

SEX AND THE AGE OF CONSENT: The Ethical Issues

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The following discussion is based on a study of voluntary and positively experienced child/adult relationships. A sample of nineteen interviewees who had been younger parties in such relationships was obtained and all were interviewed at length. The term 'child/adult sex' is used here to refer to relationships where the younger parties were less than 16 years old and the older parties were more than 16 years old. All interviewees had been involved in relationships in which the age gap was more than five years, usually considerably more. Accordingly, within this research, the term 'child' is defined in reference to age of consent legislation in Australia. As Baker (1983) argues, debates surrounding the age of consent exemplify and continuously construct age categories. In arguing for a particular chronological age to be legalized as the age of consent, those self-defined as adults categorize people below the age of consent as 'children' specifying the nature of that category to demonstrate the inappropriateness of sexual relationships in 'childhood'. As she suggests, in other contexts, people between the ages of twelve and sixteen may be categorized as 'adolescents', and as having partial membership in the category 'adult'.

To obtain the sample I and the other interviewer made use of our social network, making it known that we were interested in hearing about positive experiences of child/adult sex. The interviewees ranged in age from ten years to fifty five years at the time of interview and were from a variety of class backgrounds. The sample cannot claim to be representative and the study must be considered to be a pilot study in view of the paucity of interview studies that deal with positively experienced child/adult sex (Wilson 1981; Sandfort 1982; Rossman 1985).

Although all the interviewees characterized their experiences as 'positive' this does not mean that they did not identify both positive and negative aspects of their experience. Ultimately, interviewees summarized their experiences positively in reference to an influential discourse that views child/adult sex as necessarily an abusive exploitation of the younger party. They were keen to distance their own experiences from this characterization.

This paper will consider these interview texts in terms of the ethical objections to child/adult sex that make up the most common view of such relationships; that children are necessarily exploited and abused in such relationships. I shall begin with a general discussion of the ethical issues that are relevant to this topic. Following this, I shall be considering these texts as answers to the ethical objections

to child/adult sex. In doing this, I shall be looking at these texts as enunciating various discourse strategies in relationship to a dominant view of child/adult sex.

It is important to note that the interviewees were all Australians at the time of interview and with one exception the events described took place in First World countries. The issue of child/adult sex as it is discussed in this paper is an issue framed within the presuppositions of Western cultural understandings. For example, the prohibition against child/adult sex is justified in terms of an ideology which sees adults as equal citizens in terms of their capacity for abstract rational thought and establishes adulthood as a category in reference to the exclusion of children from the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Pateman 1988). Likewise the interviewees, in defending their involvement in child/adult sex, frequently make a claim to the freedom and equality accorded to citizens.

Discourse Strategies

In so far as this paper makes use of poststructuralist theory, it interprets poststructuralism to include an acknowledgement of agency as conscious knowing choice and the active subject, whether conscious or not, as the ultimate origin of discourses and their transformations (see also Silverman 1985; Smith 1988; Nilan 1993). At the most general level such an interpretation depends on the view that subjects actively select subject positions from within discourses and also change discourses through collage and invention. The subject is a choicemaker of some kind — even if it is not the free, conscious and unified subject of liberal humanism.

The term ‘strategy’ is used in the light of Foucault’s notion that discursive options are developed and represent strategies in relationship to a field of force (Foucault 1984: 56). This is a useful metaphor in the sense that it is possible to examine the ‘strategies’ used by my interviewees as though they were moves played in a game. On the other hand the metaphor becomes misleading if it is thought to imply that interviewees evolved strategies through a process of conscious rational deliberation. Certainly this was a part of what happened, but as well, much of this process appears to have been unconscious and unintended.

The Ethical Questions

Differing ethical beliefs about child/adult sex are usefully understood in terms of conflicts between differing ways of looking at ethics in general. I will leave aside various relativist conceptions of ethics since this is an area of debate in which few are willing to argue that the ethical status of child/adult sex all depends upon your point of view and the cultural values of a particular milieu. Philosophers often separate ‘teleological’ from ‘deontological’ views of ethics. According to teleological views of ethics an act is right in so far as it may produce “at least as great a balance of good over evil as any available alternative” (Frankena 1973:14). Such a view is described as teleological in that an act or rule is evaluated in terms of the outcome or *telos* of the action in a particular concrete situation. In turn such theories must depend on an

analysis of what good outcomes are — for example the greatest happiness, or the development of full human potential (for a recent view see Singer 1993). An alternative view of ethics is called deontological. For deontologists, an act is right or wrong whether it maximizes good outcomes or not. It is judged in terms of “certain features of the act itself.... for example, the fact that it keeps a promise, is just, or is commanded by God or by the state” (Frankena 1973:15).

Most objections to child/adult sex are based on a firmly deontological position. The argument attempts to prove that child/adult sex is wrong, and should be prohibited, regardless of the particular social context and the actual effects on the individuals who are involved. I will concentrate on the position taken by Finkelhor as both typical and influential (Finkelhor 1981; 1984). Moral attention is focussed on the power inequality between age categories. It is made quite clear that these power inequalities are not an accidental effect of a particular social situation but are universal in any conceivable context (see also Pateman 1988). Finkelhor claims, for example, that the very physical size of adults serves as an indictment of child/adult sex (Finkelhor 1981).

Following from this the crucial reason given for a universalized opposition to child/adult sex is that the inequality in power between adults and children means that the younger party cannot truly consent to such a relationship. Although harmful outcomes are noted (Finkelhor 1981; 1984) it is argued that the consequences of such interactions, whether harmful or benevolent, are not the relevant ethical issue. Finkelhor makes this position quite explicit:

In other words, victimization can take place even if the victim does not necessarily feel victimized and damaged, if and when conditions of genuine consent are not possible at the outset. (Finkelhor 1981:52; see also Herman and Hirschman 1981; Rush 1980; Nava 1984; Ward 1984)

In a similar argument in a later work he says that whether child/adult sex is wrong is not a matter to be judged by weighing up the positive and negative outcomes of such relationships in the way one might decide whether or not children ought to ‘be allowed’ to ingest caffeine (Finkelhor 1984:16). It is like slavery; even if large numbers of slaves said they were happy in their condition, it would not wipe out moral objections to slavery.

Putting the argument on consent Finkelhor writes:

.... a child does not have the freedom to say yes or no. This is true in a legal sense and also in a psychological sense. In a legal sense, a child is under the authority of an adult and has no free will. In a more important psychological sense, children have a hard time saying ‘no’ to adults, who control all kinds of resources that are essential to them. Food, money, freedom all lie in adult hands. In this sense, the child is like the prisoner who volunteers to be a research subject. The child has no freedom to consider the choice.... a child is not fully free to say no (Finkelhor 1984:18).

So the moral status of child/adult sex is not to be resolved by weighing up the harm and benefits of actual incidents. Child/adult sex is wrong because a child is not

genuinely free to say yes or no, and this is because an adult has the power to control resources essential to a child.

I believe that this deontological argument is open to a fairly straightforward objection which takes the argument as it stands and considers whether the argument would have any force if the issue in question was not a sexual contact between an adult and a child, but some other kind of adult/child interaction (O'Carroll 1982). If the argument depends on the nature of the power relationship between adults and children then it could logically apply to all interactions between adults and children. All such interactions are ethically incorrect because the power and knowledge of adults means that children cannot make an unconstrained and informed choice as to whether to participate in those interactions. On this logic it would be inappropriate for an adult to tell a child a story or to involve a child in a religious ceremony and so on.

To separate sexual contacts from other child/adult interactions a missing premise must be supplied that shows that sex is unlike other forms of interaction between adults and children and that this difference implies that differences of power and knowledge make interaction evil in the case of sex while in other cases adult/child interactions can be beneficial.

But what is this difference? The missing premise could say that sex is only morally appropriate when the participants are equal in knowledge and power. Commonly some other examples are advanced to show that this position also applies to doctors and patients, or therapists and clients (Finkelhor 1984). Yet this premise is far from universally applied since it would make all sexual contact between people of unequal power immoral. This would apply to sexual contacts between rich people and poor people, white and black, or men and women. Each particular use of the premise that we actually make must have to be justified in terms of some other considerations, external to the premise itself. But what is this extra specifying consideration in the case of child/adult sex? Even if the rule against sexual relationships in cases of unequal power were to be applied universally we might still ask why this rule is ethically justified – why is it that sexual relations are only appropriate between mature rational individuals in a context of equal power, while other types of contact may be justifiable despite differences of power between the parties?

Teleological Arguments for the Prohibition

I regard the problems considered above as typical of the problems of deontological arguments. Deontological arguments attempt to derive rules of conduct from ethical absolutes. Yet we can always ask why any particular absolute should be adhered to. Convincing answers tend to talk about beneficial or harmful consequences and in so doing depart from the deontological position. Deriving a particular ethical rule from a more abstract universal is difficult – the more abstract a rule the more likely it is to proscribe some type of accepted conduct as unethical.

As I have argued, the deontological argument against child/adult sex has a number of serious and fairly obvious problems. When these problems are pointed out Finkelhor, for one, begins to talk about the harmful consequences of child/adult sex (1984:20-21). So the ethical position shifts towards a teleological justification of the prohibition of child/adult sex.

An alternative way of looking at these issues, then, is to make a teleological ethical framework explicit. Doing this we can examine the outcomes of interactions between powerful and knowledgeable adults and children in a number of ways. The outcomes of such interactions are most likely to be beneficial if the adults are likely to be benevolent in their intentions in a particular sphere of activity. We believe that adults are not likely to be malevolently motivated in telling a child a story or playing cricket with a child. Secondly, strategies may be evaluated by talking about what are the best options for a child in negotiating the power of adults.

Within this framework it is possible to set out a socially situated ethical defence of the prohibition against child/adult sex. The premises for such a position are readily available within feminist studies of child/adult sex (e.g. Rush 1980; Herman and Hirschman 1981; Ward 1984). The argument begins with the claim that most child/adult sexual contacts are between girls and men and goes on to present evidence that these contacts almost always have a detrimental effect on the girls involved (see also Bass and Thornton 1983).

The argument continues by explaining why these consequences are a likely outcome of quite deep social structures within current society. Within modern capitalist patriarchy men are socially constructed to see their sexual desire as an innate drive that is beyond conscious control — the ‘hydraulic model’ (Weeks 1985). Given the puritanism that also informs social institutions they are highly likely to regard themselves as continually frustrated in attempts to satisfy this supposed drive (Hite 1981). This makes it unlikely that men will act in a responsible and benevolent fashion where sex is concerned. Those in particular danger are people with a great deal less power than adult men, children. Risks of harm are greatest where the child is a dependent member of a man’s own family.

This situation, it can also be argued, is exacerbated by the misogynistic heterosexuality that inflects men’s attitudes to women and girls. Sexual ownership of women is a key to patriarchal power (Rubin 1975). Men also experience their socially constructed heterosexuality as compulsive and as a form of enthrallment to those over whom they exercise social power. Women and girls are frequently resented as the cause of this problematic desiring (Dinnerstein 1978). Accordingly, malevolent misogynistic sexuality seeks out girls as vulnerable targets in comparison to adult women (e.g. Ward 1984). All this makes man/girl sex particularly likely and particularly likely to be damaging to girls. Incestuous assaults on girls are likely in view of the structure of dependency set up within the nuclear family. They are also deeply traumatic in their consequences (see e.g. Herman and Hirschman 1981).

All of this could be used to create an alternative to the deontological argument for the prohibition on child/adult sex. A teleological defense of the prohibition could claim that the likely consequences of child/adult sex are such as to make a general prohibition of such contacts a sensible strategy. The argument is that benevolent

behaviour on the part of adults, especially men, is unlikely in this type of child/adult interaction in this particular social context. Though a universal prohibition cannot be justified in terms of absolute ethical principles (as attempted by the deontological argument), a particular prohibition can be argued to be well and truly justified in terms of likely outcomes in this social context (a teleological position).

Such a shift from a universalistic deontological position to a more contextualized consideration of outcomes does not come without consequences. For a start, it implies that child/adult sexual liaisons which are beneficial to the younger party are absolutely so. They are not rendered immoral by the prevalence of harmful consequences in other cases and they cannot be considered abusive purely because of the power of the adult in question. Secondly, a strategic justification of the prohibition must depend on a survey of actual outcomes and a judgement of the consequences of the prohibition itself. Is universal moral repugnance and complete legal prohibition the best way to avoid the negative consequences of child/adult sex?

Teleological Arguments Against the Prohibition

A feminist teleological defence of the prohibition undoubtedly defines some relevant issues and must be taken into account in any overall attempt to evaluate the prohibition. Within a teleological framework it is also possible to sketch some objections to the prohibition. To begin with, despite assertions to the contrary, we are actually still very uncertain about the extent of positively experienced child/adult sex. The most useful guide to this issue must be anonymous questionnaire surveys of adults reflecting on their childhood experiences. Finkelhor's pioneer study of this type (1981) found that 19% of his female sample had experienced some form of child/adult sexual contact (from exhibitionism to penetration) by the age of sixteen (Finkelhor 1981:53). Of these he found that 9% reported a positive experience and 24% a neutral experience (52, 70). Almost all of these encounters were with men. While this study provides considerable evidence for the feminist analysis of child/adult sex, it is not without problems.

What Finkelhor does not mention in giving these summarizing statistics is the fact that the questionnaire did not ask respondents to include sexual contacts when they were over the age of twelve if they were willing participants (177). So the population of whom it can be said that only 9% reported a positive experience included all those who had had unwanted contacts with adults after the age of twelve and none of those who were willing participants. Studies conducted in the wake of Finkelhor's (Goldman and Goldman 1988; Russell 1984) also exempt voluntary relationships where the younger party is over twelve years old.

Another problem with the argument for prohibition is the extent of positive experiences reported by the male sample. Here Finkelhor found that 8.6% had been involved in a sexual contact with an adult and that 19% of these reported a positive experience and 43% a neutral experience (52, 53, 70). Again, these figures exempt from consideration all those who were voluntarily involved in sex with an adult when they were over the age of twelve.

So while such studies demonstrate the extent of harmful experiences of child/adult sex it seems likely that the extent of positive experiences has so far been underestimated considerably, particularly in cases where the younger party is over twelve years old. Even on Finkelhor's own statistics a quite measurable number of people report positive experiences. Stringent legal statutes and practically universal social beliefs treat these people as victims of a sexual assault when they do not see themselves in this light.

The interviewees in the present study viewed the universalistic condemnation of child/adult sex as stigmatizing and the stringent legal sanctions as oppressive. Sharon, for example, discussed a situation in which she believed her forty year old lover had been arrested and gaoled for paedophile offenses. She said she was upset by this because:

He was not a rapist and he was not a person who forced kids into doing things that they didn't want to do and and like you see all of those crazies everywhere who are out to rape people and abuse them but he didn't and he got done for it and so many people don't and that sort of thing freaked me out and that upset me. I don't think he deserved it.... because at least he's not putting kids in danger.

Tristan spoke of his fear of the police in the context of his relationships with adult men:

.... having an age of consent or not having one is not going to stop rape. So, you know, the people who are having sex illegally, ninety five percent are doing it because they want to do it, just like me. And making it more difficult for us is wrong. It's nerve-racking. I mean, whenever I see a cop in the street I think, "Jesus Christ!" you know. Especially, say if I'm with my boyfriend or beforehand, if I was with John or something. I mean I freak because I don't think I'm doing something wrong but they do.

Many interviewees spoke about the emotional problems they experienced in terms of the widespread moral repugnance to child/adult sex. Isobel spoke about the way it affected her relationship at the time:

I used to watch him getting dressed and I used to always have this feeling. And.... that this was it. Like this was the last moments, you know. Once we were getting dressed and we'd leave the room and descend to the street and he would never touch me in public.... unless very briefly, he might hold on to my arm or something, but he would never.... that used to very badly affect me as well.... Because I used to want it. I used to find the split between the private and the public, umm, appearances and expression really difficult and disturbing.

Other interviewees spoke about their more recent concerns with the stigmatization of child/adult relationships; the difficulties they had in speaking about these experiences with friends without it being assumed that they had been the victims of a childhood sexual assault. Denise spoke about her anger at the way the attacks on paedophilia wiped out distinctions between abusive relationships (of the kind she had experienced with her father), and consensual relationships (of the kind she had experienced in relation to adult men outside her family at the same age):

I never acknowledged it [her abuse by her father] until the time that the whole question of Paedophilia, or consenting relationships, being bashed — as child abuse — came up. People weren't able to distinguish between consent and abuse and it was only then that I felt I could talk about the abuse that had gone on, I was so mad that relationships that were consenting were being portrayed in the same sort of way as abusive ones.

Such accounts reveal some of the more problematic effects of the prohibition on those who were the younger parties in positively experienced child/adult sex. How these claims should be weighted against the risks of undermining or altering the prohibition is a hard question to answer. Merely to reveal and publicize cases of positively experienced child/adult sex is in itself to undermine the moral repugnance to child/adult sex as a category. Given that a change in the legal status of such acts is highly unlikely at the present time, debating the appropriateness of any particular legal strategy is perhaps beside the point.

A common response to accounts of positive experiences is to argue that those who claim to have experienced these events as positive and voluntary are actually masking the trauma they suffered by a defensive denial. A full acceptance of the deontological position implies this since it claims that younger parties are always victims in that they did not really have the power to say yes or no, whatever they might have thought at the time. Such an approach is given weight by the common phenomenon of adults coming to terms with experiences of sexual abuse in childhood that they had repressed or glossed over as unimportant (Miller 1985; Ward 1984; Bass and Thornton 1983). It is argued that people such as the interviewees of the present study are merely those who have not yet fully come to terms with the abuse they suffered.

Such an argument puts the case against child/adult sex beyond the reach of any possible counter evidence. The interviewees of the present study were adults who were quite self-aware, at least as much as those who would seek to deny the validity of their position. As versions of reality their stories make as much sense as other people's retrospective discoveries of abuse. In what follows I shall consider the different positions that were taken up in relation to the prohibition as discourse strategies, as various responses to the common deontological objections to child/adult sex.

Accounts which Exempted the Relationship from the Terms of the Prohibition

The most common way in which the interviewees negotiated the prohibition on child/adult sex was to minimize the transgressive aspect of their child/adult relationships. They argued that their choice to be involved in the sexual contacts was not constrained by the power or knowledge of the adults in question — neither by fear of sanctions nor by a desire to gain access to the benefits which adult power and wisdom can confer upon children. Accordingly these answers worked in terms of the deontological argument against child/adult sex. The replies did not necessarily

challenge this argument directly, but exempted their own situation from the terms of the deontological argument. I shall consider these answers in terms of three areas of adult power often referred to by proponents of the prohibition — economic power, physical power and social status.

Economic Power

Typical comments on this issue were premised on the fact that the interviewees were economically supported by their parents and did not depend economically on the adult with whom they were having a sexual contact. Sharon's answer was typical of those that denied the relevance of economic inducements:

Int: And, umm, do you think that in a sense you were attracted to him more, that you became his friend or participated in the sex because what he could offer you as an adult with economic power like, trips in the car, like music, like treats when you were out, maybe, I don't know, things like that, that you couldn't afford as a kid?

Sh: Jeff wanted to spoil every kid, you know, but often didn't have enough money to, so he would make it up by walking around some place, or going somewhere that was free to go or, you know, he was always occupied, he kept our minds busy and made sure we were happy which was the main thing. I mean he didn't go out and spend heaps of money on us.... it was really good because we were always occupied. It never got boring. I can't stand boredom. It's the worst.

Int: So you don't think like, you weren't participating in sex because, because you wanted all these goodies.

Sh: Oh no, I didn't. I'm not attracted to money. I think material things are just, more or less, waste. When I mean because Jeff was a genuine happy person.

In her reply to this question Sharon first explains Jeff's generosity as an expression of genuine friendship and caring. She argues that he was not offering these treats to manipulate children economically. Secondly she goes on to point out that much of their time together involved no expense on Jeff's part; they 'hung about', went bushwalking or to the beach. These occasions, she implies, were just as enjoyable as those which did involve some expense. She then explains her involvement with Jeff in terms of the fact that he was good company and entertaining to be with. This is consistent with claims made in the rest of the interview, and situates her experiences as an adventure appropriate to the status of adolescence. Finally she argues that if Jeff had been trying to buy her involvement, this ploy would have been unsuccessful, since she does not have a high regard for material goods.

Keith is another interviewee who resisted any suggestion that his participation in child/adult sex was motivated by economic inducements. In contrast to Sharon, he indicates that in some cases the adults with whom he was involved did make attempts to buy his consent to sex. He mentions two situations, one when he was eleven years old and had a number of sexual contacts with men on a deserted beach near the town in which he lived, the second when he was seventeen and had casual

sex with men whom he met at beats. The latter is not child/adult sex in terms of the present study but his discussion links and compares these two situations:

I think with me I pretended the money had something to do with it.... because getting the money was some sort of excuse for it. I said I needed the money but I didn't really need it 'cause even though I was living by myself [at seventeen] my parents have always supported me. I've always had, my whole time through school, a very large amount of pocket money, I've always had a certain amount of financial power of my own.

Asked earlier about an occasion on the beach where a man tried to bribe him with fresh milk and vegetables, he argued that he was not persuaded by these inducements but was motivated by sexual desire and curiosity.

Sharon and Keith's replies on this topic were similar to those of the other interviewees. They either denied altogether that gifts were provided or saw the gifts as having no determining influence in their choices. What becomes very clear in Keith's interview is that interviewees did not see adult economic power as a monolithic entity. The extent to which they, as children, were economically dependent on adults varied enormously in terms of the kinship status of the adult in question. They were dependent upon their parents and had to take note of parental economic power, but such economic power was not vested in the adults with whom they had sexual contacts. Apart from two uncles all these adults were outside of the family and were often known only to the interviewees and not to their parents. While these accounts make a convincing argument that the interviewees were not economically dependent on the adults in question, the interviews sometimes suggest ways in which the economic power of the adults may have been relevant to the relationships.

When Wendy was twelve years old she began a relationship with Paul who was in his late twenties. Throughout the interview as a whole she argues that her participation in the relationship was based on Paul's genuine affection for her ".... he just had.... the cup runneth over with love and affection. He was really attentive all the time and that sort of attention I've not had from, really from anybody." On the other hand, asked directly about the role of his economic power, she does not deny its relevance:

Oh yeah, the port and the car and going diving, guitars, going out to dinner, going to the movies and that was a big part of it.... If I mentioned that I wanted something he would go and buy it. Only small things, there was nothing large, just like a candle or a record or something.

She denies, however that she was ever led into anything that she did not want to do in order to retain Paul's affections, mentioning an incident in which she refused a suggestion to try some hash. Like Sharon, she suggests that other aspects of the relationship were much more significant than the purely economic:

I was so carried away by this feeling of being treated as one of the adults that I didn't need to be bought off at all.... I didn't need any encouragement. But he didn't try and buy sexual favours at all. He certainly was very good at setting a romantic setting and getting the right mood together and I guess the financial thing has a lot to do with that too

but I didn't see that as directly related to buying my favours. It was all part of an experience, all part of the romantic experience.

What this suggests is that the economic power of an adult may always have some significance in constructing an experience that includes a sexual contact. In these interviews sexual liaisons were often sited in the adult's house, something that depended on their economic power as an adult. Trips in cars and to entertainments are often mentioned, and again, these outings are premised on the economic power of the adult. For example Tristan mentions his meeting with his first long term adult lover after he admired a sports car owned by the man. Their first sexual encounter was at the man's flat after a trip to the beach. The extent to which such features of adult economic power made an adult attractive are not necessarily something that is open to conscious inspection.

There was one case in which an interviewee 'eloped' with his older companion after continuing disagreements with his parents about the relationship. In this case Michael, the younger party (fourteen when he left his parents) did become dependent upon his adult lover. Since the interview was conducted before these events took place I am unable to say whether the interviewee believed that his dependence compromised his freedom to make sexual choices. From a structural point of view his dependence cannot be considered irrelevant.

Physical Power

In a close analogy to statements about the economic power of adults, interviewees argued that their decision to participate in these relationships was not constrained by their fear of physical sanctions from a more physically powerful adult. Sharon, along with several other interviewees, compared her voluntary relationship with an adult to a situation in which she was coerced by another adult. Early in the interview she volunteered a general statement about force in sexual relationships:

I haven't had a relationship where I've been forced into having sex and I find that good. I wouldn't go into a relationship if I was forced to have sex with a person. That would just immediately turn me off and all of my relationships I've just hit it off with people.

Later, in a discussion of her sexual contacts with Jeff (40) and her boyfriend Robbo (17) she mentioned the fact that they never asked her for oral sex because she had told them she did not like it. She explained this in terms of an incident which involved an old man living nearby with his mother:

I was on my way to the shop, she often asked me, when I was taken into a room and forcefully had to give oral sex. That was traumatic. It really was. I hated it so much. I hated him. I ended up biting him on the dick. It shocked him so he stopped and I ran. I ran out of the place.

In considering the question of Jeff's physical size relative to her own she acknowledged the difference in power but explained why she did not feel concerned by it:

Yeah well he was [stronger], but he never used his physical power against me, umm, if anything, he used to carry me up and down the

stairs.... I used to laugh but I didn't mind.... He was never violent or pissed off or yelling and screaming or anything, not even at his ridiculous brother-in-law who lived downstairs.

In this reply the sense of lack of constraint is based on a belief in the benevolence of the adult, the improbability of physical coercion. The argument also makes a distinction between events where coercion actually occurred (with the old man) and events where physical coercion was absent (with Jeff and Robbo). In the latter case the potential for physical coercion may exist but actions are not necessarily constrained by fear of coercion.

Two other female interviewees who mentioned a coercive situation in order to counterpose it to their voluntary relationships were Denise and Bobbie. In both cases they reported incestuous abuse by a father (Denise) or stepfather (Bobbie). Constraint was both physical and also depended upon the economic position of the adult as head of the household. As well, in both cases, the interviewees made a decision to protect their mother's relationship by not informing her of the abuse, so that they were also constrained by their own moral decisions. We could argue that this moral framework is an aspect of hegemonic constructions of femininity within current patriarchy — femininity as self-denying care for others. As mentioned above, Denise makes very clear her sense of a difference between this abuse and her voluntary relationships with adults:

I kept doing it with him and sort of several other boyfriends after that. That was going on at the same time that I was being raped by my father and the contrast between the two. One, where I had no power whatsoever, and the other where I could, you know, say yes, no or otherwise. Just get up and leave. It was quite different.

Some interviewees indicated that their sense of freedom from the threat of coercion was also founded upon the view that they could always call on other adult authorities to intervene if necessary and that the reality of this threat was not unknown to the adults in question. Keith, from twelve, picked up men for sex on a beach in the small town where he lived. One of these men, in particular, he regarded with some distrust. He tried to bribe Keith and "was always trying to use the physical force of his hand, to put my hand on his cock, that sort of thing". However Keith sees his continued participation in these events as voluntary, "I allowed it to continue. And I definitely got some sort of a kick out of it". Explaining his sense of control in the situation he made the following comment:

I could have got up and walked away. I definitely could have. In fact, he was within my power because of the situation that we were in. We were in a situation where I, even as a child, represented some sort of power to people because my father was part of the power structure of that town and the company. If, at any time, I had ever gone and told anything, that bloke, he would have lost his job and would have been in trouble.

This reply is a close parallel to the answers on adult economic power. The child makes a strategic judgement about the power of various adults within the context of their relationships to the child. An adult outside the family does not have the power of economic coercion nor a legitimate power of physical coercion.

It may be reasonably suggested that a sense of freedom from the threat of physical coercion is much more likely for boys. Maria, who was eight when she was sexually involved with an uncle, speaks of her sense that her uncle could be trusted not to coerce her. At the same time she notes that she did not feel that she could have gone to her parents for protection, if she had needed to. Some other female interviewees argued that their involvement in child/adult sex did not actually increase the risk of coercive sexual assault. Denise, when she was fifteen, would go with her sister to a disco and pick up men in their early thirties who would drive them home and stay for sex. When I asked her whether she was worried about sexual violence from these men she made the following points. Firstly, that looking back she is surprised she was not more concerned. Secondly, she points out that sexual violence is an ever present threat for women, one that was not necessarily increased by her involvements with adults:

It could be just as easy that your one boy friend who you knew from school — sort of Mr. Respectable — who you never fucked with, dated with Mum's approval, whatever, could just as easily turn on you and rape you and bash you.... as one you just cruised at a disco.... I always felt in control really.

Finally she made the point that on these occasion when she picked up men she always intended to have sex with them after they arrived at her house, which made it less likely that she would be physically attacked. The central theme of all of these treatments of the physical power of adults is the claim that the interviewee did not engage in the sexual contact because of physical coercion or the fear of coercion, and to that extent these relationships cannot be considered to fall within the terms of the deontological critique. At the same time, the interviewees give a picture of themselves as negotiating the undoubted dangers of coercive sexual attack from men, being more or less successful in different situations.

Social Status and Adult Authority

In dealing with this issue there were three strategies that exempted the relationship in question from the deontological argument against child/adult sex. They all involved a claim that the relationship was not one in which a child was constrained or influenced by the authority or status of an adult. The first characterized the relationship as one in which the adult was a friend of the child and acted essentially as a child in the relationship. Maria, whose relationship with her uncle has been mentioned above, typifies this analysis. Asked whether she looked up to him as an adult or respected his status as an adult she began by pointing out that that side of the family, her mother's relatives, were lower in social status than her own family, and as a result, "I didn't look down on him but I don't know that I sort of looked to him as an example, or somebody that I worshipped in any way." She goes on to characterize her uncle as a companion:

I think I had a lot of fun and love.... And I used to learn to play something else which the country people play a lot. They get a couple of cow vertebrates [*sic*], and depending on how it falls.... it's all gambling. I

love gambling now. So I'd sort of play games like that I suppose. I remember looking at flowers.... I remember always looking forward anxiously to seeing him anyway, put it that way.

This description suggests that the adult took the role of a child in the relationship, and that in terms of status and authority it was a child/child relationship.

A much more common strategy in the interviews was to claim that the younger party took an adult role. Twelve of the nineteen interviewees made remarks that minimized the significance of age differences. A common claim was that the interviewee was effectively an adult at the time of the relationship and accordingly they were not overawed or unduly influenced by the status of the older party as an adult. For example Isobel argued as follows:

His name was Martin. When I first met him I think he was 48 and I was fourteen. Which to me was nothing. It didn't matter. It was totally insignificant to me that he was 48, but I realise it is quite an age gap. That is the sort of situation that people would term in the paedophilic. Really, but to me I was extreme.... I think I was extremely sort of intellectually developed... I used to go to art galleries constantly and my obsessions were in that sort of area.

Later Isobel was asked whether she was able to give informed consent or whether she may have been unduly influenced by Martin's superior status as an adult. She claimed:

Not really. No not really, even though.... actually even though we might talk about superior status, because I've been since a young child.... always had an intellectual connection with people who are adults and that sort of thing. In my family, the children were never kept separate and were always at social functions with the adults and at dinner parties and things like that. It was always totally umm.... it was expected that children would be there. Umm, I don't really think that the status thing was all that important 'cause I think that I was always aware of myself as being quite.... I actually told Mary [a close childhood and adult friend] that I was going to do this interview with you and she sort of said "Oh, you weren't a child at the time", you know. Because she and I both had this idea of ourselves, we were sort of very, we were quite mentally developed at the time. And what do you think about that sort of situation?

In these comments Isobel argues that adulthood is not a matter of age *per se*, but is a learned culture and consequently accessible to a person of any age given the right conditions (Goode 1986). Her exposure to adult treatment in her own family and her familiarity with the adult pursuits of her milieu effectively made her an adult. She uses this claim to argue that she was sufficiently mature to make a reasonable choice in initiating her relationship with Martin. Making use of the dominant discourse of childhood and adulthood she implies that childhood is a period in which the emotions or passions dominate, but that as an adult one develops reasonable control over impulses. As a fourteen year old her connections with adults were 'intellectual' and hence 'adult' connections. She also makes use of the dominant discourse of age

categories in distinguishing herself and Mary from other people of the same age to whom the category 'child' could have been appropriately applied.

In taking up this position Isobel links the assertion that she was in fact an adult to the issues of power and consent that feature in the deontological argument against child/adult sex. She was not a child. She was a mature and intellectual person who did not have a childlike respect for adult status. Consequently she was free to make choices about her relationship with Martin without being unduly influenced by his status as an adult. By implication she is arguing that she was capable of informed consent. This defense of her position is given extra force by her current unproblematic status as an adult (Baker 1984). Both she and her friend at the time (who are now indubitably adult) believe that she was not a child at the time these events occurred.

Another approach that had somewhat similar implications was to argue that the relationship was part of a transition to adulthood and that the interviewee became an adult through relationship to adults. This strategy was particularly marked and explicit in most of the gay interviews. In these interviews sexual contacts with adults were identified as a means of entry to the gay community and to the establishment of a gay adult identity. I will discuss one example that typifies this approach. Derek describes a sudden transition at the age of fifteen between an asexual childhood identity and a gay adult sexual practice. He sees his gayness as a personality trait extending well back into his childhood but its sexual expression as a new development. Once he started to feel sexual desire he saw it as inevitable that he would act upon it. He explains that sex was available for him through beats where he was one of the few people his own age: most were older, so sex with his age peers was not possible. Also, he argues that he was in fact attracted to older men. Admitting that adult men often manipulate boys he goes on to suggest that relating to adult men is a necessary introduction to gay sexuality:

Umm, I reckon a lot of kids that get involved with older men for the simple reason they've got problems and sometimes if they go out with men like that they can learn all about it and things like that. Get answers for their problems and things like that. But sometimes you get men that really know what they're doing and they know they can put it over young kids to get them in bed for one night stands and things like that. Because they know all about it, you know sort of thing. They could do it their way, they can get you in bed by money — all that stuff, the whole lot. But umm, they do — I reckon kids do find out all what's it about when they jump in with older men than themselves. Oh, 'cause mostly all my friends they've done the same sort of thing as I've done. It's a bit of both. He's conning you up and things like that and well, I do reckon you do have a lot of problems. Like for being gay and things like that. You've just got to figure out what you are and things like that. See he's getting his satisfaction and you're getting your satisfaction.

In an earlier part of the interview he explains that at first he was manipulated in the way described above, but that he soon learned how to deal with situations so that he got what he wanted. He learned to be more assertive at a beat, to reject someone

he was not attracted to and insist on condoms being used. So Derek is arguing that experiences with these older men are a school of life in which one learns to take an adult role. He is also more positive about the introduction to adulthood that these relationships provided, claiming that many of these men helped him to accept his gayness and helped him by listening to his problems and giving him genuine emotional support.

In this and other similar accounts, the model of child/adult sex that is invoked is one in which the younger party is being introduced into adulthood through contacts with adults. As the younger party is new to adulthood it is inevitable that old hands will be able to help this transition through the benefit of their experience. Crucially, the main issue is not the transgression against the prohibition of child/adult sex at all. It is introduction to adulthood.

This strategy has a somewhat ambivalent relationship to the deontological attack on child/adult sex. The argument acknowledges and admits the importance of the knowledge and status of the adult in influencing the younger party to take up the relationship. Yet it goes on to claim that ultimately this relationship helped the younger party to become an adult. The interviewees, it could be argued, used the relationships to establish themselves as adults and at a certain point could no longer be influenced by the status of their partners as adults vis-a-vis children.

To confer social recognition on an adolescent and to treat them as an adult is a prerogative that attaches unproblematically to people of a certain chronological age (Baker 1984). This prerogative can be regarded as an aspect of the socially conferred status of adulthood. As well, knowledge of adult culture, which is stressed in Derek's interview, is also something that pertains to adults and can be regarded as socially conferred through their unproblematic participation in adult culture.

The way in which such adult status and knowledge was relevant to the attraction felt by the younger party is revealed in quite a number of other interviews as well. Wendy describes her attraction to Paul and his friends in these terms:

Well the thing that I remember most is that he actually thought I had an opinion about things, you know. And he respected what I had to say about them and I just hadn't had that feeling before at all, someone who was willing to discuss things and say, "Oh yeah, I understand what you mean", and not lecture to me about it.

Later in the interview she spoke about the influence of Paul and his friends in terms of their social class background:

They made me realise that there were lots of other things available to me like being a university student and they told me I was smart — those sort of things.... I felt I could be just like them if I wanted so it certainly helped. And also just that other side of life, like Paul writing poetry, writing songs and stuff.... I hadn't come across anybody who actually did that and also, took arty photos....

Here we can see that the skills and knowledge that were made available to Wendy were aspects of an adult culture that she could not get access to through her age peers. Such accounts were quite common in the interviews and it seems that a major

attraction of these relationships for adolescents was the opportunity to be recognized and respected as an adult.

The more directly sexual aspects of attraction to adults cannot be ignored. Quite a number of the gay interviewees, in particular, stressed the fact that they had a sexual interest in adult men during this period of their lives, and again it is not possible to argue that such a cathexis just pops into existence without being socially mediated by the discourses that define adult status. It could be argued that this is even more an element of the sexual attraction of adolescent girls to men, given the prevalence of the patriarchally inflected discourse of romance in which the male partner is usually older and more worldly (Greer 1972; Snitow 1983). Angela made the following comment about her feelings for her male peers in adolescence:

I suppose I didn't really see boys of the same age as sexual. They were more into thumping around the head or (Laughs) you know, pulling your hair and the most they ever did was want to look at your knickers.

As with the discussion on economic issues, it is sensible to note the complexity of these accounts in terms of the role of adult status in these relationships. While interviewees often claimed that they were essentially adult, were becoming adult or were not unduly influenced by adult status, they also revealed aspects of these relationships that were premised upon the status and knowledge of the older party as an adult. In some accounts there was a quite direct acknowledgement of the relevance of adult status. Isobel, whom I have already quoted on this issue also said in relation to the influence of Martin's adult status:

Umm, I'd like to say no, but actually I think that honestly you can't deny that these things have an effect. Like when you meet someone and you know what their situation is, I'm sure it affects you, and I don't think you can help that effect. He was running the [sculpture workshop] I happened to be in and he was also lecturing ... yeah lecturing and so he had all that. All that sort of status and also it had the whole sort of thing, I could watch him. I'd be up the back of the lecture and be able to watch him and I think that often during the years that I knew him I'd watch him giving lectures and I used to like it.

As Isobel here points out, it is not always easy to say whether adult power and status has had an impact in attracting a child to a sexual relationship with an adult. In much of the interview she stresses her adult maturity, their mutual interest in the arts and their companionship. However, here she acknowledges that Martin's power and status may well have been one of the factors which attracted her to him. More broadly, this is the one area in which it was particularly difficult for interviewees to convincingly distance themselves from the interpretation of child/adult sex associated with the deontological view.

The Strategy of Exemption — a Summary

In general, the interviewees replied to the deontological position on child/adult sex by denying that their sexual relationship with an adult put them in the position of 'the

child'. They exempted their relationship from the power dynamics that are supposedly universal in child/adult sex, according to the deontological view. They claimed that they were not in any major or significant way dependent on the adult in question for economic support and did not engage in the sexual contacts for economic reasons. While acknowledging the greater strength of the adult, they argued that they were not physically coerced and did not fear coercion from this particular adult. It was more difficult for the interviewees to argue that the status of the adult was not a factor constraining their choice to be involved in the sexual contacts. Most typically interviewees responded to this aspect of the deontological position by arguing that they were not a child at the time or were in the process of becoming an adult. Accordingly, they did not believe their involvement had been unduly influenced by the status or knowledge of the adult.

As we have seen, for those who were adolescents, a common position was that the adult was the first to recognize them as an adult. This claim makes a certain amount of sense when we remember that adolescence is a relatively recent social construction and certainly not mandated by biologically inevitable differences in power and wisdom between adolescents and those over eighteen (Davey 1982). While no individual adult can actually suspend the socially constructed status and power differences between adults and adolescents, it is also true that individual adults are part of a class of adults who could collectively abandon the socially constructed extension of childhood into adolescence.

The Teleological Approach

There are also ways of looking at the above positions in terms of a teleological approach to the ethics of child/adult sex. The interviewees recognized the strategic advantages that adults have over children. They were also aware that in matters of sexual conduct adults are not necessarily benevolent in their interactions with children. The interviews reveal strategies, and also their good luck, in dealing with this context in a way that allowed a beneficial sexual contact and relationship to take place. The interviewees were not involved in sexual relationships with adults on whom they were economically dependent. The interviewees mostly argued that they were free from the threat of physical coercion in relation to this particular adult because the adult was well intentioned. Other interviewees made the point that their sexual contacts with the adult were illegal and that the adult had much to fear from disclosure. So they were negotiating a space for action in relation to different sets of powerful adults; their parents, the state and the adult parties to the sexual relationships.

In terms of the status and knowledge of an adult, the interviewees were suggesting that these adult powers were used to benefit the interviewee within the relationship. They saw the relationships as allowing access to adult knowledge and culture to the benefit of the younger parties. Speaking of the socially conferred sexual attractiveness of the adult, they claimed the sexual interest of the adult as a benefit that the adult could confer on them within the relationship.

In a number of interviews a teleological approach to the ethical issues associated with child/adult sex dominated the discussion and was used directly to confront the deontological critique of child/adult sex. I shall firstly review the way in which Christopher elaborates this position. Christopher began a long relationship with a gay man, George, when he was about nine years old. In response to a question about George's economic power in the relationship he jokingly remarked "Yeah, oh yeah — he bought me!" and proceeded to describe some of the gifts and entertainments that his adult friend had provided. He made the comment that George's power over money, "was handy". Following these opening remarks he addressed the dominant discourse on child/adult sex more thoughtfully:

Sure, you know. I mean I — he did all the things that people complain about, you know. He had adult power, he had economic power, he had a great brain, he was, you know, he could wrap me round his little finger as far as all those things go, but he chose not to abuse it. I mean that's where his strength was, I suppose. Not only strength but where.... I mean he was a good bloke I suppose, if you want to call him that, you know?

This statement is a summing up of Christopher's attack on the deontological critique of child/adult sex. He does not exempt his relationship from the categories provided by the dominant discourse. Adults have more power than children and inevitably this becomes manifest in child/adult sexual relationships. While the dominant ethical discourse concludes that such a power difference harms children, Christopher refuses this conclusion. Whether this power difference is bad for the younger party or not depends on the way the adult uses this power. In a case where the adult is benevolent, the power of the adult can be used to the benefit of the younger party.

Another aspect of the dominant discourse that Christopher addresses is the claim that the power of the adult means that the influence of the adult in the relationship is preponderant and amounts to a coercion of the younger party (e.g. Nava 1984). He considers this issue in the context of the sexual contacts in the relationship. At various points in the interview he indicates that he was quite a keen participant in these contacts. However he also reveals that George almost always initiated the sexual contacts and sometimes would persuade him despite his initial unwillingness. Commenting on these points he says:

Chris: It's a bit like someone who says 'no' but really means 'yes', in that I would want to but would say 'no' out of guilt or out of some fear of umm, maybe a fear of losing control even, or I don't know analytically what the reasons would be but I would say 'no' but would generally as a rule acquiesce in that I would agree and go ahead and enjoy it — not, I don't mean in any sort of rape sense, I just mean he would be persisting and I'd be saying 'no' but I would mean 'yes'.

Int: On occasions when you really didn't want to, what would happen?

Chris: Oh, he never, never forced me, but more, yeah, I was emotionally forced but not, not in a sense that's left me feeling angry or regretting it or anything like that. In that umm, I suppose I could say to be really simplistic about it, that what he wanted from me was sex but what he

gave me back was plenty. It wasn't a one way relationship. I got as much.... it was as much as.... if you want to see sex in terms of normal interpersonal relationship contracts — someone asking for sex in some terms is no more different than someone giving you something and wanting something back. I mean within those terms it was reasonable for him to ask for his sex. It is quite complicated and I don't want to fall into the risk of painting a rosy picture of what wasn't always a rosy situation.

Here he takes issue with the view that "consent merges imperceptibly into coercion" (Nava 1984:102). Instead he draws a line between persuasion, being "emotionally forced" and coercion, claiming that George "never, never forced" him, "not in any rape sense". Secondly he argues that this persuasion occurred within the context of the relationship as a whole. Its ethical implications cannot be understood in isolation. He presents the relationship as an exchange. George wanted and asked for sex. What Christopher received in return were the other benefits of the relationship that he describes at length in other parts of the interview — an introduction to the world of culture "with a capital C", affection, important discussions about morality and politics that helped him to attain his current perspective and so forth. It is worth noting that most interviewees did not report the kind of heavy sexual persuasion that Christopher describes here and instead noted the absence of sexual pressure in these relationships.

Christopher makes two claims here. On the one hand he is claiming his participation as a smart move in negotiating adult power. The disadvantages of this relationship, the sense of heavy persuasion in relationship to some of their sexual encounters, was more than made up for by benefits which would not have been readily attained in any other way. It was an ethically sensible choice in terms of his own interests at the time. The second claim is that there was a fair exchange of benefits within the interaction.

The position that Christopher sets out finds a close parallel in Denise's interview. Like Christopher she sees her participation in child/adult relationships as being partly motivated by what the adult had to offer as an adult. Like Christopher she focuses on the relationship as a fair exchange in which she benefited equally:

I had my first fuck, so to speak, when I was 13 at high school. I had this marvellous boyfriend and that managed to give me all manner of power and status. All the dags had boyfriends their own age. But it was much better, especially when you lived in the outer suburbs somewhere and transport was so appalling and bad.... it was much better to have a boyfriend who was at least 18 and had a car. That was a real status symbol. And I had one who was 18, had a car, a nice gold Kingswood [a large 6 cylinder Holden of a kind favoured by young working class men at the time] and a job. I suppose looking back on it I was a cynical little manipulator really because it wasn't love or anything like that. I didn't see it in those terms at all. It was just handy.

The way this strategy proceeds is to accept it as a fact that adults have more power than children/adolescents and then to enumerate the advantages to the younger party of a freely chosen relationship with such a person; namely access to adult power

and status. So whereas the deontological discourse of prohibition looks at the same difference in power and declares that the younger party must be disadvantaged, this restructuring of the discourse looks at the advantages involved. As well, the restructuring foregrounds the active choice of the younger participant and the implication is that they made use of what they had to offer in the relationship in order to get something out of it.

The use of the metaphor of exchange and contract is carried through into a discussion of the sexual aspects of the relationship. Denise says that she found the sex itself “ho-hum”, but she enjoyed the cuddling and the kissing. More importantly, she sees the sexual contacts in the context of other aspects of the relationships — as part of an exchange:

Int: What would you say about the argument that you were prostituting yourself in order to get the privileges that, as an adolescent, you should have had anyway? Like a car, access to transport, movies and so on.

Denise: I often look back and think about that. I think I was maybe prostituting myself. And I think well OK. That’s fair enough. It was my choice to do that really. Hmm I mean in some respects you could say that. They tended to be sort of I-used-them, they-used- me type relationships. It was kind of a mutual, whatever, and all parties were involved in this. I always hated romanticism.... So if you take away that air of true love and romanticism then what are you left with? You are left with something mutually pleasant and convenient to both people involved and something that’s working.

The close analogies between these comments and Christopher’s perspective is striking. A relationship can only be considered disadvantageous if its outcome is damaging. It cannot be damaging if the pluses and minuses experienced by the younger party add up to an overall positive outcome. As well, influence in the relationships was not all ‘one way’. Both parties influenced the conduct of the other to the eventual benefit of both.

Christopher and Denise defend these relationships within a conceptual field that opposes exploitation to fair exchange. Exploitation is not mere difference in social weight, such as that between adults and children, but is a situation of unequal exchange; one party receives more benefits than the other, an “appropriation without compensation” (Mandel 1970:9). Christopher and Denise deny that they suffered from exploitation while at the same time conceding that there was an inequality of social weight.

A useful concept in a poststructuralist analysis of discourse is that of ‘reversal’. As explained in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1980) a discourse can be preserved in some respects while changing its role within power conflicts. A dominant discourse may be partially appropriated and ‘reversed’ by being used in an oppositional strategy (Foucault 1980:101-102; Weedon 1988:110). We can see Christopher and Denise’s approach to the deontological view as a reversal of the deontological discourse. Much of the causal model of the deontological discourse is retained. Adults do have power and this does have an influence on the choices made

by children in the context of child/adult sex. However the ethical conclusions of this deontological discourse are rejected. In this sense the dominant discourse is reversed.

In doing this these interviewees also took up a firmly teleological position. Events are to be evaluated ethically in terms of outcomes. These are not generalizable across all situations of child/adult sex but need to be examined in terms of the specific situation. The outcomes for a child can be beneficial if adult power is used benevolently. In an interaction between two people exploitation occurs where one party benefits at the expense of another party. By contrast, a fair interaction occurs when both parties get something valuable out of the exchange.

Child/Adult Relationships and Volition

The experiences related in these interviews were characterized as both positive and voluntary. Within the liberal theory of sexual relations, relationships between adults are seen as ethically acceptable if both parties are voluntarily involved. In an important analogy, liberal theory regards wage labour as ethically acceptable in that workers voluntarily contract to sell their labour power. Such a position has come under considerable criticism from feminist theorists (e.g. Pateman 1988), and from the Left (e.g. Marx 1978; Lukes 1980).

It is possible to make a voluntary choice that is against one's interests; that does not maximize the beneficial outcomes that are actually possible in the situation. Moreover as Lukes (1980) and others have pointed out, such a choice may seem appropriate in the context of dominant discourses which operate to the benefit of the powerful. Finally, it is possible to be placed in a situation where the options are all less than satisfactory — to be married to one or another male in a state of economic dependency; to be an exploited employee of one or another capitalist and so forth.

Davies (1993) makes some useful points in regard to this issue in the context of child/adult sex and provides an apt example from her own childhood and adolescence. She notes that the "concept of agency (or believing one is in control) is, for me, quite central to sexual pleasure" (Davies 1993:142). The outcome or telos of sexual activity, sexual pleasure, is not possible unless one is a willing participant. However, she goes on to discuss an incident in her childhood, which shows that agentic choice is not in itself sufficient.

She began visiting an old man, enjoying her visits as entertainment and accepting some sexual interactions — having her hair brushed — while rejecting others. As she became an adolescent his sexual pressure on her became more demanding. He also told her he would die if she stopped seeing him. She asked her mother what to do about it without specifying the sexual aspects of their interactions. Her mother's reply left the choice up to her, saying that she might regard his gifts as a kind of payment for her visits. Davies continued to visit the old man until he died, eight years later, minimizing sexual contact but finding the situation a torment. She points out that she certainly had agency in this situation as she could have readily stopped the visits without sanction.

However, as Davies indicates, her actions were constrained within the framework of two discourses related to dominant ideas about appropriate femininity. The first was her inability to name and discuss the sexual aspects of the situation with her mother — she was trapped by the discourse of the asexual girl. The second was her belief that she had an obligation to care for this old man despite her own feelings about the situation — the discourse of the unselfish eternally helpful woman. We can see both of these as influential discourses in the context of a puritanical patriarchy; discourses which were heavily supported by Davies' social milieu at the time.

The implication of Davies' position here is that voluntary participation is not sufficient to guarantee a satisfactory interaction and that people can be constrained by influential discourses that work against their interests. In this article I have not assumed that the fact that the interviewees were voluntary participants in these experiences makes them ethically acceptable. The fact that these relationships were an expression of a choice on the part of the interviewee is a necessary component of what made the situation beneficial. However, it is only one component. Interviewees gave a great many other reasons for claiming these events as positive experiences, for arguing that they were not exploited or that they made the best choice under the circumstances. To give ethical support to certain instances of child/adult sex it is not necessary to sink into another kind of abstracted universalized sexual ethics — the ethics of *caveat emptor*, that sexual events can never be exploitative or harmful if they are voluntarily entered into.

Some More Global Considerations

The interviewees of the present study claimed at the very least that these relationships were 'positive' in that they served their interests well, being a preferable option at the time — a smart move. This is a key consideration if the ethical issue to be resolved is whether such relationships should be prohibited. The case against the prohibition is that it closes off such preferable options or makes them more difficult than they need be. Mostly, interviewees went well beyond the claim that these events were a preferable option. They described their experiences as positive in terms of the kinds of benefits for which sexual relationships are generally valued. For example they talked about the benevolence, care, affection or love of the adult. They described the connection as stimulating and enriching, or as fulfilling in terms of strong sexual interests on their part. They saw the relationships as helping them to establish an adult sexual or social identity.

It makes sense to compare these claims with those that might be made for the practice of Filipino women marrying Australian men — another sexual connection in which a power inequality is involved. A case against prohibition might be argued by pointing out that the women involved are making a sensible choice in terms of the options available to them. Furthermore, at least some Filipino brides would undoubtedly defend their involvement in these marriages much more positively, talking about love, commitment, sexual pleasure, or the expression of family affection.

At the same time a left wing feminist analysis of such connections might criticize the context in which these options are set up. The choice to marry a wealthy Australian man is made in a context of unequal power and may well be influenced by the poverty of Filipinos as Third World women, and by patriarchal discourses of romance, monogamy and female dependency. In an ideal world, the options of Filipino women would not be constrained in this way. As well, it could be argued that First World men as a class would express benevolence by ending the exploitation of the Third World.

This analogy can inform the ethical understanding of child/adult sex. The interviewees can be believed when they say that these relationships were good choices at the time and, for the most part, good relationships under any terms. This does not prevent an analysis of the context. To begin this, the interviewees were not dependent upon their participation in these relationships - they were not like economically dependent women choosing between husbands or economically dependent wage slaves choosing between employers. The interviewees were economically dependent, but on their parents or the state, not on the people with whom they were having sexual contacts. If an analogy of this kind is appropriate at all, it is that of a wife choosing to have an affair, or an employee choosing to have an out of work hobby.

This alerts us to one of the key problems of these relationships for the interviewees. Child/adult sexual contacts are illegal and almost universally opposed by parents who have the right to control their children's sexuality and a strong sense of their duty to do so. The interviewees were taking a great risk in engaging in these forbidden and hidden relationships; the risk that they would come into conflict with those upon whom they were economically dependent, with the ultimate possibility that their behaviour would lead them to the punished position of a state ward. These risks were quite real for some of the interviewees.

Bobbie, who had a relationship with an uncle when she was twelve years old, became more and more articulate in her radical political position, partly as a result of the influence of this relationship. She was involved in increasing conflict with her mother and stepfather, who blamed the uncle, even though they were unaware of the sexual connection. They forbade her to see the uncle and prevented further contact. Following this the stepfather began raping Bobbie orally, which she saw as an attempt to punish and control her waywardness.

Michael began a relationship with Toby at the age of eleven. In the interview, at twelve years old, he was quite critical of his mother and her lack of interest in her children. His relationship with his mother deteriorated and increasing conflict occurred after his mother discovered Toby was a gay paedophile. Neighbours and the school were reporting on Michael's continuing forbidden relationship with Toby and social welfare authorities were called in. To continue his relationship and avoid being institutionalized as an uncontrollable child, Michael eloped with Toby at fourteen years of age, leading the life of a fugitive from then on.

The power structure of child/adult relationships in this society was relevant to the interviewees in another way. For both children and adolescents, it is rare to have adults offer emotional support and engagement unless these adults are parents. Even

in the case of parents relations are often fraught by parental attempts to socialize the child into some pre-given notion of childhood perfection. Western culture maintains a rigid separation between adulthood and childhood, a close supervision of children by adults and an extension of childhood dependency into adolescence (Goode 1986; Davey 1982).

In many cases, especially for those who were at the time adolescents, the interviewees felt a strong need to be validated and given emotional support by an adult. Parents were often characterized as emotionally distant, authoritarian or even neglectful. Even interviewees who liked their parents felt that they had a need to have access to some other adult input. The adults with whom the interviewees had sexual contacts were very frequently praised for their emotional support and engagement with the interviewees.

When Wendy, among many other interviewees, said that her adult boyfriend Paul was the first person to actually listen to what she had to say and take her seriously as a thinking person, she reveals a paucity of social options for adolescents. Accordingly, the social context limited the choices available to the interviewees; their sexual relationships were chosen in a context that did not create a great many wonderful alternatives in terms of adult companionship and support.

Patriarchal discourses of sexuality influenced the social construction of desire as experienced by the interviewees, making an older man seem a suitable object of sexual interest while other options were less likely. This is not to say that there is anything necessarily wrong with man/girl or man/boy relationships as a type or in these particular cases (for a fuller discussion see Leahy 1992: 1993). However the interviewees were not in the situation where such a type of connection was chosen from a random pack of polymorphous perverse possibilities. Again, this can well be seen as a constraint on choice and one which is not unrelated to the social power of adult men more generally. It is worth noting that the present study also interviewed three women who had been involved in woman/girl relationships and one boy who was in a relationship with an adult woman, so the social construction of desire is not such as to close off these other options completely.

I have argued that the choices made by these interviewees were appropriate in terms of their circumstances and also that many of these relationships were realistically seen as successful in terms of the criteria by which sexual contacts are generally evaluated. On the other hand, these choices were made in a context which was both patriarchal and unnecessarily ageist, and this context created a set of options that was less than satisfactory. It is not possible for adults to express benevolence by entirely equalizing power between adults and children. However, the extent of inequality could be considerably lessened if children had more access to a diverse range of adults to draw on for social support and if the artificial extension of childhood into adolescence was abandoned.

Concluding Comments

Despite the problems I have identified, the deontological critique of child/adult sex seems likely to remain the dominant discourse on the topic. To many it may seem

attractive because it provides the rationale for a total opposition to all child/adult sex; it offers clear legal and ethical prescriptions summarized in such slogans as 'no excuses, never ever'. Absolute prohibition may seem to make sense in response to the very real horrors of most sexual interactions between children and adults. The teleological position, even when used to support the prohibition as pragmatically appropriate, inevitably suggests a much more complicated and plastic ethical situation.

As well, as I have demonstrated in this article, the causal model associated with the deontological view, the recognition of the power and influence of adults, makes sense even in reference to positively experienced relationships. The good sense of this causal analysis gets confused with the problematic ethical conclusions of the deontological view.

Uncharitably, we might also agree with Gary Dowsett's argument (1993) that the 'paedophile' is the monster we have to have in a period when more explicit ethical condemnations of sexuality outside the holy family are out of fashion in the middle class. Dangerous sexuality is still the subject of considerable anxiety as movies such as "Basic Instinct" indicate. Child/adult sex provides a respectable niche for this anxiety within the expert discourses of medical and social advice. The deontological argument here provides the rationale to prevent child/adult sex being included in the slippery slope to permissiveness.

In this article I have attempted to show that one of the major problems with the deontological position on child/adult sex is that it must bury the evidence of positive experiences with consequent problems for those who have been involved in such experiences. At the level of teaching, policing and social work it leads to an attempt to impose a completely inappropriate ethical framework on voluntary relationships between working-class adolescents and those over the age of consent. It creates particular problems for gay adolescents who often experience their first sexual liaisons before sixteen. At the level of counselling and therapy it can create a 'regime of truth' which does not permit therapists to seriously listen to their clients on this topic; a pre-ordained agenda of 'coming to recognize the experience of abuse' may be imposed, whatever the actual experiences in question. At the most inclusive level the perpetuation of the deontological framework through one of its key current manifestations represents an insensitive blindness to the complexities of ethical situations. Ethics becomes a set of abstract rules, usually ignored, and unable to take into account social milieu, culture and the actual needs and desires experienced by people.

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