



The Making and Molding of Child Abuse

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# The Making and Molding of Child Abuse

**Ian Hacking**

Some evil actions are public. Maybe genocide is the most awful. Other evil actions are private, a matter of one person harming another or of self-inflicted injury. Child abuse, in our current reckoning, is the worst of private evils. We want to put a stop to it. We know we can't do that, not entirely. Human wickedness (or disease, if that's your picture of abuse) won't go away. But we must protect as many children as we can. We want also to discover and help those who have already been hurt. Anyone who feels differently is already something of a monster.

We are so sure of these moral truths that we seldom pause to wonder what child abuse is. We know we don't understand it. We have little idea of what prompts people to harm children. But we do have the sense that what we mean by child abuse is something perfectly definite. So it comes as a surprise that the very idea of child abuse has been in constant flux the past thirty years. Previously our present conception of abusing a child did not even exist. People do many of the same vile things to children, for sure, that they did a century ago. But we've been almost unwittingly changing the very definitions of abuse and revising our values and our moral codes accordingly.

This material was written up in the fall of 1986 while I enjoyed a Killam Research Fellowship (Canada Council) and the hospitality of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University. It was intended for a volume of essays in honor of Nelson Goodman, edited by Mary Douglas and David Hull, but as this has long languished in limbo, the editors of *Critical Inquiry* kindly asked to print it even as it was becoming obsolete. I have not attempted any systematic updating, but some new information has been added.

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There is nothing wrong with that. One of the more attractive features of Western civilization is the way that we occasionally refine our sense of values and engage in consciousness-raising that lasts. Optimistically, that is what Norbert Elias called “the civilizing process.” We have found out more about child abuse, not just by uncovering horrible facts but also by clarifying our ideas and sharpening our moral sensibilities. This progress is not like obtaining a better conception of multiple sclerosis or the gene. It is not simply getting closer to the permanent truth of the matter. One difference is that as we evolve an idea about a kind of person or of human behavior, people change, behaviors change. Children experience their hurt differently. They are more self-conscious about when and how emotional and sexual abuse is painful; they see as abuse some events which before they would have ignored or repressed. Perhaps the suffering is worse for being acknowledged, or perhaps it is less damaging in the long run. Whatever, the experience of abuse is different. Likewise the abusers’ own sense of what they are doing, how they do it, and even what they do is just not the same now as it was thirty years ago. New kinds of people come into being that don’t fit the wisdom just acquired, less because the recent knowledge was wrong than because of a feedback effect. There is not strictly a truth of the matter that, once discovered, will remain the truth, for once it is counted as true and becomes common knowledge, it will change the very individuals—abusers and children—about whom it was supposed to be the truth.

There has been plenty of talk of late about the social construction of ideas, and some of this has been directed at the idea of child abuse.<sup>1</sup> I am less concerned with the construction of the idea of child abuse than with how, as I have it put it elsewhere, we uncritically and spontaneously “make up people.”<sup>2</sup> There’s more than a whiff of labelling theory here: people are affected by what we call them and, more importantly, by the available classifications within which they can describe their own actions and make their own constrained choices. People act

1. See Richard J. Gelles, “The Social Construction of Child Abuse,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 45 (Apr. 1975): 363–71; Stephen J. Pfohl, “The ‘Discovery’ of Child Abuse,” *Social Problems* 24 (Feb. 1977): 310–23; and D. Kelly Weisberg, “The ‘Discovery’ of Sexual Abuse: Experts’ Role in Legal Policy Formation,” *University of California at Davis Law Review* 18 (Fall 1984): 1–57.

2. See Ian Hacking, “Making up People,” in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas Heller et al. (Stanford, Calif., 1986), pp. 222–36.

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and decide under descriptions, and as new possibilities for description emerge, so do new kinds of action. That is a two-way street. Because people behave differently in the light of how we classify them—because we behave differently according to how we present ourselves to ourselves—the descriptions and classifications must in turn be modified.

Child abuse powerfully illustrates this theme, but it is dangerously topical. It arouses high passions. It is a story that is developing every day. There are long periods when every week presents a new TV spectacular. When I was first writing these words, there was a show on a newly opened British hotline for abused children, deluged with calls leading people to suppose that one in ten British children is abused. It was immediately followed by ABC's main special-of-the-week, "Battered Children," highlighting the moral problems of the physicians who are "the first to see the signs of abuse." The comics had just taken up child abuse. *Spiderman*, *Rex Morgan*, and *Gasoline Alley* had run stories on the topic, and *Mary Worth* was flirting with it. *Spiderman* then had a special comic book circulated to millions of school children. More importantly, perhaps, every community on this continent has its own little sequence of local horror stories.

Emphasizing the public prominence of child abuse in an earlier version of this essay four years ago, I wrote, "Next week? I don't know but I can predict with certainty that there will be lots more to say about it." That was unduly modest. One could make more specific predictions, or at any rate one could guess right. Some examples of the sort of thing one could know in advance: the continuing enormous feeling of liberation that women could experience and express when they were finally allowed to recover the ways in which their parents sexually molested them. One also could easily guess that accusations of ritual abuse and satanic rites would spread like a successful franchise from town to town. (Less expected is the fact that no jurisdiction has been able to obtain a clear-cut conviction for activities that would have to involve, across the land, thousands of cultists.)

Turning to specific predictions, I was sure that the most expensive and in many ways the most gross child abuse trial, that of the McMartins in Manhattan Beach, a Los Angeles suburb, would end in acquittal.<sup>3</sup> In Newfoundland a whole chain of priests was found guilty of sexual abuse, mostly of boys, and it was established that one refuge for boys run by the Christian Brothers, Mount Cashel, had for decades been the scene of bloody whipping and buggery by the keepers. The archbishop of the diocese had been well enough aware of this all along. (He proffered his resignation to the pope in July, 1990.) None of this

3. The 5 February 1990 issue of *People* captures the spectrum of public reaction at least as well as any of the more judicious studies that have appeared and are appearing.

was surprising. Anyone remotely in the know knew that some Newfoundland clergy were a disaster waiting to be exposed. After a meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, we yawningly learn that “there is no reason to believe there is a link between abuse and celibacy.” What makes me sit up is hearing another member of the Ad Hoc Committee blaming the “violence in society” rather than guilty priests: “The situation is so bad that even clergy abuse.”<sup>4</sup> I did not anticipate that sort of excuse.

But many events were completely unforeseen: for example, the particular sort of child abuse scandal that would rock Great Britain. American public reaction to the McMartin case seems demure compared to England at the height of the “Cleveland affair.” Unlike nearly all previous child abuse “events” outside the United States, it was completely *sui generis*, not patterned on American experience. A 1986 article in *Lancet* recommended a forensic technique known as anal dilation for detecting possible buggery of infants and children. Two pediatricians in a working-class region of northeastern England used it as partial grounds for placing 121 children in care. The daily tabloids and the local M.P. thundered against these experts destroying the British family and preempting the rule of law. In America, a new child abuse scandal provokes untold rage against the accused; in Britain, it was the pediatricians and social workers who were bitterly hated. The total number of words published in the United Kingdom, on the topic of child abuse, doubled in eighteen months, all thanks to the one issue.<sup>5</sup> People said that these English events were also a disaster “waiting to happen,” but nobody could possibly have foreseen that anal dilation would be at the center of public outcry, nor have forecast the intensity of the anger that was evoked.

Returning to the United States, by 1986 one could readily anticipate various kinds of backlash and retrenchment. I had nevertheless thought that educational programs to teach young children to recognize dangers of abuse were pretty much in place. Little did I suspect that by 1990 California would be repealing all such programs—on the

4. Bishop Exner and then-Sister Nuala Kenny quoted in Toronto’s *Globe and Mail*, 7 Aug. 1990. The official report of the case is Gordon Winters, *Report of the Archdiocesan Commission of Inquiry in the Sexual Abuse of Children by Members of the Clergy of Newfoundland* (St. John’s, Newfoundland, 1990).

5. See the official report, Department of Health and Social Security, *Child Abuse in Cleveland, 1987: Inquiry Report* (London, 1988). The fulminations of the M.P. can be found in Stuart Bell, *When Salem Came to the Boro: The True Story of the Cleveland Child Abuse Case* (London, 1988). For a strong feminist approach, see Beatrix Campbell, *Unofficial Secrets: Child Abuse—The Cleveland Case* (London, 1988). For an introduction to the tabloid press on Cleveland, see Gay Search, *The Last Taboo: Sexual Abuse of Children* (Harmondsworth, 1988), esp. p. 159.

avowedly “Piagetian” grounds that young children had not reached a maturational stage at which they could understand what was being taught to them.<sup>6</sup>

I mention some sensational or media-driven episodes as a reminder that child abuse is inescapable. What is happening? Is it that we are constantly being made more aware of an objective evil in our midst that we have been so good at ignoring? There are plenty of careful social constructionists—thinkers who are almost totally committed to the idea that categories and classifications are social constructions—who nevertheless rebel at looking at child abuse from the overall approach of “making up people.” These otherwise thoroughgoing nominalists protest that child abuse is a *real* abuse that has finally been exposed after generations of cover-up. I don’t disagree. I think that the child abuse movement may have effected the most valuable, albeit most discouraging, heightening of awareness that has taken place in my lifetime. It has switched on lights and held up mirrors to ourselves. The distortion has not been all that great.

It is nevertheless the case that no one had any glimmering, in 1960, of what was going to count as child abuse in 1990. It is not as if we went in with a clear idea of evils to be ferreted out and found far more than we had bargained for. Although now we are if anything over-confident in our litany of the bad things that can be done to children, all of which will be placed in the category “child abuse,” some of those things were not even counted as especially bad three decades ago. I am sometimes skeptical or ironic in what follows—not about attempts to help children but about the bland confidence in a truth of the matter, a truth “out there,” which it is our task to discover and use. I have no interest whatsoever in fostering a skepticism-in-general. But here it may be worthwhile. The most striking feature of child abuse, on returning to it after four years, is the pervasive feeling of depression.

WASHINGTON, June 27—A panel of child-care experts appointed by the Government has concluded that “child abuse and neglect in the United States now represent a national emergency” and it assailed “the nation’s lack of an effective response.”<sup>7</sup>

At this stage in the game such a statement is extraordinary. Fifteen years ago—after a previous fifteen years of unremitting agitation by, initially, a concerned few—the feeling of emergency was there. But it was exuberant. New methods, new agencies, new laws, new education

6. The recommendations were made in *A Report to the Office of Child Abuse and Prevention by the Preschool Curricula Task Force* (Sacramento, Calif., 1990).

7. Martin Tolchin, “U.S. Panel Declares Child Abuse Represents ‘National Emergency,’” *New York Times*, 28 June 1990.

of children, new information for parents, new therapies, and above all, new and growing knowledge would transform the world. It was shocking when in 1981 there were 1.1 million reported cases of child abuse and neglect. All the more reason to get down to work. But in 1989, 2.4 million cases were reported, and even if that doubling were entirely due to better reporting, one certainly does not think that the incidence of child abuse and neglect is any less than in 1975. The depression is not felt only by blue-ribbon panels. It is out there on the streets, where weary overworked and undertrained social workers feel like giving up. If only we had more people, more time!

And yet what have we got for more people and more time but more cases of child abuse? Knowledges replace each other almost whimsically. I just mentioned that California was undoing its Child Assault Prevention Training Program. It was introduced because one knew, pretty well, how to teach children to be on the lookout. Now another knowledge, based on another psychology, says the children don't yet have the concepts to enable them to make the distinctions that are needed; the program was pedagogically unsound. Well, won't another study determine the facts that will settle the matter, a nice longitudinal study? We are drowning in inconsequential studies. When the journal *Child Abuse and Neglect* was established in 1976, it was full of harsh news but confident knowledge. Now the tenor of the articles is very different. The child abuse scene is in certain ways more depressed now than it has been these thirty years.

My purpose is not to understand this evil, child abuse. It is not to explain it or to discover its causes, although I do invite a stepping back, a skeptical wondering whether we are using the right ideas of explanation, cause, and knowledge. My purpose is not that of the social historian curious to explain the sudden prominence of child abuse in America in the 1960s and its subsequent evolution. I will recount some of that history because it is at least the surface of the making and molding of child abuse, so we do need it as a resource. My purpose is not that of a student of politics or moral movements, aiming at showing the mechanisms whereby issues take shape, wax, and wane.<sup>8</sup> My original purpose was to consider a kind of human behavior that has undergone radical changes, so that we can see how human kinds are formed and molded. Such kinds are, I think, different from what philosophers call natural kinds because they interact with the very beings to which they apply.<sup>9</sup>

8. For an excellent account of this aspect of child abuse, see Barbara J. Nelson, *Making an Issue of Child Abuse: Political Agenda Setting for Social Problems* (Chicago, 1984). Her agenda-setting model was pioneered by Joseph R. Gusfield, *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order* (Chicago, 1981).

9. Mary Douglas, with characteristic verve, quotes one statement of mine to this effect and sharply, if to my mind implausibly, disagrees. We find out more about bacteria, and bacteria adapt to our new knowledge! See Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1986), p. 101.

Knowledge about things begins by classifying, grouping, seeing connections, and speculating about cause and effect. The malaise and depression in child abuse work is in part a consequence of having wrong expectations and conceptions of the knowledge that will be the basis for action. So what began as a fairly abstract attempt to think about the nature of human kinds is, at the moment, much closer to praxis because, I believe, the depression results partly from efforts based on a wrong idea of knowledge and causation in human affairs.

Above all I wish to emphasize the malleability of the idea of child abuse. Child abuse is, as I shall show in some detail, not one fixed thing. We have had something like our concept of child abuse for less than thirty years, during each of which it has been the focus of intense concern, especially in the United States. Prior to that we had a number of ideas that were kept quite distinct, ranging from cruelty to children to child molestation. Yet aside from occasional scandalous court cases, the public had little interest in such matters during the preceding years, 1912 to 1962. Since 1962 the class of acts falling under "child abuse" has changed every few years, so that people who have not kept up to date are astonished to be told that the present primary connotation of child abuse is sexual abuse. Conversely, those who have only just come in are amazed when they learn that attention to child abuse began with X-rays of healing bones in three-year-old babies.

### *Connections*

Before relating a little of this conceptual history it is worthwhile to recall a few of the ways in which child abuse connects with other vexing issues. The ramifications seem endless. Here are a few of them, in no particular order. It will be seen that the idea of child abuse can, at present, lead almost anywhere.

1. *Morality.* Child abuse is an intrinsically moral topic. Abusing a child has come to seem the most heinous of crimes. There is a long tradition in British empiricist philosophy of distinguishing 'is' from 'ought,' to use Humian shorthand. A mere description, it is said, never implies by itself an evaluation. But it is not possible, in our times, to describe someone as a child abuser without thereby making a moral condemnation. The evaluative power of the label results in part from the way in which distinct kinds of harm have been brought together. We used to have quite different types of moral revulsion against a parent willfully neglecting a baby, against a person savagely beating an innocent, against a stranger molesting a child, and against incest. But when these are run together as child abuse, when sexual vice is what is so often conjured up by the phrase "child abuse," and when the victim is a child, an innocent, it is no wonder that our most primitive and deep-seated moral sensibilities are in full play. Our whole value system has been affected by the trajectory of child abuse in the past thirty years,



with a compelling new constellation of absolute moral evil: child abuse. Relativists may remark that some of the things called child abuse are seen as such only in a culture such as ours. But no one has yet had the pluck to suggest that our antipathy to child abuse itself is “merely relative to our culture.” And yet, and yet . . . there is so much morality, so much righteousness here that one can begin to suspect that some sort of pseudomorality is creeping in.

2. *Feminism.* Child abuse owes its prominence in part to the women’s movement, although some of the connections are unexpected. For example, I take it that the term “battered wives” is patterned after “battered child syndrome,” and not the other way round. “Battered child” entered English about 1961, introduced by male pediatricians. “Battered wives” is surprisingly more recent, and may have been used first in England where the first shelter explicitly for battered women was established. That was in 1970, by Erin Pizzey, author of the powerful *Scream Quietly or the Neighbors Will Hear*.<sup>10</sup> Without feminism there is little likelihood that the idea of child abuse would so quickly have absorbed the notion of sexual abuse of children. Wife assault and child assault have become assimilated and the entire phenomenon of child abuse seen as one more aspect of patriarchal domination.

3. *Rights.* Children’s rights are new. They arise less in terms of moral theory than of jurisprudence and of practical law. What are the relations between the rights of parents, or perhaps the rights of the family, and the rights of children? Had not child abuse finally become a focus in the 1960s of vast public concern, the question of children’s rights would be almost unknown. This leads on to other reflections. Suppose it is the case that, in our society, men tend to think about how to solve human problems in terms of rights and obligations, while women tend to do so in terms of needs and caring. You might recognize here one way in which an issue that has been moved along by women is then preempted, in the public arena, by men with their enthusiasm for rights. Children don’t need some “rights” to be invented for them by ingenious legal minds. They need to be cared for.

4. *Juries.* There have been of course lots of specific legal questions, for example, regarding the testimony of children. Must those accused of child abuse be allowed to confront the children who accuse them? On 27 June 1990, the Supreme Court ruled 5–4 allowing testimony by cable television. The right to a face-to-face confrontation is not “indispensable.” Weighty jurisprudence like this should not make us forget day-to-day realities. A jury will seldom convict if the penalties are thought to be too heavy. The long history of English juries refusing to convict for infanticide is a classic case. More recently in Quebec, still

10. See Erin Pizzey, *Scream Quietly or the Neighbors Will Hear* (Short Hills, N.J., 1977).

widely thought of as a bastion of Roman Catholicism, three successive juries acquitted a doctor of abortion even though he asserted in court that he had aborted a fetus without satisfying a medical panel of necessity. That was, at that time, manifestly against the law. The successive juries made the law unworkable. But in the present climate, despite the extraordinary penalties, convictions can be obtained. In New Jersey one "bad touch" of a child can get you ten years in jail and a \$100,000 fine. New Jersey juries will nevertheless convict for cases of sexual abuse not involving any form of violence or consummation.<sup>11</sup> A more recent New Jersey case is even more striking, that of Margaret Kelly Michaels who was sentenced to forty-seven years in prison for sexual offences at the Wee Care Day Nursery, Maplewood, New Jersey. One should never rely on investigative journalism in judging a jury, but *prima facie*, without having read the court records, one must be in doubt that *any* justice was done.<sup>12</sup> Whatever did happen at Wee Care, we can be certain (and I have anecdotal confirmation of this from a juror who served on a not dissimilar New Jersey case twenty years ago) that such jury decisions are a thing of the recent past.

5. *Cause*. Turning to a more abstract connection, a traditional and rather positivist account of concepts goes like this: we form a concept and thereby pick out a class of things or events falling under that concept. If we care, we ask what causes the events and, also, what we should do about them if we wish to harness or eliminate them. First classify and then find causal connections, for how could one find a causal connection unless one had some well-defined classes? Most philosophers would now say that is too simplistic, but nowhere is the failure of that model more striking than in the case of child abuse. To exaggerate, ideas about the causes precede ideas about what they are causes of. People have had different views as to the causes of child abuse, some emphasizing poverty, some disease, some endemic violence, some patriarchal cruelty. Views on the causes and prevention of child abuse have determined, to a great extent, the class of events that are labelled abuse.

6. *Multiple Personality*. There is no agreement on the "causes" of child abuse, but there is an astonishing level of agreement that something else can be caused by it: multiple personality disorder. Multiple personalities, which had a fascinating role in French and to some extent American psychological theory between 1875 and 1926, effectively

11. "Guilty Verdict in Sex Abuse: Flemington, N.J.," *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 1986.

12. See Jesus Rangel, "Ex-Preschool Teacher Sentenced to 47 Years in Sex Case in Jersey," *New York Times*, 3 Aug. 1988. For critics, see Debbie Nathan, "Victimizer or Victim?" *The Village Voice*, 2 Aug. 1988, and Dorothy Rabinowitz, "From the Mouths of Babes to a Jail Cell: Child Abuse and the Abuse of Justice: A Case Study," *Harper's Magazine* 290 (May 1990): 52-63.

disappeared until the 1970s when they reappeared with a vengeance. A vigorous school of psychotherapy now finds that multiple personality disorder is not at all rare and that an individual can have up to a hundred distinct "alters." The multiple personality movement has ridden on the back of child abuse, thanks to this piece of new knowledge: multiple personality disorder is caused by child abuse, especially child sexual abuse. There is an "overwhelming etiological association with childhood trauma, especially severe child abuse."<sup>13</sup>

7. *Psychohistory*. An even more striking causal claim is historical. Human history is the history of child abuse and its effects. Every generation abuses its children and thereby molds the psyches of the next generation. The only way to understand world history is to do the history of childhood and that turns out to be the history of child abuse. Such is the remarkable thesis of Lloyd deMause and his school.<sup>14</sup>

8. *The state*. Turning to a slightly less grand historical theme, we recall that children's rights are commonly presented as a foil to traditional paternal rights or family rights. But perhaps this is a cover-up for a quite different type of confrontation, not child versus parent but families versus the state. Jacques Donzelot's *The Policing of Families* is the best known of many studies of the way that the emerging welfare state and the social net radically increased state control over families during the nineteenth century. Arguably there has been no greater increase in state intervention than that allowed by child abuse legislation, ordinances, and agencies during the past thirty years. The cynic will urge that the real "function" of legislation and agencies is not the protection of children but the increase in state power.<sup>15</sup>

9. *Money*. This cynical view can be combined with the fact that during the 1980s there was a radical decline, in the United States, in the amount of federal and (in most cases) state funds available for children and poor single parents. The welfare state gradually withdrew one mode of intervention and replaced it by another. A mild version of this observation is that the child abuse movement serves to conceal the decline in social support for children. The strong version says that child abuse legislation is a cheaper and far more effective form of control of deviant families than welfare.

13. Bennett G. Braun, "The Transgenerational Incidence of Dissociation and Multiple Personality Disorder: A Preliminary Report," in *Childhood Antecedents of Multiple Personality*, ed. Richard P. Kluft (Washington, D.C., 1985), p. 136. The doctrine was first stated authoritatively in 1979 by Kluft at a meeting of the American Psychiatric Association. The textbook of this body of theory is Frank W. Putnam, *Diagnosis and Treatment of Multiple Personality Disorder* (New York, 1989).

14. See Lloyd deMause, "The Evolution of Childhood," in *The History of Childhood*, ed. deMause (New York, 1974), pp. 1-73.

15. See Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1979).

10. *Extensions.* Once powerful child abuse legislation was in place, it could be applied where the law was silent. Fetal abuse is an evident example. Mothers who do drugs or drink heavily harm their babies. Certain types of law enforcement officers have, since 1985, tried and sometimes succeeded in indicting mothers for child abuse, fetal abuse being deemed a type of child abuse. (Because this is dubious law, there is the alternative tactic of indicting mothers directly after birth for administering drugs to another, through the umbilical cord). Needless to say such cases are closely watched by the pro-life anti-abortionists. The cases that have attracted most attention have to do with crack cocaine and fit well into crack-as-a-social-problem. The moves that are being made here are quite disreputable. Yet a positive effect is the heightened public awareness of maternal alcoholism and fetal alcohol syndrome. The syndrome has long been known, but perhaps only because of the child abuse movement has it finally become clear how much this has had to do with the ongoing destruction of Amerindian populations, especially in the far north at this very moment. Not that anyone well understands how to help.

11. *Backlash.* There is plenty of that. Concern with dubious law (fetal abuse), questionable convictions (Wee Care), and more abstract reflections on the state may appeal to some intellectuals. Far more important is the antagonism to the use of child abuse in custody cases. Many parents divorce when their children are young; many divorcees fight about the children. For a while, nothing seemed more decisive than the allegation that one parent, usually the father, was abusing the child. Revulsion at seeming injustice or exaggeration has led to a widespread antagonism to child abuse legislation in general. Among the more sophisticated, the rhetoric instantly invokes Salem. The child abuse movement is engaged in a witch-hunt.<sup>16</sup> The comparison is in my opinion nonsense, but it is nonetheless effective.

12. *Disclaimer.* Lest what follows may seem part of the backlash, I should disassociate myself from it. Certainly there have been abuses of the very idea of child abuse. The passions unleashed in the attempt to aid the hurt innocents have also grievously wounded some who were not guilty. But in a plain utilitarian balance, vastly more good has been done than harm. The very existence of the backlash effect, itself excessive, is more than enough corrective for undue zeal. It does however remind us that the child abuse movement is overtly moral and political. Nobody should expect it to display the superficial integrity of on-the-record laboratory science.

16. "From the witch-hunts of Salem to the communist hunts of the McCarthy era to the current shrill fixation on child abuse, there runs a common thread of moral hysteria" (Rabinowitz, "From the Mouths of Babes to a Jail Cell," p. 63). And for a parallel in England, see Bell's *When Salem Came to the Boro*.

*Cruelty to Children*

Child abuse was a major issue once before, at the end of the Victorian era. It crystallized around an incident in New York City, whence it sped to Liverpool and London. Some of the things that happened seem natural enough to us: the foundation of philanthropic societies for the prevention of cruelty to children, constant pressure on lawmakers, provisions for the care of children being abused, and a sharp increase in the number of prosecutions of parents who damage their children. Other aspects are forgotten. For example: the concern with cruelty to children was first sponsored by animal protection societies, or by the closely related Water Fountain Movement (encouraging all communities to have a three-level water fountain: one for people, one for horses, and one for dogs). We can better understand, even if we have forgotten them, the House of Refuge Movement and the great newsboy rescue movements. Reform was abroad: temperance, antivivisection, abolitionism, women's movements. Those who spoke for one often spoke for another.

Nevertheless some aspects of concern with children do seem quite alien to us: for example, the likes of Dr. Barnardo in the East End of London, abetted by wrestlers and swift runners, hustling boys into carriages to be taken to "homes," there to be given shelter and a Protestant education over the protests of the Roman Catholic Church—a majority of the affected families were Catholic. One hundred and forty thousand such children were exported to Toronto, many of them having been straightforwardly abducted.<sup>17</sup> Such philanthropy was not unrelated to interest. "The question of turning a crying source of weakness in England into an invaluable factor of wealth in Canada is one that is of imperial proportions and urgency."<sup>18</sup>

The founders, in 1853, of the first Children's Aid Society in New York had similar concerns. Half of the petty offenders in city jails were under twenty-one. The children had to be saved, otherwise "they will influence elections; they may shape the policy of the city; they will assuredly, if unreclaimed, poison society all around them. They will help to form the great multitude of robbers, thieves, and vagrants."<sup>19</sup> The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was

17. See Joy Parr, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada 1869–1924* (London, 1980).

18. John Herridge Batt, *Dr. Barnardo: The Foster-Father of "Nobody's Children"* (London, 1904), p. 129.

19. Circular of the Children's Aid Society, quoted in Charles Loring Brace, "The Children's Aid Society of New York: Its History, Plans, and Results," in *A History of Child-Saving in the United States: Report of the Committee on the History of Child-Saving Work to the Twentieth National Conference of Charities and Correction*, ed. C. D. Randall et al. (1893; Montclair, N.J., 1971), p. 3.

founded in the next generation, 1874. It professed less political concern. It arose from a scandalous case of a child regularly beaten by her stepmother. The child was rescued by an imaginative use of fifteenth-century English common law; the Society then lobbied for new laws. Societies arose in every state. In the United Kingdom, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children could justly claim, for fifty years, to be the largest single welfare service in the world.

When we turn to our modern idea of child abuse, we shall find that it is extraordinarily medicalized. It was introduced by physicians, and physicians still lay claim to it. Some medical men were important in the old cruelty to children movement but only because they were prominent members of society. Dr. Barnardo himself had intended to be a missionary doctor, but he found his calling at home. At no time did he think that his philanthropic work was part of medicine. Naturally a physician might treat a child injured by a parent or caretaker—just as the doctor must treat burns caused by arson. But arson itself is a matter for the police and fire brigade. Likewise, cruelty to children was a matter for the police, the courts, and the philanthropic societies, not medicine. Child abuse has been a medical concept; cruelty to children was not. That is one fundamental way in which they differ.

Despite the extraordinary fervor of the eighties, anticruelty agitation faded away. Specific reasons for the decline are not wanting. To some extent the original goals of the movement had been achieved. There was also a displacement of concern. There was a new characterization of the problematic child: the juvenile delinquent. Child-saving began by separating children from their caretakers, or picking up what we would now call runaways. It then turned to a new type of child, the “delinquent.” It introduced new types of juvenile court—Chicago was the model for the world—and reformatories.<sup>20</sup> The child had to be saved not from his parents but from himself.

The decline of cruelty agitation in Britain has been well documented at the end of a book titled *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870–1908*.<sup>21</sup> The dates are precise. In America the emergence of a profession of social worker was important. The Massachusetts Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children led the way and pushed the point at the First White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children in 1909. It urged that it would be better for professionals to place children in individual homes rather than in

20. See Anthony M. Platt, *The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency* (1969; Chicago, 1977). As its title implies, this takes an aggressively constructionist attitude to the idea of delinquency.

21. See George K. Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870–1908* (Stanford, Calif., 1982).

refuges—although the issue was by no means settled. New York and California long persisted in putting children in state institutions rather than in foster homes, while Michigan, Minnesota, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin had long hewn to the other policy. But either way the older tradition of charitable amateurs was dismantled.<sup>22</sup>

It is worth recalling that the name “social work” was unknown before 1900. Yet by 1910 there were schools of social work in numerous nations (with the Netherlands leading the way). In the United States, the National Social Workers’ Exchange had, by 1912, an employment bureau with a sizable number of categories of possible employment. A new kind of expert had emerged, and insofar as anyone was to be responsible for cruelty to children, it was, thanks to the First White House Conference, to be the social worker.

There was also a new agenda for those concerned with children. After nine years of preliminary organization, the Children’s Bureau was founded in 1912 as a federal agency. It had been assured existence at the same 1909 White House Conference. Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed that the nation should attend as much to its child crop as to its farm crop. The Children’s Bureau took as its first priority the problem of infant mortality. Only in the late 1950s did it turn to child abuse.

## 1962

Cruelty to children became invisible as a “social problem.” There was cruelty to some individual children, which was from time to time prosecuted. Then in 1962 a group of physicians in Denver, led by C. Henry Kempe, published “The Battered-Child Syndrome.”<sup>23</sup> Its appearance in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* was accompanied by a stern editorial on society’s long silence about injuries that should have been acknowledged. The editors speculated that more children died of battery from parents or guardians than from leukemia, cystic fibrosis, or muscular dystrophy.<sup>24</sup> The media got the message.

22. See Dorothy E. Bradbury, *Five Decades of Action for Children: A History of the Children’s Bureau* (Washington, D.C., 1962).

23. See C. Henry Kempe et al., “The Battered-Child Syndrome,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 181 (July–Sept. 1962): 17–24.

24. Editorial, “The Battered-Child Syndrome,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 181 (July–Sept. 1962): 42. The statement is characteristically powerful, ambiguous, and, in the most direct interpretation, not strictly true. In 1962, 2071 children under fifteen died of leukemia. (See Vital Statistics of the United States 1962, IIA, table I–23.) Even by 1979 after the radical increase in reporting—see the quotation tagged with note 36 below—the number of children actually killed as a result of actions by their caretakers was put at 2000. The official figures for 1989 are 1200 known deaths as a result of maltreatment, with possibly as many as 5000. Even at the upper limit, automobile accidents were far more lethal, for this age group, than either battering or leukemia, in any of the three decades in question.

*Newsweek* scooped the rest. Kempe had not yet published, but he had addressed the American Academy of Pediatrics on the “battered-child syndrome” in November of the previous year. *Time*’s story of July 20 followed the official publication (July 7) in the *JAMA* and the AMA’s press release in advance of publication.<sup>25</sup>

*The Saturday Evening Post* came in with a long piece: “Parents Who Beat Children: A Tragic Increase in Cases of Child Abuse Is Prompting a Hunt for Ways to Detect Sick Adults Who Commit Such Crimes.”<sup>26</sup> This is a particularly flamboyant article, savoring the ghastly things parents and guardians have done to children. Even the title indicates several of the recurring and perhaps confused themes. First, we have the “tragic increase.” Since nobody was tracking battered children, we have precious little ground for talk of increase, yet. Second, the adults are “sick.” All the popular articles write of a new “disease.” Yet simultaneously child abuse is a “crime,” which is a little confusing. A crime in the existent law, yes, but if a disease is it a crime? Finally, the term “child abuse” becomes entrenched, from the start, in the public mind.

The Kempe group of pediatricians in Denver was the source of the agitation. Now I do not suggest that it sprang fully formed from the foothills of Colorado. There had been quiet discussions in various quarters. In particular the Children’s Division of the American Humane Association (AHA) acquired a new director in 1954. The AHA, commonly thought of as an animal protection group, had a children’s division ever since the heyday of cruelty to children in 1885. It had, like cruelty, languished, but its lively new director launched a nationwide survey of neglected children. Cruelty was not an issue then, but at least neglect was. The Children’s Bureau of Health, Education and Welfare, which in a major reorganization had been stripped of many of its duties, followed the AHA. It was a bureaucracy in search of a job. It found one, with a vengeance. Committees were established. Model statutes for reporting child abuse and neglect were proposed. This was happening just as Kempe’s people in Denver were completing their research and mobilizing for publication. The remarkable thing about the Kempe paper was its source, something that the Children’s Bureau could not have foreseen: X rays.

As early as 1945 the *American Journal of Roentgenology* had carried a paper on a “new syndrome” tentatively given the Latinate name of “infantile cortical hyperostosis.”<sup>27</sup> The authors, experts in the declining

25. See “‘When They’re Angry . . .,’” *Newsweek*, 16 Apr. 1962, p. 74, and “Battered-Child Syndrome,” *Time*, 20 July 1962, p. 60.

26. See “Parents Who Beat Children: A Tragic Increase in Cases of Child Abuse Is Prompting a Hunt for Ways to Detect Sick Adults Who Commit Such Crimes,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 6 Oct. 1962, pp. 30–35.

27. See John Caffey and William A. Silverman, “Infantile Cortical Hyperostosis: Preliminary Report on a New Syndrome,” *The American Journal of Roentgenology* 54 (July–Dec. 1945): 1–16.



field of pediatric radiology, observed that infants who suffered excessive blood collection beneath the skull often show, under X rays, healed or healing fractures of the arms or legs—without there being any known history of injury. No conclusions were drawn; at any rate, none were published. This was just a phenomenon (although today it is supposed that everyone who noted the paper knew what it really meant but was too cowed to say anything). In any case the “obvious” inference was slowly drawn and discussed. Kempe’s paper was important because it firmly asserted what had previously only been whispered. Parents were beating their children to the extent of breaking their bones. A parallel evil: physicians had failed in their responsibilities. But now the tide would turn, and the doctor would treat not only the symptom, but the cause: the parent who committed the battery. The parent was sick and required help from the medical profession.

The paper also managed to put in place one of the most widespread beliefs about child abuse: battering parents were battered children, or, more generally, child abusers were abused when they were children. At first one read only “often parents may be repeating the type of child care practiced on them in their childhood.”<sup>28</sup> That statement is cautious enough, but it has been elevated into a generalization.

Equally important was the assertion that child abuse stretches across all social classes. This renders it not a social problem, not a “welfare” problem. The physicians were eager to declare it to be *their* problem:

Physical, nutritional, or emotional abuse is one of the most common maladies of the young child. . . . The medical profession has exhibited almost a complete lack of interest in this problem until recent years. . . . It is the responsibility of the medical profession to assume the leadership in this field.<sup>29</sup>

Although typically injuries were of the sort treated in outpatient clinics, hospitalization was recommended as a way of separating the child from the parent. “The physician should not be satisfied to return the child to an environment where even a moderate risk of repetition exists.”<sup>30</sup>

Only one prominent writer publicly denounced these attitudes. Inevitably, it was Thomas Szasz, the outspoken critic of most of the medical claims of psychiatry.<sup>31</sup> In his view the battered child obviously needs medical help, for it has been injured. But Kempe and Helfer had

28. Kempe et al., “The Battered-Child Syndrome,” p. 24.

29. Ray E. Helfer, “The Responsibility and Role of the Physician,” in *The Battered Child*, ed. Helfer and Kempe (Chicago, 1968), p. 25.

30. Kempe et al., “The Battered-Child Syndrome,” p. 23.

31. See Thomas A. Szasz, “Justice and Psychiatry,” *Atlantic Monthly* 222 (Oct. 1968): 127–32.

a larger agenda. The parent or caretaker also had to be sick and in need of medical care. With his astringent wit Szasz ridiculed assertions that parents came asking for "help" and always of their own free will asked for inpatient or outpatient care, once they were given a chance. It has always been Szasz's view that the courts are the place to deal with wrongdoers and that the helping professions of psychiatrists are largely fraudulent. His piece may have amused some readers of *Atlantic*, but it had no effect whatsoever.

The explosion in child abuse literature is remarkable. The *Index Medicus* listed "Child Abuse" as a new medical category in 1965. By the 1970s papers indexed there stabilized at about forty per year. But of course that is only one part of the professional concern. New journals were founded, for example, *Child Abuse and Neglect* and *The International Journal* in 1976. An essay written in 1975, noting the astonishing increase in concern, observes that while there were no books on the topic in 1965, there were 9 in 1975. A bibliography for 1975–1980 lists 105 books in print. Relying only on the abstracting journals (*Criminal and Penology Abstracts*, *Social Abstracts*, and so on) it obtains a (slightly overlapping) list of 1706 entries. There are now over 600 books in English devoted to child abuse.

There are also innumerable subspecialties, each generating its own bibliography. If we restrict ourselves to the medical literature, we shall find many a syndrome. John Caffey in 1974 introduced the Whiplash Shaken Infant Syndrome. A literature survey of this syndrome, published in 1986, lists sixty-three subsequent studies.<sup>32</sup> Even the Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, introduced in 1977, is creating its own specialist literature.<sup>33</sup>

Scholarly and scientific work is only one aspect of an explosion of concern in the United States and more generally in the English-speaking world. Yet although child abuse was taken up as a problem by lawmakers, publicists, and the media on the one hand, and by concerned professionals in the police or social work cadres on the other, there is no doubt that the medical model was central to the early days of child abuse. For example, the state-by-state American legislation for reporting incidence is patterned on ordinances for the reporting of communicable diseases. The same is true in Britain, where notification (the U.K. word for reporting), although not mandated by statute, is also modelled on rules for notification of disease.

32. Lucinda J. Dykes, "The Whiplash Shaken Infant Syndrome: What Has Been Learned?" *Child Abuse and Neglect* 10, no. 2 (1986): 211–21.

33. Patients with Munchausen Syndrome tell tall tales to their physicians, secretly switch medicines and urine samples, and so forth. In *Munchausen by Proxy*, parents do this for their children. See Roy Meadow, "Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy: The Hinterland of Child Abuse," *Lancet*, 13 Aug. 1977, pp. 343–45, and "Fictitious Illness—the Hinterland of Child Abuse," in *Recent Advances in Pediatrics*, ed. Meadow (Edinburgh, 1984). There are now well over one hundred publications on this topic.

*Definitions*

I've been using two terms, "battered child" and "child abuse." It has been reported, on the basis of interviews, that in his 1961 talk to the American Pediatric Association Kempe deliberately preferred the phrase "battered-child syndrome" to "physical abuse" in order not to lose his audience, which would include many typically conservative pediatricians. He wanted no hint of legal, social, or deviancy problems. The word *syndrome* nicely medicalizes the problem, as Kempe wished.

The word *battered* undoubtedly suggests beating. Kempe's X rays of healed or healing broken bones continue that emphasis, allowing for children who are thrown at the wall or down the stairs as well as beating. In common law, "battery" is in fact a larger category and certainly includes burning children with cigarettes, typically on the back or buttocks, scalding them, and the like. I am told it would also include sitting a child with wet diapers on a very hot radiator until its genitals turn black from scalding urine. But the law and its practice are unclear because of another entrenched right, the right of a family to conduct its affairs on its own.

It is apparent that there are many other ways to harm a child than battering: ranging over topics from neglect amounting to starvation or hyperthermia on one side, through prolonged, even lifetime, confinement in a cellar, to incest on another. The term "child abuse" naturally invites a far wider range of application than child battery. Since my concern is with categories more than history or social problems—not that one can comprehend category formation without the others—it is natural to look at definitions. Here are two, both written down by the same man in the course of less than a decade. In the first definition *child abuse* is

non-accidental physical attack or physical injury, including minimal as well as fatal injury, inflicted upon children by persons caring for them.

**The second definition**

views child abuse as inflicted gaps or deficits between circumstances of living which would facilitate the optimal development of children, to which they should be entitled, and their actual circumstances, irrespective of the sources or agents of the deficit.<sup>34</sup>

34. The first definition is from David C. Gil, "Incidence of Child Abuse and Neglect: Demographic Characteristics of Persons Involved," in *Battered Child*, ed. Helfer and Kempe, p. 20. The second is from Gil, "Unraveling Child Abuse," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 45 (Apr. 1975): 346–56.

Both are the work of David C. Gil. The first was used in 1967–68 for the first U.S.-wide survey of abused children and their abusers. The second was proposed in Gil's testimony to the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Children and Youth, 1973. Let us start with the first, a definition of physical abuse.

Gil and coworkers at Brandeis University prepared a standardized form and sent it to all state (and many local) child abuse reporting agencies. He was getting about six thousand reports the first year, perhaps seven thousand the next. In addition he had a poll done to find out how many people knew of at least one child that had been abused, according to the stated definition. There was also a survey of media reports of trials, arrests, and so forth.

The conclusions, published in 1970 as *Violence against Children*, concluded "the scope of physical abuse of children resulting in serious injury does not constitute a major social problem"<sup>35</sup> because there was not all that much of it, and even then only 40 percent of the cases were counted as serious. Only 3.4 percent were fatal, and only a further 4.6 percent led to permanent (physical) damage to the child. Compared to the millions of American children who are deprived in other ways, physical abuse according to the Brandeis definition is rather a minor problem, horrible as it may be in individual cases.

Before we proceed to Gil's second definition, it is to be noted that he was at once accused of making a radical underestimate. You might well think so. In 1967, he was telling us, there were 7000 cases, plus those not reported. The National Center on Child Abuse reported that for 1982—fifteen years later—1.1 million children were abused (a figure which, as we have seen, rose to 2.4 million by 1989). That sounds like a pretty impressive discrepancy! It shows we are not speaking of a mere slight fluctuation in definitions. In fact, of the 1.1 million, only 69,739 fell under the category of physical abuse and/or neglect. This is not further broken down with confidence, except that it is said that neglect constitutes substantially the larger share of the 70,000. Given the vastly greater reporting system instituted since 1967, Gil's figures may have been out by a factor of only three.

The first, or Brandeis definition, seems to me as good as one can do in twenty-five words or fewer. The terms are clear, completely nontechnical, and yet have well-established meanings in legal parlance and precedent: "non-accidental," "physical attack," "physical injury," "persons caring for." Gil's second definition seems, by comparison, to be a grammatical monster. Yet although he framed his opinion in a cumbersome way, he was saying something immensely important. He was trying not to appear radical in public. He thought that child battery

35. Gil, *Violence against Children: Physical Child Abuse in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), p. 137.

was not so major a problem. He also thought that American society gave most of its children a raw deal. As he passed from the protective coloration of his jargon, it became clear what he wanted from his second definition. He thought that there were three levels of child abuse: the family, the institution, and society at large. Institutional abuse includes the harm done by schools, day-care centers, police, the judicial system, foster homes, medical establishments, welfare organizations, and the like. At the social level he seems to mean the whole of a society.

Gil says with regret that since we are disinclined to go to the root causes in all three levels, we will have to stick to mere amelioration. Yet insofar as I can construe his definition strictly, it seems to me that every known family with children, every known institution that has children in care, and every society, engages in child abuse.

It is instructive that the numbers bandied around in connection with child abuse can go from 7000 to 1.1 million. It is equally instructive that one careful writer can go in five years from a precise definition to an emotive one. The two phenomena are closely connected. It is just these definition shifts that help make possible the number switches. Change in reporting procedures can move us from 7000 to say 30,000, but only change in definition can catapult us from 7000 to 1.1 million. And on my strict reading of Gil's second definition, 1.1 million is far too small. My estimate of the number of American abused children under fifteen in 1982 is about 50 million.

That may well have been Gil's intent. At least in print he becomes increasingly "radicalized." It is interesting that two roads are followed by those who wish to extend the concept of child abuse. One is to emphasize the catastrophic character of physical abuse:

Each year in the United States, at least six million men, women, and children are victims of severe physical attacks at the hands of their spouses or parents—that is twice the population of the city of Los Angeles. . . . Imagine the entire student body of a large high school—2,000 students—suddenly killed by some catastrophic event. Each year 2,000 children are killed by their caretakers (this figure is cited in materials furnished by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect).<sup>36</sup>

The other route is Gil's, who has not thought it important to revise his old figures (albeit agreeing to the fact that they are an underestimate). Instead he finds violence endemic in our society and supposes that aside

36. Gelles, *Family Violence* (Beverly Hills, Calif., 1979), p. 11. The figure of six million victims of severe family violence is taken from Murray Straus, Suzanne K. Steinmetz, and Gelles, *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family* (New York, 1979).

from mere "amelioration" one can do nothing without radical change. He yearns for a "paradigmatic revolution towards non-violent societies." His ideal is "egalitarian, libertarian, democratic and non-violent societies." These "are not beyond the realm of reason and human potential, and they are not 'unrealistic' and 'utopian' as often claimed." Such "societies of varying sizes have existed throughout humankind's history," he writes, and in a footnote refers us to Ruth Benedict, Martin Buber, and Pyotr Kropotkin to substantiate the claim. (No one else is cited.)<sup>37</sup>

Of course the practical politician has a different approach. Gil was the first witness at the hearings of the Subcommittee on Children and Youth. Senator Walter Mondale was in the chair. He wanted a bill. Following the procedure set in motion by Kempe in 1962, he did not want this to be a poverty bill, for that would never win assent. He wanted it to be known that child abuse touches every stratum of American society. Gil agreed, of course, but he tried to rock the boat by saying that the poor have all the factors that lead the middle classes to abuse their children, plus many, many more. "I know you are going to get that," replied Mondale, "but this is not a poverty problem, it is a national problem." Mondale had his way. After the hearings the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act went before the Senate. The words "and Treatment" were in response to Gil, the chief effect he had on the act. Only Senator Jesse Helms spoke against the bill. The House was happy with it, making a few clarifications, such as adding a definition of child abuse. The Senate had forgotten about that nicety. In essence, the definition is Gil's definition of physical abuse. It was signed into law by President Richard Nixon on 31 January 1974. Legislative action had been remarkably quick. Already, after some federal prodding, in 1968 every state had a child abuse reporting system; there had been none in 1962. Interestingly, outside of this continent no nation appears to have specific child abuse legislation. The British are much preoccupied by abuse but try to use existing legislation and directives from various ministries to apply it.

I cannot forbear mentioning a further example of the expediency of using the malleability of the term "child abuse." On 3 February 1984, the House voted 396 to 4 in favor of amending the definition of child abuse to include the denial of care to newborn infants with life-threatening handicaps, and that duly became law. This is a very strong constraint, because any professional, including every physician and every priest, is obliged to report any incident of child abuse, no matter how confidential, to a reporting agency. Among the applications of the

37. Gil, "Societal Violence and Violence in Families," in *Family Violence: An International and Interdisciplinary Study*, ed. John M. Eekelaar and Sanford N. Katz (Toronto, 1978), pp. 28, 31, 28.

law: if one physician believes a colleague has curtailed care to a child, on the ground that the child is irremediably damaged, then the physician must, in law, report the colleague. Neonatal discretion was terminated.

### *Incest*

Sexual offences against children used to be kept completely distinct from cruelty to children. They have been drawn together, furnishing the most striking illustration of the malleability of the idea "child abuse." Many people now think that child abuse primarily means sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is of three kinds. One plays almost no role in the thinking of the child abuse movement. It is a sort of constant: flashing, molestation in parks, children picked up in cars by strangers and assaulted. I know of no reason to think that this sort of behavior has changed in a hundred years, or that public conceptions or parental warnings have altered much. Don't take candy from a stranger. Two other kinds have come to the fore. One is sexual abuse in day care, foster homes, schools, churches, and similar institutions outside the child's natural family. The other is sexual abuse within the family, which means incest.

Incest has long been of scholarly interest to anthropologists and psychologists. From time to time it attracted the attention of eugenicists, when "inbreeding" was associated with the intellectual and physical decay of isolated villages. And certainly the incest taboo is extraordinarily intense, although what counts as a "relative" with whom marriage is banned varies from society to society, even from the French to the English. Yet there are many misconceptions about incest. Incest formed no part of English common law until the Punishment of Incest Act of 1908. In Europe incest has not in general been a crime under civil law—only in church law. It is not today a crime in the penal codes of France, Holland, or Belgium. This has been by no means a welcome discovery by those concerned with sexual abuse of children. In one historical study it is angrily observed that "under Talmudic law, in fact, sex with a girl under the age of three was not a crime."<sup>38</sup>

Independently of legal questions, incest was not thought of as a problem for our society. It was more horrible than bigamy, but the same sort of thing, a vice of strange people, nothing to do with us, in much the same way that the celebrated bigamy trial of Bertrand Russell's older brother had nothing to do with the middle classes. Parish priests doubtless knew differently, but they were silent. In the

38. Florence Rush, *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (New York, 1980), p. 17.

sixties and early seventies, child abuse and incest were kept separate. Social workers and psychologists who worried about incest betook themselves to audiences different from those that were concerned with child abuse, which at that time meant battering children. The two were not publicly joined until 1975, in an essay titled, "Sexual Molestation of Children: The Last Frontier in Child Abuse."<sup>39</sup> It became a popular issue in April 1977 with an article in *Ms.*, "Incest: Sexual Abuse Begins at Home." This is not to say that no one saw the connection between "child abuse" and "incest" before those years. Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place* (1956) is one of the most valuable—and most predictive—documents of the fifties. In the denouement, Lucas, the father of Selena, "was a drunkard, and a wife beater, and a child abuser. Now when I say child abuser, I mean that in the worst way any of you can think of. Lucas began to abuse Selena sexually when she was fourteen, and he kept her quiet by threatening to kill her and her little brother if she went to the law."<sup>40</sup>

There are tremendous passions here. Sometimes the word *incest* is not used. It lurks as a poison, a horror, beneath the words *sexual abuse* in a family context. When the word is mentioned, the horror becomes more explicit, as in these opening words from *Incest as Child Abuse*:

Adult-child incest strikes at the very core of civilization. It is primarily in the family that, as Charles Horton Cooley (1964) expressed it, the society and the personality are "twin born." Adult-child incest subverts the gestation process, disturbing both the social order and the developing child.<sup>41</sup>

That is the rationalization of the horror against incest, a rationalization that may well be queried. There is a quite separate strand in the compulsive power of the idea of intrafamily sexual abuse. It is not horror but rage accompanied by cathartic relief: rage against patrimony and relief on the part of many that one can now speak out on the topic. Most reported sexual abusers of children within the family are males—fathers, boyfriends of the mother, uncles, and a good many grandfathers. The victims are both boys and girls, many of whom, now grown up, are relieved to be able to say what has happened to them.

The effects of this liberation are manifold and ongoing. It will have an immense effect on future psychotherapies. It is well known how

39. See Suzanne M. Sgroi, "Sexual Molestation of Children: The Last Frontier in Child Abuse," *Children Today* 4 (May–June 1975): 18–21.

40. See Ellen Weber, "Incest: Sexual Abuse Begins at Home," *Ms.* 5 (Apr. 1977): 64–67. The quotation is from Grace Metalious, *Peyton Place* (New York, 1956), p. 347.

41. Brenda J. Vander Mey and Ronald L. Neff, *Incest as Child Abuse: Research and Applications* (New York, 1986), p. 1. The citation of Charles Horton Cooley refers to his *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902; New York, 1964).



Freud decided that the memories of incest that were uncovered in his consulting room must, in large part, be fantasies. Now we are back with the *prima facie* assumption that a memory of sexual relations with a parent or family member is a true memory. That matters to the therapy of children and adults alike.<sup>42</sup>

But we're no longer strictly talking about incest as it used to be understood, that is, sexual intercourse between members of the same family. To take a typical example, of 291 cases actually indicted one year in Minnesota, 8 involved sexual intercourse, and 39 involved "indecent liberties." By and large, touching is the name of the game. Even in this respect we find some evolution. A few years ago touching was just bad and inevitably led to worse things. Now, in the ever-proliferating literature, we have "the good touch/bad touch dilemma" with the less than startling conclusion that nice touches are perceived by children as good and painful ones as bad, and that the moral evaluation of a touch depends on its consequences.<sup>43</sup>

The squelching around of the idea of incest continues, not within the community working with and trying to help individual children, but among theorists. Thus it has often been asked, just why does incest ever occur when the hostility towards it is so strong? The ever-radical psychohistorian deMause has turned the question on its head. Incest, he suggests, has always been with us, everywhere, all the time. If anything needs explanation, it is the occasional absence of incest. He is able to reach this conclusion by making a lot of things count as incest that we had not seen that way before. Thus Victorian parents were very fond of giving enemas to their children at the slightest sign of bowel irregularity. This practice waned, but was still widespread in rural America right up through the 1930s. According to deMause, this anal interference with children by mothers is nothing other than incest.<sup>44</sup> Here is another example of extension: "Chronic exposure to sexual displays and sexual acts during infancy and early childhood is abusive. This occurs when parents insist that a child sleep in the parents' bedroom until 8 or 9 years of age."<sup>45</sup> The author does not call this incest, but it is plainly sexual, intrafamilial, and is here called abusive. The practice of separating parents and children—the architectural practice of providing

42. The two most recent readable books on the topic are, for helping children, Denis M. Donovan and Deborah McIntyre, *Healing the Hurt Child: A Developmental-Contextual Approach* (New York, 1990), and, about helping adults, Leonard Shengold, *Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation* (New Haven, Conn., 1990).

43. See Mary de Young, "The Good Touch/Bad Touch Dilemma," *Child Welfare* 67 (Jan.-Feb. 1988): 60-68.

44. See deMause, "The Universality of Incest," *Journal of Psychohistory* 15 (1988): 274.

45. Cornelia B. Wilbur, "Multiple Personality and Child Abuse: An Overview," *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 7 (Mar. 1984): 3.

rooms in which that is even possible—is largely a work of the industrial revolution and “the policing of families.” Some societies regard our habit of preventing children sleeping with parents as a case of cruelty. This extreme example will remind us that what counts as abuse and as sexual abuse is intimately tied to other current practices and sensibilities.

Nor is the incest story completed yet. The next “hinterland” or “frontier” is sibling child abuse. “Evidence suggests that violence among children, especially siblings, is quite prevalent and perhaps likely to increase as more single and working parents are forced to leave small children in the care of older ones.”<sup>46</sup> Sex play among children, especially when there is a significant difference in age, is increasingly regarded as sexual abuse. Oedipus becomes Elektra.

### *Abuse and Pollution*

“Child abuse” has now become such a standard locution that we may take it too much for granted. A few mild semiotic observations are in order. People learning English as a second language know our remarkable ability to string nouns together, without a hint of grammar, and yet know how to parse them. We have little trouble comprehending phrases like “child assault prevention training program” or “health care delivery system.” Pity the poor foreigner! How do we parse “child abuse”?

The verb *to abuse* can mean either to use improperly, or to maltreat. Of course, for child abuse, maltreatment is what is in question, rather than incorrect use. But consider phrases of the form “*N* abuse,” where *N* is a noun. I have noticed the following: child abuse, drug abuse (substance abuse, alcohol abuse), police abuse, spouse abuse, voice abuse, sex abuse, incest abuse, confinement abuse, contact abuse, noncontact abuse, elderly abuse, self abuse. “Voice abuse” comes from a medical journalist. I think it is the one instance that no one will understand with certainty: does it mean verbal abuse, that is, abuse committed by using one’s voice, or does it mean abuse of one’s voice? It is the latter, a practice to which preachers and lecturers are much given. “Police abuse”—as in the Coalition Against Police Abuse, founded in Long Beach in 1974 by B. Kwaku Duren, a former Black Panther—means abuse by the police, not abuse of the police.

“Drug abuse” means what? Incorrectly using a drug? Those most up in arms about drug abuse hold, I believe, that there is no correct use of crack, so abusing crack is not a matter of using it incorrectly. Drug

46. Lawrence S. Wissow, *Child Advocacy for the Clinician: An Approach to Child Abuse and Neglect* (Baltimore, 1990), p. 195.

abuse seems to mean something more like abusing oneself by means of a drug. "Sex abuse" presumably means sexual abuse, rather than abuse of sex. "Contact abuse" is sexual abuse of a person that involves making contact with that person, while "noncontact abuse" is also sexual abuse. The latter can include a mother in the bath asking her twelve-year-old son to bring her something, or the mother being an occasional prostitute. Sexual abuse is commonly placed in contrast to physical abuse, that is, battering. Is "spouse abuse" abuse of a spouse or abuse by a spouse or both at once? Most people take it to mean abuse of one's spouse. "Child abuse," "spouse abuse," and "elderly abuse" ("senior abuse") are thus parsed in parallel ways.

"Incest abuse" (which many readers may not credit, but it does appear in the literature) must mean abuse perpetrated by committing incest, or some such. "Confinement abuse" is abuse perpetrated by confining a child to a closet or cellar or worse. (Parent buries child with stove pipe over face to allow breathing. After awhile, parent defecates down stove pipe.) Then there is our old friend, "the crime of self abuse," to quote from the 1728 example furnished by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It appears about the time that "self abuse" was beginning to replace "self pollution" as a name for masturbation.

Now it is notable that we do not have the expression "food abuse" although we know what that would mean: incontinent overeating leading to gross obesity. Or it might denote the converse problem, anorexia. These seem to be just as much cases of substance abuse as alcoholism, but we do not call them that. I think it is because we moderns do not regard gluttony as a vice. Of course we are now taught that self abuse is not vicious either, but the association of *N* abuse and vice has, I think, been with us since 1728. That is why the journalist's "voice abuse" sounds silly to our ears. There's no vice in question. Vastly fewer children are victims of "confinement abuse" than are killed in or by automobiles, but "automobile abuse" is not a kind of child abuse. Cars are virtues, not vices.

It is interesting to look at indices of newspapers or journals. Throughout our century there was a stable category "cruelty to children" until about 1966, when the indices start saying "cruelty to children: see child abuse." Then gradually cruelty to children disappears. Still there is an entirely different category in the indices—"incest." About 1977 one sees, for the first time, under "child abuse," the entry "Also, see incest." By about 1982 (it varies from index to index) incest involving minors is simply filed under "child abuse." Vice has tagged vice.

Whence the wickedness in *N* abuse? One answer is hard to resist. For two centuries the English language had only one chief instance of the locution, namely self abuse. For those same two centuries, this practice was wicked indeed. In the *Dictionary's* quotation of 1728, it was the

crime of self abuse, not a crime in common law, but in a higher law. Self abuse was vile, it was filth. The earlier term had been "self pollution." The use of the word *pollution* to mean emission of semen without coitus is as old as our language.

Who would attach any significance to the casual fact that *polluted* once had the following meaning, in the words of the *Supplement* to the *O.E.D.*: "(slang, orig. U.S.) Intoxicated, drunk; under the influence of drugs." Surely this is just another jocular usage, such as "pickled," "plastered," or "smashed"? Of course. Nevertheless, the application to alcohol did come in precisely during the buildup for U.S. Prohibition. I am less confident about the connection of pollution and drugs, but it does seem to coincide with the First American Drug Scare that took place early in this century. Self pollution, self abuse, substance abuse, "polluted."

Mary Douglas has made famous the thesis that societies define themselves in part by their relationship to pollution, both "literal" and "metaphorical."<sup>47</sup> I put the words in quotation marks because she has made us realize that what we take for granted as dirt isn't earth, for example, but something loaded with implicit meanings. She has demonstrated that it is no accident that *pollution* is the word for ecology freaks and that it plays a role in their organizations and ginger groups comparable to the abominations of Leviticus or the purification rites of the Lele of Zaire.

Although I am more concerned with a more indirect and ancient metaphor of pollution, I have no difficulty connecting child abuse and pollution. Here is the rhetoric of the seventies: "Society has taken some tentative steps to correct environmental pollution. But it has done precious little to correct the social pollution of many Americans' ecologies—the polluted ecologies that drive many parents to child abuse."<sup>48</sup>

Every society has its own register of pollutions and purifications. Most people find those of their own society natural and even inevitable, while those of other peoples strike us as bizarre, even comical. Incest is the closest approximation that we have to a crosscultural taboo, and even in that case the liaisons that are prohibited vary enormously from culture to culture.

It needs no imagination to suggest that, if *N* abuse is connected with pollution from the start, the transformation of child abuse into incest is simply a matter of the word *abuse* going home to pollution. One can also suggest that other things are going on. For example, it is

47. See Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966).

48. Edward Zigler, "Controlling Child Abuse in America: An Effort Doomed to Failure," in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect* (Washington, D.C., 1977), p. 33.

all right to talk about battering children, while incest is so abhorrent that people will not even talk about it. But incest can be talked about once it has been put in the category of child abuse. Moreover, no "professional" (social worker, doctor, lawyer, teacher, priest) wants to get involved with incest. But it is now proper to be involved with child abuse. Thus the medicalization and "societization" of incest as child abuse makes it possible for society to deal with a "problem."

I do not, however, think that gets to the root of the matter. Two other factors are evident. First, a vast variety of sexual misdemeanors, euphemistically called touching, now get lumped with incest as if they were the same thing. After contact, we get noncontact (sexual) abuse. That is, the region of pollution is radically extended. Vice is conquering our society, not because we are more vicious but because we are declaring a vastly wider range of acts to be wicked. Moreover, we are creating the knowledge: it is now a well-known fact that a parent who once fondles a child will, if not helped by one of the caring professions, finally consummate his evil passions.

A second feature is that although child abuse is societized in one way, namely, made the property of the caring professions, it is in another sense desocietized. By being restored to its home, pollution, it ceases to be a matter of poverty, overcrowding, unemployment, and the like. I have observed earlier that it was part of the original medical agenda of child battering to withdraw it from the scene of social change. To declare something a pollution is to sacralize it, to make it sacred, to be treated by ritual. Incest has been medicalized only in that ancient sense of medicine which is associated with witchcraft.

### *Cause, Category, and Action*

Even readers hitherto unfamiliar with the child abuse literature will see that cause, category, and action can be expected to be intertwined in complex ways.

What causes child abuse? Kempe and his colleagues led the way with medical and psychiatric models. They commenced the cycle of abuse doctrine, whereby the parents of abused children were abused as children.<sup>49</sup> This could perfectly well be a sociological doctrine to the effect that certain conditions, poverty say, produce abuse of children,

49. The cycle of abuse doctrine is now a popular cliché, introduced at the start in 1962; compare note 28 above. It is a good example of a piece of certain knowledge that has been modified or abandoned by careful thinkers. It was developed in Sidney Wasserman, "The Abused Parent of the Abused Child," *Children* 14 (Sept.–Oct. 1967): 175–79; J. E. Oliver and Audrey Taylor, "Five Generations of Ill-Treated Children in One Pedigree," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 119 (Nov. 1971): 473–80; Marvin Blumberg, "Psychopathology of the Abusing Parent," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 28 (Jan. 1974): 21–29; John J. Spinetta and David Rigler, "The Child-Abusing Parent: A Psychological

combined with the proposition that there is a cycle of poverty. But no, the idea is that the trauma of abuse produces certain character traits and defects which will, if not treated, produce abusive behavior.

A disease model makes sense only if there is a conviction that there is one underlying causality (or a structure of multiple causality). It should make one think that being a child abuser is a medical condition, a disease, something approaching a natural kind, in short. The treatment would be thought of as analogous to that for tuberculosis, in which a national goal would be both to produce higher standards of sanitation and to intervene with the ill parent on an individual basis. In the disease model

parents are studied in terms of what is wrong with them, so that abuse is seen as a problem with certain parents who are unusual, or different from the normal. Abuse results from some individual or family defect. . . . In the process other parents are seen as normal and the wider society is not seen as problematic. . . . The disease model legitimates the role of a variety of health and welfare professionals who are seen as experts on such exceptional problems.<sup>50</sup>

Another feature of the disease model is that it emphasizes early detection or prediction of abusive families. Once again the Kempe group led the way.<sup>51</sup> But anyone who reads the literature is likely to agree "that research on the prediction of future violence does not instill confidence in the reliability or the validity of the assessment process" (*P*, p. 139).<sup>52</sup>

As for action, the rare evaluative studies of treatment programs

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Review," *Psychological Bulletin* 77 (Apr. 1972): 296-304; Jill E. Korbin, "Childhood Histories of Women Imprisoned for Fatal Child Maltreatment," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 10, no. 3 (1986): 331-38; and so forth. That represents the positive establishment of the knowledge, a powerful proposition based on impressions. For its undoing, see, for example, Srinika Jayartne, "Child Abusers as Parents and Children: A Review," *Social Work* 22 (Jan. 1977): 5-9; Alfred Kadushin, *Child Welfare Services* (London, 1974); and Michael Benjamin, "Abused as a Child, Abusive as a Parent: Practitioners Beware," in *The Maltreatment of the School-Aged Child*, ed. Richard Volpe, Margot Breton, and Judith Mitton (Lexington, Mass., 1980). Note here we are concerned with predicting parental abuse (most abused children become abusive parents), not with explaining the abusive behavior of some parents (many abusive parents were abused children). The cycle of abuse doctrine of course becomes more true and more trivial the more generic is the use of the term "abuse." Given Gil's most generous definition, where virtually every American child is abused, the doctrine is empty.

50. Nigel Parton, *The Politics of Child Abuse* (New York, 1985), p. 149; hereafter abbreviated *P*.

51. See Ruth S. Kempe and Kempe, *Child Abuse* (Chicago, 1978).

52. Parton provides useful references to the prevention literature in the early eighties as well as the best available discussion, in this context, of false positives and false negatives. There is a vast but pretty inconsequential literature on "families at risk": see, for example, L. Kowal et al., "Characteristics of Families at Risk of Problems of Parenting: Findings from a Home-Based Secondary Prevention Program," *Child Welfare* 68 (1989): 529-38.

lead to substantial scepticism. There is certainly no knowledge as well of the efficacy of independent self-help groups such as Parents Anonymous. Naturally just about anything has been proposed as treatment. One is not astonished to find talk of sterilization in North Carolina and Georgia.<sup>53</sup>

What alternative is there to the disease model? Typically, to regard child abuse as a social problem. Sometimes the observations are quite specific: television is to blame.<sup>54</sup> Note that although this may be at least arguable for violence it would be hard to make such a case for the post-1977 favored type of child abuse, namely, incest.

Alternatively one gets “sociostructural” approaches that regard child abuse as a feature of a society and its norms, not as a class of acts perpetrated by individuals. Often social change, alteration of the family role, and the like are emphasized, and we are reminded of *anomie*. Or one gets “social-psychological models,”<sup>55</sup> which emphasize failures of mother-child bonding, domestic upheaval, broken homes, and so forth.

It is clear throughout that conceptions of what child abuse *is*, conceptions of its causes, and conceptions of actions to take, are intimately connected. They usually fail to pan out for reasons that are now to be described: child abuse may not be a right category, at all.

### *Not a Category at All?*

One is not surprised, by now, to read assertions like this: “child abuse is not a naturalistic category—nothing is ‘naturally’ child abuse” (*P*, p. 148). Or: child abuse “is not an absolute entity but, rather, is socially defined and cannot be divorced from the social contexts in which it occurs. We further posited that mistreatment is not a unitary phenomenon but encompasses a broad range of acts, acts that can be distinguished from one another both conceptually and operationally.”<sup>56</sup>

The second assertion is made by Jeanne Giovannoni and her coworker Rosina Becerra. Their book, *Defining Child Abuse*, is an energetic attempt to analyze both professional and community conceptions

53. See Norman and Nancy Polansky, “The Current Status on Child Abuse and Child Neglect in This Country,” Report to the Joint Commission on Mental Health for Children (Feb. 1968); cited in Gil, *Violence against Children*, p. 46.

54. See Lucien A. Beaulieu, “Media, Violence and the Family: A Canadian View,” in *Family Violence*, ed. Eeckelaar and Katz, pp. 58-68.

55. These are the labels used by Gelles and Claire Pedrick Cornell in their “Introduction: An International Perspective on Family Violence,” in *International Perspectives on Family Violence*, ed. Gelles and Cornell (Lexington, Mass., 1983), pp. 13, 14.

56. Jeanne M. Giovannoni and Rosina M. Becerra, *Defining Child Abuse* (New York, 1979), p. 239. Compare Gelles, “The Social Construction of Child Abuse,” p. 364: “There is no objective behavior we can automatically recognize as child abuse.”

of child abuse in California. Research was based on four culturally and geographically distinct counties in that state. The professionals studied were pediatricians, social workers, lawyers, and police. The researchers took some seventy-two examples of mistreatment of children. These are little stories, or "vignettes." The items were as varied as "the parent burned the child on the buttocks and chest with a cigarette"; "on one occasion the parents left their child alone one night"; "the parents always allow their child to stay around when they have friends over to experiment with cocaine"; or "a divorced mother, who has custody of her child, is a prostitute." Professionals, and also people at large, were asked to rank the severity of these incidents. Factor analysis was used to sort incidents into the following categories, ordered with the worst kinds at the top of the list.

Physical Abuse  
Sexual Abuse  
Fostering Delinquency  
Supervision  
Emotional Mistreatment  
Drugs/Alcohol  
Failure to Provide  
Educational Neglect  
Parental Sexual Mores

The ordering of the top two may be misleading, for there is a wide range of items of physical abuse that are not considered very serious, while any sexual abuse is considered serious.

We have just listed nine different kinds of human behavior that meet with widespread disapproval. The names are shorthand, of course, so that "supervision" refers to inadequately supervising a child in one's care. *Defining Child Abuse* makes clear that both California professionals and Californians in general have little difficulty sorting events into instances of one or the other of these nine clusters of behavior. Within each category, the four kinds of professional have only slightly different rankings of particular "vignettes." Professionals tend to be more lenient in the ranking of evils than members of the community as a whole. In California, blacks and Hispanics are the people who are most condemnatory of almost every type of child maltreatment. The ranking of the various kinds of abuse, does, however, differ a little within different subcommunities.

The nine categories are curiously familiar; it is as if Giovannoni had taken child abuse apart. Some of the categories make sense only within our own form of social organization: fostering delinquency, for example. Likewise the concept of educational neglect is resolutely embedded in our own very peculiar and very recent conception of education. But for the most part these categories can be applied, with-



out excessive ethnographic naivety, across a wide spectrum of societies. Here we must distinguish a category from the classes that are deemed, in a particular society, to fall under that category. Thus it was once alleged that Pueblo Indians had color concepts different from ours. For instance, in the red, pink, orange, yellow area they were said to sort differently from us. It still makes sense to speak of their having a category, color, just as we have a category, color, even though their colors are different from ours.

In this spirit, then, one agrees that different societies put very different classes of action under what we call "sexual abuse" or "maltreatment of a child in connection with drugs or alcohol." But most societies have, and indeed arguably must have, some actions that are disapproved of, forbidden, or taboo, in the areas of sex, of physical harm, of failure to provide food or clothing or shelter or protection, or even adequate supervision of children. Similarly, within our own society the notion of physically harming a child is readily understood, even though classes of events falling under this category may differ from subgroup to subgroup. "Spare the rod and spoil the child" is still a truism for many of us, while for others of us putting the proverb into action is a sign of cruelty, of wickedness, and even, in some states, of criminality. One point of Giovannoni and Becerra's research was to determine how such subclassifications and boundaries are drawn within different segments of people in California.

Another point established by the research was that both professionals and the common people have no difficulty using the nine labels listed. All can make fine distinctions within the nine categories. The authors lodge a plea against use of the blanket term "child abuse." Yet at this very same time, Kempe was saying that the time had come to drop the expression "battered-baby syndrome" and stick to the generic "child abuse." Why drop a rather precise and by now well-understood classification falling under the physical abuse category? Why, when Giovannoni and Becerra are clarifying, insist on the diffuse motley of "child abuse"? Because "battered child" had done its work in arousing public consciousness. Now we are in a state of heightened consciousness where "child abuse" does the trick.

That sounds like a strange position for a medical man! Medical research, we had thought, wants causes and cures. Not necessarily. What was wanted was power: power to do good, of course. It was left to Giovannoni and Becerra, the sociologists, to make the sort of remark one expected from medicine:

A more rational policy formation requires greater specificity in policy-related research endeavors, including epidemiological, etiological, and evaluative research. Until there is further delineation of that which is to be counted and estimates of its dispersion, epide-

miologic and incidence estimation would seem futile. Similarly, etiological research may be premature until there is a more detailed specification of the phenomena for which the causes are being sought. . . . the development of more refined manifestational taxonomies . . . would seem necessary before any etiological investigation could take place. Before events can be expected to have a common etiology, the events themselves must share some commonality. Such commonality is yet to be demonstrated in the diverse phenomena that are considered to be manifestations of abuse and neglect.<sup>57</sup>

That is about as searing a condemnation of Dr. Kempe and the movement as can be imagined. Yet note how the doctors have triumphed. They now own the subject. Even sociologists and social workers must describe child abuse in terms of etiology and epidemiology.

### *A Larger Framework: Normalcy*

We began with an idea rich in moral certainty: Thou shalt not abuse thy child. Could there be a more timeless commandment? Then we find that the idea of child abuse has been both malleable and imperial, beginning thirty years ago, taking in new territory ever since. That does diminish the present force of the commandment. There is only one viable attitude: child abuse is bad and we'd be glad if there were a lot less of it. But when we turn from abusive actions to the idea of child abuse there is and should be no unanimity in attitudes.

Here are two of many opposed visions. One is that of the activists, the loose coalition that I've called the child abuse movement, drawing on concerned pediatricians and radical feminists alike: "This has been a period of terrific consciousness raising; we have found out more and more about the extent of child abuse, and we have recognized more and more kinds of acts as instances of abuse." Another line, more cynical, holds, "Child abuse is a rhetorical device for diverting attention from society. Senator Mondale said it all in the original Senate Committee hearings—'This is not a social problem.' The felt 'crisis' in American family life and its relation to the work force is a matter of public social relations which American political discourse has traditionally been unable to broach. Hence anger is directed at a rottenness in individual relations, involving abusive adult and innocent child. A great many unrelated kinds of harms to children are lumped under one unreflective but powerful emblem: 'abuse.' That serves mindlessly to identify the evil enemy in our midst. It relieves us of the need to think

57. Giovannoni and Becerra, *Defining Child Abuse*, p. 256.

who we are.” These two attitudes invite different kinds of engagement, but they are not strictly contrary. One could display and even act on both attitudes. I do.

The idea of child abuse is not thereby idiosyncratic. In only one respect is it rare. We live with and through a welter of conceptions that are at once moral, human, social, and personal, but there are, at any time, few fundamental concepts that we can watch being made and molded before our very eyes. Many of our ideas have histories similar to that of child abuse, but they are lost to conscious memory—just as the traces of the evolution of the idea of child abuse are in most places being erased at this very moment. But there are differences among thick moral concepts. Child abuse is an instance of a special class. It is a normalizing concept.

Normalcy has become one of the most powerful metaconcepts in human affairs. The idea of normal people has to a large extent displaced the Enlightenment notion of Human Nature.<sup>58</sup> “Normal” acquired its sense of “usual” or “typical” only in the nineteenth century, originally in medical contexts, where the opposite was always “pathological.” From ancient times the word has spanned the descriptive and the evaluative. It denoted a T-square that produced right angles, which are both right angles (90°) and right angles (correct ones). That’s equally true of the Greek prefix *ortho*. The orthodontist or the orthopsychiatrist makes the child’s teeth or mind straight, regular, like others—and also right, good, desirable.

“Normal” and “ortho” have always spanned the is/ought divide, but our present use of the normal and the pathological was forged in the medical world of the early nineteenth century. It was then generalized, first by Auguste Comte, to the social world. By the end of the century Émile Durkheim could use suicide rates to diagnose pathological as opposed to normal societies. The pathological was deviancy, the core topic of social science. At the same time normalcy became measured by statistical means. The statistics were just descriptive, but since one of the strands of “normal” is “right” (and healthy, with all its connotations), the abnormal was not merely different but wrong (and diseased).

The connection between medicine and normalcy may be concealed, but it is seldom absent. Suicide is a good example. Suicide did not concern doctors until it was taken over by French alienists such as Jean-Étienne Esquirol, men who claimed the sole right to have knowledge of

58. The classic study of the idea of the “normal” is Georges Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (1966; Boston, 1978); the 1966 edition is itself an expansion of an essay from 1943. In *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge, 1990), especially chapter 19, I argue that normalcy displaced Human Nature, and I provide some of the medical and statistical background.

suicide. They share that right today only with the statisticians who tabulate autodestruction and with the sociologists whose science is an outgrowth of medicine and statistics. Suicide and child abuse alike are members of a constellation of "social problems" worked out in the framework of the normal and the pathological. The majority of the problems examined in the journal *Social Problems*—which of course includes suicide and child abuse—are couched in just those terms.

Many readers will have resisted my distinguishing child abuse from late nineteenth-century cruelty to children. I did so chiefly because Victorians never medicalized cruelty. Cruel parents were not deemed sick or even pathological. There was no attempt to characterize normal family behavior. There was no medical intervention, even when some of the active interveners were in fact trained physicians. Child abuse in contrast began with doctors in 1962, and among the opening assertions was that abusive parents are sick and in need of help. I said in the preceding section that in the power struggle over who owns child abuse the doctors triumphed. I now suggest this was a foregone conclusion because child abuse is seen in a framework of normalcy and pathology.

More and more kinds of behavior become counted as abusive because they become seen as abnormal. This is a complicated play between what is usual and right. I quoted the assertion that it is abusive to have children sleep in the same room with parents after infancy. It has long been usual for American families who could afford the rooms to keep the children separate. But now what is unusual becomes abnormal, and what is abnormal becomes wrong. This is not idle semiotic chatter, deconstructive wordplay built on artificial hyphens and imaginary etymologies. It is plain morality, plain English, and plain history.

I said at the beginning that we had the idea of child abuse as something definite, and then went on to show how it has grown, changed, been reformed, and remodulated. But we are not here concerned with some generic "social construction." The primary evolution of child abuse has been in the direction of dividing more and more types of behavior into normal and deviant. The idea of child abuse was not fixed in the beginning because standards of normalcy did not exist and are increasingly brought into being. This in turn affects all of us. It's good to be normal. As types of behavior become characterized as normal or deviant, norms become established, norms to which people are glad to conform. Which means that people come to see themselves differently, choose different courses of action, and what is usual in human behavior itself changes, creating new phenomena to feed into an ever-changing concept such as child abuse. With concepts such as this, it is not to be expected that they will stay fixed for long.

Moreover there is another aspect of the normal readily illustrated by its own history. The normal means the usual and that's good—in, for example, Durkheim. But Francis Galton, who gave us the very name

“normal” for the normal distribution or bell-shaped curve, explicitly called the average “mediocre,” and that’s bad. Paradoxically the normal points in two directions, which is part of its ambivalent hold on us.<sup>59</sup> Galton’s program of eugenics was a plan to change the averages, to move them away from their present station. Gil, author of the two definitions of child abuse that were quoted beside each other above, is in exactly this Galtonian tradition. The normal treatment of American children is mediocre or worse. They’re all abused, and we must become aware of that fact.

Is there then nothing that we can know about child abuse? We would like our interventions, our official agencies, our courts, our teachers, our doctors, our people on the street, and indeed ourselves to act caringly, helpfully, prudently, wisely, justly, from knowledge. Is that a vain hope, because the object of knowledge is always changing, and because the terms to express the knowledge are evaluative, not only at the base level (“child abuse”) but also at the metalevel (“normal”)? It is vain only if the knowledge is thought of as scientific and above all medical knowledge, as knowledge of chemistry and tissues and organs. Yet it is almost impossible to escape the medical model, not because of the overt power of the medical profession, but because of the covert power of the organizing ideas, right back to normalcy, which that profession fostered on the Western mind.

59. See Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, pp. 177–79.