**Day-care abuse allegations of 1982-1992**

Case study assignment developed by Prof Caldwell-Harris

Boston University dept of psychology, CAS PS 241c, October 15 2013

**Background**

Day-care sex-abuse hysteria was a panic that occurred primarily in the 1980s and early 1990s featuring claims against daycare providers of child sexual abuse, including allegations of Satanic ritual abuse. In 1982, a prominent case in Kern County, California, first brought the issue of day care sexual abuse to the forefront of the public awareness, and the issue figured prominently in news coverage for almost a decade. The Kern County case was followed by dozens of cases elsewhere in the United States as well as Canada, New Zealand, Brazil, and various European countries. Those accused in the Kern County were freed in 1996. Many of the accused in different cases served long jail terms before their convictions were overturned (e.g., Gerald Amirault, from the Fells Acre Day Care Center, was initially indicted in 1984 and was imprisoned until 2004).

**Relevant materials**

**A. How accusations began**

Example from Fells Acres Day Care Case. In 1984, a four-year old student at the Fells Acres Day School wet himself while taking a nap. Gerald Amirault changed the boy into spare clothing. Later that year the boy was discovered playing sexually-suggestive games with his cousin. After being questioned about this by his mother and uncle, who himself had been molested as a child, the boy said that Amirault had touched his penis.

The police called the parents of all the children to a meeting at the police station to discuss the situation. They were instructed to go home and interview their children and to look for signs of sexual abuse. Examples of behaviors parents were told were symptomatic of abuse included bed wetting, changes in appetite and nightmares. The children were also questioned by the police, social workers, therapists, and others.

**B. Good standing of the daycare centers**

Before allegations, the daycare centers had been successful and generally admired and appreciated in their communities. Daycare providers had no criminal histories. None had engaged in prior suspicious behavior. No child pornography or anything else incriminating was found in defendant's home. In the McMartin Preschool case, police searched Ray Buckey's home (he was the 25 year old son of the owner and an aid at the school) confiscating as evidence a rubber duck, a graduation robe, and Playboy magazines.

**C. Physical evidence**

In most cases, no physical evidence of abuse was obtained.

**D. interview transcripts (on piazza.com for this class; see Frontline and Little Rascals sites)** If any professor would like to use the transcripts I found, just email me. I organized them into different categories – charris@bu.edu

**Questions for Group Discussion**

1. What struck you about the transcripts? Discuss in your group some different reasons for why children made these accusations.

After discussion, write down your ideas.

2. State your best idea (about why children did these things) as a research hypothesis that could be tested in a laboratory using research methods that you've learned about in this class or in your other classes.

One question about the testimony given by children is whether there are aspects here that are unique to young age. Suggested characteristics specific to young age are lack of cognitive ability, lack of world knowledge, difficulty standing up to repeated questioning, and desire to please adults (or authority figures).

3. Of the characteristics you listed in the prior question, which do you think are unique to children's young age and which ones may be found among adults who are interrogated?

Many writers and researchers have noted parallels between false confessions made by adults who are interrogated by the police, especially for felonies such as robbery and murder.

4. Discuss among your group why adults would falsely confess to a crime. Provide as many ideas as you can and then rank order your ideas according to which your group thinks is the best idea.

State your best idea (about why adults make false confessions) as a research hypothesis that could be tested in a psych lab.

5. The severity and sheer number of criminal cases brought against day care in the period from 1982 to 1992 is astonishing. Why did all of these law suits and allegations happen very quickly in this time period? What caused the events to happen at this time? Why was there virtually no allegations before that time period or since?

Discuss in your group as many different reasons as you can. Write your best reasons. Rank order the reasons for how important or valid you think they are.

6. Should we be concerned that another spate of such allegations will occur again?

7. What guidelines should there be for how to question children about crimes? Discuss among your group and rank order your ideas according to consensus in your group about their usefulness. State one of your ideas as a research hypothesis and describe what method could be used to test this hypothesis.

*Comments on student answers.* Students in my 2013 class were good at describing the techniques interviewers used to elicit accusations from the children; they noted that many of these techniques would also work with adults; and that adults may confess to crimes to escape interrogation or because they believe confession will at least moderate punishment. Students sometimes had reasonable ideas for research but didn't fully describe research methods. Students also didn't have a lot of insight into why these accusations happened. See discussion of reasons, including massive entrance of women into the workforce in the 1970s, here: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/terror/meaning/ Students also didn't have ideas for guidelines for interviewing children, other than “don't use leading questioning.”

There is thus considerable room to lecture on these points following the classroom exercise, or ask students to consult online soures, such as the frontline webpage.

Students also wanted to know if there was any way to know if any abuse had actually happened. I said no, but many experts think that no abuse happened.

We did not dwell on the toll paid by the accused daycare providers – ail time, leading a life as an acused child molestor ; the loss of all one has worked for. This is why showing one of the documentaries could be useful.