

Subtle Stereotyping: The Media, Homosexuality, and the Priest Sexual Abuse Scandal

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2003



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful for helpful comments and suggestions from many people including Catherine McDermott, Daniel Kang, Elena Balduzzi, Janis Bohan, Chuck Colbert, Lisa Henderson, and Van Cagle.

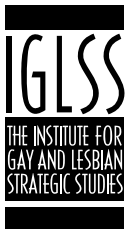
Thank you to IGLSS supporters:

*IGLSS is grateful to
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*In particular, we thank the Gill Foundation,
Ford Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and
the Richard W. Nathan Anti-Homophobia Trusts
for their support of IGLSS projects.*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Journalists endorse accuracy and fairness as the guiding values for their profession. Accurate and fair coverage of events may be compromised when journalists report stories that evoke and perpetuate commonly held but false stereotypes. This study investigated the presence of subtle stereotypes about homosexuality in the *Boston Globe's* coverage of the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal. Examining over 1300 items published during 2002, the first year of the scandal, the study describes how the coverage sometimes evoked the erroneous correlation between a gay sexual orientation and child sexual abuse.

Findings: The study identifies several ways that this link between homosexuality and child sexual abuse was made, despite the fact that extensive research has demonstrated that it is false:

- The most obvious linkages consisted of direct conflations of homosexuality and child sexual abuse that were offered either as original statements or as representations of a third party source.
- The second category of conflations were less overt, but equally effective in linking homosexuality and child sexual abuse. In these articles, text concerning gay priests was juxtaposed with reports of sexual crimes, without explanation or explicit connection. Over time, this method of reporting established a pattern of association that implicitly validated the false connection between child sexual abuse and homosexuality.
- *Boston Globe* readers were exposed to an average of two articles per week during 2002 that linked abuse and homosexuality.
- The study also found that journalists sometimes rejected conflations through corrective rebuttals. These rebuttals were most often found in response to direct conflations—that is, those drawing an overt link between homosexuality and child sexual abuse. The more subtle form, indirect conflations, were more often allowed to remain unchallenged in the coverage, thus providing an unintentional platform for maintaining inaccurate beliefs in the false cultural stereotype.

Recommendations: The study suggests the following recommendations for actions that serve the interests of accurate and fair reporting:

1. Journalists should be aware that false stereotypes can be activated in their coverage and that perpetuating such stereotypes can be legally, culturally, and politically harmful.
2. Journalists should be attentive to the false stereotypes associated with groups that have been marginalized in society.
3. Journalists should be aware that stereotypes can be activated not only through the content of a story but also through its placement and through supporting documents that accompany a story.
4. When stereotypes and other false information are reported as part of a story, journalists need to clearly refute them. Clear and effective rebuttals acknowledge both that these stereotypes are present and that they convey false information. Journalists also need to correct this misinformation by providing accurate information in its place.
5. When an ongoing story contains elements that evoke stereotypes, journalists should consider publishing items specifically designed to discuss and dismantle the stereotype.
6. Journalists would do well to solicit consultation from communication specialists to help avoid coverage that inadvertently activates stereotypes.

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INTRODUCTION

In January of 2002, the *Boston Globe* initiated coverage of the sexual abuse of children by some priests within the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. What began as coverage of a regional situation quickly developed into a major story. One *Globe* columnist referred to it as “arguably the biggest story the *Globe* has ever broken.”¹ Within months, the focus on sexual abuse by some Boston-area priests had reverberated into a story of national and even international significance. By the end of 2002, the story and the crisis it represented had resulted in the resignation of the senior Roman Catholic prelate in the United States. One commentator observed, “the current flood of revelations about Catholic priests sexually preying on minors and the failure of Catholic officials to expose their outrages is taking on the dimensions of a history-changing scandal.”²

As the story of the sexual abuse of children by some priests unfolded, it took a curious turn. The story had begun as an exposé of sexual crimes and of the efforts to conceal them, yet periodically it emerged as a story about gay priests. The presence of gay priests in the church became a matter of considerable attention. In some quarters, gay priests were explicitly blamed for the problem of sexual abuse of young people within the church—this despite a long and exacting series of studies that have concluded that there is no relationship between child sexual abuse and a gay sexual orientation.³

This excerpt from an article published in the *Globe* on April 24, 2002, provides an example of an explicit accusation that a gay orientation is associated with child sexual abuse:

Cardinal Adam Maida of Detroit told reporters yesterday that behavioral scientists think “it’s not truly a pedophilia-type problem but a homosexual-type problem,” and that bishops need to “cope with and address” the extent of a homosexual presence in Catholic seminaries. [n.a. #656. April 24, 2002]

Statements of this sort leave no doubt about the presumed relationship between a gay orientation and sexual abuse of children: the argument explicitly presented is that gay priests are responsible for the sexual abuse scandal. In a far greater number of instances, the *Globe* coverage made references to gay priests that implied, to varying degrees, that they were responsible for the sexual abuse of children without making a direct statement to that effect. As an example, one news article included this observation about the Vatican’s reaction to the sexual abuse scandal:

The Vatican has been reluctant to talk about the crisis in the United States. The pope’s spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, has repeatedly refused to talk about the situation in Boston, and to date his only comment has been to suggest that seminaries need to rethink the admission of gay candidates for the priesthood. [n.a. #643, March 22, 2002]

¹ Chinlund, C. (2002, April 29). Bias on the church scandal? *Boston Globe*. Retrieved September 18, 2002, from <http://www.boston.com>

² Steinfelds, O. (2002, April 19). *Commonweal*. Retrieved February 17, 2003, from <http://www.commonwealmagazine.org>

³ See, for example, Cantor, J. M. (2002, Fall). Male homosexuality, science, and pedophilia. *Division 44 Newsletter*, American Psychological Association, pp. 5-8; Freund, K., Watson, R., & Rienzo, D. (1989). Heterosexuality, homosexuality, and erotic age preference. *Journal of Sex Research*, 26, 107-124; Groth, A. N., & Birnbaum, H. J. (1978). Adult sexual orientation and attraction to underage persons. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 7, 175-181; Groth, A. N., & Gary, T. S. (1982). Heterosexuality, homosexuality, and pedophilia: Sexual offenses against children and adult sexual orientation. In A. M. Scacco (Ed.), *Male rape: A casebook of sexual aggression* (pp.143-152). New York: AMS Press; Herek, G. M. (1991). Myths about sexual orientation: A lawyer’s guide to social science research. *Law and Sexuality*, 1, 133-172; Jenny, C., Roesler, T. A., & Poyer, K. L. (1994). Are children at risk for sexual abuse by homosexuals? *Pediatrics*, 94 (1), 41-44; McConaghy, N. (1998). Pedophilia: A review of the evidence. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 32(2), 252-265; Pratt, J. (1998). The rise and fall of homophobia and sexual psychopath legislation in postwar society. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 4(1/2), 25-49; Stevenson, M. R. (2002, September). Understanding child sexual abuse and the Catholic Church: Gay priests are not the problem. *Angles*, 6(2), pp. 1-8. Retrieved March 5, 2002, from www.IGLSS.org

How did this shift in the assignment of responsibility for the sexual abuse problem occur? How is it that the early emphasis on abusive priests began to give way to a focus on gay priests? And how could such a shift find legitimacy in the face of a large body of research documenting the absence of any relationship between child sexual abuse and a gay orientation? The shift reflected confusion based on a stereotype that holds that gay people are child molesters. This stereotype ignores the fact that the relevant dimension in any case of child sexual abuse is the age of the victim, not his or her sex. For instance, if a female child is molested by a man, we do not regard this as a heterosexual incident. Rather, it is recognized as a case of child sexual abuse. Nor do people generalize from the single case to say that all heterosexuals are child abusers. Sexual orientation is simply not relevant in discussions of child sexual abuse.

Despite this critical distinction and a body of research that disavows any connection between sexual abuse and sexual orientation, references to gay priests faded in and out of the *Globe's* and other outlets' coverage of the scandal. Appearing and receding in a ghostlike fashion, the references were often difficult to identify with certainty, and even more difficult to understand. Efforts to grasp the content of and, even more importantly, the processes underlying this shift demanded the systematic application of a method designed to investigate written texts with just such questions in mind.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis⁴ is a method for studying written texts in order to decipher the implicit messages contained within these discourses. This technique provides a means for pinpointing how the initial focus on sexually abusive priests occasionally and persistently gave way to a focus on gay priests. Discourse analysis offers a technique for examining the various manifestations of the conflation between child sexual abuse and homosexuality in the coverage of the scandal. In addition, the approach can be used to clarify not only the form but also the processes underlying this false conflation between sexual abuse and a gay sexual orientation. This method requires a thorough reading of texts being studied in an effort to discern both the patterns of utterances within the text and the relationships between the text and social and cultural phenomena. (See the box, "Critical Discourse Analysis," for more information about the use of this approach in the present study).

Discourse analysis does not examine the motives behind particular discourses, however; nor does it imply any privileged understanding of those motives. Rather, the method focuses on an analysis of what discourse does—on its results rather than on the intent of the discourse.⁵ In keeping with this caveat, this paper does not strive to decipher the motives of journalists who have written about the sexual abuse scandal, but rather to explore the impact of how the story has been told. Such impact plays out, of course, within a complex cultural context, and the optimal use of discourse analysis as a means of examining this conflation requires a thorough understanding of the place of the conflation in the larger context in which it resides.

The Conflation of Homosexuality and Child Sexual Abuse

The context in which this scandal and this story emerged was one already rife with beliefs and values related both to sexual abuse and to homosexuality. The conflation of the two was also deeply imbedded in the beliefs of individuals and the rhetoric of institutions. The misconception that gay men are more likely than heterosexual men to sexually abuse children has long been a mainstay of

⁴ Critical discourse analysis is a multidisciplinary study of the "intricate relationships between talk, text, social cognition, power, society, and culture" as described on p. 253 in van Dijk, T. A. (1993). *Principles of critical discourse analysis*. *Discourse in Society*, 4, 249-283. See also Karim, K. H. (1997). The historical resilience of primary stereotypes: Core images of the Muslim Other. In S. H. Riggins (Ed.), *The language and politics of exclusion: Others in discourse* (pp. 153-182). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Riggins, S. H. (1997). The rhetoric of othering. In S. H. Riggins (Ed.), *The language of politics of exclusion: Others in discourse* (pp. 1-30) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁵ Whillock, R. K. (1995). The use of hate as a stratagem for achieving political and social goals. In R. K. Whillock & D. Slayden (Eds.), *Hate speech* (pp. 28-54). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

stereotypes associated with homosexuality. Herek has observed that the false link between pedophilia and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) orientations has been “a particularly powerful cultural image.”⁶ It is also a cultural image that has direct consequences for how LGB people are viewed and how they are treated.

Early Political Uses of the Conflation Myth

In her examination of the radical right’s literature on gay men and lesbians, Herman located material conflating homosexuality and pedophilia that dates back to 1969. She quoted the following excerpt from a religious journal: “Homosexuals, voyeurs, exhibitionists, and other deviants will be tempted to join the teaching ranks in attempts to gain either an outlet for their sexual drives or a platform from which to propagandize for public acceptance of their irregularities.”⁷ According to Herman, explicit links between homosexuality and pedophilia were published in radical right outlets in 1972.⁸

Not long after that, in 1974, Anita Bryant’s campaign to rescind the inclusion of lesbians and gay men in Miami’s anti-discrimination ordinance went by the suggestive name, “Save Our Children.” Bryant went on record with her concerns that gay men and lesbians were pedophiles, including in her subsequent autobiography where she wrote: “Public approval of admitted homosexual teachers could encourage more homosexuality by inducing pupils into [sic] looking upon it as an acceptable life-style. And second, a particularly deviant-minded teacher could sexually molest children.”⁹

Updating the Conflation Myth in the 1990s

The early 1990s saw a resurgence of the radical right’s false assertions about the relationship between child sexual abuse and homosexuality. Herman characterized a prominent aspect of the rhetoric as the discourse of seduction: “Children, in this discourse of seduction, are seen to possess a malleable sexuality, vulnerable to persuasion. Homosexuals are represented as predatory, subverting God’s plan for youth.”¹⁰

Much of the resurgence of the false conflation during the 1990s occurred in the context of campaigns aimed at blocking members of sexual minorities from access to civil rights and marriage rights. Pharr’s analysis of the messages prominent in anti-gay campaigns summarized the strategy this way: “Pedophiles = lesbians and gay men.”¹¹

A number of scholars and political observers have studied the intentional use of the conflation myth as a prominent aspect of anti-gay campaigns.¹² These studies suggest that assertions of the false association between homosexuality and pedophilia have the effect of characterizing gay people as dangerous and destructive. Campaign materials incorporating this assertion are designed to convince

⁶ Herek, G. M. (1991). Stigma, prejudice, and violence against lesbians and gay men. In J. C. Gonsiorek & J. D. Weinrich (Eds.), *Homosexuality: Research implications for public policy* (pp. 60-80). Newbury Park, CA: Sage, p. 70.

⁷ Cited on p. 48 in Herman, D. (1997). *The antigay agenda: Orthodox vision and the Christian right*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁸ Herman, 1997.

⁹ Quoted on pp. 67-68 in Smith, R. R. & Windes, R. R. (2000). *Progay/antigay: The rhetorical war over sexuality*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

¹⁰ Herman, 1997, p. 79.

¹¹ Pharr, S. (1996). *In the time of the right: Reflections on liberation*. Berkeley, CA: Chardon Press, p. 66.

¹² Eastland, L. S. (1996). The reconstruction of identity: Strategies of the Oregon Citizens Alliance. In E. B. Ray (Ed.), *Communication and disenfranchisement: Social health issues and implications* (pp. 59-75), p. 69; Douglass, D. (1997). Taking the initiative: Anti-homosexual propaganda of the Oregon Citizen’s Alliance. In S. L. Witt & S. McCorkle (Eds.), *Anti-gay rights: Assessing voter initiatives* (pp. 17-32). Westport, CT: Praeger; Gallagher, J. & Bull, C. (1996). *Perfect enemies: The religious right, the gay movement, and the politics of the 1990s*. New York: Crown; Russell, G. M. (1993, August). Homophobia as political strategy: The passage of Amendment 2 in Colorado. In L. S. Brown (chair), *Countering attacks on gay/lesbian rights: State movements and referendums*. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

voters that LGB people do not deserve legal recourse when facing discrimination at least partly because they are sexual predators who prey upon children. Because these materials tap into stereotypes about LGB people that are held by many voters, they may be very effective in convincing voters to limit the rights of gay people.

This false conflation has come under considerable scrutiny, not only by researchers who have empirically rejected the link but also by those working in legal domains. For example, during the legal proceedings about the constitutionality of Colorado's Amendment 2, the question of a connection between homosexuality and sexual abuse became a direct focus of legal arguments. Evidence contradicting the false linkage between pedophilia and homosexuality was presented in Denver's District Court and in at least one *amicus* brief filed for the U.S. Supreme Court's deliberations in the case.¹³

The empirical repudiation of the false sexual abuse-homosexuality link appears to be having an effect in educating people in the general population. Herek's recent research suggested that a majority of people do not accept the false connection: fewer than 20% of the men and fewer than 10% of the women in his 2002 survey believed that homosexuality and sexual abuse are linked.¹⁴

While such gains are promising, stereotypes persist about gay people and their supposed threat to children. In a 2002 Gallup poll, 40% of respondents indicated that they would prohibit gays and lesbians from working either as members of the clergy or as elementary school teachers.¹⁵ This finding does not necessarily mean that 40% of those surveyed believe that lesbians and gay men are likely to abuse children. Often the discomfort may not reflect a clearly articulated threat but rather a vague suggestion of some unspecified danger that gay men and lesbians are presumed to present to children.

More directly relevant here, in a May 2002 CBS/*New York Times* poll, about a quarter of the respondents said that homosexuality in the Catholic Church has increased the likelihood that priests will sexually abuse young people.¹⁶ Similarly, a *Newsweek* poll in the prior month found that nearly one-third of respondents attributed the sex abuse scandals in the church to the number of gay men in the priesthood. A similar percentage said that screening gay men from the priesthood would reduce the problem of sexual abuse of children by priests.¹⁷ At the same time, 61% of U.S. Catholics indicated that they do not believe that gay men are less able to contain their sexual impulses than are heterosexuals, and 39% of Catholic respondents indicated their willingness to accept a gay priest in a committed relationship with another man.¹⁸ Clearly, many people remain ambivalent about this issue; equally clearly, fertile ground remains for the false conflation between gay sexual orientation and sexual abuse of children to take root.

The Church's Views of Sexual Orientation

Because the false relationship between child sexual abuse and homosexuality persists, some people have drawn upon it as an explanation for the sexual abuse of children by some Roman Catholic priests. The appeal of this myth may be strengthened by the church's more general attitudes toward

¹³ Keen, L. & Goldberg, S. B. (1998). *Strangers to the law: Gay people on trial*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, National Association of Social Workers, & Colorado Psychological Association. (1994). Brief *Amicus Curiae*, *Romer v. Evans*, 94-1039, U.S. Supreme Court.

¹⁴ Herek, G. M. (2002). Gender gaps in public opinion about lesbians and gay men. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 66(1), 40-66

¹⁵ Newport, F. (2002, September). *The Gallup Organization: Homosexuality – In-depth analyses*. Retrieved October 13, 2002, from www.gallup.com/poll/analysis

¹⁶ Reported in Newport, 2002.

¹⁷ Reported in Newport, 2002.

¹⁸ Poll shows Catholics view gays more favorably than others. (2002, May 05). *Washington Blade*. Retrieved October 28, 2002, from www.washblade.com

LGB people. While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a full exposition of the church's treatment of sexual minorities,¹⁹ it is important to recognize that these attitudes constitute an important aspect of the context for understanding the promulgation of the homosexuality-child sexual abuse link during a scandal that took place within the church.

In brief, the Catholic Church's views about sexual orientation represent a subset of the church's teachings with regard to sexuality in general. Sexuality is seen as a gift from God, but the gift is to be used in a very constrained fashion. The church's views of sexuality are securely anchored in the belief that procreation is the only basis for acceptable sexual behavior:

[T]he church holds that premarital sex, artificial birth control, abortion, and homosexual activity are ethically wrong. The full expression of sexuality is found within the sacrament of marriage, as a holy union, and as such sexual relations outside of marriage are considered sinful.²⁰

Within this perspective, the church certainly does not embrace non-heterosexual orientations. A 1986 statement from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith offered this caution:

Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder. Therefore special concern and pastoral attention should be directed toward those who have this condition, lest they be led to believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable action. It is not.²¹

At the same time, the church has been equivocal in its pronouncements about homosexuality. While the Vatican's position on the matter of homosexual behavior has not wavered from one of condemnation, its recent pronouncements on the subject have been characterized by an increasing respect for gay and lesbian persons.²² The same document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, for example, refers back to the Congregation's 1975 declaration, which "stressed the duty of trying to understand the homosexual condition and noted that culpability for homosexual acts should be judged with prudence."²³

In addition there seems to have been some tension between the Catholic Church in the United States and the Vatican on the question of homosexuality.²⁴ The United States Conference of Bishops has taken the rather ironic position of advocating active compassion for gay men and lesbians even as it condemns their sexual behavior. In a 1991 statement from the United States Catholic Conference, U.S. bishops spoke directly against sexual prejudice, urging Christians both to confront their own fears about homosexuality and to avoid adding to the negative treatment faced by homosexual persons.²⁵ The U.S. Bishops' 1997 letter, *Always Our Children*, carried a conciliatory tone as it emphasized the pastoral needs of lesbian and gay people, with a particular focus on lesbian and gay

¹⁹ For further information, see, Gramick, J., & Nugent, R. (Eds.). (1995). *Voices of hope*. New York: The Center for Homophobia Education; Jordan, M. D. (2000). *The silence of Sodom: Homosexuality and modern Catholicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Nugent, R. (1997). Homophobia and the U. S. Roman Catholic clergy. In J. T. Sears & W. L. Williams (Eds.), *Overcoming heterosexism and homophobia: Strategies that work* (pp. 354-370). New York: Columbia University Press; Sullivan, A. (1999). Alone again, naturally: The Catholic Church and the homosexual. In G. D. Comstock & S. E. Henking (Eds.), *Que(e)rying religion: A critical anthology* (pp. 238-259). New York: Continuum.

²⁰ Shafranske, E. P. (2000). Psychotherapy with Roman Catholics. In P. S. Richards & A. E. Bergin (Eds.), *Handbook of psychotherapy and religious diversity* (pp. 59-88). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, p. 70.

²¹ Statement from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on the pastoral care of homosexual persons, 1986 (2001). In E. J. S. Maher, Jr., *Being gay and lesbian in a Catholic high school: Beyond the uniform* (pp. 132-142). New York: Haworth, (p.133).

²² Sullivan, 1999.

²³ Statement from the Vatican Congregation (2001), p. 133.

²⁴ Paulson, M. (2002, March 4). Vatican stance on gay clergy criticized. *Boston Globe*. Retrieved October 8, 2002, from <http://www.boston.com>

²⁵ United States Catholic Conference (1997). *Always our children: A pastoral message to parents of homosexual children and suggestions for pastoral ministries*. Retrieved June 30, 2003, from <http://www.usa.edu/~facshaferi/catholic/always.htm>

youth.²⁶ Many gay Catholics regarded this letter as a positive step despite its continued insistence on the need for chastity on the parts of LGB Catholics.²⁷

Various state and regional ecclesiastical bodies within the United States have taken stronger stands. The Washington State Catholic Conference, for example, has taken the position that “prejudice against homosexuals is a greater infringement of the norm of Christian morality than is homosexual orientation or activity.”²⁸ In other settings, the Catholic Church as an institution has taken varying stands on anti-gay ballot measures. In some cases, the church has been an active participant in and fundraiser for anti-gay campaigns; in other cases, the church has refrained from supporting anti-gay measures. In a parallel fashion, there appears to be considerable variability among Catholic clergy in attitudes toward equal rights for LGB individuals.²⁹ Similarly, recent polls have suggested that U.S. Catholic laypeople are mixed in their attitudes toward homosexuality. In a 2002 *Newsweek* poll, about half of the Catholic respondents agreed with the church’s assertion that same-sex sexual behavior violates natural law, but 30% of the Catholics polled disagreed with this position.³⁰

In recent months, the Catholic hierarchy has been quite consistent in its reaction to changes in the legal status of the same-sex relationships. In May of 2003, the bishop of the Boston Archdiocese, along with three other bishops in Massachusetts, issued a request to all pastors that they remind parishioners that the Church opposes same-sex marriage. Their statement urged Catholic laypeople to lobby their legislators to pass a constitutional amendment that would limit marriage to relationships between one man and one woman.³¹ Just over two months later, the Vatican’s guardian of orthodoxy, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, released a 12-page document representing a world-wide effort by the Church to stop same-sex marriages.³² The document, entitled “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons,” declares that same-sex marriage violates “natural, moral law.” It cautions politicians that their taking a stand in support of same-sex marriage laws would constitute a “gravely immoral” act.

²⁶ Statement from the United States Catholic Conference, *Human sexuality: A Catholic perspective for education and lifelong learning*, 1991 (2001). In A. J. Maher, Jr., *Being gay and lesbian in a Catholic high school: Beyond the uniform* (pp. 117-119). New York: Haworth, p. 118.

²⁷ Dignity/USA Dateline (1997, November). Dignity responds to U.S. Bishops’ pastoral letter: “Always Our Children.” Retrieved August 19, 2003, from <http://www.dignityusa.org>

²⁸ This quotation is taken from Nugent, 1997, p. 368.

²⁹ Nugent, 1997.

³⁰ Reported in Newport, 2002.

³¹ Paulson, M. (2003, May 29). Bishops eye pulpits to fight gay marriage. *Boston Globe*, pp. A1, A8.

³² Simpson, V. L. (2003, July 29). Vatican rallies opposition to legalized same-sex unions. *Boston Globe*, p. A8.

THIS STUDY

Within this context, the scandal over child sexual abuse by some priests emerged. Journalists working in this context produced the news coverage that carried connotations between the sexual abuse of minors and homosexuality, transmitting the story to a public also immersed in this very context. The first articles about the problem of abuse by priests were published in the *Boston Globe* on January 6, 2002. Even as the *Globe* continues publishing frequent stories related to the scandal, this critical discourse analysis covers the 1326 separate items related to the scandal published in the *Globe* between that starting date and January 6, 2003. Table 1 identifies the types of items included in this analysis, along with the total number and percentage of items of each type, demonstrating the broad range of journalistic forms that were brought to bear on this topic. A discourse analysis approach suggests that any item that is directly or indirectly related to the scandal is of interest as one element of the overall construction of the story.

Table 1: Categories of Published Items (January 6, 2002 to January 6, 2003)

Type of Item	Number	Percentage of Total Items
News Article	962	72.5%
Commentary	143	10.8
Editorial	42	3.2
Letters to the Editor	119	9.0
Miscellaneous (Transcripts, graphics, timelines, etc.)	60	4.5
Total	1326	100.0%

The aim is to examine and understand what the readers of the *Boston Globe*—the newspaper that garnered a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the story—were reading, with a focus on how this coverage did or did not reflect the false linkage between sexual abuse and sexual orientation. Using a critical discourse analysis provides a way to specify and examine the processes underlying the conflation of homosexuality and sexual abuse. In some cases, these processes were quite obvious, as when journalists quoted people who asserted that the conflation was true. In other cases, the processes were more subtle and indirect. In all cases the processes were clear enough that two independent judges agreed over 95% of the time about whether a particular item did or did not include a conflation and about the precise nature of the conflation as well.

Direct Conflations: Overt Claims of Linkage

Among the items that included one or more connotations, the most obvious linkages consisted of direct statements to the effect that homosexuality and child sexual abuse are connected in a causal fashion. In principle, there are two possible ways that these direct connotations could occur in the coverage: either the writer offers this linkage as his/her own assertion, or the writer reports that a third party has made this assertion. There was no instance in which the writer of a news story, editorial, or commentary explicitly endorsed the homosexuality-pedophilia link. On the other hand, there were letters to the editor that did endorse a direct connotation. As an example, the author of one letter put forth an argument based on reports of sexual abuse by clergy, on the one hand, and reports of the number of priests who were gay, on the other. The letter-writer based the following conclusion on a faulty assertion of a causal relationship between these two factors:

Are we invoking political correctness in refusing to admit to the very obvious probability that the scientifically correct conclusion is that there is a strong correlation between the tendency to commit such abuse and being homosexual? [Letter # 1169, March 24, 2002]

Direct Conflations: Third Party Sources

By far, the more frequent form that direct conflations took was of a second variety: writers reported that a third party had asserted a causal relationship between homosexuality and sexual abuse. As detailed in Table 2, conflations of this type occurred in every type of item—news stories, editorials, commentaries, and letters to the editor.

Table 2: Conflations Within Categories

Item Type	Frequency	Conflation Codes			
		Items with no conflation	Direct conflation only	Indirect conflation only (not including “man-boy sex”)	Both direct & indirect conflations (not including “man-boy sex”)
News Articles	962	866	14	56	6
Commentaries	143	131	8	3	1
Editorials	42	40	2	0	0
Letters to the Editor	119	114	4	1	0
Miscellaneous (Transcripts, graphics, etc.)	60	56	2	2	0
Total	1326	1227	30	62	7

Twenty of the news articles contained direct conflations; of these 20 items, 14 contained direct conflations only and 6 included both direct and indirect (discussed below) conflations. The direct conflations were quite straightforward and easy to identify. In most cases, they were contained in articles reporting views of the sexual abuse scandal held by two specific sources: the Vatican and certain conservative U.S. Catholics. The first conflation of this type occurred within two months of the first articles in the *Globe’s* focused coverage on the scandal. Pope John Paul II’s chief spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, had made statements to the *New York Times* that both implicated gay priests in the sexual abuse scandal and suggested that gay men should not be ordained to the priesthood. The *Boston Globe* opened its first article on the Vatican’s announcement in this way:

The Vatican, in its first comments on the clergy sexual abuse crisis, declared this weekend that gay men should not be ordained as priests. . . .

Navarro-Valls made his comments in an interview published yesterday in *The New York Times*. He said that “people with these inclinations just cannot be ordained” and suggested that just as a marriage can be annulled if the husband turns out to be gay, so the ordination of gay men might also be made invalid. . . .

Although scholars have established no connection between homosexuality and pedophilia, the Vatican’s comments were apparently provoked by the fact that many of the victims of clergy abuse in Boston, as elsewhere, have been adolescent boys, and not the prepubescent children who are victimized by the standard pedophile. [n. a. #628, March 4, 2002]

In this article, the *Globe* provided a straightforward report of the explicit connection that Cardinal Navarro-Valls made between a gay orientation and sexual abuse. In the process, the coverage repeated false information given by the Vatican spokesman—namely, the linkage between gay orientation and sexual abuse of minors. This false information, in turn, is likely to tap into existing stereotypes of gay men as pedophiles, potentially reinforcing those stereotypes in the very process of their being encountered (particularly from a presumably authoritative source). The author of the article offered several pointed statements that called the conflation into question. The first rebuttal cited A. W. Richard Sipe, a psychotherapist and former priest: “Discriminating against orientation is not going to solve the [sexual abuse] problem” [n. a. #628]. The second rebuttal occurred in the

conflation excerpt quoted above: “Although scholars have established no connection between homosexuality and pedophilia . . .” [n. a. #628]. The third rebuttal again quoted Sipe, who asserted both that “over twice as many priests are involved with adult women as with boys” and that “[h]omosexually oriented priests don’t violate their celibacy any more or less than heterosexually oriented priests” [n. a. #628].

The article also offered quotes from two other experts on the priesthood. The Reverend Donald B. Cozzens and Eugene Kennedy both questioned the Vatican’s position and argued that many gay priests have served the church well. In addition, Kennedy offered a distinction between people with mature sexual development—whatever their orientation—and “people whose overall personality development is stunted” [n. a. #628, March 4, 2002].

This same article contained several more specific rebuttals of the false conflation between homosexuality and pedophilia. One was a generic reference to “[s]pecialists and victim advocates who say they do not believe there is a link between the high number of gay priests and clergy sexual abuse” [n. a. #628]. This comment was followed by a quotation from a nationally known expert in the area of crimes against children:

There is no research that indicates that a person who says he is gay, or who is sexually attracted to an adult person of the same gender, is more likely to be sexually interested in children. . . . [n. a. #628, March 4, 2002]

The article concluded with a final rebuttal to the conflation, in this case a quotation from the national director of a victim’s advocacy group.

This particular news article stands as an example of an attempt at responsible reporting of a false conflation espoused by a third party—in this case, a Vatican spokesman. The third party proffered the conflation—which is, in essence, inaccurate information. A reporter might relay this misinformation without comment. However, doing so would amount to allowing false information to remain unchallenged in the coverage. Alternatively, a writer can report the misinformation but counter it with accurate information from other, more reliable sources. In this particular article, the reporter provided rebuttals from the three experts about the priesthood as well as from an expert on child sexual abuse. In addition, the writer offered a more generic rebuttal (“specialists and victim advocates”), as well as a specific rebuttal from a prominent figure in the victim advocacy arena.

These rebuttals are important for two reasons. At an obvious level, they serve to counter the false information associating sexual orientation with child sexual abuse. At a more subtle level, they also operate to interrupt processes underlying stereotypes and other automatic thought patterns.³³ Stereotypes represent beliefs that are pervasively shared and automatically activated in the minds of readers by relevant information. Psychologists have found that stereotypes are, in fact, quite resistant to change, reflecting what has been termed a consistency effect—that is, they persist even in the absence of confirming information or in the presence of disconfirming information. Human beings (including newspaper readers) are consumers of information who seek out evidence that confirms the biases they already hold, and they do so without conscious intent or reflection.³⁴ Thus, readers who have—knowingly or unknowingly—incorporated the stereotype about gay men and sexual abuse will gravitate to the statements made by the Vatican spokesman and will tend to ignore information that disconfirms their biases. For these reasons, it is important that misinformation such as this false conflation must be countered in ways that are both forceful and obvious.

³³ For information about psychological processes associated with stereotypes, see the following: Barch, J. A., & Chartrand, T. L. (1999). The unbearable automaticity of being. *American Psychologist*, 54, 462-479; Corrigan, P. W., & Penn, D. L. (1999). Lessons from social psychology on discrediting psychiatric stigma. *American Psychologist*, 54, 765-776; Devine, A. G. (1989). Stereotypes and prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 5-18; Karim, 1997.

³⁴ Corrington & Penn, 1999.

The rebuttals in the article above represent an important effort to counter the false information embedded in the conflation stereotype. On the other hand, there is a cautious quality to these rebuttals. They are less than direct in countering the stereotype; indeed, they do not directly acknowledge that a stereotype underlies the pedophilia-homosexuality connection. Explicitly calling attention to the presence of a stereotype would enhance the probability that readers would be open to changing their own stereotypic beliefs. The best approach would be to counter the stereotype directly and emphatically, leaving no room for any ambiguity.

Generally, the *Globe* writers took some care to counter direct conflations. Excluding letters to the editor, there are 33 items that contain direct conflations. (This figure includes 26 items with direct conflations only and 7 items that contain both direct and indirect conflations.) Of these 33 items, 22 include at least one rebuttal. Table 3 details the frequency of direct conflations and rebuttals among items in each category; however, these numbers alone do not tell the entire story. In most cases, rebuttals were neither as forceful nor as numerous as in the article discussed above. In addition, there was some evidence that, as a group, the writers' attention to countering the misinformation contained in such conflations waned over the course of the scandal. Items that reported direct conflations were more likely to also include rebuttals during the earlier months of coverage than during later periods.

Table 3: Direct Conflations and Rebuttals by Category

Item Type	Direct Conflations (alone or with indirect)	Rebuttals	Percent of Conflations with Rebuttal
News Article	20	11	55%
Commentary	9	9	100
Editorial	2	2	100
Miscellaneous (Transcripts, graphics, etc)	2	0	0
Total	33	22	67%

One final observation about direct conflations is worth noting. Two commentaries included what can only be called rebuttals against the conflation stereotype even though the commentaries themselves neither included nor otherwise referred to the conflation. The fact that these writers felt a need to counter conflations that were not even expressed in their commentaries stands as testimony to the premise that the conflation stereotype is widespread. Even when the conflation is not directly stated, it occupies a place in many readers' (and, apparently, writers') consciousness. The writers who offered rebuttals in the absence of clear statements of the conflation were, in effect, taking a step beyond countering explicit misinformation; they took the widespread misinformation into account and countered its implicit presence in their readers' minds.

Indirect Conflations

Direct conflations represented only the first level in understanding how the coverage of sexual abuse by some priests metamorphosed into discussions of gay priests. The subtler version of the conflation is not necessarily apparent from a single instance. Instead, these subtle or indirect conflations became clear only through reading numerous items that collectively suggest a particular pattern of meaning. The pattern in this case involves an implicit connection between homosexuality and sexual abuse, one more subtly presented. The two themes are not explicitly linked in a causal fashion, but are presented side-by-side, allowing their linkage by association. Associations of this sort were made repeatedly in the coverage, and it is through this repetition across different categories of writings and by different authors that the pattern emerges.

The association implied by this pattern is entirely consistent with the stereotype that assumes a causal link between a gay sexual orientation and child sexual abuse. Among the most straightforward examples of indirect connotations were references to “man-boy sex.” These references were almost always couched in that specific phrase. The very phrase itself is problematic. “Man-boy sex,” by definition, connotes an abusive relationship—sex between an adult and a child. It is precisely because of the conflation stereotype that the phrase, “man-boy sex,” is read not only—and, arguably, not primarily—as connoting an adult-child relationship. Instead it is read, however inaccurately, as a homosexual relationship. One might guess that, in the absence of the conflation stereotype, the phrase would be more clearly taken to refer unambiguously to an adult-child relationship. The congruence of this language with the conflation stereotype, therefore, lends an added charge to the phrase “man-boy sex.” This charge is compounded by the perception that the North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) is widely seen as a gay group—this despite the fact that NAMBLA is certainly not embraced by the vast majority of members of LGB communities.³⁵

References to man-boy sex appeared a total of 43 times in the coverage of the scandal. As indicated in Table 4, these references occurred in every type of item except letters to the editor. The majority of these references appeared in the context of news articles (rather than in editorials or commentaries) and particularly in articles focused on Reverend Paul Shanley, the priest whose alleged history of public statements in support of sex between adults and children seemed to go unnoticed by church officials.

Table 4: References to “Man-Boy Sex”

Item Type	References to “Man-Boy Sex”
News article	37
Commentary	4
Editorial	1
Letters to the Editor	0
Miscellaneous (Transcripts, graphics, etc.)	1
Total	43

In some important respects, the references to man-boy sex are more problematic than are direct connotations. These indirect references activate and reinforce the conflation stereotype and they do so in a subtle way that invites no critique. The phrase “man-boy sex” is offered in a straightforward manner with no suggestion that the conflation it suggests is a false one. If the implication of homosexuality imbedded in the phrase were recognized and the need for rebuttal acknowledged, writers might, for instance, refer to these same acts as “adult-child sex,” pointing out that it is the age differential rather than the sex of those involved that is at issue.

In a handful of cases, writers used alternative phrases that were equally accurate (and arguably more appropriate) and that did not support the conflation stereotype. One editorial, for example, referred to “reports of a sexual philosophy deeply at odds with the church” [ed. #1046, May 21, 2002]. (The same editorial, it should be noted, also included the familiar reference to “man-boy sex.”) One news article included an early description of Shanley’s having “advocated sex between men and boys,” but also included subsequent alternative language. These alternatives described the priest as having “supported sexual relations between adults and children,” and as having “supported sex between adults and minors” [n. a. # 584, April 25, 2002]. The use of alternatives such as these demonstrates the availability of language that does not support the stereotypic conflation of homosexual orientation and sexual abuse. Given that this conflation misrepresents the connection

³⁵ Herman, 1997.

between sexual orientation and sexual abuse, and given that certain language forms have a good probability of activating the conflation stereotype, one could argue that greater accuracy in reporting is achieved by using alternative language. Wording that describes events without triggering implicit stereotypes is less likely to transmit misleading information at an implicit level.

Other Indirect Conflations

The use of the phrase “man-boy sex” is a single example of indirect conflations that stands out because of the particular language invoked. Other versions of indirect conflations are more often characterized by juxtapositions among different terms or narratives. There are many variations on this form represented in the 69 indirect conflations (not including “man-boy sex”) found in the items examined. This total of 69 is based on 62 items with indirect conflations only and 7 items containing both direct and indirect conflations. Table 5 shows a breakdown of indirect conflations by item type (excluding one indirect conflation in a letter to the editor).

Table 5: Indirect Conflations and Rebuttals by Category

Item Type	Indirect Conflations (alone or with direct)	Rebuttals	Percent of Conflations with Rebuttal
News Article	62	8	12.9%
Commentary	4	1	25
Editorial	0	0	n/a
Miscellaneous (Transcripts, graphics, etc)	2	0	0
Total	68	9	13.2%

The following two examples of indirect conflations are offered as illustrative. The first is taken from the *Globe's* June 5, 2002, coverage. The article in question [n. a. #270, June 5, 2002] reviews some of the details reported early in the coverage of the case of Reverend Joseph E. Birmingham, a priest with an extensive history of alleged sexual abuse of children. This article is based on newly released personnel records kept by the Archdiocese of Boston, and it describes both some of the priest's alleged abuses and also church officials' responses to these allegations. Every allegation included in these records concerns the abuse of minor children. Accompanying the article is a photocopy of a portion of a letter written to the Archdiocesan personnel office regarding Father Birmingham. The letter, written by another priest to alert the office to Birmingham's abuses, refers to the “rumor of possible homosexuality” in reference to Birmingham. There is nothing else in the article or in the associated documentation that suggests Birmingham was involved in sexual activity with any adults. Thus the reader is left to assume that the “rumor of homosexuality” refers either to Birmingham's alleged abuses of children or to some unreported homosexual encounters by this adult who also abused children. In either case, the reproduction of the letter serves as a striking example of the conflation between homosexuality and the child sexual abuse. Clearly, the *Globe* staff did not author the phrase, “rumor of possible homosexuality;” it occurs directly in a letter written by an outside party. The conflation, however, remains unacknowledged and unchallenged—and may even be reinforced by the letter's inclusion as an accompaniment to this story that (otherwise) refers only to abuse of children.

The second example of an indirect conflation is taken from an article published in the September 13, 2002, *Globe* (n. a. #278). This article also describes details culled from personnel records maintained by the Boston Archdiocese and released by court order. The article consists entirely of accounts of alleged abuses of minors by priests, with one exception: the very first account in the article discusses the arrest of a priest for sexual activity with another adult man in a department store restroom. This article also has an associated photocopy of a memo, this one a document written by a bishop about the restroom incident. The conflation in this case occurs by virtue of position and

placement. A homosexual encounter between consenting adults is prominently placed at the beginning of an article that otherwise deals solely with allegations of the sexual abuse of minors. The nature and presumed importance of the former incident is further underscored by the accompanying memo with its blatant description of two men in the public restroom.

Both of these examples demonstrate the ease with which the conflation stereotype gets expressed and activated in the coverage of this scandal: the juxtaposition of the two phenomena (homosexuality and pedophilia) recreates and thereby reinforces the conflation. In the first example, the conflation is introduced by the language of a third party rather than by a journalist, and its inclusion in this article presumably derives from its reference to the priest in question, rather than from an intentional attempt to link homosexuality with pedophilia. In the second case, the conflation occurs as a function of sequencing and placement of stories culled from personnel records of priests. This story may have been presented first simply because of its potential dramatic appeal or because it differed from the other stories, which dealt with child sexual abuse. The confluations implied here need not reflect anyone's negative intent. Rather, in both cases, the two concepts—homosexuality and child sexual abuse—are simply juxtaposed as part of the journalistic process. However, because their association reflects widely held stereotypes and beliefs (directly expressed in some cases by third parties), the conflation is inadvertently reinforced when such associations are included in press coverage, and may thereby be evoked in the minds of readers. The net effect of these editorial decisions is that the conflation stereotype is not interrupted; indeed it is likely to be activated and reinforced in readers.

There were 69 instances of indirect confluations (not including “man-boy sex” references) in the 1326 items surveyed, accounting for 5.2% of the items examined (or 5.7% of the items excluding letters to the editor). Table 2 shows the frequency within each category of items containing indirect confluations and direct confluations, as well as the frequency of items containing both forms of conflation. The indirect confluations occurred at intervals throughout the year-long period of examination, beginning with an indirect conflation (not detailed in this paper) on the first day of coverage (January 6, 2002). Unlike the direct confluations, the indirect confluations are not obvious and they are not easily countered. They operate at a kind of stealth level: the conflation is expressed implicitly rather than explicitly. There is scarcely any room for rebuttal when linkages are so implicit. Most often, they are more likely to create a visceral response than to signal a need for a rational rebuttal.³⁶

The basic problem, then, with indirect confluations is that they constitute unchallenged misrepresentations in the coverage. They offer information that is verifiably false, but that fits and activates a stereotype. These indirect confluations have the potential for leaving readers with false information, since they are not accompanied by rebuttal or critique. Generally, when journalists encounter misinformation that is embedded in a story, they must decide whether to report the falsehood. If they elect to report it, they typically also provide a rebuttal. Indeed, this is what often happened when confluations were expressed directly. We found such rebuttals (without regard to the quality of the rebuttals) to misinformation in 67% of cases where coverage included *direct* confluations (excluding letters to the editor). Where indirect confluations occur, however, the misinformation, subtle and unacknowledged, is rarely rebutted. In fact, rebuttals occur in only 13.2% of cases of *indirect* confluations identified in our data (See Table 5). In the remainder of cases, false information is allowed to stand.

³⁶ For more information about visceral responses to rhetoric, see: Douglass, 1997; Eastland, 1996; Russell, G. M. (2000). *Voted out: The psychological consequences of anti-gay politics*. New York: New York University Press.

Another Kind of Conflation

The focus on direct and indirect conflations became obvious early in the course of this study. It was only after considerable exposure, however, that a third sort of conflation became clear. As with indirect conflations, this type of association might not appear problematic from a single case or even from handful of cases. Its problematic quality becomes apparent only after it is repeated in many, many items in the coverage. This conflation, labeled here as “broadly offensive,” occurs when abusive sexual acts against minors are paired with all sorts of other phenomena usually viewed as highly inappropriate. Many of these behaviors would be accurately characterized as abusive, and some of them are sexual in nature. For purposes of this study, these broadly offensive acts include inappropriate behaviors, other than sexual abuse of minors, allegedly committed by priests. They cover a wide variety of violations including physical assault, bribery, extortion, use of illicit drugs, violations of vows of celibacy with adults (women or men), and prostitution. Legal, illegal and/or immoral acts committed specifically in the service of covering up sexual abuse were not included in this category.

These broadly offensive phenomena, which are tabulated in Table 6, were described with considerable frequency in the coverage, and often they were reported in great depth and detail. They occurred most frequently—though by no means solely—in coverage of personnel records that had been released by the Archdiocese of Boston. In all, 108 of the items examined (including 6 letters to the editor) included at least one depiction of these offensive behaviors. As indicated in Table 6, the majority (81.5%) of these depictions occurred in news articles; just under 10% (9.3%) were found in commentaries.

Table 6: References to All Offensive Acts

Item Type	All Offensive Acts
News article	88
Commentary	10
Editorial	1
Letters to the Editor	6
Miscellaneous (Transcripts, graphics, etc.)	3
Total	108

Strikingly, in the articles where these wide-ranging offenses were mentioned, there was virtually no discussion about them. In particular, in most cases, no clear-cut distinction was made between the sexual abuse of minors and these other offensive behaviors. In the absence of such explicit distinctions, these offensive behaviors appear to be grouped with the sexual abuse of minors, with the unstated assumption that they were all somehow the same—or at least inextricably linked. Drawing on the analyses underlying this study, the conflation between the sexual abuse of minors and these broader offensive activities might be expected to have consequences for how gay priests are viewed. Translate what is more fundamentally a visceral process into a logic problem: homosexuality and sexual abuse of minors are linked in a variety of ways in the coverage; sexual abuse of minors and a number of other offensive behaviors appear to be linked; therefore, homosexuality and these other offensive behaviors might be expected to be associated as well. The net impression might be that sexually abusive priests, who were falsely stereotyped as gay, did many other bad things as well—or that sexually abusive priests engaged in a wide range of offensive behaviors, including homosexuality.

An additional impact of this conflation involves the lack of clarity in specifying what precisely is wrong with the behavior of these priests. To date, in the *Globe's* coverage, as in almost all other outlets, most discussions of the scandal lump all problematic behaviors together; they are represented as a single problem in need of amelioration. In a parallel fashion, to date, virtually every

publicly proposed solution to the scandal has focused exclusively on preventing and intervening in cases of the sexual abuse of minors. There is a major flaw in both aspects of this parallel: although many different problematic behaviors on the parts of some priests have been identified, only one has been the subject of much attention. It is not reasonable to expect that a single type of preventive or intervention strategy will have the desired effects on this whole range of problematic behaviors. It is not likely that preventing sexual assaults of minors by priests will require the same interventions as will preventing physical assaults or illicit drug use by priests.

While the focus on the sexual abuse of minors is critical, an exclusive focus on this topic neglects a host of other serious offenses that likewise need attention and amelioration. Until adequate attention is given to the many facets of problematic priestly behavior, some members of parishes remain vulnerable to abuse, and the spiritual life of the church is in danger of further erosion. What is missing is an analysis of the overarching structures and processes of power exchanges in the church that allow abuses of various types to occur. Such an analysis could elucidate all manner of violations while offering the possibility of successful interventions that are as broad-based as are the violations. This would, of course, represent a strategy that is considerably broader than focusing on any single group of priests.

Gratuitous References

Thus far, this analysis has addressed categorical conflations that are discrete and can be enumerated. Two other expressions of conflation between homosexuality and sexual abuse should be noted. The first is a subtle expression whose presence in a single instance might be deemed reasonable and appropriate, but its repetition activates and reinforces the conflation stereotype. This expression entails gratuitous references that hold no significant information but that reflect and evoke the stereotype. By far the most prominent expressions of this sort are unnecessary references to the sex of abuse victims—specifically, references to victims as “boys.”

For example, in an article about former priest John J. Geoghan that appeared on the first day of the *Globe's* specialized coverage of the scandal, the following two sentences appeared as a paragraph unto themselves: “Almost always, his victims were grammar school boys. One was just 4 years old” [n. a. #502, January 6, 2002]. A commentary published in the paper later that month, on January 18, 2002, includes this description of the timing of a report on pedophilia for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops: “The report came at a time that a priest was found to have molested 35 boys in Louisiana” [com. #768, January 18, 2002]. We might ask what is added by referring to the victims in each case as boys rather than as “children”—other than an invitation to the conflation of child sexual abuse and homosexuality.

These are but two examples of scores of times when the coverage described the victims in terms of their sex. Although such references did not reach the threshold for coding them as conflations, they do run parallel to the conflation. While factually accurate, they convey the notion that there is something significant about the fact that many of the victims are boys. The real issue is—or should be—the age, not the sex of the victims. Cahill and Jones draw the following apt parallels:

- When a man abuses a young girl, the problem is not heterosexuality. Few would characterize such abuse as a heterosexual act similar to consensual sex between an adult man and woman. Similarly, when a priest sexually abuses a boy or under-age teen, the problem is not homosexuality. The problem is child abuse.
- If a male boss sexually harasses a female employee, again, the problem is not heterosexuality, but sexual harassment. In instances where priests abuse male seminarians who are legally above the age of consent, the problem is sexual harassment and sexual abuse—not homosexuality.³⁷

³⁷ Cahill, S., & Jones, K. T. (2002). Child sexual abuse and homosexuality: The long history of the “gays as pedophiles” fallacy. Retrieved October 3, 2002, from www.NGLTF.org

One is also reminded of another parallel. The use of referents to victims' sex in these stories is not unlike referents to the race of perpetrators that were once routinely included in some newspapers' accounts of criminal acts (and that occasionally still occur in some newspapers). The implicit message was that the race of the perpetrator represented an important dimension of the crime. In the contemporary instance, there is a similar implication: that the sex of the victims is important, that it makes a difference in the story. However, the real issue here is not the sex of the victims but their ages and their relationships to their abusers. References to victims' sex may reflect factual information, at one level, but they may also reflect inaccurate information in the form of an implied conflation of homosexuality and child sexual abuse. The impression that the two are linked may be all the more likely when one considers the relative invisibility of female victims of pastoral abuse in the coverage of the priest scandal.³⁸

One final conflation occurred with considerable frequency in the coverage, although it also did not meet the threshold necessary for coding as an indirect conflation. This final category involved instances in which discussions of the scandal made reference to gay priests but did not directly or indirectly tie those priests to the scandal in any definable fashion. As an example, a news article filed on May 10, 2002, focused on the role of canon law in situations "when secular or civil law becomes entangled in church business" [n. a. #084, May 10, 2002]. The article, prompted by Cardinal Law's testimony about the relevance of canon law to church decisions, discusses the differences between canon and civil systems of law, drawing extensively upon expert observations. In this context, with no prior mention of gay priests whatsoever, the article offers this example:

All priests and bishops are subject to criminal laws, and cannot cite canon law to absolve themselves of criminal or civil responsibility. But [expert] Berman said the secular legal system can go only so far.

For example, legal analysts cite case law that the Catholic Church would be fully entitled to establish a ban on homosexual priests, as some bishops have called for. While such a ban would pass muster under canon law, it would be clearly discriminatory under civil law. But analysts say the First Amendment would keep the government's nose out of the matter, meaning that no one inside the church whose behavior is circumscribed by canon law could appeal to a secular court on grounds that the church is discriminating. [n. a. #084, May 10, 2002]

This article illustrates how easily references to gay priests move in and out of the coverage of the scandal. In this instance, the reference to gay priests does not constitute a coded conflation; there is no other information about the priests or about sexual abuse that would justify its being coded as a conflation. Nonetheless, it is interesting to consider the author's use of the possible ban on gay priests as the basis for illustrating potential conflicts between canon and civil law in the matter of the sexual abuse scandal. Like the references to the sex of victims, one wonders why this illustration and not another. In the absence of any information, a reader is left to wonder why anyone would be considering such a ban. What do gay priests have to do with the scandal? But readers do not encounter the coverage in a vacuum. They are reading this illustration and the article in which it is embedded in a much larger context—a context characterized by some degree of prejudice against gay people in general and by the conflation stereotype in particular. Again, there is the potential for the activation of the conflation stereotype and, with it, the potential for the conveyance of misinformation.

³⁸ Lundstrom, M. (2002, March 21). Female victims often overlooked in horror stories of clergy abuse. *Sacramento Bee*. Retrieved October 3, 2002, from <http://www.sacbee.com>; Pfeiffer, S. (2002, December 27). Women face stigma of clergy abuse. *Boston Globe*. Retrieved December 30, 2002, from <http://www.boston.com>; Reed, C. L. (2002, March 27). The gay purge. Retrieved March 9, 2003, from <http://www.survivorsnetwork.org>; Rubin, B. M. (2002, June 13). Female victims of abuse say they've been lost in shuffle. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved October 3, 2002, from <http://www.chicagotribune.com>; Tolbert, M. A. (June, 2002). Where have all the young girls gone? *CLGS special report: Clergy sexual misconduct: Perspectives* (pp. 1, 9, 11-12). Berkeley, CA: Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry; White, G. (2002, June 13). As bishops talk, women speak up too. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Retrieved October 3, 2002, from <http://www.wheretwoormore.com>

THE FINDINGS IN PERSPECTIVE

The vast majority of items included in the *Globe's* coverage of the scandal—92.2% of all items analyzed for this study—included no conflations whatsoever. On the surface, this figure suggests that the *Globe* did quite well at avoiding conflations of child sexual abuse and gay sexual orientation. However, the 92.2% figure must be understood in context. This percentage is calculated from all items about the scandal printed in the *Globe* during the specified time of the study. As is indicated by tabulations in Table 1, this total included news articles, commentaries, editorials, and miscellaneous items. (Letters to the Editor were excluded from this figure, since they did not represent the *Globe* staff's coverage—although some letters did include conflations.) The miscellaneous category contained 60 separate items, including such things as stand-alone photographs, cartoons, legal transcripts, graphics, and timelines. Each of these was counted as one item in the final tally, creating a base number of items that is larger than the tally cited by the *Globe* in describing the paper's coverage of the scandal.³⁹

Many of the miscellaneous items are not pieces where the conflation stereotype would be likely to occur. Even among the articles and commentaries, the vast majority of items used to calculate the percentage address topics that are irrelevant to conflations. For example, the topic simply does not fit in coverage of archdiocesan financial decisions, legislative changes in response to the scandal, details of the U.S. Bishops meetings, or a stand-alone photograph of Bishop Lennon singing Christmas carols with a group of nuns. In sum, although the calculated percentage of conflations was based on the entire 1207 items (the total number of items excluding letters to the editor), the number of items in which such conflation might occur was far lower. Thus the 92.2% figure benefits from a methodological decision that clearly favors the *Globe*—that is, one that minimizes the apparent proportion of conflations.

Further, only a limited set of specific conflations were used in the calculations for this percentage. All direct conflations were counted; however, some indirect conflations were excluded from this calculation. For example all those in the “man-boy sex” category (a total of 43) and all those in the “all-offensive acts category” (a total of 108) were excluded. In addition, gratuitous references—where unnecessary details imply a conflation (see above)—were not considered in this figure suggests. Thus, the 92.2% figure represents a very generous assessment of the *Globe's* performance along the conflation dimension.

To view this figure from a different perspective, approximately 7.8% of items did include at least one conflation—one meeting the stringent criteria explained above. Calculating from a total of 1207 total items (excluding letters to the editor) over a year's time, this means that a reader who followed this story in detail would have encountered approximately 94 such conflations (plus five others in letters to the editor). In other words, and again counting only the most obvious cases, this reader would have been exposed just under twice each week to items that implied that gay sexual orientation is related to the sexual abuse of children. Viewed in this light, the numbers reveal a very troubling situation.

Possible Effects of Subtle Stereotyping

Coverage that conveys and promotes the false conflation between homosexuality and child sexual abuse—including coverage that fails to confront this conflation when it appears—is certainly less than accurate and less than fair. This coverage also carries unfortunate consequences that expand into the world beyond the daily newspaper. In effect, the misinformation in the coverage of the scandal operates in a fashion similar to the conflation myth when it is used in anti-gay campaign materials. As suggested earlier, conflations of the sort tracked in the study reinforce inaccurate beliefs that

³⁹ Robinson, W. (2002, February 5). Media and the crisis in the church. Panel at Boston College, Boston, Massachusetts.

many people already hold about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. This misinformation—supported by being left unchallenged in media coverage—may foster material reactions to LGB people, ranging from disliking them or distancing from them, to denying their access to civil rights protections and blocking their entrance to certain occupations. The promulgation of false information connecting LGB people to child sexual abuse may also bear negative consequences for how LGB people view themselves. Members of marginalized groups are not immune from or unaffected by the negative regard in which others hold them.⁴⁰

With regard to the Catholic Church specifically, the false connotations are likely to have little impact on many church officials. Many already subscribe to a theology that holds homosexuality as immoral. However, the stereotypes conveyed by such misinformation may well contribute to a climate that will make it easier for members of the Church—both lay and clergy—to view gay priests and gay applicants to the priesthood in a decidedly negative light. In the wake of the sexual abuse scandal, various Vatican officials and others have proposed that gay men be barred from the priesthood. Similarly, there has been some discussion that gay priests who are already ordained should be ejected from the priesthood.⁴¹ Given that there is no reliable empirical basis for connecting homosexuality and child sexual abuse, such proposed actions can be expected to have no benefit to children in terms of decreasing the risk of abuse and would instead represent an altogether unnecessary harassment of gay priests. To the degree that members of the church have accepted the false conflation between child sexual abuse and homosexuality, they may be quite comfortable in supporting this ill-advised and wholly ineffective strategy for solving the problem of sexual abuse of children by priests. Clearly false information allowed to stand in newspaper reports has material consequences for people in the real world.

Implications for Media

The findings from this critical discourse analysis suggest some of the processes that contribute to the maintenance of a belief in a linkage between a homosexual orientation and child sexual abuse. This conflation stereotype is pervasive in the culture, and such stereotypes routinely slip into personal and public rhetoric—and they often do so outside the awareness of the speaker or writer. The study described in this paper focuses on a single newspaper's coverage of a still ongoing scandal. While the specific numbers and examples are drawn from an examination of the coverage of the scandal in the *Boston Globe*, there is no reason to think that the *Globe's* coverage is any worse (or any better) than that carried in other outlets. Indeed, ongoing examinations of other outlets in a less systematic fashion suggest that the *Globe* is not unique in raising—and perhaps even maintaining—the conflation stereotype.

Journalists are no more exempt from the effects of their culture than is anyone else.⁴² In the normal course of events, journalists can expect that their writings will reflect cultural stereotypes even when they strive to be fair and accurate. This is the case despite the fact that most journalism professionals

⁴⁰ See, for example, Eastland, L. S. (1996). The reconstruction of identity: Strategies of the Oregon Citizens' Alliance. In E. B. Ray (Ed.), *Communication and disenfranchisement: Social health issues and implications* (59-75). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum; Jurkowitz, M. (2003, April 8). *Globe's* articles on priests spurred scrutiny worldwide. *Boston Globe*, p. A18; Russell, G. M. (2002). *Voted out: The psychological consequences of anti-gay politics*. New York: New York University Press. Shidlow, A. (1994). Internalized homophobia: conceptual and empirical issues in measurement. In B. Greene and G. M. Herek (Eds.), *Lesbian and gay psychology: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 176-205). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁴¹ See, for example: Fitzgerald, J. (2002, March 6). Priest fears gays in ranks pose threat to Church. *Boston Herald*. Retrieved in March 8, 2002, from <http://www2.bostonherald.com>; Reed, C. L. (2002, March 27). The gay purge. Retrieved March 9, 2003, from <http://www.survivorsnetwork.org>; Ripley, A. (2002, May 20). Inside the Church's closet. *Time*, 60-62; 64; Stammer, L. B. (2002, May 23). Gay priests say it's harder now to tell the truth. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved March 9, 2003, from <http://www.survivorsnetwork.org>; Washington Post. (October 12 2002). Vatican weighing ban on gay men. *Daily Hampshire Gazette* (Northampton, MA), B8; Zoll, R. (2002, March 23). Researchers caution Catholic Church against targeting gays. *Detroit News*. Retrieved March 23 2002, from <http://www.detnews.com>

⁴² See, for example, Aarons, L., & Murphy, S., (2002). *Lesbians and gays in the newsroom: 10 years later*. A report from the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California in collaboration with the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association.

regard accurate and fair reporting as a priority.⁴³ The only way to ensure a greater degree of fairness and accuracy is to take into account the potential for the unintended transmission of cultural stereotypes that lurk quietly, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, in the shadows—including in the rooms where stories are made, in the rooms where stories are written, and in the minds of the people making and writing those stories. It is self-evident that everyone is influenced by cultural stereotypes. Yet, while no one lives outside of or is unaffected by his or her culture, individuals can cultivate an intentional awareness of prevalent stereotypes and myths. This awareness can guide our efforts to avoid contributing to the maintenance of stereotypes in whatever ways are relevant to our personal and professional circumstances.

This perspective is hardly novel to professional journalists, as an item in the *Boston Globe* on January 20, 2003 made clear. The article was written by the *Globe's* ombuds columnist in response to a reader's discomfort with a music critic's use of the word "wifebeater" as a synonym for an article of clothing commonly referred to as a tank top. The ombuds columnist, who works at the intersection of the *Globe* and its readers, offered this comment:

[The reader's] comment prompted in-house discussion about the role of a newspaper in echoing words that—accepted as they may be in pop culture—are rooted in stereotype or born of misplaced glibness. In general, the *Globe* steers clear of such phrases, preferring, say, "boom box" to "ghetto blaster." In the case of "wifebeater," the post-publication consensus seems to be that, from now on, the phrase is best reserved for articles on domestic violence.⁴⁴

In addition to being affected by their culture, journalists and editors are in strategic positions for influencing that same culture. It is, therefore, especially important that journalists cultivate an active awareness of cultural biases (even when they personally do not subscribe to these biases), of the ease with which such biases creep into writing, and of the ease with which they are activated in the minds of readers. Failure to take these factors into account, at best, supports preexisting biases—a phenomenon that the *Globe* staff struggled with in the above quotation. On the other hand, when journalists nurture an awareness of cultural prejudices and work to avoid both transmitting and evoking these biases, they are far more likely to provide coverage that has the potential for being both fairer and more accurate.

Recommendations for Media

1. Adherence to the journalistic goals of truth and fairness requires that journalists avoid activating false stereotypes that will result in the transmission of information that is both inaccurate and unfair to particular groups of people.
2. Journalists need to cultivate an ongoing awareness of the false stereotypes that may be associated with particular stories.
3. Editors should be aware that false stereotypes can be activated not only through the content of stories but also through their placement. They should be especially alert to the potential for stereotypes contained in and or implied by supporting documents accompanying news stories.
4. When stereotypes and other false information are included within a story, journalists need to make clear-cut statements that correct the misinformation. Rebuttals are most effective when they a) explicitly acknowledge that false information is conveyed by the stereotype and b) offer accurate information to counteract the stereotype's false content. When rebuttals are cautious and unclear, they leave room for the stereotype to persist.
5. In an ongoing story that involves the persistent presence of a particular stereotype, journalists and editors might focus specific articles on the stereotype itself: the nature of the stereotype, its origins, how it is expressed socially, and what is actually true.

⁴³ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (1999, March 30). *The core principles of journalism: Striking the balance, audience interests, business pressures and journalists' values*. Retrieved July 26, 2003, from <http://people-press.org>

⁴⁴ Chinlund, C. (2003, January 20). It's the readers' turn to speak out. *Boston Globe*, p. A15.

6. Because journalists stand in the midst of the culture they describe, they cannot be expected to achieve a perfect ability to rise above stereotypes. They should seek consultation from communication specialists to help avoid coverage that activates stereotypes, particularly when covering stories that are closely linked to strong cultural stereotypes that might easily be imbedded in the story over time.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical discourse analysis is an approach to understanding texts rather than a specific methodology that is applied in exactly the same way to every type of text. The approach generally entails a thorough series of readings designed to identify and explicate implied messages that characterize the text. The specific process used for this study included the following:

- Define the focus of the study and specify the research question: Where and how does the focus on abusive priests change to focus on gay priests?
- Conduct a literature review to develop a critical understanding of relevant contextual domains (e.g., the Catholic Church, sexual abuse, the church's view of homosexuality, previous research on the conflation of homosexuality and sexual abuse of children, etc.).
- Delineate text that will serve as source data—in this case, every article with any connection to the Catholic Church's abuse crisis that was printed in the *Boston Globe* beginning with a first day of specialized coverage on January 6, 2002, and ending with January 6, 2003.
- The researchers read the entire data set to familiarize themselves with the full text and to generate preliminary answers to the research question.
- Each researcher read for patterns underlying the connection between sexual abuse and sexual orientation. Both traced and recorded the language used to describe priests, to describe abuse, and to explain abuse. They recorded all references to gay/homosexual people or behavior. Each generated a list of possible answers to the research question.
- The two researchers met to compare notes periodically during their reading of the data set and again after completing the reading. They discussed their early impressions of the data set and jointly examined the possible answers that each had generated. They also related the emerging findings to the earlier critical review of the literature.
- The researchers selected several types of constructions within the text for more thorough examination:
 - direct conflation: an explicit assertion that gay priests or homosexuality are responsible for sexual abuse of children
 - indirect conflation: an implicit pairing of references to gay priests or homosexuality with child sexual abuse
 - man-boy sex: a subcategory of indirect conflation that typically occurred in precisely this language (i.e., “man-boy sex”)
 - broadly offensive conflations: pairings between child sexual abuse and other broadly negative behaviors (e.g. rape, prostitution, drug abuse, etc.)
- Each researcher independently read and coded items in the data set using codes that corresponded to each of the target constructions.
- The researchers compiled summary statistics for the codes.
- The researchers continued to explore and discuss the relationship between research findings and broader contextual issues.