

*Trauma's Legacy*  
*Psychology 607, Winter 2004,*  
*University of Oregon*

**Discussion Questions and Thoughts from the Class: The Politics of Denial,**  
*January 12, 2004*

Note: Questions that we did not address are included without responses following them.

**Milburn and Conrad present an anecdote about a couple in Oregon who are members of the Christian Coalition. They include the following quote: “ ‘Obviously,’ says Christie, speaking of homosexuals, ‘in the last twenty years since they wrote their homosexual agenda, they have had a methodical plan. That’s why we’ve had to wake up’ ” (p.74). It seems that this couple’s concerns go beyond punitive and move into the realm of paranoia. How might this fear relate back to Milburn and Conrad’s theory about childhood punishment? What is the relationship between paranoia (as it is manifested in this example) and denial?**

Perhaps if we think of “fragility of self” as a common characteristic of those high in denial, it helps to explain the link between denial and paranoia, such that the fragility creates the type of fear/paranoia exemplified in the above anecdote.

It might be useful to think about how variations in the degree to which a person has a self-serving bias might play a role in these processes. For example, individuals with depression tend to have a limited self-serving bias, compared to “normals”. Paranoid individuals, on the other hand, may (I can’t remember from discussion whether this has been shown empirically or if this was a hypothesis) have a more extreme self-serving bias. The book Madness Explained by Richard Bentall deals with some of these ideas.

**The idea of physical punishment being necessary to “break a child’s will” comes up repeatedly in the examples that Milburn and Conrad present. Where does this conception of the child as this almost evil being stem from? Do individuals learn from parents who use it as a means to justify their punitive behavior? It seems so contrary to another prevailing societal image of the child, that of children as innocent “clean slates”, that it seems strange to imagine how the two could coexist.**

**What were your thoughts about Milburn and Conrad’s parallel between the Calvinist minister’s description of Hell and a child’s perception of physical punishment (p.79)? Are they stretching their theory too far?**

**I was struck by the statistic that “the most common cause of death of children under the age of four is abuse at the hands of parents or other caretakers” (p.82). Knowing that I must have heard this before, I was embarrassed at my surprise. How is the denial of such an atrocity so pervasive? Why have more people not rallied around this issue? Why has**

**education in this area lagged behind other causes? Or is the education there and people are ignoring it?**

**A point that I found particularly interesting about the discussion of the Christian Coalition was the quiet methods they seem to use. By quiet I am referring to the fact that, for example, Milburn and Conrad suggest that they teach political candidates not to mention that they are a part of the coalition. Do you think that it is true that their influence on society is happening quietly and that people are being tricked into electing candidates whose beliefs they aren't aware of or is it that the American public would rather look away than deal with the increasing influence of this group?**

The Christian Coalition is also extremely organized and has tremendous power to mobilize people for events and other people-powered functions.

How aware is the average American of this movement? How aware can they be given both the tactics the CC uses and the content of the current media?

**Assuming that punitive child rearing has existed in throughout America's history, what do you think about the question Milburn and Conrad pose concerning why it seems to be playing an increasing role in politics in current times? They propose the idea of economic threat as one possible explanation (p.115). Can you think of others?**

Historical example that the number of lynchings in the South were correlated with the difficulty of economic times.

However, couldn't you argue that a society is experiencing some threat at any given time and that this isn't a sufficient explanation?

Backlash deals with the idea that perhaps successive gains for one group (e.g. women, homosexuals) result in subsequent backlash against the group. Perhaps this could explain some of the attitudes that are playing out in our current society?

**In the reading for the last class, Milburn and Conrad addressed the idea that perhaps punitive child rearing has differential effects depending on gender. However, they did not return to this idea in these chapters. How do you think the issues they discuss in this chapter might play out differently depending on gender?**

This is a complicated issue because you are dealing both with the socialization aspects and the fact that boys and girls tend to be subject to different types of punitive child rearing and/or trauma (e.g. sexual abuse is substantially more common in girls).

The movie "Tough Guise" addresses the unique socialization of American boys.

**The discussion of the effect of emotional arousal on cognitive complexity seems so relevant to the tactics being used in both advertising and public policy today. How much do you**

**think this is impacting our current political climate? Is this a tactic that has been used throughout history or has it become more prevalent?**

It is difficult to strike a balance between reality (e.g. showing things that are violent/dramatic but provide necessary truths) and drama used to sway public opinion.

It is also important to recognize the fact that the content of the news may be driven by supply and demand. Perhaps if people did not watch or spoke up about the content of media, things would change?

However, consider the example of the image of the towers falling on 9/11. Apparently there were many who spoke up asking the media to stop repeating the image, to no avail.

It is interesting to consider to what extent the cases of inaccurate facts/arguments presented by politicians, media, etc. are the result of insufficient dissemination of information versus ignoring the facts. Perhaps it is often the case that it is selective reporting of facts (picking out what is useful for the point that they want to make).

**Milburn and Conrad's chapter on slavery made me think about how other countries/cultures address negative historical events. For example, has Germany done a better job (than the US has done with slavery) of coming to terms with the Holocaust and acknowledging the atrocity? This comes back to something we discussed last week- to what extent are these patterns of denial culture-specific?**

It is hard to compare these two events because Germany was forced to engage in the Holocaust.

Psychology and psychiatry tend to be guilty of the same type of historical "whitewashing".

Even now, people are more likely to acknowledge the economic struggles/hardship associated with slavery than they are to acknowledge the personal struggles (e.g. rape, assault).

Disciplined Hearts deals with how similar issues have affected Native American populations.

**Other thoughts from discussion:**

How strong is Milburn and Conrad's empirical argument? Why is there such a relative lack of this kind of work? Perhaps psychology is better at thinking about internal psychological processes and not as good as examining broader interpersonal/cultural issues.

Why do people who bring up social injustices get punished? Perhaps this has gotten more severe after 9/11, but it seems to be a response that goes much further back.

It is important to remember that Milburn and Conrad's hypothesis is that both punitive child rearing and DENIAL of that experience are prerequisites for the effect on punitive political attitudes.

It is interesting to consider what a “bad” childhood is. Most often people jump to thinking about the single mom, poor, etc., whereas the “bad” childhood we are talking about as correlated with punitive political attitudes may be very different.