



Circular arguments and category errors in the rejection of voluntary intimate relationships between adults and children

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Introduction

As is commonly known, many children are sexually abused. It's entirely unreasonable to deny this and anyone who does certainly is not aware of the facts, or else ill advised or even immoral.

However, denying that there is a large-scale sexual abuse of children is not the same thing as denying that any kind of erotical (or platonical!) relationship between adults and children amounts to such abuse.

Experts have long been aware that there really are relationships between minors and adults that can be voluntary and harmless. We may define these as relationships based on mutual affection and attraction, which have nothing to do with sexual (or emotional) abuse.

Unfortunately many people seem to be convinced that if you acknowledge the existence of sexual child abuse, you should therefore automatically acknowledge the non-existence of positive close platonic friendships or erotic relationships between adults and children outside the child's own family circles.

Obviously, this is about as logical as contending that the existence of women who are being raped by men would prove there are no loving, voluntary relationships between women and men whatsoever.

Fortunately a lot of people realise that this line of reasoning is invalid if you call their attention to it. However, there are still a few other errors of thought affecting the debate about close friendships and erotic relationships between minors and adults. This is the subject I wish to address in this article.

Children loving adults

Many people assume that children will never want to have an intimate relationship with an adult outside their own family circle. In their view, the only natural kind of love that a child is able to feel for an adult would be the love of a child for his parents. Similarly, the only adequate type of love that an adult should feel for a child is parental love or a variant of it. More *personal* feelings of friendship or *erotic* feelings obviously do not easily fit in this picture. This is why there could be no voluntary friendships between adults and children that would not

correspond to this model of parental love.

I find this view extremely peculiar, because almost anyone will recall the friendly or amorous feelings one had as a child for an adult as a *person*, rather than just as a parental figure. These feelings may also have involved tender, erotic or even outright sexual desires, which do not exactly seem to correspond to the average love of a child for his parents.

Begging the question

Some opponents of intimate relationships between adults and children simply deny that children may "really" love adults or be in love with them.

They hold that by their very nature children wouldn't love any adult who doesn't fulfill a parental role for them. Also, children would never have any type of natural erotic or sexual desires centred on an adult.

Thus, they don't recognise an important part of child sexuality and erotic development. It is clear that we can't regard this attitude as very realistic.

Others do *not* deny that children may have erotic desires for an adult, but they hold that these desires should be redirected towards other children (of approximately the same age) or even be repressed completely. They hold that any intimate relationship of a child with an adult that would have an erotic dimension (regardless of whether this is expressed as tenderness, non-genital eroticism or genital sexuality) is always "wrong" so that no adult should get involved in it. It would never be what a youngster "really" wants.

It's quite bizarre that so many people (probably a moral majority) seem to find it *obvious* that intimate relationships between adults and children can never be really voluntary. Whereas according to these critics it would be an argument against relationships that would in fact be voluntary!

Let's look at the logical structure of this argument:

Either a voluntary relationship only appears to be voluntary, so that it would not really be a voluntary relationship, and *therefore* immoral. In that case we wouldn't need any separate arguments against so called voluntary relationships, as none of them would really be voluntary.

Or a voluntary relationship really is voluntary, and in that case we can't say that it really is an involuntary relationship.

It clearly is nonsensical to hold that a relationship is not voluntary just because we don't *want* it be so. In philosophy we call this "petitio principii", or "begging the question". If someone applies this kind of circular reasoning to the question of relationships between children and

adults, he's really saying: "There are no voluntary intimate relationships between children and adults, because there are no voluntary intimate relationships between children and adults."

Affection and eroticism

A closely related argument reads that children, who claim that they have freely chosen to be in an erotic or sexual relationship with an adult, aren't really looking for the erotic or sexual aspects as goals in themselves, but exclusively for the affectionate dimensions of the relationship. This is a very strange argument, because if we're talking about a close personal and emotional friendship or romantic relationship eroticism and sex never really are goals in themselves. They never stand completely apart from the rest of the relationship. Eroticism or sex are always integrated into the relationship as a whole and can be used for example to express love or to strengthen the bond.

In other words, the fact that children in such relationships aren't striving for eroticism as an intrinsic objective is not a good argument against such a relationship, because this is true for most valuable emotional relationships.

Children's erotic life

Another claim is that emotionally healthy children would never spontaneously want to have any kind of erotic contact with an adult, and that they would therefore exclusively consent to it because they fear the adult will end the relationship if they don't. This is a very peculiar presupposition because:



Children may masturbate at a very young age and engage in sexual fantasies. This does not point to any kind of emotional disturbance. On the contrary: if all types of masturbation are forbidden from a very young age this may lead to specifically sexual frustrations.



Children can really fall in love with peers and experience some kind of erotic contact with them, which corresponds to their level of sexual development.



Children can really be erotically interested in an adult and they can even fall in love with him or her.

Therefore, the argument mentioned could only be plausible if we denied all these facts. There is no good reason to suppose that children would never want any type of erotic contact with an adult, as long as such a contact corresponds to their own feelings and development. On the contrary, we have every reason to suppose that some children long for erotic interactions with (specific) adults. This is also confirmed by research into adults who used to have a positive voluntary emotional

and erotic relationship with an adult when they were children.

Category error

Another error encountered amongst opponents of voluntary intimate relationships between children and adults is that these would be psychologically detrimental because they would be "obviously" morally wrong. According to this argument, responsible adults should say *no* to the (as such *real*) erotic desires of children. This would be some kind of moral duty, as it would be self-evident that a child would go morally astray otherwise.

We're dealing with a category error: something would be psychologically detrimental because it would be morally reprehensible according to a specific conventional moral system. In fact no moral system can be simply self-evident, which is even recognised by a religion like Christianity, allowing for very different viewpoints on for example homosexuality (and even pedophilia). Therefore, it is misleading to claim that it would be self-evident that intimate relationships between children and adults should always be seen as immoral. From a rational standpoint it should rather be the other way around: voluntary relationships should be morally evaluated by the criterion whether they are harmless or not. Many people tend to inverse this line of reasoning, claiming:

Voluntary relationships are harmful because they are immoral (for example because of a religious prohibition or cultural taboo).

Whereas, from a rational point of view it could only be:

Voluntary relationships are (psychologically) harmful and therefore they are immoral.

Please note that I'm not talking about the real detrimental (social psychological) effect of taboos, but about the supposedly inherent negative psychological effect of the forbidden relationships as such, which would even occur if there weren't any taboos against them.

Sexual addiction

Yet another argument runs that children who are in an erotic or sexual relationship with an adult will inevitably become sex addicts:

An erotic relationship between a child and an adult links eroticism and love too early so that children learn to confuse the two when they grow up and thus become sex addicts.

This argument is flawed because within a voluntary relationship erotic contacts would automatically have to be voluntary, i.e. a type of eroticism to which the child does not in any way object, and which

corresponds to his or her level of psychosexual development. Only in such a case, if the child predominantly engages in the sexual contact because he doesn't want to lose the relationship, can we imagine such a distorted association to arise. However, such a relationship would not be voluntary anyway!

Thinking errors

Errors of argumentation don't exactly facilitate rational debates. It is always essential to avoid them, because if we don't, some things might be rejected for the wrong reasons.

It is particularly ironic if adults who're involved in this type of voluntary relationships are repeatedly told: "But surely you realise why it is unacceptable? The child is much too young! What on earth are you doing! Please think about it!"

