

## **Researching and Theorizing the “Age Taboo” on Intergenerational Sexualities**

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*By means of an ethnographic project, Sarah Goode’s *Understanding and Addressing Adult Sexual Attraction to Children* aspires to better understand the self-conception and self-identification of pedophiles, with the ultimate aim of deconstructing the phenomenon by which culture demonizes pedophiles in order to better protect children. However, the approach adopted by Goode places age and age relations under a totalizing neurophysiological paradigm, marking a problematic theoretical turn under which queer youth are potentially denied the opportunity of expressing a legitimate voice in their own lived experiences.*

**KEYWORDS** *Age relations, child sexual abuse (CSA), children, essentialism, intergenerational intimacy, neurophysiology, paedophiles, queer theory, sexuality, youth*

Through her ethnographic research titled Minor-Attracted Adults Daily Lives Research Project, Goode gathered data from 56 self-identified pedophiles on a range of matters relevant to their lives, political ideals, and self-perceptions. Goode presents her findings thematically within the text of her 2010 *Understanding and Addressing Adult Sexual Attraction to Children* as constructing and negotiating identities (chapter 6), attraction and fantasies (chapter 7), experiences of support within online pedophile communities (chapter 8), and debates and dissent within the online pedophile community over the nature of relationships with children, specifically whether these should be built on a social and educational role or include a sexual component (chapter 9).

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Perhaps what is the most unusual aspect of the text is its engagement (however limited) with the community being studied. The value of the book can be seen in its opening chapters, with the explicit acknowledgment that the prevailing approach of demonizing pedophiles “makes the situation worse” (p. 168). Goode challenges the crass demonization of pedophiles perpetrated by the media, children’s charities, the child abuse industry, politicians, and law enforcement, arguing that “when individual people become so corrosively vilified, not because of what they *do* but because of what they *are*, it is certainly time that sociologists and other students of culture study this phenomenon” (p. 47, italics in original).

In a variety of online postings in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* website that appeared after the publication of the book, Goode detailed the considerable difficulties she encountered while conducting her research (Newman, 2009). Certainly, in terms of researching a subterranean population, which few have dared to even talk about, she can be added to a distinguished line of ethnographic sociologists such as Howard Becker (1953) and William Foote Whyte (1943). However, the litmus test of her research endeavor to help understand how pedophiles position themselves within their own community forums, and in relation to the wider society, comes about not just in analyzing the response of self-identified pedophiles but also analyzing the wider community’s behavior toward pedophiles. For example, vigilante attempts, draconian prison sentences, and constant vilification in the media are unlikely to encourage pedophiles to feel genuinely part of the community.

A crucial aspect of any critical ethnographic study should also involve a thorough ethical and self-reflexive probing of where one stands on the core epistemological and political questions that may arise from researching a sensitive subject and a highly stigmatized group (Becker, 1953). However, in Goode’s work there is clear tension between her expressed aim of “protecting children from abuse” (p. 2) and understanding the subjectivities of a group that rejects the very basis of her political assumptions. *Understanding and Addressing Adult Sexual Attraction to Children* is marketed by Routledge as “a valuable discussion on how adult sexual contact harms children and examples of a range of initiatives which work to protect children and prevent offending” (see back cover). Goode reinforces this political position by claiming “each chapter contributes to the goal of demystifying the whole field of adult sexual attraction to children, so that as a society we can all take a greater level of responsibility for protecting children from sexual abuse” (p. 2).

This leads to some of the limitations of Goode’s approach. First, she fails to fully theorize the implications of power/knowledge disparities when it comes to core epistemological issues of knowledge production, scientific veracity, which cultural stories are able to be disseminated, and the crucial role of specific interests in denying voices to marginalized groups such as

child lovers (Evans, 1993; Rubin, 1992). The central reason for this oversight is a naive adoption of an essentialist perspective on adult–child sexual relations and subsequent failure to engage with constructionist and deconstructionist insights on childhood.

Goode also displays a far from benign attitude toward her research respondents. Indeed, most of her final summation amounts to criticizing the positions supposedly adopted by self-identified pedophiles, while embracing the child sexual abuse (CSA) paradigm on adult–child sexual relationships. This, in turn, makes it very difficult to present the findings of her respondents as anything other than marginal or symptomatic of a distorted persona.

Goode continues to deploy stratified, hegemonic narratives on adult–child sexual relationships, rendering her attempt to situate the collected data into anything resembling coherence a fundamentally futile task. Her basically unreconstructed modernist approach to sexual epistemology ultimately fails to provide significant theoretical or practical insights. In contrast, Goode's reliance on developmental and neurophysiological approaches leads her down a blind alley—one which supposedly presents a liberal notion of progressive tolerance but which in fact ultimately binds sexual theory and praxis to a bureaucratic, monolithic regimen and consigns pedophiles to a sinister and dystopian future, with children too continually subjected to a panoptical regime of surveillance.

Goode's study inevitably has implications for topics of concern to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) studies, both in terms of practical impact and of the significance of the theoretical approach that the author adopts toward such questions. As to the former, a wealth of empirical and biographical data suggests that a significant proportion of young people have their first physical encounters with older individuals and that such encounters can be rewarding and affirmative (Rind, 2001; Rind, Tromovitch, & Bauserman, 1998; Sandfort, 1982; Waites, 2005). Goode's absolutist and universalizing approach, which mandates "inherent harm" (at a neurophysiological level) as the necessary outcome of every possible "sexual encounter" between a "child" and an "adult," has the effect of silencing queer youth, negating/invalidating the expression of their lived experiences by erasing the possibility of their voices entirely (Angelides, 2004; Kincaid, 1998). Consequently, their self-understanding, self-identification, and subjective sensibilities can make no possible difference when the "inevitability" of the outcome is preassigned by Goode.

Second, Goode sidesteps the significant contributions of gender studies and queer theory. At least since Foucault (1978), the very notion of sexuality can be considered, at best, as a contingent cultural image. Judith Butler's (1993) work on performativity has done the same for gender. More recently, we have finally begun to "queer the child" (Stockton, 2009), with the recognition of the need to critique unhelpful developmental models of "the child," viewed in terms of "growing up," achieving "genital maturity," and "maturing

into rational adulthood.” Deleuzian-inspired scholars (Braidotti, 2005/2006; Colebrook, 2009; Grosz, 2004; Parisi, 2004), working at the cutting-edge of queer theory, have taken us to the point whereby we can eradicate the notion of sex entirely, enabling us to approach queerness in terms of preindividual singularities and affective investments. These insights are sidestepped by Goode.

Finally, it might be observed that the deployment of “inevitable harm” narratives and biological essentialism in Goode’s work delineates precisely the mechanism by which arguments from morality can be reintroduced under the guise of “scientific objectivity.” When questions surrounding the production of subjectivities, cultural investments in normative images, and the operation of collective utterances are all wiped out in favor of instituting notions of “sex and the child” as preexisting stable entities, relevant epistemological questions—such as those surrounding the power/knowledge practices that have produced such fictions—are occluded, with the consequence that all we are left with is the repetition and circulation of existing stereotypes and mythologies (Yuill & Durber, 2008). Hence we see that Goode’s stated aim—to “protect children from abuse”—is invoked without any challenge to its inherent presuppositions: that “children” should be treated as a somehow distinct category, that “protection” is appropriate public policy, and that “child sexual abuse” is a helpful and substantive concept. All of which are doxa that must be challenged before any genuine engagement with the lived realities of queer youth can become possible.

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