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Interrogating the Essential: Moral Baselines on Adult-Child Sex

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[Yuill, Richard \(/library/author/61\)](/library/author/61); Oct 01 2010

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The topics discussed at a conference organised by Inter-Disciplinary.Net, entitled *Good Sex—Bad Sex* in Budapest (May 4–6, 2009), ranged from sado-masochistic identities, to masturbatory fantasy, to sex workers and pornography. However, when the theme of ‘adult-child sex’ [1 \(#footnote1 ejlxiih\)](#) was discussed it was done so with reference to the ethical issues surrounding it. This speaks volumes on the subject’s capacity to raise intense popular emotions, whilst lulling intellectual discourse in the misguided direction of establishing moral baselines and relying on essentialist epistemological insights.

During discussions on the above themes, Bruce Rind, Thomas Hubbard, Donald Mader, and Helmut Graupner articulated broadly liberal or libertarian critiques of current age-of-consent statutes and prohibitions on adult-child sex. David White, on the other hand, argued that adult-child sexual relationships are morally impermissible from an ethical standpoint. For these authors, biological, ethical, and historical models are important in current debates about adult-child sex. In their differing ways, each (with the exception of White) effectively attempted to subvert a dominant universal truth, namely that adult-child sexual encounters are pathological, unnatural, or historically and culturally invariant. Diederik Janssen (Janssen, forthcoming) provides an invaluable queer anthropological account, questioning the very Westernized temporal understandings conventionally imputed to a range of child and adult-child sexual practices, notably the Sambia peoples of Melanesia. However, in this paper I will argue that attempts to supplant one set of moral and essentialist insights with another are not without problems. Indeed, I maintain that essentialist notions of sex have been able to thrive in the discussions on adult-child sex because they still predominate in common sense and inter-disciplinary approaches to childhood and age categories in general. Despite Postman’s provocatively entitled 1982 text, “The Disappearance of Childhood,” the last quarter of a century has arguably witnessed the

reverse: a thorough-going retrenchment of a Westernized, conservative, and bourgeois conception of childhood.

Writing about the current “moral panic” surrounding adult-child sex, William Simon (1996, p. 127) states, “what is relatively unique to the current situation is the combined effect of the intensity of moral disapproval attached to the behaviour and the implausibility of the desire.” Despite failing to explain why this is occurring now, Simon is surely correct in highlighting *intensity* of moral disapproval when discussions on adult-child sex take place. Moral disapproval against the paedophile is certainly widespread, not just in Britain and America, but across other Western cultures too. Indeed, the apparent “fundamental” and “natural wrongness” related to any manifestation of adult sexual desire towards children is so firmly rooted within contemporary Anglo-American culture that it rarely requires justification. For academics, politicians, media editors, and the general public it is just plain and simple common sense!

What remains difficult to dispute is the entrenched status of child sexual abuse CSA as axiomatic truth. Even the very persona of the paedophile has come under intense clinical, media and community scrutiny, frequently marking him (as the gender is generally masculinized) out as “the most frequented cultural toilet” (Kincaid, 1998, p. 94). However, for this to be fully understood it is necessary to analyze the relationship between the intensity of moral disapproval against adult-child sex and the supposed ‘implausibility’ of adult sexual desire for children.

The growing estrangement of the paedophile from late modern sexual citizenry (see Weeks, 1998) has paralleled the emergence and establishment of the vulnerable and victimized child as a hegemonic sexual truth. Adult-child sex, therefore, remains firmly embedded as essentially immoral in modernist binary theorizing. The purpose of this paper is not to argue one way or another as to what moral view anyone should take on adult-child sex, but rather to enable a more rigorous analysis of the inter-discursive themes raised by such debates.

This context has clearly affected the potential options available for those daring enough to contemplate critical field research in this area. As well as a brief summary encapsulating the experiences of seven writers and researchers critical of mainstream child sexual abuse (CSA) perspectives, I take an in-depth look at my own experiences of conducting PhD research in the U.K. between 1999 and 2004 to highlight the problems faced by academics covering this topic. The final section will critically examine the contested claims from CSA survivors and pro-paedophile writers. Here, I will argue that a Foucauldian analysis can provide a useful tool-kit to help unpick the discourses raised on this controversial topic.

I begin by examining a personal narrative taken from the above research of an adult male, Philip, who consciously refuted a victimological label to explain his extensive sexual experiences with adult males when he was a boy. This is to emphasize that current debates on adult-child sex suffer from an effective embargo on intellectual critiques of CSA’s hegemonic position, and are impoverished by a lack of consideration given to the subjective voices of young people who have enjoyed, and do enjoy, enriching and empowering intimate and sexual relationships with adults. Philip’s story merely highlights the significant contrast with conventional thinking on adult-child sex and the substantial obstacles people such as Philip face when attempting to tell their story.

Analyzing a Non-Victimological Case-Study

I have singled out the following interview taken from my doctoral research (see chapters 9-11 in Yuill, 2004) with an individual (now in his forties) who, throughout his childhood and adolescence,

experienced numerous sexual relationships with adult males. Philip was alerted to the research by another respondent and contacted me by phone, explaining that he wanted to discuss his experiences with adult men when he was a boy.

The four sexual experiences of Philip (as a young boy through to adolescence) with older men are relayed here chronologically. Philip relates his first experience as a learning experience seeing, and being excited by, the somatic changes brought on by the man's subsequent ejaculation. Although he draws a distinction between the psychic and sexual in his recollection of the event, he defines this event as superior to peer sexual experimentation. Philip relays both physical and psychological excitement at the event, substantiating libertarian claims that differences in subjective perceptions between adults and young people (in terms of understanding and needs in the intimate and sexual sphere) does not invalidate a relationship, or the possibility for a young person's needs to be fulfilled.

Philip: [Aged 7] My first arousal of adult men was when I was in Africa. ... It was just my curiosity was piqued and I noticed that he was washing his genitals. He started to get an erection. ... I was curious to explore his body further. About three or four days later I crept into his bedroom. ... I think he was fast asleep and I started playing with his penis. ... I was just curious what an erection was. I think I'd experienced it a bit as a boy but they would come and go . . . and I certainly hadn't seen anything as big as that. ... I was most excited by his sexual excitement. There was no sexual excitement for myself, it was just pure curiosity but he was clearly very aroused, and my touching him increased his arousal - that excited me more. I think it was just like childhood curiosity.

During Philip's second experience when he was aged ten there is more of a physical interchange, in which the man carried out particular sexual acts which excited him. Again, the initiative was shown by Philip who viewed it as furtive physical curiosity and playfulness.

Philip: There was a chap who lived in the apartment above ours called Paul. . . I got onto the bed with him and he just had his shorts on.... He didn't resist me, my advances to touch him and stroke him physically but he was a bit taken aback when I tried to feel his genitals.

Researcher: You mentioned the first experimentation, looking at men's erections. Can you recall the first time when you took it further, thinking about sexual activity?

Philip: Paul actually on one occasion (when I was playing around with him and he was masturbating) inserted his finger into my backside, which really did excite me!

At various points in the interview, Philip reflected on his childhood experiences. He sums up his sexual experiences with adult men as seduction by him, but firmly embedded within child understandings of sexuality. He lists these as less selfish, playful, pleasure-seeking, and less fearful of rejection, but also stresses the unavailability of labels to explain the activities in which he was involved. This reinforces Dowsett's claim that man-boy relationships are often exploratory, effectively taking place in "social lacunae," in which a "sexual culture" develops before any formal definition (Dowsett, 2000, p. 32).

Philip: Again, with time and sort of seduction, I suppose as a child it's a conscious process but it isn't quite as selfish as the sexuality you experience as an older person. So there's a genuine interest in making the other person get a response and make them happy or whatever. So I played around with them whenever I could. . . . They probably weren't gay men or pedophiles.... I certainly didn't have a name for them at that age. ... I think as a

child you just learn to take such things in your stride. . . . You don't take a rejection of a physical advance quite so personally.

Philip characterizes his third experience as a more overtly sexual friendship. He contrasts this with a later more mature, intimate, and rounded relationship. He reiterates his assertiveness in initiating the encounters, coupled with his careful preplanning of the event.

Philip: We had a next-door neighbour . . . and I was probably about nine–ten years old. He was going through a divorce, and I had got to know him quite well. . . . I asked him if it would be okay if I stopped over for the night. . . . I got into bed with him and started playing around with him. And at first he objected, but I just persevered and got him fully sexually aroused and was masturbating him and trying to get him to orgasm. Because that was my objective: to get men to achieve orgasm. . . . I persuaded him that I liked to have my bottom played with. . . . He loved my arse-hole. Of course that was my dream. And as our friendship (because it wasn't a relationship) developed, we would get more and more bold about inserting things into my backside.

Philip notes significant developmental somatic changes associated with stronger orgasms. Alongside greater excitement, he explains how carrying out sexual acts in public places gave him more power in the exchanges. Philip claims that he had control over his adult partner through the very process of initiation, whereby he could decide whether or not to begin a sexual exchange. Rather than risk being construed as a negative debarment to adult-child sex, Philip views it as providing the impetus for a greater sexual thrill, in which he was able to appropriate a public space for his own needs.

Philip: Now I was twelve/thirteen, and I was definitely having much stronger sexual responses. I was having orgasms. I wasn't ejaculating as far as I can remember at that time. . . . I used to get him to do risky things like put his fingers inside me when we were at the swimming baths in the cubicle drying afterwards. That was quite a turn on: the fact that it was in such a public environment, and I think the power I had over him in the sexual department. . . . I could wrap him round my finger to have sex. It was quite easily done and it was me that made the advances... He just identified as a sexual man and saw me as this curious boy who liked his arse being played with.

Researcher: Did he at any time give pleasure to you through masturbation?

Philip: I used to masturbate myself. He would occasionally do it but I wasn't really interested in that. My orgasms came through being screwed, the friction of rubbing my body against the sheets. The masturbating element really developed from my playing with him but I could quite easily get orgasms from being buggered.

Philip draws sharp contrasts between the following experience when he was thirteen, which he characterises as more of an emotional and cognitive connection, including a greater symmetry of interests and experiences, and the former, which he views as purely physical. Although alluding to infrequent sexual contact, Philip considers learning from his adult partner, through acquiring knowledge and experience, as more important.

Philip: This was a much older man (in his mid-fifties). Whereas the neighbour was in his thirties (a very virile docker) the older man was much more intelligent, more cultured and the relationship between ourselves was far more cerebral. Td go round, and we would read and listen to music... It was a more intelligent, mature relationship than the one I'd had

with the docker, which had really been seduction on my part, very physical. . . This person didn't have a huge penis unlike the docker, but that didn't bother me. This was a different relationship. We did things together, camping. . . . The friendship I had with the docker (the physical friendship) there was no sort of mental connection at all. I went round there purely to get my rocks off. But with the older bloke. ... I wanted to learn more about music, about literature. It was more of an intellectual side. It was very good and there was equally, if not more, stimulation from the intellectual side than the physical side. Maybe every couple of weeks we would have sex. It was just masturbatory sex.

Throughout, Philip emphasizes the importance of his early familial and cultural context for scripting his early sexual experiences positively. He also positions himself through a libertarian sexual ethic of individual enrichment through empowerment. Philip also challenges dominant notions of age-appropriate interaction, by contending that the central component of his sexuality throughout his life course was a substantial attraction (physical, emotional, and intellectual) to adult men as opposed to his peers.

Philip: I had a couple of friends, but because I was in and out of school my education was a bit all over the place. ... It was quite clearly men that interested me not younger boys at all. ... Their sexuality was (for want of a better term) now and for then... just playful and experimental but I wanted to push.... I was pushing things further, but I never thought I was doing anything wrong. My parents (my mother especially) was quite liberated. ... I grew up in quite a wholesome and healthy environment, without physical and sexual inhibitions.

Philip alludes to wider social contrasts between his interests and attitudes and those of his peers, ones which encouraged him to seek adult company and participate in adult activities. Philip's experience is concurrent with respondents in Leahy's (1992) study, who identified a commonality of interests with their adult partner, alongside a conscious minimization of adult-child boundaries, to explain their positive experiences. This was also shared by a significant number of respondents in my own study who describe symmetry of interests with older people at a relatively early age, non-commensurate with their chronological age (see chapter nine in Yuill, 2004).

Philip: Because I was quite independent and didn't have many friends. ... I had a different social attitude from my peers, different political attitudes through my grandparents. I was a socialist at seven or eight years old.... So I developed a lot of personal interests in music, and I used to like cycling a lot, joining the Youth Hostel Association ... and I joined the Red Cross.

In contrast to CSA formulations, Philip eschews victim status in intergenerational relationships. Although recognizing physical power differences between adults and young people, he maintains that he was always able to distinguish consensual from coercive inter generational experiences. In all of his encounters and relationships he saw himself as the active seducer and initiator. He also relates that throughout these experiences, a range of his own needs (physical, educational, emotional and social) was met. Philip's account criss-crosses the mentor-child empowerment positions often referred to in positive discursive presentations of intergenerational sexualities (Yuill & Durber, 2008). Whereas there is a prominent theme of learning from his adult partners (commensurate with mentor-protégé conceptions), Philip clearly emphasises the multiple ways he was able to assert himself and push the limits of sexual contact. Although mindful of physical power differences, he asserts that he was the one who had control throughout such situations and knew exactly what he was doing.

Researcher: You mentioned that you always had an interest in adult men?

Philip: Yeah! I would say that from the age of seven onwards that my focus on sex and men have always been more mature men.... In all the relationships and friendships I was involved in, I knew exactly what I was doing, and knew what I set out to do and was fully in control. And there were times as a boy, I travelled to and from school by train . . . and you would occasionally get old men into the apartment. ... Sometimes I'd get turned on by that and hope that something happened and I'd engineer a situation. I'd play with my crotch or something to see if they were watching out the corner of their eye but if ever a man made an approach on me that would terrify me. ... I had to at all times be the seducer and initiator, and I think that was right and proper because I was a child and I knew my circumstances, I knew I was smaller and they were bigger and stronger men and I knew what rape was, and knew what physical assault was, and I wasn't going to let that happen to me. ... It never happened to me!

Despite recognition, even amongst CSA researchers, of a continuum of experiences in intergenerational sexualities (Coxell, King, Mezey, & Gordon, 1999), this has not been translated into a permitted subjectivity. Instead, non-victimological responses are co-opted by CSA formulations, via a series of strategic and rhetorical techniques, in which positive accounts are marginalized, or dismissed as a product of either being duped by their abuser, subsumed within structuralist gender norms of hegemonic masculinity, or medical-psychiatric / psychoanalytical paradigms of denial.

Such strategies are curiously identical to those allegedly imposed by “backlash” formulations on CSA (see Scott, 2001). Perhaps not surprisingly (due to the predominance of victimological sentiments in academic circles), this criticism has rarely been voiced with regard to the way non-victim accounts have been similarly marginalized, medicalized, or insensitively dismissed. A notable exception to this is Leahy who strongly rebukes Finkelhor for conscious bias in excluding positive accounts of adult-child sexual encounters from his 1981 text (see Leahy, 1996, p. 32).

Clearly, there has been a blatant discrepancy in the way victim and non-victim accounts of intergenerational relationships are constructed. The multiple ways in which transgressive subject positions of young people who do not identify themselves as victims have been consciously ignored constitutes not only a biased formulation, whereby “hierarchies of agencies” confer victim-based accounts automatically with a higher status, but also an insensitivity to other accounts of intergenerational sexualities. This point has been well made by Rind et al. (2001, p. 750) when they argue,

[o]ur critics, and many CSA researchers, have had no difficulty accepting reports of negative experiences at face value, but have selectively denied any validity to reports of positive experiences and seek to discount them as the result of processes such as denial.... To our knowledge, no one has systematically studied the sorts of pressures that might exist on individuals to redefine experiences initially seen as positive.

This final contribution from Philip is a crucial example of the above. The way he relays how his account was reformulated by the commentator is also consistent with the way CSA professionals deny access to alternative perspectives. Although Plummer (1995, p. 118) points out that the paedophile's story is one that cannot be told because there is no willing audience, this omits the other component in intergenerational sexualities, namely how positive accounts from young people have been denied a voice within mainstream discursive channels. In this respect, Philip's experience in attempting to have his story told offers crucial insights into the absence of public articulation of positive accounts from

young people of intergenerational relationships in late modernity.>

Philip: There was a radio discussion with an American sex abuse industry commentator Michelle Elliott and there was a . . . BBC journalist and she was going on about children's rights. . . . So I said, fuck this, I'm going to phone up and explain that as a child I was quite happy to have sex and I actively sought sex! . . . I got through and I explained to the switchboard and I got on and said my bit in ten seconds, and Michelle Elliott immediately cut in saying, kill the caller, and went on to say this is a perfect example (you can't speak after they've cut you off) of how a child has grown up to believe that what he was doing was his own free will but really he was being manipulated by adults. And I couldn't say a word. Nobody could hear me now. I was pissed off!

This Is Not a Love Song²

The ethical issues brought up when discussing adult-child sex underline a point made by Paul Reynolds at the Conference, which I not only concur with, but want to expand upon, namely the mismatch between Utopian eulogizing of the ethical "goodness" of adult-child/adolescent relationships and the rather different way such relationships are socially and culturally constructed within contemporary capitalist societies (see Yuill & Evans, 2007). Clearly, there is neither an accessible discourse on the benevolence of eroticized mentor-protégé intergenerational relationships, nor is there any societal commendation for pederastie salvation of alienated boys, or a readiness to hear uplifting tales from children themselves of the wonders of sexual relationships with adults.

Simon may have wittingly or unwittingly hit on something here: the persistence of essentialist, naturalist, and moralist frameworks on sexuality. Despite seemingly significant shifts in late (post)modern theorizing on sexuality, discussions surrounding adult-child sex are often presented alongside questions of morality and cultural consensus. Certainly the force of the counter-arguments stacked up against any manifestation of adult-child sex seems insurmountable. Indeed, the material, discursive, and symbolic omnipresence of the paedophile across a range of fictional and non-fictional documentaries as the ultimate "Folk Devil"³ cannot be overstated (see Sonenschein, 1998). This is testament to the paedophile's successful transformation over the past three decades within Anglo-American culture into a "thing" one that has developed a distinctive persona, series of attributes, and when with other like-minded individuals, forms sinister "rings."

Within these campaigns, the paedophile is construed as possessing an "unchanging essence" (Kincaid, 1998, p. 88), a singular unity, and therefore assumes a very "un-postmodern" identity. Despite the persistence, and regurgitation, of a plethora of clinical typologies and taxonomies, classificatory attempts to explain variations in the paedophile by persona, acts, behaviours, *modus operandi*, gender, minor or substantial attraction to children, or age of his victim,⁴ the power of the paedophile label remains intact.

Very few people would pity or care what happened to the viewer of Internet child pornography, sex offender, or "predatory paedophile." As Plummer (1995, p. 118) points out, the paedophile's story is one that no one wants to hear. Instead, the stories which are produced are either ones of endless horror for child victims at the hands of a monstrous sexual predator, or, as in the U.S. NBC program "To Catch a Predator," a late modernist black comedy constructing the paedophile as a pathetic village idiot, ensnared by a vigilant media prepared to crusade for child "protection." As will be clear in the following case example, the way adult-child sex is currently constructed (through media, populist demonstrations, and the law) also informs, and regularly constitutes, the limits of, academic research, and, crucially, what academics can say on this topic.

Where Academics Fear to Tread

As part of my Doctoral research conducted at the University of Glasgow, between 2001 and 2005, I contacted an Internet-based group which seeks to work for a better understanding of child and intergenerational sexualities.⁵ Unbeknown to me this group had been infiltrated by a Dutch-based Conservative group led by Ireen Van Engelen.⁶ This group then passed on this information to Marcello Mega, a freelance tabloid journalist based in Scotland. Mega then published articles in *The Scottish Daily Mail* (Mega, 2001a) and the *Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)* (Mega, 2001b).

From the content and tone of these articles, it was not hard to see that Mega sought to paint myself as a paedophile, and criticize the University of Glasgow for supporting such research. This was followed by further “revelations” a year later after sensitive interview transcripts had been stolen from my office and passed on to Mega. These were printed in the *Scottish Mail on Sunday* (Mega, 2002a), the *Scottish News of the World* (Mulholland & Mega, 2002), and also covered in the *THES* (Mega, 2002b). Throughout this period I was also subjected to harassment from journalists, offensive phone-calls and emails, two lengthy University senate investigations into my work, having to explain my research to officers from the Serious Crime Squad, and the *News of the World* photographing me inside the family home.

On completion of the Thesis, I determined to correct some of the deliberate misinformation, which had circulated regarding my research. Throughout this period, the media (both tabloid and broadsheet) presented the research as potentially dangerous. For example, Andrew Durham, a social worker, was quoted in the *THES* saying Dr Yuill’s thesis would “play into the hands of abusers,” and that “victims of abuse sometimes report positive experiences, but this was often a result of manipulation by their abuser or a coping mechanism.”⁷ This point was restated in subsequent comments by Chris Harrison (Warwick University social work lecturer) and Anne Houston. Harrison stated that “whatever [Dr. Yuill’s] intention, one thing we know about sexual offenders is that they seize on this kind of thing and use it to support their position.”⁸ In a similar vein, Houston commented on Sky News, “our concern that anything in the public domain which could be used as an “excuse” by abusers to persuade children that sex between an adult and child is “normal” is dangerous.”⁹ Finally, in the *Glasgow Herald*, Rachel O’Connell, director of the cyberspace research unit at the University of Central Lancashire went further, in stating that such research showed the need for a UK-wide ethics board, suggesting in Orwellian fashion, that such a body would scrutinize any future research on what she deemed “sensitive subjects.”¹⁰

Certainly my own case is far from unique. In fact, researchers critical of CSA in both the U.K. and U.S. have faced similar experiences over the past two decades. In a recently submitted paper (Yuill, 2009), I identify seven other researchers who have faced intimidation through a series of systematic political attacks, punitive legal injunctions, financial penalties, and harassment. I’ve listed the following in the chronological order of when the attacks began. James Kincaid who wrote *ChildLoving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* in 1992. Chin-Keung Li’s work in 1990 and 1993 were essentially follow-ups on his PhD, completed in 1987 on pedophilic sexuality. Matthew Waites conducted his PhD on “The Age of Consent, Homosexuality and Citizenship in the United Kingdom (1885-1999)” at South Bank University from 1995-1999. Bruce Rind, Robert Bauserman, and Philip Tromovitch published their meta-analysis on CSA in the *Psychological Bulletin* in July 1998. In 2002, Judith Levine wrote *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children From Sex*. Harris Mirkin published articles concerning moral panics over paedophilia and the politicization of child sexuality in the *Journal of Homosexuality* in 1999 and *Sexuality and Culture* in 2000. Finally, Pat Sikes (2006) conducted life history research on consensual romantic and sexual relationships between teachers and students in U.K.

secondary schools.

These attacks generally followed a particular pattern whereby the opinions of professionals and academics (either in the field of child protection or regulation of sex offenders) were co-opted in a “rent-a-quote” manner, to counter (or trash) the research(ers). Within this “dialogue,” notable figures opposed to CSA were positioned similarly to the way CSA survivors have been; as the only permitted voice in mainstream theorizing and research in this area. In such presentations, professional discourses are often presented as “higher truths” coming from experts and workers in the field, with “obvious superiority” in the epistemological hierarchy. This is in stark contrast to the opinions of the researchers whose perspectives are formulated through a “discourse of derision” (Ball, 1997) as in some way lesser or irrelevant, or deliberately misrepresented.

This facilitated various political reactions to the research(ers), ranging along a continuum from mere disapproval or a call for injunctions, to more direct demands for outright censorship and harassment. Often it started with fairly mild comments from local politicians, children’s charity representatives, or church leaders rebuking the researchers, stirring up populist opinion against them, or even questioning whether public monies should be spent on such work. This was often followed by politicians (usually right wing Conservatives, either U.S. Republicans or U.K. Tories) encouraging, or directly involving themselves in, displays of pique or moral outrage that such researchers should even criticize CSA, question notions of childhood sexual innocence, or discuss paedophilia. Such campaigns often culminated in direct pressure being exerted on a particular funding body, institution, or publisher to cease supporting such work. Finally, these efforts often brought about sustained harassment of critics and their families, through media intrusion, threats to career and future funding applications, and, most sinister of all, personal endangerment including death threats via phone, email, or face-to-face.

Sexual(ized) Child as Docile Object

What was important in relations between children and adults was that childhood became a common area of interest for parents, educational institutions, and public health. Children’s sexuality became both a target and an instrument of power which resulted in the sexual misery of children and adolescents. The object was not to forbid but to use childhood sexuality as a network of power over kids. Children consequently became oppressed by the very ones who pretended to liberate them. (Foucault, quoted in Foucault, Hocquenghem, & Danet 1988, p. 133)

The debates on adult-child sex reveal disparate perspectives on childhood and adolescence. Those who are opposed regard the very idea as morally repugnant, often arguing that children should not be used as means to the end of meeting an adult’s sexual gratification (see Renvoize, 1993). Within the professional literature on CSA and sex-offensive behaviour, such a position has increasingly developed as an axiomatic “article of faith” alongside efforts to preserve notions of childhood sexual innocence. As Renvoize (p. 118) herself admits, “it is psychologically necessary to maintain our peace of mind to maintain a picture of the innocence of children.”

Maintaining such a stasis also requires conferring research paradigms which presume, and often tautologically confirm, CSA binary assumptions such as victim/perpetrator, abused–abuser, with a monolithic “truth status” and significant resources. It also relies on maintaining broader structures of power such as the confirmation of parental control over children, rendering them “chattel property” (Brongersma 1990), coupled with the role of state agencies in pathologizing and demonizing those involved in adult-child relationships. Plummer (1981) stated in an earlier contribution to this topic that the problem with pro-paedophile and child sexual liberationist positions was that they ran counter to core liberal values of egalitarianism. Indeed, such values have arguably defined the wider sexual

citizenship literature (see Evans, 1993), resulting not only in the disbarment of the paedophile from late modern sexual citizenry, but also crucially the conspicuous absence of the sexually and socially empowered child (see Angelides, 2004; Yuill & Durber, 2008).

In sharp contrast to cultural trends that appear to marginalize adult-child sex, Kincaid (1998, p. 101) provocatively argues that contemporary mainstream AngloAmerican culture (through film, media, advertising, and even documentary storytelling) effectively endorses “a sexual discourse that inevitably links children, sexuality, and erotic appeal.” Contrary to conventional professional scripting of child sexuality and paedophilia, Kincaid claims that an uneasy cultural “denial” exists whereby the paedophile is scapegoated as marginal, pathological and dangerous, thereby offsetting any critique of mainstream culture’s conscious and subliminal sexualization of children (p. 14). Kincaid concludes by controversially remarking that what the paedophile and contemporary Westernized productions of childhood share in common is a yearning for an empty, incompetent child (p. 212).

Professional and academic mainstream approaches to adult-child sex have been dominated by feminist theorizing on how gendered power-differences have affected women’s position within heterosexual relationships. Such perspectives have increasingly informed the contemporary debates, specifically the global dimensions of power which structure sexual relations between adults and children (see Angelides, 2004). Within this context, three interrelated debates have taken place, which I will analyze here to help understand how adult-child sex has been so problematized over the past three decades.

First, in terms of a child’s ability to consent, Archard (1998) enumerates conditional factors including sexual and physical maturity, cognitive faculties and the extent to which children are denied (through a lack of access to sexual education) the right to make sexual choices (see chapter 8 in Archard). In relation to intergenerational sexuality, he identifies fundamental disparities in “experience, needs, desires, physical potential, emotional resources, sense of responsibility, awareness of consequences of one’s actions, and above all, power between adults and children” (p. 126). Secondly, Jeffreys and Archard claim that in asserting children’s rights to sexual expression, yet simultaneously proclaiming the importance of a pseudo-paternalistic mentoring role for an older person in such a sexual relationship, propa paedophile positions reveal either “a weak position” (p. 127), or a willingness to “have it both ways” (Jeffreys, 1990, p. 206). Archard points out a seeming contradiction in paedophile advocacy claims that children are sexually mature and know what they want (p. 127). Finally, the absence of children’s voices in pro-paedophile campaigns has led critics to claim that this proves that adult males drive such agendas (see Finkelhor, 1991).

These critiques however are not without significant problems themselves. For example, in the first critique Archard presents an overly functionalist and static picture of adult-child relations in Western culture, in which children are largely cultural dupes. However this has not prevented a growing sociological literature contesting such assumptions and putting forward alternative discourses emphasizing children as competent social actors (see Wyness, 2000). Other commentators (Kincaid included) also note the number of social policy areas where children are considered capable of consenting and the variety of different ways children are presented as actively capable, as child criminal “Hoodies,” or in manipulating classroom situations against “helpless” adult teachers.

The second critique fails to consider the possibility that far from pro-paedophile justifications betraying a contradiction between children’s sexual rights and paternalism, they reveal divergent perspectives. For example, some justifications for “Greek Love” and “Pedagogical Eros” do reflect paternalistic assumptions, whereby a male mentor is viewed as an essential prerequisite for the “normal” socio-sexual development of adolescent boys (see Eglinton, 1970). However, child liberationist positions reject such arguments in favour of removing ageist barriers as a precondition for the genuine

empowerment of young people, and for the development of enriching, egalitarian man-boy relationships (Reeves, 1992). This critique also neglects the fact that late modern child-youth-adult boundaries have been constantly shifting, and fails to recognize the problematic way children have been dichotomously positioned in discourses throughout Western modernity, crisscrossing between notions of them as active participants, or as hapless victims in need of protection (see Jenks, 1996). These shifting discourses also affect the strategic ways children are positioned within intergenerational relationships across a wide range of institutional and social contexts including pedagogical praxis, the law, and media campaigns. Furthermore, within such discursive presentations, “facilitator” and “equal partnership” roles are regularly presented alongside each other. Consequently, rather than advocates of intergenerational sexualities confounding paternalistic protection notions (right from) with liberation language (right to), such tensions are at the heart of Enlightenment thinking on childhood.

The final criticism over the lack of activist children demanding their right to have sex with adults is not unique to adult-child sexual relationships. The involvement of any children in such campaigns would likely result in legal intervention, suggesting that the non-involvement of children has more to do with current legal and cultural injunctions than any definitive proof that they would not choose to participate in such debates if they were given the opportunity (see Evans, 1993, p. 239). Indeed, the lack of involvement by children in policy-making is a reality in many areas of society, highlighting embedded social and cultural frameworks militating against any extensive notion of children’s rights.

Deconstructing the Terms of the Debate

What I want to stress here is that it is the very terms of the debate which are problematic, specifically the way late and/or postmodern age categories and boundaries are constituted within an immutable and “undeconstructable realm.” Indeed, as noted by some writers on this topic (Evans, 1993), the very discrepancies in the way children are treated in non-sexual contexts, as opposed to sexual situations (especially involving adults) suggest an increasing difficulty of policy-makers and mainstream theoretical approaches to maintain stable and fixed subjectivities. Consequently, a ready-made instability exists around the category of childhood in many areas of contemporary society. This may offer the possibility of an alternative critical lens for viewing age categories generally, as well as examining more carefully non-victimological motivations and dynamics within adult-child sexual relationships.

This proliferation and seeming acceptance of instability stands in sharp contrast to the way modernist, Enlightenment essentialist discourses have been able to maintain a continuing influence (even stranglehold) on late modern sexual agendas on paedophilia, child sexuality, and adult-child sexual relations. Within this particular debate, the “child” continues to be a sacred site. In fact, dominant discursive formulations on child and intergenerational sexualities continually emphasize and then isolate the sexual sphere: as an area very different to adult sexuality. Consequently, the child is constituted, in Foucauldian terms, as “an especially dense transfer site” around which power-knowledges can coalesce (Foucault, 1978, p. 42).

Many of the narratives written by self-identifying child-lovers even emphasize the naturalness and usefulness of the love shared between men and boys. Some argue for evolutionary socio-biological explanations for sexual attraction to children, arguing that the contemporary form of “boy-love” is a “genetic heritage, passed down due to successful adaptation” and is “genetically predetermined” (Riegel, 2000, pp. 6-7). However, these self-identified child lovers seek the removal of ageist barriers at the same time as they identify the objects of their desires as ‘boys’ in contrast to themselves as ‘men.’ Such signifiers not only work to reposition the self and the other within a dominant discourse of gender but also to re-establish naturalized and dominant identifiable positions of age for both. They

deny the bodies involved any right or possibility of being excluded from the dominant discourse on age as a trajectory of human development and, thus, sexual maturity.

The burgeoning literature on male survivors of sexual abuse also relies on naturalistic conceptions of sexual development for the boy, whereby a child comes into a natural and fixed state of sexual being. King (1995, p. 55) states that “any boy naturally gives great power to his male role model” and that CSA constitutes an “intrusion into his own natural developmental progression” (p. 68) and “his [the boy’s] own natural sexuality” (p. 99). In a further attempt to construct a fixed sexual position for the minor involved in any intergenerational relationship, Finkelhor (1979, p. 697) argues “that children, by their very nature, are incapable of truly consenting to sex with adults” as they lack essential information and “are ignorant about sex and sexual relationships.”

Ethical debates on intergenerational sexualities have been constructed on relatively safe ground over the past twenty-five years. After all, who in their right mind would dare to contest such an ontological certainty that adult-child sex is wrong? However, it is the ethical arguments against intergenerational sexualities themselves that have failed to provide a convincing case. Such positions have been unable to make their case because they have not provided a rationale for separating the sexual from the social in intergenerational relationships. Secondly, they have not been able to frame their ethical postulates outside of the temporal and spatial ideological conceptions of childhood, intergenerational relationships, and normative sexual hierarchies in which they were formulated. In short, Finkelhor’s original thesis, and the CSA theorizing and research it has helped spawn, remains an ideology masquerading as ethical certainty.

Like any other dominant position, the ascendant position of CSA can be open to contestation and critical scrutiny. Future critical forays into this hotly contested arena will undoubtedly encounter a number of challenges by critics determined to uphold current normative conceptions on child and intergenerational sexualities. Nonetheless, such approaches also open up the possibility of fresh insights on age, age-relations, and sexuality, which have the potential to offer informative and challenging perspectives.

In the first place understandings of adult-child sex need to be set outside seeing sex and sexuality as immutable and natural components of the human experience. A post-Foucauldian theorizing of the body emphasizes how “bodies, sensations, pleasures, acts, and interactions are made into ‘sex’ or accrue sexual meanings by individuals, groups, discourses, and institutional practices” (Seidman 1997, p. 81). “Sex,” therefore, is not what certain corporeal acts essentially are, but rather what we think they are. What comes to be defined as “sex” differs across cultures and histories. What we read as ‘sex’ is specific to our own cultural and historical location (Rupp, 2001). In regard to finding evidence of sex, it is not the genitalia, but rather the head that is our “most erogenous zone” (Caplan, 1987, p. 2). It is the mind (in Western culture, necessarily separated from the body through the deployment of Cartesian dualism to control the wayward flesh) that demands the existence of a corporeal form which can be understood within the context of its experiences and disciplined accordingly. The interpretation of all activities involving intimate physical contact as “sex” demands conformity of the body to established systems of knowledge concerning its actions and specifically its intimate engagements with other bodies (Durber, 2005).

This insistent labelling of bodies as sexual (the compulsory sexualization of the body) reveals a conscious awareness by the culture of its desire to discipline all bodies. Such a system of discipline seeks to penetrate ever deeper into the actions of the body in order to discover ever-new forms of corporeal pleasures and types of sexualized beings. This it does in order to maintain the “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” that grant the discourses of sex and sexuality knowledge of and over the

body (Foucault, 1978, pp. 45-47). Indeed, a proliferation of sexual acts and sexual identities only reaffirms the belief that one's sexual experiences are an important part of self and an indicator of one's true and natural sexual identity. Irrespective of whether the body becomes a normal or an abnormal sexual type, or whether the body engages in morally defined good or bad sex, therefore, so long as the subject recognizes the body and specific parts of the body as sexual, the disciplining required by these discourses is achieved. The chaste body, the paedophile body, the reproductive body, the homosexual and the heterosexual: these are all examples of successful constructions of a docile being who knows the body as sexual (Durber, 2005).

Conclusion

What this paper has shown is that essentialist arguments on adult-child sex have, despite over three decades of near-unbridled supremacy, failed to provide a universalist ethical case. A quarter-century of essentialist-dominated approaches to child sexuality, adult attraction to children and/ or adolescents, and adult-child sex, has merely produced a series of monolithic, sterile, and politically slanted formulations. CSA positions consciously exclude any iconoclastic dissent, or narratives that don't fit victimological assumptions, thereby restricting access for critics through perpetuating an atmosphere of fear.

CSA theorists claim their aim is to facilitate the development of children's sexual difference by protecting them from adult impositions. However, this position itself imposes a politically normative schema on the direction children's sexuality should take, whilst palpably failing to facilitate the very autonomy and self-determination, which they assert should be the central aim in child protection measures. The debates over adult-child sex should not be hijacked by a sterile, monolithic, and arrogant ideology which labels adult "child lovers" as sexual deviants who "have a problem."¹¹ Instead, the topic deserves a mature and critical interrogation of the way both child and adult-child sex is constructed. Future discussions on this topic should focus in particular on: who owns the debate? Which groups assume privileged status in the dissemination of particular narratives? Within such future debates Alcoff's hope of a "transformative future ... in which children could be, for the first time ... free from the economy of adult sexual desire and adult sexual demands," and where "the sexuality of children that emerges from it ... will be determined then and only then by children themselves" (1996, p. 133) could offer tremendous possibilities.

Critical sociological approaches on children's citizenship claims may also provide useful insights for debating children's sexual rights outside protectionist frameworks, whilst taking seriously more radical empowerment agendas. Although some may be critical of wholesale, or particular aspects, of liberal democratic transformations, the inherent logic appears to point to a momentum towards more inclusionary forms of sexual citizenship (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and Queer). Such trends are also likely to highlight significant discrepancies in discursive presentations of children in the social, criminal, and intimate fields, whilst establishing (wittingly or not) the context for an extension to children's sexual citizenship and more radical conceptions of consent. These developments will have significant, and as yet ill-defined, implications for the future trajectory of adult-child sex.

Footnotes

1 As this was the title of the theme at the Conference, I will continue to use it throughout this paper. It would however not have been my preferred choice.

2 Title of a song by Public Image Limited (PIL).

3 A phrase coined by Stanley Cohen in his groundbreaking *Folk devils and moral panics* (1972).

4 For example, adult sexual attraction to older children (ages 12-14) is more correctly defined as hebephilia, and adult attraction to mid to late adolescents (ages 15-18), is more accurately defined as ephebophilia.

5 <http://www.ipce.info> (<http://www.ipce.info>).

6 Van Engelen is the chair of a foundation named Soelaas, which campaigns in the Netherlands on a traditional conservative, pro-family, and anti-paedophile platform.

7 Durham quoted in the *THES* (December 3, 2004, p. 3).

8 Chris Harrison, quoted in *THES* (December 3, 2004, p. 3).

9 Anne Houston, quoted in Sky News (December 2, 2004) at <http://www.sky.com/> (<http://www.sky.com/>)
skynews/article/0"30000-13258957,00.html

10 See Williams (2004). O'Connell's own research has been criticized itself on ethical grounds. See article "One researcher posed as a child online, and deliberately baited paedophiles," at <http://www.spiked-online.com/articles/00000006DEAA.htm> (<http://www.spiked-online.com/articles/00000006DEAA.htm>)

11 A comment made by one of the speakers at the Budapest Conference.

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Author affiliation:

RICHARD YUILL

Author affiliation:

a Independent researcher, UK.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the author. Email: richard.mfoucault@gmail.com



1. (#footnoterefl_ejlxiih) As

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