

'The Main Thing Is Being Wanted': Some Case Studies on Adult Sexual Experiences with Children

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SUMMARY. Pedophilia is always considered by mainstream society as one form of sexual abuse of children. However, analysis of the personal accounts provided by pedophiles suggests that these experiences could be understood differently. This paper attempts to document some aspects of the pedophiles' construction of their sexuality, to provide illustrations of how these individuals understand themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Pedophilia is legally a crime in most western countries, and it is considered a mental disorder by orthodox psychiatry.¹ In official and research statistics, pedophiles are included within the category of child molesters. To many professionals concerned with the protection of children, pedophilia is synonymous with child sexual abuse, and is reckoned as a very serious social problem. Pedophiles are to be arrested and imprisoned, or, within a rehabilitation framework, to be given therapy or other behavior-changing treatments. Very rarely does one hear an academic or a professional speaking out in defence of pedophiles.²

Are all pedophiles violent child molesters? Or are they, as one

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pedophile has argued in a book, gentle and loving people?³ There is a great need for giving voice to the viewpoints of pedophiles, not least because they are rarely heard. We must let them speak for themselves. It is through listening empathetically to their accounts that we can hope to achieve a dialogue with them and consequently a better understanding of their experiences.⁴

APPROACH

This paper is based on about 100 hours of tape-recorded material that I have gathered from 27 men who have had sexual contact with children. All of these men were volunteer informants who agreed to participate in my study without remuneration. Twelve of them were introduced to me by several psychiatrists, but they were under no compulsion to take part in my project. Also, it was made clear to them that their participation in this project would in no way affect their relationship to their psychiatrist. Three other informants were contacted through a pedophile organization, and the rest (twelve) via an advertisement in a magazine.

Because the subject of the study was a very sensitive issue, it was difficult to get in touch with a large number of suitable informants. Therefore I placed no restriction on the type of people I interviewed, except the basic requirement that they must have had some sexual experience with children. I took great care to ensure that all informants took part in my study out of their own free choice.

It was not always possible to ascertain what each participant's reason for participating was. Nevertheless, some of them did mention that it was the first time they ever had the chance to talk about their experiences in detail with somebody who was willing to listen, and this gave them the feeling of being understood. Perhaps this desire to communicate with another person motivated these men to respond to my request. Needless to say, I assured all my informants that strict confidentiality would be kept of any information they might provide, and also that this project was an academic pursuit which had no connection with any government agency. The aim of the study was to document how they construe their sexual experiences with children.

The phrase 'how they construe their experiences' is of paramount

importance here. To construe experience is to interpret events, to give form to occurrences, to make sense of what is happening, and to carry on one's life in the direction that these interpretations and constructions entail.⁵ Human existence is 'subjective,' in the sense that it is the 'subject' who exists—it is the 'I' who carries on the 'existence.' I want to understand how my pedophile informants have understood their sexual life as *an experiencing subject*. This point is of fundamental importance, because there is no pedophilia as an entity of its own right, there are only individual *persons* who experience sexual feelings for children. The search for a categorical etiology or pathology for pedophilia as an objective entity will mask the rich complexity of the unique life of the individual concerned, and will reify the subjective human experiences involved.

This study consisted of in-depth interviews with individual pedophiles. The aim of each interview was to let the informant talk freely about his experiences with children. I was not looking for any particular type of accounts, nor was I testing any specific hypothesis. My role was as an unprejudiced researcher seeking an understanding of an area of human experience that only my informants could clarify. I communicated this clearly to them. I used open-ended questions as far as possible to avoid leading the informant to a particular way of describing his experiences. During each interview, I maintained, as much as possible, a non-imposing and receptive style of interaction with the informant, so as to encourage him to speak frankly and freely about what he believed.

Granted all this, however, it is possible to argue that what the informant believes might not be the 'objective' or 'real' situation he is in. To this challenge one could argue that what is real is not something out there independent of the human observer. To an individual person, reality is what he construes to be real. Still, it could be argued that at best each informant's account is a rationalization of his own behavior. This, however, is not necessarily a problem. If we take 'rationalization' not in the pejorative sense as something 'false' or 'unreliable,' but in its etymological sense of being 'related to reason,' then we could accept, indeed we have to say, that the informant's account constitutes his effort of giving reason or meaning to his experience. This is precisely what my study wants to document.

The situation in which the informant's account was produced was one in which I asked him to reflect on, to explain, to justify, indeed to 'rationalize' (to give reasons for), his sexual desire. It was a dialogue between a sincere listener and the pedophile. The situation was not one in which the informant ran the risk of incriminating himself by what he said; it was not a police interrogation in which he had to defend himself. Therefore, I expected that his 'rationalization' was more likely what he believed, and hence what I wanted to understand. Even if what he has told me represents more his fantasy than actual occurrences, the material still reflects his understanding of his desire.

From what is said above, it is clear that the focus of this study is on the pedophiles' construction of their experiences. This, however, is just one side of the coin — there is also the children's experiences to be reckoned with. An important question in this regard is whether the children involved construe their experiences differently. Hence it is desirable to carry out a study which compares pedophiles' construction of their experiences with that of the children involved. However, practical limitation in terms of time, resources and access to children has made it impossible to do so in this present project. Nevertheless, the collecting and analyzing of pedophiles' accounts is in itself an important task towards attaining an understanding of this particular type of human experiences.

In the analysis, I tried to reconstruct from what each informant had told me his understanding of his sexual desire for children. Then I examined the explanatory accounts given by all the informants, and drew out the elements common to their construction. While these elements are not necessarily present in the account of every informant, they do provide us with some insights into the self-understanding of these individuals. In the following sections, I will discuss thematically these various elements of the pedophiles' construction of their sexual experiences. Needless to say, these case studies are not to be taken as representative of all those people who have had sexual encounters with children. Each person has a unique life history. This work can only claim to be a documentation of some relevant cases. But it is my conviction that our understanding will slowly deepen as this process of documentation progresses further.

'I AM BORN LIKE THIS!'

This is a prominent feature in the accounts of about one-third of my informants. These individuals feel that their sexual desire for children is a natural part of their constitution. This desire is variously described as 'inbred,' 'innate,' 'a fact of nature,' 'inherent in them,' etc. The *leitmotif* of their accounts is 'this is me' or 'just the way I am.' The following is an example of this type of construction.

Tom is a 25-year-old businessman from a fairly rich family. From adolescence onwards, Tom gradually realized that he had strong sexual desire for boys. He felt he could only attribute this to an innate disposition as there was nothing in his life that he could identify as responsible for this development. This is his description:

I can offer no explanation for my feelings, it is inherent in me, it is just something that comes naturally to me. To be honest, you know, I think it'd always been in me. I don't think it's sort of one stage that happened that converts me over to that. (. . .) It's not something that happened in my life that changed me totally, it's always been there.

This understanding of the innate nature of their pedophilic desire underlies my informants' feeling that they cannot change, and that they have the same right as people who are born otherwise to pursue the expression of their sexuality.

THE SPECIAL APPEAL OF CHILDREN

Over half of the informants have mentioned specific characteristics in children which they find particularly attractive. Thus to them, relationships and sexual activities with children are experienced as much more satisfying than those with adults. These relationships are their first choice, rather than a substitute when adult sex is lacking.

In these informants' accounts, children are portrayed as gentle, warm, generous, innocent, truthful, broadminded, affectionate and perceptive, whereas adults are described as selfish, narrow-minded, materialistic and without depth of feeling. Interaction with children,

as my informants have experienced it, is much more enjoyable than that with adults because the informants do not have to put up a social facade, they can simply be themselves.

In this context, pedophilic activities are often construed by the informants in terms of childhood play. The account of Nick provides an example that highlights some of these points. All through his adult life, Nick, who is 33, has had many relationships with boys, some of which have been sexual, some not. The relationship that he treasured most, with an Arab boy of 9, did not involve sex. Nick felt that he was accepted as part of the boy's family, and he thoroughly enjoyed the three years they spent together. When the boy eventually left Britain, Nick experienced a tremendous loss. This is how he expressed his feelings:

Nothing is the same after he left, you know, just like (pause), just like the world has lost its color (sighs), every, everything was different.

Besides this Arab boy, Nick was also very fond of his two nephews. Again, sex was not involved. To him, the relationship between himself and his nephews was one of affection and love. It was the boisterous play he had with his nephews and their friends that gave him pleasure and a sense of fulfilment. They played rough and tumble games, they played football, they went camping and searching for adventures and mischiefs, they visited amusement arcades, they looked for fun. Nick described his pedophilic desire in the following way:

I like kids because I didn't have any other, real, great experiences with adults when I was a kid. You can't learn to be pedophilic, it's something that happens, it's a form of growth, growth that makes you a pedophilic. It's the way you're brought up, experiences you had, experiences of being unloved, experiences of having difficult relationships. (. . .) For me, without the spirit of children around, I'm alone. (Weeps) I have to look—this is difficult—I have to look for things worth living for. (. . .) Youth comes into it, the spirit comes into it. 'Cos it's not just sex. I enjoyed their company.

Lots of things come into it. Sex, to me, sex is a very small part, you know, in a relationship with a boy. Sex is, you know, the smallest part. 'Cos I've had hundred of relationships with boys without sex coming into it. (. . .) Spirit is the charisma of childhood, that is, hmm, that is, childness. Just the fun, the innocence. Sex isn't the main thing, the main thing is being wanted I suppose.

To many pedophiles, the childhood world represents the best of life, while the adult world the worst. Pedophilia is not primarily a matter of sex, but of love, of being wanted, of childhood enjoyment, of things that the adult world cannot provide. The following extracts from some other informants' accounts illustrate this contrast between the adult and the childhood world:

Children get involved in sex with each other, because they don't feel it's wrong, you see. Now you can meet a child and you can say to a child, should we play doctors and nurses or whatever, and they know what you're talking about, and they do it to each other, sometimes they are willing to do it with an adult. (. . .) I suppose, you can say that I'm slightly immature, haven't lost my childhood. Childhood is a very, very short sort of time in your life, goes too quickly, and it's very sweet, you know, it's all innocent. You know, you do things which you don't do as adults, I mean, if you're a child, you can take your clothes off and lunge into a river, to swim, you're quite free, you have no inhibitions. But if you strip off, as an adult, you get arrested! (Keith)

Children are immeasurably perceptive, but by the time they have grown up, society has dealt them a deadly blow, and their perception has fled for all times. (George)

Children are warm and generous and it is only when they get older and they learn the ways of the world and ask what's in it for me or what is it worth. When that happens they lose all their charm and enchantment. (Jack)

The attraction of the childhood world is so great that Paul, another informant, expressed the wish to never grow up:

I am very much a Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up. That is why boys are attracted to me. I don't look down upon them as kids, I regard them, and they me, as 'all boys together.' My deep love for boys for so many years is so much a part of me psychologically that growing up would be impossible.

NORMAL PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

While mainstream society looks at adult-child sexual activities as pathological and criminal, most of my informants feel that these are normal pleasure-seeking activities. Eight of the 27 informants have articulated a defense of pedophilia in terms of cultural relativism and sexual liberation: human sexual practices are culturally conditioned, thus there can be no absolute standard; normality is relative, so pedophilia cannot be *a priori* deemed abnormal.

Simon is a 74-year-old retired salesman, a respected person in his local community. Throughout his long life, he has had numerous sexual encounters with boys. He has a special knack of relating to boys, and can easily establish relationships of trust with them. He believes that his sexual attraction towards boys is inborn, and that the pursuit of mutual pleasure with a willing boy is normal and legitimate. This is how he put it:

As a boy-lover, I feel that it's up to me to take advantage of a willing boy. I don't see anything wrong in that, because I do not — let me get this quite clear, I don't go out seeking boys for my pleasure, I don't go out encouraging boys for my pleasure. I only encourage boys who come to me and want me to have a bit of sex play with them, and that has always been my angle. I have never ever forced a boy.

The following quotations, from two other informants, illustrate how the argument of relativism and liberation is articulated to jus-

tify the 'normality' of pleasure-seeking through sexual activities with children.

There is the historical aspect. In the Middle Ages children were not children in the sense we speak of these days. Probably pedophilia went on regularly within and outside families. I assume that hundreds of years ago sex with younger females was just not noticed. Before 'alcoholism' was recognized, people who got themselves into a state were called lazy, good-for-nothing scoundrels etc. etc., get the point? (Kevin)

My contention is that an adult can have a relationship with a child in a way that does not harm, and indeed, helps, the child. I consider myself to be an adult capable of such a relationship. Other adults might be more selfish in an adult-child encounter and end up harming the child. By banning and stigmatizing adult-child encounters, our society has ensured that such instances as do still occur are almost always of the bad kind, so giving the active opponents of adult-child encounters an argument for even heavier clampdown. If adult-child sex was commonplace, the majority of it would surely be good for both participants and, therefore, not something to be discouraged. Indeed, because the adult would be able to teach the child from an informed standpoint, many of the childhood misunderstandings about sex that come from child-child encounters would be avoided. (Bruce)

Implicit in the sexual liberation viewpoint, as illustrated by this quotation from Bruce, is the argument that adult-child sexual activities have positive educational value to the children involved. Jack also made this clear in his account:

If everybody could have an experience at an early age, some kind of experience with an adult, people would not have nearly as many problems as what they do have, and I think that's why, sex with children, I think it's an extension of that, hmm, teaching them what I've learned. But it got to be done in a nice, pleasant way, you can't force anybody.

MUTUAL AFFECTION AND LOVE

Whether they feel that they are born pedophile, or that pedophilia is a normal and legitimate variation of human sexual expression, most of my informants have stressed the experience of love, affection, or closeness in their encounters with children. The sense of emotional contact with another human person is as important as, if not actually more important than, the excitement of sex. Among these informants, four have explicitly articulated their experience with children in terms of romantic courtship and love.

Ben is a 36-year-old businessman. From early childhood onwards he felt that he was only attracted to males. Then as he grew older, he gradually realized that this attraction was to boys rather than to men. He also realized that what he wanted was a stable relationship of love with a young teenage boy. The following extracts from his account show how Ben construed his pedophilic relationships in terms of romantic love.

Most important thing I look for, I suppose, is a loving relationship with a boy, and, although I've had physical relationships with probably, I don't know, maybe a hundred or more boys over the years, I can only point to four or five true relationships over that time. (. . .) As emotions become more involved, and the relationship becomes longer established, so does the child's involvement become greater. The bond develops out of a mutual need for love and affection. The bond is nurtured and develops further out of both of us doing things for the other person even we're not necessarily particularly interested ourselves, yeah? Now, it's not the case with the one at the moment because he enjoys the sex as much as I do if not more, but I know that in the past, there may have been occasions, I mean once the relationship is established, where the boy would—I have to differentiate this from force or whatever—but I mean there may have been occasions where the boy would make love because I wanted to, all right? Hmm, he may have been actually ready to go to sleep. That's the other side of the coin to me watching the go-kart for three hours, OK? Hmm, we all become trained, not Pavlovian, but trained

to a degree that we know that somebody wants something recognized, and we recognize it, yeah? Not because it interests us, but because we know that they want it recognized. The thing that's mutual is the love and affection, all right? Out of that affection, we do things for each other.

The presence of a relationship of love in a pedophilic encounter is also of paramount importance to Charles, another 74-year-old informant. This is how he put it:

To me the important and salient consideration in the validity of the experience is the presence of love, or slightly less than that, affection. Anything outside this is possible but in no way significant.

Thus to these men, pedophilia is construed as a matter of romantic relationships, not as casual sex. The experience of romantic love is sometimes emotionally very intense, comparable to that which obtains in the socially acceptable forms of heterosexual courtship, and the partners can sense subtle cues from each other. An example of such intense feelings ('falling in love') can be found in the description provided by Paul, a 57-year-old golf club greenkeeper, about his encounter with a 13-year-old boy:

He stopped, my blue eyes and his brown eyes just met. For seconds, which seemed like hours, neither of us spoke. He then said, excuse me, Sir, could you tell me where the head greenkeeper is? I explained that he only had to go along the path for about 40 yards. He thanked me profusely and slowly mounting his bike and rode away, giving me a smile, the likes of which I had not seen for many years. It was obvious that something between us had clicked. I was transfixed, I started trembling, my legs weakened, I could not concentrate on my mowing. Yet I had six hours of non-stop mowing ahead of me. My mowing became automatic, I was oblivious to the playing members and visitors who spoke to me whilst I stopped my machine whilst they tee'd off. I was in love, love deeper than I had ever before experienced. Was that beautiful boy applying for a greenkeeping job?

CONCLUSION

The extracts from the accounts of my informants discussed in this paper illustrate the subjective feeling involved in a pedophile's experience of sexual attraction towards children. This may take the form of a fascination with the innocence and the lack of inhibition in children's life and activities, as well as a desire in the pedophile to remain in childhood. It may also involve a condemnation of the hypocrisy of the adult world, and a rejection of the latter's absolutist moral standard. To some pedophiles, their relationships with children are constituted by an intense love and affection. In such a relationship, as construed by the pedophile, there is a mutual recognizing and accommodating of each other's needs and desires to foster the growth of love. The interaction involved is experienced as spontaneous, and the partners understand each other. Thus on the whole, most of my informants have construed their sexual contact with children in a very positive light.

It must be pointed out that this paper is only trying to place into focus the salient features of pedophilic experiences as seen from the perspective of some pedophiles. What has been discussed above is not meant to be taken as typical of every pedophilic relationship. Perhaps some researchers will find in these personal accounts evidence to 'pathologize' the individuals concerned,⁶ but such an attempt at reducing a person's life to a diagnostic category or an etiology masks the complexity of human existence. Like every one of us, a pedophile is constantly in the process of creating a personal world to anchor his existence. A very vivid example is Keith—his life is situated in a world that he has virtually built up himself. A visit to his room will reveal to the visitor the richness of this world—numerous car models, vehicle paraphernalia, gramophone music records, small pieces of wooden furniture which he himself has made, and pictures of children cut out from magazines, pasted on papers and bound together into many volumes.

As Nick, another informant, has remarked, 'sex isn't the main thing.' To many of my informants, sex does not constitute the whole of a 'pedophile's' life—it is only a part of it, albeit a *meaningful* part. To call a person a 'pedophile' may in itself be reductionistic—as if that person's desire for children constitutes the

whole of his life. This reducing of a person into a narrow category is part of what has been called the 'discourse of sexuality' which permeates western society,⁷ and it controls the life of individuals through deploying such labels of sexual identities as 'the homosexual,' 'the lesbian,' 'the impotent male,' 'the pedophile,' etc. These labels imply that the *essence* of the individuals concerned is thoroughly known and that these people must be placed in certain well-defined positions in society (e.g., as outcast, prisoners, or failures). Within such a scheme of things, individual personhood becomes impossible.

While to a certain extent this discussion seems to be endorsing a relativization of the concept of 'normality,' it is not my intention to defend all types of sexual contact between adults and children. Lust murder of children and coercive sexual contact must be ruled out as unacceptable no matter how these acts are construed by the adult committing them. But when it comes to the question of consensual adult-child sexual activities, there is much more room for alternative constructions, and hence it is more difficult to arrive at a blanket judgment. However, total relativism is not the answer, as it would only lead to solipsistic chaos. Personal life, though individually subjective, must nevertheless be lived in the context of a community, because this is the form that human existence has taken throughout our development, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically speaking. Therefore, it is important that the pedophile takes into consideration reality as construed by the community in which he finds himself, not necessarily to submit to society's demands, but in order that he can construe reality more adequately if he wants to continue living in this community.⁸

The discrepancy between pedophiles' views and those of mainstream society has to be examined critically to see if there is any possibility of achieving an optimal balance between individual rights and collective responsibility. In dealing with this problem, it must be borne in mind that the viewpoint of mainstream society cannot simply be taken as correct and that of the pedophiles taken as suspect. Instead, each should be analyzed in terms of its historical and ideological roots. Only after such an exercise can we begin to address the more practical questions of ethics, the law, and social policies with regard to sexual contact between adults and children.

NOTES

1. While 'pedophilia' as such is not an official offence category, sexual contact with underage persons is criminalized by various sexual offence statutes concerning 'unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor,' 'indecent assault,' 'buggery,' 'indecentcy with children,' etc. With respect to psychiatric classification, the current edition of both the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association) and the *International Classification of Diseases* (World Health Organization) have categorized pedophilia as a mental disorder.

2. Perhaps one notable exception is the Dutch lawyer, Dr Edward Brongersma, who is an outspoken defender of consensual pedophilia. See Brongersma (1980, 1984).

3. Tom O'Carroll, the ex-leader of the now defunct British Pedophile Information Exchange, has attempted to put across to the public such a view. See O'Carroll (1980).

4. Parker (1969) and P. Wilson (1981) contain biographical material of some pedophiles, and can be taken as studies that provide a channel for these people to speak for themselves.

5. The use of the terms 'to construe' and 'construction' in this paper follows the inspiring work of George Kelly (see Kelly 1955). Kelly's work is *reflexive*, that is, it can subsume its own theoretical and research activities within the framework it provides. Hence my own work here represents my effort in construing the reality of 'pedophilia,' it is my construction of my informants' construction.

6. Wilson & Cox (1983) contains accounts from a group of pedophiles, but the researchers' interpretation represents a 'pathologizing' of these people's experiences. This 'pathologizing' is one construction of the 'reality' about pedophilia, but it is not necessarily the only possible one.

7. Foucault (1979) has used this concept to analyse the emergence of the very notion of 'sexuality' in western society, and how this 'discourse of sexuality' has effected the subjugation of the human body.

8. I have discussed some of these issues in my PhD dissertation, *Sexual Experiences of Adults with Children: An Analysis of Personal Accounts* (1986), University of Cambridge, and also in Li (1988).

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