

International Academy of Sex Research Joins the Debate: Is Pedophilia a Mental Disorder?

In a recent issue of the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*—the official journal of the International Academy of Sex Research—some psychologists say that “unusual sexual interests” should not be considered mental disorders.

Bruce Rind, author of the 1998 meta-analysis that claimed to find little or no harm in man-boy sex, joins the discussion; other commentators disagree.

By Linda Ames Nicolosi

The *Archives of Sexual Behavior* published a special edition in December 2002 to discuss whether pedophilia should remain a mental disorder.

Opening the debate, prominent author and writer Richard Green, M.D., J.D. argued in favor of removing pedophilia from the diagnostic manual (DSM).

Green was one of the clinicians who, in the 1973, took the side of gay activists to argue vigorously for removing homosexuality from the manual.

In a second article, “The Dilemma of the Male Pedophile,” Gunter Schmidt, D. Phil., makes a sympathetic case for the pedophile who, Schmidt says, must “remain abstinent for significant periods of time” and “lead a life of self-denial at significant emotional cost.” Schmidt calls for a new, “enlightened discourse on morality” with the recognition that “in view of the pedophile’s burden, the necessity of denying himself the experience of love and sexuality,” he deserves society’s respect.

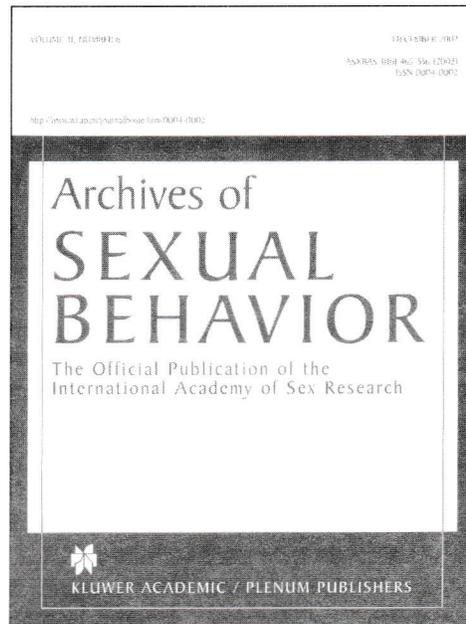
Furthermore, Schmidt argues, molested children don’t always appear to be harmed. A 1998 study by Bruce Rind, Schmidt notes, found that many boys grow up to have positive or neutral memories of their man-boy sexual experiences.

The Issue of “Consent”

Many of the commentators in the *Archives* argued that children are usually too immature to offer valid consent for sex with an adult. But the issue of consent is actually not the point at all, another writer responded—for no parent asks his children for their “consent” before baptizing them into a church.

A number of the commentators stated their disapproval of the moral influences exerted on society by its Judeo-Christian heritage, which has traditionally stigmatized child sexuality.

Psychiatrist Richard C. Friedman, the author of *Male Homosexuality: A Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspective* and a number of related research papers, says that it would be “more helpful than harmful” to continue to view pedophil-



ia as a mental disorder because we know so little about adult-child sex at this time, and because of the potentially harmful power discrepancy between children and adults. But he closes his commentary by urging that society not “discriminate” against people who are sexually attracted to children.

Looking at the issue historically, argues psychologist Robert Prentky, the age for sexual consent used to be ten in England until about 100 years ago. So, when, he wonders, is “a child no longer a child?” Certainly there are some 12-year-olds, he says, who are mature enough to give valid consent for sex. Prentky also observes that some of our culture’s most beloved heroes were “clearly pedophiles”—including, he says, the authors of the children’s classics *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland*.

The debate in the *Archives* provides an eye-opening view into the philosophical reasoning employed in the discussion about what should be the defining criteria for mental illness.

Criteria for Mental Illness

Why should pedophilia *not* be considered a mental illness? Richard Green makes the case by considering several factors.

Distress. One of the criteria for mental illness is subjective distress – and, Green notes, many pedophiles are not distressed about their attractions at all—except, he notes, about being the possibility of being jailed. In fact, “some celebrate their interests, organize politically, and publish magazines or books.”

Disability. Considering another marker of illness, “disability,” Green says, psychiatry must not let itself be locked into the narrow definition of disability currently dictated by our culture. When we broaden our view to consider other cultures over time, Green explains, we see that many African tribes and even the ancient Greeks considered man-boy pedophilia to be a helpful rite-of-passage into manhood.

Animal Behavior. Looking at normality from the perspective of the animal kingdom, Dr. Green looks at a close genetic relative, the pygmy chimp, or bonobo. Studies

continued

show that the bonobo has erotic contact with babies of its own species. And that behavior isn't likely harmful to the babies, Green says, because it's the babies themselves that often initiate the contact.

Frequency of Occurrence. Green says that pedophile attractions aren't even especially unusual. Studies prove that many so-called "normal" men with conventional sexual interests can, in fact, be sexually aroused in a laboratory setting when they are shown erotic photos of little girls.

So, is the pedophile a dysfunctional person? No, Green says; in truth, there appear to be quite a number of "highly skilled pedophiles" — in fact, even some beloved public figures—so a simple explanation of "social inadequacy" doesn't explain their psychological condition.

Taken together, Green says, these findings converge on the conclusion that pedophilia is not a mental disorder — at least "not unless we declare a lot of people in many cultures and in much of the past to be mentally ill."

A Change in Sexual Morality

Dr. Gunther Schmidt says that the Western world was once dominated by Judeo-Christian principles, and we used to judge particular sex acts like adultery, sodomy, and sado-masochistic sex as intrinsically wrong. But now those old "prejudices," he says, are fading away.

What anyone decides to do sexually with another person is today considered morally acceptable, he says, as long as a valid agreement is negotiated. But because the child is usually too immature to give his "consent," pedophilia must continue to be seen as harmful.

However, Schmidt notes, even though the child is too young to agree to sex, it's certainly not true that harm always results from child molestation. And even some boys who were actually forced into sex with a man against their will, Schmidt says, later remember those experiences as having been "favorable to their development" and "interesting and enjoyable."

And because an attraction to children is a basic part of the pedophile's identity—in other words, "who he is"—the pedophile's self-denial of gratification is, in fact, "tragic."

Others Say the Issue of "Consent" is Irrelevant

Not all of the writers in the *Archives* agree that a power imbalance renders a relationship psychologically harmful or subjectively unsatisfying.

For example, psychiatrist Emil Ng, M.D. of the University of Hong Kong says that in ancient Chinese history, children are described as "natural sexual beings," and romances are portrayed with children as young as ten years old in sexual relationships with each other, or with adults—and "sex

play is viewed as beneficial to their healthy development." Is lack of "consent" a valid reason to call pedophilia harmful? No, Dr. Ng notes, "the seemingly righteous and humanitarian debate on child self-determination" is nothing more than "another game adults play to impose their own values on children."

After all, Ng notes, "How often do the adults [in the West] try to ascertain 'valid consent' from their children before getting them to do most things?" For example, have parents "sought valid 'consent' from their children before baptizing them soon after birth?"

"Unequal Relationships Are Not Necessarily Unprincipled"

Dr. Paul Okami of UCLA agrees that unequal a power imbalance is not the issue. History is full of examples, he notes, of unequal relationships that "work" for the individuals involved—for example, a professor and his student marry "and live happily ever after." An unequal relationship doesn't violate principles of justice or fairness in sexual relationships, Dr. Okami says, "unless one views sexual relationships as similar to hand-to-hand combat."

Actually, he says, the real problem in pedophilia traces back to Christianity. People "detest" pedophilia because Christianity has given our culture a restrictive attitude toward the "naturalistic" child and his sexual instincts.

Christianity, Okami says, "regards children as sinful heathens who need the devil beat out of them. The end result is a powerful desire to save priceless, lovable, sacred innocents from something dangerous, dirty, disgusting and sinful."

Dr. Bruce Rind agrees with Dr. Ng and Dr. Okami that lack of consent from the child doesn't necessarily mean adult-child sexual relationships are harmful. (Dr. Rind was the lead author of the 1998 study that was attacked in the media by radio personality Dr. Laura Schlessinger. The Rind study concluded that there was little or no psychological harm in man-boy sexual relationships.)

Dr. Rind notes that many other societies, today and in the past, have endorsed sex between a man and a boy. And, what is necessarily wrong with a power imbalance? After all, Rind says, some parents force their children to go to church! And couldn't religious indoctrination, for that matter, be harmful to the child?

Even Man-Boy Incest May Be Remembered Positively, Says Rind

To back up his claim that pedophile relationships can truly be consensual, Rind describes several cases of men who say they benefited from—and even initiated—their childhood sexual experiences, including a "positive" recollection of father-son incest.

One boy had several relationships with men, starting when he was age 11, "all of which he viewed as very positive. He thinks the sex helped his sexual self-confidence; as he matured, he knew exactly what he wanted in sex, while his peers were still searching."

Another man saw the childhood intimacy he had with a man as the "highlight of his life."

Still another boy started having sex with his own father at age ten, and now (he is 33 years old) he looks back on their incestuous relationship as "beautiful, pure" and full of love. He said he "cherished the intimacy."

Dr. Charles Moser—the clinician who was invited to pres-

ent a paper at the May 2003 American Psychiatric Conference on pedophilia—supported Rind's observations. Psychiatry, he said, is ethically obliged to help those people who have unusual sexual interests pursue their subjective ideal of personal fulfillment.

"Any sexual interest can be healthy and life-enhancing," Moser concluded.

Reference:

"Special Section: Pedophilia: Concepts and Controversy," in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 31, No. 6, December 2002, p. 465-510.