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Trends. The Politics of Science and the Science of Politics: Adult-Child Sex and Child Sexual Abuse

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"A meta-analytic examination of assumed properties of child sexual abuse using college samples" published in *Psychological Bulletin* has been inducing a firestorm of controversy among social scientists and political and social commentators. In the article, the authors provide data that do not support the beliefs of many lay persons and mental health professionals that child sexual abuse (CSA), regardless of gender, causes pervasive and intense harm in the general population. The authors make their case by reviewing, through meta-analysis, 59 CSA studies based on college samples. The authors assert that the meta-analysis revealed that (1) students with CSA were, on average, slightly less well adjusted than controls; (2) this poorer adjustment could not be attributed to CSA because family environment (FE) was consistently confounded with CSA; (3) FE explained considerably more adjustment variance than CSA; and (4) CSA-adjustment relations generally became nonsignificant when studies controlled for FE. The authors also assert that self-reported reactions to and effects from CSA indicated that negative effects were neither pervasive nor typically intense, and that men reacted much less negatively than women. The authors also assert that the college data were completely consistent with data from national samples and that basic beliefs about CSA in the general population were not supported.

As with an analogous study (Hamner et al, 1997) that provided data that did not support another widely held belief--viz., the nature of outstanding child mental health programs--scientists and lay people alike are finding it difficult to accept the scientific process. One sine qua non of this process--according to many writings on the philosophy of science--is the attempt to marshal data that indeed does not support a hypothesis. But woe to the unfortunates who take this tenet seriously. They may as well be literally facing the Inquisition as much the sacred and the secular rise up in rage and wrath. Instead, those who believe that the authors are incorrect should sublimate through the same scientific process so that--perhaps--he who lives by the sword dies by the sword. On the other hand, these seekers of a preordained truth may be hoisted on their own petard.

One further point: IBPP assumes that at least some of the authors' opponents have not read the entire *Psychological Bulletin* article. For the authors end with the following quote, "Finally, it is important to consider implications of the current review for moral and legal positions on CSA. If it is true that wrongfulness in sexual matters does not imply harmfulness..., then it is also true that lack of harmfulness does not imply lack of wrongfulness. Moral codes of a society with respect to sexual behavior need not be, and often have not been, based on considerations of psychological harmfulness or health...Similarly, legal codes may be, and have often been, unconnected to such considerations...In this sense, the findings of the current review do not imply that moral or legal definitions of or views on behaviors currently classified as CSA should be abandoned or even altered. The current findings are relevant to moral and legal positions only to the extent that these positions are based on the presumption of psychological harm." Thus, the authors' opponents may not only be hoisted on their own petard but blinded by it as well--a fate that, unfortunately is often linked to personnel security experts who insist on taking what may be legitimate behavioral proscriptions and adding surplus and unfounded psychopathological ascriptions. (See Andersen, H., Barker, P., & Chen, X. (1996). Kuhn's mature philosophy of science and cognitive psychology. *Philosophical Psychology*, 9, 347-363; Arvidson, P.S. (1998). Bringing context into focus: Parallels in the psychology of attention and the philosophy of

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science. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 29, 50-91; Duin, J. (March 23, 1999). Critics assail study affirming pedophilia. *The Washington Times*; Hamner, K. M, Lambert, E. W, & Bickman, L. (1997). Children's mental health in a continuum of care: Clinical outcomes at 18 months for the Fort Bragg demonstration. *Journal of Mental Health Administration*, 24, 465-471; Rind, B., Tromovitch, P., & Bauserman, R. (1998). A meta-analytic examination of assumed properties of child sexual abuse using college samples. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124, 22-53.) (Keywords: Abuse, Child Abuse, Children, Molestation, Morality, Psychological Harm, Sexual Abuse.)