

Schultz speaks out on sexual offender policies

12/01/06

Dr. Pamela D. Schultz, associate professor of communications at Alfred University, presented two papers at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association in San Antonio, TX, in November. Author of "Not Monsters: Analyzing the Stories of Child Molesters," published in 2005 by Rowman and Littlefield, Schultz frequently speaks and writes on issues relating to sex offenders. One presentation at the conference was entitled "Public Perception of Child Molesters: Monsters in our Midst." In it, Schultz argued that "Public perception of child molesters is that they are monsters, which insinuates that they exist in a category contrary to human nature, outside of natural sexual identity and order." She said the perception, which is "perpetuated by media, politicians, and public policy, undermines our ability to combat the crime. A monster might be captured and contained, but a monster cannot be expected to experience or respond to human sources of motivation. Megan's Law, for example, which requires convicted sexual offenders to register, "publicly communicates the message that a community has the power to expose the monsters in its midst, with the underlying assumption that 'outing' child molesters is a means of controlling their behavior. Yet the ultimate effectiveness of Megan's Law is undermined by the paradox it represents, since isolating and alienating child molesters merely emphasizes their unnaturalness while paradoxically assuming that these monsters can be motivated by natural impulses of shame and fear. "Thus, the public image of child molesters as monsters is problematic and might even put more children at risk, since by emphasizing offenders' 'otherness,' we maintain the belief that the crime cannot be combated because the perpetrators are inhuman," Schultz said. In her paper "Naming, Framing, Blaming & Shaming: The Moral Panic over Child Molesters and Implications for Law and Public Policy," Schultz pointed out that "In the United States, concern over child molestation and child molesters has attained the status of moral panic." The public perception of child sexual abuse, she said, "is created and maintained by a mass-mediated glut of misleading statistics and lurid accounts of molestation. The moral panic over child molesters reflects the ideological role of mass media in actively constructing meanings. "Media accounts frame child molesters as monsters, and this deeply rooted stereotype has driven public policy and legal responses to the crime. From this perspective, the 'reality' of sexual abuse is superseded by the rhetorically constructed panic surrounding it." As a result, she said, the "rhetorical constructions of child molesters have inspired politically expedient but ultimately ineffective and potentially even dangerous means of combating the crime, such as Megan's Law." Schultz's book has just been translated into Japanese and is being sold through Amazon.com in Japan.