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SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 1999

## Study on Child Sex Abuse Provokes Furor on Findings

Report by American Psychological Group

By ERICA GOODE

Few people took notice last July when *Psychological Bulletin*, an academic psychology journal, carried a lengthy, jargon-heavy report titled "A Meta-Analytic Examination of Assumed Properties of Child Sexual Abuse Using College Samples."

But nearly a year later, the study, its authors, and the American Psychological Association, which publishes the journal, are at the center of a political storm.

Conservatives like Dr. Laura Schlessinger, the radio talk-show host, and Representative Tom DeLay of Texas, the majority whip, have declared that the study, which concludes that the effects of sexual abuse on children are not always severe, trivializes the impact of such abuse and condones pedophilia.

Janet Parshall, a spokeswoman for the Family Research Council, a fund-raising organization for conservative causes, said the article "gives pedophiles a green flag." Representative Matt Salmon, Republican of Arizona, introduced a resolution in Congress last month condemning the article.

Members of the Leadership Council for Mental Health, Justice and the Media, an organization of mental health researchers, also criticized the study, saying it included "numerous flaws and weaknesses."

Responding to the furor, the psychological association announced last week that it was taking steps to insure that "journal editors will fully consider the social policy implications of articles on controversial topics." Such considerations will not influence the decision to publish an article, said Dr. Raymond D. Fowler, president of the association, but will allow the inclusion of other material to put controversial studies in context. The association also said it was seeking an independent evaluation of the scientific quality of the study.

In a letter to Mr. DeLay, Dr. Fowler said that "the association has always condemned the sexual abuse of children" and that the group did not support "the 'normalization' or decriminalization of any form of sexual relations between adults and children."

The journal article was written by Dr. Bruce Rind, an adjunct faculty member in the psychology department at Temple University, Dr. Robert Bauserman, an evaluation specialist working on AIDS prevention at the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and Philip Tromovitch, a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. The article, a statistical reanalysis of 59 studies of college students who said they were sexually abused in childhood, concluded that the effects of such abuse "were neither pervasive nor typically intense, and that men reacted much less negatively than women."

The researchers also questioned the practice, common in many studies, of lumping all types of sexual abuse together. They argued that treating all forms of sexual abuse equally presents problems that, the researchers wrote, "are perhaps most apparent when contrasting cases such as the repeated rape of a 5-year-old girl by her father and the willing sexual involvement of a mature 15-year-old adolescent boy with an unrelated adult."

In the first case, serious harm may result, Dr. Rind and his colleagues maintained, but the second case "may represent only a violation of

social norms with no implication for personal harm." The authors also suggested that the term "adult-adolescent sex" or "adult-child sex" be substituted, in some cases, for "child sexual abuse."

Dr. Rind could not be reached for comment. But in a statement released by Temple University's Office of University Relations, he said: "Our article went through rigorous peer review in one of the most difficult journals in psychology to publish in. Even though our study has been criticized by certain persons in the media, many psychologists at academic institutions have praised it as being excellent work."

The researchers also released a statement saying that their article "does not condone" child sexual abuse and that "lack of harmfulness does not imply lack of wrongfulness."

Dr. Bauserman said in a telephone interview that though he and his colleagues expected that their research might evoke some discussion in academic circles, the public outcry came as a surprise.

"We certainly did not expect a controversial public reaction like this," he said. "Our feeling simply was that it's going to be read by researchers in the field, and that they're going to be able to evaluate whether it makes useful points or not."

### Critics say the report trivializes the effects of sexual abuse on children.

*Psychological Bulletin* has a circulation of fewer than 6,000 copies, most of which go to academic psychologists. And for many months after the article was published, neither the authors nor the psychological association received any feedback.

That changed in March, when a Philadelphia radio talk show. Dr. Schlessinger then discussed the article on her show. The onslaught soon followed, and as evidence that the study condoned pedophilia, the Family Research Council and other critics said that the North American Man-Boy Love Association, a group that promotes consensual sex between boys and men, mentioned the study positively on its Web site.

Dr. David Spiegel, a psychiatrist at Stanford University and a member of the leadership council, criticized the study, saying that it had serious methodological flaws and that the researchers "use meta-analysis the way a drunk uses a lamppost — for support, rather than illumination."

Dr. Spiegel, who with other researchers hopes to publish a critique of the journal article, said many other studies indicated that sexually abused children can suffer severe consequences. Studies have linked sexual abuse to post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, increased risk of suicide, and gastrointestinal problems.

Dr. Fowler said that the major finding of the study had been overlooked in all the hubbub: "Horrible as it is that some adults abuse children; it's good to know that there's a chance for them" to recover.