

The Horrors of Child Abuse

Horror Stories and the Construction of Child Abuse

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Since problems that are publicly seen as horrors are those that typically receive significant attention from policymakers, it is important to recognize how and why certain problems come to be seen that way in the first place. Johnson's study suggests that no problem, even one as overtly disturbing as child abuse, speaks for itself. Rather, his account illustrates that the public association between child abuse and horror is a product of how news accounts frame the issue. Johnson illustrates that although graphically violent cases of abuse comprise most news coverage of the issue, such cases are actually only a tiny segment of the child abuse problem. Framing the problem primarily in terms of these atypical horror stories detracts public attention and policy-making resources away from the full range of situations that constitute child abuse.

Everyone recognizes that the mass media's power extends beyond the mere transmittal of information. Their power (and some of their mystery) also derives from their ability to elicit emotions. Eliciting emotions often paves the way for action. We recognize the importance of this process at a common-sense level. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, for example, gained much support and momentum from the publication of emotionally provocative photographs and accounts of the brutalities at Selma and Montgomery, Alabama. Press coverage helped shape public action, leading to subsequent civil rights reforms. The Vietnam War—"the first mass media war"—offers another good example. The pervasive newspaper stories and television accounts of daily battle scenes were important influences at all stages of the

war, for both its supporters and detractors. More recently, press coverage of the rioting in South Africa is seen as an important influence on U.S. policy.

Sociologists recognize the relevance and importance of emotionally provocative mass media accounts for creating new social problems. Sensationalized mass coverage often is an important aspect of social problems claimsmaking. Examples include the construction of "crime waves," various problems of juvenile justice, foreign policy, corporate homicide, and missing children, among others. This [study] analyzes mass media's use of child abuse horror stories, emotionally provocative stories about violence to children. Such horror stories have played an important role in the political, social, and institutional success of the child maltreatment movement in the United States.

THE EMERGENCE OF CHILD ABUSE AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

Child battering, child abuse, and child neglect (now commonly subsumed under the term *child maltreatment*) are relatively new terms, even though injuries and fatalities to children are as old as recorded history. Dr. S. West published the first medical documentation of systematic, intentional injuries to children in 1888. Researchers continued reporting important information about nonaccidental childhood traumas to the medical professions long before child abuse emerged as a social problem and political issue in the early 1960s.

In 1962, the research team headed by Dr. C. Henry Kempe and Dr. Ray Helfer published their now-famous article on "The Battered-Child Syndrome" in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. This study, published in the medical profession's most prestigious and respected journal, was accompanied by an official editorial asserting the seriousness of this new medical problem. The characteristic features of the syndrome included traumatic injuries to the head and long bones, commonly done to children under 3 years of age by parents who were themselves beaten or abused as children. The parents commonly denied mistreatment of their children. The publication of this research article was an important step in legitimizing this problem as one demanding medical intervention.

The first state laws specifically formulated for child abuse intervention were passed in 1963; between 1963 and 1967, 47 of the 50 states passed some form of child abuse and/or neglect legislation. The American Humane Association (AHA) and several professional social work organizations provided expert testimony and played other active roles in advocating legislative initiative.

Technological advances, as well as certain features of pediatric radiology as an occupational specialty, played important roles in these early efforts to establish the child abuse and neglect movement. These developments have increased significantly the number of officially recognized and classified child abuse and neglect cases. In 1963, a study commissioned by the AHA could document only 662 cases of nonaccidental trauma to children for the entire United States but, by 1980, nearly 700,000 cases achieved official recognition and status.

Child abuse began as a relatively esoteric concern of a few medical researchers. But the dramatic article on "The Battered-Child Syndrome" by Kempe et al. attracted the mass media's attention. Barbara Nelson argues that professional and mass media publications offered complementary coverage, which was critical to the early agenda-setting and political successes of the social movement. Initially, the emphasis was on physical abuse or "battering," but as the movement achieved legitimacy, the scope of both media and movement concern expanded to other areas, including child neglect, emotional abuse, and, eventually, incest and sexual abuse of children. The publication of child abuse horror stories has played a prominent role in the social, political, and institutional successes of the child maltreatment movement during the last 25 years. These horror stories are mass media reports of individual cases that involve dramatic or unusual injuries to children and that evoke an emotional response about the problem of child abuse or neglect. This chapter analyzes the formal properties of child abuse horror stories and the role they have played in the emergence and definition of this social problem.

NATURE OF THE RESEARCH

This [study] derives from a larger study of all newspaper stories on child abuse and neglect that appeared for 32 years in the *Arizona Republic* and the *Phoenix Gazette*, the two major newspapers in Arizona. The earliest newspaper files on these topics began in 1948 under the headings cruelty to children, family problems, domestic disturbance, as well as various conventional criminal classifications involving victimized children. Arizona was not one of the 47 states to pass child abuse legislation in the early 1963–1965 period. Arizona passed its first laws in August 1970; they became effective at the beginning of 1971. After the 1970 legislative action, state news organizations began keeping files labeled "child abuse" and "child neglect," as both phenomena were defined in the early legislation. I examined news stories from 1948 to 1980 to study the relations between mass media reporting and legislative action, the role of local versus

national wireservice reporting, and the stories' substance. In addition, I collected clippings from many other newspapers, magazines, and other media over a period of more than 10 years.

During 1948–1980, a total of 623 news stories about child abuse and neglect appeared in the Phoenix newspapers. There were 93 stories during 1948–1969, an average of slightly more than 4 per year. Arizona's first child abuse law passed in 1970, producing a 10-fold increase in the news stories about this topic. Between 1971 and 1980, the papers published an additional 490 stories concerning all aspects of child battering, abuse, neglect, and maltreatment, averaging almost 50 per year.

Much of this coverage featured child abuse horror stories. Of the 93 stories published during 1948–1969, 88 (95%) presented facts about an individual case of childhood injury. Most of these were dramatic, horrific stories. While the proportion of child abuse horror stories fell after 1970, they remain the dominant form of newspaper report. Of the 623 stories published during 1948–1980, 436 (70%) placed primary emphasis on reporting the facts of an individual case. Local (Arizona) stories accounted for 350 (80%) horror stories; the remaining 86 (20%) stories came from the AP and UPI national wireservices.

To better understand the nature of these horror stories, I conducted an ethnographic content analysis, which is a method of analyzing documentary evidence, based on the observer's or analyst's insider understanding about a setting or phenomena. In this case, I analyzed the mass media reports on child abuse to identify the formal properties of child abuse horror stories. Formal properties are those analytical features of the newsreporting format that define it as a type. The content analysis of child abuse horror stories reveals five distinct properties of the form: (1) evocation of negative emotionality, which is accomplished by the development of either (a) ironic contrast, or (b) structural incongruity, (2) disembodiment of interaction, (3) decontextualization, (4) use of official sources, and (5) individualization of causal agency.

FORMAL PROPERTIES OF CHILD ABUSE HORROR STORIES

Evoking Negative Emotionality

Ideally, parents love and protect children. Families are the source of intimacy and selfhood, and, even though parents have more power than their children, parents presumably use this power in the child's best interests. Family expe-

rience is, for most people, largely favorable and rewarding. For some, it is not, but few view their family experience with emotional neutrality. Thus, stories about violence within the family have a great potential to elicit an emotional response from their audience.

Mass media accounts of domestic violence play upon our common family experience, whether actual or desired, to elicit emotions. The term *child abuse horror story* obviously suggests that such stories evoke feelings of horror, but I use the concept more broadly, referring to stories that elicit strong negative feelings. Whether the specific feelings evoked are horror, shock, revulsion, sadness, anger, tragedy, or some other is less important than the fact that the feelings are strong ones for most individuals. Stories about horrible injuries or gruesome circumstances may produce emotional reaction:

The Baltimore Police found Patty Saunders, 9, in the 23 × 52 inch closet where she had been locked for half her life. She weighed only 20 pounds, and stood less than three feet tall. Smearred with filth, scarred from parental beatings, Patty had become irreparably mentally retarded. (*Newsweek*, October 10, 1977:31)

The preceding story evokes negative feelings, not only by portraying inhuman treatment, but by specifying the terrible, life-long consequences. Another example:

Alyssa Dawn Wilson died at the age of six weeks in a Beauford, South Carolina clinic. An autopsy disclosed that the infant had a ruptured liver and spleen and eye injuries, a fractured knee, 14 broken ribs, bite marks on her cheeks, bruises on her stomach and back and alcohol in her bloodstream. Her father was arrested for murder. (*Newsweek*, October 10, 1977:32)

In both examples, the injuries are such that the reader can clearly see that they could not have been either unintentional or accidental. At a common-sense level, we impute moral responsibility or culpability for intentional or willful injuries. We commonly do not hold people blameworthy if it can be shown that their actions were unintentional or accidental. But only the foolhardy could believe that the injuries in these examples could have resulted "from an accident." It is the fact that they are intentionally inflicted, rather than their consequences, that makes these injuries so horrifying. Barbara Nelson observes that one of the ironies of press coverage of child abuse cases

is that severe injuries often make "better news copy" than more dramatic acts that result in death, because severe injuries permit a longer follow-up by other reporters and, hence, additional stories. A child's death often precludes such extended coverage.

Negative emotions may be aroused by detailing the gruesome facts of the injury, or the consequences of the abuse, or even the circumstances surrounding the investigation:

The body of a missing two-month-old boy was found in a pile of rubble Tuesday, hours after the infant's parents were charged in connection with his death. The Marion couple earlier told police that their son was abducted while they completed last minute Christmas shopping. The nude body was found under some dirt, leaves, and cement in the foundation of a torn down house, about four blocks from the parents' home. "The location was given to us by the father," said Detective Larry Connors. Thus far, police do not know if the death was the result of child abuse that went too far, or the result of a deliberate slaying. (*Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, December 27, 1978:3)

Child abuse horror stories use two journalistic conventions to elicit an emotional response from the reader: ironic contrast and structural incongruity. They are related and similar in some respects, but nevertheless distinct. The press prefers certain kinds of stories because they allow for a better display of the intrinsic properties of the medium. Newspaper reporters have a strong preference for "man bites dog" stories, for example, because the print medium and the linear display allow for a greater exploitation of ironic contrast. "Man bites dog" is a phrase that epitomizes ironic contrast. The phrase creates the image of man, often the unwitting victim of a dog's attack, uncharacteristically turning on the animal alleged to be man's best friend. Presenting the story in print maximizes its ironic possibilities.

Consider the ironic contrast in a 1981 story about Arizona's leading medical expert on virtually all forms of child abuse and neglect. Dr. Larry C. Rork, the 1979 winner of local awards for his expertise and service related to child abuse, was subsequently accused of multiple acts of child abuse and sexual molestation by three boys confined at Camelback Hospital. Even though subsequent investigations completely exonerated Dr. Rork, he committed suicide before the investigation's completion. The juxtaposition of Rork's expertise and the charges against him provides the story's irony.

Another story, from the *Kansas City Star* for Tuesday, August 9, 1977, con-

cerns Herbert Smith, Jr., who faced 5 years to life in prison for the fatal beating of his stepdaughter, whose death he tried to prevent through a law suit Smith, 31, from Wichita, pleaded no contest to a charge of second-degree murder. His daughter fell into a coma, and Smith filed a civil suit to prevent doctors and the child's mother from unhooking the child's respirator. Smith claimed in the suit that he could face more serious charges if the machine were unhooked. The injunction was denied, and the respirator was unhooked. In this case, the irony comes from the fact that the person responsible for the injuries became the litigant to "save the child's life."

Structural incongruity need not involve a formal irony, but it usually does include some feature that strikes the reader as bizarre, strange, unusual, or "out of place." One well-known example is the now infamous case of the 1984 arrest of the grandmotherly (and 77-year-old) Virginia McMartin, founder and director of the McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, California. Along with six relatives and co-workers, she was charged with nearly 300 counts of sexual abuse and molestation of the children in their care. A second example:

A nine-year-old girl was sexually molested by her father and uncle, an aunt and her brother's boyfriend over a seven year period without any of the suspects knowing the others were involved. Each suspect had been questioned separately, and then released into the lobby of the police station in this St. Louis suburb. "You should have seen the look on their faces," said Detective Don Gultz. It was "You too?!" The four adults were charged with 53 felony counts. (Overland, Missouri, United Press International, August 16, 1985)

The "shocking" details in such stories elicit negative emotions from readers.

Disembodiment of Interaction

Mass media reports of child abuse never report the interactional sequences leading to abuse. The "facts" of a story are presented as if they "speak for themselves," and reporters make no attempt to give the participant's perspective. This reporting strategy works because reports of statistically rare dramatic injuries or "horror stories" receive disproportionate attention. The typical case of child abuse is not very dramatic: a nonserious injury to a child under 3, committed by a young person (usually the mother), who is under much stress while having few resources to manage the exigent circumstances, and so on. Such cases—the overwhelming majority of child

abuse—usually are not seen as “good news stories” by the press. Mass media reports disproportionately present the more dramatic cases, with the assumption that “the facts speak for themselves.”

A 40-year-old man has been charged with assaulting his 15-year-old daughter by hanging her upside down by her toes and then beating her. (*Arizona Republic*, March 18, 1979:22)

A Tucson woman, convicted of dumping her four-year-old daughter into a tub of scalding water for telling a lie, was sentenced to three years in prison. (*Arizona Republic*, March 9, 1978:11)

These stories reflect a common journalistic convention: beginning a story with a shocking or provocative “grabber.” A typical grabber presents dramatic details of a specific individual case, intended to grab and retain the reader’s attention for the rest of the story. Beginning a story with a “grabber” reflects journalists’ “recipe knowledge” used to manufacture news. In the preceding examples, it seems evident that the abuse could not have been “reasonable,” so there is no attempt to place the action described within an interactional or social sequence, no attempt to tell the story from the various participants’ points of view, no attempt to place the account into some intelligible, comprehensible context. In this way, abuse is typified as irrational and incomprehensible.

Decontextualization

News reports rip child abuse situations out of their social context. There are some good, understandable reasons for this. First, child abuse almost always occurs within the privacy of the home and is rarely witnessed by outsiders or third parties. So reports invariably reach outside agencies, whether police, social service, or mass media, after the fact. Second, newswriters place great reliance on institutionalized news sources as their primary source of information on many stories. This makes the original social context of a child abuse incident extremely difficult to recapture, even if reporters were motivated to do so.

Dianne Devanne, age 11, had a lot to look forward to; high school, perhaps college and a career or raising a family. But she never got the

chance. Police say she was beaten to death by her father and stepmother. A rare case? Hardly. In nearly every state, laws are very loose, accurate models are scarce, and society is restive when faced with terminating parental rights. Dianne Devanne returned home in August to Braintree, Massachusetts, after two years of living in foster homes and institutions. Everyday for two weeks prior to her death, she was beaten for such acts as spilling the salt or not doing the dishes quickly enough. The beatings increased to one an hour on the last day of her life. Her father, claiming she had fallen down the stairs, took her to the local hospital where she was pronounced dead from a blow to the head. A blood clot lodged in her brain. The following day, Dianne’s father and stepmother were charged with murder. (*Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1978:34)

This account displays a common reporting strategy for child abuse horror stories, that is, to describe injuries that could not be “reasonable” by any standard. If there is a counterclaim to the allegations (e.g., Mr. Devanne’s claim that she had fallen down stairs), it can be easily neutralized or discredited, usually with a reference to some official source of information (e.g., the hospital’s judgment that Dianne died from a blow to the head). This leads to the next property of child abuse horror stories, the reliance on and use of official sources of information.

Reliance on Official Sources

For stories on child abuse, newspapers and television news rely on official sources of information, including police, prosecutors, social welfare departments, hospitals, school officials, and so on. Official sources play prominent roles in many other kinds of stories. The reasons for relying on official sources are clear; official sources can help solve a daily practical problem of newswriters: the need to generate enough material to fill a paper or news program. But, for stories on child abuse, there is another reason for relying on official sources: It is the official intervention and assessment of the actor’s intent that *defines a particular act as abusive or neglectful*. For this reason, it would be implausible (if not impossible) for newswriters to define some parental act as abusive or neglectful independent of an official assessment of the actor’s behavior. News accounts of child abuse invariably rely on official sources of information, and they take the official perspective toward the act being reported. The following story is interest-

ing because it shows the use of four official sources in writing the story (police, social services, courts, and official criminal records):

Allen Madden was pummeled for perhaps four hours before he died, at times with fists, at times with a wooden club wrapped with gauze and labeled "The Big Stick." He was five years old. Police found his frail body on the living room floor, his blond hair red with blood, his hands bruised from trying to deflect the blows. "Probably, he did something an average little kid does, write on the wall or something. That's all it takes," said a former social worker who had urged that the shy kindergartner not be returned to home because she feared "there's going to be a dead kid." Allen died January 10. His mother and boyfriend are charged with murder. Allen's mother, Pam Berg, quit high school, married a sometime factory worker, Gerald Madden. . . . The Madden marriage ended shortly after Allen was born, each parent accusing the other in court of beating the children. (Quincy, Illinois, Associated Press, January 22, 1979:1)

This is not an example of the routine, ordinary child abuse case that crosses the desk of the average Child Protective Services worker who investigates such matters or that constitutes the overwhelming statistical majority of abuse cases. Most child abuse cases do not involve serious injuries. Few produce death. Few perpetrators have prior criminal records. Few such allegations result in some kind of court proceeding (about 10% nationally). The routine child abuse case does not make very good "copy" for news reporting. What makes good copy is a more dramatic case, such as the example here, and when these are reported on, official sources provide the newsworthy facts, and newsworkers invariably adopt the official perspective in presenting them.

Front line reporters at the local level tend to be young and, unlike seasoned news veterans, unreflective about adopting the official or bureaucratic view about some problem. It often takes years to learn about the deeper realities and meanings of some event or phenomenon, to recognize the hidden organizational interests that lie behind some rational, scientific rhetoric. This is true in the child abuse field; many local news reporters are seduced by the bureaucratic reporting of a horrific story and rush to news judgment without realizing how the dissemination of these unrepresentative stories promotes vested bureaucratic, agency, or political interests. That two *Denver Post* reporters would win a Pulitzer Prize for exposing the myths and hidden pro-

motive interests in the "missing children" issue is one small indication that the unexamined assumptions of the mass media are changing.

Individualization of Causal Agent

Most reporters and editors have been formally educated; they know the myths and some of the realities of domestic violence. Commonly held beliefs include the following: Abused children grow up to abuse their own children; unemployment places great stresses upon the unemployed individual and the family; drinking problems and alcoholism are frequently involved in domestic disputes; arguments over money and other practical matters are commonplace and frequently severe, etc. Nevertheless, when confronted with the prospect of interpreting the facts of an individual case, reporters rarely refer to such factors. It is much easier to sustain a complicated, mixed sense of social responsibility for other acts, including certain war crimes, employee theft, certain forms of organizational deviance, and some forms of "sexual deviance" (or sexual preference). Despite the fact that virtually all of us have some family experience, the mass media accounts promote the idea that individuals bear total, absolute responsibility. Whatever the stressful conditions or circumstances that confront the individual, the press treats that individual as responsible for what occurs. Consider the following account:

"Filth of just about any kind of description" throughout a Huron Street house prompted City County Health officials to charge a woman Thursday morning with neglect of a dependent child. It was the second time this year that Westerman was charged with neglect of the children. Allen Family Relations Court suspended a one-year sentence August 20 after a March 8 arrest because of similar conditions in the two-story house, Holly said. Neglect of a dependent is a felony. Health officials said they found the house filled with rubbish, garbage and excrement. Holly explained that he and Bonnie Rafert, a health inspector, went to the residence Thursday morning with a Board of Works crew to clear rubbish and garbage from the yard. The Health Department has received numerous complaints about the yard, he said. Westerman has been charged at least seven times since 1974 because the condition of the yard violated city ordinances. While Rafert was supervising the removal of the rubbish-filled van from the property, Westerman swung a bat at her, causing a door of the van to slam in front of her, Holly said. When

Holly attempted to arrest her, she ran into the house. Holly said he called the police for assistance. When he and the officers entered the house to make an arrest, the cluttered condition was evident. (*Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, September 21, 1979: B1,2)

From this account, it seems reasonable to think that Westerman is economically poor (apparently not even having a first name!), having lived in the same residence for at least 5 years, but with few material resources for home repairs or other improvements, having interpersonal skills and a lifestyle that are at variance with middle-class standards and/or the official expectations of police, social workers, health inspectors, etc. And yet, the reporter seems to assume that official suspicions warrant the label "felony," and there is no attempt to assess the relationship between Westerman's material circumstances and their consequences on parental supervision. Whatever these circumstances might be, they apparently do not mitigate the absolute responsibility for maintaining a clean yard. Consider the following story. It asserts that the mother's knowledge was an intentional, willful knowledge, even though the grounds for this judgment are not spelled out to the reader. It concerns the story of a 20-year-old mother charged with neglect of a dependent child in connection with the July 7, 1979 death of her infant, Christopher Swenson, aged 2.

"Mindy Swenson was well aware that Christopher was being mistreated by Timothy Carpenter," the Allen Superior Court affidavit said. Carpenter was charged with murder, an habitual offense in the case, and lived with the mother and the child for several months prior to the death. The mother was booked at the City County lockup Wednesday and is being held at the Allen County jail under \$2,000 bond. She had been staying at the home of Carpenter's foster father in rural Auburn, Indiana. (*Fort Wayne Gazette*, July 10, 1979)

There is a general view about child abuse and neglect that pervades all of the mass media accounts. This view holds that child abuse and/or neglect is an entirely individualistic phenomenon, an act for which an individual is solely responsible. Rarely do stories refer to the wide range of stresses that can influence individuals, including such factors as absent partners, alcoholism, unemployment, financial difficulties, drug problems, stigmatization from prior arrests and/or prison records, poor occupational or school preparation, and a wide range of social-psychological difficulties. Even when such factors are cited or alluded to in mass media reports, they are not seen as mitigating per-

sonal responsibility. Society and its institutions are not seen as causal agents in producing child abuse and neglect; rather, the press takes the view that society and its institutions represent functional responses to the problem tending to control it. This is, of course, in keeping with larger trends involving the individualization and medicalization of a wide range of social problems.

THE ROLE OF HORROR STORIES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHILD ABUSE AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

Publishing child abuse horror stories serves a wide range of uses. One of the most obvious is that it fits the organizational needs and interests of news organizations. Barbara Nelson notes that child abuse stories have a great human interest potential, and that human interest stories have become increasingly important to the organizational needs and interests of mass media:

The reporting of child abuse follows a fairly consistent pattern in which unwholesomely criminal cases where the child survives are preferred to what might be considered the more serious, but somehow more routine cases where the child dies. The titillation of bizarre brutality accounts, in part, for this pattern, but other factors also contribute to the news-papers' preference for this type of story. Part of this preference can be traced to the organizational needs of newspapers. From the perspective of news managers, more information unfolds in a case of brutality than in one where the child victim dies. This fact, in itself, sustains coverage.

More than just new organizations are involved. The publication of child abuse stories also helps many professional and occupational groups, social science and medical researchers, and various private and nonprofit agencies. These agencies establish agendas for the child abuse movement. They are invariably tied to requests for more resources and more public funds. The crowning achievement of this political effort would have to be the passage of "The Mondale Bill," in 1974, which established the National Center for the Treatment and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect and infused \$80,000,000 into child abuse programs during the ensuing 3-year period.

It would be a mistake to see child abuse as merely a creation of the media. News organizations played a creative role in the process; some would argue a major role. But, just as important, news organizations responded to a sense

of urgency created by other groups, agencies, and sectors of the public. The press occasionally stimulated government action and legislative initiative, sometimes on their own, but more commonly at the bidding of other parties. Either way, the mass media reports of child abuse and neglect seem to have played a strong role in legitimizing this problem, serving at all phases to present the official conception and definition of child abuse, as well as promoting existing or planned official interventions, policies, programs, and budgetary requests. It is easy to see that the mass media perspective on child abuse is that promulgated by official agencies and their professional supporters. Insofar as the press criticizes official definitions or agencies, its criticism is coupled to the plea that officials do not have the resources they need to do a better job.

It is very important to understand that there is a larger cultural and historical context within which child abuse horror stories have appeared. Many of our contemporary social welfare and criminal justice institutions originated in the Progressive Era of the 1880s to the 1920s, a time of great optimism for institutional solutions to social problems. Today, we seem to have entered a New Progressive Era, characterized by significant cultural optimism about the capabilities of the welfare state to resolve social problems. The mass media organizations that have disseminated child abuse horror stories have, in addition, published many stories on incest, sexual abuse of children, child prostitution, drugs, crime of all sorts, pornography, drunk driving, etc. Such coverage has proliferated to such an extent that psychologist Robert J. Lifton has coined the term "psychological numbing" to refer to the feeling of being overwhelmed or inundated by such problems, even to the point of apathy or cynicism on the part of many citizens.

Educated persons who follow press coverage will feel the "psychological numbing" of which Lifton speaks, and so we will understand the existence of apathy and cynicism. Such feelings, however understandable, are transitory and situational for most people and do not reflect the kind of long range commitment to solving social problems that readers of a book such as this are likely to share. For us, it is important to have a realistic and informed basis of knowledge about modern mass media, definitions of social problems, and welfare state operations to make the best choices we can for a better future.

QUESTIONS

1. How do news accounts depict horror stories of child abuse as if these were the majority of abuse cases?
2. Which other claimsmakers besides the news media participate in this statistical misrepresentation of the child abuse problem? How specifically?
3. Spend a couple of minutes jotting down the different categories of child abuse that come to mind. Why, despite this range of abuse situations, are news audiences primarily interested in the horror stories?
4. Given the variety of situations of child abuse that exist, in terms of public policy why is it consequential that news reports about abuse tend to concentrate on the tiny percentage of cases that are horror stories?