



Possible sources of the rejection of voluntary and harmless intimate friendships between children and adults outside the child's own family

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Voluntary intimate relationships between adults and children who aren't related (nor in a setting of foster care) are still confronted by a wall of incomprehension, disgust and even hatred.

All this can be traced to conscious and subconscious ideas about such relationships. What exactly is the basis for these ideas? In this essay I want to mention several possible sources for them.

1. Abuse hysteria

The most obvious source of misconceptions regarding relationships between adults and minors is the abuse hysteria, which seems to have got completely out of control. As is usually the case in a witch-hunt, a much too broad criterion is used to catch possible abusers before they commit their crimes.

Gypsies used to be regarded as thieves (and sometimes they are still seen that way today), because there really were some thieves among them. Similarly anyone with friendly and/or erotic feelings towards youngsters is regarded as an abuser because there really are some abusers amongst the whole population of people with such feelings.

What is happening is that a much too broad, stereotypical generalization of characteristics of an immoral minority with a group with common features is generalized toward that group as a whole. What's frightening about this, is that an irrelevant feature of the group as a whole is regarded as a proof for criminal inclinations

Just as a Gypsy woman is not a thief *because* she is a Gypsy, an adult who loves children is not an abuser *because* he or she loves children. There is no logical connection whatsoever between the ethnical identity of being a Gypsy and stealing, and similarly, there is no logical connection whatsoever between loving children and abusing them. A simple truism, but in practice it turns out to be quite complex for most people.

Prejudices usually arise because of an overgeneralization, and they are

reinforced by real or apparent traumatic events. Via the right type of propaganda you can convince people that any kind of group is evil incarnate.

We know this from the witch trials, the persecution of the Jews or the massacres in the war between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. The larger the hysteria, the stronger the propaganda, and the less rational people become: a vicious circle.

2. Formalism in relationships

A next source for the rejection of relationships with children is connected to what I would like to call "relational formalism". By this concept I mean that many people may be inclined to test relationships against formal conditions rather than personal features and the quality of mutual personal understanding and positive attachment. People are categorized on the basis of external, formal characteristics, and the categorization is used as a touchstone for the relationship.

The more people are primarily regarded as men and women, adults, teenagers and children, instead of unique, irreplaceable persons, the stronger these formal features will count as a touchstone for individual relationships. An example is how relationships between men and women used to be approached in Mediterranean areas such as (parts of) Spain. These were often strongly formalized. For instance, during a party, men and women were expected to be seated completely separately from members of the opposite sex, and to limit themselves as much as possible to sex-specific subjects such as sports (men) and house-keeping (women).

This type of formal relational criteria may seem strange to a Westerner, but it certainly continues to play a role in the Western world. For example, some like to see formal parallels of heterosexual relationships in homosexual ones, with so-called "males" and "females". Another example concerns how relationships between young adults and the elderly are approached. When I was in my twenties I used to cherish a friendship with an elderly married couple, based on equality, and this friendship was considered very strange by many of my peers. They implicitly seemed to use a formal criterion, which led them to think that something had to be wrong. Not because they knew the concrete relationship and found it wanting in quality, but because they had a (implicit) world view according to which people of different formal categories are supposed to treat each other in specific ways or even not have any contact with each other.

According to many such formalistic views, friendships of adults with children are always unacceptable, because their failure to respect the formal limits would be downright scandalous. They go against the order of things, against one's concept of how things should be. Therefore, adults who have emotionally close friendships with children are at best

socially disturbed according to these views and should be helped to internalize the formal 'rules', or else they should be seen as selfish rebels who want to turn the world upside down for purely destructive reasons.

I recall the following scene from my personal life. During my birthday party several years ago with mainly adult guests I had also invited two young girls, with whom I actually had a much better and closer friendship than with most of the adults present. I tried to give everybody as much attention as possible without forgetting the children. A (adult) friend had arrived with a self-made painting. I asked my two girl friends, who happened to be very bored at that moment, to hang the painting on the wall with a nail. Much to my surprise, the artist got very excited because of this. He got quite angry with me, because this was such an "abnormal" situation.

As a man, I had clearly shown attention towards the children (formal error 1), I had involved them in the central activity (formal error 2) and in addition I had ask them to fulfill a "male" task, namely hitting the nail into the wall (formal error 3). It was impossible to discuss the event with the person mentioned.

The scary part about formalism is that it puts people into impersonal pigeonholes and reduces them to roles. It is the ultimate form of subjugation of individuals. At the same time however, it is the basis for a conventional, conformist society, in which people are supposedly able to lead a thoughtless and comfortable life. For this reason, shaking of formal pillars of society invokes an enormous amount of aggression. It is as if you would downgrade holy truths.

A newspaper article I've recently read shows how far this can go. It mentioned how a few men had seriously physically abused a woman, because she openly dared play snookers in a café. This was such a shocking 'sacrilege' for the men that the woman had to pay dearly for it.

3. Formal sexual norms

As an extension of relational formalism we can notice there is also a formal normativity within sexology. Traditionally only heterosexual coital sexuality was considered psychologically healthy and any other sexual orientation was seen as more or less pathological (individuals would have become fixed in a phase of the sexual development towards the uniform norm, or they would have regressed to a previous phase of development).

As in relational formalism, the central criterion is outward and impersonal. It does not matter how a person experiences his sexuality subjectively, but whether he complies with formal, impersonal norms or not. No matter how pleasant and positive intimate relationships between adults and children may feel for the partners involved, they should always be seen as inferior as they don't correspond to the sexological

norm of adult coitus.

The normative formalist sexology has a negative impact on relationships between adults and children, but equally so on other forms of 'deviant' erotic and sexual behavior, including even sexual abstinence.

4. Discussion

If my analysis makes any sense, the aversion of relationships between adults and youngsters is probably not entirely reducible to the abuse hysteria. It certainly is the main immediate obstacle to the emancipation of relationships between adults and children. But at a deeper level I also think that there are formalist, impersonal ideas about relations and sexuality which imply that relationships between adults and minors can only be seen as breaching the order of things, i.e. as an illness or crime.

The emancipation in this area will mainly have to be directed against such factors. I think that this ought to happen within a broader context of a new view on relationships and sexuality, a view, which holds that the individual and his subjective experiences ought to be the focus of our interest, rather than his formal characteristics. In other words, the emancipation of relationships between adults and children is directly connected to an increased *personalisation* of society. In this respect, it is inherently related to radical political currents such as libertarian socialism and anarchism. More moderate movements such as social democracy and social liberalism also show some overlap with this philosophy. However, because of their marked formalism, conservative, totalitarian and (dogmatic) confessional movements will probably always remain hostile to the emancipation of relationships between adults and children. The more right-wing the societal climate, the greater the taboo on the deviant and unconventional, more so if we're talking about something as "scandalous" and "unheard of" as relationships between adults and children.

The freer and more authentically people are allowed to live their lives and the more they are protected against intolerance, the more room there will be for relationships between adults and children. In this respect, such relationships are to an important extent a political issue.

