

# The Dilemma of the Male Pedophile

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The public and scientific debate on pedosexuality is a heated one. We find ourselves involved in a difficult balancing act that demands utmost care if we are to avoid, on the one hand, playing down the gravity of adult–child sexual acts and, on the other hand, overdramatizing its catastrophic potential. However, the tendency to polarize and overgeneralize is strong. Both, those inclined to de-emphasize the severity of the problem and those bent upon blowing it out of all proportion, distort the reality of children who are drawn into sexual contact with adults, colonizing their experience, their memories, and their own assessments. It seems to me that one of the prerequisites for a more reasonable discussion is to disentangle the confusion of moral and clinical discourses. This requires that we argue, from a moral standpoint, where morals are at issue and, from a clinical point of view, when it comes to traumatizing effects. Above all, we should not clothe moral judgments in the garb of clinical “expertocratic” language.

I shall preface my attempt to disentangle the confusion of these two levels of discourse with my own definition of a pedophile, in order to make very clear what I am talking about. Pedophiles are men whose sexual wishes and desires for relationship bonds and love are focused either primarily or exclusively on children who have not reached puberty, whereby the relative importance of each of these three areas—sexuality, relationship, and love—may vary, as it does with other people as well. The group is very heterogeneous in terms of what its members desire and what they actually do. The objects of their desires may be boys, girls, or both; their preferences with respect to practices certainly vary (from exhibition to penetration); some have fleeting contacts with a series of children while others look for long-term relationships, which may be sort of caring or manipulative. Many are considerate in their behavior toward children; others use force. Only few employ violent means. Some pedophiles take advan-

tage of the offerings of the free market, with its Mafia-style structures that brutalize forbidden forms of sexuality (child pornography, child-trading schemes, child prostitution). Others, a group whose number is unknown but which may actually include a large proportion of pedophiles, remain abstinent for extended periods of time, many even throughout their lifetimes, expressing their desires in fantasy and leading a life of self-denial at a significant emotional cost. In short, pedophilia is a type of sexuality which, like heterosexuality and homosexuality, manifests itself in a wide range of forms. Yet, there is one fundamental difference: It always involves an adult and a child and not, as in heterosexuality and homosexuality, a relationship of more or less equally strong partners. There is no equality between partners in pedophile encounters. And it is this imbalance of power that endangers the child’s capacity for sexual self-determination, threatening to overpower it completely.

Thus, we find ourselves in the midst of the moral discourse, or rather of the moral discourses, for there are at least two, and even they must be clearly distinguished from one another. The first of these is the traditional one, the one I refer to as the child molester discourse. It is blunt, highly emotional, overgeneralized, full of prejudices—you find it in the boulevard press but not only there. Already Moll (1909), who wrote almost 100 years ago the first textbook on child sexuality, and Kinsey have complained of this discourse. The figure of the child molester has survived the test of time; only the perceived nature of the harm attributed to him has changed in the course of the past 100 years. Where he once left behind moral disorientation and devastation, his legacy in our time is psychological disaster and emotional death.

Today, there is a second form of moral discourse, which presumably has a much greater impact on the current social situation of pedophiles today than the loud outcries of fundamentalists or barstool moralists. It represents a view based upon a broad social consensus. As an enlightened discourse on morality, it is particularly

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virulent in liberal circles, in groups which were once rather more inclined to caution and concession in their judgment of pedophiles. This is the discourse of sexual self-determination or equal rights, which has assumed a dominant role in the general view of sexuality today.

Traditional sexual morals, which condemn specific acts *per se* (premarital and extramarital sex, sex between partners of the same gender, oral sex, and so on), without regard for their context, are fading rapidly from view. We may safely regard them as a thing of the past. They have been replaced by a consensus morality or a morality of negotiations (Schmidt, 1998). In other words, whatever two (or even more than two) partners capable of negotiating on an equal footing agree upon and wish to do sexually is regarded as morally acceptable. It is no longer the sexual act itself that is subject to moral scrutiny but the manner in which it comes about. Thus, it is appropriate to speak of consensual or interactional morality or a morality of negotiations (Schmidt, 1998).

Consensual morality is one aspect of a vision of sexual policy referred to by English sociologists, such as Plummer (1995) and Weeks (1995), as intimate citizenship. The term describes a civil, democratic, radically pluralistic society in the sexual realm, in which coequal individuals establish ways for intimacy—sexual preferences and orientation, forms of relationships and living together, approaches to child-raising, versions of masculinity and femininity—and practice them on the basis of respect for the needs, wishes, and limits of others as well. Diversity and difference in lifestyles are accepted; respect for the autonomy of the other is regarded as an indispensable principle.

Most unconventional forms of sexual behavior (e.g., sadomasochism) are viewed with much less alarm from the perspective of intimate citizenship than was the case 20 years ago. Indeed, they have acquired the status of sexual lifestyles rather than that of sexual deviations or perversions. In contrast, pedophiles have been subjected to increasing pressure, since the imbalance of power between adult and child is in conflict—evidently inherently (in the philosophical sense)—with the morality of consent. As a consequence of the enlightened, democratic discourse on morality that prevails today and which is particularly popular and influential among sexual liberals, pedophiles are sought out and pursued with much more determination than before.

The central question is this: Does pedophilia inexorably and categorically violate the morality of consent and intimate citizenship? Of course, there can be no question that it does so wherever violence, coercion, extortion, and emotional manipulation are employed. Thus, we must articulate the problem more specifically. Can there be sex-

ual consensus at all between adults and children? Many pedophiles say there can be, arguing roughly along these lines: “I want nothing more than what the child wants. I can enjoy it only when the child enjoys it as well.” This message comes across in a number of different versions. In numerous conversations with pedophiles seeking advice, I have rarely found myself compelled to doubt the subjective truth of such statements. One reason for this might be that many homosexual pedophiles, for instance, have a relationship of identification with the child. Yet, I severely doubt whether this attitude also reflects the subjective truth of the child as well. Lautmann (1994), a sociologist, conducted an interview study with a nonclinical sample of 60 pedophiles, providing highly interesting data on self-perceptions and self-constructions of pedophiles. Lautmann also examined the question of consent in detail and cautiously affirmed a “carefully developed strategy of consensus” (p. 98) on the part of the respondents. He went on to ask whether there might not be such a thing as “sexual contracts between the generations” (p. 77). It seems to me that the main reason Lautmann can come to such a conclusion is that he is too closely concerned with the sequence of actions and ignores or gives insufficient consideration to the social and psychological context in which these actions are embedded for both the adult and the child.

Perhaps this can be illustrated with a simple example: A man approaches a 10-year-old boy from his neighborhood, whom he has known for some time, and asks him if he would like to see his model electric trains. The boy eagerly accepts the invitation. After playing with the trains together for a while, the man tells the boy that his back has grown tight and tense from sitting on the floor so long and asks him if he would give him a back rub. The boy does as requested. He sometimes massages his father’s back and his father too likes that very much. After a short time, the man suggests that the back rub would be much more effective if he took off his shirt. The boy doesn’t mind that either. When the man then asks the boy if he would like to have a massage as well, the boy says no. He plays with the trains a while longer, then says good-bye and goes home.

It is evident that nothing has happened against the boy’s will in this scene. His “no” is accepted without further attempts at persuasion. At the behavioral level, the actions appear to represent a consensual sequence. Yet, if we examine the social context, considering as well the meaning of the actions of each protagonist, we quickly realize that the two people are operating within two distinctly different scenarios. In other words, the issue on which they ostensibly agree means something very different for each of them. There is actually no true agreement at

all. Consensus can only be achieved if everyone involved is acting in the same play and is, so to speak, “on the same page.” The boy wants to play with the electric trains. The man seeks physical tenderness and sex with the boy. An adult man who is asked by an adult woman in a discotheque if he would like to have a drink with her at her place knows very well that this can be a sexual advance, but for the boy, trains are just trains, plain and simple. He sees the back rub as an act of friendly assistance performed for a nice adult, an act familiar to him from his own family context. In the mind of the man, it is a point of departure for the physical tenderness he hopes to experience. It is erotically stimulating, foreplay to anticipated sexual acts. Thus, the problem of sexual consensus between the adult and the child lies in the disparity of scenarios. Only by ignoring the aspect of social meaning is it possible to see consensus or at least the absence of dissent in such a situation.

Only the adult is aware of the disparity of scenarios and only he is in a position to overcome it, simply by saying what it is he really wants—and in that case the boy’s “no” would undoubtedly come more quickly and emphatically. Part of the muddled situation is that the pedophile is compelled to preserve this disparity of scenarios in order to keep the plot moving. Thus, he will tend to do whatever is needed to maintain it, as the element of deception is essential to fulfilling his own desire. From this vantage point, therefore, I find it difficult to imagine consensual sexual acts between children and adults. There are undoubtedly exceptions, which would include cases of boys just entering puberty and who have masturbated or had other sexual experiences leading to orgasm with peers, that is, of boys who can be expected to know “what the score is” and who have experienced their own sexuality without adult participation and perhaps become curious about how adults would react in contact with them and about what they might experience with an adult.

I wish to mention here in passing, the interesting fact that pedophiles also resort to the argument of the child’s need for self-determination. This self-determination, they say, is endangered by society, by parents, and others who deny children their own sexuality and thus stifle the child’s natural development. Pedophiles, as the argument goes, guide children into sexuality, liberating them from repression and suppression in the process. Apart from the fact that this represents a rather paternalistic view of self-determination with a patently apologetic function, the concept of child sexuality is of interest to our discussion. Here, the child is seen as a small adult with nearly full sexual capacities who is forbidden to use them. It is a highly naturalistic view of child sexuality and pedophiles who entertain it find themselves in rather illustrious company. Kinsey, who saw child sexuality as a rudimentary

form of adult sexuality, was one of its advocates (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948, chap. 5; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953, chap. 4). Kinsey argued that it is practiced less frequently and is less goal-oriented than adult sexuality, but that all of the essential elements are already present: curiosity, genital stimulation, sexual arousal, lust, erection, and orgasm (with all its characteristic signs, from the absent gaze to accelerated breathing to muscle spasms). Kinsey thought in terms of sexual responses and acts, not of relationships or meanings. Thus, he could establish the kind of analogy between child sexuality and adult sexuality that many pedophiles use in their argumentation. Ultimately, Kinsey found little reason for alarm with respect to noncoercive and nonviolent sexual contact between adults and children in which, in his view, two individuals with the same sexual make-up interact.

This naturalistic view of sexuality is regarded as antiquated today. Gagnon and Simon (1973) pointed out long ago that homologous sexual behaviors of children and adults are not analogous or identical, since children do not yet follow the same sexual scripts or recognize the same sexual meanings as adults. Genital manipulation by children, even when it leads to erection and orgasm, differs significantly from adult masturbation, which is accompanied by erotic fantasies and scripts.

The problem of pedophilic behavior, and this is the point I am trying to establish up to here, can be examined apart from the discourse concerned with harm and damage. It is not necessary to instrumentalize the aspect of trauma in order to articulate and legitimize concern about pedophilia. Once we have eliminated the confusion between the aspects of morals and trauma, I would hope that the discussion focused on the potential impact of sexual experiences with adults upon children can be carried out in a more realistic vein, i.e., more closely in line with the reality of the children concerned.

This debate on trauma is heated and polarized as well. One gained insight into its structure and history once again in a kind of time-lapse review during weeks of discussion on SEXNET (sexnet@listserv.acns.nwu.edu), an internet discussion group for sexual scientists, in late 1998. A few examples are as follows: Nonclinicians criticize the selected samples and selected empirical insights gained by clinicians and offer data from nonclinical, unselected samples, which produce less dramatic findings with respect to the incidence and consequences of sexual acts performed with children. Clinicians counter with the argument that the superficial survey methods used in the social sciences do not do justice to the complexity of the issues, suggesting that it is particularly naïve to think that such methods are adequate to a study of trauma, that is, acute or persistent disorders and impairments. The one side (clinicians)

claims that failure to describe processes of development amounts to playing down the biographical significance of sexual trauma. The other side (social scientists) argues that their opponents quite often exaggerate the role played by experiences of abuse in human biographies, assigning young boys or girls having had sexual encounters with adults categorically and automatically to the status of victims. While the one group cites Sandfort's studies from Holland (Sandfort, 1983), which showed that young men who experienced sexual relationships with adult men prior to puberty tended to regard these partnerships as positive and favorable to their development, the other points out emphatically that former partners of pedophiles often wish to protect their former lovers, that they have a need to justify the unusual course of their own development in their own eyes, and so on and so forth. The discussion is conducted between two opposing camps; it is quite unproductive and so circular that it makes one's head spin. Everyone justifies his own assessments on findings for a subgroup within the diverse population of pedophiles and the wide range of pedophilic behaviors, extrapolating from that basis to make general statements about the entire heterogeneous group.

Quite apart from such controversy and despite a number of persistent uncertainties, it seems to me that it is important to establish two fundamental points as a basis for a kind of minimal scientific consensus (and perhaps to agree that further research is needed in order to articulate them more precisely): (1) Sexual contacts between adults and children pose a risk of lasting trauma for the latter even when they do not involve violence or the patent use of force, the risk is presumably greater the younger the child is, and is likely to rise in proportion to a number of other factors, including the "adult" character of the sexual practices involved, the frequency of sexual acts, the length of time during which they occur, the degree to which they involve family relationships, the extent to which the child's family and social environment is impaired, the degree to which the child's loyalty and trust are exploited, as well as many others. (2) There are many cases of nonconsensual sexual contacts between adults and children that are not traumatic for the child, although they do indeed violate his or her right of self-determination. Nonconsensual experiences are not categorically traumatic; what is morally unacceptable is not necessarily injurious. This presumably applies to many acts of exhibitionism, to contacts which stop short of genital contact (as in the model train episode described above), and for sexual activities within the context of prepubertal sex play. Here I would call to mind, this time in agreement, a statement by Kinsey et al. (1953), "It is difficult to understand why a child, except for its cultural conditioning, should be disturbed at having

its genitalia touched, or disturbed at seeing the genitalia of other persons, or disturbed at even more specific sexual contacts" (p. 121). In following Kinsey's lead in this case, we relieve children from the burden of the otherwise automatic assignment to the role of victim or of a victim narrative and, in the event that the experience was not unpleasant, perhaps even interesting and enjoyable for them, from the doubt expressed in questions like "What kind of a child am I if this can happen to me? Why didn't I sense the evil and the danger that should have been obvious to me, according to my parents' and the police's reaction?"

Oddly enough, the empirical evidence supporting my second statement is a product of the rapidly expanding definition of "sexual abuse." There are now more than 100 studies comparing adults who experienced sexual abuse as children (from exhibitionism to violent sex, inside and outside the family context, in this degree of breadth and generalization) with adults who have not had such experiences. Meta-analysis, for example, shows that fully half of all men and a quarter of all women surveyed describe their experience as neutral or positive (Rind, Tromovitch, & Bauserman, 1998). With respect to the many and varied psychological symptoms and problems experienced during adulthood (alcoholism, depression, anxiety, compulsive behavior, eating disorders, suicide attempts, sexual disorders, etc.), the differences between the index and control groups were statistically significant, although the unbiased effect size estimate ( $r_u$ ) was consistently low (0.10–0.20). While these studies do not by any means rule out severe or devastating effects of sexual experiences with adults, the only explanation for the small effect size is that many experiences covered by the broad definition of "sexual abuse" are neither experienced as negative nor represent sexual trauma. Thus, we should recognize the need to bring our assessment of the impact of sexual acts involving children back into balance in order to do justice to the realities of the children themselves.

Apart from such reflections on the issue of traumatizing effects, however, it is quite clear that pedophilia in contemporary Western societies represents a form of sexuality that cannot be lived out, since it is in conflict with a central social covenant based upon sexual self-determination and consensual sexuality. That is the dilemma of the male pedophile. The great differences in terms of power and influence, knowledge and insight, dependence and autonomy and, even more importantly, the disparity of scenarios and the differences in adult and child sexuality make pedophilic relationships irreparably problematic. The dilemma is tragic because the pedophile's sexual orientation is deeply rooted in the basic structure of his identity. Pedophilia is as much a part of him as is love for the same or opposite sex for the homosexual or heterosexual man

or woman, the difference being that the one is accepted, while the other is categorically forbidden and virtually impossible to realize. In view of the pedophile's burden, the necessity of denying himself the experience of love and sexuality, he deserves respect, rather than contempt.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I thank John Southard, who translated this essay from German to English.

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