

"Participant Victim": Oncology of an Oxymoron

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Abstract

For many decades the social sciences have struggled with the issue of the child who, in flagrant violation of cultural taboos, willingly cooperates in sexual intimacies with an older person, or even seeks out and initiates such activities. While some social scientists have accepted the reality of this collaboration, others presume the child to be a *de facto* victim. This latter assignment, however, is contradicted by the child's willing involvement, a conundrum which led in the 1950s to the unlikely combining of two essentially diametrically opposed words into the phrase "participant victim." For a time, various authors embraced this concept; however, as victimology and child sexual abuse anxiety began to take hold in the late 1970s, the "victim" was redefined as absolutely incapable of being a "participant," and the phrase has fallen into disuse.

The social sciences have traveled a rocky road since the journey began with such pioneers as Wundt, Hall, Ebbinghaus, and James; and over the years the jarring self-correcting nature of science has knocked the wheels off some of the most prestigious of chariots. From the masturbatory insanity hypothesis that afflicted young people for some two hundred years up until the 1950s (Hare, 1962), through the hyper-behavioralism of John Watson (1913) epitomized by the traumatization of "Little Albert," (Harris, 1979) the lobotomies of Freeman and Watts (Swayze, 1995), and Hawke's castration "solution" (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1953, p. 744)—just to mention a few of the more egregious—one staunchly defended hypothesis after another has fallen by the wayside, but not before having done incalculable and irretrievable harm to countless people. In the victimological hypothesis currently in vogue, "Priests, doctors, psychiatrists, and others have invested sex with magical powers ..." (Wilson, 1981, p. 129) while at the same time installing themselves as the principal authorities in sexual matters: "Victimologists are, *de facto*, the new social-science police." (Money, 1988, p. 9). Children are seen as incapable of grasping the complexities inherent in this magical view of sexuality, and when they choose to participate in sexual activities with others, especially older persons, they are automatically presumed to be "victims." Founded principally on ideologies, and contradicted by empirical research (e.g. Bender & Blau, 1937; Ingram, 1981; Sandfort, 1987; etc.), the validity of this "magical powers" hypothesis of harm, like so many others that preceded it, is open to question.

One of the few pre-1950s empirical studies of sexual interactions between children and older persons was conducted by Bender & Blau (1937), who concluded that "The child was either a passive or active partner ... and in some instances seemed to be the initiator or seducer." (p.517). The perception of the child principally as a "victim" is not found in this study. That children were sexual beings capable of expressing and acting upon their sexual desires was generally accepted in that period; Angelides (2004) notes that early in the 20th century "[V]arious ... discourses began explicitly to acknowledge child sexuality as a normal and natural reality. In fact, prior to the 1980s [textual] representations of child sexuality were common, particularly in

the context of sexual encounters with adults ... as flirtatious, precocious, and seductive..." (p. 143).

The precise beginnings of the idea of the child as a "victim" are uncertain, but, as noted above, the concept of the child being a "participant" had become well established by the 1950s when these two were formally united:

Sexual victimization is a form of prohibited sex contact involving two or more persons. It is of such a character as to give these persons the respective legal statuses of victims and offenders under the laws designed to protect the 'weaker' against the 'stronger' members of society. From this definition it follows that there are two major types of victimization episodes: those of actual assault by an offender who forces his sexual contacts on a victim without the latter's consent, against his will, or against his resistance; and those episodes of mutual consent relations between coparticipants, in which the consent of the 'weaker' party has no legal sanction. The first type includes victims in fact as well as in law. These may be called accidental victims. The second type consists of victims under the law but not in fact. They are participant victims. (Mangus, 1953b p. 147, cf. Weiss, Rogers, Darwin, & Dutton, 1955 p. 2).

Apart from the questionable assumption that children are always in the "weaker" position in these transactions (they can destroy the older partner simply by complaining or making an accusation), it seems illogical that an individual who is "not in fact" a "victim" can subsequently be designated "under the law" as a "participant victim." In this interpretation it would appear that "the law" is not concerned with tangible "fact," but instead with such ethnocentric cultural ephemera as tradition, ideologies, religion, and other superstitions. Science should have little or no use for these latter factors, but rather is charged by its very nature with a relentless search for truth and facts. Regardless of the impeccable credentials and good intentions of the originator(s), the fabrication of the "participant victim" cannot, at least in hindsight, be seen as science.

Various authors (e.g., Berg, 1983; Bolen, 2001; Davis, 2005; de Young, 1982; etc.) have utilized and or commented upon the participant victim concept in one way or another. One of these, Ingram (1981), describes his study of 74 boys who were referred to him for counseling:

...cases of boys being "indecently assaulted" puzzled me I was asked to counsel traumatized children who had eventually a totally different reaction from that of their parents, or the moral welfare committee. They regarded the experience with a certain robustness, if not relish... (p. 177).

... there were violent family scenes and a general hue and cry. ... The child was cross-examined by the police, examined by the doctor and so on. ... As a psychiatrist said ... "if he had not been buggered by the man, he certainly was by the police and doctor." (pp. 180-181).

There is no doubt that children do encourage sexual activity with an adult and participate in it willingly, ... I do not think there is any evidence ... that any of the children were worse off for the activity; many, no doubt, may be better off for a

relationship with a loving adult outside the family. I can see how a lot of harm can come from violent reactions... (p. 186).

Ingram described participants who quite obviously did not see themselves as victims, except perhaps as victims of their parents and other authorities. Even though he titles his chapter "Participating Victims," his obvious emphasis is on participation, almost to the exclusion of any aspect of victimization.

The use of "participant victim" began to decline with the advent of the "child sexual abuse" paradigm. One of the first proponents of this victimological concept was Finkelhor (1979, 1981, 1984, 1986) who took the position that almost every sexually expressed relationship between a minor and an older person is inevitably destructive to the minor's psychosexual development and overall mental health. Thus children were redefined as innocent victims without any participation in, or responsibility for, such relationships (Angelides, 2004), and the participant victim, for better or worse, gradually faded from the social science lexicon.

Although victimology and child sexual abuse anxiety rapidly surged to the forefront of both academic and "pop" social science in the latter third of the 20th century, not everyone viewed this phenomenon as positive. Money (1988), for example, described victimology as "a science only in the etymology of its name. In practice it is a branch of the sexosophy of the judicial and punishment industry, not of sexology, the science of sex and sex research." (p. 9). The victimological assumptions that child/older person sexual contacts cause "harm, that this harm is pervasive ..., [and] that this harm is likely to be intense..." have been called into question by Rind, Bauserman, & Tromovitch (1998, p.22). Neither did Constantine (1981) accept that such contacts were a principal source of harm, but observed that "Negative reactions of parents [and other adults] ... to a child's sexual encounters, aside from their function of inducing guilt, can be ... the most psychonoxious aspect of the entire experience." (p. 241). Schultz (1980) further notes that victimology "seems to artificially create 'norms' for minors and then justifies departures from them as traumatic. Such fabrication is professionally unethical and possibly damaging to minors..." (p. 40).

The dissemination of the "magical powers" paradigm was noted previously (Wilson, 1981, p. 129), and Wilson went on to observe that boys pay little heed to such ideas, but rather see "... sex as being no more than just a game..." (ibid., p. 130). As they continue to promote their victimological magical powers hypotheses of harm, members of what Dineen (1996) refers to as the "psychology industry" would rather not be reminded of the dire sequelae of their predecessors' no-doubt well intentioned blunders mentioned above, nor of the possibility that they may be doing similar harm to the very children they claim to be "protecting." The adoption and subsequent abandonment of the "participant victim" paradigm forcefully demonstrates the tenuousness of hypotheses which are based on ideology rather than empirical evidence, and the extensive iatrogenic harm that may be generated by such specious experiments on real people.

Earlier in this paper, the statement by Mangus (1953b p. 147) that some children are "victims under the law, but not in fact" was quoted. With the "participant victim" hypothesis essentially having been abandoned, the issue for those "not in fact" children then becomes the question of their willingness, i.e., their capacity to "consent," which, although disparaged by

some (e.g., Spiegel, 2000), is presented as an accomplished fact by Bender & Blau (1937), Weiss et al. (1955), Sandfort (1987), and supported by the research of Waber et al. (2007), as well as by the American Psychological Association (1989) and many others. Absent this consent, the child is, as Mangus and others note, an "accidental victim," a victim both in fact and under the law. But with this consent in place, we are left with a "participant" who is not a victim "in fact," but only in the eyes of "laws seemingly designed for the protection of the young [that] are really intended to control them." (Mirkin, 1999, p. 503). In the final analysis, social scientists need to come to grips with the reality that "participant victim" is nothing more than an obsolescent oxymoron, and that in fact there exist only the mutually exclusive non-consenting child "victim" and the consenting child "participant," both of whom are viable individuals whose humanity, integrity, rights, freedoms, and choices deserve to be respected in either situation.

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