

ARTICLE

From pederasty to pedophilia: Sex between children or youth and adults in U.S. history

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Abstract

The history of sexual relations between children or youth and adults in the United States has received limited attention in part because of the strong taboos against discussion of the topic. The growing moral panic about pedophilia in the 1980s, which coincided with the first wave of American historiography of sexuality, had a silencing effect. Historians of the family first broke the silence by researching the history of incest within the family, focusing on father–daughter relations. Later, in the 1990s, historians of childhood argued that age should be considered as a category of analysis within the history of sexuality. Many scholars have explored the role that age played in structuring same-sex male encounters, especially at the turn of the twentieth century. Others working in a range of disciplines have historicized the rhetoric of the “sexual psychopath” or the “pedophile,” and its effects. Much work remains to be done on multiple aspects of this topic.

1 | GAYLE RUBIN'S PREDICTION

In 1984, the anthropologist Gayle Rubin published her field-defining essay, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.” Rubin argued that the study of sexuality requires its own theoretical underpinnings distinct from feminist theory. Many key concepts that she introduced in the essay—such as the domino theory of sexual peril, and the charmed circle of sexuality—were adopted and circulated by other scholars. Another key point made by Rubin, however, dropped from the discourse like a hot potato. At the time she was writing, Rubin observed, the United States was in the grip of a wave of hysteria over child molestation. This hysteria served the purpose of shoring up normative sexual boundaries. But in 20 years, she predicted, the men and women persecuted by this wave of hysteria would be recognized as “victims of a savage and undeserved witch hunt” (Rubin, 1984, p.154). Rubin could not have gotten it more wrong.

More than three decades later, American hysteria over child abuse and child pornography has reached an even higher pitch. The child molester has become the go-to villain of Hollywood, television, journalism, and fiction. Laws have been strengthened and expanded to take into account new technologies, such as digital cameras and the internet. Instead of coming to view the anxieties around pedophilia as historically contingent, people today seem ever more convinced that present attitudes towards child sexual abuse represent a universal trans-historical taboo. When I teach Rubin's article, my students express shock at her willingness to entertain the possibility that the taboo against

pedophilia might one day weaken. A gender studies professor I know excerpts the article to remove Rubin's arguments about pedophilia because her students get so tripped up on this issue that they never move on to discussions of her other theories.

The strengthening of the taboo against child/adult sex during the last half century has had a powerful impact on the historiography. At a foundational level, the strengthened taboo has affected historians' abilities to frame questions about the past by introducing a new terminology that makes it difficult to examine the subject through a historicist lens. Words and phrases including pedophilia, molestation, and child sexual abuse, gained currency only after the 1950s, making them problematic terms of inquiry for earlier time periods. Yet, substitutions like "child/adult sex" or "intergenerational sex" can inspire negative reactions from contemporary readers, who might feel that such ostensibly neutral terms downplay the violence and harm involved. In this essay, I have tried to reserve the terms pedophilia and sexual abuse for discussions of the historical eras when they operated. For other eras, I have used either period-specific terms like "pederasty," or descriptive phrases, such as "intergenerational sex" and "adult/child sex." The latter phrase helpfully points to a central concern within this historiography: the question of how changing definitions of childhood have affected understandings of sex involving youth. Ultimately, explorations of this topic have depended as much on insights from the history of childhood as on insights from the history of sexuality.

2 | PEDERASTY AND THE HISTORY OF SEXUALITY

The earliest historians of sexuality expressed a strong interest in the subject of intergenerational sex between children or youth and adults. Take for example Hans Licht's *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece* (1926–1928), which helped to originate the history of sexuality as a field. Licht (a penname for the German scholar Paul Brandt) argued that sexuality played a central role in Ancient Greek life. His book discussed a range of topics including masturbation, lesbianism, prostitution, and pederasty, or erotic relationships between men and boys. According to Licht, understanding pederasty was "the key to the understanding of the whole of Greek culture" (Licht, 1956, p.413). The word pederasty, he explained, had no defamatory meaning in Hellenic times. *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece* was translated into English in 1932 and influenced historians of sexuality working on diverse times and places. Hellenic pederasty signified a point of historical contrast, which illustrated that sexual mores were culturally constructed rather than universal and trans-historical.

The example of Ancient Greek pederasty also served a foundational role in Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, which provides the theoretical basis for most of the historiography of American sexuality. Foucault conceptualized the *History of Sexuality* as a multi-volume series that would extend from the Ancient Greeks through modern times, although he died before he could complete the work. The first and best-known volume in the series introduced the project. Volume 2, *The Use of Pleasure*, examined Ancient Greece. Foucault sought to understand not simply why "the Greeks practiced, accepted, and valued relations between men and boys" but why they crafted a system of ethics that regulated this sexual practice (Foucault, 1990, p.97). According to Foucault, "what is historically singular is not that the Greeks found pleasure in boys, nor even that they accepted this pleasure as legitimate; it is that this acceptance of pleasure was not simple, and that it gave rise to a whole cultural elaboration" (Foucault, 1990, p.214).

Many scholars faulted Foucault's interpretation of the Ancient Greeks and criticized his reliance on translations of ancient texts (Richlin, 2013). But one of his leading interpreters, the classicist David Halperin, agreed that the example of Greek pederasty was a powerful illustration of the historical construction of sexuality. Halperin reiterated Foucault's argument that the ancient Greeks did not see a man who preferred sex with boys as a different type of person from a man who favored women (Halperin, 1989). As a founder of the influential journal, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Halperin had a great impact on the development of the field of the history of sexuality, following Foucault's death. *GLQ* promoted historical interpretations that treated object-choice identity categories like homosexual and lesbian as modern inventions. But this Foucauldian interpretation became disconnected from the history of pederasty which had informed its origins. The first wave of American historians to apply Foucault's theories to the

United States traced the emergence of homosexual and lesbian identities, while paying far less attention to the development of the category of the pedophile and its associated practice of intergenerational sex. The emergence of the history of sexuality had perfectly coincided with the growing strength of the taboo against pedophilia to unsurprising effects. Facing a strong anathema against any perceived normalization of intergenerational sex, many historians were reluctant to delve too deeply into the history of the practice.

When U.S. historians in the 1980s did address the topic of sex between children and adults, they treated it as ancillary to their primary concerns. Take for example the work of two founders of the field, George Chauncey and Estelle Freedman. In Chauncey's groundbreaking 1985 essay exploring the emergence of modern sexual identity categories in the United States, as captured in the evidence collected by a 1919 naval inquiry into sexual immorality conducted in Newport, Rhode Island, he paid little attention to age despite the rich evidence in his sources. The naval inquiry records indicated a wide variety of identities at play in Newport's queer subculture. Those identities included *brownies*, *pogues*, and *fairies*, terms which were defined by gender or by proclivities towards specific sexual acts. The records also included multiple instances in which same-sex encounters were described as involving boys (Chauncey, 1985). The use of the term *boy* raised questions about the role of childhood in constructing definitions of sexuality, but Chauncey did not give these questions the same attention that he gave to the role of gender. Later, he corrected this oversight (Chauncey, 1993; Chauncey, 1995). In Chauncey's book *Gay New York*, he acknowledged that "some sexual relationships were organized on the basis of a power and status hierarchy dictated by age rather than by gender" (Chauncey, 1995, p.88). Certain men defined themselves as "active pederasts" or "wolves" who desired penetrative sexual encounters with youths or "punks." In fact, as many as 40% of prosecutions for homosexual offences in early New York were generated by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and concerned sexual encounters involving boys. Nonetheless, Chauncey argued, these age-structured same-sex encounters were best understood through the lens of gender. Older male penetrators were seen as performing a manly role, and their younger slighter partners were seen as passive and effeminate.

A similar emphasis on gender over age can be seen in Estelle Freedman's work. Freedman's 1987 essay on the emergence of ideas about the "sexual psychopath" in the mid-twentieth century highlighted the central role that fears of child molestation played in the era's sex crime panics. Freedman argued, however, that the psychopath literature only "played on fears of child molestation" to achieve a deeper purpose of regulating gender in the light of shifting sexual norms (Freedman, 1987, p.103). In fact, the manipulation of this taboo to anathematize gay men offers one possible reason why historians of sexuality avoided the topic. Some historians likely did not want to strengthen a discourse that had been used to systematically oppress gay men. Writing about the history of the discourse of the sexual psychopath could disarm homophobia; writing about the history of sex between adults and children—and especially between men and boys—held the potential to feed homophobia. The solution was to avoid the topic. In 1988, Freedman and John D'Emilio published the first textbook to synthesize the new history of sexuality within the United States. *Intimate Matters* barely mentioned sex with children in its 800 pages, beyond a handful of references to incest (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1997). Such oversights within the first wave of the history of sexuality led feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon to decry the field in a 1990 essay. MacKinnon argued that historians of sexuality wrote only about subjects that made them feel sexy, and missed the real history of sexuality, which was men's timeless abuse of girls and women (MacKinnon, 1991).

MacKinnon's argument about the timelessness of the abuse of girls and women found little traction among historians. Many feminist historians during the 1990s, like Ruth Alexander, Regina Kunzel, and Mary E. Odem, were pushing back against timeless assumptions and questioning when and why adolescent female sexuality became the target of social reformers and legal authorities (Alexander, 1995; Kunzel, 1993; Odem, 1995). This new literature revealed the historical contingency of categories such as *adolescent* as well as *girl*, *boy*, and *child*. Although this historiography paid little attention to the subject of sex between children and adults *per se*, it contributes to our understandings of how the boundaries of youth changed over time, as well as the role that sexuality played in fixing those boundaries. New age of consent laws defined adolescence as a category of young women who could not legitimately engage in non-marital sexual relations, while adolescent girls fought to establish their sexual autonomy.

This historiography demonstrates that one must always keep in mind the lack of historical fixity of categories of childhood when considering the history of sex between children or youth and adults.

3 | INCEST AND THE HISTORY OF THE FAMILY

During the 1980s, feminist historians of the family paid greater attention to the history of sex between adults and children than historians of sexuality did. The work of family historians followed the “rediscovery” of the problem of incest by feminist activists beginning in the early 1970s. Shulamith Firestone argued for feminist action against child sexual abuse in her 1970 manifesto *The Dialectic of Sex*. Florence Rush gave a passionate speech against incest at the first New York Radical Feminists' conference on rape in 1971. *Ms.* magazine published an article on incest in April 1977 that was widely cited and distributed. These feminist texts defined incest as a form of patriarchal violence perpetrated by male family members against female children (Clancy, 2009, p.77–93). Soon, feminist historians began to seek historical context for this contemporary problem.

Historian Linda Gordon came out of a feminist political context. She was a founding editor of the *Journal of Women's History*. In 1984, together with Paul O'Keefe, she published “Incest as a Form of Family Violence: Evidence from Historical Case Records,” which looked at sources from the Boston area dated between 1880 and 1960. In the essay's opening paragraphs, Gordon and O'Keefe declared that they did not approach their research from a “value-free” position, but from an engaged concern with public health. Like Firestone and Rush, Gordon and O'Keefe argued that incest was common. One in ten social work cases from a random sample of their historical sources involved allegations of incest. In all but one of the cases, the perpetrator was an older male, and in almost every case the victim was a younger female. In a very small number of cases, boys had also been abused along with their sisters. Gordon and O'Keefe interpreted the history of incest as an outgrowth of patriarchal family structures and stressed its harmful impact on children (Gordon, 1984). Gordon reiterated these arguments in her 1988 book about domestic violence, *Heroes of Their Own Lives*. For most of the twentieth century, Gordon explained, social workers had assumed that incest was incredibly rare, and as a result, no one had researched the history of this form of family violence. It was the feminist rediscovery of incest that had allowed “the first historical consideration” of the problem to emerge (Gordon, 1988, p.208).

Other feminist historians of the family extended Linda Gordon's work. Elizabeth Pleck discussed incest at length in her influential work, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of American Social Policy Against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present*. Like Gordon, Pleck treated incest as a common form of family violence (Pleck, 1987). Joan Sangster examined the history of incest and the family in Ontario in the early twentieth century in her work *Regulating Girls and Women* (Sangster, 2001). Other scholars examined how medical authorities in the United States constructed a conspiracy of silence about incest (Evans, 2006; Sacco, 2009). Rachel Devlin's work complicated this picture; according to Devlin, psychoanalysts and other clinicians did speak about father–daughter incest, but in ways that nonetheless shored up patriarchy rather than undermined it (Devlin, 2005). Scholars from Gordon onwards have also made note of how discourse about incest has shored up racial, ethnic, religious, and class hierarchies. In the Boston area, early social reformers often depicted incest as an Irish problem, or a Catholic problem, not a concern within the middle-class Protestant family. Other scholars have written about the lack of attention to the sexual abuse of Black girls, who were denied the assumption of sexual innocence extended to White girls. The growing body of work on the history of incest, however, has had little to say about boys. Perhaps this reflects the genealogy of the discussion, which emerged from feminist attention to patriarchal violence against women and girls. Even if the majority of victims of incest are girls, the history of incest's male subjects still needs to be written.

After the rediscovery of incest within feminist circles, the psychohistorian Lloyd DeMause took up the topic. In his work, the historiographical pendulum swung from the earlier mode of total denial to the opposite extreme. DeMause argued that incest was almost a universal practice throughout history. He estimated that in the contemporary United States, 60% of girls and 45% of boys had experienced childhood sexual abuse, if not by their parents, then

in ways that implicated their parents (DeMause, 1991). DeMause's psychohistorical theories did not represent mainstream historical thought. But his work shared in common with the work of historians of the family a new consensus that incest was far more common in the past than had previously been acknowledged.

4 | PEDOPHILIA AND THE HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD

The history of the family in turn gave rise to a new field, the history of childhood, which gained popularity during the 1990s. This field examined children and youth both within and without the family. The organizing principles of the field are that childhood is a constructed category that changes over time and place, and that historians need to pay attention to age as a category of historical analysis. These insights have helped to fuel a new wave of work on intergenerational sex that extends beyond incest within the family, and beyond the subject of girls as victims.

Stephen Maynard's 1997 essay "'Horrible Temptations': Sex, Men, and Working-Class Male Youth in Urban Ontario, 1890–1935," was one of the first works of scholarship to apply the insights of the history of childhood to the subject of intergenerational sex in North America. At the article's outset, Maynard acknowledged that "sexual relations between boys and men have generated little interest among historians" (Maynard, 1997, p.191). His essay would help to launch a new field of inquiry. Maynard's research in the case files of criminal prosecutions for sexual encounters between boys and men in turn-of-the-century Ontario turned up a mix of "danger and desire" familiar within the history of sexuality. Maynard pushed back against taboo by asserting that sexual encounters between men and boys were marked by consent and coercion. Many working-class boys willingly traded sex for food, shelter, money, entertainment, and companionship. Not all encounters were brief pick-ups. Some boys formed "elaborate, long-lasting relationships with the men they met" (Maynard, 1997, p.209). And although the law treated such relations harshly, many working-class communities saw them as ordinary. Parents did not always object to their sons' relationships with men. At a time when many boys worked in dangerous conditions, parents had greater worries to keep them up at night.

In U.S. historiography, Stephen Robertson was one of the first scholars to insist on the "importance of age as a prism that shaped how twentieth-century Americans saw gender, sexuality, and identity" (Robertson, 2001, p.6). His essay on theories of psychosexual development in the mid-twentieth century paid attention not only to the discourse of the "sexual psychopath," familiar from the work of Estelle Freedman, but also to the effects those theories had on childrearing and the treatment of boys. Peter Boag built on the research of both George Chauncey and Stephen Maynard in his 2003 study of male same-sex relationships in the Pacific Northwest, a region he defined as straddling the United States and Canada. Boag found many examples of sexual relationships between older male "wolves" or "jockers" and young adolescent "punks," the same terms that emerged from Chauncey's sources. But Boag drew on the history of childhood to differentiate the identities of adolescent punks from those of effeminized adult fairies. His analysis highlighted "the centrality of sexuality to changing social views of children at this time" (Boag, 2003, p.60). Sexuality was key to new concepts of adolescence, a development which inflected how jocker-punk relationships were experienced.

While the development of ideas about adolescence brought changes to intergenerational same-sex male relationships at the turn of the twentieth century, there remained continuities linking these relationships to past analogues. Most significantly, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many relationships between adult men and adolescent boys involved the exchange of money or goods. Cultural anthropologist Kerwin Kaye explored this continuity in his 2004 article in the *Journal of Homosexuality*, which synthesized much of the extant secondary and primary literature on the topic. Like Stephen Maynard, Kaye found that working-class youth had a long history of participating in sex work. But the meanings of the work changed over time in response to the emergence of the hetero/homo binary and the rise of the gay rights movement (Kaye, 2004). Building on Kaye's work, historian Don Romesburg focused in on the early decades of the twentieth century to examine how developmental ideas about male maturation shaped the policing of boy sex-workers. Romesburg argued that the "boy" sex worker was not understood simply in

gendered terms as a feminized body. Rather, boyhood was “a product differentiation that coupled performances of youth and maleness with a particular affinity for pleasuring the male body in a way supposedly exceeding the abilities of competing female prostitutes” (Romesburg, 2009, p.376). Age mattered, in short.

Historians of childhood have also shown interest in historicizing the subject of sex between adults and girls. Stephen Robertson compared the prosecutions of sex crimes against boys and girls in New York City during the first half of the twentieth century. He found that initially, the courts did not recognize boys as potential rape victims, but those attitudes changed in the mid-twentieth century, when the hardening of the homo/hetero binary made authorities more sensitive to the damage done to boys by sexual assault (Robertson, 2006). Nicholas Syrett focused his attention solely on girls in his 2016 history of child brides in the United States, from Independence through the modern era. Ideas about early marriage have changed over time, Syrett argued, as ideas about childhood have changed. In the colonial era, people did not believe there were precise ages when a person should go to school, start working, or get married. Only during the late nineteenth century, as ideas about childhood as a separate life stage developed, did early marriage begin to seem out of the norm. States began to impose minimum ages for marriage. Nonetheless, Syrett argues that before the 1920s, objections to child marriages were “not framed around the issue of sex or sexual exploitation” (Syrett, 2016, p.4). Critics worried more about how youthful marriage abbreviated the childhoods of girls. As a consequence of this absence of historical concern about pedophilia, Syrett's book has less to say about the history of sexuality than one might expect.

So how and when did contemporary ideas about pedophilia take hold? Literary theorist James Kincaid influenced thinking on this topic with his controversial 1992 book *Child-Loving*, which argued for the central importance of the “pedophile” in the modern cultural imagination (Kincaid, 1992). A few years later, Philip Jenkins traced the development of the trope of the pedophile-monster in his book *Moral Panic*, which placed the late-twentieth century hysteria over child molestation into a historical context. Jenkins, like the historians of the family writing in the 1980s, argued that before the 1970s, the psychological literature often treated sexual relations between adults and children as infrequent and non-harmful. Traditionally, English common law had placed the age of sexual consent at 10 years old. States began to increase this age limit piecemeal in the late nineteenth century, and during the Progressive era a new discourse emerged that described men who had sexual relations with children as monstrous and perverted. However, during the mid-twentieth century, psychiatrists and other authorities pushed back against this discourse. State legislatures limited powers of forcible commitment, and the courts shifted to de-criminalization, de-carceration, and de-institutionalization of people found guilty of having sexual contact with children. Offenders became known as “child molesters,” a term that carried less negative connotation than the alternatives “sexual psychopath” and “pedophile.” But the rhetoric of pedophilia came roaring back with a vengeance during the 1980s. The feminist revolution focused attention on “child abuse,” a new term used to describe both battering and sexual molestation. Activists cited inflated statistics about rates of incest. Lurid stories circulated about pedophile rings and serial child murderers. A revolutionary shift in attitudes took place that elevated the fear of pedophilia to a “national demonology” (Jenkins, 1998, p.190).

Jenkins's work has prompted many responses. Some scholars have questioned Jenkins's framework of the “moral panic,” arguing for the application of other theoretical models like Foucaultian biopower, or psychoanalytic thought, to explain the American cultural fixation with the pedophile (Angelides, 2004; Chenier, 2012). Other scholars have used Jenkins as a launching point for more focused inquiries. Simon Cole made reference to Jenkins's work in the opening sentence of his study of the evolution of the treatment of sex criminals in New Jersey during the second half of the twentieth century. Cole argued that over the period of his study beliefs about the “sickness” of child molesters passed from the specialized realm of medical knowledge to the received wisdom of the culture (Cole, 2000). Chrysanthi Leon focused on the evolution of sex crime policy in California during the twentieth century in her 2011 book. Following Jenkins's periodization, Leon tracked changes in punishment from the emergence of the idea of the sexual psychopath, through the era of rehabilitative thinking, to the present era of extreme containment. Leon's work historicized the “sex offender punishment boom” that took place beginning in the 1980s, and argued for the harmful effects of the hysterical rhetoric that made pedophiles into bogeymen (Leon, 2011, p.167).

Several works have focused on critical moments in the evolution of the contemporary taboo against pedophilia. Jim Downs discussed the scandal that erupted in 1977 following the publication of an article titled "Men Loving Boys Loving Men" in the Toronto-based gay newspaper *The Body Politic*. Opposition to the article came not just from conservative critics and legal authorities, but from within the collective that published the paper. Many readers objected as well, and argued that pedophilia should not be included within the gay rights movement (Downs, 2016). A similar debate erupted 15 years later. Joshua Gamson, a sociologist, studied the expulsion of the North American Man Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) from the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) in 1993. The split came in response to the United Nation's approval of the ILGA as an advisory group, which prompted Republicans within the United States government to threaten U.N. funding unless the international body would certify that no money would be given to groups that condoned pedophilia. The ILGA swiftly expelled NAMBLA and two similar groups, but not without protest by NAMBLA who asserted that pederasts were "part of the gay movement and central to gay history and culture" (Gamson, 1997, p.186). Gamson's research revealed how strengthening taboos against pedophilia during the 1980s had an effect that extended beyond the present to understandings of the past.

5 | CONCLUSION

NAMBLA's complaint that pederasts were being expunged from the past and the present was not without grounds. To this day, the history of sexual relations between children and adults remains understudied in relation to the frequency of the practice, its prominence in the cultural imagination, and its significance in contemporary politics. Although American popular culture is overrun with the latest exposés of child abuse scandals in the nation's schools and churches, historians have hardly begun to provide the much-needed context for making sense of these narratives. I know from private conversations that some scholars remain worried that any efforts to historicize the topic of sex between children and adults will imperil their careers. They have good reason for these fears, considering the backlash that has been directed at scholars who have tackled the subject in the past (Levine, 2002). As Elise Chenier observed in a recent essay on pedophilia, "For most people, the whole topic is either best avoided, or it arouses such a strong emotional reaction that careful contemplation is quite simply not possible" (Chenier, 2012, p.173). Much remains unknown. Although the handful of historians who have worked on intergenerational sexuality, and especially intergenerational male same-sex relations, have paid close attention to class and gender, they have had less to say about the operations of race. The subject of intergenerational sexuality involving women and girls outside the family circle has also received little attention. There are many unanswered questions, for example, about the intergenerational dynamics present within lesbian bars in American cities during the twentieth century. Any student of the history of sexuality looking to make an original mark in the field will find plenty of opportunity within this historiography, if they are willing to risk the consequences. But that is a risk they should consider carefully.

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