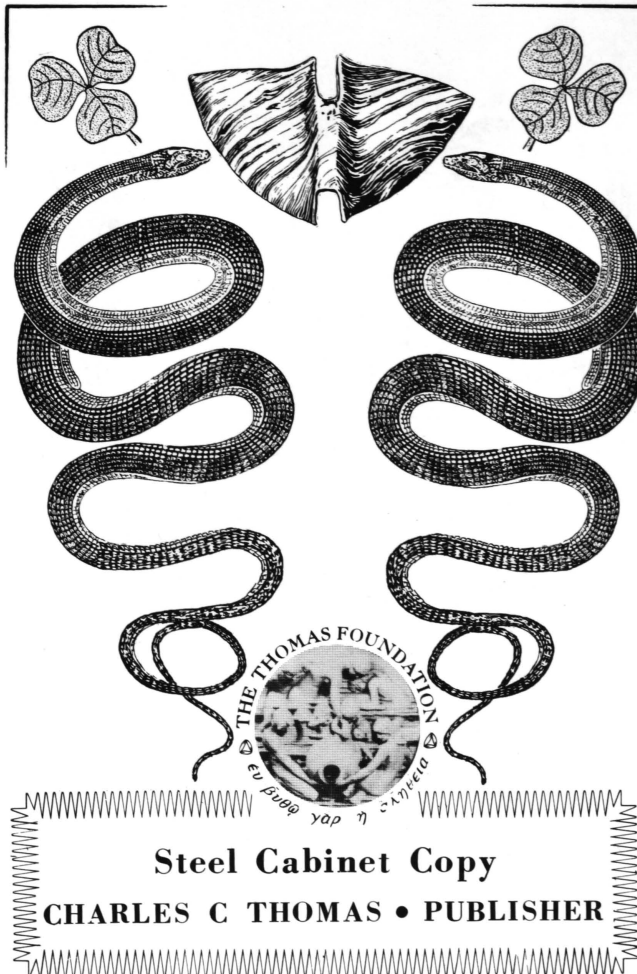


THE REAL WORLD OF  
CHILD INTERROGATIONS

RALPH UNDERWAGER  
HOLLIDA WAKEFIELD





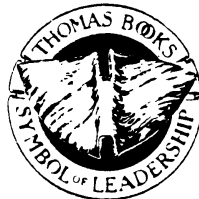
**THE REAL WORLD OF  
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# THE REAL WORLD OF CHILD INTERROGATIONS

*By*  
RALPH UNDERWAGER  
*and*  
HOLLIDA WAKEFIELD

*With*  
Ross Legrand  
Christine Samples Bartz



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CIP

*To Paul E. Meehl, Ph.D.  
Regents Professor, University of Minnesota  
Who taught us respect for the real world,  
the value of faith and reason,  
and to aim at straight thinking*





## INTRODUCTION

Throughout our careers as psychologists, we have provided therapy to sex offenders, victims, families, and adults who were victimized as children. In the beginning, although we occasionally saw a case involving false allegations, most of our sexual abuse cases were actual abuse which we discovered, reported, and treated. For the most part, we worked with the justice system to respond to abuse with treatment and rehabilitation of the offender, the family, and the victim. Prosecution of the offender was not a primary nor superordinate goal. We also provided treatment for sexual offenders throughout this period.

But five years ago we started seeing a change in the cases we encountered. A South Dakota woman was accused of sexually abusing two teenage retarded sons and a normal son, age ten. The allegation was that she had repeated intercourse with them. The woman steadfastly denied abusing her three boys. The public defender had contacted dozens of psychologists before she found anyone who was willing to look at the case. We agreed to evaluate the documents and the attorney retained us as experts. We suggested that the sheriff and social worker had pressured and influenced the boys to produce the statements about abuse through numerous coercive interviews with them. Ralph testified in April, 1984, and the result was a hung jury. The state did not try her again.

Following this, in August, 1984, we became involved in the notorious Scott County cases. The county attorney, Ms. Kathleen Morris, charged 25 adults in the small town of Jordan with sexually abusing 40 children in what she believed to be two interlocking sex rings. Initially there were allegations of child pornography production and connections with organized crime. Ms. Morris directed and controlled the investigation by the law enforcement and human services agencies of Scott County, Minnesota that produced the charges. The investigation had begun in late September, 1983 and by the spring of 1984, the parents had been arrested and charged, and the children had been placed in foster homes where they remained for over a year and a half.

Mr. Barry Voss, attorney for Mrs. Bentz, asked us to examine the documents and perhaps testify in the trial of Robert and Lois Bentz, the first of the adults to be tried. The Bentzes were charged with sexually abusing at least nine children, including their three sons. We studied police reports, case worker reports, psychological evaluations, videotaped interviews of children, charges, and statements supposedly made by the children. What we saw convinced us that the statements about sexual abuse being made by the children were the result of regular, repeated interviews and intense pressure to describe abuse. Also, the bizarre and improbable nature of the accusations increased the likelihood that they were not true. At the trial Ralph testified as to the likely effects of the process these children had been put through by the county.

On September 19th the jury returned a not guilty verdict. The next month, after the jury had been impaneled but before testimony was to begin in the trial of Don and Cindy Buchan, the prosecutor, Ms. Morris, dropped all charges against all the adults except one who had already pled guilty. Ms. Morris stated that she dropped the charges because the judge had ruled that she had to give the defense all police notes and that to do so would endanger an ongoing major investigation. As the interviews progressed, the stories had grown to include accounts of ritual murders and religious rites along with the deviant sexual orgies and this was now touted as a major ongoing investigation.

The Attorney General of Minnesota, Hubert Humphrey III, took over the investigation of these charges after Ms. Morris dropped them. In February of 1985, the Attorney General issued a report of the five-month investigation by the FBI, Minnesota's BCA, and the Attorney General's office. The report concluded that the statements made by the children were not credible, because the procedures followed in the investigation exerted undue and coercive influence upon them. They determined that the children had been questioned repeatedly, over an extended period of time, by the prosecutor, police, therapists, social workers, and foster parents, all who believed that the abuse was real. For some children, the allegations of sexual abuse evolved into stories of mutilations and homicides. However, the report says the children stated they lied about the murders, because they were afraid of the interrogators and wanted to please them. One lad said he got the idea for his story of ritualistic torturing from a TV show he had watched (Humphrey, 1985; Erickson, 1985).

The national publicity given to the Scott County cases led to calls to us

from all over the United States. Five years later we have consulted or testified in cases of sexual abuse throughout the United States, the military justice system, Canada, New Zealand, England, and Australia.

Over the past five years, we have now been actively involved in over three hundred cases of child sexual abuse accusations and have consulted in many others. This active involvement has included reviewing documents and audio- and videotapes, testifying in court, interviewing and/or testing alleged victims, evaluating alleged perpetrators, and evaluating and/or providing therapy to victims, families, and perpetrators. We have conducted research projects in six areas related to child sexual abuse. They are: (1) the interrogation of children as it is done in the real world; (2) therapy given to children when there is an accusation of sexual abuse; (3) judicial assessment of competence; (4) use of anatomically detailed dolls; (5) MMPI profiles of persons falsely accused; and (6) consequences to mental health professionals who aid in the defense of a person accused of sexual abuse. These research efforts are described in our book, *Accusations of Child Sexual Abuse*. The seventh area of research is the systematic analysis of cases where we have been consultants and expert witnesses. This is the beginning of that analysis.

Table 1 gives a summary of the 330 cases in which we have been involved in the last five years and the outcomes for those which have been adjudicated. We classified the cases as divorce and custody, day care, teacher or other professional (coach, priest, doctor, counselor, etc.), friend or neighbor, stepfather or other relative, stranger, and own child (not in a divorce and custody situation) in order to compare the outcomes in different types of cases.

The outcomes of the 291 adjudicated cases were classified in three categories. Acquittal/no abuse includes the following: the charges were dropped, the case was dismissed by the judge, the individual was acquitted in criminal court, and the family or civil court determined that no abuse had occurred. The category, guilty/abuse, includes the following: the individual pled guilty, the individual was found guilty in a criminal trial, and the court determined that abuse had occurred in family or civil court. The third category is a plea bargain or stipulation. In a fourth group are cases where there has been no adjudication to date.

Of the 330 cases, 191 (58%) involved criminal charges, 119 (36%) were in family court, 9 (3%) were military court-martials, and 26 (8%) were civil suits for damages. (Because several cases involved more than one type of court, the totals add up to more than 330 and 100%.)

**Table 1**  
**Adjudication of Different Types of Cases**

| Type<br>of Case             | Adjudicated Cases      |     |                  |      |                              |     |                      |      | No<br>Adjudi-<br>cation |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|-----|------------------|------|------------------------------|-----|----------------------|------|-------------------------|
|                             | Acquittal/<br>No Abuse |     | Guilty/<br>Abuse |      | Plea Bargain/<br>Stipulation |     | Total<br>Adjudicated |      |                         |
|                             | N                      | %   | N                | %    | N                            | %   | N                    | %    |                         |
| Divorce/Custody<br>N= 130   | 89                     | 78% | 20               | 18%  | 5                            | 4%  | 114                  | 100% | 16                      |
| Day Care<br>N=34            | 13                     | 48% | 11               | 41%  | 3                            | 11% | 27                   | 100% | 7                       |
| Teacher<br>N=20             | 13                     | 81% | 1                | 6%   | 2                            | 13% | 16                   | 100% | 4                       |
| Friend/Neighbor<br>N=50     | 19                     | 40% | 21               | 45%  | 7                            | 15% | 47                   | 100% | 3                       |
| Stepfather/Relative<br>N=54 | 22                     | 45% | 20               | 41%  | 7                            | 14% | 49                   | 100% | 5                       |
| Own Child<br>N=41           | 22                     | 60% | 12               | 32%  | 3                            | 8%  | 37                   | 100% | 4                       |
| Stranger<br>N=1             | 0                      | 0%  | 1                | 100% | 0                            | 0%  | 1                    | 100% | 0                       |
| Total<br>N=330              | 178                    | 61% | 86               | 30%  | 27                           | 9%  | 291                  | 100% | 39                      |

Based upon our experience, research, and review of the literature, we believe there are serious problems in the procedures followed when there is an accusation of child sexual abuse. The system of laws, policies, and procedures determining the way accusations of child sexual abuse are handled has developed in the absence of empirical data (American Psychological Association, 1987; Finkelhor, 1984; Finkelhor, 1986; Furby, Weinrott & Blackshaw, 1989; Lusk & Waterman, 1986; Sgroi, 1982). It is not unusual for social change to occur without factual support for the changes. Child sexual abuse is what political scientists term a *valence issue*, that is, an issue that has a strong symbolic character and elicits a uniform emotional response so that there is little disagreement (Nelson, 1984).

Facts are not required to unleash passion or guide new policies. What is supposed to be the most restrained and rational deliberative body in

our nation, the U.S. Supreme Court, has frequently based decisions on psychological assumptions not supported by any data (Melton, 1987a). Psychology, too, has often confused assumptions with fact and anointed error with the benison of science (Scarr, 1985). When false myths are claimed to be true, science has failed its function to describe reality (Melton, 1987b). When myth and reality are confused, the greatest danger is the emergence of mistaken policies and procedures sure to produce the unintended consequences effect. Another consequence of erroneous myths is that real problems and needs are ignored and not understood. The end result may be that the cure is worse than the disease.

A second problem we see with the child sexual abuse system is the rapid extension of criminal sanctions in two directions. High frequency behaviors that heretofore have been understood to be within a normal range, such as bathing with children, tickling, affectionate pats, touching genitals (Rosenfeld, Bailey, Siegel & Bailey, 1986; Rosenfeld, Siegel & Bailey, 1987) are now behaviors for which people may be accused of sexual abuse. On the other hand, very low frequency behaviors which clearly are criminal, such as ritual satanic murders, torture, coprophilia, urophilia, and cannibalism are given credence and raised to the level of commonplace occurrence. People are sent to prison with no consideration of antecedent probabilities, that is, the inherent incredibility of bizarre and highly improbable accounts.

A third problem is the abdication of the justice system's responsibility for fact finding to law enforcement and mental health professionals who are empowered to make decisions that dramatically and permanently affect people's lives. Judges, prosecutors, and juries often rubber stamp the opinions and decisions of such experts, who have no accountability for their decisions. We have seen courts approve as experts persons with only undergraduate degrees or less, one or two weekend seminars or workshops, and maybe a four-hour inservice training program. Confering great power on persons with little knowledge, no sophistication or depth, and limited abilities can only increase the risk of error and fail to protect children.

A major problem is the way children are interviewed. The typical investigative procedures involve repeated interrogations by police, social workers, and/or mental health professionals. This experience may result in adults inadvertently molding and developing an account of sexual abuse in a nonabused child. It may create confusion of fact and fantasy

and teach the child to please adults by giving them what they want. It is through this process that a false accusation may be developed.

We have observed in the system a complete lack of attention to the consequences of embroiling a child in a false accusation. We have seen little awareness of what it does to a child if a mistake is made and nonabused children are treated as if they had been abused. This experience is neither innocuous, benign, nor inconsequential. It is harmful and may be permanently damaging and destructive. It is both puzzling and ironic that those most vociferous in championing the welfare of children and the need to protect them remain oblivious to the possible harm of a mistaken adult belief that a child has been abused.

The total number of reported cases of child sexual abuse has increased markedly in the past decade. Although the number of false allegations included in these reports is indeterminate, there are estimates of the number of false allegations of child abuse and neglect in general. Douglas Besharov, the former director of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, reports that 65 percent of all reports of suspected child abuse turn out to be unfounded. This determination, involving about 750,000 children each year, is made after abuse has been reported and a child protection agency does an investigation. In contrast, in 1976 only 35% of all reports of suspected child abuse were unfounded (Besharov, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1986).

Even following this extensive screening of reports, at any one time around 400,000 families across the country are under the supervision of child protection. However, a study conducted for the U.S. National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect found that in about half of these cases, the parents never actually maltreated their children (Besharov, 1985c). This figure is for child maltreatment in general. But there is no reason to assume that it is any different with reports of child sexual abuse. In fact, the ten-fold increase in reported cases of child sexual abuse in the past decade makes it likely that many of these cases involve people who have not abused their children. (See Wakefield & Underwager, 1988 for a discussion of false accusations.)

When suggestive and coercive interviews result in false allegations of sexual abuse, the entire system is weakened. Besharov points out that the dramatic increase in unfounded reports prevents help from reaching children who need it. The great number of junk cases weakens the system and we are now facing "...an imminent social tragedy; the nationwide collapse of child protective efforts caused by a flood of



unfounded reports" (Besharov, 1986, p. 22). The protective service agencies are making mistakes on both sides. Because the system is so overloaded, children who actually are abused are not properly protected. Studies indicate that 25 to 50 percent of the children who die under circumstances suspicious of abuse or neglect have been reported to child protection (Besharov, 1988).

We believe that false allegations of sexual abuse have become a serious problem. Out of over three hundred cases in which we have been involved over the past five years, in three-fifths of those adjudicated there was a determination of no abuse. The percentage of false allegations is particularly high in certain types of situations, such as acrimonious custody and visitation disputes.

The people who are the target of a false report of child abuse are subjected to enormous stress and trauma. The investigation is difficult and invades the privacy of the family. If the report is founded, it can cost thousands of dollars to fight the charges. Our therapy caseload now includes people recovering from the effects of a false accusation along with people who are victims or perpetrators of actual abuse.

In the past, most child sex abuse cases were discovered when a child spontaneously told someone about it. But now the abuse is often alleged only after an adult began questioning a child. The proliferation of prevention programs in the schools and the media attention to sexual abuse has resulted in parents, doctors, teachers, and others becoming hypersensitive to the possibility that a child may be sexually abused. Any suspicious circumstances may result in misinterpretation and questioning of a young child who then becomes vulnerable to all of the effects of influence and selective reinforcement. When a story about abuse develops in this fashion, it is not a deliberate fabrication. In most cases of false accusations, the adults are caught up in the account and believe it is true.

With the increase in reported child sexual abuse, and the number of cases which depend upon the uncorroborated testimony of a young child, there has been controversy about the susceptibility of children's memory to suggestion and the reliability of their testimony. This has resulted in a number of research studies addressing this issue. What we have found, and report on in Chapters 1 and 2, is that no one has come close in duplicating in laboratory research what takes place when children are interviewed in the real world. Neither professional nor lay people have any idea of what actually happens when children are interro-

gated by adults who are trying to substantiate abuse. None of the research studies contain the level of suggestions, pressure, and coercion frequently exerted on children in real life situations. To treat children in an experiment in the way they are treated in the real world would be grossly unethical behavior for a psychologist.

The purpose of this book is to show what really happens in child interrogations. Many researchers have acknowledged the difference between what they do and the real world. They have called for more ecologically valid studies, that is, information about what the real world is like when children are interrogated (Ceci, Toglia, & Ross, 1987). This book is built around interviews in real cases and we have selected actual interviews as the central part of the chapters. These are interviews that we reviewed and analyzed as part of our services in consulting on a case. The interviews we have included in the book are not the worst examples of those we have reviewed but are typical of those we have seen. Over the past four years we have developed a rating system for analyzing the tapes. This is described in Chapter 2 and the ratings are also included in the transcripts in the book.

The case histories that accompany the interviews in the chapters are based on actual cases on which we have consulted, although we have changed names and other identifying details. In some of the chapters we have combined several cases in order to completely disguise the history, but there is nothing described that we haven't encountered in one of our cases. At the same time, the central focus of each chapter, the actual interview, is left unchanged. Each chapter illustrates a specific problem area we have observed in our experience. The cases from which the interviews are taken come from all over the United States.

Our purpose in publishing these interviews is to demonstrate what really happens in many cases of alleged child sexual abuse. Our hope is that by recognizing the problems, the process can be improved. It is not necessary to subject children to the type of interviews seen here.

We know enough to do it better.

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**THE REAL WORLD OF  
CHILD INTERROGATIONS**





## Chapter 1

# INTERROGATION OF CHILDREN

HOLLIDA WAKEFIELD, RALPH UNDERWAGER AND ROSS LEGRAND

**H**ow can children say sexual things happened to them that didn't happen?

This is the fundamental question when we must decide whether an accusation of child sexual abuse is true or false. The question is most pointed when there is an uncorroborated statement by a child about sexual abuse which the accused perpetrator denies. If the sexual abuse is not real, then how and why is the child telling about sexual behaviors and describing abusive acts? How can children talk about sexual acts if they haven't experienced them?

When there is an accusation of child sexual abuse, children often are the only witnesses offered. Frequently, no corroborating or supporting evidence is found in spite of extensive effort. Then the accusation rests solely upon a child's alleged words. Increasingly, adults report a statement, claim the child said it, and, under new legislation establishing exceptions to the hearsay rule, the adult report is admissible as evidence. The person accused is saying, "No! I didn't do that!," but adults can't believe that a young child would make up an account of sexual abuse so the story is often unconditionally accepted. Adults may believe the simplistic maxim, "Children never lie about sexual abuse." Therefore, whenever a child supposedly makes a disclosure about sexual abuse, those adults immediately believe that the abuse is real.

But it is mistake to pose the question in the form of whether the child has lied. To lie assumes a conscious, willful, and deliberate purpose and intent to deceive. Young children are unlikely to have the cognitive capacity or the maliciousness to lie in this way, although some older children and adolescents may. Children don't know what they don't know. Their experience is limited and their store of available knowledge is small. When asked questions they don't understand or to which they have no answer, they can blithely give an answer without knowing it is

mistaken. Adults who lack knowledge about children's developing capacities may not see how the child has responded without knowledge and take the answer literally, especially if it suits their purposes. Unless there is strong evidence of deliberate, intentional dissembling, it is foolish to spend much time or energy on the question of children lying. It is almost always the wrong question.

### THE FIRST SOURCE OF ANSWERS

When trying to understand a child's behavior, the first place to look is in the environment of the child and observable behaviors, not to inferred internal states or dispositions. The farther away an interpretation is from observable events, the greater the probability of error. The more complex the inferred causal chain and the more speculative the inferred internal events, the more likelihood there is to introduce error. Therefore, before speculating about processes going on inside a child, which can only be guesses, it is best to get as much data and clarity as possible about the environment and the child's actual observed behavior. Reports of children's behavior made by adults with either a bias or a benefit to be gained should not be immediately accepted as accurate. Retrospective accounts and parental descriptions of children's behavior have been shown by years of research to be unreliable.

It is surprising that so many mental health professionals apparently think first of dynamic, internal, private events (i.e., intervening variables such as shame, fear, anxiety, guilt, embarrassment, etc.) when interpreting the behavior of a child rather than considering environmental variables. We have seen this exclusive focus on inferred private, subjective events in almost every case where mental health professionals believe the abuse was real but the allegations turn out to be false. When behaviors are explained and interpreted by inferring unobservable internal events inside a young child, the alternative interpretation of causal environmental influences outside the child is seldom considered.

An example we have seen many times is that a child's lack of response to questions is interpreted to mean the child is ashamed. The adult assumes children are ashamed of sex and of being sexually abused. Therefore, the child's nonresponse is seen as consistent with sexual abuse. The child's silence then is transformed into denial of the sexual abuse. Because denial is bad for the child and disclosure is good for the child, the adult coerces the child to produce affirmations of abuse.

Under this pressure the child may say something interpreted as support for abuse. This interpretation is then offered in testimony as evidence for abuse. What began as observed behavior of silence or nonresponsiveness by the child has been changed by an intellectual alchemy into evidence of abuse.

When an adult believes there was abuse and a child says there was no abuse, the adult may assume that the child has a secret about abuse. Therefore the child is believed to have been threatened by the perpetrator to keep the hideous secret. To tell the secret is good because then the child can be saved. The adult must press the child to reveal the secret in order to protect the child from the violent and abusive perpetrator. A line of questions about secrets begins. If a child answers questions with a "No," the questions are repeated. Denials are ignored. Adult pressure continues until some response affirming a secret about abuse is obtained. The adult is reinforced by the role of the virtuous and noble protector and saviour of children.

But it is more parsimonious to ask if the child's nonresponse may be caused by strangeness of the environment, an unfamiliar adult, or other external factors. Or it may simply be that nothing happened and the child can't say anything about a nonevent. It takes less of a leap of faith to understand nonresponse or denial to be caused by environmental variables or the absence of any abuse than to infer the chain of speculative intervening variables required to say nonresponse and initial denial supports a hypothesis of abuse. In a curious turnabout, those who claim most strongly that children must be believed don't believe the child when the child says no abuse occurred. What is believed is limited to statements supporting the accusation of abuse.

Environmental cues and constraints are powerful determinants of behavior for both adults and children. Children are more susceptible to environmental influences than are adults. Therefore, the place to begin understanding a child's behavior is in the environment. This does not exclude later consideration of internal, private events but rather is likely to sharpen and focus any discussion of internal events, reducing speculative invention of nonempirical intervening variables.

When a mental health professional fails to consider environmental factors when dealing with an accusation of sexual abuse, there are three possible causes: (1) the professional may be ignorant, ill-trained and unaware of the scientific facts about environmental influence; (2) the professional may be committed to a theoretical position (i.e., Freudianism,

ego-psychology) that minimizes or denies the influence of the environment and emphasizes internal subjective processes; (3) the professional unwittingly may be projecting onto the child an adult subjective experience of adult internal motivations and intents. An adult cannot know what it is like to be a child. The adult mind cannot function without adult capacities. Therefore an adult may project onto the child an adult perception of what it is like to be abused. Whatever the cause, failure to consider environmental influences when evaluating an allegation of child sexual abuse based solely upon statements of a young child shows a flawed, mistaken, and biased approach.

### ADULT SOCIAL INFLUENCE

When examining the environment of a child the first question to ask is what degree, level, and type of adult social influence is exerted upon the child in that specific environment. The power and centrality of social influence is one of the best established facts in psychology. To ignore the impact of social influence upon any human interactive behavior reduces the credibility of any explanation offered. How adults behave toward children during the course of a developing sexual abuse accusation must be considered a possible causal factor in producing statements by a child. Before assuming that an accusation is true in the absence of independent, corroborating data, adult social influence as a cause of children's statements must be ruled out.

Physics, the paradigm of hard science, is forced by experiment to continue to embrace quantum mechanics and the basic concept of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle that any measurement or observation changes and interferes with what is being measured. Physicists have no convincing reason to believe that the objects of which the world is made exist independently of their somewhat puzzled observers (Economist, 1989). When the best knowledge and understanding of the world we live in cannot prove that reality is beyond the mind of the observer, surely psychologists should attend to the process of observation and assessment in human interactions.

We have seen again and again, in sexual abuse cases throughout this and other countries the massive imposition of adult social influence on suggestible children. Children are interrogated repeatedly by adults who believe that the abuse is real. The adult behaviors toward the children are frequently coercive, leading, suggestive, and punitive. Under such

pressure, children may produce statements which adults then believe prove sexual abuse. Through this environment of powerful adult influence the child may be taught an account of sexual abuse that is false.

By the time this process of adult social influence has been repeated, sometimes over a number of months or even years, a nonabused child may come to believe the story. When a child has been taught inadvertently a fabricated story, repeated it enough to produce subjective certainty, for that child a nonevent has become reality. This is not a benign or innocuous experience. It may result in long-term damage to a child. This also means that the child may appear truthful, credible, and reliable, because for the child it is a real story. Reliance by a fact-finder upon the demeanor of a witness to assess credibility is then an error. Christiansen (1987) points out that cross-examination, which is supposed to give the trier of fact a basis for evaluating the credibility of the witness, will probably fail with a child witness whose memory has been falsified by being taught a story.

### VICTIMS OF GOOD INTENTIONS

An adult is seldom deliberately trying to brainwash the child or develop a fabricated account of sexual abuse, although this may happen occasionally in divorce and custody situations. Thoennes and Pearson (1988) state that court counselors in their study saw deliberate false reporting in 13 percent of the accusations arising in contested custody cases. However, deliberate fabrications probably account for a small minority of the total cases of false accusations. Instead, an interviewer is likely to have a preconceived idea about abuse along with a lack of awareness of suggestibility of children and environmental factors, including the stimulus value of adults.

In the cases we have examined which turn out to involve false accusations, the interviewers show little understanding of the impact their procedures have on the children being assessed. This is true of mental health and law enforcement professionals as well as lay people. Much of the literature on child sexual abuse does not deal forthrightly with this issue but rather proceeds on the assumption that whatever a child says must be believed. This literature does not discuss the impact of the interrogation process upon statements used to establish that abuse occurred. This is surprising and distressing in that any knowledgeable and competent mental health professional knows that in any human

interaction involving two or more people, factors of social influence are at work.

### **BELIEF IN THE FACE OF UNPOPULAR FACTS**

Many professionals are convinced that any alleged disclosures from a child must be unconditionally believed. Yuille (undated) points out that children's disclosures of abuse are now given so much credibility that it is often sufficient for the child to show sexual symbolism in play for a social agency to remove the child from home. If interrogators assume that abuse occurred, they will perceive their role as substantiating the abuse so that appropriate action can be taken to protect the child and punish the perpetrator. Raskin and Yuille (in press) state, "It is common practice for interviewers to assume that the allegations are true and that the purpose of the assessment is to obtain information that can be used to arrive at that conclusion."

An adult who believes the accusation will question the child in a way that shapes, molds, and creates statements about abuse. The attempt to get statements about abuse may result in incredible pressure and coercion. DeLipsey and James state regarding their review of videotaped interviews that "... the most distressing problems were the use of leading and suggestive questions and coercion to make the child confirm certain information" (p. 238).

Years of research in social psychology demonstrate the principles of behavior that are involved in adult social influence on children (see Wakefield & Underwager, 1988). Together with the evidence for suggestibility, these unpopular facts may disconfirm or falsify many allegations of child sexual abuse. But what happens when there is scientific evidence contrary to strongly held beliefs?

What should happen is described by Skinner (Mahoney, 1976), "Science is a willingness to accept facts even when they are opposed to our wishes." Hardly anyone would say that we should deliberately ignore facts. Scientists agree that a good theory is one that can be tested and proven false. When a theory or concept is falsified, it is reasonable to expect that some attitudes and beliefs will change in accordance with the facts.

What does happen is demonstrated by a large body of research. People don't like to see or hear anything that conflicts with deeply held beliefs or wishes. Some time ago the response to bad news was to kill the



messenger—literally. Today, it is more likely that the source of facts contrary to firmly held dogmas is demeaned and belittled. When those who ignore the scientific facts disconfirming their beliefs are confronted with those facts, the best prediction is that they will demean the source and refuse to change their beliefs or behaviors (Aronson, 1988; Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1958; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Ross & Lepper, 1980; Ross, Lepper & Hubbard, 1976).

What are these facts from social psychology? There are several areas of the science of psychology that appear in every introductory psychology textbook, including expectancy effects and experimenter bias, conformity and compliance, and reinforcement theory. These are firmly grounded in theory and the research literature. Every psychologist ought to be familiar with them and understand their basic principles. They cannot be gainsaid or ignored without truncating the body of scientific fact psychology has built. These are the unpopular facts that must be acknowledged.

The research on the expectancy effect and experimenter bias demonstrates that expectancies about an outcome of an experiment or interaction can influence the outcome itself. Biased investigators will err in the direction of their expectancies when they summarize, analyze, and interpret their data, and their own attitudes and expectancies will influence the actual behavior of their subjects. The expectancy and bias of interrogators has like effects.

In interviews, the bias of the interviewer can affect both the selection of the information to be recorded and the substance of the information itself. Subjects respond the way they feel to be most proper in light of the interviewer's verbally and nonverbally communicated expectancies. Garbarino and Scott (1988) state that in interviews with children, expectations of the professional, unfounded in empirical data, in which the professional strongly believes, can influence what information is given by the children. If the professional believes that all or most allegations of abuse are real, he or she will produce information to validate abuse.

The research on conformity and compliance demonstrates how the desire to get approval from others exerts a powerful influence upon behavior. In interviews with children there is pressure to conform to the perceived expectations of the adults. This can only be avoided by a careful effort by interviewers who recognize their own stimulus value and minimize cues on how to respond.

Reinforcement theory describes how behavior is controlled by the

consequences that follow the behavior. Theories on parenting techniques recognize that the best way to change the behavior of a child is to use attention, praise, approval, and other social reinforcement. Children are sensitive to approval from adults and will learn quickly to behave in the way that gets rewarded. They are reinforced for making certain statements simply by a smile, a nod, an approving tone of voice, or saying "What else?" If interviewers are not aware of this, they will inadvertently reinforce responses of the child that confirm their prior biases.

In many cases the reinforcement given to children is obvious. A child may be told that she is brave and that "Mommy will be proud of you for telling the scary secret," or a child is told that he can go for a treat after he tells about the abuse. Slicner and Hanson (1989) describe interviews where children were promised or given candy, food, beverages, and toys, including one interviewer who presented a child with five lollipops in the course of one interview, while keeping one in her own mouth throughout the session. They describe another where the child, exhausted after a two-and-one-half hour interview with five adults pleading for details, was told that as soon as she complied, she would be taken to lunch at McDonalds. DeLipsey and James (1988) noted frequent instances of bribery and coercion in their review of videotaped interviews. They report that uncooperative children were often offered candy and food or denied access to the lavatory until they finished the interview.

It is also reinforcing to remove an aversive stimulus. When an adult stops asking repeated questions when the child produces the desired answer after several repetitions, the cessation reinforces a specific answer and may also reinforce giving an answer approved by the interrogator. Slicner and Hanson (1989) state that "both the proximity of concluding a lengthy and excruciating interview, as well as the promise of food in exchange for providing a statement serve as powerful reinforcers" (p. 69).

Where adult reinforcement of a child is not obvious, it still must be considered as a potential factor in the production of statements. Study of the process of psychotherapy shows there is a strong effect of subtle verbal and nonverbal behaviors by therapists to produce conformity by the client to the values and attitudes of the therapist (Garfield & Bergin, 1978; Tjeltveit, 1983). The same process is present in the interaction between an interrogator and a child and should be acknowledged.

## THE CHILD IS AN OBJECT, NOT A PERSON

When an adult relates to a child by ignoring the interactive nature of the relationship, denying any impact of the adult's behavior, intents, and purposes, and refusing to consider environmental variables, that adult has objectified the child. The child is not treated as a person, is not understood to be a child, but is only an object for the adult's agenda.

This is the same basic problem feminists have objected to in their discussion of male-female relationships. When a man approaches a woman with nothing in his mind but his own agenda—sexual satisfaction—and shows no awareness of the other person's value, needs, desires, capacities, or personhood, the woman is turned into an object. This demeans, diminishes, and renders powerless the person objectified. Feminists have shown that this is a form of oppression and victimization. In this instance the rhetoric matches the reality. Male dominance over and control of women has generated deep, enduring, and often devastating pain. It has produced costs to individuals, society, the economy, culture, and nation.

If children are to be treated as persons in their own right, adults must be aware of their own position of power and ability to dominate a child. Adults must control their own purposes, assumptions, and behavior toward a child and acknowledge the potential for their behavior to influence the child. If this is not done, there is no way the adult can avoid objectifying the child. It is tragic that an attempt to ensure that children are treated as persons winds up not treating them as persons. We can and must do better in discovering ways to relate to children that foster their individuality and their personhood.

## HOW DOES IT GET STARTED?

The development of the system we now have for responding to allegations of child sexual abuse is a social process. The main players are medicine, politics, the judicial system, including social workers and law enforcement, and psychology. The relationships among the persons who are in these institutions, guided by shared norms, beliefs, and values, are the social characteristics of the child abuse system. A model that explains how this started is the "invisible college" concept (Crane, 1972) which shows the powerful informal communication networks linking the judicial system, the media, and groups of researchers and political figures.

Studies of bibliographic citations analyzing the communications patterns empirically demonstrate the reality of the invisible college (Dunn, 1981; Lipton & Hershaft, 1985; Price, 1965; Price & Beaver, 1966; Yokote & Utterbach, 1974).

The invisible college connected with sexual abuse is readily evident in the interlocking system of a small number of researchers, prosecutors, mental health professionals, and politicians who revolve through seminars, workshops, lectures, training sessions, media presentations, and literature. There is a common set of beliefs and values, a common set of attitudes, and a common set of behaviors characterizing this group both in this country and abroad. The result is the rapid dissemination of views, research findings, and assessment methodologies through this network and their use in the real world. Examples are rapid proliferation of the use of dolls, coloring books, prevention programs, and unsupported maxims such as children are traumatized by testifying in the presence of the accused. All of these became standard operating procedure in accusations of child abuse in the absence of credible evidence to support their use.

An example of how such a system can function to produce policies and behaviors based upon dubious theories and research is the medical research on herpes. Lipton and Hershaft (1985) describe how an article published in a prestigious American Medical Association journal was widely accepted, touted as fact, and advanced as a basis for treatment, though highly vulnerable to scientific criticism and of doubtful value. The few attempts to analyze systematically the problem of unsound or fake research have raised great anxiety about the quality of scientific research. Even more fearsome is professional readiness to accept research without exercising critical acumen. Some professionals do not read research literature but rely upon casual word of mouth or informal discussions. Many professionals who read research literature never read the methodology section but skip to the results and discussion sections. The result may be that flawed findings are given credence and limited results are overgeneralized.

## A COMMON PATTERN

We have examined transcripts, audio- and videotapes, charges, psychological evaluations, and testimony from hundreds of cases (Wakefield & Underwager, 1988) and have found that the way children are interro-

gated when sexual abuse is suspected shows a common pattern across this and other countries. The system of reporting laws, child protection agencies, law enforcement officials, prosecutors, and the laws and regulatory codes governing these agencies shape the common pattern.

An adult usually first suspects possible sexual abuse of a child. (Although an older child may spontaneously say something to an adult, with younger children the process most often begins not with the child but with an adult.) The most frequent trigger for the suspicion is some sort of change in the child's behavior such as bed wetting or nightmares or physical conditions such as a redness or soreness in the genital area.

The adult then questions the child and calls the authorities. If the adult is not a parent, the parents are also informed, although in some instances the first the parent learns of the accusation is when the authorities arrive and begin an investigation. An initial report is made either to the child protection agency or to the police. If the first report is made to the police, the police will then inform child protection. The first person who has contact with the child or the child's family is usually a social worker.

Sometimes the child is first taken to the family physician or to a hospital emergency room where the adult tells the doctor that abuse is suspected. The doctor may question the child and then make a report to child protection. Although there are seldom clear physical signs of sexual abuse, the notes of the physician frequently state "suspected sexual abuse" based on the history given by the adult.

The parent or other reporting adult has probably questioned the child before the police department or child protection agency gets involved. The strong emotion triggered by a suspicion of sexual abuse may result in intense, repeated, and suggestive questioning. Then when the official talks to the adult, the adult will give his or her recollection of whatever the child said in response to this questioning along whatever suspicions led to the original report of abuse. If the investigating official believes that children must always be believed and false allegations are rare, this account will be accepted as factual. The initial official contact with the child will therefore be based upon the assumption that the abuse really happened. This bias affects the way the official questions the child and the subsequent outcome of the investigation.

What happens in this first official interrogation is important in assessing the weight to be given to any statements a child makes. The younger and more suggestible the child is, the greater the significance and effect of

this first interrogation. It will set the direction and the scope for all future contacts with the child. But it is probably the least documented and most likely distorted of the succession of interrogations.

The first official interrogation of a child may range from a single social worker interviewing the child to several people, including police, social workers and prosecutors, coming unexpectedly to the home and taking the child to the police station, as happened in one of the cases in Jordan, Minnesota. There is often a social worker and a police officer, or two or more officials. Particularly in divorce and custody cases, the accusing parent may take the child to a child protection worker, physician, or mental health professional for the first official interview, be present for the interview, and even participate in it.

The initial interrogation by officials is usually not recorded. There may or may not be notes or reports and the amount of information available about this first interview is generally minimal. Most often, the only information is a report summarizing what the child supposedly said during the interview. However, if the interview is not recorded, there is no way to know what actually went on. We have found that reports of what supposedly transpired in an interview are often markedly different from what actually took place, which we later discover when we are able to view the videotape of the actual interview.

Often interviewers ask a question or make a statement to which the child gives little response. After the question is repeated several times, the child may finally nod or answer yes. But in the written report, the child is presented as making the statement rather than only agreeing with the interviewer's statement. There is seldom mention of any denials which may have preceded the eventual affirmation. This is probably not a deliberate misrepresentation; instead, the prior beliefs and bias of the interrogator lead to an erroneous recollection of what actually happened. Herbert, Grams, and Goranson (1987) state that tape recordings are essential for accurate knowledge of what went on in an interview. Without them, the conclusions drawn about the interview by the interviewer are likely to contain significant factual distortions. They found that without taping, interviewers reflected their bias by giving inaccurate and mistaken reports about the interview.

Following the first official interrogation, there is a wide variation in what happens next. Sometimes there is only the initial interview. There may be an additional interrogation which is tape recorded. But the child may be questioned repeatedly by social workers, prosecutors, therapists,



parents, siblings, or others. Sometimes the child is taken from the parents and placed in foster care where the foster parents ask questions and encourage talk about the abuse. The child may be placed in sexual abuse therapy where he or she talks regularly to a therapist about the abuse. If the issue is brought to adjudication, either in criminal, civil, family, or juvenile court, the child may be questioned frequently by the prosecutor or attorney and brought into the courtroom to be familiarized with the environment. Through this the account of the abuse is further rehearsed. It is often months, or even years, before the judicial system makes a determination about the abuse.

This pattern is not limited to the United States. We are familiar with similar techniques and problems from cases in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, The United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. Hayes (1987) describes interviews in England in which great pressure is put on the child to disclose the abuse, including the use of directed play with dolls and leading and coercive questions. Interviews of this sort were used in Cleveland, England, with the result that dozens of children were falsely identified as having been sexually abused by their parents. As in the United States, the problem was with interviewers "who commence an interview with a preconception that abuse has taken place" (Enright, 1987, p. 672).

### INTERROGATION AS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Children may be interviewed dozens of times before a legal determination is made about abuse. In every interview the child learns more about what the interrogator expects and learns what to say or do that will get a positive response from the interrogator. The child learns the language of the sexual abuse literature, such as the distinction between "good touch" and "bad touch." The child learns about sexual behavior, including deviant behavior, and learns to equate sexual touch with touch that hurts. The child learns the victim role and learns to express anger towards the alleged abuser. The child learns the story and may come to believe it happened, even if the allegations are false.

The interviewer must know something about the allegations in order to ask any questions. The interviewer's own assumptions determine the questions asked and the direction of the interview is determined by these questions. This results in a bias in the interview procedures of even the most skillful investigators. If the interrogator is unaware of this and has