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Construction of the Offender in Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Training for Adults

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Abstract: Until recently, the media was Americans' primary source of information about child sexual offenders. Today, however, millions of adults attend child sexual abuse prevention trainings sponsored by churches, schools, and other organizations. This paper draws on participant observation in 22 sessions of a popular Catholic program. It examines how the curriculum frames child sexual offenders and how group processes support or challenge that framing. While such trainings have the potential to challenge incorrect stereotypes, group and organizational pressures often coalesce to perpetuate fear, anger, and an inability to see offenders as anything but "others."

Running Head: Offender Construction in CSA Prevention Training

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Bio: Anne Nurse, professor of sociology at the College of Wooster, is the author of *Fatherhood Arrested: Parenting from Within the Juvenile Justice System* and *Locked Up, Locked Out: Young Men in the Juvenile Justice System* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2002 and 2010). Her Ph.D. is from the University of California, Davis.

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Introduction

Over the last thirty years, the public has become more aware of child sexual abuse (CSA) and its deep social and individual impact. Importantly, we have begun to reframe our understandings of victims; increasingly recognizing that children are not at fault, that they rarely lie about CSA, and that abuse can have lifelong effects if victims do not receive help and support. But what about the cultural understandings of offenders? Research shows that perceptions of offenders are largely driven by the media, are extremely negative, and are often based on myths (Katz-Schiavone, Levenson, and Ackerman, 2008; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Sample, 2001; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). For example, this literature finds that people overestimate the prevalence of abuse by strangers and they incorrectly believe that offenders have extremely high recidivism rates. Perpetrators tend to be viewed as a homogeneous “other,” unredeemable and evil.

Incorrect beliefs about CSA offenders are problematic because they can have real-world consequences. For example, myths drive the creation and acceptance of punitive and ineffective public policies (Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004). Negative and false characterizations of offenders can be used to justify high levels of harassment of offenders, their children, and their other family members (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009; Tewksbury 2005). Faulty information can leave children vulnerable when adults assume offenders only fall into certain categories or act in particular ways (Sanghara and Wilson 2006). Because knowledgeable parents and teachers are in a position to supervise children and provide them with safety information, a number of scholars have supported

adult educational programming to correct misperceptions (Mendelson and Letourneau, 2015; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006).

Today, a large and growing number of adults do receive education about CSA through churches, schools, and other child-serving groups (like the Boy Scouts). Such organizations provide either in-person or on-line training sessions with the stated goal of helping adults better protect children. The assumption is that by increasing accurate knowledge about CSA and how to prevent it, adults will be better able to identify and report suspicious circumstances. In those cases where CSA cannot be prevented, the trainings may also serve as a way for organizations to mitigate their legal liability. To date, we know relatively little about the effect of these programs and we know virtually nothing about how they might influence images of offenders. Does adult education offer a counter narrative to media portrayals of offenders?

This paper is drawn from a unique qualitative case study of one of the largest national adult training prevention programs. Understanding the effects of this particular program is important because of its scope: it has trained well over a million American adults since 2004. But this particular case can also serve as an illustration of the larger processes that occur when adults come together to discuss the highly emotional topic of CSA—whether that be in adult prevention training, neighborhood notification meetings, or community discussions after a CSA allegation. Drawing on participant observation, this paper examines how a popular curriculum used in many Catholic institutions frames child sexual offenders and how group processes support or challenge that framing.

Theoretical Approach

Frame analysis is a theoretical approach first attributed to sociologist Erving Goffman (1974). Today it is used across many social scientific fields to focus attention on how social problems are defined, constructed, and interpreted. Entman (1993) describes what it means to frame an issue: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). Frame analysis is relevant to this project because people arrive at adult training with preexisting frames for understanding sexual offending, organizations then use their curricula to frame the issue in particular ways, and finally, participants respond to the frame provided by the organization.

Entman's definition makes clear that one of the primary reasons frames are important is because they help attribute causality and blame for social ills. Some types of frames directly name a cause, while others imply it through their presentation. For example, Iyengar (1991) found that whether problems were presented as episodic or thematic made a difference in blame attribution. Episodic frames are those that use examples of individual people or situations to illustrate larger processes. For example, the media might profile a particular poor person to illustrate poverty in America. In contrast, thematic framing focuses on larger trends (like unemployment rates). Iyengar finds that, in most cases, episodic frames lead listeners to blame problems on individualistic causes while thematic frames lead to societal attributions.

Research suggests that groups trying to convince people to engage in action are more successful when they use frames that resonate with their “current life situation and experience” (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986, p. 477). But even when a frame resonates, it may not be enough to inspire action. In these cases, groups try to amplify beliefs and values that are associated with the frame. Pulling from a wide range of research about social movements, Snow et al. finds that effective amplification techniques include emphasizing the seriousness of the problem, providing a clear locus of blame, playing off of negative stereotypes of an antagonist, making people believe that action is possible, and convincing them they are morally responsible to become involved.

Adult prevention training is an interesting case because it provides participants with a frame for child sexual offending and then allows them to discuss it, opening the door for group processes to shape the message. Group polarization is particularly likely. Forsyth (1983) comments, “When people discuss issues in groups, there is a tendency for them to decide on a more extreme course of action than would be suggested by the average of their individual judgments, but the direction of the shift depends on what was initially the dominant point of view” (p. 311). In other words, group discussion tends to make generally-held attitudes (or pre-existing cultural frames) more extreme (Baron, Hoppe, Kao, Brunsman, Linneweh, & Rogers, 1996).

Literature Review

This literature review examines American attitudes and knowledge about child sexual offenders to provide insight into the cultural frames that adult training participants bring with them to sessions. An extensive literature suggests that Americans hold

extremely negative attitudes toward child sexual offenders. The primary source for their attitudes is the media (Katz-Schiavone et al. 2008), which usually portrays an offender as a “compulsive recidivist whose behavior often escalates to lethal violent crime” (Sample 2001, p. ii). Correspondingly, the public holds incorrect stereotypes that are in line with this image. For example, surveys suggest that Americans see sexual offenders as having particularly high recidivism rates, severe mental illness, and/or low cognitive functioning (Levenson et al. 2007; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). Rehabilitation is seen as ineffective (Katz-Schiavone et al. 2008). The public also tends to overestimate the proportion of assaults that are committed by strangers. It is likely that this is related to the more intensive media coverage of stranger assaults than of family or acquaintance assaults (Levenson et al., 2007; Quinn et al., 2004).

Given the stereotypes Americans hold, it is not surprising that they view sexual offending through a very negative and individualistic frame. Historical analyses find that there has been some variation in images of offenders over time, but that the image of them as “perverts” or evil is common (Leon, 2011). Current research affirms this finding and adds that Americans’ attitudes toward sex offenders are considerably more negative than toward other types of criminals (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1993). Levels of fear of child sex offenders are also notably high. In one survey, for example, respondents said they were afraid of all types of sexual offenders, but they felt particularly strongly about those who offend against children (Kernsmith, Craun, & Foster, 2009). Mona Lynch’s research (2002) bears out these highly negative feelings about offenders. She analyzed congressional debate about four proposed bills involving CSA in the 1980s and 1990s and found that the discourse revealed feelings of disgust toward sex offenders. Offenders

were portrayed as contaminated and therefore as polluting anything with which they came into contact.

Negative perceptions of offenders make them ideal targets for “othering.” Weis defines othering as “that process which serves to name and mark those thought to be different from oneself” (Weis, 1995, p. 18). She goes on to argue that the purpose of othering is to help individuals and groups create and maintain desirable identities. In other words, by describing who and what the “other” is, one implicitly suggests what the dominant group is not. Cowburn and Dominelli (2001) look specifically at how CSA offenders are othered. They argue that by portraying “normal” men as the protectors of women and children and offenders as the opposite, the dominant gender social order is maintained and a powerful sense of us and them is created.

A study of community notification meetings in Wisconsin provides an important glimpse of the process of othering sexual offenders. Zevitz and Farkas’ (2000) conducted a multi-method study of community notification meetings in Wisconsin. These meetings were called in order to educate residents about sexual abuse prior to an offender moving into their neighborhood. Drawing from participant observation data, the researchers described what appeared to be a process of othering and polarization as neighbors felt free to say extremely negative and angry comments about offenders with no alternative views expressed. Zevitz and Farkas also found that the meetings increased the residents’ level of fear.

Context and Methods for this Study

This study took place in training sessions under the auspices of the Catholic Church. In 2004, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops required all American dioceses to implement training for adults who spend time with children in institutional settings. As with most adult educational programs, the stated goal of the program is to educate adults about child sexual abuse so they can better protect children through recognizing and reporting suspicious circumstances. The training mandate covers Catholic organizations ranging from schools, to sports leagues, and churches. It also covers a wide range of adults (teachers, clergy, classroom volunteers, Sunday school staff, kitchen workers, coaches etc.). Classroom volunteers are a particularly large group, including adults who might be interested in driving the occasional field trip as well as those who want extensive involvement in the classroom.

The requirement that even casual parent volunteers attend training makes the Catholic program somewhat unusual and sometimes causes surprise and resentment. It can be difficult for people to find a three-hour block of time, especially if a babysitter must be hired or work schedules are complicated. This is problematic for the Catholic Church because they have a vested interest in not upsetting their volunteers. They, like many other churches and nonprofits, rely on volunteer labor and are therefore very wary about imposing requirements that might be onerous.

While there are a number of training programs used by dioceses across the country, the program in this study is the most popular nationally. It consists of a three-hour instruction session led by a trained facilitator. Sessions are anchored by two thirty-minute movies with time for structured discussion after each. The first movie focuses on

the victim experience and on how offenders groom children and families. It is very emotional and contains footage of actual offenders and stories of real victims. The second movie is somewhat less emotional, providing information about how adults can identify and prevent CSA.

This study was conducted between February and October of 2015 in 22 adult training sessions in a large Midwestern diocese. The diocese covers rural, urban, and suburban counties and is home to close to 200 parishes and over 100 schools. Because the diocese is so large, training sessions are offered multiple times a week in various locations. The researcher attended sessions in a variety of settings, administered pre/post/follow-up questionnaires, and engaged in participant observation. This paper draws primarily from the observational data although the pretest data is used to describe the group of participants. All of the participants were informed about the presence of the researcher and gave their consent. The field notes from the sessions contain a comprehensive list of all of the comments, concerns, and questions raised by both the participants and the facilitator. The observational data were coded using the TAMS software package.

Because the training program is mandatory for all volunteers and employees, its participants come from a wide range of backgrounds. In the sessions attended for this study, 62 percent of attendees were female and the average age of the whole group was 39 years. Most of the participants (50 percent) were there to volunteer in their children's classroom, the rest were teachers, coaches, Sunday school instructors, school or church staff members, or Scout leaders. Whites were overrepresented compared to the general population (90 percent compared to 63 percent of the U.S. population). Blacks were the

next largest group in the sample at 5 percent. The sample was also more highly educated than the general population with over half having completed a four-year college degree, compared to only about thirty percent of U.S. adults. This is probably because people who work with children in an official capacity (teachers, coaches, volunteers etc.) tend to have more education than the population at large. Because of the Catholic setting, those who identify as Catholic were overrepresented at 75 percent.

Catholic anti-abuse training is a particularly rich setting to explore how participants receive and respond to messages about offenders. This is because the sole purpose of the sessions is to educate participants about CSA and, consequently, participants are not distracted by other topics. Additionally, facilitators are required to incorporate time for discussion. This allows participants to share their beliefs and concerns. While this training has some unique elements because of its Catholic setting, the curriculum is based on the best practices literature and thus its material is similar to that presented in training programs offered by other churches and organizations.

Results

Official Framing of Offenders

The curriculum is the centerpiece of training sessions and sets the official frame. Organizations can select a curriculum from options already on the market or they can create their own. The context and history of organizations plays a role in choices about the curriculum. For example, many churches, day care centers, scouting groups, and other organizations have been rocked by CSA allegations and some have responded with cover-ups and denials. This has been a particularly well-recorded problem in the Catholic

Church. As a result, some participants arrive at sessions angry about the history of CSA and listen for ways in which the organization may be abdicating responsibility or minimizing the harm abuse causes. Other participants feel resentful that they are being required to come to training when they believe the real problem lies elsewhere (with the bishops, or with the leadership of an organization). Even more challenging, some of the people required to attend the sessions are former victims themselves (or are the family member of a victim). The sessions have the potential to be extremely upsetting for this group, especially if participants were victimized at the hands of priests, teachers, or childcare workers. All of these factors play into how information is presented and received in sessions.

Like most training programs, the curriculum studied here contains a core set of messages about offenders. These messages are presented in the videos and are reinforced by the facilitators. They include the following:

1. Anyone can be an abuser. This point is emphasized so that participants do not focus on one type of person, causing them to miss potentially harmful behavior by people who do not fit a particular profile.
2. Abusers are much more likely to be someone known to the child than a stranger. To bolster this claim, statistics are presented about the percentage of offenders who are strangers or who fall into another category
3. Gay people are not overrepresented among offenders. This message dispels a common stereotype.
4. Abusers plan ahead and groom their victims and the victim's families and communities. This message is reinforced by the inclusion of videotaped interviews in which offenders describe this process in some detail.
5. Celibacy does not cause priests to abuse children. This information is provided to counter a myth that priests engage in abuse because they cannot get married.

Two evaluations of this program suggest that the curriculum is effective in educating people about the set of messages listed above (Windham & Hudson, 2010; Nurse, 2016). For example, the Nurse study found that participants knew more accurate information about the intended messages at the end of the session than they did at the beginning. They also retained the new information over six months. This finding of knowledge gain is consistent with studies of other similar programs (Hazzard, Webb, Kleemeier, Angert, & Pohl, 1991; Hebert, Lavoie, & Parent, 2002; Kleemeier, Webb, Hazzard, & Pohl, 1988; McGrath, Cappelli, Wiseman, Khalil, & Allan, 1987; Rheingold, Campbell, Self-Brown, de Arellano, Resnick, & Kilpatrick, 2015).

The fact that participants learn the direct messages imparted by the program is important. It suggests that the curriculum can play a powerful role in correcting misperceptions about offenders. At the same time, direct messages are only one part of the way that the problem is framed. Participants also pick up subtle and sometimes unintended messages. For example, the curriculum includes extensive video footage of two male offenders talking about their motives and behaviors. This is intended to help participants learn about the grooming process and to show them that offenders look like anyone else. In addition to these two men, participants also hear about a number of other offenders through victim testimony. These offenders, who are not pictured, include a camp counselor, a priest, a family friend, and a female teacher.

From an analysis of the comments made during sessions, participants received at least three indirect messages about offenders. First, participants noticed that both offenders were wearing street clothes. This led them to raise their hands and complain about the justice system, saying that if people who committed such serious crimes were

not in prison, the courts must treat sexual offending leniently. Second, participants noted with horror that both offenders in the video victimized very large numbers of young children (more than twenty each). This created a vivid image of how offenders behave. Below is an excerpt from the field notes that highlights reactions to both the clothing and the multiple offenses.

Participant: Both the offenders in the film had multiple offenses. Why were they wearing civilian clothes?

Facilitator: A lot of people ask me that. They were convicted and part of their sentence was community service, making the movie was part of it

Participant: Absurd. (other participants make disapproving sounds)

Facilitator: Yes, it's difficult to see the justice in that.

A third indirect message received by participants involved whether offenders take responsibility or feel remorse for their actions. As described, most of the video footage involves two offenders talking about how they groomed children. While one offender talks about his actions having been wrong, remorse or admission of responsibility is not a prominent theme. As a result, participants in the class talked about offenders as being "remorseless," "cold," and "calculating." It is likely participants turned to these kinds of individualistic explanations to explain offending partly because of the video's episodic framing of the issue. While there are thematic elements (some statistics are given for example), what comes through most strongly are the voices of the two individual offenders talking about the crimes they committed.

The fact that participants in the training picked up unintended messages would not necessarily be problematic if some were not factually incorrect. For example, participants came away believing that sexual offenders receive light sentences. In fact, sentences for sexual offenders tend to be long compared to other crimes, these sentences have risen dramatically over the last twenty-five years, and U.S. sentences are generally higher than

other western countries (Budd & Desmond, 2014). At the same time, not all of the unintended messages in the curriculum are wrong. There are many offenders with multiple victims and many do not express remorse (Blumenthal, Gudjonsson, & Burns, 1999; Wortley & Smallbone, 2014). The value of these correct messages, however, is limited by what the curriculum does not tell participants. For example, the curriculum does not say that the majority of offenders abuse fewer than ten children (Wortley & Smallbone, 2014), child sexual offenders have fairly low recidivism rates compared to other types of offenders (Harris & Hanson, 2004), and therapy can be effective in helping offenders, particularly juvenile offenders, to both stop offending and take responsibility (Lösel & Schmucker, 2005; Waite, Keller, McGarvey, Wieckowski, Pinkerton, & Brown, 2005).

Group Response to the Official Framing

In training sessions, there are a number of opportunities for participants to discuss the material and ask questions. Because of this, they have some ability to drive the direction of the sessions and the portrayal of offenders. The facilitators also play an important role in directing the conversation. This section first presents an analysis of the main themes in the participants' comments and questions and then moves on to examine the facilitator's role.

The most frequent comments participants made about offenders involved anger, disgust, and revulsion. Participants usually expressed these emotions after the first movie when facilitators asked for their reactions. The quotes below are representative:

They (offenders) are like animals from the jungle—they should all be taken out and shot.

(Offenders are) perverted, horrendous

(I was) disgusted, really disgusted. Those people were talking like it was nothing. It was unbelievable

I couldn't look at the abusers. I wanted to punch them in the face.

These kinds of comments were made in every session I attended. Their number and vehemence were at least partly a reaction to the fairly detailed video testimony given by serial offenders. At the same time, anger and disgust appears to be routinely expressed in educational contexts where no videos are shown. Zevitz and Farkas (2000) found the same phenomenon during community notification meetings where there was no offender testimony.

After anger and disgust, the expression of fear was the next most common type of participant comment about offenders. Most often, it was parents who expressed fear for their own children. Below are representative comments

While watching it (the video) I wanted to lock my kids in the house. Maybe I'll just homeschool

Participant One: It's hard to watch the kids hurting

Participant Two: It was even harder to watch the adults talk about what they did

Facilitator: How did it make you feel?

Participant Two: I feel paranoid for my own kids. You never know.

I'm feeling like, I trust people so much then I watch this and it's like an internal battle. How much should I trust? I feel internal turmoil.

I feel terrified

Like the expressions of anger, the talk about fear mostly, but not exclusively, occurred during the discussion after the first movie. Again, however, the prevention trainings

mirrored the community notification meetings that Zevitz and Farkas (2000) studied. In both contexts, increased fear was a primary outcome.

While participants were angry and fearful about offenders, they were also open to learning more about them. This was reflected in the questions they asked during the sessions. The third most frequent theme came from these questions and involved participants wanting to know why offenders abuse children. For example, in one class a participant asked, “Why are they (offenders) that way?” In another class a person speculated, “Maybe it’s like an addiction?” Participants usually addressed these questions to the facilitator, but other times they speculated among themselves.

One of the reasons the etiology question came up so frequently is that the curriculum does not provide information about it. The training manual does, however, give facilitators information in case they are asked. They are encouraged to tell participants that there are three kinds of offenders: true pedophiles who are attracted to children, situational offenders who abuse children at times of great stress or drug use, and offenders who simply abuse any vulnerable person around them. I saw facilitators give this answer several times during sessions and each time the participants were unsatisfied. Most often, someone raised their hand and resisted the idea that situational factors can cause someone to abuse children. For example, in one session a participant commented skeptically, “I can’t imagine doing that due to stress, even if I was on drugs.” Other people strongly agreed with her. In some classes, the facilitators did not give the textbook answer about causation. Instead, they either evaded the question altogether or said they did not know. My notes suggest that this kind of response caused frustration among the participants. They reacted by murmuring among themselves or by repeating the question.

As is clear from the above example, facilitators take an active part in driving the direction of the group discussion. Their assigned duties are to handle sign-in and other paperwork, introduce and play the videos, lead the discussion, and answer questions. In reality, however, they play a far more complicated role as they try to manage the emotions in the room, represent the organization, defuse participant resentment, and remain true to the curriculum. These goals are disparate and require a delicate balancing act. Facilitators employed various strategies during sessions, several of which involved presenting particular images of offenders.

As described above, in virtually every session participants engaged in highly negative comments about offenders. Only once did I see a facilitator try to deescalate this type of talk or introduce a more well-rounded view. In fact, more often than not, the facilitator participated in and encouraged the conversation. In one class, for example, a participant said that offenders are “horrendous.” The facilitator immediately responded, “Horrendous captures it....what you saw on the film is very typical of offenders. That’s who they are.” Below is another interchange in a class.

Participant: Why aren’t the offenders in the movie still in jail?

Facilitator: It’s up to the judges unfortunately. If I had my choice, I’d throw away the key.

Participant: Yes, the offenders should be in jail forever.

There are a number of reasons that facilitators have an interest in supporting or even instigating negative comments about offenders. Given the organizational history of priest abuse, and the potential presence of victims in the room, they do not want to appear to be lenient or sympathetic toward offenders. Additionally, facilitators do not like to contradict participants because it can shut down conversation and embarrass people who

are (often) volunteering their time and may already be resentful. The training manual encourages facilitators to gently correct dangerous misperceptions about victims (like the belief that victims bring on abuse) but this is not extended to negative talk about offenders.

A second area where facilitators presented non-curricular images of offenders involved assumptions about their identity. As they are prompted to do in the teaching manual, all facilitators emphasized that “anybody can be an offender” and that offenders are not usually strangers. At the same time, they contradicted these messages by suggesting that there are particular categories of people who are not actually under suspicion. The first category of exempt individuals included all the people at the training. Some facilitators reassured the participants that the Church trusted them to be around children--the session was required only because it would make them better protectors of children. Other facilitators more subtly exempted participants when they thanked them for being at the session, saying that the Church runs because of good people like them. This effectively suggested that the “bad guys” are out there somewhere, not in the room.

The message that participants could not be offenders was reinforced by the complete lack of resources provided for offenders or for people who might be struggling with sexual feelings involving children. This stands in interesting contrast to the assumption that victims are present. Facilitators often used statistics to estimate how many people in the session were abused as children or how many knew a victim. Correspondingly, the handouts given out at the end of the sessions were about how to report abuse and how to get help for victims, not how to get help for offenders or potential offenders.

A second category of individuals exempted from the “anybody can be an abuser” message included the nuclear family of the participants (the spouse and other children). This message was given more subtly, primarily manifested through a lack of discussion of incest. Incest is not mentioned at all in the official curriculum. The topic did, however, come up nine times during the 22 sessions. Notably, seven participants asked about it and two facilitators pointed out that incest is an important issue. When participants raised the incest issue, facilitators generally acknowledged its existence and moved on. In one case, however, the topic came up when a facilitator asked whom should be contacted in cases of suspected abuse. A participant raised her hand and said, “The parent (pause). Except if the parent is the problem.” Instead of acknowledging that incest happens, the facilitator simply stressed that talking to parents is an important part of protecting children.

A second way that facilitators implicitly exempted family members was to argue that offenders are people who cause us to feel discomfort. This is not an official curricular message, in fact the official curriculum encourages people to look out for particular behavioral warning signs (like gift-giving) rather than vague feelings. The curriculum also emphasizes that offenders are often well liked in the community. Facilitators reinforced the warning signs but, when emotions in the room were running high, they supplemented them with a calming message about offenders: you can tell who they are because you will have a gut feeling. Some examples of this message are below.

Participant: But parents always seem to be as nice as can be. I am now convinced that I wouldn't know if they were an abuser.

Facilitator: Yes you would, you'd have an uncomfortable feeling.

You have to trust your gut, God gave us that. Nurture your sixth sense.

If your gut is telling you there is a problem, it's likely there is.

The “gut feeling” message does not, on its face, deny the possibility of family abuse, but it does divert attention from close family members who are unlikely to engender uncomfortable feelings. It also suggests that there is an inherency about sexual abuse—that offenders give off a different feeling from normal people.

Discussion

The evaluations of adult prevention programs cited above confirm training’s potential to counter specific incorrect and negative stereotypes of sexual offenders. This is encouraging, especially because some research suggests that accurate knowledge of CSA can mitigate stereotypes of offenders and that adults who have gone through an educational training program have more positive attitudes toward offenders (Hogue, 1994; Taylor, Keddle, and Lee, 2003). At the same time, these studies were conducted with direct care workers, not the general public, and an additional study found no attitude change associated with training (Craig, 2005).

This study is unique because it goes beyond simply assessing whether the direct messages in the curriculum are learned. Instead, it considers how the broader frame of an adult training program affects participant views of offenders. This particular program employs a frame that counters some cultural misperceptions. For example, participants are told that offenders can be anyone but that they are unlikely to be strangers. At the same time, however, it is implied that sexual offenders are all serial abusers who are calculating and remorseless. Such offenders, by extension, are framed as needing lengthy prison terms since they are unlikely candidates for rehabilitation. Information that might

deconstruct this frame (for example, that treatment can be effective or that the rate of sexual offending is decreasing) is not in the official curriculum.

The training program uses four of the five effective belief amplification techniques identified by Snow et al. (1986). The curriculum stresses the seriousness of the abuse problem, creates a stereotyped antagonist, gives people methods to take action and convinces them that it is their responsibility to be involved. Interestingly, however, it fails to give a clear cause for the problem. This may be because the etiology of offending is complex and there are not solid or easy answers. At the same time, however, the curricular frame does suggest that the causes of offending are located in the individual. This is conveyed by a lack of discussion of any possible societal causes and by the episodic framing of the videos with their images of individual offenders telling their stories.

This study suggests that the curriculum is the central component driving the construction of offender imagery in the training sessions but that group processes matter as well. These pressures generally result in “othering” offenders. We see this process when facilitators say or imply that participants and their families could not be offenders. It can also be seen in the revulsion participants express toward offenders and the fact that no countervailing messages are given. Offenders are portrayed as being so different, they engender an uncomfortable “gut feeling.” Participant-led discussions about the etiology of offending provides another opportunity for othering. There is clear resistance to the idea that situational pressures could cause someone to sexually abuse a child and participants push for explanations that locate the cause of abuse within the person.

It is important to recognize that othering is not simply an end in itself. When facilitators face situations that are tense, it is easy to reach for popular cultural frames to ease the situation. For example, facilitators sometimes try to reduce participant resentment about required attendance by exempting the people in the room from suspicion. The Catholic context discourages facilitators from talking about incest¹ (which could suggest that offenders are like everyone else) because it might appear that they are trying to deflect blame away from the Church. They also have little leeway to provide a nuanced view of offenders because it might be read as an attempt to excuse abusing priests. The othering of offenders—through the reliance on stereotypical understandings of them-- becomes a convenient and culturally acceptable way to allow participants to feel good about themselves and to unite the community as one who rejects child abuse.

The control of fear is another important goal that affects how facilitators talk about offenders. Facilitators are at the frontline working to achieve a balance between fear and empowerment. The curriculum encourages them to make sure that fear is reduced through the presentation of effective prevention strategies. This is in line with best practices which find that fear alone is generally not an effective agent of behavioral change (Ruiter, Abraham, & Kok, 2006, p. 626). When levels of fear become particularly high, facilitators sometimes contradict the curricular messages. For example, they resort to talking about the power of the “gut feeling” to prevent abuse.

This study suggests that the negative and individualistic frames the participants arrive with only become more intense during the trainings. As the group polarization

¹ It should be noted that there are other reasons why facilitators may avoid discussing incest. First, it is a highly emotional and fear-producing topic. Second, acknowledging incest may appear to counter the Church’s insistence on the sanctity and naturalness of the nuclear heterosexual family. Third, the sessions overall tend to focus more on organizational abuse than on in-home abuse.

literature predicts, one angry or disgusted comment leads to others and facilitators do little to prevent or temper them. Facilitators have little incentive to step in because they do not want to correct participants unless it is absolutely necessary and, in many cases, they agree with the negative sentiments being expressed.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that it is based on a sample of people attending a Catholic-sponsored training in the Midwest. The resultant low racial/ethnic and religious diversity in the sample limits its generalizability. Further research needs to be conducted on how racial/ethnic minorities and non-Catholics receive messages about offender behaviors and characteristics. As described, the sample for this study is also more highly educated than the general population. Education and knowledge about CSA are positively correlated (Quas, Thompson, & Clarke-Stewart, 2005) so it is likely that the general public knows less about the topic than do the participants in this study and may, in turn, hold more strongly to stereotypes (Taylor et al., 2003).

Although the curriculum studied here is used in many dioceses across the country, it should be noted there are variations in facilitator training by diocese. This may mean that facilitators are trained to react to participant comments in different ways in different regions of the country. At the same time, all Catholic dioceses are responding to similar organizational pressures and histories. The fact that the curriculum studied here is similar to other national programs also suggests that this study may have relevance to programs outside the Catholic Church.

Conclusion

The goal of CSA training is to protect children through teaching adults accurate information and effective prevention strategies. Framing sexual offenders as the “other” is not the explicit intention of the program but is often an unanticipated byproduct. It happens in a context where offenders are assumed not to be present, allowing their image to be manipulated to achieve other ends. Specifically, othering allows facilitators and participants to reduce fear, manage resentment, and acknowledge past CSA scandals.

While othering may achieve a number of short-term goals, it can contribute to long-term societal problems. First, it can cause people to focus their attention on people outside their own homes, missing the possibility of family abuse (Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). Second, the rhetoric of “gut feelings” can cause people to concentrate attention on people who are different from them and thus may make them feel uncomfortable. This is a particular concern if racial or sexual minorities come under scrutiny because they engender uncomfortable feelings from the majority. Third, othering involves an individualistic frame that locates the source of the problem in the individual. This turns attention away from possible social causes of offending. Finally, othering can provide justification for the harassment of offenders and their partners and children. Because churches and child-serving organizations are committed to protecting children from harm, they need to be aware of the effect othering may have on the children of offenders.

Prevention training is one of a few spaces where adults come together to discuss and learn about CSA. Most of the other information Americans receive comes from the media, which offers a distorted view of offender characteristics and behaviors (Katz-Schiavone et al., 2008; Sample, 2001). This study suggests that adults are very open to

learning new information about offenders, particularly about why they abuse children. For this reason, adult training has the potential to be effective in dismantling offender stereotypes. At the same time, this study shows that participants resist information when it appears to normalize offending or to suggest societal causes. Curricula must be designed carefully to ensure that the organizational context and participant preconceptions do not cause the group to revert to their preexisting cultural frames.

The public is currently engaged in a debate about whether and how to dismantle mass incarceration. This makes it all the more imperative that Americans have accurate information about sexual offenders. This will allow policy decisions to be driven less by fear and stereotypes and more by an informed and well-rounded view of offenders. Adult prevention training and other types of educational outreach have the potential to shape understandings of and attitudes toward child sexual offenders. As we move forward, however, we need to recognize how context, curriculum, preexisting beliefs, and group processes can combine to produce a frame that conveys unintended and incorrect messages about offenders.

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