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Keith F. Durkin & Clifton D. Bryant

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propagandizing pederasty : a thematic analysis of the on-line exculpatory accounts of unrepentant pedophiles

Keith F. Durkin

*McNeese State University
Lake Charles, Louisiana, USA*

Clifton D. Bryant

*Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Blacksburg, Virginia, USA*

Although pedophilia has been the topic of an extensive research effort, the preponderance of this research has used subjects from clinical or correctional populations. This constitutes a major empirical concern as most of the academic knowledge on this topic is based on data gathered from either incarcerated offenders or probationers in treatment. However, such offenders constitute an unrepresentative sample of the larger population of pedophiles. Accordingly, there is a large number of pedophiles for whom little information is available. Computer networks offer a unique opportunity for the study of those pedophiles who are not in a correctional or clinical population. The data for this study were gathered from a Usenet discussion group composed of pedophiles, alt.support.boy-lovers. The sample includes 41 admitted pedophiles who participate in this particular computer forum. The central research question addressed was "How do pedophiles who use the Internet account for their deviance?" Scott and Lyman's (1968) classic

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Address correspondence to Keith F. Durkin, Department of Social Sciences, P.O. Box 92335, McNeese State University, Lake Charles, LA 70605-92335.

formulation of accounts served as the theoretical framework for this study. The results of this research indicate that more than half of these pedophiles offered accounts for their deviant orientation and behavior. Moreover, all of these accounts took the form of justifications, and none took the form of excuses.

Social stigma frequently attends deviance. Stigma is a social stain that has the tendency to "spoil" the social identity of its bearer (Goffman 1963). Because of the stigma associated with deviance, identity management is an exigent consideration for anyone who engages in such behavior (McCaghy 1968). Deviants may use a variety of strategies to circumvent, or at least partially mitigate, the stigma that is normally associated with deviance. Sociologists have advanced a plethora of theories and concepts to address this phenomenon. These include vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940), vocabularies of adjustment (Cressey 1973), techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957), deviance disavowal (F. Davis 1961; McCaghy 1968), deviance avowal (Turner 1972), disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes 1975), tertiary deviance (Kitsuse 1980), and accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968).

There has been extensive research conducted on the management of a deviant identity. Sociologists have investigated the identity management strategies of a diverse array of people whose behavior or beliefs are considered deviant, including convicted child molesters (McCaghy 1968), dishonest shoe salespersons (Friedman 1974), motorists who are suspected of driving while intoxicated (Warren and Phillips 1976), participants in singles dances (Berk 1977), taxi-drivers (Hong and Duff 1977), a hit man (Levi 1981), convicted rapists (Scully and Marolla 1984), college students who miss class (Kalab 1987), convicted murderers (Ray and Simons 1987), participants in chain letters (Boles and Myers 1988), pedophile organizations (de Young 1989), obese persons (Hughes and Degher 1993), police officers who work in internal affairs departments (Mulchahy 1995), and female bodybuilders (Duff and Hong 1996).

Adults who engage in sexual activity with children, or possess such a sexual orientation, are considered to be among the most serious deviants in our society. Such contacts are illegal everywhere in the United States (McCaghy and Capron 1994). Pedophiles, unlike some other varieties of deviants, enjoy almost no

social support. None of the 2,753 respondents to a recent national survey indicated that they believed it was "normal" or "all right" for adults to have sexual contact with children (Janus and Janus 1993). The prospect of adults engaging in sexual activity with children "inspires an innate disgust in most people" (Finkelhor 1979:693). Pedophiles are "considered to be among the most degenerate" of all deviants (Bryant 1982:332). In fact, they are even disvalued by other deviants. In prison, "pedophiles occupy the lowest rung of the inmate social system" (Heitzeg 1996:325). The especially strong societal condemnation of pedophilia raises an important sociological question: How do pedophiles manage such a disvalued identity?

Currently, there is a growing societal concern over the use of the Internet by pedophiles. These individuals are using this computer network to transmit child pornography, to locate children to molest, and to communicate with other pedophiles (Durkin 1997). There have also been reports of adult men masquerading as children and entering computer chat rooms that are frequented by youngsters to engage in sexually oriented discussions or "cybersex" with these children (Lamb 1998). Although the use of the Internet by pedophiles presents serious social problems, it also provides new possibilities for sociological investigations of pedophilia. Durkin and Bryant (1995:197) argued that computer networks present "an enormous range of opportunities for systematic" research on sexual deviance. In this regard, the Internet offers a unique chance to conduct a study of a group of pedophiles who are not drawn from a clinical or correctional population.

Pedophilia has been the topic of a plethora of studies conducted by psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, sexologists, and criminologists. However, this previous research has been widely criticized on methodological grounds. Critics have pointed to the fact that not even a single investigation has used a potentially representative sample of pedophiles (Okami and Goldberg 1992). These studies typically used samples of individuals who were incarcerated for committing sexual offenses or who were receiving mental health treatment. However, those samples are biased and lack generalizability (Ames and Houston 1990). The subjects included in those studies constitute "at most a very tiny and unrepresentative sample" of all pedophiles (Finkelhor 1986:138). Therefore, there are a large number of pedophiles about whom little is known.

The data for this study were gathered from a Usenet discussion group composed of pedophiles, alt.support.boy-lovers.¹ Scott and Lyman's (1968) classic formulation of accounts served as the conceptual framework for this study. The guiding research question was this: How do pedophiles who use the Internet account for their deviance? The accounts framework affords an effective conceptual tool for examining pedophiles and the attitudes that they hold in regard to their deviant orientation and behavior. Accounts reveal a certain way of viewing the world and, thus, can be considered as an indicator of the deviant's cognitive structure (Benson 1985; Pogrebin, Poole, and Martinez 1992). Mayer (1985:21) noted that "one striking characteristic of the pedophile is the ability to minimize or rationalize his activities." Many pedophiles "have an entire set of beliefs that they feel justify sex between a child and an adult" (Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner 1984:89). Their distorted belief systems manifest themselves in the explanatory statements they offer for their orientation and behavior (Stermac and Segal 1989; Pollock and Hashmall 1991). A conceptual examination of pedophiles' accounts offers the prospect of substantially advancing the development of theories about individuals who sexually abuse children (Stermac and Segal 1989; Pollock and Hashmall 1991). Scott and Lyman (1968:62) argued that "the study of deviance and the study of accounts are intrinsically related, and a clarification of accounts will constitute a clarification of deviant phenomenon." Consequently, an understanding of the accounts offered by pedophiles who use the Internet will augment and extend our understanding of the general nature of pedophilia.

ACCOUNTS

The notion of accounts was first advanced by Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman (1968). They defined accounts as "socially approved vocabularies that neutralize an act or its consequences when one or both are called into question" (P. 46). There are two categories of accounts: excuses and justifications.

¹ Usenet is "a giant set of more than 10,000 discussion groups (called newsgroups) distributed over the Internet and devoted to every conceivable subject, from Rush Limbaugh to particle physics" ("Welcome to Cyberspace" 1995:9). The user of these newsgroups can read and post messages. The postings are organized in an archival fashion and can be read like a daily newspaper (Pitter et al. 1995).

Excuses involve the acknowledgment that the act in question was wrong but also include a denial of complete responsibility for that act. Justifications, however, involve an acknowledgment of responsibility for the act in question but also include a denial of the pejorative qualities normally associated with that act. Accounts can serve as explanatory mechanisms for deviance (Pogrebin et al. 1992). They are normally recognized as occurring subsequent to the deviant act.

Sociologists have noted that accounts serve important functions for deviants. First, they have an exculpatory function (Scott and Lyman 1968; Benson 1985). Hamlin (1988:436) noted,

the guilt that individuals will feel after being told that what they did was wrong or that they themselves are bad can be destructive of social identity. Justifications and excuses neutralize guilt and enable individuals to feel good about themselves.

Second, accounts are a type of impression management technique that protects the social identity of the deviant in the face of potential societal disavowment. They allow a deviant "to mitigate blameworthiness by representing one's behavior in such a way as to reduce personal responsibility" (Pogrebin et al. 1992:236). The proper use of accounts can allow an individual to avoid the stigma that is normally associated with deviance (Benson 1985). Finally, accounts may facilitate future deviance. Weinstein (1980:578) argued that "the reasons given for an act are often the conditions for its continuation." Accounts can be converted into attitudes and beliefs, which in turn permit further deviance (Sheley 1980).

The first category of accounts is excuses. When an individual offers an excuse, he or she admits that the behavior in question was wrong but denies full responsibility for the act or its consequences. Excuses cite "circumstances mitigating or entirely eliminating the everyday requirement of accountability" (Rothman and Gandossy 1982:451). A successful excuse may reduce the tendency of others to hold the actor responsible for the behavior in question or to make negative inferences about the actor's character (Michner, DeLamater, and Schwartz 1986). There are four types of excuses: appeals to defeasibility, appeals to accidents, appeals to biological drives, and scapegoating.

Justifications are the second category of accounts. Justifications are accounts "in which the individual or group accepts responsibility for the deviant behavior or belief but denies the

pejorative or stigmatizing quality of it" (de Young 1989:114). This usually involves some "attempt to change the audience's perception of the act" in question (Riordan, Marlin, and Gidwani 1988:496). Deviants who use justifications seek "to make a normally immoral act moral" or, at the very least, not as aberrant as it is typically considered (King 1987:220). There are several types of justifications: denial of victim, denial of injury,² condemnation of condemners, appeal to loyalties, the sad tale, a claim of self-fulfillment, and basking in the reflected glory of related others (BIRGing).³

Furthermore, Nichols (1990) observed that accounts can be extraordinarily complex. He argued that there is a distinction between monothematic and polythematic accounts. Monothematic accounts use only one defensibility, whereas polythematic accounts draw on two or more defensibilities. Although there is virtually no discussion of polythematic accounts in the extant literature, examples of this phenomenon can be found nonetheless. For example, in their research on convicted murderers, Ray and Simons (1987:65) discovered an example of an account that can be conceptualized as polythematic: "Some respondents maintained that a series of stressful events had driven them to use intoxicants as a way of numbing their psychological pain. They contended that in this stress motivated intoxication, they acted irrationally [and committed murder]."

The aforementioned account combines a sad tale (i.e., a series of stressful events) with an appeal to defeasibility (i.e., stress-induced intoxication).

ACCOUNTS AND PEDOPHILIA

There is currently a relatively limited body of literature dealing with the excuses and justifications of pedophiles. The majority

² Friedman (1974) described a type of justification, the claim of benefit, that can be conceptualized as an extension of the denial of injury. This particular account goes a step beyond the claim that the act in question was harmful and asserts that it was actually beneficial. For instance, some topless dancers argue that they provide a "therapeutic" service that protects other women from sexual assaults that would occur if the patrons did not have this vicarious carnal outlet (Stoller 1991; Thompson and Harred 1992).

³ Although not included in Scott and Lyman's (1968) original typology of accounts, some scholars (e.g., Duff and Hong 1996) have noted that this technique is an additional type of justification. The BIRGing justification involves "publicly trumpeting some connection with a successful other" (Richardson and Cialdini 1981:41).

of this information comes from research conducted on, and observations made regarding, pedophiles in clinical and correctional populations. McCaghy (1968) studied the deviance disavowal strategies of child molesters. He interviewed 158 men who were convicted of sexual contacts with children. At the time of the interviews, 115 of the men were incarcerated and 43 were on probation. Stermac and Segal (1989) studied the cognitions of child molesters based on their assessments of factually based vignettes about adults engaging in sexual activities with children. They compared the cognitions of 20 child molesters who were undergoing psychiatric treatment with control groups consisting of clinicians, lawyers, police officers, and other members of the community. Pollock and Hashmall (1991) examined the clinical records of 86 child molesters who were referred for psychiatric assessment for the presence of justificatory statements. De Young (1989) performed a content analysis on material published for public dissemination by the pedophile organization North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA).⁴ She examined these publications to identify the accounts offered by this deviant organization. Lanning (1987) made observations about the excuses and justifications of child molesters on the basis of his extensive experience in law enforcement. Barnard et al. (1989) provided information on the justifications of pedophiles that was obtained from their clinical observations. A review of this literature suggests that pedophiles use a variety of strategies in an attempt to rationalize, justify, and otherwise normalize their deviance. The accounts proffered by pedophiles include both excuses and justifications.

It appears that these particular deviants tend to offer two types of excuses for their behavior—appeals to defeasibility and

⁴ NAMBLA was founded in 1978 after the arrest of 24 Massachusetts men for having sexual contact with adolescent boys. This group advocates the abolition of laws regarding the age of consent, as well as the release of all men incarcerated for “noncoercive” sexual acts with minors (de Young 1989). The group is currently estimated to have about 1,000 members (Van Biema 1993). NAMBLA has its headquarters in New York City and local chapters in Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Toronto (Holmes 1991). Many NAMBLA members have been arrested on charges related to child molestation and child pornography. In 1982, police raided a Massachusetts cabin and arrested two NAMBLA members. During the raid, officials found two 16-year-old boys who had run away from home and 200 pounds of child pornography (Leo 1983). During the past decade, more than a dozen men affiliated with the group’s San Francisco chapter have been convicted of sexual offenses (Van Biema 1993). The head of NAMBLA’s West Coast steering committee, who was the alleged organizer of a sex-tourism operation for pedophiles, was arrested on child-molestation charges in Bangkok (Kortum-Stermer 1990).

scapegoating. In his classic paper on child molesters and drinking, McCaghy (1968) documented an excellent example of the former type of excuse. He found that convicted child molesters frequently attributed their sexually deviant behavior to alcohol. A second type of excuse used by these individuals is scapegoating. Mayer (1985:21) noted that adults who have sexual contact with children often "try to place the blame on the child for seductive behavior." Moreover, Lanning (1987:27) observed that a child molester who has been apprehended by authorities "may claim that he was seduced by the victim, that the victim initiated the sexual activity, or that the victim is promiscuous or a prostitute."

Pedophiles also offer justifications for their deviant orientation and actions. The relevant academic literature has indicated that they attempt to offer three types of justifications for their deviance: denial of injury (including the claim of benefit assertion), condemnation of condemners, and an appeal to loyalties. Many molesters argue that their actions were not harmful to the child involved (Finkelhor 1979; Mayer 1985). In fact, clinical reports reveal that many child molesters believe that such activity will not harm a youngster unless force is used (Stermac and Segal 1989; Pollock and Hashmall 1991). Such fallacious assertions contradict the voluminous body of scientific literature that indicates that children who are molested often suffer a variety of physical, psychological, and social damage because of their victimization (see Conte and Berliner 1988; Green 1988; Fuller 1989; McLeer et al. 1994; Jumper 1995). An extension of the denial of injury justification involves a claim of benefit (Friedman 1974). This entails the assertion that the behavior in question not only lacks injurious qualities but is actually beneficial. There have been reports of pedophiles offering this specific justification for adults engaging in sexual activity with children (Abel et al. 1984; Barnard et al. 1989). For instance, Stermac and Segal (1989:582) found that "men who have sexual contact with children differ from other men in the types of cognitions and beliefs that they have regarding the salutary consequences of this behavior on children." Pedophiles also offer condemnation of condemner's justifications. This particular type of account is featured prominently in the literature of pedophile organizations such as NAMBLA (de Young 1989). Law enforcement officers and social workers are typically the targets of diatribes that accuse them of engaging in a variety of unscrupulous and incompetent

practices such as "brainwashing" children and engaging in a draconian witch hunt against pedophiles. A final type of justification proffered by these individuals is an appeal to loyalties. The central allegiance claimed by pedophiles is the so-called "rights" of children. Such arguments have been advanced by the pedophile organization NAMBLA (Leo 1983; de Young 1989). This type of justification typically involves the claim that "the repression of childhood and adolescent sexuality is damaging to minors and therefore society. As part of the liberation of children and adolescents free sexual expression is encouraged. This sexual expression includes the "right" of children and adolescents to be sexual with adults (Gonsiorek 1994:29).

Although the previous work dealing with the accounts of pedophiles has been informative, most of it suffers from the same methodological problems that plague pedophile research in general. For instance, McCaghy (1968), Stermac and Segal (1989), and Pollock and Hashmall (1991) all used subjects who were drawn from clinical or correctional populations. Similarly, the observations made by Barnard et al. (1989) and Lanning (1987) regarding the excuses and justifications of pedophiles were based on their respective experiences in clinical psychology and law enforcement. Because pedophiles in clinical and correctional settings do not constitute a representative sample, the generalizability of these research findings and observations are limited. De Young (1989) conducted a study of the accounts that appeared in NAMBLA publications. However, it is unclear how generalizable the results of her research are as these accounts are a product of an organization rather than of individual pedophiles. Consequently, the information obtained from an investigation of the accounts of pedophiles who use the Internet will serve as a useful supplement to this extant body of literature on the excuses and justifications of pedophiles.

METHOD

The data were gathered from a Usenet newsgroup composed of pedophiles, *alt.support-boy.lovers*. Users of this newsgroup can read and post messages. These postings are organized in an archival fashion. These messages can be downloaded to a personal computer and sent directly to a printer. Consequently, messages can be printed for content analysis. There are approximately 5 to 10 new messages posted daily. There are between

150 and 200 messages posted to the newsgroup each month. These postings range in length from several sentences to several paragraphs.

We performed content analysis on all of the postings to the Usenet newsgroup alt.support.boy-lovers for a period of one month. There were a total of 154 postings from 80 individuals that appeared on the newsgroup during this time period. Ninety-three of these postings were contributed by 41 users who are admitted pedophiles. These 93 postings constituted the data that were analyzed for this undertaking.⁵ Slightly more than half (51 percent) of the individuals who posted to the newsgroup during the month were admitted pedophiles.⁶ These individuals contributed 60 percent of the postings for this time period. The unit of analysis for this undertaking was the individual pedophile (i.e., the posters). The postings of each of the admitted pedophiles were examined to determine the presence or absence of themes that corresponded to the respective variable of interest. The coding categories were based on the following operational definitions of the respective variables:⁷

⁵ It seemed appropriate that only those individuals who admitted to a pedophilic orientation should be included in this analysis. We had examined the postings on this newsgroup for several months before the actual data collection procedure. This examination indicated that not all posters admitted to possessing such a sexual preference. In fact, some of the most vociferous defenders of adult-child sex never indicated that they were pedophiles. Although it is reasonable to assume that this is the case, there is no way to be absolutely confident of this without an admission. Therefore, the decision was made that only the postings of admitted pedophiles would be used in this analysis.

⁶ An admission of a pedophilic orientation involved using the term *boy lover* in a self-descriptive fashion, speaking of an attraction to underage males, speaking of having "relationships" with boys, or indicating an affiliation with the pedophile organization NAMBLA.

⁷ To determine the reliability of the coding categories used in this research, a sample of the postings used in this study was coded by another individual. This sample consisted of 10 percent ($n = 16$) of the postings that appeared on the newsgroup during the time period designated for data collection. Postings were selected for inclusion in this sample on the basis of a set of random numbers drawn from a random number table. The second coder was provided with a list of operational definitions for the variables and asked to code these 16 postings. Reliability coefficients, based on the Kuder-Richardson 20 (KR-20) statistic, were calculated to assess the intercoder reliability for each item, as well as the overall reliability for the coding categories. The KR-20 statistic is the appropriate measure of reliability for dichotomous variables (Ferguson 1976). Its interpretation is the same as Pearson's correlation coefficient (r). If the correlations between the two coders' classifications of text are low, the KR-20 values will also be low. Alternately, if the two coders are frequently in agreement on the classification of text, the KR-20 values will be high (i.e., approaching 1.00). There was an exceptionally high level of agreement between two coders. The reliability scores for the seven 7 variables ranged from 0.9302 to 1.000. The average intercoder reliability score was 0.9900.

Account offered—the posting contains some type of explanation offered in defense of pedophilia or adults having sexual contact with children.

Condemnation of condemners—the poster attempts to shift the focus from pedophiles and their behavior to the actions of those who condemn them. Targets of condemnation may include law enforcement officers, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and others.

Denial of injury—the poster claims that adults engaging in sexual contact with children does not cause harm to children. It may involve a claim of benefit assertion.

Claim of benefit—this particular account is an extension of the denial of injury account. The poster goes a step beyond simply asserting that adult-child sex does not harm the child and claims that such behavior is actually beneficial for the child involved.

Appeal to loyalties—the poster attempts to justify pedophilia and adult-child sex by claims of an allegiance to “children’s liberation” or “children’s rights”.

BIRGing—the poster makes the assertion that “great men” have also been pedophiles.

Polythematic account—the posting contains an appeal to more than one defensibility. It includes any combination of the following accounts: condemnation of condemners, appeal to loyalties, denial of injury, and BIRGing.

RESULTS

The number and percentage of pedophiles in this sample who offered each of the various accounts are reported in Table 1. Slightly more than one half (53.7 percent) of these 41 pedophiles proffered some type of account in defense of pedophilia or adults engaging in sexual activity with children. The most common type of account offered by the pedophiles in this sample was denial of injury. Thirty-nine percent provided this type of account, which consisted of the assertion that sexual contact with adults does not cause harm to children. For instance, one poster, who was speaking of his sexual relationships with boys, wrote, “The experiences were always mutual and I don’t feel/think those [boys] were mentally damaged by this as many people believe.” Another pedophile asserted that:

TABLE 1 Number and Percentage of Pedophiles Offering each of the Various Types of Accounts

Account	Number offering	Percentage offering
Any type of account	22	53.7
Denial of injury	16	39.0
Condemnation of condemners	13	31.7
Polythematic account	10	24.4
BIRGing	6	14.6
Claim of benefit	4	9.8
Appeal to loyalties	2	4.9

Note. BIRGing = basking in reflected glory.

"I don't see anything wrong with a teenager having a sexual relationship with an adult providing both are consenting and that there is some sort of friendship for this closeness to be based on."

The next most popular account, condemnation of condemners, was offered by nearly one third (31.7 percent) of the pedophiles in this sample. This involved shifting the focus from pedophiles to those who would condemn them, such as law enforcement officers, social workers, mental health professionals, and parents. Interestingly, gay men were also the target of condemnation. Some of the pedophiles who use this newsgroup had apparently argued that they were an oppressed sexual minority similar to homosexual men. They had made these claims on computer newsgroups dedicated to discussions of homosexuality. In response, several gay men had posted messages on alt.support.boy-lovers claiming that the behavior of pedophiles is aberrant and has nothing to do with homosexuality. One of the pedophiles responded,

Oh wow, you're a good homosexual. You should be accepted by society. And in many countries you will indeed. You might even find yourself integrated in society as being a homosexual. No, you don't want to be classified in the same category as those nasty, tasteless, and horrible pedophiles. You don't like the young boys so you don't even want to think about those pedophile bastards. Come on you guys! What was the situation about half a century ago? Homosexuals were in the same position as pedophiles are nowadays. People looked upon homo-

sexuals as being nasty, tasteless, and horrible bastards. Now YOU are doing the same towards another group. You're right: pedophiles aren't in the same group, but a little bit of understanding is the least pedophiles could expect from previously repressed groups.

Another target of condemnation was people who had contributed postings to the newsgroup that expressed opposition to pedophiles. For instance, one individual, who claimed he had found this newsgroup by accident, argued that pedophiles were mentally ill and should seek psychiatric help. In response, one pedophile remarked, "Most likely that's because you have the brain of a chimpanzee and are just as brainwashed by the mythologies of your culture as the other 90% of your putrid country."

Approximately 15 percent of the pedophiles in the sample offered a BIRGing account. This involved the claim that great men have also been pedophiles. For example, one poster wrote,

A favorite pastime of boy lovers is collecting pictures of boys, and those boy lovers who have no desire to break the law usually make excellent photographers. An example is the German photographer Hermann List, who is internationally renowned as one of the finest photographers of the first half of this century.

Another maintained,

some of the more famous lovers of boys throughout history include the following: Alexander the Great. The Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato. Plato was 13 when the two met. The Greek poets Anacreon, Alcaeus, Meleager, Strato, and many others far too numerous to mention ... Oscar Wilde, commonly thought to be the "father of the modern gay movement." In fact, he loved boys, not men. Allan Ginsberg, the beatnik poet of the '60s, and his literary guru William S. Burroughs (of "Naked Lunch" fame).

The claim-of-benefit account, which consisted of the contention that sexual contact with an adult is beneficial to children, was offered by 9.8 percent of the pedophiles in the sample. This justification is an extension of the denial of injury account. Speaking of the boys that he was sexually involved with, one pedophile remarked,

In all cases the boys had a noticeable improvement in their self-esteem, their grades in school went up, they became more stable emotionally, and in one case I pulled a boy back from the drug/school dropout scene and he is now an officer in the Army.

Another poster wrote, "I feel that a consensual intergenerational relationship can be a learning experience for people that want to get involved in one."

The least popular account among these pedophiles was an appeal to loyalties, which was only offered by 4.9 percent of the sample. One pedophile briefly spoke of his support for the "sexual rights of minors" in a posting. Another individual always concluded his posting with the statement "in liberation," which was obviously an allusion to the so-called "children's liberation movement."

Nearly one quarter (24.4 percent) of the pedophiles in this sample offered a polythematic account that appealed to more than one defensibility. They included some combination of denial of injury, condemnation of condemners, BIRGing, and appeal to loyalties. Some of these accounts were quite lengthy and presented detailed arguments. For example, one pedophile contributed a posting that he titled, "An Open Letter to All Who Care About the Children of the World":

Our children are in danger. There are predators loose in the world who, in the guise of "protecting" children are, in fact, profiting immensely—meantime destroying the very ones they pretend to protect. Throughout history, one group of people or another has been singled out for attack by the "mainstream" population. These groups have included people of differing nationality or religion; people who may be "different" due to skin color, or physical appearance; and people who are physiologically and psychologically drawn to those of their own gender. Now, another group is under attack—directly putting our children at risk. A group that, throughout the history of the world, have played a vital role in the shaping of societies. A group of people who, in many cultures held positions of prominence and prestige. For thousands of years, these people have been reaching out, when no one else cared, or took the time, to lead, instruct, and see to the general welfare of our youth. Among the members of this group have been such names as: Socrates; Leonardo De Vinci; Michelangelo; Alexander the Great, and many, many others, including a large number of

rulers, spiritual leaders, and teachers The group that I am referring to is men who are attracted and drawn to those younger people who are under the arbitrary "legal age"—commonly referred to as "pedophiles." In translation: lovers of children Not one child, in the history of the world, has been damaged mentally simply because of a physical relationship with someone older than themselves. Mental scarring does occur, however, when the child (or adult) is made to believe that the love they feel for the other person is wrong, and that the relationship that they freely consented to is made to appear evil. Thousands of children a year are being "brainwashed" by supposedly well-meaning psychiatrists and psychologists, as well as "child protection agencies," who all, as previously stated, derive 100% of their profit from perpetuating the lie that a person who loves a child is a "child molester."

The previous polythematic account appealed to three defensibilities—denial of injury, condemnation of condemners, and BIRGing. Another pedophile contributed a polythematic account that was of similar detail. It combined a denial of injury account with a condemnation of condemners account:

A child is a sexual being. Therefore, children should have the right to explore any aspect of sexuality they desire to engage in. Why do parents, politicians, and police (the 3 p's) feed guilt into children that are sexually active? The guilt and shame put on the child's senses does a major amount of damage to the child. The majority of damage comes when the parents press charges and the boy lover goes to jail and the boy has to deal with the fact that the relationship which was consensual has put this guy away for a long time. There is no doubt that children can and do have the ability to decide for themselves what they want Children that are sexually active should be left to themselves to decide who should be their sex partner Consensual sex is justified in all forms, so there should not be a tag of criminal placed on intergenerational sex.

DISCUSSION

Caution should be exercised in the interpretation of these results. First, these findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of pedophiles who use the Internet with any certitude. They are reflective of admitted pedophiles who participate in the Usenet newsgroup alt.support.boy-lovers. There is no way

to know how the users of this particular group are similar to or different from pedophiles who participate in other computer forums (e.g., America Online). Second, these findings are probably not generalizable to pedophiles in the general population. Pedophiles who use this newsgroup are probably of higher socioeconomic status than other pedophiles because they have the resources necessary to access expensive computer and telecommunications equipment. Although there are some limitations associated with the generalizability of the results of this research, this study has significant import nonetheless inasmuch as it represents the first substantive data on pedophiles who use the Internet. Furthermore, a major problem associated with previous research on pedophiles is the fact that the samples used were drawn from clinical and correctional populations. Accordingly, the current undertaking can serve as a useful supplement to the extant body of knowledge on pedophilia.

The overall tone and demeanor of this newsgroup may contribute to the management of the deviant identity of pedophile. Semantic manipulation would appear to be a major mechanism of both self- and public image enhancement. In the context of this newsgroup, pedophiles are referred to as "boy lovers." In fact, this newsgroup is named alt.support.boy-lovers. Sex between adults and children is called "love." However, in the context of the larger society, pedophiles are referred to with such pejorative appellations as *pervert* and *child molester*. Thompson and Harred (1992) observed a similar tendency in some occupations. They noted that trash collectors call themselves *sanitation engineers*, undertakers refer to themselves as *funeral directors*, and dog catchers use the term *animal control officer* in a self-descriptive fashion. This technique has implications not only for the self-concept of the practitioners of these occupations but also for the public perceptions of these vocational endeavors. Although it is highly unlikely that the use of the term boy lover will have any impact on public perceptions of pedophiles, it nonetheless may have important implications for the self-concept of pedophiles. Rather than conceiving of themselves as child molesters or perverts, these pedophiles can more comfortably conceptualize themselves as adults who have a "romantic" interest in boys.

An important finding of this research is that slightly more than half of the pedophiles in this particular sample offered accounts in defense of pedophilia or adults having sex with

children. Four individual types of accounts were offered: denial of injury (including the claim of benefit justification), condemnation of condemners, BIRGing, and appeal to loyalties. The large percentage of pedophiles in the sample who offered accounts suggests that the sharing of accounts constitutes an important part of the discussions on this particular newsgroup.

An especially significant finding is that all of the accounts offered by these pedophiles were justifications; none were excuses. This particular result is probably attributable to the social context in which these accounts were offered. Those observers who found that pedophiles offer excuses for their deviant orientation and behavior (e.g., McCaghy 1968; Pollock and Hashmall 1991) studied pedophiles from clinical or correctional populations. Pedophiles in such settings may attempt to deny complete responsibility for their actions to give a favorable impression to clinicians and criminal justice officials in an attempt to receive lenient treatment. On the other hand, the Internet is an entirely different forum. Most of the users of alt.support.boy-lovers are presumably pedophiles. As they all likely share similar values in regard to their sexual persuasion, they constitute a highly sympathetic and receptive audience. Furthermore, if these pedophiles were to use excuses, they would essentially be admitting that pedophilia is deviant, immoral, and even pathological. In doing so, they would be accepting the label pervert. However, "to justify an act is to assert its positive value" despite of any claims to the contrary (Scott and Lyman 1968:58). Justifications allow these individuals to attempt to redefine pedophilia as an "acceptable" mode of sexuality and consequently to maintain a positive self-image.

The most popular account, which was offered by 39 percent of the pedophiles in this sample, was denial of injury. This involved the contention that sexual contact with an adult is not harmful to a child. The use of this type of account by pedophiles has been noted by other observers (Mayer 1985; Stermac and Segal 1989; Pollock and Hashmall 1991). When individuals offer an account, they are trying to convince themselves as well as others of a certain point of view (Pogrebin et al. 1992). Although it is highly unlikely that pedophiles who use the Internet will persuade the general public that sexual contact with an adult will not harm a child, they may be trying to convince themselves that such activity is not injurious to children. This account may serve an exculpatory function for pedophiles

by assuaging the guilt associated with engaging in (or desiring to engage in) sex with children.

The claim-of-benefit justification, which is an extension of the denial of injury account, was offered by fewer than 10 percent of the pedophiles in this sample. This statement involved the claim that sexual contact with an adult is actually beneficial to a child. The use of this statement by pedophiles has been noted elsewhere (e.g., Barnard et al. 1989; Stermac and Segal 1989). However, it does not appear to figure prominently in the accounting systems of the pedophiles in this sample. For the few who used it, it may serve an exculpatory function. The remorse that may be associated with pedophilia can plausibly be eliminated (or at least partially ameliorated) through the belief that one is "helping" children.

Nearly one third of the pedophiles in this sample offered a condemnation of condemners account. This involved shifting the focus from pedophiles and their behavior to the attitudes and behavior of those who would condemn them (e.g., police, social workers, mental health professionals, and parents). De Young (1989) also found this account present in her examination of NAMBLA publications. It appears that pedophiles use this strategy in an attempt to discredit their condemners. Although it is highly unlikely that this account will succeed in discrediting their condemners in the eyes of the general population, it may function to discredit them in the eyes of other pedophiles. Such an attitude may make pedophiles less sensitive to punishment and less amenable to treatment efforts. Some of the pedophiles who offered this account asserted that law enforcement agents, social workers, and mental health professionals were conducting a draconian witch hunt against pedophiles. Pedophiles who hold such a belief pose a serious challenge to mental health professionals. It is doubtful that they would be amenable to any type of treatment or intervention because they believe that they have been persecuted by members of the mental health profession.

A BIRGing account was proffered by 14.6 percent of the pedophiles in this sample. This involved the assertion that great men have also been pedophiles. Although this particular account was relatively rare among these pedophiles, its presence is noteworthy nonetheless. The extant literature on accounts and pedophilia does not contain any documentation of the existence of this account. Moreover, it appears to be

somewhat of a rarity among deviants in general. Previously, the use of this account has only been documented in a study of female bodybuilders. These women deflected social disapproval by "basking in the reflected glory of the few glamorized, exceptionally attractive women bodybuilders" (Duff and Hong 1996:565). Pedophiles represent some of the most disvalued individuals in contemporary society. The use of the BIRGing account allows them to feel a connection to noteworthy men such as Oscar Wilde, Allan Ginsberg, and many of the ancient Greek poets and philosophers. Consequently, this may function to enhance the self-esteem of the pedophiles who use this account.

Fewer than 10 percent of these pedophiles offered an appeal to loyalties account. This consisted of claims of an allegiance to "childrens' liberation" or "childrens' rights." De Young (1989) found that this type of account was present in the literature produced by the pedophile organization NAMBLA. However, this particular justification does not appear to be an important accounting strategy for the pedophiles included in the current study. Only 2 of these 41 pedophiles used this account, and when they did so, it was always offered in a brief statement that appeared to be peripheral to the main focus of the respective posting.

About one quarter of the pedophiles in this sample used a polythematic account. This type of account, which appealed to more than one defensibility, included some combination of the following: denial of injury, condemnation of condemners, BIRGing, and appeal to loyalties. The number of the pedophiles in this sample who offered polythematic accounts suggests that many of them have complex accounting strategies.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to examine how pedophiles who use the Internet account for their deviance. These pedophiles make extensive use of accounts. Two specific accounts, denial of injury and condemnation of condemners, were particularly popular among this group of pedophiles. The BIRGing account figured prominently in the accounting systems of some of these pedophiles. This is a noteworthy finding as there has been little previous documentation of deviants who use this particular account. The results of this research also indicate that

accounts have a greater complexity than is normally indicated in the literature. This is an especially significant oversight as accounts can be extraordinarily complex in the real world (Nichols 1990). Nearly one quarter of the pedophiles in this sample offered polythematic accounts. Therefore, it is extremely important that sociologists involved in the study of accounts take this into consideration. The results of this research, along with the relevant academic literature on the topic of pedophilia, indicate that there are several readily identifiable accounts that pedophiles offer for their deviant orientation and behavior.

These computerized accounts may very well have import beyond neutralizing deviance for the respective individuals who offer them. Although pedophiles have traditionally used accounts, the Internet provides a highly effective mechanism for the aggregation and dissemination of accounts. As Durkin and Bryant (1995:194) observed, the computer can function as a "germination and distribution mechanism for sexual deviancy." The pedophiles who use the computer newsgroup alt.support.boy-lovers are in effect advertising and propagandizing their ideological position. The fact that a substantial number of these pedophiles are offering accounts may lead to the generation of a consolidated body of accounts. In turn, this may help the scores of pedophiles who read this newsgroup to justify or legitimate their deviant orientation and behavior. Weinberg and Falk (1980) observed a similar phenomenon occurring in the various sadomasochistic organizations they studied. They noted that an important function of those groups was the development and communication of various justifications and apologia that allow the members to accept their deviant behavior as being perfectly normal.

Currently, there is a great deal of societal concern regarding pornography in cyberspace. Recently, the federal government attempted to enact legislation to ban indecent communication on the Internet. Unlike other research on the topic of sexual deviance in cyberspace (e.g., Durkin and Bryant 1997; Lamb 1998), the current investigation found little in the way of pornographic materials. Consequently, it is difficult to address issues surrounding governmental censorship of the Internet on the basis of this study's results. However, the findings of this research appear to have implications for one particular matter related to governmental intervention in the use of the Internet. Recently, it has been suggested that the computer access of

pedophiles who are on probation and parole be restricted (L. Davis, McShane, and Williams 1995; Durkin 1997). The logic behind this argument is that exposure to the pornography available on the Internet, as well as the supportive environment that this computer network affords pedophiles, may be detrimental to rehabilitation efforts and consequently encourage reoffending. The results of the current undertaking indicate that the computer newsgroup alt.support.boy-lovers provides a highly sympathetic milieu for its users. This finding provides additional support for the recommendations made by L. Davis et al. (1995) and Durkin (1997) to restrict the computer access of pedophiles as a condition of their probation or parole.

Sociologists also need to examine other forms of deviant behavior that rely on the computer. Durkin and Bryant (1995:197) noted that

what seems to be conspicuously lacking are investigative efforts to document, explore, and analyze the newly emerging socially deviant uses of computers, founded on the unique capabilities, characteristics, and applications of computer communication, especially the evolution of non-white-collar deviant and criminal behavior patterns.

Given the diversity of deviants who are using the Internet, this certainly appears to be a significant oversight. For instance, pedophiles are not the only sexual deviants who are using the Internet. There are computer forums dedicated to nearly every conceivable form of sexual deviance, including bestiality, coprophilia, sadomasochism, and transvestism, to mention but a few. Moreover, hate groups, such as White supremacy and Holocaust denial groups, are using the Internet to proselytize and organize. A former Ku Klux Klan official who runs a racist site called Stormfront claimed "we're reaching tens of thousands of people who never before had access to our point of view" (Kanaley 1996:O5). Furthermore, there have been reports of cults, such as Heaven's Gate, using the Internet to recruit new members and disseminate their groups' deviant ideologies (see Lacoyo 1997). Finally, there have been reports of some individuals "becoming addicted to the Internet in much the same way that others became addicted to drugs, alcohol, or gambling" (Young 1996:899). There is a compelling need for sociologists to be more attentive to the novel configurations of deviant behavior that rely on the computer. The mass media is beginning to

provide glimpses into the use of the Internet for deviant purposes, but the topic still awaits systematic research by sociologists.

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