

Boyhood Sexual Experiences with Older Males: Using the Internet for Behavioral Research

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Empirical research into the sexuality of children goes back many decades and, in the past, it has been possible to interview children directly in both clinical and non-clinical settings (Bender & Blau, 1937; Sandfort, 1987). Retrospective surveys of childhood sexual experiences have also been conducted in college introductory courses in the social sciences (see, e.g., Rind, Bauserman, & Tromovitch, 1998).

The advent of the Internet has opened up new possibilities for anonymous behavioral research with otherwise inaccessible participants (e.g., Duffy, 2002; Rhodes, Bowie, & Hergenrather, 2003) and some researchers conclude that the Internet can provide data equal in validity and quality to in-person “paper and pencil” studies (Cronk & West, 2002; Pettit, 2002). The present research was conducted via the Internet by posting links to an online questionnaire on various Internet newsgroups, which were selected based on non-relatedness to the topic in question, excluding, for example, “survivors” of sexual abuse (negative bias) or devotees of “boy love” (positive bias), such as alt.gossip.celebrities, alt.smokers.cigars, rec.arts.comics.strips, etc. This approach is not claimed to be ideal, but, in the present social climate (Jenkins, 1998), it may be the most practical. Research has indicated that reactions and effects differ substantially between girls and boys with these experiences (e.g., Rind et al.,

1998); therefore, issues involving girls are not addressed in this study.

The present study was designed to investigate claims (e.g., Finkelhor, 1984) that boyhood sexual relationships with older persons in general cause “harm, [that] this harm is pervasive... [and] is likely to be intense” (Rind et al., 1998, p. 22). In addition to perceived “harm,” the question of “willingness” was also addressed. Given its highly self-selected nature, this convenience sample is likely to be unrepresentative of the general population. However, because the basic issue is the assumption by some of universal, intrinsic, and extreme harm in these relationships, the sample need not be representative to be useful and appropriate in testing the validity of these claims.

After addressing basic demographics, the survey posed five questions concerning self-perceived general mental health and coping ability. The next section gathered information on the circumstances and conditions at the beginning of the relationship, such as the economic and social status of the younger and older males; relationships with parents; need for an emotional, physical, and intellectual extra-familial relationship; and the contribution of unacceptable family conditions to this need. The development of the relationship was then addressed after instructing the participant that if he had more than one such relationship, he should describe the “principal” or most important one. Questions included the participant’s age at the beginning of the relationship and the age difference compared to the older male, how he initially encountered the older male, the amount of time the parties were able to spend together initially and on a continuing basis, and the occurrence of bonding, joint activities, personal counseling, educational, and other support. Another section dealt with initial desire and willingness in the sexual aspects of the relationship, desire and willingness to continue, any physical coercion, the participant’s understanding

Editor’s note: A longer version of this letter was peer-reviewed and was not accepted for publication. The reviewers and the Editor did, however, share the view that portions of the submitted article contained concepts and data that were of potential interest to the readers of *Archives*. Accordingly, an invitation was made to submit this material as a Letter to the Editor. For those wishing to investigate further, the complete original article is available at <http://www.sebrom.info>.

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of “simple” and “informed” consent as defined in the questionnaire, and the relative extent of these forms of consent in the relationship. The next section covered the age at which specific sex acts began and their frequency, and the last section examined perception of the importance of the relationship, the relative importance of the non-sexual and sexual aspects, the distribution of “power,” the question of “child sexual abuse,” the degree of positive versus negative overall effects, effect on later sexual orientation, the validity of the decision to participate in sex, and the role of outside interference in the relationship.

After the 103 valid responses had been analyzed, a high proportion of homosexual and bisexual participants was noted. However, previous investigations have indicated that homosexual, bisexual, and pedosexual individuals seem more responsive to investigations of this type, whereas heterosexual adult males (perhaps due to greater anxiety over the social stigma attached to unconventional sexuality) are less likely to respond. Racial identification was heavily skewed toward Whites, and geographical location to North America, Continental Europe, and the UK; educational levels also appeared high. The non-standardized mental health measures were subject to self-reporting bias, but the participants appeared to perceive themselves as well-adjusted overall; only 12 perceived their general mental health as below average, and about one-fourth rated themselves below average in job performance or in getting along well with others at home or work.

Both participants and the older males were mostly of average or middle-class socioeconomic status; significant inequality was reported by only 12. Participants were typically closer to their mother than their father, but the majority of both parental relationships were based on at least a “usual” (5 on a scale of 1–7) level of attention. Desires for an emotional and physical (non-sexual) relationship were moderate, but somewhat higher for an intellectual (mentoring) relationship. Unacceptable family, economic, and/or social circumstances appeared to contribute very little to the desire for a relationship with an older male.

The median and modal age at the beginning of these relationships was 12 years ($M = 12.1$, $SD = 2.6$); half (51) began at ages 11 through 13, around the onset of puberty. The publicly perceived categories of males frequently involved in such relationships (i.e., teachers, clergy, and youth leaders) were poorly represented, with “other” being the most frequent; 40 of the older males were casual acquaintances or family friends. The modal category for initial time together was “more than once a week.” An absence of “bonding” was reported by 13 of the participants, but of the 90 who reported any level whatsoever of emotional connectedness or bonding, 67 characterized this factor as “some” (3 on an increasing scale of 1–5) or greater. Personal counseling ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 1.2$) and hobbies ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 1.2$) seemed to be

the most important activities, followed in decreasing importance by sports, trips, and manual skills. However, none of these had importance even approaching the “some” level (same 1–5 scale as above). The mean for material support was 1.8, between “never” and “rarely.” Nonsexual activity decisions in the ongoing relationship tended to be shared; almost half the participants characterized them as “mutual.”

Table 1 reports retrospective perceptions and evaluations of the effects of the relationships, by participant categories of N (all participants) = 103, F (adult female attracted) = 66, M (adult male attracted) = 25, and O (other) = 12, which for simplicity includes bisexual (8) and minor attracted (4).

Moderate or greater importance was ascribed to their relationship by 67 participants and the relative importance of sexual to non-sexual activities was perceived as equal or greater by 82. “Power” was regarded as shared equally by 37, while another 40 felt that the older male had somewhat more power, but exercised it considerably. Some three-fourths of the participants characterized their experiences as not at all constituting “child sexual abuse,” whereas 18 reported it as “a little,” and 6 as more than a little. Overall effects were described as positive by 59 and as neutral (neither positive nor negative) by 31; therefore, 9 of every 10 participants reported their experiences as non-negative. Little or no influence on adult sexual orientation was reported by 78, and the validity of the decision to engage in sex was characterized as “good” by 71 and “reasonable” by another 17. However, as in all retrospective surveys, the degree of recall bias affecting these responses is unknown. It is noteworthy that although most of these relationships lasted more than a year and were extensively sexual (involving multiple contacts and more “advanced” sexual activities), only two of the older partners were ever imprisoned.

To explore the association between self-perceived overall effect and other aspects of the relationships, cross tabulations and Pearson r s for a variety of characteristics are presented in Table 2. Additional correlations were tested but were non-significant.

Age at the beginning of the relationship, age differential, and adult sexual orientation were not associated with overall effects. However, type of consent given and willingness to continue the sexual activities were significantly associated with perceived effects and initial willingness was marginally associated. Higher levels of perceived consent or willingness in these latter three correlations were associated with positive evaluations of the relationship, but it must be noted that, as with any correlation, this association does not prove a causal relationship.

This study replicates findings of research conducted mostly before the ascendancy of victimology. Those older studies generally concluded that such relations are not inherently negative and harmful and can even be beneficial (e.g., Money & Weinrich, 1983; Sandfort, 1987; Tindall,

Table 1 Effects and perceptions

	N 103	F 66	M 25	O 12
Duration				
Less than one month	11	6	3	2
One through two months	5	4	0	1
Three through five months	1	0	1	0
Six through eleven months	11	8	3	0
One through two years	27	19	6	2
Three through five years	26	13	8	5
Six through ten years	8	4	2	2
More than ten years	3	3	0	0
Still exists	11	9	2	0
Importance				
Only slight	23	19	4	0
Somewhat	13	8	1	4
Moderate	23	15	5	3
Very	31	16	13	2
Extreme	13	8	2	3
Relative importance				
Non-sex major	7	7	0	0
Non-sex much more	4	3	1	0
Non-sex some more	10	6	1	3
Non-sex equal to sex	23	13	7	3
Sex some more	20	11	7	2
Sex much more	22	16	4	2
Sex major	17	10	5	2
Power				
All his	17	11	5	1
Most his, considerate	40	28	8	4
Shared equally	37	21	10	6
Most mine, considerate	8	6	2	0
All mine	1	0	0	1
Child sex abuse				
Not at all	78	50	19	9
A little	18	12	4	2
Some	1	1	0	0
A lot	2	2	0	0
Completely	4	1	2	1
Overall effect				
Very negative	5	1	3	1
Somewhat negative	8	2	6	0
Neither neg. nor pos.	31	22	6	3
Somewhat positive	34	22	8	4
Very positive	25	14	7	4
Influenced orientation				
Not at all	58	42	12	4
A little	20	17	3	0
Some	12	6	1	5
A lot	8	1	6	1

Table 1 continued

	N 103	F 66	M 25	O 12
A whole lot	5	0	3	2
Validity of decision				
Objected	1	0	1	0
Passive	10	6	2	2
Bad decision	4	2	2	0
Reasonable—more info	17	14	2	5
Good—more info	22	12	6	4
Good—sufficient info	17	13	4	0
Good—no misgivings	32	19	8	5

1978). However, this study extends that earlier research by collecting and reporting more detailed information on this type of relationship, and offers little support for the hypothesis that boyhood sexual relations with older males are typically involuntary, experienced traumatically, and generally lead to maladjustment. Victimology holds that all forms of boy/older male sexual contact are injurious to the younger participant (Finkelhor, 1984); therefore, ample evidence of harm should have been apparent even in this convenience sample. However, participants indicated that consent, in the “simple” sense, was common; enjoyment was more characteristic than displeasure or trauma; encouragement rather than resistance on their part (as the younger participant) characterized sexual interactions, especially after the first several encounters; feelings that the sexual contacts could appropriately be labeled “child sexual abuse” were in the minority; perceptions of shared or considerate use of power rather than being dominated in the relationships were in the majority; and self-perceived short-term and long-term effects were characteristically positive or neutral rather than negative. Finally, self-reports of current mental health indicated that most participants felt that they were emotionally healthy, coped fairly well with life’s problems, and generally had good social relations with others. These results are inconsistent with victimological assumptions of trauma and harm as central, universal features of this kind of sexual interaction.

The convenience sample presented here is not claimed to be representative of the population from which it was drawn. But the goal of the research was to examine the validity of the universalistic claims of victimology, so the sample did not need to be broadly representative in order to determine if unknown proportions of boyhood sexual experiences with older males are self-perceived as voluntary, positively experienced, generally free from outside interference, and neutral or positive in their effects. Studies based on clinical and legal samples tend to show, in contrast, that such relations are often forced or coerced, negatively or traumatically experienced,

Table 2 Cross-tabulations and Pearson correlations with overall long term effect

	<i>N</i>	Very negative	Somewhat negative	Neutral	Somewhat positive	Very positive
Age at beginning						
<10	19	1	4	7	1	6
10–11	17	2	2	3	6	4
12–13	38	2	0	13	13	10
14–15	19	0	1	7	8	3
16–17	10	0	1	1	6	2
$r(103) = .148, ns$						
Age differential						
3–4	25	0	1	9	12	3
5–9	20	2	2	5	4	7
10–14	13	0	0	3	5	5
15–19	15	0	0	5	5	5
>19	30	3	5	9	8	5
$r(103) = .12, ns$						
Adult sexual orientation (cf. Table 1)						
Exc. female	36	2	5	10	13	6
Pri. female	30	0	1	12	9	8
Bisexual	8	0	0	2	4	2
Pri. male	8	1	1	2	2	2
Exclu. male	17	1	1	4	6	5
Other	4	1	0	1	0	2
$r(103) = .04, ns$						
Type of consent given						
<i>Don't under</i>	8	0	1	4	3	0
Objected	2	2	0	0	0	0
Passive	21	2	4	5	5	5
Ent. simple	12	1	2	4	3	2
Most. simple	22	0	1	3	10	8
Sim. = infor.	16	0	0	7	6	3
Most. infor.	6	0	0	3	1	2
$r(95) = .29, p < .004, two-tailed$						
Initial willingness						
Obj. strongly	0	0	0	0	0	0
Obj. little bit	7	1	1	2	1	2
Neutral	41	4	5	11	12	9
Exp. consent	41	0	2	15	15	9
Initiated	14	0	0	3	6	5
$r(103) = .25, p < .015, two-tailed$						
Continuing willingness						
<i>Once/twice</i>	9	1	2	4	2	0
Obj. strongly	1	1	0	0	0	0
Obj. little bit	6	1	1	4	0	0
Neutral	22	2	3	7	4	6
Exp. consent	51	0	2	13	19	17
Initiated	14	0	0	3	9	2
$r(94) = .40, p < .001, two-tailed$						

Note: Response options in italics were excluded in calculating correlations

and associated with long-term harm. The concern is not the validity of such findings (they clearly describe particular cases), but rather that they are inappropriately interpreted as applying generally to all such boyhood sexual experiences with older males. These assumptions also discourage research into the full range of the characteristics of such experiences. Hopefully, the present study can encourage additional unbiased investigations by showing that such factors as reactions, effects, power, and motivations are much more varied and complex than the narrow views found in victimological assumptions, which in turn are accepted too uncritically by professionals, the media, and the lay public.

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