

COMMENTARY

Commentary on “Analyzing Child Sexual Abuse Allegations”: Will a New Untested Criterion-Based Content Analysis Model Be Helpful?

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We accepted an invitation from O’Donohue et al. to provide feedback on their criteria-based content analysis (CBCA) model for assessing child sexual abuse allegations and identified three concerns. First, the claim that “most allegations are likely true” risks departing from the neutral and objective hypothesis testing stances required for forensic evaluations. Second, the article fails to review the extensive literature concerning previous (and mostly unsuccessful) efforts to empirically validate similar CBCA approaches. Third, we posit that any model or systematic analysis must occur within comprehensive forensic evaluations that integrate contemporary advances in interviewing techniques, data collection from multiple sources, and consideration of multiple hypotheses.

KEYWORDS *child sexual abuse, forensic interviews, child sexual abuse allegations, criteria-based content analysis, multiple hypotheses*

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INTRODUCTION

“Analyzing Child Sexual Abuse Allegations” (O’Donohue, Benuto, & Cirlugea, 2013) describes a model for forensic investigations when children have made sexual abuse allegations. The article posits that understanding and evaluating child sexual abuse (CSA) cases can be accomplished through careful and systematic analyses of 10 dimensions or factors. These 10 factors are derived from a review of the extensive developmental research on children’s cognitive capacities and memory formation and retrieval, the suggestibility of children and their vulnerability to outside influences, and what is known about children being able to communicate and testify about their experiences.

The O’Donohue et al. model in “Analyzing Child Sexual Abuse Allegations” is offered to aid investigators of child sexual abuse allegations, help mental health professionals reviewing forensic interviews of children who have made CSA allegations, and assist clinicians assessing and treating children who others suspect have been sexually abused. The model includes an approach to identifying potential bias in child interviews that was developed in a separate study by the same research team. The model is offered to help organize a forensic interviewer’s analysis of the information derived from an interview or investigation or to help organize expert opinions given in court testimony.

The O’Donohue et al. model emphasizes a comprehensive and systematic approach that it views will result in “sounder conclusions” in court. One premise is that “examination of a restricted set of hypotheses can lead to false conclusions and expensive and harmful legal processes” (p. 297). Recognizing a lack of empirical testing, the authors describe their model as a “work in progress” and invite, *inter alia*, efforts to “improve the model by either showing that there are other factors that this model fails to mention or by showing the irrelevancy of one of the factors of the model” (p. 309). See [Table 1](#).

We accept the invitation for comment on the model and ask the question, “Will this new untested criterion-based content analysis model be helpful?” Our commentary will focus on three topics. First, we are surprised by the unelaborated claim in the article that “most allegations are likely true” and view this as a potentially dangerous departure from the neutral, objective, and even-handed hypothesis-testing stances demanded of forensic experts. Second, we identify the O’Donohue et al. model as a criteria-based content analysis (CBCA) and note the failure to review an extensive literature regarding previous efforts to empirically validate and test criteria-based content analyses (CBCA) of child sexual abuse allegations. Third, we posit the best value of any model or systematic analysis will be as part of comprehensive forensic evaluations that emphasize the growing consensus about

TABLE 1 The Ten Dimensions of the O’Donohue Model

1. Outcry Analysis	The general circumstances of the child’s initial accusations should be determined and analyzed for possible bias.
2. Stake Analysis	Whether anyone who had significant contact with the child has a hidden agenda relevant to a guilty or not guilty verdict toward the accused should be established.
3. Parental/Significant Other Suggestion	Whether a caregiver or parent has made leading statements or engaged in leading questioning with the child resulting in the child developing a false memory should be evaluated.
4. Forensic Interview Analysis	Whether biased interviewing techniques were practiced should be evaluated.
5. Memory Analysis	Whether memory errors (e.g., errors of omission or commission) may have occurred should be determined.
6. Sufficiency of Details Provided by the Child	Whether the child can describe in an age-appropriate manner events that occurred before, during, and after in a way that makes a coherent, understandable narrative should be assessed.
7. Inconsistencies Analysis	A contradictory statement by logic contains falsehoods. Thus, whether the child has provided inconsistent core details between or within statements should be assessed.
8. Logistical Detail Analysis	Whether the allegation contains logistical implausibilities should be assessed.
9. Fantastical Details Analysis	The presence or absence of fantastical details in the allegations should be examined.
10. Personological Analysis	Whether the child suffers from any mental health problems or history that may indicate an increased probability of either truth-telling or problematic reports should be assessed.

Originally published in O’Donohue, W., Benuto, L. T., & Cirlugea, O. (2013). Analyzing Child Sexual Abuse Allegations. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice, 13*, 296–314.

appropriate interviewing techniques, data collection from multiple sources, and consideration of multiple hypotheses.

An Unelaborated Premise about CSA Allegations

We are both surprised and puzzled by the first line of the article that “. . . it is reasonable to hypothesize that most allegations of childhood sexual abuse are true” (p. 296) and a later section titled, “Most Allegations Are Likely True” (p. 299). In light of the considerable controversy about the prevalence of CSA, we found the failure to elaborate this claim to be a significant omission, particularly when forensic application of the model is clearly intended. From our perspective, forensic evaluators of CSA allegations

must maintain a neutral, objective stance that actively seeks to confirm *and* disconfirm all possible hypotheses.

ARE “MOST ALLEGATIONS LIKELY TRUE”? LESSONS FROM HISTORY

The short history of this area, only decades old, is rife with misunderstanding as well as the use of techniques and the application of principles or professional attitudes that are poorly validated and have led to results, such as criminal convictions of supposed offenders in day center investigations, that would find little scientific or professional support today (Clark, 2009).

Lessons from history should inform us. The issue of the frequency of true versus false CSA allegations, or of substantiated versus unsubstantiated findings of CSA, is far from settled. In the 1980s, some took the controversial position that most accounts were true (Herman, 1981). Some research has even found significant numbers of child protection professionals believed that children “never lie” about child sexual abuse (Everson & Boat, 1989). O’Donohue et al. reference an earlier article about two pathways to a false CSA allegation and note the “children never lie” position is contrary to a considerable amount of research (O’Donohue, Beruto, & Fanetti, 2010). A review of the literature on CSA allegations reveals that consensus on accurate estimates of true and false allegations has not been achieved:

The occurrence of false negatives is suggested by research findings that show some children who are victims of sexual abuse are reluctant to disclose their abuse and may deny sexual abuse when initially interviewed by authorities. Additionally, the occurrence of false-positives is suggested by research that shows children’s verbal reports may be altered or contaminated by some interviewing techniques, procedures, or styles. (citations omitted; Kuehnle, 1996, p. 291)

Some who cite low rates of false allegations count only deliberate attempts to deceive and exclude cases in which honest errors were made (Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Wakefield & Underwager, 1988). False CSA allegations can also originate from misinterpretations, or over-interpretations of young children’s comments, or by suspicions, claims, or reports by others on the child’s behalf (Poole & Lamb, 1998). The ways children might be exposed to sexually explicit stimulation have significantly increased in today’s society, making it more important to consider alternative explanations for concerns about child sexual abuse (Faller, 2007). In addition to making the “most allegations are likely true” claim, the authors fail to define the kinds of CSA allegations to which this claim applies.

After previously noting that “we presently cannot draw valid conclusions about the rates of either false denials or false allegations of sexual abuse” (p. 296) and that “no analytic model can determine whether an allegation is true or false,” (p. 297), making the statement that “most allegations are likely

true” without citing the literature or identifying the controversial aspects of this issue is perplexing. Prevalence rates in one context may be different from allegations raised in another. For example, many studies have found the base rate of false CSA allegations in divorce cases to be twice that in non-divorce cases. Indeed, there remain significant debates over whether child victims of sexual abuse or non-victims are grossly misidentified or whether false-positive or false-negative reports create the greatest harm (Herman, 2009; Kuehnle, 1996).

PRACTICE STANDARDS REQUIRE NEUTRALITY, OBJECTIVITY, AND TESTING OF MULTIPLE HYPOTHESES

The current, prevailing view is that interviewers should be neutral toward an allegation of sexual abuse and entertain multiple hypotheses that might explain an allegation (e.g., AACAP, 1997; APSAC, 2002; Kuehnle, 1996). O’Donohue et al. note many investigations reflect inappropriate confirmatory bias, or a wish to simply “confirm” a child’s allegation, and examination of “a very restricted subset of allegations.” (p. 297). We believe these kinds of problems may be more prevalent when investigators adopt a “most allegations are likely true” mindset.

The O’Donohue et al. article also posits that a thorough and unbiased investigation must explore all relevant hypotheses, but it stops short of identifying the hypotheses to be explored. Kuehnle (1996) recommended that analysis of CSA allegations should be framed around nine possible hypotheses. These are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2 Kuehnle’s Nine Hypotheses for Analysis of CSA Allegations

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1. The child is a victim of sexual abuse, and the allegation is credible and accurate.
 2. The child is a victim of sexual abuse, but due to age or cognitive deficits, does not have the verbal skills to provide a credible description of his or her abuse.
 3. The child is a victim of sexual abuse, but due to fear, will not disclose his or her abuse.
 4. The child is a victim of sexual abuse, but due to misguided loyalty, will not disclose his or her abuse.
 5. The child is not a victim of sexual abuse and is credible but has misperceived an innocent interaction. [*A variation of this hypothesis might be that the child is truthful, but has misperceived an ambiguous or innocent situation, or has misidentified an alleged suspect.*]
 6. The child is not a victim of sexual abuse but has been unintentionally contaminated by a concerned or hypervigilant care taker or authority figure.
 7. The child is not a victim of sexual abuse but has been intentionally manipulated by a care taker or authority figure into believing that he or she has been abused.
 8. The child is not a victim of sexual abuse but knowingly falsely accuses someone of sexual abuse because of pressure by care takers or authority figures who believe the child has been abused.
 9. The child is not a victim of sexual abuse but knowingly falsely accuses someone of sexual abuse for reasons of personal aggrandizement or revenge.
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Kuehnle's multiple hypotheses model may be used to assist forensic examiners in identifying which hypothesis or hypotheses appear best supported by data developed during their investigation. Investigators must be on guard against confirmatory bias and disconfirmatory bias. Disconfirmatory bias is the privileging of information that does not support sexual abuse and disregarding information that supports sexual abuse (Faller, 2007).

In order to remain neutral and unbiased, professionals involved in cases involving CSA allegations must understand as much as possible about (a) the difference between an unsubstantiated case and a deliberate false case; (b) the criteria for deciding that a case is false or true; (c) base rates for false allegations by adults and children; (d) situations where there is risk that an allegation by an adult is false; and (e) situations where there is a risk that an allegation by a child is false (Faller, 2007). A balanced perspective that places an equal premium on both sensitivity (preventing false negatives) and specificity (preventing false positives) is likely a necessary condition for professional consensus on best practice (Faller & Everson, 2012). O'Donohue et al. appear to agree:

It is in the interests of all stakeholders (including prosecutors, defense attorneys, and child protective service workers) to thoroughly understand and evaluate the major rivaling plausible alternatives in a sexual abuse case. (p. 297)

Empirical Questions about Criteria-Based Content Analysis Models

We identify the O'Donohue et al. model as a criteria-based content analysis (CBCA) model. CBCA models (also called criterion-based statement analysis or statement validity assessment, Vrij, Kneller, & Mann, 2000) refer to the content analysis of a statement or statements according to a set of criteria (Steller & Koehnken, 1991). Previous research illuminates much about CBCA in CSA and investigative analyses. The CBCA approach is neither new nor without controversy.

The crucial question concerning CBCA analysis is whether it is sufficiently valid to discriminate truthful from fictitious statements (Steller & Koehnken, 1991). O'Donohue et al. note that a wide range of responses and symptoms may follow CSA. Because there is "no unique pattern of symptoms exhibited by *the sexually abused child*" (emphasis added), making inferences about abuse status based upon symptoms is invalid and cannot be used to analyze the veracity of a child's sexual abuse allegations nor does an absence of symptoms automatically denote an absence of abuse. While O'Donohue et al. note their proffered model is limited by the lack of empirical validation, no reference is made regarding empirical support for CBCA in general. Our position is that evaluation of this model requires an understanding of the underlying principles of CBCA as well as knowledge of previous CBCA research regarding CSA allegations.

THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLE OF CBCA: THE UNDEUTSCH HYPOTHESIS

CBCA relies upon the "Undeutsch hypothesis," or the idea named for a German CSA investigator in the 1980s who posited that descriptions of events that really happened differ in content and quality from descriptions of events that were not actually experienced. Undeutsch reported that experienced events are reported in richer detail and with clearer links to other real-world events than events that have been fabricated or imagined (Undeutsch, 1989). Undeutsch believed that "truthful, reality-based accounts differ significantly and noticeably from unfounded, falsified, and distorted stories" (Undeutsch, 1982, p. 44). In addition, the statement's consistency with information from other sources also informed final opinions about the veracity of a statement (Vrij, 2005).

No one has required the Undeutsch hypothesis to be true all of the time or claimed any single CBCA factor as determinative of either a finding that abuse did or did not occur. In the quantitative research of CBCA, the presence of each criterion is presumed to strengthen the hypothesis that the account is based on genuine personal experience or the opinion that truthful statements have more of the elements measured by CBCA than do false statements (Vrij, 2005).

Limited Support for CBCA and Cautions against Forensic Use without Additional Data

Studies have found that statements in cases confirmed as true had higher CBCA scores than statements viewed as doubtful (Esplin, Boychuk, & Raskin, 1988) and that more criteria were met in cases where CSA was viewed as "plausible" than in cases viewed as "implausible" (Lamb et al., 1997). Previous CBCA models for investigating CSA allegations have identified different factors and noted either the presence of the factor or the "strength of presence" of the factor. For example, one line of research used 19 criteria and included ratings of "strength of presence" of the criteria (Steller & Koehnken, 1991; Raskin & Esplin, 1991). Another group of researchers utilized 14 of the specified 19 criteria that they found to be memory-based and reliable but focused on the absence or presence of the criteria (Horowitz et al., 1997; Lamb et al., 1997).

More CBCA criteria have been found present in accounts independently rated as likely or very likely to have occurred than in accounts of events deemed unlikely or very unlikely to have occurred (Lamb et al., 1997). Similar results have been reported by other researchers (Boychuk, 1991; Raskin & Esplin, 1991a, 1991b). Difficulties have been noted, however, in using CBCA in cases that were less clear or "doubtful." While some criteria

TABLE 3 Utility of Individual Criteria for Distinguishing between Plausible and Implausible Accounts (Lamb et al., 1997)

Criterion	Present in Plausible Accounts (%)	Present in Implausible Accounts (%)	Significance
1. Logical structure	100	100	—
2. Unstructured production	76	46	.033
3. Quantity of details	97	77	.021
4. Contextual embedding	82	46	.037
5. Interactions	62	23	.010
6. Conversions	74	46	.051
7. Complication	33	23	—
8. Unusual details	41	15	.070
9. Superfluous details	4	0	—
10. Misunderstood details	8	15	—
11. External references	4	8	—
12. Subjective feelings	49	38	—
13. Perpetrator feelings	16	23	—
14. Spontaneous corrections	26	8	—

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are found significantly more often in plausible accounts in ways predicted by proponents of CBCA, some implausible statements obtain high CBCA scores suggestive of events actually experienced (Lamb, et al., 1997; Table 3).

Because of these kinds of findings, most CBCA experts caution against decision rules for combining content criteria or for determining cutoff scores to differentiate between truthful and deceptive statements on the basis of the amount or strength of the context criteria that are present. (Steller & Koehnken, 1991). O'Donohue et al. follow this general admonition against decision rules, identifying 10 factors in their model and providing no decision rules for their use.

Numerous confounding variables have been identified in CBCA. In a review of 37 CBCA research studies, Vrij (2005) noted CBCA scores are positively correlated with age, intelligence and verbal skills, and social skills. CBCA scores are also often related to the interview style of the interviewer with cognitive interviews and the use of open-ended questions seen as better facilitators of memory retrieval than more direct forms of questioning. (Vrij, 2005, p. 24). Coaching has been shown in laboratory research to affect CBCA scores: Coaching can make false allegations resemble what the CBCA raters would view as characteristics of true memories. The ability to reliably diagnose or rule out the possibility of influence of external factors on CBCA scores has not been achieved.

In light of concerns about the validity and reliability of CBCA raised by previous researchers, introducing another CBCA model without some kind of empirical testing seems premature. The O'Donohue et al. article notes, "... no analytic model can determine whether an allegation is true

or false" (p. 297). They also openly acknowledged the lack of empirical validation of their model, even though they had outlined the same model 3 years earlier (O'Donohue et al., 2010). Still, notably absent are cautions from CBCA research conclusions that "the level of precision clearly remains too poor to permit the designation of CBCA as a reliable and valid test for use in the courtroom" (Lamb et al., 1997, p. 262). If the authors have a different perspective, it should have been outlined and the reasons for developing a new CBCA approach as better than previous efforts explicitly stated.

Fitting CBCA within Comprehensive Forensic Evaluations

Reliance upon the interviews of children in CSA allegation investigation is a necessity. Child interviews are a necessary but not sufficient condition for a high-quality forensic evaluation or investigation. In the vast majority of sexual abuse cases, the primary evidence is the child's verbal allegation and testimony (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008). In the absence of photographic or DNA evidence, a credible eyewitness, or perpetrator confession, forensic evaluators in cases of alleged child sexual abuse must rely on, *inter alia*, psychosocial or "soft" evidence (Everson et al., 2012). Systematic assessment of the plausibility of CSA allegations calls for multifaceted procedures that synthesize the results of medical examinations, suspects' statements, polygraphic examinations, witnesses' statements, and other circumstantial or physical evidence when determining, with varying degrees of certainty, the probability that the alleged events actually occurred (Lamb et al., 2008; Horowitz et al., 1997). The two most common evaluation models for investigating CSA allegations are the Child Interview/Joint Investigation Model and the Comprehensive Forensic Evaluation (CFE) Model.

THE CHILD INTERVIEW MODEL AND CONCERNS ABOUT OVERRELIANCE ON CHILD INTERVIEWS

Many agencies and programs dealing with high numbers of investigations traditionally utilized a single interview with the suspected victim. Within this model, a single taped interview with the child was often the primary evidence for the case. This emphasis contributed to the evolution of a now voluminous research literature about interviewing children about sexual abuse (Faller, 2007).

Children's disclosures of abuse can be highly probative of abuse, particularly when they are elicited using techniques supported by research (Lyon, Ahern, & Scurich, 2012). Researchers have moved beyond identifying methods that undermine children's accuracy and have developed positive prescriptions for effective interviewing. Interviews that utilize the tools incorporated into the NICHD structured interview protocol, including instructions,

narrative practice rapport building, and open-ended questions regarding abuse, will lead to more accurate and complete reports (Hershkowitz, Fisher, Lamb, & Horowitz, 2007). Furthermore, these methods can be further improved through the use of instructions with counterexamples and a promise to tell the truth (e.g., in the Ten-Step interview). Interviewers may elicit information from the child that helps the interviewer assess the likelihood that the child's report has been distorted by others, including the suspect and prior recipients of the child's disclosure (Lyon et al., 2012, p. 38).

The Child Interview/Joint Investigation Model developed in response to the criminalization of child abuse, especially sexual abuse, and emergence of state statutes mandating collaboration between child protection agencies and law enforcement. These interviews are typically taped. Eventually, the child interviews were supplemented with interviews of the suspect, any non-suspected parents, and other potential witnesses (Faller, 2007). With the introduction of law enforcement into the process, simultaneous investigations tied to separate courts with different burdens of proof can complicate cases (Dale, 2013a, 2013b; Everson et al., 2012). CSA allegations can legally (and often simultaneously) play out in child protection or juvenile courts, criminal courts, domestic courts, and courts dealing with domestic violence (Dale, 2013a, 2013b). Different burdens of proof sometimes result in confusing and seemingly contradictory legal findings. For example, while some domestic judges rule out consideration of possible CSA when there are unsubstantiated CPS findings, the failure to criminally prosecute, or the failure to secure a criminal conviction, other judges conduct independent investigations.

COMPREHENSIVE FORENSIC EVALUATION MODELS

More comprehensive forensic evaluation (CFE) models, like those used in child custody disputes, have become the preferred model for investigation of CSA allegations (Gould & Martindale, 2007; Faller, 2007; Kuehnle, 1996). Comprehensive forensic evaluations have value when (a) there are allegations of intrafamilial sexual abuse; (b) when domestic violence, mental illness, or substance abuse is alleged; (c) when there are allegations of multiple offenders and/or victims, or (d) when prior assessments were inconclusive or arrived at disputed conclusions (Faller, 2007). Best-practice methodology typically includes use of a broad range of information sources for a comprehensive search for evidence supporting or refuting the allegations, weighing substantive evidence based on the degree of independent corroboration, testing of multiple hypotheses, and constructing a case-specific narrative to account for the available evidence (Everson et al., 2012; Everson & Faller, 2012). Comprehensive approaches also typically reach beyond the sexual abuse determination to address issues such as treatments for any child victim and/or various family members, rehabilitation of offenders, the advisability

of family reunification, and possible criminal prosecution or rehabilitation of offenders (Faller, 2007).

A NEED FOR CONTINUED IMPROVEMENT

Neither the Child Interview/Joint Investigation nor any of the comprehensive models are *per se* "better" than the others. In fact, each approach evolved, at least in part, because of dissatisfaction with the others. On the one hand, more comprehensive approaches sought to replace a perceived over-emphasis on the child interview and problems simply "believing" what the child reported. Critiques of approaches using single-child interviews with no or limited supplemental investigation also express concerns with the level of training of the interviewers relative to the complexity of the task (Inbau, 2001) and cite research that poor interviewing technique with potentially suggestible children makes the process unreliable (Ceci & Bruck, 1995). CPS workers and law enforcement officers who lack training in working with children need the guidance of structured interview protocols in CSA investigations because their training in interrogation techniques (e.g., use of leading and suggestive questions, coercive questions, and manipulation of the interviewee, etc.) is antithetical to interviewing potential child sexual abuse victims (Faller, 2007).

On the other hand, the integrity of evaluations conducted by outside professionals has also been questioned. Retention of a private forensic evaluator does not guarantee a reliable methodology. In a survey of forensic psychologists investigating CSA allegations as part of child custody disputes, only 36% reported following a sexual abuse protocol, model, or professional practice guidelines in their evaluations (Bow, Quinnell, Zaroff, & Assemany, 2002). Almost two-thirds reported testing the alleged child victim and a fourth of the psychologists reported interviewing the alleged perpetrator and alleged child together. In addition, professionals who are frequently retained by the accused have been viewed as much more skeptical about CSA allegations made by children than those who conduct evaluations for child protective service agencies or law enforcement (Faller, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

Most crimes of child sexual molestation have no witnesses, leave no physical signs, and are concealed by the perpetrators. These characteristics make the detection of child sexual molestation very difficult and increase the importance of the victims' disclosure for investigative as well as for treatment purposes. (Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007, p. 112)

So what is the answer to the question, "Will this new untested criteria-based content analysis be helpful?" The answer is, "We don't know." Just as it is

unsatisfying to not know whether a child did or did not experience child sexual abuse, we offer that it is unsatisfying to not know whether this will help. We do, however, believe that new approaches in this area must build upon previous research. O'Donohue et al. have looked to the child development literature, but their presentation did not address two significant literatures: issues related to the debate about CSA base rates and previous empirical efforts at CBCA. From our perspective, the cautions about limitations that are sprinkled throughout the article do not replace the need to responsibly cover the issues.

About the best interests of children, we do find agreement. O'Donohue, Benuto, and Cirlugea (2013) emphasize the best interests of children require diligent efforts to determine the veracity of an allegation of CSA for both clinical and forensic reasons. Children who have been sexually abused need to be protected and provided with appropriate support and treatments. Yet children can also be victimized as a result of false allegations. The authors note false allegations of CSA can lead children to develop untrue beliefs they have been victimized and/or construct false stories that negatively change their autobiographical understandings and self-concept. Children may be harmed where false allegations drastically alter their perceptions of and experiences in relationships with persons with whom they previously had close attachments or strong emotional bonds. On this, we agree.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors wish to thank Michael Lamb, PhD for his assistance in the completion of this manuscript.

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