

Controversial Issues in the Study of Child Maltreatment

Chapter 9

False Allegations

- Do children and adults make up stories about child abuse?
 - Very difficult to collect data on this problem.
 - Some evidence that false allegations account for 2-6% of the cases reported to CPS
 - Some confusion about this bc there a high percentage of CPS cases are labeled unsubstantiated. But that does not mean the allegation is false. It just means that there is not enough evidence to move forward with the allegation.

Fabricated Reports

- Sometimes parents are having a custody dispute and one accuses the other of abuse to gain custody
 - In Canada, one study found that 12% of divorce/separation cases involved a false accusation
- Pseudomemories
 - Parents or professionals might unintentionally create false memories in a child
 - Research shows that if you ask children leading questions about a movie that they saw (e.g., Did you see a boat?), children are more likely to report a memory related to the question, even though the movie did not have the object that was contained in the leading question (e.g., there was no boat in the movie)

Pseudomemories (con't)

- There is some evidence that just by asking repeated questions, professionals and parents can create a pseudomemory. When there is a criminal investigation, it is almost inevitable that children will be asked the same question more than one time by more than one individual (parent, lawyer, police, social worker, etc.)
- In fact, one study found that a child interviewed in an abuse investigation will be interviewed an average of 11 times.

False Allegations Related to Repeated Questioning

- Ceci et al. (1994) tried to understand the effect of repeated questioning in an experimental setting.
- They had a deck of cards. Each card in the deck contained a description of certain events, some of which the child had experienced (*true event*) and others of which the child had not (*false event*).
- The child was asked to pick a card, and the experimenter read what was on the card to the child. The experimenter then asked the child to think hard about what he had just said and whether the child had ever experienced the event. The experimenter provided prompts to the child to help them think about the event (e.g., who was with you? What were you wearing?) This experiment was conducted once a week for 10 weeks.
- At the end of 10 weeks, a new adult experimenter met with the child and (without the deck of cards) simply asked the child whether various events had happened to him/her. If the child said “yes,” the experimenter asked for more details (e.g., who was with you? What were you wearing? Etc.)
- Results: 58% of the children said that they had experienced at least one false event; 25% of the children said they had experienced all the false events
- The children provided rich detail about the events, leading researchers to feel that the children had come to believe that they had actually experienced the events.

False Allegations (con't)

- The Ceci et al. study doesn't suggest that we shouldn't interview children about abuse, just that we have to be cautious.

Balancing Passion vs. Empiricism

- The book sites several widely-believed *at the time* allegations of various types of abuse, including satanic ritual abuse.
- We know believe that many of these claims were false, and that a (sort of) hysteria of the culture at that time (including books, talk shows, etc.) perpetuated these myths.
- Your book makes the point that when a topic has emotional content and can harm children, the way child maltreatment does, there are lots of people who are passionate about it.
- Passion can be good because it brings attention to the social problem.
- Passion can be problematic because it can obfuscate what the facts and truth are (or that we don't have all the facts or truth)

Does Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Constitute Child Maltreatment

- I return to the issues I raised in my power point for Chapter 7—there are different types of IPV, some more severe than others. For example, when it comes to common couple violence, some surveys find that 30% of couples engage in this type of violence. If this type of couple conflict is that common (almost normative, in fact), can we say that exposed children are being maltreated? That's a lot of maltreated children...
- However, on the other hand, research indicates that children exposed to IPV suffer negative effects.

IPV (con't)

- Let's suppose we are now talking about the most severe forms of IPV—where someone's life is in danger or someone is terrorized by their partner.
 - Should parents/guardians who expose their children to IPV be considered abusive parents/guardians?
 - Is the victim of IPV as culpable as the perpetrator for exposing their children to this violence?
- These questions often pit child advocates against advocates for victims of IPV

IPV (con't)

- The textbook describes a court case in which child protection workers removed children from a home in which a woman was a victim of IPV. The woman went to court to get her children back.
- The court ruled in favor of the woman, saying that unless children were in imminent danger because of the IPV, CPS could not remove children from the home.
- Edelson (2004) has argued that these cases should be decided on an individual basis. There may be situations in which children should be removed from a home where IPV occurs.

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

- How can we differentiate this from homicide?
 - High-risk factors for SIDS include:
 - Recurrent life-threatening incidents witnessed by only a single caregiver
 - An atypical presentation of what happened to the child
 - Evidence of physical maltreatment
 - Autopsy findings indicate some sort of trauma to the body
 - Family history of involvement with CPS
 - A death scene that suggests neglect
 - Poor care during pregnancy (limited prenatal care, alcohol abuse, etc.)

Mandatory Reporting Laws

- Why would these be controversial?
 - Forces some professionals (e.g., physicians, psychologists) to violate the confidentiality of their clients
 - Reporting doesn't always help children
 - Some professionals think that they are better prepared to help the family compared to over-burdened CPS workers (side note: emails from the administrators at Penn State used something akin to this argument as to why they didn't report Jerry Sandusky the second time they learned about his behavior)
- Regardless of the problems, the general consensus is that there is more underreporting than over-reporting and that reporting is important. The law requires reporting, and some professions ethical guidelines require them to report.

Corporal Punishment (CP)

- Earlier in the textbook and the lectures a distinction was made between corporal punishment and child maltreatment.
- Most Americans consider CP an acceptable form of discipline (>90% of parents will use it at some point in a child's life).
- Murray Straus, a violence researcher, believes that various myths perpetrate the idea that CP is a good discipline strategy. He states:
 - CP legitimizes violence; children learn that violence is a good way to solve problems
 - Discipline can go from CP to abuse when parents are angry or stressed
 - The distinction between CP and a beating is not clear

Corporal Punishment (con't)

- Straus has 10 myths about CP (see pages 319-320 of textbook for full explication) including these 3:
 - *Spanking works better*—there is no research evidence for this
 - *It is unrealistic to expect parents to never spank*—why do we criminalize physical assault against strangers, but not against family members?
 - *If you don't spank, your children will be spoiled*—no research evidence for this. Consistent discipline is what makes children well-behaved.

Additional Issues

- Family Preservation vs. Out-of-Home Care
- Community Notification Laws
- Repressed and Recovered Memories
- (see textbook for a discussion of these topics)