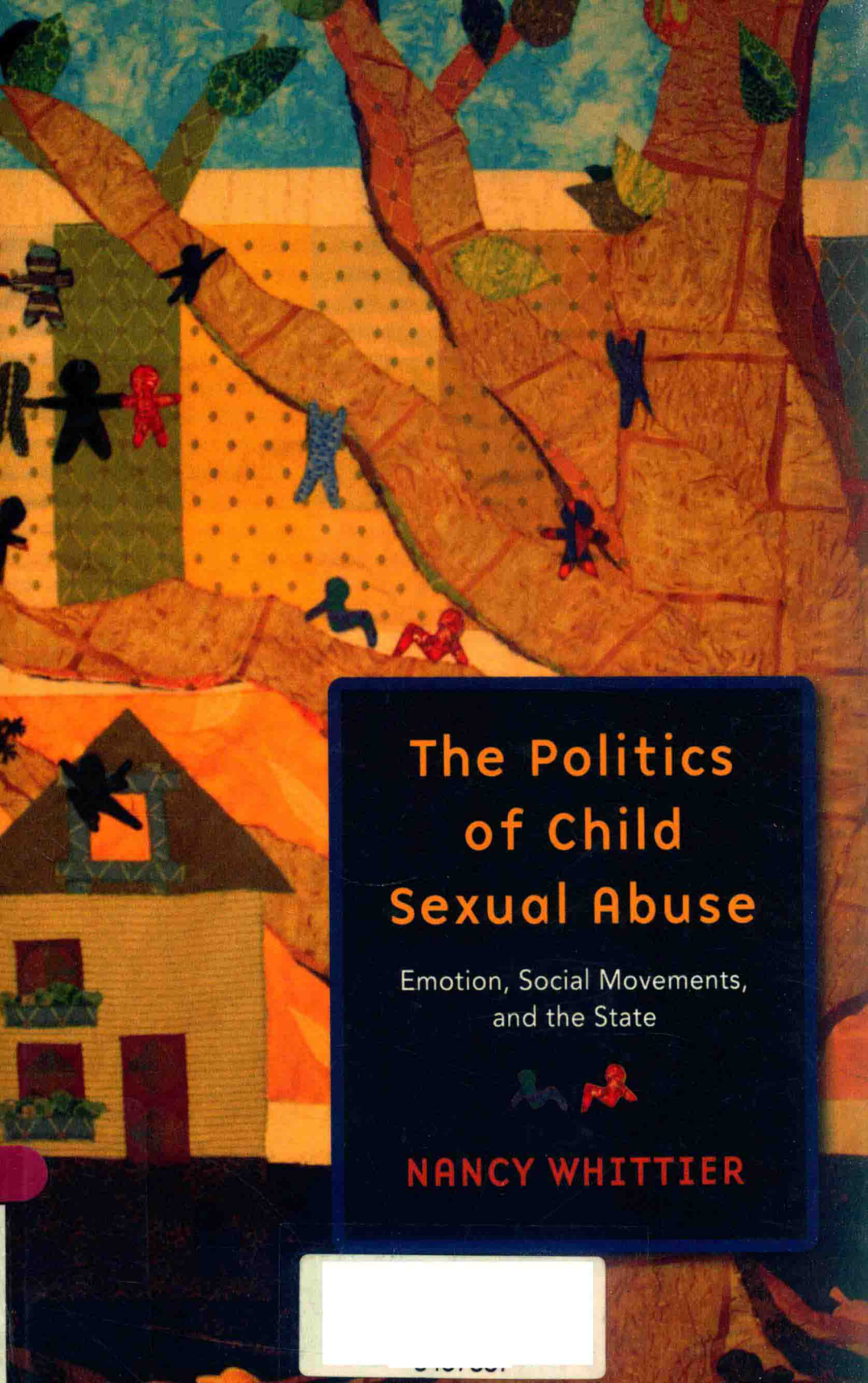
The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse
Emotion, Social Movements, and the State
NANCY WHITTIER

THE POLITICS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Emotion, Social Movements, and the State

Nancy Whittier

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The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse

For Sally A. Kennedy

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Two respondents for whom I used pseudonyms in the hardcover printing of the book, Maggie Jochild and Staci Haines, are referred to by name in this edition because of their importance to the historical record of this movement. I am especially grateful to both of them for giving me permission to name them, and for their assistance in this project.

This project has been with me through the birth and early childhood of three children, my own health problems and those of family members, one major move, two terms as Chair of my department, three computers, numerous smaller writing projects, and many other disruptions major and minor. It might have been done more quickly without all of these, but it would probably not have been done as well, and I certainly would have enjoyed the doing less. I particularly appreciate my partner, Kate Weigand, my oldest son, Jonah, who was two when I began the research, and my twins, Eva and Isaac, who were born in the midst of it. Thank you for the distraction and the support.

This book is dedicated to my late mother, Sally A. Kennedy. While she did not live to see it published, her influence is on every page, in my attempt to write precisely and to understand the complexities of human interaction.

Acronyms

CAP (Child Assault Prevention Project)

CAPTA/CAPTARA (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act/ Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment and Adoption Reform Act)

CPS (Child Protective Services)

FMSF (False Memory Syndrome Foundation)

IAF (Incest Awareness Foundation)

ISA (Incest Survivors Anonymous)

ISRNI (Incest Survivors' Resource Network International)

NCCAN (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect)

NY-WAR (New York Women Against Rape)

SIA (Survivors of Incest Anonymous)

SSBGs (Social Service Block Grants)

VAWA (Violence Against Women Act)

VOCA (Victims of Crime Act)

VOCAL (Victims of Child Abuse Laws)

VOICES, AKA VOICES in Action (loosely translated as "Voices of Incest Survivors")

Errata

In the first printing, two individuals were given pseudonyms whose real names should have been used. Elaine Westerlund was referred to as Leanne and Kathy Morrissey was referred to as Maureen.

On page 45, the final paragraph stated that Incest Resources operated into the 2000s. Incest Resources has been an active organization from 1980 to the present.

On page 51, the second paragraph stated that several members of Incest Resources drew on Re-evaluation Counseling techniques in their self-help groups, and on page 62, the final paragraph, which continues to page 63, stated that the women who organized Incest Resources had a background in co-counseling. Only one of the women who organized Incest Resources had a background in co-counseling and she was never involved with their self-help groups.

On page 60, the second paragraph identified Elaine Westerlund as white, and on page 61 she is referred to as a white feminist. She is of mixed racial identity.

On page 193, the fourth paragraph referred to Kathy Morrissey as an activist inside a state agency and stated that she formed an advisory group with local advocates and professionals in 1994. Kathy worked as an advocate inside a state agency and did not form an advisory group.

We apologize for these errors, which have been changed in the second printing.

Contents

The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse

Introduction

1950s: *Growing up in the 1940s, Barbara never talked about having been raped by a family member. As a young adult, she went to a psychiatrist who told her that people generally weren't bothered by incest, and, despite her distress, she let the matter drop.*

1982: *Several women in their twenties met through a local feminist anti-violence group. Discovering their shared experiences of childhood sexual abuse, they began meeting to support each other, theorize about child sexual abuse, and work to make the issue more visible.*

1995: *A man in his thirties confronted his parents with accusations of child sexual abuse. Denying his account, they argued that his memories were false, implanted by a therapist's suggestive techniques. They referred to literature from the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, and implored him to see a new therapist.*

1998: *The stickers read "Proud Survivor" and "The Abuse Stops Here." Fluorescent green and orange, plastered to marchers' bodies, they caught the eye of onlookers, who often cheered or mouthed, "Me, too," as Run Riot, a survivors' activist group, chanted and sang its way along the route of the San Francisco Gay Pride Parade.*

1999: *In her thirties, Susan understood the silence around her sexual abuse by a family member as the result of racism, fueled by the idea that an African-American woman speaking up about incest supported the*

demonization of Black men. In response, she proclaimed, "That fear has allowed the death of Black women and girls. At some point, I think we have to say that we are worth... speaking out about it and we are worth our brothers, Black men... to stand with us and say, 'We will not allow this to continue. We will not sanction this silence.'"

1999: *A longtime activist I interviewed explained, "I have gone from never having seen a survivor in the early 1980s to having worked with hundreds of women by the end of the 1980s. I've gone from thinking I was the only one to being crystal-clear about how condoned sexual assault is and the implications that it has for women and children."*

2002/2003: *At a meeting with the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the child sexual abuse prevention organization Stop It Now! helped outline a new approach to preventing child sexual abuse that built on successful public health campaigns against smoking and drunk driving. Impressed, the CDC funded programs by Stop It Now! and similar groups. At the same time, the Ms. Foundation convened a meeting of organizations from around the country to discuss how to jumpstart a social movement against child sexual abuse.*

Nearly everything about the cultural and political response to child sexual abuse has changed, sometimes more than once, since 1970. This book tells the story of how we got from there to here and explores what that journey tells us about child sexual abuse, gender politics, and how social change happens. The changes that these vignettes illustrate are due to the efforts of a social movement of child sexual abuse survivors, feminists, professionals, and other advocates, in tension with an opposing movement of parents accused of child sexual abuse and researchers who dispute the reliability of memory. Many of the changes are readily visible, but others occurred out of view in the arcane world of federal policy and state bureaucracy or took place within activist groups and were well known only in those circles. The connections between the actions of the government bureaucrats, local social workers, grassroots activists, and their opponents, have remained hidden until now.

This book is about those connections and how sometimes-competing groups of activists achieved a revolution in attitudes and policies toward child sexual abuse. I tell the collective story of activists and their groups alongside the story of how media portrayals and public policy around child sexual abuse evolved. I paint the first comprehensive picture of how activism on this issue emerged from the women's movement in the early 1970s, changed over time as it entered the mainstream, and ultimately transformed the political and cultural landscape. In doing so, I also examine the transformations in feminist politics more broadly, the role of emotions and the self in social change, and the sometimes unexpected ways that activists influence mainstream culture and institutions.

Until the early 1970s, the prevailing view was that child sexual abuse was extremely rare and mostly confined to the economically disadvantaged or to particular ethnic or racial groups. Seductive children were thought to provoke sexual contact with adults, and incest was often believed to be the result of controlling mothers who drove their husbands into their daughters' arms (Brownmiller 1975; Butler 1985; Rush 1980). The issue was rarely discussed, and those who had been sexually abused often disclosed their experiences to no one. While some of these ideas remain in circulation today, the scope and speed of change are remarkable.

Child sexual abuse is an unlikely political battleground. It has few advocates, and most people find it easy to condemn. And yet, there have been numerous struggles over it: Can the claims of adult survivors, the testimony of children, or the denials of those accused of offenses be believed? What is the nature of memory? Should offenders receive psychological treatment, or should they be punished? Does reducing child sexual abuse require fundamental change in the patriarchal family, or in institutions such as the Catholic Church where it occurs, or is it an aberration within otherwise functional institutions? Should government fund programs to prevent or remediate child sexual abuse, or should it stay out of the private business of families? These battles have played out in the arenas of federal and state policy, scientific research and professional therapeutic knowledge, mass culture, grassroots politics, and people's daily lives.

In the pages that follow, I tell the stories of these battles. They are instructive not just for understanding responses to child sexual abuse, but for understanding social change more generally. Activism for social change, I will suggest, takes many different forms, beyond protest demonstrations or letter-writing campaigns. It includes "bearing witness" or making new identities and experiences visible, the creation and dissemination of new knowledge, and the actions focused on changing individuals' emotions and sense of self that have often been dismissed as merely therapeutic. Correspondingly, the state, institutions, and opposing social movements, use the same range of strategies for their own ends. The broad range of activist and state actions, in concert with cultural representations, are what define and redefine the meanings, policies, and individual experiences associated with child sexual abuse—and, indeed, with most issues.

Child sexual abuse is an issue that cuts across political lines. Feminists brought it to public attention in the 1970s, but they could not maintain ownership of the issue. Indeed, their very efforts to bring attention, money, and serious societal response to child sexual abuse promoted the involvement of individuals and institutions from decidedly nonfeminist positions. Politicians of all stripes stood to gain support from their constituencies by claiming opposition to child abuse (Nelson 1984). Physicians and mental health practitioners brought their own professional priorities to the table (Davis 2005). And because child sexual abuse occurs in all social groups—across political allegiances, as well as race, class, and culture—women and

men from diverse perspectives identified as survivors. In some cases, this diversity led to surprising alliances across political lines; at other times, it led to uneasy truces or episodic issue-based alliances.

Yet while the movement became extremely varied in composition, its feminist origins continued to influence how even conservative groups framed and sought to remedy child sexual abuse. The changes in policy, culture, and individual experiences around child sexual abuse reflect both the goals of feminists, and those of nonfeminist survivor activists, opponents, medical professionals, law enforcement, and elected officials. These changes, influenced by other actors, illustrate the complex long-term outcomes of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Activism against child sexual abuse exemplifies post-Sixties politics. It was shaped by the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, entered the mainstream in watered-down form like so many other offspring of the 1960s, gradually reshaped how we see the issue and how institutions respond to it, and spawned multiple new forms and sites of activism. These new forms of activism, heavily influenced by the feminist notion of the personal as political, politicized emotion and the effects of inequality on individuals, targeting them for social change (Meyer and Whittier 1994). The movement against child sexual abuse is a microcosm of these politics of emotion and internalized oppression. In its attempts to change how people think and feel, it illustrates the politicization of emotion and identity. In its engagement with public policy, it illustrates the limits and leverage of that form of politics within the state. It therefore helps us understand the rise of a mass self-help culture, as well as debates over the political implications of public policy and social services oriented toward managing individuals' emotions and identities.

The history of the movement against child sexual abuse is not how any of the players in the polarized debates over the issue would tell it. It is not a history that fits ideas about social movements as unified, coherent challenges based in formal organizations and consistent goals. It is a history of neither failure nor triumph, neither purity of purpose nor sell-out. It is not solely a story of feminism and anti-feminism, or of individual healing from trauma, or of institutional change. It is a story of how a vibrant social movement achieved major change on an issue, but often in ways that activists could not predict or control. Precisely for these reasons, this movement sheds light on how social change—partial and contradictory—occurs.

Large numbers of people, in this movement and in others, have remained concerned with challenging the social forces that shape their lives. Paradoxically, they use the language of psychotherapy and personal growth to discuss these forces and to try to change them. They do so at a time when powerful institutions, including the government, also use these same languages in an effort to sway the populace to their own ends (Rose 1990, 1999). In other words, both activists and their targets have taken a "therapeutic turn." Activists' use of therapeutic ideas and language is not inevitably apolitical,