

PSYCHOLOGY

Bad Theories Can Harm Victims

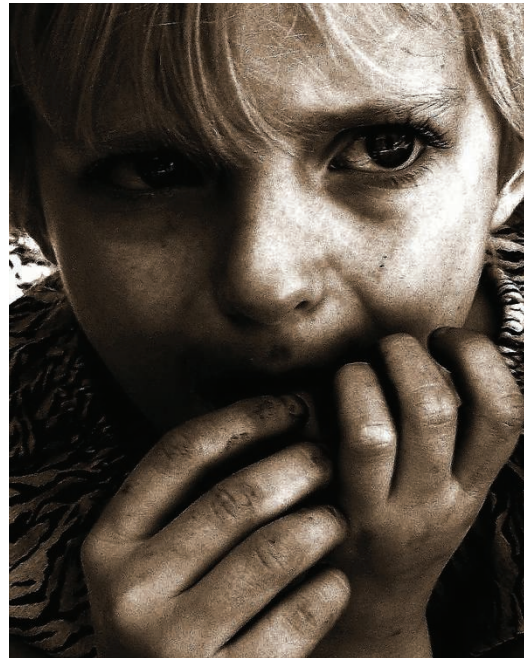
Elizabeth F. Loftus* and Steven J. Frenda

“Our lies about sex abuse are not helping victims.” So argues Susan Clancy in her persuasive book, *The Trauma Myth*. She adds that the conventional trauma model is harming victims and exacerbating their damages. To appreciate her forceful position, one needs to step back in history a few decades.

The 1970s and early 1980s saw an increased awareness of the prevalence of the sexual abuse of children and its subsequent psychological repercussions. That victim advocacy wave transformed our culture’s naïveté into an understanding of sexual abuse as directly traumatic and frightening, always carried out against the child’s will, and necessarily damaging. This “trauma model” has gone largely unchallenged. The model was embraced by professionals and communicated by them to a ready public.

Now comes psychologist Susan Clancy (at the Harvard-affiliated Center for Women’s Advancement, Development, and Leadership in Nicaragua) to bravely challenge the trauma model. By her account, many victims of childhood sexual abuse report that they did not initially experience the incidents as traumatic because, at the time, they knew and trusted their abuser and did not fully understand what was being done. They weren’t terrified, rather they were uncomfortable and confused. Any suffering they experienced came later, in the form of shame and guilt that they had somehow “consented” and that they did not experience the abuse as a horrifying trauma that the popular theory says they were supposed to have felt.

Clancy’s opposition to the trauma model might be dubbed the “naïve complicit model of sex abuse.” She bases her views on ten years of interviewing sex abuse victims plus an extensive review of literature back to the early 1900s. Her interviews are, perhaps, the most colorful of her supporting data. She talked to a diverse sample (recruited through newspaper ads)—including the chief executive of an Internet company, a minor-league baseball player, a her-



oin addict, and a runway model. From them she learned this truth: For many victims, sex abuse is not a traumatic experience when it happens. They reframe their experience later on and feel guilty for having “allowed” it to occur. “I let it happen,” Charles stated. “I gave this guy blow jobs 12 times,” Chris told her in explaining why he believed others would not understand his case. Clancy’s extensive literature review revealed that other researchers had found these same types of victims in their samples.

So here’s the irony. After professionals have worked for decades to raise awareness of sex abuse and continually emphasized that it is never the victim’s fault (as Clancy certainly believes), many victims still feel alone

and guilty. Those victims who did experience trauma don’t need to feel guilty. They were forced into it. They are often angry. But those many victims whose experience was different are made to feel guilty because their cases do not fit into the societal mold. As mentioned, many children do not comprehend the meaning of what they are being asked to do, so they will often go along with the encounters. When victims mature and develop the capac-

ity to understand their experience, they are confronted with a rhetoric of sexual abuse as typically traumatic and frightening. Many are left with the idea that their experience is abnormal, that there is something wrong with them. Most of them never seek treatment and never report the crimes, and some even assume they didn’t experience actual sexual abuse. It is time to stop harming them.

The topic of sex abuse is something we should all care about. Not simply because it is an awful crime and its victims often need help. But it is also something of an industry. It has spawned thousands of articles, books, and professional seminars. It spurred reporting laws. There are countless professionals working on the problem. Polls report that over 90% of Americans are concerned about sex abuse. And millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent on prevention and treatment programs. All Clancy wants is for us to think about it correctly.

Clancy’s foray into the contentious topic of sex abuse has wreaked havoc in her personal life. She laments the gross misinterpretation

of her research, the accusations of being a pedophile apologist, the colleagues who no longer speak to her, and other challenges that came as a result of going against the grain on an issue so wrought with emotion. After publishing *The Trauma Myth*, more of this will probably come her way. A quick look at comments posted on the book’s Amazon.com listing reveals that angry readers have already pounced:

“[Clancy] makes one very big mistake. She claims that child abuse is rarely traumatic when it happens. Yet, this is not true.”

“Sexual abuse is terrifying no matter what age it occurs.”

“naïve, insensitive book”

“I do not recognize one iota of truth in what Dr. Clancy is discussing.”

“I would like this ‘expert’ to tell the millions of child sexual abuse survivors that it has not affected them physically, spiritually, and mentally.”

Despite the many times that Clancy states that using children for sex is morally revolting and that sex abuse is never the victim’s fault, her message is one many readers simply cannot or do not want to hear. Maybe that is because her conclusions raise doubts about the correctness of a cherished theory.

There is also a message that speaks to science more generally, although Clancy only

The Trauma Myth
The Truth About the Sexual Abuse of Children—and Its Aftermath

by Susan A. Clancy

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briefly touches on the point: No matter how strongly a theory has been embedded in the cultural zeitgeist (as the trauma model certainly has), we should always be prepared to discard it on the basis of persuasive evidence. Such behavior is a hallmark of good science, which will shed ideas that are contradicted by evidence. Clancy says the trauma model has to go. We would not completely do away with it, but we do agree the model must be discarded in the cases of many victims to whom it does not apply. Clancy approaches child abuse with sensitivity, empathy, and thoughtfulness. Is anybody out there listening?

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SOCIOLOGY

Putting Law into Practice in Personnel

Anna-Maria Marshall

Anyone who has been employed in the United States has, at one time or another, filled out an equal opportunity form, sat through a sexual harassment prevention program, or followed an affirmative action protocol to hire a new employee. Designed to make the workplace a more fair and equitable place, these policies were vaguely mandated by law, but corporate human resources offices directed their shape and their breadth. Frank Dobbin's impressive *Inventing Equal Opportunity* documents the crucial role played by the personnel profession in translating equal employment law into practice.

The book provides a corrective for existing explanations for the structure of the American workplace. Some scholars credit social movements whose agendas included the effort to ensure equality in the workplace. The civil rights movement, the women's movement, the disability rights movement, among others, made political demands that led to legal changes. However, Dobbin (a sociologist at Harvard) notes that there is little evidence demonstrating a causal link from social movement activism to corporate policy. Others cite the law as the agent for change: new statutes

and judicial opinions recognized new rights for workers; employers responded to those new laws through fear of litigation.

What previous models have in common is that they omit many intervening variables that explain the proliferation of policies—an expansion that has occurred even in a legal climate that has been increasingly hostile to workers' rights. They assume a direct causal arrow between the passage of a law, for example, and the adoption of a corporate policy. According to Dobbin, however, this explanation ignores the ambiguity in the laws and their silence about what compliance looks like. With its separation of powers, government in the United States is considered weak by many political sociologists. Responsibility for creating and enforcing the law is dispersed among many different authorities, thus making it almost impossible to dictate the shape of compliance. Dobbin argues that into this vacuum created by the weak state marched “an army of equal opportunity experts” who defined the meaning of compliance and gave it the force of law.

Dobbin's analysis explores the long-overlooked role of the private sector in defining compliance and in designing many of the policies and procedures that shape the existing American workplace. Specifically, he documents the efforts by generations of human resources professionals to counter discrimination. Dobbin writes:

“By institutionalizing equal opportunity as a specialty within personnel, the profession created a place for an internal constituency to champion new rounds of [corporate] equal opportunity and diversity measures.”

The author illustrates this model through discussions of several developments in personnel policies, including diversity management, work-family programs, and sexual harassment grievance procedures. For example, in the United States sexual harassment is a form of employment discrimination, although the laws prohibiting discrimination never describe such conduct. The law expanded to embrace sexual harassment through the steady accretion of bureaucratic definitions (regulations issued by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) and judicial opinions. But the regulations remained vague, and the judicial opinions offered only piecemeal guidance on how to avoid lawsuits. Thus, simply defining sexual harassment as a



form of employment discrimination was not enough to tell employers how to handle it.

In this ambiguous legal environment, employers struggled to find appropriate means to comply with the law's vague prescriptions. Personnel managers stepped into this void. Relying on well-established traditions, they encouraged corporate executives to adopt training programs and grievance procedures. With scant legal evidence, they argued that such policies would inoculate employers from dreaded lawsuits. This prediction became a self-fulfilling prophecy: As more and more employers adopted similar programs, courts took notice, and the U.S. Supreme Court eventually ruled that an employer could successfully defend against a sexual harassment claim by demonstrating that it had a grievance procedure.

Dobbin makes a powerful argument about the importance of long-overlooked personnel managers in creating the legal environment that governs so much of an American's working life. In doing so, he also makes a compelling argument that legal rules do not directly affect behavior. Rather, organizations exert a powerful influence on the meaning of law in particular contexts. It is perhaps understandable that in staking out this new territory, he trivializes the role of law, which after all provided the symbolic raw material that personnel professionals were using to expand their influence. By emphasizing the importance of human resources officials, Dobbin also ignores the role of employees, whose grievances and complaints were the engine of the many changes in the personnel field. Their complaints reflected changed expectations for how they deserved to be treated in the workplace; the demands they placed on their employers prompted personnel professionals to get creative. Although Dobbin skirts these topics, *Inventing Equal Opportunity* lays a strong foundation for further research on them.

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Inventing Equal Opportunity

by Frank Dobbin

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