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ABOUT 'PEDOPHILIA' AS A CONCEPT

Summary of a lecture given by Frans E.J. Gieles, Ph.D. on 22 January 1997, introducing a panel discussion on pedophilia at Alcmæon, the Utrecht Faculty Association for the Social Sciences. Dr. Gieles' specialty is special education.

Introduction

I have been asked to introduce this panel discussion on pedophilia. This is a widely discussed subject at present, definitely no longer taboo. The media have been full of it in the last half year, which does not mean that the subject has become easier to discuss as a result of this exposure.

The goal of my introductory remarks is to make this discussion possible and meaningful. To this end we will have to take a critical look at the central concept: pedophilia.

Concepts and Definitions

It is a good practice to define the concepts which you use in a text or discussion. However, I have noticed that this is seldom done when one speaks or writes about pedophilia. It is assumed that the meaning of the word is common knowledge, but in fact this one word, pedophilia, can refer to a range of substantially different matters and behaviors.

A good definition includes a description (what it is), a circumscription (what it is and what it isn't, that is, the boundaries of the concept), and a connotation (the ideas which are associated with the concept as a matter of course). This should also take place with the essential words in the definition itself. Words such as "child," "adult," and "sex" can be interpreted in very divergent shades of meaning. Nevertheless, one seldom sees or hears an attempt to define these terms carefully.

That is unfortunate, for in fact all sorts of things are called "pedophilia." Such a label becomes imprecise. When for example intimacy between children and adults is discussed under the label of "pedophilia," this makes a discussion about appropriate intimacy in fact impossible, and therefore hinders any discussion of intimacy.

Labeling is a Social Process

How you label something has a great influence on what happens thereafter. If a man of my age is sitting in a park with a small girl on his lap, it makes a big difference whether one greets him with "Hey pedo!!"

or "Hi grandpa!"

How do you label the feeling between two lovers: "sexual desire" or "romantic love"? For example, on the school playground, every remotely affectionate behavior between boys is quickly labeled as "Dirty faggot!"

Within my profession I have gradually come to label things differently than the handbooks do. These typically label the child as being hyperactive, slightly brain damaged, etc. This way of labeling leads to reticence to involve oneself on the part of the educator and to stigmatization of the child. I now always label the interaction, the relationship, or the contact, thus I label the behavior of the adult as well. I don't speak of a "hyperactive child," but of a "difference in tempo" and of "establishing contact in spite of a difference in tempo."

In the last half year we have seen this labeling process in action with the label "pedophile." Ever since August 19 last year, when the media spotlight focused on, to phrase it politely, "the suspected pedophile Dutroux," everything but the kitchen sink has been stuffed under this label: nude pictures, unethical videos, exploitation, prostitution, and even murder. If then many forms of intimacy between children and adults are also shoved under the same label, any discussion about them is meaningless. After all, Dutroux is bad, Dutroux is a pedophile, therefore pedophilia is bad, therefore intimacy is bad, if not suspect.

The Concept "Pedophilia"

The original meaning is "loving children" and some still use the word with that meaning. But over the years, in the course of the social process of labeling, the meaning has been thoroughly shifted. First the meaning "also in a sexual sense" was added, which resulted in a shift from "loving" to "desiring." Thus far only a desire, a feeling, which doesn't directly imply an act. In fact the meaning of the concept continued to shift in that direction: desire became "predisposition," a predisposition in a sexual context quickly becomes a "passion" and in fact one for which you can offer no resistance, thus soon enough the concept also applied to sexual behavior. "Preference" or "inclination" became "predisposition" or even "identity."

Meanwhile, for one person "pedophilia" refers to a feeling, for someone else to an act, thus quite a difference. The first refers to a feeling that anyone can be familiar with and that is a property of humans and mammals: affection for the child. The other interprets this feeling as abnormal or sick and only occurring in specific people, "pedophiles." Thus confusion on all sides.

The current public meaning of the word alludes to sexual behavior between a child and an adult. The "child" is assumed to be more or less a baby: helpless and dependent and certainly asexual; the "adult" is assumed to be sure of himself in all respects, emotionally and relationally, completely mature and developed. The relationship is

invariably evaluated as an inherent authority on the part of the adult, and sex is interpreted in a very limited sense, namely the most common adult forms of it.

When formulated in this manner, "pedophilia" is not ethically acceptable and there is only place for a "perpetrator" (even if he or she is 12 years young) and a "victim" (even if he or she is 17 or 19 years old). For the perpetrator the only option is prison or "therapy;" for the "victim" only the victim role. This is the frame of reference within which currently not only pedophilia, but also many other forms of intimacy between young and old are discussed. One also acts based on that frame of reference.

The professional literature doesn't bring us much further. Definitions are seldom given of the concepts used, rather, the discussion hooks into the public notions with all of their connotations.

There is the well known psychiatric definition from the DSM III Revised, but this has been roundly criticized, for example by Lex van Naerssen in his dissertation, as being in fact only a moral judgment instead of an objective description of something which actually exists. The definition is unworkable in practice because the subjective experience of those involved and assignment of meanings by them are not taken into account, and it is precisely these factors which should be decisive for what you do and how you judge.

The definition of the [Dutch] National Center for Mental Health has turned out to be quite usable for many years: "Pedophilia is the human condition characterized by a feeling of being attracted to children, also in a sexual sense, which is experienced as very important." This definition is not judgmental, describes correctly, and does not automatically (that is, by definition) imply an act. As already mentioned, this definition as well has shifted from "feeling" to "tendency" to "passion" to "act." Definitions have also circulated within the NVSH, formulated by myself and others, but these are in fact in retrospect somewhat too broad and actually refer more to an ideal than to an extant reality.

I look for the solution, as others in the NVSH now do, and as Van Naerssen also does in his dissertation, in the rejection of "pedophilia" as a usable and meaningful concept. It has become a concept which every person interprets in his own way, a container concept which has been stuffed so full that it has become unusable and in that sense has become an "empty" concept. It is also a one-sided concept: it refers only to the adult partner in the contact; for the younger partner there is no other role available than a passive, submissive role.

What I now do is, just as I do this in the rest of my profession, to label the relationship, the interaction, the contact; thus to label both partner and their behavior and the process of their interaction. What I then pay attention to is the quality of the relationship: how poor or rich is it? how full of feeling or lacking in it? how broad or how narrow? how personal

or impersonal? how free or constrained? to what extent can each partner be himself and develop himself as a self? All of these are generally accepted, usable, reasonably easily evaluated and meaningful criteria. This is how I classify relationships, by quality. Should a sexual aspect be present, it no longer stands in the foreground, and definitely not to exclusion of other aspects, but has its place as a possible aspect of intimacy within a relationship which may or may not be qualitatively good. In this manner, intimacy in relationships between young and old is easily discussed, much better it seems to me than under the label "pedophilia."

The Social Process of Labeling

We have seen this at work in the past six months with the concept "pedophile," as the shady businessman Dutroux, suspected of murder, and living a heterosexual lifestyle, has been invariably discussed as a "pedophile" instead of, say, a slave trader, which seems to me a more logical label. No, the background articles and programs didn't have to do with slave trafficking or greed, but invariably with "pedophilia." From there to "porno," from there to "pedophile networks" and from there to stricter laws and stricter enforcement. The conference in Stockholm as well barely touched on poverty, trade agreements, employment ethics, and factory practices, no, the focus was on "the pedophiles."

This social process of labeling is lucidly described by **Van Naerssen in De Staatskrant**, 19 December 1996, and by a professor of literature from Los Angeles, Kincaid, in De Morgen, 23 November 1996.

In short, by wholesale labeling of these problems - and that is what they are - as "pedophilia," one makes these problems a great deal easier to assimilate and to solve: we only have to catch "the pedophiles," lock them up or "treat" them (that is, "adjust" them) and the problem goes away. All that actually "goes away" is the tension which people feel: they don't have to take a hard look at themselves, at their own society, economy, culture, and families - at our trade practices, at our practices of child-rearing and education, of living together, of thinking and doing. We don't have to pay attention to how many murders our children see every day on TV, to how many murders they win points for in their computer games, nor to how our children grow up in a society which is bloated with one-sided and impoverished forms of sex, while for them all of this is "for later." How little do they receive in the form of personal communications about these things from us, their parents and educators.

Conclusion

My proposal is that we not talk about "pedophilia," but about intimacy in relationships between young and old, and in doing so to indicate clearly what one means. By "child" does one mean a girl of five or a young man of fifteen. Does one have a cold, dominant mother in mind or a kind one?

A father who is a true friend to his son or a cold and distant authority?
Does one mean petting or is one thinking of intercourse? You see, we
can talk using very ordinary words, we don't need a fancy Greek term.

Frans E.J. Gieles, Ph.D., educator

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