



Diffusing responsibility: A case study of child sexual abuse in popular discourse



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ABSTRACT

Popular discourse provides a window into predominant social beliefs. To assess predominant beliefs about child sexual abuse, this exploratory, descriptive study examines the discourse surrounding a high-profile child abuse case that involved over 100 victims and culminated in the arrest of a well-known Delaware pediatrician in 2009. The Dr. Earl Bradley case, dominated local news media for more than a year. Online comments from the state's primary newspaper were collected and analyzed to identify themes. Coding analysis found that popular discourse overwhelmingly explained the abuse as the fault of the victims' parents, putatively, the mothers. Commenters engaged in direct blaming of parents, thus, at least to some extent, shifting blame from the offender and the institutional systems that failed to adequately react to the allegations of abuse to the victims' parents. Newspaper comments also demonstrated social distancing which, in addition to the comments attributing blame to the parents, served to excuse and distract from the responsibility of authority figs. or structural change. Although comments that defended parents did appear, these instances were far less frequent than comments blaming the parents, which illustrates a trend to individualize rather than activate collective challenges, therefore putting the onus on victims to police the powerful. Overall, institutional malfeasance eclipsed the well-being of children, and public commentary displayed an implicitly gendered parent-bashing, diminishing the responsibility of the professionals.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Media, popular discourse on sex crime and shared values

Print, broadcast, and Internet media play an important role in defining, sensationalizing, and mobilizing the public and institutional authorities (Cohen, 1972, p. 9; Welch & Schuster, 2005, p. 398). Scholars have demonstrated the particular impact of various media sources in shaping fear of crime and crime policies (Garland, 2001; Garriott, 2011; Simon, 2007). Sex crime has been an especially salient topic for mass media outlets. The specter of the serial pedophile, although varying in content over time, has particularly captivated U.S. mass media (Leon, 2011; Greer, 2003; Jenkins, 1998). Media coverage has emphasized certain kinds of offenders and offending over others, allowing stereotypical and inaccurate views to characterize social beliefs and social policies regarding sex crimes (Leon, 2011). In some cases, these perpetuate "rape myths" and other justifications for sexual violence (Brinson, 1992; Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000; Greer, 2003, p. 70). For better or for worse, tough "talk" regarding sex crime has been enshrined in numerous laws and policies, including the well-known Megan's law (Leon, 2011; Meloy, Miller, & Curtis, 2008).

As news mediums have become more accessible and interactive, readers can now respond to news accounts through the commentary feature that most web-based news sources provide. Comments posted from online newspaper readers are part of the popular discourse and, thus, are important to examine as they contribute to representations of social phenomena, including crime. While Internet news media, and specifically, reader commentary, cannot give a representative sample of publically-held beliefs, such discourse reveals important information about the cultural "tool kits" (Rafter, 2007, p. 405–406; Swidler, 1986, 2001) people draw upon to make sense of their social worlds. Put another way, discourse is one place to locate culture. As Mary Douglas (1966) explains, "culture, in the sense of public standardized values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals. It provides in advance some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered" (p. 39–40). As a result, examinations of how issues are presented in Internet news media outlets can provide a window into the usage and availability of particular tools. Specifically, querying popular discourse about sexual offending sheds light on how people think and talk about sex crimes (Leon, 2011; Rafter, 2007).ⁱ In this exploratory, descriptive study, we provide an

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ⁱ Numerous claims-makers compete to dominate the imaging presented in popular culture (Whittier, 2009). This article does not document and categorize the range of possible ways of thinking and talking about sex offenders, across groups or venues. Rather, we focus on one case and the images reader commentary reflects.

extended analysis of one sensational case to examine a distinct aspect of popular explanations for sex crimes: the location of responsibility for victimization.

1.2. The Earl Bradley case

Despite child sexual abuse accusations dating back to the mid-1990s, pediatrician Earl Bradley continued to run a thriving medical practice in Lewes, Delaware, a rural community that boasts of multi-million dollar beach houses as well as a large immigrant farming population. Patients were drawn to Bradley's practice because of the scarcity of pediatricians in the area, and his willingness to accept any kind of insurance and Medicaid (personal communication with Attorney General's office, November 2012). In addition, Bradley's pediatric practice appealed to children, comprising carnival rides, huge Disney character statues, brightly painted cars on his front lawn outside the doctor's office, and a mini movie theater showing Disney films inside. Though investigations were conducted after child sexual abuse accusations were brought against Dr. Bradley, no legal action was taken due to insufficient evidence. In fact, several of Dr. Bradley's peers (i.e. other medical professionals) asserted that, while "Bradley was strange, weird, and could be very disagreeable" (Ammons, 2010: 18),ⁱⁱ Bradley's questionable medical procedures, such as using catheterizations on his young patients, were "not medically improper per se" (Ammons, 2010: 6).

In 2009, a two year old girl complained to her parents that Bradley had inappropriately touched her. This became the catalyst of the successful investigation that ultimately lead to Bradley's conviction; nine months later, Bradley was arrested and charged with nine criminal child sexual abuse counts, including a felony charge for a fourth degree rape of a two-year-old patient (Cape Gazette, 2009). Following his arrest, over 13 hours of video tapes were discovered, showing the sexual molestation of child victims, including incidents where the children appeared to lose consciousness. Bradley was convicted in 2010 of 24 counts of child sexual abuse (Bradley v. State 51 A.3d 423, 2012) based on evidence from 103 of his young patients, some as young as three months old. In 2011, Bradley was sentenced to 14 mandatory consecutive life sentences plus an additional 164 years (Bradley v. State 51 A.3d 423, 2012). His conviction was affirmed unanimously by the Delaware Supreme Court in 2012 and the public defenders' office declined to pursue appeals (Mavity, 2012a).

Though initially believed to have targeted the most marginalized victims – children who were poor, non-white, and from families where English was not their first spoken language – this information proved incorrect as the investigation continued and a more complete list of the victims emerged from the criminal case. However, "no wealthier zip codes" were represented in the criminal caseload, despite the fact that Bradley's patient list drew from these neighborhoods (personal communication with Attorney General's office, November 2012). Wealthier parents appear to have participated in the subsequent civil case, however. This suggests that wealthier parents either resisted pressure by prosecutors to participate in the criminal case more effectively than other parents, who had fewer private resources for private therapy for their children, or that they simply were not willing to allow their kids to be more visible by taking on the "victim" status that goes with engaging in the criminal justice process (Nielsen, 2000). Over 900 families were represented in a civil case against Bradley, the Beebe Medical Center and the Medical Society of Delaware that was settled for \$123.5 million in October 2012 (Mavity, 2012b). Considering the number of

families represented as compared with those who participated in the criminal proceedings, the range of victims and their social classes were undoubtedly more diverse (personal communication with Attorney General's office, November 2012).

1.3. Diffusing responsibility: pathologizing individuals and excusing institutions

When sensational sex crime cases first break, popular discourse reflects the impulse to quickly explain how the horrible victimizations could have happened (Chase, 2010; Hendrix, 2010). These immediate reactions to sensational cases, both historically and in recent scandals, center on explaining the pathology of individuals (Leon, 2011; Schultz, 2005). After excoriating the monstrosity of the terrible offenders, explanations often look beyond the offender to locate other blameworthy actors. For example, in the Penn State case of 2011,ⁱⁱⁱ the news media vilified Jerry Sandusky for perpetrating sexual assaults, but blame was also placed upon the mandated reporters, such as head coach Joe Paterno, who should have instigated criminal investigations (Freeh, Sporkin, & Sullivan, 2012). Ultimately, Penn State was itself sanctioned for these failures, losing both athletic titles and the ability to fund athletes and programs (Freeh, Sporkin, & Sullivan, 2012; Ganim, 2011). But although structural factors that allow sexual assaults to continue unchecked are often identified in investigative reports after the fact, this level of accountability or interest in contextual explanations is rarely reflected in popular news media, which tends to individualize blame, with a particular focus on the pathology of individual offenders (Greer, 2003, p. 50, 139).

1.4. Parents and child victims

Gendered assumptions about women as caregivers result in blaming the mother when children are hurt. It is assumed that a mother's instinct to protect her children will overcome any barrier that may threaten their safety. For example, scholarship has shown that women who are not able to save their children from situations of domestic violence are labeled "bad mothers" and risk losing custody of their children (see Hannah & Goldstein, 2010). This idea has been further engrained in society by psychological theory and social service practice that attribute child abuse to maternal deficiency (Roberts, 1995). The mother is often blamed when she is not the abuser, and sometimes even in cases where she is a victim as well (see Neustein & Leshner, 2005). For instance, a 2012 Delaware statute (Bill 234) permits domestic violence victims to be arrested if their partner/spouse harmed the child because the victim (usually, the mother) failed to protect the child from direct physical pain or the emotional pain of the child witnessing domestic violence perpetrated against the child's caregiver (again, usually the mother) (see also Harris, 2010). Thus, social expectations influenced by gendered assumptions perpetuate the idea that mothers are to blame when their children are victimized.

1.5. Social distancing and blame attribution

When confronted with victims' stories, one social response is to judge the victims' contribution to or involvement in their own victimization, which entails an assessment of the victim's behaviors and attitudes. This is more likely to occur when observers distance themselves socially from the victim, thus freeing them up to ascribe negative traits to the victims (Heater, Walsh, & Sande, 2002). If victims engage in

ⁱⁱ Prompted by the failures of the medical community and criminal justice authorities that allowed Bradley's practice to flourish for over a decade despite these allegations, the DE governor appointed the Dean of the Widener Law School to conduct an independent investigation into the case (Ammons, 2010). In addition to charges raised in 2009, Ammons investigated claims from 1994 in Philadelphia and later reported by his sister, who worked as his office manager, a nurse (who said he videotaped children during examinations), and several doctors who believed Bradley conducted long and unnecessary vaginal exams of children.

ⁱⁱⁱ This case involved charges of child molestation dating from 1994 to 2009 against a former university assistant coach (Jerry Sandusky) brought by at least eight underage boys. Charges also included high-level university officers for covering up the incidents. Sandusky was found guilty on 45 of 48 counts and was sentenced to 30–60 years in prison in 2012; the Penn State president was forced to resign, and the head football coach and athletic director were fired.

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