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Understanding Childhood Sexualities

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SUMMARY. Contemporary concern over paedophilia and child sexual abuse usually rests upon uncritical and under-theorized conceptions of childhood sexualities. This article examines some of these assumptions and then outlines the social 'constructionist' alternative. Focusing upon the processes by which a child comes to script its sexual world, a number of central dimensions are posed: the scripting of absences, of values, of secrecy, of utility, of gender and of generation. By analyzing the complexity of childhood sexualities, the implications for cross-generational sexuality may be clarified.

Over the past decade paedophilia and child sexual abuse have increasingly been transformed into a public issue. From the concern over child pornography and 'child sex rings' to the prosecution of emerging 'paedophile liberation' groups; from the discovery of that last taboo, incest – and on to the proliferation of campaigns to make the public and especially children aware of the dangers of 'molestation' and even sexual murder, variations on this theme have rarely been out of the public eye (e.g., Burgess, 1984; Finkelhor, 1984). As homosexuality has become slightly less open to sustained moral panic, the new pariah of 'child molester' has become the latest folk devil to orchestrate anxieties over the political, moral and interpersonal life of western societies (e.g., Eliasoph, 1986; Mitzel, 1980; Wexler, 1985; Weeks, 1985).

This moral panic has signposted a 're-alignment of sexual poli-

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tics' by which many but not all feminists have parted company with the 'sexual libertarians' and partially allied themselves with the sexual conservatives and the professional child welfare lobby (cf. Finkelhor, 1979, p. 11.) Each side in this debate has produced its own substantial literature—one organised around the symbol of 'child sexual abuse' and related issues like 'Father-daughter Rape' (e.g., Ward, 1984), and the other (and much more underground) around the symbol of 'child love' and related issues like paedophilia¹ (e.g., O'Carroll, 1980). This volume is largely organized around the second symbol—of paedophilia—and as such is likely to provoke controversy from the other side. But this may be a false controversy.

Each term identifies somewhat differing phenomena and proceeds to assemble 'the problem' in a particular and distinctive way. Child sexual abuses uses the rhetoric of rape, exploitation, violence, power and seduction—a language of 'danger.' In contrast, child love uses the rhetoric of love, consent, joy, willingness and choice—a language of 'pleasure.'² Superficially, it would seem that they both cannot be right.

Yet in recent years, through the work of the new social historians, some socialist-feminists, Foucauldians and the 'constructionist' sociologists,³ a new and more fruitful approach to sexuality has started to emerge. Rather than viewing sex as a unitary essence with a common meaning, it searches for the multi-layered complexity, historical diversity and situational ambiguity of "sex." As Carol Vance (1984) remarked at the Barnard Conference of Feminist Scholars which tried to clarify this view:

The hallmark of sexuality is its complexity: its multiple meanings, sensations and connections. It is all too easy to cast sexual experiences as either wholly pleasurable or dangerous: our culture encourages us to do so. (p. 5)

In this perspective, both terms—'child sexual abuse' and 'child love'—may prove misleading if they purport to capture one unitary phenomenon. Indeed far from capturing a given essence—of danger, of pleasure—it may even be that such terms flatten and homogenize vastly divergent experiences. Thus one view constructs a

world of childhood where ‘natural children’ are relatively sexually inexperienced — even sexually innocent — and where adults may terrorize them. The other view constructs a world of childhood where children are ‘naturally sexual’ and adults may help them to joyfully explore their desires.

Such ‘essential’ constructs help to polarize debates rather than clarify them because they each rest upon a limited and limiting view of both sexuality (as pleasure *or* danger) and childhood sexuality (as naturally innocent *or* naturally sexual). Where one stands in the current moral panic over children and sexuality is likely to be directly linked to these constructions. Thus, in this article my aim is to first examine these general views before outlining the alternative constructionist account which is more sensitive to the complexity of childhood sexual worlds and which would provide a more helpful basis for understanding cross-generational sexualities.

THEORIES AND POLITICS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUALITIES

Taking the two limited views of childhood and sexuality outlined above, four positions may be presented as in Table 1 below.

A first cluster of views highlight the sexual nature of children. Informed by a Freudian awareness of polymorphous perversity, a biological knowledge of sexual development or an anthropological sense of children’s actual sexual behaviour in other times and places

Table 1. Four broad positions on childhood sexualities

View of sexuality as:

DANGER

PLEASURE

View of childhood sexuality as:

CHILD AS SEXUAL

The
REPRESSION
model (1)

The
LIBERATION
model (3)

CHILD AS NON SEXUAL

The
CORRUPTION
model (2)

The
PRECOCIOUS
model (4)

(Constantine and Martinson, 1981), the assumption is made that children are indeed sexual creatures. But such an assumption, perhaps increasingly widely held today, can lead in two diametrically opposed directions. For some (Model 1) the presence of childhood sexuality is a danger sign: the child's bodily pleasures and sexual desires need firm constraint unless a sexual free-for-all—a fucking war of all against all—is to be allowed. “Demon” sex threatens the stability of social order and needs to be regulated from the earliest childhood awareness of it. Although such a position is largely equated with a traditional puritan view, it finds echoes in the Freudian position where civilization may only be bought at the cost of massive sexual repression.

In contrast, some Freudian followers have taken the presence of childhood sexuality to a reverse conclusion (Model 3). Inborn desire is not a beast within, but a liberator. Wilhelm Reich suggested a strong version of this argument: encourage children to experience their ‘natural’ sexuality from the earliest of ages and it will help them to become better, fully functioning adults. A happy childhood sex life leads to creative, life affirming, healthy adults. It is, of course, this view which underlies many of the childhood liberation groups as well as the emerging paedophile organizations. Thus the Rene Guyon Society has as its slogan “sex by eight, or its too late,” whilst the Childhood Sensuality Circle has a long charter on children's sexual rights. Much of Tom O'Carroll's (1980) defense of paedophilia also rests upon this ‘liberatory’ view. Children's natural sexuality should not be thwarted; to do so is to cripple children in their prime.

Yet another view moves from a basic assumption that children really are not sexual at all—but are in effect largely innocent and hence open to the corruption of adult ways (Model 2). In this view, children are empty receptacles and capable of being easily seduced into dangerous sexual practices. They must therefore be kept away from all corrupting influences—from any media concern with sex which could give them sexual ideas or any adult who could tempt them into inappropriate sexualities. This view is also held by many feminists who stress the innocence of young girls who become the passive victims of male power.

As Florence Rush (1980) has expressed it:

The sexual abuse of children is permitted because it is an unspoken but prominent factor in socializing and preparing the female to accept a subordinate role; to feel guilt, ashamed, and to tolerate through fear, the power exercised over her by men. (p. 25)

A final cluster of potential arguments centres around seeing children as not being sexual whilst viewing sex itself as pleasurable (Model 4). I suspect this is a relatively rare position, since those who view sex as pleasure do not usually view children as being nonsexual. Hypothetically, though, this is the case of an innocent child being 'sexualized' prematurely but harmlessly to the delights of sex.

The Constructionist View of Childhood Sexualities

I believe that the repression, liberation and corruption models contain the key elements of adult thinking about childhood sexualities, and guide the way that paedophilia and child sexual abuse is perceived. From the point of view of their protagonists, they are usually seen as mutually exclusive; from the point of view of this article, however, they are not necessarily in conflict. What matters in this analysis are the multiple and often contradictory *meanings* that a child assembles and negotiates with others as it moves through a myriad of emerging encounters: *sexuality never means one thing once and for all*. There are *both* 'asexual' moments and 'sexual' ones; sexuality is *both* 'danger' and 'pleasure.' Sexuality here is a biological potential in everyone at birth, and like all other human potentials it awaits a social environment to become significant. Potential is only possibility, not outcome. In this view, childhood sexuality is largely contingent upon the social environment: it is not something fixed in the child that awaits repression or liberation, or even biological timing; rather it is something which is socially constructed. The culture furnishes the child with scripts which help to define the who, what, where, when and why of sexuality (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). This process starts in childhood and continues throughout the life cycle. It also varies, of course, according to class, race and, most centrally as we shall see, gender.

In this view, the context matters enormously. The child learns sexual meanings through sexual encounters—though it also brings earlier acquired meanings to such encounters. It is the total social context that matters for the child, and here there are no totally predictable and uniform outcomes. Thus, if the child can see the relationship as a positive one—it will be positive. If a negative one—then problems may ensue. Most commonly its perceptions will be mixed. But always it is the total context which matters. We can make our own sexual hells and alternatively our own sexual heavens—and always with a little help from our friends (and enemies). John Gagnon (1977) has put this view well:

The supposed and actual significances of adult-child interaction are in ironic opposition. The way adults behave toward children affects their sexuality—not by suppressing or controlling it but by *creating* it. When adults react or do not react to what children do “sexually,” they are creating what sexuality *will be* for the child (not what it is). Thus an adult who stops a child from touching its genitals is not suppressing some natural urge, but taking one activity among many others and giving it a particular meaning. (p. 82)

Children then have bodies, relationships, and feelings which *have* to be handled by them. There is no given sexuality but there is most assuredly a capacity and potential; there is no intrinsic sexuality but neither are children nonsexual. Parents and caretakers play a critical role, along with media, peers, etc. in helping children construct their own sexualities.

There is much evidence from biology, anthropology, psychology and sociology on the irrefutable existence of a *potential* or *capacity* for something that can be called ‘sexual’ by young children—a capacity that is often manifested in various ‘sexual’ behaviours. In those societies where sexuality is viewed positively and encouraged amongst children, nearly all boys and girls move from a vague fingering of the genitals in the very early years to a systematic masturbation by the age of six to eight and coital relations may frequently be experienced prior to puberty (Ford and Beach, 1965; Ch. 10). But even in societies where childhood sexuality is looked on as-

kance we find a lot of evidence for things going on that adults can see as sexual: serious researchers all over the world have noted this from the kindergarten onwards.⁴

Ironically, though, to show that boys can have erections and that girls can have orgasms at very early ages, that they can engage in masturbatory, homosexual and heterosexual play, and that they can develop a curiosity about birth and reproduction is NOT to show that they are necessarily sexual. Sexuality certainly has its physiological and behavioural base: but amongst humans it has an essentially symbolic, socially constructed meaning. Nothing automatically translates itself for the child into sexual meaning—this, like everything else, has to be learned and is culture specific. So although a baby may experience a physiological change called orgasm, meaning has to be given to it. Hence the experience is likely to be very different for a five-month-old baby, a five-year-old child, a fifteen-year-old adolescent, and a fifty-year-old adult. The physiological base remains, but the meanings shift with the context. The simple imposition of adult sexual meanings (in all their diverse forms) onto the child's experiences (in all their diverse forms) is a gross error.

The problem for analysis thus becomes: *how does a little child come to assemble a sense of sexuality, and to acquire a language with which it can handle its bodily sensations and connect these with the outer world: how does it come to acquire a sense of a sexual self, of a gendered being with specific sexual interests; how does it acquire a series of explanations for sexuality and a language for what it is all about?*

This is not to follow Freud. For him the problem is one of explaining the persistent interests of the child in a basic sexuality that unfolds from its earliest days: it is there, ensconced firmly in the family love affairs, and it unwinds through difficult but determinate stages. My view provides a much more precarious imagery—of a child stumbling around and picking up confused and ambiguous messages about sexuality, and then reinterpreting and remoulding them as it drifts through adult life. Potential and possibility is never predetermination and predestination.

CONSTRUCTING CHILDHOOD SEXUAL SCRIPTS

Before we can hope to understand the wider issue of intergenerational sexualities, it is necessary to be able to both describe and analyze the concrete processes by which children and adolescents come to script their own sexual worlds. But it is a hard enough task to understand childrens' social worlds in general: too often adults have too easily imposed 'stages of development' and adult understandings upon childrens' inchoate experiences. Norman Denzin has tried to study such worlds but commented that:

childhood is a world that is unique to children and their caretakers, and it is a world that does not readily admit of close-up naturalistic investigation. . . . Their speech patterns are often slurred and idiosyncratic. They may speak a private language that only a few other persons can understand. They often refuse to show proper deference to self or other. They are subject to the control of their caretakers, and they reside behind the closed walls of school and home. (pp. 75, 59)

If it is difficult to grasp the general character of the child's world, it is even harder to grasp the building of its sexual scripts. With rare exceptions—Martinson and Constantine in the USA, Langfeldt in Norway—few have made any attempt to describe the 'protosexual' experiences of the child (although there is now substantial work on the adolescent experience). It remains a taboo area of research.

Childhood sexual scripts are assembled in a piecemeal fashion from a number of sources: from caretakers, from peers, from the media and wider culture, from the child's own slowly unfolding biography with its own set of earlier acquired meanings. From such sources the child is in a constant struggle to interpret its bodily sensations, name the parts and the acts, identify sets of feelings, make sense of emerging relationships. Such scripting is pervasive: the child cannot *not* do it. The content of such scripting is highly variable and context bound, but in contemporary western culture several common themes can be identified.

First is the scripting of absences. Whereas in most aspects of a child's life an elementary language is provided, with sexuality there may be many voids which have to be filled by the child itself

(cf. Goldman and Goldman, 1982; Gagnon and Simon, 1973). In one major study on sex education, it was found that “while parents wanted to be helpful to their children they felt unprepared and uneasy: they reported not knowing what to say as well as not knowing how to say it” (Gagnon and Roberts, 1980, p. 276). With few messages or even “emptiness” coming from adult worlds, many children are left to sort out their scripts with peers, media or alone in secretive and dark corners. It is not that childhood sexuality is being repressed; it is rather that a pattern of communication is being set up which starts to put ‘sex’ into a separate compartment cut off from the rest of experience—a compartment which may grow tighter and become even more closed in adult life. Left in a void, sex may come ultimately to inhabit an autonomous realm of its own.

A second process at work is the scripting of values: the child soon comes to appreciate that sexuality is not a neutral value-free zone but one that is heavily embedded in judgements and emotion. In more ‘permissive’ contexts it may come to be seen as supremely important, but more typically it is scripted negatively. Martinson (1981) has suggested that adults, when asked to offer a retrospective view of their childhood sexual encounters, will typically use negative words:

Such words as embarrassed, miserable, awkward, irritating, uncomfortable, afraid, confused, disturbed, distrustful, ashamed, depressed, repulsed, frustrated, and guilty are more often heard than words like excited, proud, enjoyable, warm and comfortable, uninhibited, beautiful, accepted. (p. 32)

This negative set of meanings helps to establish patterns of communication around childhood sexual worlds that are largely about guilt. If the child comes to put sex in a separate compartment, then it is also a pretty dirty one!

With these two features of absence and negative valuation, a third scripting process becomes very probable: the scripting of secrecy. A child comes to understand that sexual matters are not a matter of public knowledge: they must be pushed into private thoughts and private spaces. Such a process adds to the sense of

ambiguity and confusion in a child's world: it is left to clarify a whole domain of experience by itself—with an enormous potential for misunderstandings, an exaggerated and spiraling concern for relatively minor matters, and the construction of strong fictional worlds. “Fantastic socialization” becomes probable (Stone, 1962).

A fourth issue is the scripting of the social uses of sexuality. In the recent interactionist tradition where sex is seen as neither drive nor essence, it becomes central to ask questions about the social uses to which sex may be put. It may, for example, be used as a challenge to authority, as a means of gain, as a form of play, as a means of expressing anger (cf. Plummer, 1984, p. 42). The point here is that not only does the child have to learn that ‘sexuality is a drive,’ it also has to learn the uses to which ‘it’ can be put. In one study of a children's ward, for instance, the children learned that they could use sex as a way of disturbing authority and distressing adults (cf. Mitchell, 1977). In another study, “boys allowed themselves to be fondled and then masturbated . . . because they wanted to be loved” (Ingram, 1981, p. 184). Others have learned that they may be able to use sexuality as a means of exploitation—or even as a way of making money.

All these scripting mechanisms—of absence, of valuation, of secrecy, of utility—are complex, intertwined and scarcely researched at all. What is important here is the mode of approach: looking at sexuality through the child's eyes to grasp how it actively has to construct a sexual world. The issue of whether the child *is* sexual or not need not be of concern. What matters is how the child interprets sexuality. Of this, we know very little.

There are two further scripting mechanisms which need to be considered and which are more pivotal than the others: those of gender and generation.

The Scripting of Gender

Gender identity—acquired well before 5 and usually by 3—is the bedrock identity of life. The sense of being a boy/man or girl/woman may come to be deeply taken for granted but as a category it serves as a plan with which social and psychic experiences are organised. As Gagnon (1977) says:

The label [of gender] has a forward function, that is, it is used to organize the new things that happen. This is done by observing who earns the principal income, who is in charge of the housework, and who plays with dolls or cars. All of these activities are more or less gender typed, mostly by frequency rather than dramatic difference, and by verbal exhortation of what boys do and what girls do. (p. 68)

Gender identity is clearly distinct from a sexual identity; a sense of being a boy or a girl is not directly linked to a sense of being heterosexual, homosexual, sado-masochistic or paedophile, which usually comes later. Nevertheless, given the centrality of gender identity as an organizing feature of social life, it is very likely to shape sexual identity (cf. Harry, 1982). The expectations—or scripts—around gender will “flood” the child’s emerging comprehension of sexuality. Thus, for instance, although boys and girls will both experience the ‘scripting of absence,’ girls may well experience it more intensely because of the widely held cultural assumption that little girls are asexual innocents and because their anatomies may make genital excitability and orgasm less immediately apparent (cf. Langfeldt, 1981, pp. 40-1).

This gender dimension is crucial to any understanding of paedophilia since how little boys and little girls respond to intergenerational sexualities may be organised on very different lines. Two key continuums stand out.

First, there is the continuum of *dependency-independency*. Evidence suggests that boys are encouraged to break away from their mothers earlier than girls, and to establish patterns of behaviour that are more autonomous, assertive, active, aggressive and achievement oriented. This floods over into their construction of sexual meanings, whereby the boy is much more prone to organize sexuality around the satisfaction of his needs and to see himself as the active pursuer of sex. Many adult paedophiles say that boys actively seek out sex partners—perhaps this is partially a training ground for them to establish their prowess.⁵ In one of the few accounts provided by a boy, he says: “It’s often not the man who goes out to seduce the boy, but the other way round. In my first experience, I did the seducing. . . . It is mostly the boys who go out in search of

sexual satisfaction from men . . .” (Mark Moffett in Tsang, 1981, pp. 14-5).⁶

Girls by contrast often learn that their worlds are much more limited and compliant. They learn that to be “too forward” is to be considered “unlady-like.” Again, this floods over into their sexual meanings: their sexuality is much more a matter of something that others do *to* them and define *for* them. It is something relatively out of their own control. At its most extreme edge, little girls may come to realize that it is totally out of their control—in dim, inarticulate ways they may come to see themselves as the objects of massive sexual terrorism, from touching and exhibitionism to rape and sexual homicide. Often this sense of initial passivity and ultimate terrorism is caught in the adult male’s (often the father’s) sexual advances towards her. It is compounded by the violation of trust, and the harbouring of the act as a dreadful secret. Only recently have adult ‘survivors’ of this rape been willing to speak out (cf. Ward, 1984; Stanko, 1985).

A second, and closely linked, dimension of gender sexualization concerns *intimacy* and *distance*. Girls are encouraged to move towards a complex but essentially private world where emotional sensitivity to others is very important, while boys are encouraged to move out into the public world where little emotionality should be seen or felt. Girls create a “girl culture” often based on the home and the bedroom (cf. McRobbie, 1980), while boys are more likely to shy away from any display of feeling (indeed, they are “sissies” if they do) and create a “boy culture”—of sport, toughness, larking around—that is based outside the home.

Students of this preadolescent boy culture consistently suggest it is a world of “dirty play”—of aggressive pranks, sexual talk and racist invective (Fine, 1987). It is a world where boys test themselves and establish status through dirty words and aggression: It is a world where “fag talk” is developed “as terms of insult, especially for marginal boys” (Thorne and Luria, 1986, p. 182). By adolescence, it can become highly developed (Willis, 1977, Ch 2). In one sense these are crude stereotypes—most concrete experience will not fit—but they do suggest a central dimension which impinges upon the construction of childhood sexualities. Girls are led

to connect their sexual meanings much more readily to a complex set of relationships and emotions, whereas boys are led into a much more specific concern with the doing of limited acts often divorced from the complexities of emotional life. Boys seem much more prone, for instance, to create their own exploratory masturbatory circles (Langfeldt, 1981), and to develop an interest in pornography and specific, fetishistic sex acts.

All of this has been put very clearly by Stevi Jackson in her marvellously clear account of *Childhood and Sexuality* (1982):

Because boys are encouraged to be independent and exercise their own judgement, while girls are expected to be dependent and compliant, it is not surprising that men usually take the initiative in sexual relationships. Because boys learn dominance, girls submission, the most common position for sex has the man on top, the woman supine beneath him in symbolic affirmation of their relative social status. Because boys learn to be physically aggressive, as men they are capable of using sex as a means of coercion; if they have learnt to regard women as inferiors, the likelihood becomes that much greater. Because girls' emotional capacities are developed to a greater extent, their sexuality will be more closely tied up with feeling and they will find it harder to divorce sex and affection. Because boys have a choice of how to prove their masculinity, while girls' opportunities to affirm their femininity are more limited, girls come to regard long-term, romantic relationships as more central to their lives, and so invest more in them. (pp. 88-89)

From Gender to Generation

So far I have tentatively schematized a number of dimensions that are of value in understanding how children construct their sexual worlds. To this must now be added a further issue: age categorization. In discussing paedophilia, child sexual abuse or the age of consent, the issue of "age" is clearly omnipresent—with images shifting from little baby girls being choked on their father's penis to teenage boy hustlers hanging around Times Square or Piccadilly

Circus. In one conference I recently attended, Ann Burgess rapidly moved from images of babies in commercial advertising to sexual murders of young adults! Clearly not only is there a difference in what is being done in these cases; there is also a major difference in the *social meanings of age*.

The most common approach to age in social science suggests that it may best be viewed as a series of developmental stages or crises. Freud, Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg see life as essentially an obstacle race with key hurdles to be more or less overcome by certain periods: their common feature is a ground plan with critical stages, and when they do not specifically study the erotic world (as in Freud) these theories may still be seen as having implications for the sexual. Martinson, for instance, has usefully applied Piaget's cognitive sequences in childhood development to sexuality (Martinson, 1976). In sophisticated versions, their emphasis is dual: an inner capacity is fixed phylogenetically while requiring an outer social world to elicit it at the critical phase (cf. Kegan, 1982).

Classically, such thinking has enormous implications for the way adults approach childhood sexualities. For here, sexual development passes through a series of stages of competence on the way to a "maturity" in adult life. Precisely what these stages are will differ according to the theory: for Freud the child starts out sexual, this sexuality is smashed and only gradually restored in a precarious adult life; for others, the child starts asexually but biological shifts lead to a noticeable "spring awakening" at puberty and maturity by adult marriage. "Ages of consent" and "views of cross-generational sexuality" all harbour models of this development sequence.

Yet this view of maturity and development has come under a great deal of critical attack within social science (e.g., Strauss, 1969). Denzin has argued that such theories have political consequences: "[American] children who are properly educated should cluster somewhere around a set of national normative standards that depict normal growth and development" (Denzin, 1977, p. 9). He is particularly concerned about I.Q. testing and the "Americanization" of different ethnic groups; but this could equally well be applied to the standardization of diverse childhood sexualities. Academic models of development are established which can serve to homogenize and standardize childrens' sexuality.

The central issue, then, is not how people proceed through stages towards maturity, but:

how they negotiate and generate the meaning of changes, stages and development; how they come to have a sense of them as things separate from themselves; and how they subsequently respond to them as real things. The very order that conventional human scientists take for granted— . . . life stages . . . (is) problematic. (Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1977, p. 9)

“Childhood” itself is not a biological given but an historically produced social object; so is “youth,” and so—more recently—is the notion of “mid-life crisis.” What the social scientist has to appreciate is how members of a society come to generate and transform their sense of age and competence through interactive work with others.

Within this approach there is no assumption of a linear sexual development. Given specific contexts, an adult “at 40” may never have had an interest in ‘the sexual.’ In contrast, a “child” “at 7” may have built an elaborate set of sexual understandings and codes which would baffle many “adults.” A person may become a highly sexual “adolescent,” lose interest in “mid-life,” regain interest in “old age.” This is an imagery—of drift, becoming, emergence—which does not rest easily with our standard and dominant developmental imagery.

And here lies a dilemma. It is precisely because of this “developmental” imagery being so pervasive that many children and adults collectively construct the sexual worlds of childhood around such a theme. Cross-generational sexuality may serve to reinforce such assumptions—the child is a child, the adult is an adult. But it also harbours the potential to suggest that the child is an adult and the adult is a child; that such categories are neither fixed nor universal. Such meanings are likely to be relatively rare, given the dominance of our developmental view of age. But the constructionist view at least signposts a greater flexibility than is usually thought.

CONCLUSION

This article has suggested that in looking at child sexual abuse and/or paedophilia, it is centrally important to understand childhood sexualities. Little is directly known about this since it is a complex and difficult area in which to conduct research. The tendencies in the past have been to think in terms of essentialist views of sexuality (as pleasure or danger), of childhood (as sexual innocents or as sexual creatures), and even of age (as developmental stages)—all of which help to create essentialist views of paedophilia and/or abuse. In adopting a constructionist perspective I have suggested the need to examine the changing and highly variable contexts in which boys and girls come to build and negotiate their different sexual worlds and outlined some of the dimensions this could entail. When the complexity of such worlds can be better understood, the complexities of intergenerational sexualities will become more apparent.

NOTES

1. The term 'paedophilia' is commonly identified with the child lovers—in deed this is its strict definition. Tom O'Carroll (1980) uses it this way in his 'radical case.' However, it is actually a medical term which emerges in the writings of Ellis and Hirschfield, and generally implies some pathology. In the main, I have chosen not to use it in this article.

2. The use of these terms is derived directly from the recent feminist debate on 'pleasure and danger'—which is also the title of the published proceedings of the 1982 'Scholar and Feminist' conference at Barnard College in New York City. See Vance (1984), and in particular the contribution by Millett.

3. The work of some of these new social historians has been usefully reviewed by Stone (1985) and includes, notably, Weeks (1981), D'Emilio (1983), Walkowitz (1980) and Bray (1981). The socialist feminist are well represented in Snitow (1983) and Vance (1984). The key 'constructionist' work in sociology is Gagnon and Simon (1973), but see also Gagnon and Simon (1984) and Plummer (1975, 1982). And Foucault is, of course, Foucault (1979).

4. Most useful here is the volume edited by L. Constantine and F. Martinson (1981), though they do take the view that children from very early ages are intrinsically sexual, whereas I believe their evidence is more adequately seen as demonstrating children's sexual potential and capacity. Much other work exists. For example: the Newsons (1963) found that 36% of mothers of one-year-olds reported genital play (though it is more common in boys than girls). Sears, Maccoby and Levin (1957) found a lot of genital interest, sex play and masturbation amongst pre-school children. And Kinsey (1953, p. 104 and 1948, p.177) re-

corded orgasm in babies of five months. (See also Yates, 1978; Elias and Gebhard, 1974; Martinson, 1976; Rutter, 1971.)

5. Perhaps too, because of the stigma attached to homosexuality, it is necessary for boys to actively pursue gay men since there is no mechanism for direct socialization into the gay world. Active decisions have to be taken by many young gay men.

6. But see Sandfort (1981) for a more detailed breakdown on 'initiation' of 25 cases. The range of responses should caution us about being too strong on generalisations (see especially pp. 40-6).

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