

# Butner Study Redux: “They used us. They lied.”

written by Sandy | April 6, 2022



By Sandy Rozek . . . In the early 2000s a young man we will call Joseph was serving a sentence for a sexual crime, an internet crime, in the Federal Bureau of Prison’s Butner Low Unit in Butner, North Carolina, when he was approached by a Dr. Andres Hernandez. As he listened to Dr. Hernandez explaining a treatment program that he had developed, Joseph felt that maybe participating in the program would be a way he could, just a little, turn some of the wrong he had done into something good, something that could be of benefit to others who, somewhere down the road, made some of the same poor choices that he had made.

The program was designed, so explained the doctor, to help those who had been involved in viewing illegal images of children understand the depth of the harm they were doing. It would provide a safe space where men with similar offenses could share with each other and with medically trained staff members, both in group and in individual settings, and where peer and staff support would help each other see their crimes

for what they were and encourage the building of empathy for the victims and aversion for their own actions.

In agreeing to be a part of the program, Joseph knew he would be leaving Butner Low and moving to Butner Medium, where the medical facilities were, but it was with the understanding that if he wished to leave the program at any time, he would be transferred back to Low. He had asked if he could think it over and come into the program at a later time and was told it was "now or never," a one-time offer. He agreed, and thus began, without his knowledge, his participation in a portion of what would later be published as the [Butner Study Redux](#).

The program consisted of an eighteen-month cycle, and Joseph was in the program for several cycles during the next four years until his release from prison.

The one-on-one individual sessions with a staff member went as Joseph expected, and he found them therapeutic and helpful. However, the group sessions took on a totally different tone and became unpleasant, even somehow threatening.

"The pressure was always on," said Joseph. Staff encouraged the men to talk about offenses other than their arresting offense, offenses they had not been charged with, more serious offenses, offenses that were pre-arrest history. "Men were pressed continually to 'tell the truth,' and when they were hesitant or fearful of incarceration by disclosing other 'possible' crimes, it was suggested they could be polygraphed." Denials were disbelieved by staff, and the rest of the group was encouraged to join in the ridicule and accusations of denying the truth.

Joseph remembers an overwhelming feeling that they were being collectively brainwashed. "It felt like being in a pressure cooker," he recalls. His shame and embarrassment at what he would say next was evident in the hang of his head even before he spoke. "I never confessed to anything I hadn't done, only

to my charge of possession, but looking back, I sadly remember toeing the staff's lines. I confronted men about their pasts; I reported to staff men who did not comply or were resistant to treatment. I did what I was programmed to do. I thought I was doing the right things because when I did wrong, staff would correct me on it, and when I did right, they would praise me. It wasn't until YEARS later that I started to deprogram and really see how much harm I caused to those men...all in the name of 'therapy.' "

Courage and pride asserted itself again as he said, "People deserve punishment for their crimes regardless of what those crimes are. I committed crimes, and I deserved to be punished. Punishment must be appropriate, though, and being on the sex offense registry for thirty years after the completion of my sentence and never reoffending – I don't see how that is justified."

Continued denial in the group was sure to result in expulsion, but being expelled for not being "honest and forthcoming" was only one of the ways participants left. Some were judged "not amenable to treatment" from a psychological viewpoint. Some just gave up and quit. Refusing a polygraph when "suggested" to take one was a sure ticket out. Whatever the reason, leaving was a negative experience, and the group members all knew it. While they were group participants, the men were in a segregated, protected portion of the facility. Once no longer in the program, they were moved to the general population (gen pop) while awaiting transfer back to Butner Low, a transfer that was many weeks and sometimes months in the coming. "Men lied just to stay out of general population," Joseph said.

2005 saw the end of Joseph's term of incarceration and his participation in Dr. Hernandez's treatment program. His release was marked by the death of a loved one within a month, a stint in a half-way house, several years of supervised release, and of course the ever-present requirement, which followed him and even worsened as he moved from the state

where he was released to another, to register on the sexual offense registry. He has experienced obscenities hurled at him by neighbors, hostile and threatening drive-by incidents, and employment discrimination and hostility.

Much of it seems a blur of memories over the years, but crystal-clear in his mind is the day and the moment when on his computer screen he saw a reference to a sex offender study done at FCI Butner starting in 2000, and, with his heart in his throat and his head spinning, he clicked on it.

“I felt blindsided and betrayed! I could not believe that the director of the SOTP (Dr. Hernandez) and some staff had collected information from men like me to use against us. We were told we were in a therapeutic community and ‘safe place’ to build senses of responsibility, integrity, and honesty so we would integrate into society and never reoffend. We were never told we were part of a study. We were never told the collected information would be used against us for purposes such as exaggerating an individual’s crime and having him committed. They never said anything about our utterances being used against us; they said the opposite! We were encouraged to talk about our histories and our lives, and staff told us that nothing we said would be held against us as long as we didn’t specifically name anyone. Reading the article and the report, all I could think was, ‘They used us. Oh my gosh. They lied.’ ”

***Almost as soon as it was published, the entirety of the Butner Study came under fire for a variety of reasons. Some of its more damning criticism [is found here](#).***