

[Home](#)[Up](#)[\[Doc. List E8\]](#)[\[Newsletter E8\]](#)

## Abuse by Definition?

### The Taboo as Excuse

Frank van Ree

In: KOINOS # 25

*In Koinos 24, psychiatrist Dr. Frank van Ree unfolded his point of view concerning intimate relationships between young people and adults and concerning criteria which distinguish good and damaging contacts. We have received a variety of positive reactions to that article. Van Ree became involved with this subject through his psychiatric practice as well as through his close personal contacts with Dr. Edward Brongersma, who passed away in 1998. It is a source of concern to him that society's view of pedophile and ephebophile relationships has become so simplistic. We asked him to make a new contribution taking a closer look at the ultimate taboo of our time.*

The words eroticism and sexuality are used frequently. Their definitions differ in various dictionaries, as does the manner in which they are used in the professional literature. There is particularly a great lack of clarity because these terms are often used interchangeably or defined in a way that their meanings overlap. Sometimes an attempt is made to connect the sexual specifically with certain bodily areas or organs. But here as well all manner of discussions arise concerning where the boundaries lie. In the interest of clarity and to avoid misunderstandings, I have formulated two definitions which indicate in which manner *I* employ these two concepts.

*Eroticism means to me the admiration of and the desire for the bodily manifestation (corporality) of the partner. Sexuality is the name I give to the (bodily) behavior which gives form to that admiration and desire.*

Eroticism is associated by many people with something sublime, a quality which also brings to mind platonic relationships. However, as soon as the bodily/sexual aspect plays a role, for many people, certainly in our western culture, feelings of shame and awareness of guilt and sinfulness play along. Sexuality is commonly subject to taboos.

Many sex taboos exist, albeit that every period of history and every culture has its own variations. By taboos I mean prohibitions for which rational arguments are lacking or in any case offer insufficient explanation. Sometimes they have to do with certain orientations - for example, homosexuality - or with specific behaviors, such as fellatio,

anal intercourse, etc. Some are seldom absent, such as the incest taboo. Violation of taboos is accompanied by guilt feelings, awareness of sinfulness, and more or less anxiety, particularly if clear sanctions are prescribed. One who thinks back on his or her own childhood years remembers the forbidden games by which the realization of their forbidden character was in fact present, but by which there was also pleasure and positive excitement. Insight into the reasons for most of the prohibitions was lacking. Much of this was labeled as 'doing something dirty', 'being naughty', or filthiness and sinfulness by parents and other caretakers.

There have been various theories developed to explain those taboos. Important examples are the depth psychology theories of Freud and his followers, and the sociological theories of Parsons and later thinkers. The psychoanalysts based their empathic explanations principally on the struggle between passionate impulses ('the pleasure principle') and the limitations which are put on them by the outside world ('the reality principle'), particularly in connection with the triangular relationships between parents and children (Oedipus complex, Electra complex, etc.). The sociological explanations direct themselves to the development of social rules in service of the preservation of the group of origin and the establishment of larger group ties in service of the preservation of the species. These theories were considered especially important for the origin of the incest taboo. As for special technical taboos the connection between the eliminatory and sexual function of the urogenital system, through which hygienic factors play a role, is often alluded to. Whatever the case may be, history shows that taboos sometimes kept gaining ground (for example the incest taboo) and were sanctioned with increasing intensity and atrocities, but in other periods in fact diminished in strength. Thus for us the taboo on homosexuality subsided and the provisions concerning it specifically have disappeared from our criminal laws.

### **It's always other people**

Whoever looks closely at the present-day rules and regulations concerning sexuality runs immediately into the difficulty that, in spite of the recent increase in openness, even talking about sex is still to some extent taboo. To phrase it differently: we still run up against what effectively amounts to secrecy. It is striking how on the one hand everything is shown and discussed in the media, while on the other hand most people act as though they themselves are not involved in such matters and have no interest in it. Sex films have a huge turnover, porno movies have high viewer ratings, but nowhere are videotapes to be seen lying around, and the viewers who enjoy these performances seldom discuss them openly with each other. The Dutch cabaret performer Youp van 't Hek had an observation about this: 'The telephone sex business turns over huge sums of money. But if I ask my acquaintances and friends whether they ever make use of it, they all say 'no'. And then I think, 'Am I making all of those calls by myself?' This discussion taboo

goes further than just the 'amusement applications'. Psychotherapists who (rightly or not) in the course of their work keep their own lives out of the discussion, by doing so promote the continued existence of many taboos and stigmatize their clients as sexual deviants or perverts. After all, these clients do or long for that which therapists do not (appear to) desire or carry out. It is only very recently that homosexuality has been crossed off the list of disturbances as described in the psychiatric classification system (DSM). Before then the helping professions busied themselves with combating and treating this 'sickness'. For that matter, there are at present, notably in the United States, powerful forces which are attempting to reverse this development.

### More than a taboo

While the breaking of taboos has to do with acting counter to social norms and values, and ethics are at issue, a very different discussion is going on currently about 'sex with children and/or young people'. At present the very mention of it provokes many people to indignation, anxiety, and anger. The fact of the matter is, one associates this concept not purely with the taboo, but much more with criminality. Pedophilia and ephebophilia are not merely inappropriate, unrespectable, deviant, or even morbid minority orientations, but criminal pursuits. 'Pedophiles and ephebophiles are child molesters, child abusers, child threateners, and above all child rapists and murderers.' That is what the media seem to report to us. Of course the indignation over rapes and murders which have actually happened is appropriate, as is the call for measures to protect children and young people. That is all the more so because punishment and treatment of these and other sexual delinquents in the past seem to have failed or at least to have been inadequate, so that recidivism often is the result. But one makes a serious mistake when one makes a specific connection between criminal behavior and 'sex with children or young people'. There are no grounds whatsoever to assume that pedophiles and ephebophiles should specifically tend toward (aggressive) criminal behavior. Tender and aggressive expressions are found in every orientation. There are men who rape and murder adult women or men. There are violent homo- and heterosexuals. There are very aggressive lesbians, who sometimes direct their violent acts against children. Aggressivity and violent action are not orientation specific. It is in fact predominantly men, regardless of orientation, who abuse their physical power and commit violent crimes. Women who are involved in violent sexual contacts with children are commonly dragged into it by their male partners! Just where the masculine tendency to aggression comes from is still open to discussion. Of course the socialization of macho behavior is often assumed to be one of the causative factors. But it is certainly not impossible that genetic factors play a role. (Physical) aggressivity is a behavior which is connected both with person and situation, but is not an orientation characteristic. It is more characteristic of men than of women.

### News value

Why has the emphasis in the discussion of ephebophilia and pedophilia come to lie so one-sidedly on the subject of criminality?

Undoubtedly the reporting in the media plays an important role here. The media have the task of informing the consumer, in which certainly as much openness as possible should be attempted. That means that even unpleasant news cannot be excluded from mention. Exactly this kind of information has great news value. Particularly calamitous matters such as wars, disasters, and murder make a great impression. That which is not problematical has generally less effect. It is not the media who are guilty of tainted reporting as much as those readers and viewers who have an enhanced sensitivity for the sensational, and who base their opinion principally on the information which goes with it.

But it is more than just the media. It is striking to what extent strongly biased publications have appeared for some time now in the legal and medical professional literature. Even in research, negative descriptions of concepts form the starting point. Erotic feeling for children and young people and sexual contacts with them - pedophile and ephebophile behavior - are labeled as abuse and sexual abuse from the beginning of the research, thus before one has researched their effects. In the United States, words such as pedophilia and ephebophilia are hardly used, but rather one speaks of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). From the very start it is a matter of abuse, perpetrators, and victims. In much of the work reported as sexological research, scientists forget the need for impartiality. Pedophilia and ephebophilia are even nearly exclusively judged by examination of material originating from legal cases and psychiatric files, that is, data originating from negative selections.

### Power differences

Even if we could explain some of the current distortion by news gathering and biased scientific research, the very character of ephebophilia and pedophilia plays a role. After all, these involve contacts and relationships between parties who are fundamentally unequal where power is concerned. That difference in power takes many forms. First of all, the adult is generally physically stronger, certainly when young children are involved. For that matter, men in adult heterosexual relationships are generally physically stronger than women. In addition, for very young children, verbal ability will be less or even entirely lacking. Still this doesn't mean that the child or young person is unable to make disapproval known! But what is very important is that the young child lacks knowledge of social norms and values and their significance. Nor can the adult partner explain such matters, at least not to a small child. It is possible to recognize (emotional) rejection of consent in small children, but there can never be any question of informed consent. However unfairly, for many people these differences mean that pedophile and ephebophile contacts and relationships always involve abuse of power. The structural power difference is translated into a sort of necessary abuse of power.

The child or young person can more easily be misled and abused through these factors than the more mature person. But the *possibility* of deception and abuse may not be identified with actual deceit and abuse.

### **Lack of differentiation**

The current animosity toward pedophiles and ephebophiles is very difficult to counter. This is due first of all to the fact that people with these sexual preferences have been forced into silence. In the current atmosphere of condemnation and contempt, who can say anything about experiences which are not negative? Just as was once the case with homosexuals, pedophiles and ephebophiles are now objects of repression. Their situation makes it nearly impossible for them to make known anything positive about their experiences. One finds only infrequently descriptions in the belles lettres of what are often very tender and moving love relationships. But those researchers who work with statistical methods pay no attention to these or consider such descriptions to be false romanticism and deception.

As for the power advantage of adults, one encounters generalizations almost unremittingly, regardless of whether the contacts involve babies, small children, pubescent youngsters, or older adolescents. Consider for example how great the difference in maturity is between a five- and a fifteen-year-old. This lack of differentiation is characteristic of much of the reporting in the media and also of a considerable portion of the articles in psychological, psychiatric, and legal professional publications.

One can't help but notice that people with a preference for children and young people, in spite of the intense criticism and threat to which they are subjected, deliberate within their own groups about what they should do. They have formulated in various publications the minimum requirements which relationships with children and young people should meet. A number of them have committed themselves to abstinence because they assume - correctly - that public condemnation would cause (secondary) harm to the young person or the child. It is odd, to say the least, that professional publications and the media have little or nothing to say about this. One hopes that an end will be put to the current one-sided negative presentation of these matters. Above all, we should not let ourselves be dragged along any further by the witch-hunt which has developed in America and which has now infected European countries as well.

**[Doc. List E8]**

**[Newsletter E8]**

Home

Up