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Review: The Trauma Myth, by Susan A. Clancy

By Reviewed by Susan Pinker
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A researcher who has been shunned for her views argues that it is the breaking of trust, not the physical act itself, that tortures the victims of pedophilia

It's hard to forget the newly separated mother of a preschooler who came into my child psychology clinic 20-odd years ago, her face dark with fury. Earlier that week, her daughter had calmly reported to a daycare worker that "daddy tried to put froggies up my bum." Convinced this was sexual abuse, the mother wanted me to evaluate the child and be prepared to testify in court to bar the father - in her mind, a criminal and a pervert - from ever visiting his child alone again.

Though I took the claim seriously, I admit I was reticent about the plan. This was the mid-1980s, the peak divorce years in Canada. The school of hard, if not vicious, knocks had taught me that divorcing parents will say anything, and I mean *anything*, to punish the other parent. And when I evaluated the girl, I discovered that she was doing just fine. She seemed placid, was eating, sleeping and playing well, and her developing skills were on target. Without prompting, she also told me, in her matter-of-fact croaky voice, that daddy had tried to put froggies "down there." But I wondered, if that were true, why did she look and act so, well ... normal? If she had been fondled, or if God forbid something worse had happened, wouldn't she seem more traumatized?

Like most clinicians, I believed the orthodoxy of the era, one that has persisted to this day: Child sexual abuse was like rape but even more traumatic. It was the ultimate violation, an act of force so violent and foreign that there would be no way a child could remain impassive.

Susan Clancy, a Harvard-trained psychologist and researcher, has discovered that the matter is much more complex, and courageously takes on the accepted wisdom in her trenchant new book, *The Trauma Myth*. This short, punchy work tells two connected stories. The first is Clancy's well-written empirical account of how child sexual abuse really happens, why victims often stay silent and the real reasons for the oft-delayed, damaging aftermath of abuse. The second story is about how we crucify scientists whose findings don't match our preconceptions. On hot-button issues they can be hounded out of their labs and research institutions if their data jeopardize long-accepted political scripts.

[The] co-opting of a child's loyalty and 'participation' is what prompts great distress in victims later

The book's narrative begins in the mid-1990s, when Clancy, then a graduate student, became interested in studying trauma and memory. She placed an ad for research subjects in *The Boston Globe*: "Were you sexually abused as a child? Please call Susan for more information regarding a research study in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University."

Urgent messages of adult respondents soon clogged her office voice mail. Clancy wasn't surprised. She already knew that "childhood sexual abuse is exceedingly common. Approximately one in five children ..." is how she tried to reassure Frank, her first volunteer, who felt compelled to exit the subway to call her as soon as he read the ad on his evening commute. Unlike the stereotype (think *Precious* or *Lolita*), Frank could have been a 42-year-old Cleaver from *Leave It to Beaver*, a middle-class married man with three kids and a steady job in the financial industry. Yet what Frank told her shocked Clancy.

When Frank was 9, a friend of his family - someone he and his parents cared about and trusted - involved him in mutual sexual touching over a period of six months. What shocked Clancy was that as a young boy he didn't feel so much violated as chosen, special. The man lavished attention and baseball cards in equal measure, and though Frank didn't quite "get it," the touching was part of the experience. As a child, he didn't feel the touching as traumatic or forced, just puzzling. Like 90 per cent of Clancy's subjects, Frank was too young to understand the sexual nature of the adult's overtures, and as he was lonely he enjoyed the adult attention. Feeling complicit made Frank also feel deeply ashamed as an adult. After all, it didn't match the trauma story that was everywhere in the media, one in which bizarre strangers force themselves on terrified, unsuspecting victims. And as he had done nothing to stop it, then maybe *he* was the deviant.

Self-blame turned out to be rampant among Clancy's sample. The vast majority of the child victims never experienced violence, force or intercourse; they don't remember feeling fear or pain as children, simply confusion. But decades later, when they twig to the betrayal of their trust and innocence, the realization is corrosive. That's when the psychological damage begins, especially as the man - and it's always a man - was usually someone they trusted and loved: a parent, stepparent, uncle or teacher. Paradoxically, the more subtle the abuse - for example, a grandfather who became aroused when he held and moved his young granddaughter around on his lap - the greater the later self-recrimination. "I tell you, I didn't like it, what he was doing, but just didn't really understand. ... I guess I just thought of it as something we did on Grandpa's lap when we watched TV," a 46-year-old homemaker told Clancy.

This co-opting of a child's loyalty and "participation" is what prompts great distress in victims later, according to Clancy, by reinforcing their sense of culpability and isolation. She argues persuasively that, for most victims, we need to shift our concept of abuse from the violent rape model to something more varied and subtle if we want to succeed at treatment and prevention.

This is an unassailable goal. Still, the author has been the target of hate mail, shunning by colleagues (she now lives and works in Nicaragua) and vilification by advocates. Perhaps misled by the book's title, and too angry to read it or consider its nuances, they erroneously believe she is condoning child abuse. Nothing could be further from the message of this book, which states plainly, over and over, that children are never at fault, that sexual abuse is always a crime and that the blame always rests with the adult.

"It did not matter that no force or aggression was used. The experiences were still horrible, and listening to the details filled me with fear, shock and revulsion. As an adult, I understood that the events occurring were sexual in nature, very wrong, and an egregious violation of a child's rights," she writes. Amen.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist whose recent book, The Sexual Paradox, was awarded the William James Book Prize by the American Psychological Association. Her next book is on the science of human relationships.

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