From Abusive Families to Internet Predators? : The Rise, Retraction and Reconfiguration of Sexual Abuse as a Social Problem in Canada

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Current Sociology 2009 57: 69
DOI: 10.1177/0011392108097453

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://csi.sagepub.com/content/57/1/69
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The Rise, Retraction and Reconfiguration of Sexual Abuse as a Social Problem in Canada

John Pratt
Victoria University of Wellington

abstract: This article traces the development, retraction and reconfiguration of the way in which sexual abuse has been understood as a social problem in Canada. It looks at the processes of its social construction and situates these within a theoretical framework derived from Ian Hacking’s work on transient mental illness. It argues that sexual abuse was able to flourish as a social problem because of the ‘ecological niche’ constituted by the presence of four vectors: cultural polarity, observability, recognition of victims and expert classification. As this confluence has changed, however, so too has the framework of understanding that had been provided for it, leading to its current retraction and reconfiguration.

keywords: Canada ♦ classification ♦ cultural polarity ♦ internet ♦ mental illness ♦ sexual abuse ♦ victims

There is a voluminous literature on the genesis of social problems. There is far less on the way in which a social problem, having come into existence, changes course or fades from view altogether. In these respects, sociological explanations of sexual abuse usually fall into one of two camps: either that it is a problem that has no substance, a moral panic generated by extravagant claims makers with the assistance of an indulgent media (see Best, 1990, Jenkins, 1992), or that it is a problem with an essentialized substance, a product of the power relations of patriarchal societies, but brought to light in the last 20 or 30 years by the campaigning activities of women’s organizations and allies in the child care professions. Neither explanation, though, can account for its fluidity. For much of the 1980s and 1990s (but not before, see Kempe and Kempe, 1978), sexual abuse came to be understood as something that was devastating and largely irreparable.
In their best-selling self-help manual, Bass and Davis (1988: 29) proclaimed that ‘the long term effects of sexual abuse . . . permeate everything: your sense of self; your intimate relationships, your sexuality, your parenting, your work life, even your sanity’. No longer an exclusive property of dysfunctional individuals or incestuous families, as it had been understood before, it was now a problem that could occur in apparently ‘normal families’. It then came to be linked with organized, systemic or cultic abuse, involving large groups of prominent men in positions of trust and power.

It also became a problem of both the past and the present. It involved not just children contemporarily at risk, but, in addition, all those adults who began to come forward to speak of their own past victimization and its consequences: some because they had previously been too fearful to speak about it, others who had only just remembered it. Profuse apologies began to be offered from the organizations in which it had been allowed to flourish. Indeed, victimization need no longer just bring shame, pain and destruction. It also began to bring redemption, damages, even celebrity status.

However, some of the key features of this framework of understanding have since been largely discredited. There are, after all, no paedophile rings; there is no ritual abuse; recovered memories cannot be trusted; not all victimization claims are legitimate. As a result, in Canada, the problem has undergone a series of retractions and reconfigurations, with the effect that the predatory stranger has once again come to the forefront of those who would sexually abuse children.

In this article, I want to explain the emergence and fluidity of this problem by applying the explanatory framework developed in Ian Hacking’s (1998) work on ‘transient mental illness’ – an illness ‘that appears at a time, in a place, and later fades away [although] it may spread from place to place and appear from time to time’ (Hacking, 1998: 1). What brings it into existence in the first instance is the presence of what he describes as an ‘ecological niche’. This is the confluence of four main vectors, which take the following forms. First, the problem has to be observable. It must be ‘strange, disturbing and noticed’ (Hacking, 1998: 82): it has to be a social problem that not only has a quantifiable element but one that remains in the public domain – it has to be newsworthy as well. Second, the problem has to fit between a cultural polarity of social phenomena that loom large in contemporary consciousness – ‘one virtuous, the other vicious and tending to crime’. Hacking (1998: 81) thus explains how ‘mad travellers’ disease’ in the late 19th century – the impulsive and uncontrollable travels of respectable working-class men of which they had no memory – fitted between romantic tourism and criminal vagrancy: ‘both were deeply important to the middle classes, because one stood for leisure, pleasure and fantasy escape, while the other stood for fear of the underworld’. In these respects, mad
travellers’ disease came into existence as ‘an option for the less fortunate that lay between affluence and crime’ (Hacking, 1998: 82). Third, there have to be victims for whom the problem, despite the pains it causes, also acts as a kind of haven or release from intolerable social or psychological circumstances. The position of victims, particularly crime victims, in many modern societies today seems particularly pertinent to this. By the early 1980s, victimization had been able to unite two different features of the changing social, political and cultural arena of post-1970s modernity (Furedi, 2004): the general sense of vulnerability that is now experienced in the course of traversing the anxieties and insecurities of everyday life (Giddens, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995); and the demand for recognition and esteem through the range of non-class-specific social movements that emerged in this period, usually concerned with single issues of oppression, offering new opportunities for unity and solidity as class alignments declined. Victimization thus has the capacity to act as a new kind of citizenship, an emblem of broader dangers and uncertainties that has to be universally borne rather than individuals accepting culpability (Garland, 2002). Fourth, the problem must be validated (see also Best, 1990: 80): experts much vouch for its authenticity and place it within a larger framework of diagnosis or taxonomy.

I want to argue that it was the presence of these four vectors that allowed sexual abuse to flourish in Canada. Without them, though, it has to change into a different formulation if it is to survive. As Hacking (1998: 82) argues, ‘we should expect a [social problem] to mutate or disappear if its habitat is destroyed’.

**Observability**

Before the 1980s, sexual abuse in Canada was not ‘observable’. The report of Greenland (1973), although titled *Child Abuse in Ontario*, makes virtually no mention of the matter. In the federal *Report to the House of Commons on Child Abuse and Neglect* (1976), there is no reference to sexual abuse. In 1981, however, the Badgley Commission was established to conduct a ‘national fact-finding study of sexual offences against children and youths and to recommend how young victims could better be protected by the law and helping services’ (Badgley, 1984: 5). Because of its concern with the sexual exploitation of young people, Badgley also looked in detail at child pornography and prostitution. At the start of the inquiry, then, sexual abuse was one among these other forms of exploitation. By the time it reported, though, in 1984, sexual abuse had become its central feature. Its summary begins ‘persons who have been sexually abused as children and youths have told us of their anguish and sense of helplessness, feelings intensified by their not knowing how they might have sought appropriate help’ (Badgley, 1984: 1). What had happened between 1981 and 1984 is that
the problem had become increasingly observable. For example, the *Report of Metro Toronto’s Special Committee on Child Abuse* (1982) estimated that one in four girls and one in 10 boys were sexually abused by the age of 18 amid considerable media interest (‘sexual abuse is reaching epidemic proportions’, *The Globe and Mail*, 26 April 1982: 8). Thereafter, Ontario social workers made the decision to prioritize this rather than other forms of abuse, giving it increased professional attention.²

Against this backcloth and despite its original parameters, the first 40 of the 52 recommendations made by Badgley relate to sexual abuse (matters such as mandatory reporting and the relaxation of evidential rules to facilitate its prosecution). It also set the benchmark for calculations of abuse levels. Based on the evidence of a substantial literature review (much of which involved research outside Canada), it concluded that its ‘real levels’ were one in two for girls and one in three for boys. Thereafter, the phrase ‘one in three’ became reified popular wisdom (‘as yet there is no reliable picture of the extent of child abuse in this country, but . . . we can try to adjust to the preliminary estimate that one in three women and slightly fewer men experience sexual abuse as children’, *The Globe and Mail*, 21 July 1989: A4). Other claims makers simply took the Badgley estimates as ‘fact’ and then extrapolated ‘real number’ calculations: ‘1,400,000 Canadians were being abused each year [and] 4,785,000 males and 7,250 000 females had experienced some form of unwanted touching in Canada’ (Matthews, 1996: 24). The media, in conjunction with claims makers, then inflated the size of newly discovered sites. After the first cases of ritual abuse became public knowledge in the mid-1980s, *The Globe and Mail* (27 November 1990: A9) reported that ‘an estimated 2,000 individuals stepped forward claiming to have been abused in satanic cults’. After a causal link had been established between sexual abuse and multiple personality disorder, Toronto psychiatrist Margot Rivera claimed that there were 100,000 such cases in Ontario at any given time (*The Globe and Mail*, 3 July 1991: A1).

As the problem became more observable, so there was an escalation in reported cases: in Ontario from 249 in 1980 to 1628 in 1986, in Nova Scotia from 6 to 165, while New Brunswick had experienced a 622 percent increase between 1983 and 1987 (*Report of the Special Advisor to the Minister of National Health and Welfare on Child Sexual Abuse in Canada*, 1990: 19). The increase in reporting then confirmed that it was indeed a problem that was out of control³ rather than being one that was now more regularly detected. Again, social work practices had helped to achieve this. For example, in Toronto, a special phone number was established for abuse victims, unlike victims of other forms of child abuse. There remains an expectation that within two hours of such a report to Children’s Aid Societies, it will be investigated with the police in attendance.⁴ Furthermore, the manner of its reporting in the media helped to maintain a distinction between its *public* prevalence
and actual levels. At the same time, the more it seemed to be increasing, the
more it justified enlarging the power base of social work organizations
combating it: ‘the complexity of child sexual abuse along with the increasing
numbers of reported cases is straining every part of front-line systems’
(Report of the Special Advisor to the Minister of National Health and Welfare on

The way in which individual cases produced multiple abusers and vic-
tims helped it remain observable. Reports of the Prescott sex ring in 1989
claimed that 119 paedophiles were involved and that 275 children and 42
adults had been victimized (The Globe and Mail, 16 February 1990: A13). In
Martensville Ontario, nine people were charged with 180 offences and
seven with 114 (The Globe and Mail, 26 September 1997: A8). The Mount
Cashel case in Newfoundland began with claims of widespread sexual
abuse by as many as 20 priests and lay teachers at a Catholic orphanage.

Former choirmaster John Gallienne pleaded guilty to 20 sex charges
involving 13 choirboys at St George’s Cathedral Kingston. In the 1992
Grandview Training School case, allegations were made by more than 70
students. In 1994, the police were interviewing 450 people in the St Anne’s
Residential School case. John Paul Roby was convicted of sexually molest-
ing 26 boys and one girl at the Maple Leaf Gardens ice hockey arena in
Toronto in 1999 (Vine and Challen, 2002). The nature of these cases also
meant that sexual abuse became identified with conspiracy and corrup-
tion, often in high places, rather than the identification it had previously
had with much less newsworthy dysfunctional families or dangerous but
sad and isolated strangers. The resulting lawsuits and settlements main-
tained its visibility. The level of damages being claimed and increasingly
awarded confirmed the way in which sexual abuse was now regarded as
a life-shattering event and of great public importance. In 1990, Gallienne’s
victims reached a Can.$2.1 million settlement; in 1994 victims at the
Roman Catholic Du Plessis orphanage were involved in a class action for
Can.$1.5 billion. In 2003, a Can.$4.3 million lawsuit was lodged against an
abusing Roman Catholic priest: ‘the lawsuit is not about what the priest
did to [my] body; it’s what he did to my soul, my spirituality – what price
these?’ (The Globe and Mail, 20 March 2003: A8).

In addition, documentaries and a new genre of movies and miniseries
based on real cases continued to keep the problem in the public domain.
After the screening of The Boys of St Vincent miniseries (based on abuse at
St John’s Reformatory), the Toronto Star (8 December 1993: A4) reported
that ‘the 24 hour phone counselling service has been swamped around the
clock with calls from . . . middle-aged men remembering similar events in
their own lives 20 to 30 years ago. The program triggered a lot of awful
memories. Most of the callers have never talked to anyone before about
their childhood experiences, not even to family members.’ David
McCann’s disclosures of abuse at St Joseph’s Training School (he himself had been motivated by the publicity given to disclosures about another Catholic orphanage) produced similar effects: ‘callers flooded police switchboards with stories of their mistreatment over the next two weeks, more than a hundred former wards called the police. Another 20 took their stories to the media’ (Henton with McCann, 1995: 167).

**Cultural Polarity**

The problem did not become a matter of public interest simply because it was becoming more observable. What also contributed to this was the way in which sexual abuse seemed to sit between two cultural polarities. On the one hand, there was the innocence of children: they have become ‘symbols of purity’ Hacking (2003: 40) later wrote. This is because their value changes historically (Zelizer, 1985), their numbers in the population being instrumental in this. With fewer children, ‘parents have more at stake with each child, the emotional ties between parent and child become closer and children receive better treatment’ (Best, 1990: 3). In Canada, live births were in significant decline before and after sexual abuse became observable: from 371,988 in 1970 to 348,958 in 1997; even more significantly, the proportion of live births per 1000 of population declined from 17.4 to 11.6 in this time. One of the consequences of this has been that average family size declined from 3.7 in 1971 to 3.0 in 2000. In these respects, the scarcity of children reinforces the bond between them and their parents: ‘at a time when very few human relations can be taken for granted, the child appears as a unique emotional partner in a relationship unlike marriage or friendship, the bond that links a parent to a child cannot be broken; it is a bond that stands out as the exception to the rule that relationships cannot be expected to last forever’ (Furedi, 2001: 107).

On the other, the ideal of family life as something stable and nurturing has been falling apart. Marriages in Canada declined from 188,428 in 1970 to 153,306 in 1997; at the same time, the number of divorces increased from 29,063 in 1970 to 67,408, with the ratio of marriages to divorces declining from 6:1 to 2.25:1. In 1981, only 6 percent of Canadians lived under common law; by 2001 this had increased to 16 percent (Statistics Canada, 2003: 11). Furthermore, the number of one-parent families increased from 476,300 in 1971 to 1,290,800 in 2000: and the ratio of husband–wife families to lone-parent families declined from 10:1 in 1970 to 5.2:1 in 2000. As the norm of family life has fragmented, so the everyday care of children has become more fraught with risk. For some, the instability of the family reveals hidden sites of patriarchal oppression; for others, it makes children vulnerable to new dangers and uncertainties from the supernumerary caregivers with whom they now have contact. In these respects, the threat
of sexual abuse to children no longer came from random attacks beyond the family, but instead was located right at its heart, in these circles of immediate caregivers: post-1980 understandings of sexual abuse emerged between these impressions of innocence and corruption. The discovery of ritual abuse – the first recorded case was in Canada (Padzer and Smith, 1980) – had exemplified these two polarities and what they might lead to when set against each other. Male family members came under the most suspicion and scrutiny: ‘we have chosen to refer to female victims and male offenders in this report . . . because most sexual abuse is committed by adults who are known to the child and acting in a care-giver capacity, much of the report focuses on these situations’ (Report of Metro Toronto’s Special Committee on Child Abuse, 1982: i). Thereafter, Badgley (1984: 218) concluded that ‘the main need of sexually assaulted children is for adequate protection from persons whom they already know and may trust’. In this way, a host of others (usually men) acting in loco parentis were brought into its net. The Children’s Aid Society’s Metropolitan Service Plan stated that ‘in 85–95 percent of cases, the abuser is someone known to the child: parent, relative, a person who works with the child’ (Children’s Aid Society Toronto, 1994: 5; my emphasis).

One reason for the growth of this extended network of abusers has been the changing pattern of women’s employment (in part related to the growth of one-parent families). By 1992, the number of preschoolers whose mothers were in paid employment had risen from 695,000 in 1980 to 1,300,000 (The Globe and Mail, 9 June 1992: A8). If, in the past, necessary child care could have been provided within extended family structures, the subsequent reorganization of family life now makes this much more problematic and anxiety provoking. During the 1980s, only 23.4 percent of the 652,922 three- to six-year-olds were in licensed daycare and of the 1,634,000 school-age children, only 3.5 percent were in a licensed before- or after-school programme (Statistics Canada, 1988). In the absence of licensed daycare services, what we find is ‘a dramatic increase in the informal, unlicensed sector of child care, swelling the cottage industry of informal care-giving, and ultimately accounting for up to 85 percent of all day care provided in the country’ (Pence, 1993: 62–3). As a result, ‘in less than five years, day care has been transformed from an acceptable solution for mothers who must find someone to look after their children while they work, to a potential hazard for children, because of the risk of maltreatment, especially sexual mistreatment while in day care’ (The Globe and Mail, 9 June 1992: A8). Doyle (1994) thus warned of ‘sexual abuse in neighbourhood and community settings’, and of ‘perpetrators who gain a position of trust in day schools and care settings’. Indeed, in recognition of this, Badgley had recommended that a new offence be established for sexual misconduct by those in a ‘position of trust’.
When abuse was discovered in these settings, it then seemed to reinforce both the innocence and vulnerability of the child victims and the corruption and depravity of their abusers. Thus, when sentencing Gallienne to four-and-a-half years’ imprisonment in 1990, the judge stated that ‘this accused was given a most precious trust. It was to teach music to children. Instead, he broke that trust and he violated those children . . . they are innocent victims and have been badly wounded. The scars from those wounds may well last a lifetime’ (quoted in Steed, 1993: 281). After revelations of abuse at Mount Cashel, it was reported that ‘Catholics are grappling with the incomprehensible: that priests should have violated both their children and their calling to such devastating effect’ (The Globe and Mail, 21 July 1989: A13). After the conviction of school teacher Doug Brown for sexual abuse of 17 students at Upper Canada College, an exclusive private school, one of his victims spoke of his subsequent descent into drug addiction and destitution, illustrating the extent to which innocence could be polluted in this way (The Globe and Mail, 16 October 2004: A6). Meanwhile, institutions that had chosen to hide or help their own past abusers (Berry, 1992), were themselves seen as culpable and conniving: ‘the victim’s courage in coming forward with their pain, sometimes to face the additional anguish of ostracism must be respected and commended by all members of the church community at large. The local church’s response to the pastoral and clinical needs of the victims lacked a sense of Christian compassion and contravened basic principles which govern the church. When the victims and their families needed the Church the most, it failed them. With the passage of time, the pain which the victims and their families suffered has not waned; nor has the anguish felt by the whole church community’ (Report of the Archdiocesan Commission of Enquiry into the Sexual Abuse of Children by Members of the Clergy, 1990: 2).

Victims

Previously, abuse victims had not come forward because what they had experienced was too shameful, too hurtful, too embarrassing; and because no one would believe them. The Report of Metro Toronto’s Special Committee on Child Abuse (1982: 6) affirmed that ‘sexually abused children are sometimes frightened into silence, or even into changing their allegations of abuse, after dealing with officials from social agencies’. As one of the victims in the Maple Leaf Gardens case subsequently explained, ‘it was ten years before [I] could tell anyone about what had happened. At 13, who are you going to tell?’ (The Globe and Mail, 20 January 1997: A2). In Newfoundland, some mothers believed that they would bear deformed children if they reported a Catholic priest (The Globe and Mail, 15 June 1989: A5). They thus kept their silence, despite what their children had told
them. Those who suffered abuse in native schools were in a particularly
vulnerable position if they complained: ‘if anyone objected, they were told
by missionaries that family and welfare cheques wouldn’t be cashed and
local stores, run by the Hudson Bay Company, would not grant them
credit’ (The Globe and Mail, 19 October 1996: A14).

Even when individuals did come forward, they were likely to face
obstructions at a variety of levels. The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the
Response of the Newfoundland Criminal Justice System to Complaints (1990)
found that ‘so overwhelming was the prestige and authority of the
Catholic Church in Newfoundland, and of the Christian Brothers in par-
ticular, that the government didn’t dare interfere with their activities, no
matter what terrible rumours were heard’. Earlier complaints of abuse by
the Christian Brothers at St Joseph’s had been ignored by the Ontario
Deputy Minister of Reform Institutions (Henton with McCann, 1995).
Similarly, the publisher of the St John’s Evening Telegram had refused to
publish a story 14 years earlier about abuse at St John’s Training School
because ‘he did not want to destroy one hundred years of good work by
the Christian brothers’ (The Globe and Mail, 15 June 1989: A5). Under these
circumstances, there could be no release for victims. To proclaim what
had happened to them would only increase their sense of shame and
exclusion. In effect, they had ‘no collective story, no rationale for public
disclosure, no framework by which a public story could be formulated
and understood’ (Davis, 2006: 53).

This began to change in the early 1980s. Victimization through sexual
abuse assumed an almost iconic status, representing the most intolerable
and irreparable violation and oppression. Whatever the respective expe-
riences of sexual abuse victims – in native schools and other institutions
or in their own families and from events in the present to events several
decades in the past – their victimization could now take the form of a
haven: a release from silent sufferings, and validation of survivor status.
A series of law changes6 (following the Badgley recommendations) now
made it easier for them to speak out and establish their victim status: lack
of physical evidence would no longer stand in the way of prosecution;
children would be allowed to depict what had happened to them when
they were unable to verbalize it by playing with anatomically correct
dolls. The Canadian Supreme Court ruled in 1989 that no corroboration
of abuse was required to prove abuse had happened; and in 1992 the
same court extended the Statute of Limitations deadline for sexual abuse
cases (the clock can start when the memory of abuse occurs, not when the
abuse actually happened). Furthermore, abuse complaints were now
much more likely to be accepted by Canadian social workers. They had
been strongly influenced by US expertise in the early 1980s (McCullogh,
2002), particularly the much heralded Roland Summit. It was he who put
forward the hugely influential assertion that ‘it has become a maxim among child sexual abuse intervention counsellors and investigators that children never fabricate the kinds of explicit sexual manipulations they divulge in complaints or interrogations’ (Summit, 1983: 190–1, my emphasis).

The new stature of victims has been recognized by provincial and federal governments. No longer the victim’s fault, these institutions have come to accept their own culpability for ignoring or condoning the problem. Profuse, sometimes servile, apologies became the means to heal the harm that had been done: ‘at this time, formally and publicly, I want to apologize to the victims. They were in no way responsible for what happened to them. On a personal level, and on behalf of the Government of Nova Scotia, I want to say sincerely I am sorry. Also, I will be conveying my apology to the victims in writing. We cannot change the past. We cannot make up for the suffering that has been inflicted but we can help victims to rebuild their lives and their futures’ ( Nova Scotia Minister of Justice, quoted in Kaufman, 2002: 133). After the apology, it is was as if a new kind of social contract between victims and the rest of Canadian society had been established, restoring them to the full citizenship that being abused had robbed them of, sometimes with damages to assist. Meanwhile, as their status grew, victims’ claims became broader – these could include unfilled dreams as well as injuries suffered: ‘Man, 42, claims abuse destroyed his dream of becoming a hockey player’ was one headline in The Globe and Mail (19 October 2002: S3). Indeed, victim status need not be confined to victims themselves, as a former Roman Catholic altar boy in the late 1970s explained when claiming damages for himself and his parents: ‘my parents are victims as well. They trusted this priest to take care of their children while they were taking care of their marriage’ (Toronto Star, 25 May 2002: A26).

For some, victim status began to offer even more than a haven and release: they changed from being survivors into ‘thrivers’ (Davis, 2006: 207). Sheldon Kennedy, after revealing his experiences of being abused by ice hockey coach Graham Jones, acknowledged that ‘I feel like I am 10 months old inside a 27 year old body. You are learning to live again. You are learning to have friends and you have to learn to laugh and relax, I can’t remember the last day I relaxed totally’ (The Globe and Mail, 7 January 1997: C12). Victimization no longer need be hidden away in shame, but could be publicly proclaimed: ‘in August 1990, nine former wards [of St John’s Training School] each wearing a white T-shirt with an illustration of a Brother pulling a child from his bed, picketed a meeting of the Canadian Catholic Churches Board in Ottawa. Twelve protestors demonstrated outside of St Michael’s Cathedral in downtown Toronto’ (Henton with McCann, 1995: 190). Victims became celebrities, as with Shane Earle, whose allegations finally broke the veil of silence on Mount Cashel: ‘He’s
signed one film contract for a production of his life story, he’s been to Toronto to tape one television show, to Chicago for *Oprah Winfrey* and goes to New York next month to appear on the *Phil Donahue Show* (Toronto Star, 11 September 1992: A6). Similarly, Vine and Challen (2002: 128) wrote that Martin Kruze, who exposed the Maple Leaf Gardens abuse, had ‘created a business card, letterhead and tax cover sheets adorned with the popular yellow happy face, and the word “survivor” was proudly displayed across the top of his stationery . . . [he] made the rounds on daytime television and radio talk shows: *Canada AM* with Valerie Pringle, *The Dini Petty Show*, and *Jane Hawtin Live* were just a few.’

**Expert Knowledge and Classification**

Ownership of the sexual abuse problem had been vested initially in the medical profession (Kempe and Kempe, 1978). However, Badgley (1984) and subsequent reports recommended that this should now be shared with social work organizations and other child care professions. This would provide a much broader classificatory framework and overcome the *politics of fear, indifference and disbelief* that had previously encased the problem. No longer bound by medical codes of confidentiality, the growth of counselling, social work, psychological and other therapeutic services in conjunction with feminist activism (Hacking, 1992; Nelson, 1984) ensured that sexual abuse became a free floating phenomenon, a problem in search of new explanations and modes of redress. The coalition of these new interest groups was able to dramatically change the classificatory dimensions of sexual abuse. First, in terms of place. It now occurred across the social body, irrespective of class, in ‘normal’ families as well as marginal, dysfunctional ones. Second, in terms of evidence. This would no longer be restricted to physical signs and symptoms, or even memories that remained long after these had faded. In addition, it was claimed that the trauma of abuse was such that victims had had to forget about their memories of such events in order to survive them: ‘memory repression arise[s] not because it reduces suffering, but because not knowing about abuse by a caregiver is often necessary for survival’ (Freyd, 1996: 4). In effect, the taxonomy of abuse now acknowledged that its trauma was simultaneously unforgettable and beyond memory.

In these respects, the ecological niche in which abuse was housed began to reflect the *politics of memory* (Hacking, 1995) as well as the politics of fear. To bring the forgotten victimization of adults to light, new ways of understanding the problem were produced (backed up by a growing pedagogy on multiple personality disorder, ritual abuse and recovered memory, the three main sites associated with this ‘memoro-politics’): ‘the phenomenon of not remembering should neither disqualify the patient from being
believed nor serve to discourage the therapist, but in itself is a symptom indicative of a severe traumatic experience’ (Prozan, 1992: 30). Many abuse workers accepted and extended the unconventional therapeutic methods and client relationships of the pioneers of memoro-politics (see Pazder and Smith, 1980; Schreiber, 1973). ‘Retrieval therapy’ for example, could include ‘the administration of truth drugs, hypnosis, massage therapy, rebirthing and dream and art work’ (Blume, 1990: 279). Alternatively, commonsensical interpretations of tell-tale signs and symbols (‘fear of being alone in the dark, wearing a lot of clothing’ [Blume, 1990: xviii]) would be presented by the therapist to the victim as proof of what they had forgotten. In such ways, this new therapeutic knowledge gave it an authenticity that was missing from more distanced and objective diagnoses of established, patriarchal and patriarchal fields of psychology and psychiatry.

As regards child victims, the abuse worker’s task was to retrieve their memories through therapeutic interviews (lasting up to 80 hours in some cases [La Fontaine, 1998]), and/or interpret the way in which they tried to articulate them (in preschool cases especially it was most unlikely that children would be able to speak in any coherent way about such practices), or at least discern intimations of abuse from other ‘clues’ given off by them (in their artwork, other forms of play, behaviour, mannerisms and so on). Once such memories were retrieved, they would be believed by abuse experts since it had become established practice that ‘children never lie’ about such matters. The Hamilton ritual abuse case was built around such assumptions. In 1985, two sisters had made startling claims of satanic abuse and other forms of extraordinary degradation (their mother reported that ‘they’re saying I killed other people’s kids, burying them and cooking them’, The Globe and Mail, 13 November 1985: A22). Despite police scepticism, and no corroborating physical evidence, the children were believed by other child care professionals involved with the case: ‘a panel of experts from Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children has concluded that [the children’s] stories of ritual murders and cannibalism were based on real experience’ (The Globe and Mail, 8 April 1986: A19). US experts, including Summit, then affirmed its likely validity to an eager news media (Lippert, 1990). Other cases followed. One or two (e.g. Martensville, Saskatchewan) involved allegations of abuse in child care facilities, in the manner of the infamous US McMartin case (Eberle and Eberle, 1995). A more regular theme in Canada, though, was the alleged involvement of sex rings, usually implicating high-ranking male citizens. This confirmed existing views on the gender-specific nature of most such crime, while further alerting feminist groups and other sympathizers to the inherent dangers posed by men in such positions. Their work against these powerful, not to say supernatural, forces then became a signifier of their own courage and dedication in a fundamental struggle around good and evil (see Haaken, 1996).
The respective fields of the politics of fear and the politics of memory sustained each other: expanse and accreditation in one allowed the other to flourish as well. Publicity given to delayed/recovered memories also helped to encourage those who up to then had been afraid to speak of their all too painful memories; those disclosing memories they had never forgotten prompted the recovery of memories in others. As Steed (1993: 68) wrote of one prominent abuse exposé (involving both recovered and painful memories), ‘this was prompted by the fact that the floodgates were opening. In 1987, Sylvia Fraser’s autobiography, *My Father’s House* was published. Also, the National Film Board of Canada released *To a Safer Place*, Shirley Turcotte’s documentary film about her incestuous childhood. The following year *The Courage to Heal* appeared on bestseller lists. . . . During that period, the most powerful women in American television, Oprah Winfrey and Roseanne Arnold, came out as survivors of sexual abuse. In Canada, the inquiry into allegations of physical and sexual abuse of boys at Mount Cashel began in 1989, and the consciousness of this country was transformed.’

**Retraction, Reconfiguration and the Return of the Stranger**

There had always been dissenting voices during the rise to prominence of the sexual abuse problem. It was quickly recognized, for example, that allegations of abuse were becoming pivotal in many custody cases and were extremely difficult to disprove, given the validity now associated with such claims and the relaxation of evidential requirements (*Toronto Star*, 5 August 1990: B1). At this time, though, because abuse was flourishing so successfully in the niche that had been constructed for it, concerns about difficulties in proving complaints vastly outweighed concerns about any false allegations that might ensue from them (see Report of the Special Advisor to the Minister of National Health and Welfare on Child Sexual Abuse in Canada, 1990: 79). However, from the mid-1990s, this construction underwent a gradual reconfiguration: all four of the vectors that had put it together began to lose force or change their direction. First, the expert knowledge that had validated many of the new sites of abuse was discredited, effectively shutting them down. Some of the ‘multiples’ were revealed to be manifest charlatans (see, for example, Merskey, 1992; Stratford, 1988), while the claims of their therapists simply became unbelievable (see Showalter, 1997). Indeed, these therapists are likely to be wary of making any further diagnoses of this disorder. Reporting on one who was sued by his clients for implanting memories in them (the first such Canadian case), La Framboise (1998: D1) wrote that ‘the women’s version of the story has become eerily familiar in
North American courtrooms as increasing numbers of patients accuse their former therapists of misdiagnosing them with multiple personality disorder and endangering their health. In recent years, juries in the US have awarded such patients millions of dollars in damages, therapists have had their licences suspended, and hospital wings devoted to the treatment of multiple personality disorder have been shut down.

Similarly as regards ritual abuse – the lack of evidence of sex rings and satanic practices (there should have been bodies, graves, blood, limbs, implements, altars – but there was never anything except memories) ultimately discredited this site of abuse (Lippert, 1990). In what is likely to have been the last of these cases in Canada – Martensville 1992 – it was eventually found that there was no satanic cult: ‘children at the baby sitting service were not taken to a place called The Devil Church. They were not hung in cages, made to eat faeces or swallow acid, engage in intercourse with adults, dismember other children, mutilate adults, or partake in human sacrifices. This has been proven in court, supported by a Royal Canadian Mounted Police investigation and confirmed in a unanimous Court of Appeal judgment’ (The Globe and Mail, 10 November 1995: A20). As to the paedophile rings made up of local businessmen and their middle-class colleagues, ‘Project Truth’, set up by the police in Cornwall, Ontario, initially led to 114 charges against 14 men (including priests, businessmen, a doctor and a lawyer) in 1998 and involved 157 complainants. However, only one man was successfully prosecuted and eight charges against the final defendant in the case were stayed in 2004.

Such developments have not only shrunk and narrowed the classificatory framework of abuse, they have also reaffirmed the power of medical and psy-professions to define the problem over that of more exotic and ideologically driven claims makers. The Canadian Psychological Association (1996) concluded that ‘developmental psychology casts doubt upon the reliability of recovered memories from early childhood. Reports of recovered memories of sexual abuse may be true, but great caution should be exercised before acceptance in the absence of solid corroboration.’ Indeed, in Ontario, there have been pressures to have psychotherapy added to the list of controlled acts that can only be administered by regulated health professionals rather than any self-accredited abuse workers (‘one health professional commented on the possible adverse consequences of misapplication of psychotherapy techniques for recovering memories of childhood sexual abuse’, Health Professions Regulatory Advisory Council, 2001: 72).

Second, with more strict policing of claims making based on unverifiable memories, the observability of the problem began to change. The number of substantiated ritual abuse cases declined by 50 percent.
between 1993 and 1998 (Trocme et al., 2000). There had been 170 criminal cases in Canada since the late 1980s to 1994 based on recovered memory evidence and 50 convictions, but there were only five convictions in 1995 and only one thereafter. Here, too, therapists began to be sued for malpractice and insurance companies refused to fund such therapy, ensuring that medical institutions, without this fallback protection, were reluctant to allow it to be practised on their premises (Brandon, 1999). This means that sexual abuse is now much more likely to be understood as an unforgettable event, rather than one that has been forgotten for decades and only recently brought back to memory.

Third, the ecological niche that had been constructed had become too successful – it began to produce too many victims. Notwithstanding all the previous estimates and calculations that demonstrated the enormity of the problem, the unchecked and taken-for-granted acceptance of victimhood began to raise alarm, particularly as many of the experts involved in such claims making had themselves been discredited. After investigations of three paedophiles in Nova Scotia children’s institutions, there were 1246 claimants (whose medical and psychiatric records were never checked) but no new charges (The Globe and Mail, 5 February 2002: A17). In the Kingsclear case, ‘only one person was charged on 34 counts against 18 children, but 284 victims were paid out Can $11 million’ (The Globe and Mail, 1 September 2001: A9). The changes to the abuse niche that were brought about in these ways meant that it could no longer accommodate unsubstantiated victimhood. As the Kaufman Report explained, ‘in some sectors of Canadian society, there was often an uncritical acceptance that all but a minute number of claims would be legitimate – regardless of who was making the claims, how the claims had been generated, the existence of any motivation to make false claims and, most important, the absence of any meaningful disincentives put in place to the making of false or exaggerated complaints’ (Kaufman, 2002: 19). Furthermore, the observability of a new group of victims takes some of the light away from sexual abuse victims: these new victims are all those who have been caught up in webs of false allegations. In the Grandview Training School case, Robert Ross was acquitted of abusing his students in 1997 after being charged in 1992. Headlined as ‘Who’s the victim now?’ The Globe and Mail, (8 November 1997: D3) noted that ‘recovered memory abuse had been the sole evidence against him, with one of the alleged victims claiming that Bass and Davis’ Courage to Heal had been her bible’.

Fourth, the cultural polarity that abuse sat between has also changed. At one end of this, we still have innocent children and the high value that is placed on them; at the other, however, the exclusive attention that was given to corrupt families and betrayals of trust has yielded ground to a new awareness of the ‘dangerous stranger’. This person had always had
a place in the background of the abuse niche. For example, in addition to the new laws against abusers who betrayed the trust children had given them, law changes targeted at predatory strangers were also introduced, in particular the establishment of a sex offender registry in Ontario – and later a national one – in response to the abduction, rape and murder of Christopher Stephenson in 1988 (Petrunik, 2003). At that time, however, the dangers that children faced from those whom they trusted, those whom they were most familiar with, was thought to be more immanent and it was such people who were placed in the forefront of abuse understandings. What has since happened is that the dangerous stranger has moved much more to the centre of this picture. To a certain extent, this has been inevitable given the collapse of memoro-politics, which had been partly responsible for occluding the stranger while focusing almost exclusively on male caregivers as abusers. It is also the product of a series of high-profile cases – those involving the sexual murders of Jessica Koopman in 2001, Holly Jones and Cecilia Zhang in 2003 for example – in which sexual predators were involved. Furthermore, the Holly Jones case presented a direct link between the effects of pornography and sex crime (and positioned the site of abuse away from family surroundings and into the criminal underworld). This connection has allowed the police to increase their power to define the problem. This is likely to lead to more attention being given to evidence of abuse that stands up to the rigours of criminal law requirements rather than the unverifiable allegations that therapists and counsellors had been willing to accept.

However, ‘sexual predators aren’t the guys in trenchcoats’, as a detective in a police child pornography unit explained (The Hamilton Spectator, 18 October 2004: A9). The growth of Internet ‘grooming’ and ‘luring’ makes the threat of the stranger all the more sinister and alarming: ‘a child on the Internet could be alone in his bedroom and with a stranger anywhere in the world, at the same time’, was the realization of one aghast parent (The Globe and Mail, 5 January 2002: F6). Indeed, ‘the typical [Internet] predator is hard to pin down. He or she can be any age, any race or ethnic background. While the vast majority of online predators are male, women can also be offenders’ (Calgary Herald, 5 February 2007: D7).

Alongside these shifts in cultural polarity and expert diagnosis, it is these dimensions of the abuse problem that have become increasingly observable as some of its previous dimensions have faded from view. In a new series of estimates and calculations, now more likely to be provided by police and experts in computer crime (the fact that this is usually targeted at older children further increases the power of the police as definers of the problem), it is claimed that ‘one in five young people from age ten to seventeen had been the targets of sexual solicitation over the Internet in the previous year’ (The Globe and Mail, 14 September 2002: A9);
and ‘it’s a worldwide problem that’s growing exponentially . . . twenty five per cent of youths are asked to meet someone they’ve encountered on line’ (The Hamilton Spectator, 18 October 2004: A9). On ‘Safer Internet Day’ in Ontario (7 February 2007), the attorney-general announced that ‘protecting our children from Internet crime is one of the biggest and most important crime and safety challenges we face today’.11

In such ways, the shadow of the stranger is once again covering over images of family members and others in loco parentis in the way in which sexual abuse is understood.

Indeed, families and caregivers have become bastions of defence against this figure. In contrast to the various instructions that began to be issued in the 1980s about keeping children safe from those closest to them, we now find a pedagogy that provides instructions for parents and caregivers on how to keep their children safe from Internet intrusion: ‘Keep your kids safe on the web: as teens and tweens flock to the Internet, so do the predators hunting for their next victim’ (Calgary Herald, 5 February 2007: D7); and ‘Blogging Safety Tips for Parents’ (Vancouver Sun, 29 July 2006: B1). It is not, though, that abuse was simply a ‘panic’ after all, waiting to fade away as interest declined. The value of children and the vigilance against all impurities that threaten them remains in place. What changes, as this analysis of sexual abuse in Canada illustrates, is the way we understand these impurities.

Notes

1. There are inevitable difficulties – jurisdictional and governmental to name but two – when discussing such a matter at national level in Canada. Nonetheless, the picture I have tried to present here, drawing on data primarily from Ontario, but supplemented by documentation elsewhere in Canada, is one that speaks to the national understandings of this issue. Ontario sources consisted, inter alia, of provincial government reports, newspaper searches from 1975 to the present for reports of child sexual abuse in the The Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star, as well as perusal of the board and committee minutes from 1980 to 1998 of the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto.

2. Children’s Aid Society Toronto Archives, SC1, Box 138, File 10.


5. The Supreme Court has ruled that organizations could be vicariously responsible for the sex crimes of their employees (The Globe and Mail, 15 April 2002: A4).

6. Law changes regarding the reliability of children’s evidence, special arrangements for the child to give evidence within and outside the court and videotaped evidence are to be found at sections 659, 486 and 715 of the Canadian Criminal Code.

7. In the longest and most expensive prosecution in US history, allegations were made of ritual abuse involving 42 children at the McMartin Preschool in
Manhattan Beach, California. Eventually all charges against members of the McMartin family and other teachers were either rejected by a jury or were dismissed.

8. In this book, Fraser describes how amnesia had masked the prolonged sexual abuse inflicted on her by her father.

9. Although Jessica Koopman was actually murdered by a family friend.

10. This is now a criminal offence under the Criminal Code Amendment Act 2002.


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**Biographical Note:** John Pratt is Professor of Criminology at the Institute of Criminology, Victoria University of Wellington. He has taught and lectured at universities in the UK, continental Europe, North America and Australia. He has published four books and co-edited three and has published more than 100 journal articles and book chapters. His research is most usually in the area of the history and sociology of punishment. However, he became interested in the dynamics and processes of sexual abuse as a social problem in the aftermath of a famous New Zealand case allegedly involving ritual abuse.

**Address:** Institute of Criminology, School of Social and Cultural Studies. Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington, New Zealand.
[Email: John.Pratt@vuw.ac.nz]