

The Pedophilia Smear

Self-appointed guardians of American morality like
Laura Schlessinger are targeting sex researchers.

By Vern Bullough, Ph. D., D. Sci., R.N.

Editor's note: The following article in one form or another has been posted on the Internet for years. Recently, when I wanted to cite the article in a forthcoming publication, I contacted Dr. Bullough for further information and permission, only to have him tell me that he did not, in fact, write the article. He informed me that the article appeared to be a compilation of various speeches he had given, and that while it was essentially factual, it did contain some things he did not say. After some discussion, I offered to correct the text according to his instructions and post this "authorized" version on the Internet.
David. L. Riegel, 1 January 2005.

In June 1998, Bruce Rind, Philip Tromovitch, and Robert Bauserman published a meta-analysis of 59 studies dealing with child sexual abuse based on college samples in the *Psychological Bulletin*, the principal journal of the American Psychological Association. They reported that, on the basis of existing studies, the negative effects of child/adult sexual interaction were neither pervasive nor typically intense, and that males were less harmed than females. The findings confirmed previous studies showing that intergenerational sexual interaction affects individuals differently.

A year earlier, Rind and Tromovitch had reached similar conclusions about child sexual abuse using a national probability sample. Their findings should have encouraged therapists to rethink some of their assumptions since they implied that, for a significant portion of child sexual abuse victims, the trauma was not what many believed it was, and that treatment modalities could be adjusted according to the individual himself or herself.

Instead the two studies led to a firestorm of controversy which eventually resulted in a congressional resolution condemning them. Why?

Before trying to answer that question, it is important to look at another and seemingly unrelated event. In August 1998 the Center for Sex Research at California State University in Northridge held a world conference on pornography. Speakers ranged from Nadine Strossen, president of the American Civil Liberties Union, to scholars and investigators from academe to Annie Sprinkle and other porn stars. That conference also resulted in a storm of controversy, and ultimately in a state legislative investigation that charged the conference with encouraging pedophilia. I myself was accused before the legislative committee of being a self-confessed pedophile by one witness.

The common denominator between the Rind articles and the Northridge conference was accusations against individuals that they were encouraging pedophilia. Such accusations arose, I believe, from a deliberate policy to arouse public opinion against sex research. They also amounted to a last-ditch attack against the changing relations between men and women in the

United States and a growing public toleration of various forms of sexual activity either previously outlawed or heavily stigmatized.

Let me explain.

With the 20th century just ended, there has been a growing public acceptance of divorce, two-career families, premarital sexual activity, contraceptives and abortion, homosexuality, lesbianism and transgenderism. But many Americans still remain uncomfortable with the sexual upheavals that have taken place and their effect on the family. They both like and fear change, and are not always certain about how to respond.

At the same time, a hard core of resistance persists among groups who believe a wife's place is in the home, not the market place; that contraception and abortion are immoral; that only married couples should enjoy sex; that divorce is sinful; and that homosexuality, lesbianism, transgenderism and even sex education are all major threats to the well being and to the religious beliefs of society. The problem for those most hostile to change is finding a way to disseminate their message to the public without alienating them. They adopt several tactics including painting the past in unreal, idealistic terms. But their most effective weapon is to seize on hot-button issues that revolve around children.

Several factors are at work. Working mothers may feel guilty about not being home with their children. Families are also smaller, with concomitant greater demand on parents to pay more attention to their children. The benign neglect under which many children of earlier ages grew up is portrayed as a fearful thing. Children's activities, it is believed, need to be organized, and chauffeuring them is a major responsibility of the parents or caretakers. Education begins with nursery school, not kindergarten, and more is demanded of the schools than ever before. And the list could go on.

In short, the world of childhood is pictured as one of terrible dangers lurking everywhere. All of this adds to the guilt of the parents. In their defensiveness, they respond almost hysterically to that most frightful of all hot-button issues, child sexual abuse.

Child abuse, whether sexual or otherwise, is something society cannot condone. When it occurs it is sad, frightening and potentially traumatic and should not and must not be tolerated.

That said, it is not that easy to determine exactly where or when child abuse has taken place, and the uncertainty leads to all kinds of problems. To an overly fearful parent or overly zealous child therapist, almost anything can be interpreted as a sign of child sexual abuse.

To complicate the issue, at least since the time of Freud, many in the helping professions have believed that adults carry over the effects of childhood traumas into adulthood. Freud himself later described some adult recollections of their childhood sexual abuse as fantasy. But in the 1960s and 1970s, many of Freud's critics decried his re-evaluation as a cop-out.

Perhaps the watershed book in this debate was Ellen Bass and Laura Davis' 1988 book *The Courage to Heal*, which blamed many of the psychological ills of adults on incidents of

childhood molestation and emphasized that the cure could only come about through recovering memories.

An unwilling ally of the child-abuse hysteria was the federal government with the passage in 1974 of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, which created a well-funded federal bureaucracy devoted to ferreting out child abuse. This quixotic crusade was determined to wipe out child sexual abuse once and for all. Hot lines were established and professionals trained. No effort was too great, no charge too minor, to justify tracking down child abusers, no matter the age of the victims.

In the midst of all this hysteria, many therapists came to believe that the key to their adult client's problems was a repressed memory of childhood sexual abuse. Therapists perceived that their duty was to ferret out these memories by any means necessary. Many of those memories were clearly false, but that did not diminish the ardor of therapists and federal prosecutors.

The result was a twentieth-century witch trial of hundreds associated with the child-care industry. So persuasive was the belief in widespread child abuse that anyone who challenged it was accused of being a child abuser. Finally, in 1991 Elizabeth Loftus entered the fray with her book *Witness for the Defense*, co-authored with K. Ketcham. Herself a victim of child abuse, Loftus challenged much of what passed for recovered memories. If she appeared in court for the defense as an expert witness, prosecutors called her a "whore." Others simply charged her as being an unwitting accomplice of murderers and rapists.

Although most of those charged during this witch-hunt were eventually acquitted, many served long terms in jail, and some still serve, even though an increasing majority of the population now believes they may be innocent.

This was the sexual/judicial atmosphere when Bruce Rind and his colleagues published their meta-analysis of child/adult sexual interaction and the Northridge conference was held. Reaction was slow to gain momentum in both cases. Six months after the article appeared in the *Psychological Bulletin*, a web site operated by the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality attacked the study.

Founded by Charles Socarides, Benjamin Kaulinan and Joseph Nicolosi, this site is devoted to combating public and professional acceptance of homosexuality. Since many of the studies included in the Rind study involved same-sex interaction, they saw it as encouraging homosexuality, and mounted what could only be called a moralistic attack on it. Soon afterward, a right-wing Catholic newspaper, *The Wanderer*, joined in. Without reading the original article, the editors wrote that the Rind study attempted to demonstrate that adult-child sexual relations were beneficial and that it was also part of an effort to depathologize pedophilia.

Popular radio talk-show host Laura Schlessinger quickly gave the newspaper article national publicity. The uproar was intense and immediate as other conservative groups such as the Family Research Council emphasized the alleged tie between pedophilia and homosexuality. The resulting firestorm led to a congressional condemnation of the study, mostly by people who had never read it.

Even the American Psychological Association ran for cover, trying to disassociate itself from the Rind article instead of defending it on its scholarly merits.

In *Dr. Laura: The Unauthorized Biography*, Vickie L. Bane (1999) unflatteringly portrays Schlessinger as an insecure, aggressive woman, prone to attacking colleagues, who has undergone several major lifestyle changes, including an early divorce, a switch from classroom physiologist to radio therapist, a major affair with her original talk-show host, a remarriage, a delayed entrance into motherhood, and finally a return to the airwaves when her child was three.

Last and perhaps most influential was Schlessinger's return to Judaism in 1996 and to Orthodox Judaism in 1998. Her father was Jewish and mother Catholic, and upon her rededication, she saw her mission as to "help God perfect the world."

Schlessinger's attack on the Rind study exposes the real fear deep in the American psyche about child sexual encounters. Any research claiming that it might not always be traumatic is simply too threatening to tolerate.

And more attacks can be expected since the smear of "pedophile" has replaced the mid-century charge of "pinko" or "communist" by the self-appointed protectors of the American way of life.

The most vocal and most indiscriminate of such smear artists is Judith Reisman, a former songwriter for the children's television show *Captain Kangaroo*, who claims to see a direct link between pornography and pedophilia. She mounted her first attacks in the 1980s by charging the great sex researcher Alfred Kinsey with being a pedophile, and claiming he used data from known pedophiles in his 1948 landmark *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*.

Reisman, the only "researcher" given a grant by Meese Commission in its study of pornography during the mid-1980s, has made it a mission in life to discredit Kinsey. But her lawsuit against the Kinsey Institute backfired when she was ordered to pay the Institute \$50,000 in legal fees incurred while defending itself against her unsubstantiated and malicious charges - a sum which she has refused to pay.

Given her correlation between pornography and pedophilia, the Northridge conference seemed a natural target for another Reisman attack. Backed by her right-wing allies, including the John Birch Society, she charged me before a legislative committee with being a "self-confessed" pedophile. The result was a legislative audit of the Center for Sex Research at Northridge.

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Reisman's charges were ultimately dismissed and the Center cleared, though she continues to attack me. Since her definition of pedophilia is so nebulous, the accusations are not - so far - legally libelous, and she remains - for now - protected by the First Amendment. Unfortunately, however, apart from the personal anguish that such charges bring, I now find it professionally difficult to study the sexual activities of children under any condition - in particular, pedophilia.

Anyone in the US who disseminates or even possesses child porn is subject to prosecution. Any therapist who attempts to treat a pedophile - even someone who admits to fantasizing about

engaging in sex with an under-aged person - is required by law to turn that client over to the authorities, or risk arrest himself or herself

Researches into pedophilia thus have few sources to rely on - either the accounts of convicted pedophiles or the memories of children actually or allegedly sexually abused. The former are not particularly reliable, and the latter have often been manipulated by a therapist.

The only remaining source is the recollected memories of adults or near adults. And precisely this group furnished the data for the meta-analysis by Rind and his colleagues. Yet even their use of this secondhand data rendered them controversial. Their mere scholarly interest in pedophilia opened them to the charge of being pro-pedophilia, and by association pro-homosexuality, pro-premarital sex, pro-gender change, and so on.

Such blanket and irresponsible charges make headlines. But Reisman and Schlessinger will never turn the United States back to its mythical past. Their maneuvers are a delaying action, at best, while important sexual research goes wanting - particularly in the field of child/adult sexual interaction.

Dr. Vern Bullough (1928-2006) founded the Center for Sex Research at California State University in Northridge in the 1970s, and subsequently served as Dean, Faculty of Natural and Social Science, State University College at Buffalo, NY. He was awarded the title of Distinguished Professor of History and Social Sciences, and is now a State University of New York Distinguished Professor Emeritus. He was also recently awarded an honorary D. Sci for his research into sexuality.