

Man-Boy Lovers: Assessment, Counseling, and Psychotherapy

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SUMMARY. Clinical experiences with 36 males, between the ages of 21 and 60 are described. All of them felt an enduring sexual attraction for boys. Sixteen males were treated for sexual identity conflicts. For eight of them this ended in a positive self-labeling as pedophile, the others had severe problems with accepting sexuality as positive and lustful. Twenty males were treated for identity management problems and counseled how to handle their relationships with boys. Several modalities of interpersonal interaction in man-boy relationships are proposed and the ways conflicts can arise within these frames of reference are explored in counseling and psychotherapy.

The Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Utrecht, started sexual counseling in 1974. Until 1980 most people came for the treatment of sexual dysfunctions and only a few for gender dysphoria problems or problems around paraphilia. I was contacted by the police department of Utrecht. According to the penal law in The Netherlands, any form of sexual behavior between an adult and a minor under the age of 16 is considered a criminal act for the adult (Article 247 of the Dutch Penal Code that dates from 1886). In 1950

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84% of all punished sex crimes involved a minor under the age of 16, this figure was 51% in 1971, and 28% 1982.

The police recognized that in many cases involving sexual contact with boys and girls between the ages of 11 to 15, the youths were consenting participants. The police department asked if referral to our clinic was possible. An agreement based on three points was reached: (1) the adult must request psychological advice or treatment, (2) the court case must be non-violent, (3) no manifestation of severe psychiatric symptoms as delusions or depression.

During 1980-1985 nine men were referred. As the opportunity for counseling and psychotherapy became known, other men not involved in court cases came to the clinic. This article is based on clinical experiences with 36 males between the age of 21 and 60. Of the total, 31 felt exclusively attracted to boys, the others felt attracted to both boys and girls but their attraction to boys was stronger. This article describes assessment, counseling and psychotherapy with these men. A theoretical outline is given for each procedure.

THEORIES ON SEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

The definition of man-boy relationships differs in penal law, moral and ethical discussion, and in psychiatric classification. The penal code concentrates on the ages of those involved and on the question of what precisely is sexual in their contact. The moral and ethical discussion centers around dimensions of responsibility, power and abuse and around the relationships of adults and children from a general perspective. And when the term pedophilia is used in psychiatric classifications, the onset of the biological puberty divides the child from the no longer child. To understand the psychological meaning of any sexual contact however, we need other criteria.

Sexual contact between two adult men is homosexual, but if one of them, deliberately and skillfully "plays the female," it's a situation that is psychologically different from sexual contact in which both "play the male." And if two 11 year-old boys masturbate each other out of curiosity, the psychological meaning of this behavior is

quite different from the situation in which they do the same thing, playing “mom and dad.”

The problem of naming and classifying sexual relationships is described in Michael Ross's article, “A theory of normal homosexuality” (1987) in which he names 16 different aspects and meanings of sexual relationships. We can argue about the number of meanings we want to consider, but it is inevitable that we use some psychological frame of reference if we want to evaluate a particular sexual desire. Otherwise we come to circular definitions in that a sexual desire is a desire for sex and that a pedophilic desire is a desire for children, definitions that are interesting but not illuminating. Starting from a subjective point of view, we can ask what meaning a person attaches to sexuality.

Some people see their sexual behavior as the consequence of sexual desire. They have no specific sexual orientation, in fact they like all kinds of people, male and female, child and adult, and if they have the opportunity, they will have sexual contact or a sexual relationship with a person they feel attracted to. On the other end of the continuum are people who see their sexual behavior as the consequence of a more specific sexual desire, either innate, acquired, or a mixture of both. Scientific theories are mostly on the side of people in the latter category, following Freud's (1905, 1953) idea of a polymorphous sexual instinct (desire) that differentiates in the course of life and fixates on certain objects (male, female, child) or certain behaviors (sadism, masochism).

Most psychosexual development theories take heterosexual desires and commitments as the norm. What happens in a boy's mind that leads him to become interested in girls and want to have emotional, erotic and sexually meaningful relationships with at least one of them? This process is poorly understood. Psychodynamic, behavioral and cognitive explanations differ considerably. Nevertheless it seems that if the outcome is successful, most boys become interested in girls at a certain age and implicitly or explicitly this heterosexual interest is the “natural” outcome of the process. But why do some persons become homosexual, pedophile, sado-masochistic and so on?

The theories on homosexual identity development (see Minton and McDonald, 1984 for an overview) agree on one point: preho-

mosexual boys realize at a certain age that they are different, that they are not the same as their peers. It's not homosexual *behavior* that initiates these thoughts, it's *the interpretation*, the cognitive structuring of events that leads to the attribution "I'm different, maybe I'm homosexual." This is beautifully described in Edmund White's *A boy's own story* in which two boys have sex but both interpret the relationship in a completely different way. For one the contact is just fun, the other realizes that the sexual relationship is meaningful for him in an intense, emotional way. Psychosexual development is in most theories a discovery of something that was "always there" and a person gradually realizes what his sexual desires are by a process of sensitization, structuring and self-labeling.

For some men this structuring process is without internal conflicts: they accept their feelings at an early age, only slightly confused by the fact that others see them as sinful, psychologically or socially deviant. But for a considerable number becoming homosexual is not that easy and there are different ways to cope with the fact that one feels attracted to men or boys and to integrate this feeling in one's self concept. I agree with Minton and McDonald that unity, consistency and continuity of a person's perception of himself are the criteria a counselor should make to decide if there is an identity conflict.

The reasons for identity conflicts can be diverse. It is the insecurity, the often chaotic memory of things, the inconsistency in partner choice and the general disorder in speaking and thinking of the meaning of sexuality that are clinical indications for an identity conflict. Some men succeed in effectively using systems of denial (Tripp, 1975) by practicing homosexuality without having to admit to themselves or to others that they are homosexual and in doing so deny the existence of an identity conflict. The man who always, in his sexual contacts with other men, acts as a masculine male in a male-female relationship can have a consistent idea of himself as heterosexual up to the moment he meets a partner he likes who does not want to accept that role. The identity conflict can come up after years of an undisturbed bisexual life.

Developing a sexual identity is in fact making sense of one's behavior, fantasies, intellectual, and emotional attachments. What

counts is the structuring of behavior and desire. The labels used in common and scientific language (hetero-homo-bisexual, pedophile, sado-masochist) are frames of reference a person uses in his lifetime to give unity, consistency and continuity to his sexuality. We have to realize that there are probably a lot of people who structure their behavior and desire without any label of sexual preference.

ASSESSMENT OF THE SEXUAL IDENTITY

I used the criteria of unity, consistency and continuity in the intake procedure with these 36 males. I asked them to explain in their own words how they saw themselves sexually and what, in their view, were their problems. Although all males reported sexual attraction to adolescent boys, their self-labeling was different. Twenty males saw themselves as pedophiles, 14 were hesitant and two saw themselves definitely as not pedophile. Those who considered themselves pedophiles gave self-definitions strongly linked to their sexual desire. In their psychosexual development most of them had had sexual experiences with females or other males, but they found these experiences sexually unsatisfying and were, at the beginning of therapy, motivated to have intimate relationships only with adolescent boys. None of them felt attracted to pre-pubertal boys; in fact, most of them considered this kind of desire highly abnormal.

The 14 males who were hesitant were more heterosexual. Some of them were sexually experienced, both homo-, heterosexual, with adults and boys. In the sexual biography of others we found only incidental contacts with a boy and no sexual contacts with adults. Some males were married and found the contacts with their female partners and the adolescent boys equally satisfying although different. In this category were all 10 males who felt attracted to both pre-pubertal and adolescent boys, one male who felt attraction to pre-pubertal boys and three who experienced only attraction to adolescent boys. The two males who did not consider themselves pedophiles were the ones who wanted conversion therapy. They strongly condemned their sexual desires and wanted to be rid of them.

There was an almost perfect correlation between the problems

these 36 men reported and their self-description. Those who considered themselves pedophiles wanted to talk about their relationships with boys, they complained about the absence of social support, and were not very interested in talking about their past. Those who hesitated and/or wanted conversion therapy were confused about the meaning of their desires and wanted to talk about how they had to structure them in their psychosexual life.

In line with the ideas on homosexual identity development, I diagnosed those 16 males who didn't see themselves as pedophiles and who didn't want conversion of their desires as having an identity conflict. They all were confused, some mildly, some very strongly, about their feelings towards boys. I tried to structure their thoughts and feelings by asking them to describe as accurately as possible the interactions they had had with boys and the feelings they had experienced in the relationships. All males reported feelings of guilt, low self-esteem and depressive moods. Another characteristic was an extreme concern about their erotic and sexual feelings being found out. Often the therapist was the first person with whom they spoke about pedophilia. They carefully avoided public situations where their preference could be detected.

I presented some affirmative models of man-boy love by giving them biographies in which both men and boys spoke about their relationships in a positive way and asked them to discuss these models with me. For eight men this strategy was successful within 10 therapy sessions, leading to positive self-labeling as a pedophile. For eight others this method didn't change their negative feelings and confusion. It was remarkable that they all had had a strong sex-negative upbringing that seemed to influence all thoughts about their sexual self. They made a severe distinction between sex and love, seeing sex as essentially dirty or degrading and defining love in a very romantic way. With these we set the primary goal of therapy not as coming to terms with pedophilia but in overcoming negative feelings concerning sexuality and sexual relationships. We were only partially successful in this strategy as five males discontinued therapy. The remaining three became more positive on sexuality but still found it difficult to structure their feeling on man-boy interactions. In fact, all three thought of themselves as homosexuals after the confrontation with the biographies. We think these results

were possible within the conceptual framework presented to them, in which sexual identity was defined as the subjective perception of one's self. In all cases we ended the identity formation phase as soon as the client had coherence in his positive feelings on what sexuality meant for him.

TWO KINDS OF IDENTITY CONFLICTS

Although the men with sexual identity conflicts were remarkably similar in their insecurity and in the fact that of dissociation of sexual feelings from other parts of their personality, the counseling sessions affirmed that identity conflicts are diverse. A sex-negative upbringing is very destructive in building a sexual identity, while sex, especially the sensual enjoyment of one's own body and that of the partner, is seen as sinful and against nature. This idea is often internalized at a very young age and expresses itself later in life in many ways: fear of touching and being touched, all kinds of defense mechanisms, a strong desire to control interpersonal relationships, especially as emotions enter, and so on. Regardless of the fact that these men feel attracted to boys, they are *sexually* dysfunctional. Disorders in desire, arousal and orgasm have a high frequency in this group.

Some of these men are afraid to enter the adult world. They exhibit Peter Pan complex, and idealize youth. Sex with a boy one likes and admires is for them an unhealthy affair for which one ought to be punished. I noticed a lot of sex fetishism in these men (see Hoffman, 1968, for an analysis of this phenomenon in the gay world) — sexual excitement by either a part of his sexual partner's body (the boy's buttocks) or by an object or situation that has an over importance of fantasies and desires (boy's clothes or shoes). A certain degree of fetishism is present in everybody, but clinically it's rather easy to differentiate between a preference for something from an obsession with it.

Do these men use their fetishes as a defense against sensual emotions in a much broader context, or is it the taboo on these emotions that produces the fetishes? I'm inclined to accept the latter interpretation purely on a speculative base. A sex-negative upbringing can result in all kinds of psychological stress, the main problem being

that one learns that sexuality is always a problem, dirty and lustful at the same time.

IDENTITY MANAGEMENT OR REALIZATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

If an adult male wants sexual contact with a boy under the age of 16 (the age of consent in The Netherlands), he is confronted with two problems. One is the legal situation that makes him conceal these contacts and relationships. The other is that there are almost no role models for adult men on how to interact with boys and vice-versa. A lot of pedophiles live in a constant fear of being arrested or blackmailed. Especially after detection and arrest, they often suffer shock and severe depression. Counseling in these cases means that one tries to restore their self-esteem. He is treated as a criminal for contacts and relationships that he doesn't see as criminal and the confrontation with the legal reality is often painful; it hurts one's self concept and more specifically one's self-esteem. As one of my clients said, after he was arrested: "They want a criminal, not a boy-lover, but a child-molester. Sometimes I consider a rape, so they can be really satisfied." I sometimes played the devil's advocate by telling them: "Okay, you say you had a good relationship with this boy and I think you are a child-molester. Tell me about that relationship, what was so good about it?" They were forced to think over the meaning of the relationship and had to reflect on its non-sexual aspects. I also used this method with men not arrested or convicted because I think that even if the legal situation is changed and man-boy relationships are permitted, every pedophile is confronted with the fact that he desires contact that is uncommon and condemned in our society. A man-boy relationship is doubly stigmatized in that it is a homosexual affair and ignores the generation gap, which is as great a taboo in our society. In fact, unless they are your own children, an adult is expected not to be emotionally interested in children. The school system is based on the idea that the relationship between a teacher and a pupil is instrumental, not emotional.

One of the men was a teacher of mathematics and often had out-

side contact with boys from his classes. He had no intention of having sexual contacts with these boys for fear of losing his job. His colleagues protested against these contacts from fear not of pedophilia, but because such contacts undermined their authority. Outside the family system, emotional ties between adults and children are not reinforced but frowned upon. I confronted the men about this. How can one manage an emotional relationship with a boy in a social context when its value is not seen? Three studies (Rossman, 1976; Sandfort, 1981; and Reeves, 1983) have shown that man-boy relationships exist in our society and that they can be enjoyed by both partners.

From these studies I extracted four modes of interpersonal interaction:

1. Fun and games. This relationship gives a person the opportunity to realize the sensation of sexual pleasures in a context that is playful and non-committed.
2. The affective. In the relationship, love, friendship, or other forms of emotional attachment are important to a person and he tries to get as much satisfaction as possible.
3. The economic. The interactions are regulated by means of a financial agreement. The boy defines his role as a prostitute, the man sees sex as a commodity he has to pay for.
4. Sexual identity formation or exploration. One or both partners explore what sexuality means to them. The sexual interaction can be casual and not very important, or the most meaningful way to develop emotional bonding with a person and to define oneself as a sexual being.

Men who had a certain coherence in their self-concept as a pedophile or a boy-lover would unconsciously realize this in the context of the relationships described above. We have no data on the boys, but we suppose, on basis of the research described above, that these models were present in their minds too. Conflicts in a man-boy relationship can arise in several ways:

1. The partners in a relationship see the situation in completely different ways. What for the adult is a very passionate, intense feeling, is for the boy just fun. Or the adult is focused on playful, non-committed sex, while the boy is hungry for affection and attachment.
2. A person consciously structures the relationship on a certain modality, while expecting that the expression of his feelings on another modality would be more satisfying. We find this situation in relationships which on the surface appear to be all fun and games, with one or both of the partners denying the affective components of their interactions, not knowing how to express them.

The men were first encouraged to talk as freely as possible in detail about an actual relationship they had with a boy. They were also asked to tell as much as possible about meaningful relationships they had had in the past, both with boys and with adults. I structured what was said in the modalities described. I then analyzed with the men how conflicts between partners arise. First by misunderstanding the others motive's, second by wanting to get something in a relationship but not being able to realize this. I explained the man-boy interaction as a form of social skill based on a pattern of expectations of what one wants from an interaction. In fact I tried to analyze the sexual scripts the men used in their interactions and to contrast these with the ideas they had on interactions.

1. Eight males defined the actual relationships they had had only within the fun and games modality, describing in detail how important it was that the boys be playful, sexually active, good-looking and extroverted. All these men had problems with attachment and found it difficult to manage a long-term relationship with a boy. They described the ideal relationship in terms of attachment, but they thought it impossible to realize this with boys. It was explained to them how difficult it is to realize emotional commitment in a relationship if one is only focused on the sexual aspects of social interactions. They were asked to pay more attention to the motives of the boys, and given examples of conflicts that can arise between an adult

and an adolescent and asked what they would do to solve this conflict. After 12 to 18 sessions three men said they were capable of realizing emotional commitment. The others found it too difficult and restricted themselves to casual sexual encounters with boys.

2. The other 12 men gave a lot of meaning to the affective modality in their relationships but often felt frustrated because boys could not handle such a situation. I explained to them the psychosexual development of adolescent boys and the way most boys discover their sexual feelings and code them as heterosexual. So, it was not strange that most boys had difficulty in relating sexuality and affection in a man-boy relationship. I then presented possible conflicts to them. This proved to be more successful with these men, as 10 reported that they got more satisfaction out of their relationships; the other two were very passionate in their feeling. Conflicts between them and their partners continued because they expected the boys to return the feelings in the same way.

EVALUATION OF COUNSELING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

I believed that with the procedures described it is possible to help a person get a coherent sense of personal identity and to realize interactions with adolescent boys that are satisfactory to both. At the same time, we have to realize that the social stigma in sexual contacts between man and boys makes it very difficult for both to integrate this kind of relationship in their self-concept simply because the partners must hide their motives and acts (sexual and non-sexual) from the outside world. For, although non-sexual contacts are not forbidden, men and boys often dare not do things together for fear that others will code all affective behavior as queer, sissy or pedophile. Counseling and psychotherapy with pedophiles are severely restricted by society's legal and moral views that positive relationships between men and boys are not possible. This, of course, is not a very pleasant conclusion for one who tries to help a person understand and manage problems experienced as the most intense expression of their personal being. One can only hope that

in the course of time emotional relationships between adults and children become socially accepted.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANING OF MAN-BOY RELATIONSHIPS

Although highly speculative, it is necessary to rethink the meanings of sexuality, especially if words such as homosexual and pedophile become global. As Tripp states in an analysis of the homosexual matrix: "In the final analysis, what does it all mean?—or does homosexuality have any special meaning? Probably not. It is a fact of life; the rest is interpretation and consequence" (Tripp, 1975, p. 268).

Man-boy relationships exist. They exist in many societies, in some severely tabooed, in others freely admitted. Why do they continue to exist in our society despite legal, moral and ethical sanctions? In looking over my files and notes made during the course of counseling, I realize the difference between these relationships and heterosexual and homosexual relationships: All the men were once boys and all these boys will be men in a couple of years. Tripp's hypothesis states that there must be some tension between partners in order to find each other interesting, fascinating and sexually attractive (Tripp, p. 36). In the case of man-boy relationships, this tension is provided by the completely different perspective of two different generations.

The boys are fascinated by the idea of what it is to be a man and the man's fascination is over what he lost in becoming an adult. This can function as a trigger for an emotional relationship that eventually is expressed sexually. Regardless of the moral, ethical or legal context, this tension is present in all man-boy encounters, or, in a broader context, in all encounters between persons who differ considerably in age. Although in our society emotional relationships between generations are not reinforced, the tension and the fascination exists and man-boy relationships are just one way of resolving it.

If this line of reasoning is correct, sex researchers should not only concentrate on the possible damage of a "pedophile" relationship,

but should also take into account the (non-sexual) profits for both partners involved.

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