

Reflection

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Sexually Victimized Children was written largely as a Ph.D. dissertation in sociology at the University of New Hampshire in 1978. Somewhat before that time, I learned about the topic of sexual abuse from writers like Florence Rush and Louise Armstrong, and also from local child welfare professionals whom I had encountered. This seemed to me to be an emerging social problem badly in need of social scientific research. In thinking about how to approach it, I was particularly influenced by the experience of Murray Straus, who was my dissertation adviser, and his former graduate student, Richard Gelles. Two things seemed clear at the time from their work, and from a number of other sociologists in the fields of both criminology and sexuality. One was that experiences that were generally considered as rare and deviant occurred at a much higher frequency among the population than most people imagined. Second was that sensitively designed survey research could motivate people to disclose stigmatized experiences that were generally considered too private to talk about. I wasn't yet as thoroughly convinced of this second conclusion as I later became, but it seemed as though college students at least might be a good place to start to find out. They were also handy, and didn't need a tremendous amount of research funding to study.

A lot of people have subsequently followed this model and used college student samples for studies of sexual abuse and other forms of intimate violence. I myself have not done any additional student studies, mostly out of concerns that these populations are not truly representative. I have instead turned my attention to general population surveys, an approach for which I think the efficacy of asking about sexual abuse and other forms and intimate violence has been clearly established.

My early work in *Sexually Victimized Children* was succeeded by a considerable volume of similar research looking at the long-term effects of retrospectively recalled sexual abuse and other forms of child maltreatment. These studies were very important at an earlier stage in trying to establish the potentially great developmental significance and importance of child maltreatment. However, I have come to the conclusion that for the most part this retrospective research is no longer so useful in the advancement of the field, which from my point of view has entered another stage.

The retrospective research model, from my point of view, is not adequate to disentangling the various complex sets of factors occurring before, in and around, and after abusive episodes, and thus has reached its limits in understanding how abuse affects development. Even more importantly, the retrospective research design doesn't allow us to focus enough on the things that can be changed to prevent abuse and modify its negative impact. So at the present time, my research focuses much more on studies of children themselves.

Another serious problem with the retrospective research, represented by my early studies, is that it portrays the experiences of victims in a different historical era, one that had not yet been touched by public awareness about family violence, women's victimization, and child maltreatment. I believe those changed historical circumstances have altered the experience of victims, and make it hard to generalize any longer from the older research, important as it has been.