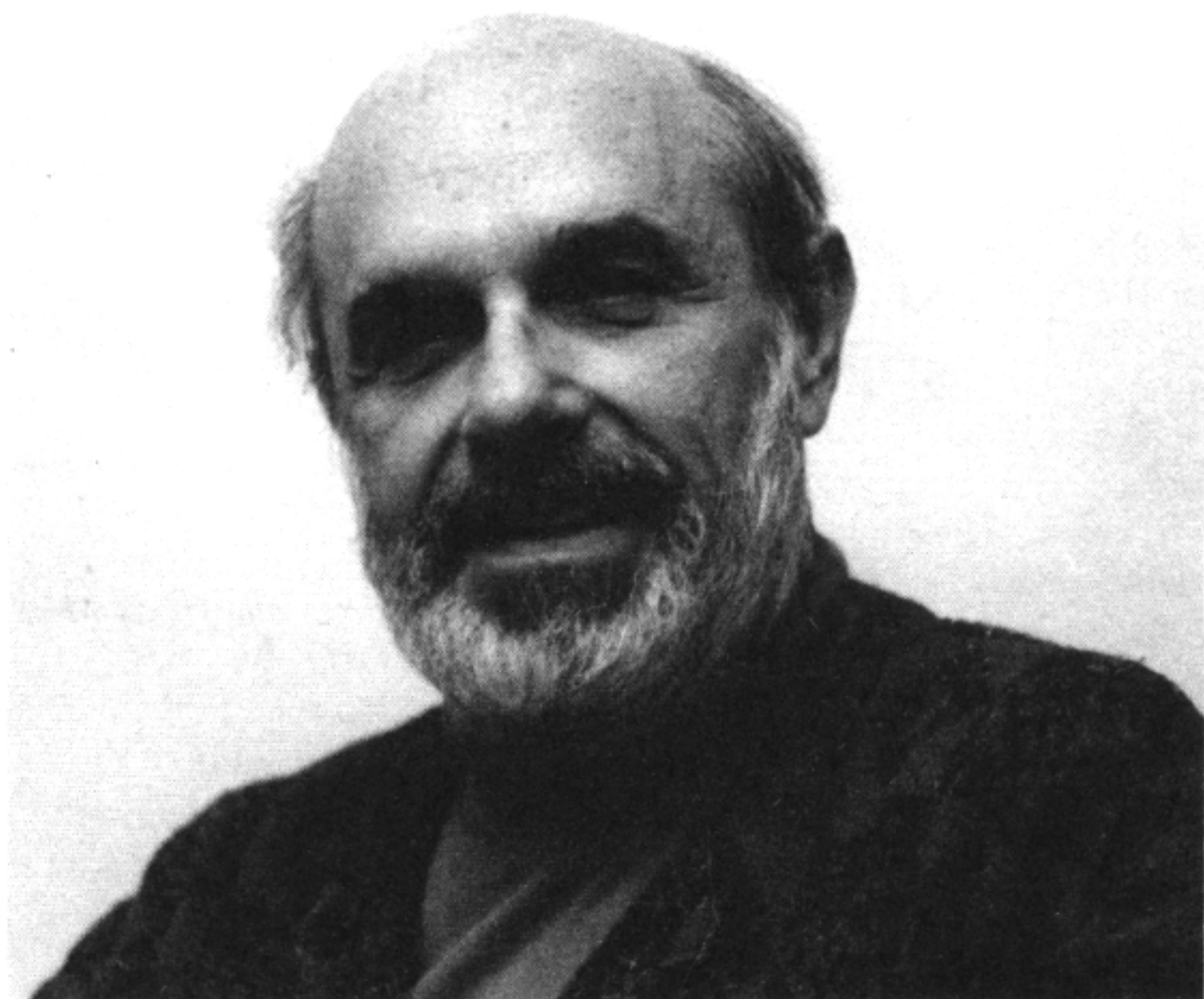


INTERVIEW: JOHN DeCECCO



Dr. John P. DeCecco is a Professor of Psychology and Human Sexuality at San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California, and Director of Human Sexuality Studies for the University. He is also Director of the Center for Research and Education in Sexuality (CERES), and Editor of the *Journal of Homosexuality*. The interview took place in December 1987 in Amsterdam, where Dr. DeCecco is currently a visiting professor.

Sexual Identity

Question: *Let us begin with with some issues raised in your article in the book The Origin of Sexuality and Homosexuality. In it you question the validity of "sexual identity" as a scientific concept and suggest the substitution of "sexual relationships". Could you begin by briefly summarizing the background of this critique for our readers?*

John DeCecco: It came out of a historical survey of the development of the idea of homosexual identity, the different formulations it took, in anthropology, sociology, and within psychiatry, especially in the psychoanalytic movement in America. That survey was designed to document Michel Foucault's notion that the gay identity was really a reverse discourse of the notion of homosexuality as a pathology, that it was an effort to show that homosexuals, later called "lesbians" and "gay men", could fulfill the same roles in society that heterosexuals did, that they could have long lasting relationships, that their sexuality didn't deflect them from the more serious pursuits such as work and community devotion and so on. We showed that the "gay identity" emerged as a way of "detoxifying" the pathological model of homosexuality that had arisen in the 19th century, and was propagated throughout much of the twentieth century by European and American psychiatry. As such it was a categorization of individuals rather than any general acceptance of homosexuality.

You saw several advantages arising from a shift to the study of sexual relationships, one of those being that it would make research more value-free.

I think the idea of the gay identity limits the study of homosexuality. Until fairly recently, many of the articles that were submitted for publication in the *Journal of Homosexuality* fitted this model of detoxification, such as 'Lesbian mothers should be entrusted with their children because the children will grow up in the appropriate gender roles, to be heterosexual'. Much research that came to me—it's now beginning to change—was an effort to prove that homo-

sexuals were "normal", but by criteria applied to heterosexual society, and there was nothing unique to homosexuality itself. I'd be interested to see an article in which we'd find out how lesbian mothers and gay fathers allow children a kind of freedom that is not present in traditional families, allow the children to develop bisexuality and androgyny and so on. That's one big limitation of the "gay identity"—there are others, besides.

You speak about that as a limitation, and yet at a certain point in history, that was perhaps absolutely necessary as a political strategy.

Yes, that detoxification literature is obviously a political ploy. It is not descriptive of the wide range of homosexual desires and acts—it shuns being "gay". So much of what Foucault calls the reverse discourse has been a political discourse. Simply, it says that all these terrible things that are claimed about homosexuals are not true, that indeed homosexuals can be very much like heterosexuals except for the fact that they are homosexuals. If inquiry into homosexuality is to be open, we must resist ideology, we must resist the normalization as well as the pathologization. Academicians should not make their first priority political whitewash; it should be the illumination of the phenomena that they turn their attention to. It would be much better and maybe ultimately better serve political purposes, if we tried to render reliable accounts of what is going on in people's sexual lives, without yielding to the pressure of saying, 'What is it that we should be telling the public that will make them more sympathetic?' I think that is where truth and politics part company.

If you abandon the language of identity, which has been so prevalent in discussions of homosexuality, and to some degree in paedophilia, what are you replacing it with, what kind of language?

To me, it is the individual and his or her desires and actions that are primary. There are such things as individual character and individual personality. They are disordered and opaque, but they are what distinguishes a single person

from anybody else. The study of sexuality ought to be pursued within the context of a person's life, and that life in its social context. The sexual identity categories are very crude, and tend to veer more and more away from sexual feelings and acts and become entities in themselves. If ultimately what we want in society is to arrive at some consensus of what sexuality is, and the ethical constraints within which it should be expressed, subsuming people under these categories works against that objective. So what do you replace sexual identity with? You don't have to replace it with anything. You replace it with people's lives, and the part that sexuality plays in those lives.

What are the implications of this shift for the study of paedophilia?

One of the things that attracts me to the study of paedophilia is that it allows the possibility of an inquiry into childhood sexuality, free from normative models that have occupied our attention in the past, particularly the psychoanalytic model of stages of heterosexual development. I see it as a chance to determine how children in their own ways, yet to be described, and in varied fashions, yet to be discovered, can be and are sexual, and how adults, as the mentors and teachers of children, unavoidably, will have some kind of role in that development, apart from just standing outside and observing it, which would be very unusual for anyone who really cared for a child. I don't think we know much about the sexual development of children, apart from heterosexual models, which say that a child at eight should be repressing sexuality and at puberty it suddenly floods forward, and ultimately leads to fatherhood and motherhood.

For the study of homosexuality to reach the point where it was able to free itself from the limitations of sexual identity concepts, there had to be a political progress. Isn't there value in a similar period of political organization for a paedophile identity? Given the current extraordinary oppression directed against paedophilia, is it possible to conduct a value-free scientific discourse on the subject?

No, but at least you can show how heterosexual values dominate. Before the gay liberation movement, it would have been impossible to do that, and it still is not easy to do today, but I think—I'm hoping, but I believe—that we now have a choice that we did not have one hundred years ago when Ulrichs formulated his theories of the Urnings. I think we now see that the identity route is another trap. You know, for a long time it left out paedophilia, homosexual paedophilia, and has never countenanced heterosexual paedophilia, which one would assume is even more prevalent, and has never acknowledged lesbian paedophilia. So I would say there wasn't a choice before the creation of the "gay identity". Maybe the inquiry should be framed differently, in other words it's not going to be an inquiry into paedophilia *per se*, but an inquiry into childhood sexuality and the roles that adults play in that, including the sexual role. We've maintained the preposterous stance in Western society that the adult has no part in that, or that the part is simply that of an observer, and yet in almost every other aspect of children's lives the adults are participants as well as observers. We've put a fence around the sexual area, and said 'This you must stand outside of'. So my feeling is, the better route to go is to say that paedophilia is part of the broad inquiry into sexuality, the meaning and the experience of sexuality in an individual's life, including children, and not frame it too narrowly as paedophilia. If you narrow the inquiry to "paedophiles", to the adults, you're going to deflect it away from the children, and you're going to deflect it away from the broader examination of the sources of heterosexual oppression and prejudice.

Society versus Paedophilia

Why is society's protectiveness of the child so strong, and why has it created such a violent reaction to paedophilia, especially in the last five years?

I think you need to ask, 'What are they protecting?' It seems to me that what they are protecting, is a whole system of adult ownership of

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children and control of their development, of dictating to them desire and character so that they grow up to be mindless workers and consumers. The ordinary family is suffocating kids' imaginations and feelings, including their sexuality. There is so much economic and political power that rests on the continuation of family control and oppression, that anyone who threatens it is going to be severely punished. The family is the only recognized institution for the rearing of children, and other organizations are acting in place of the parent, and the law says it that way, that they have parental custodial rights, even though we have legions of unfit and abusive parents. It was the genius of the Greeks—well, it's not genius, because they could not do anything but what they did—that they organized homosexuality so that it was congruent with the family, and therefore did not have this opposition. I think we need to investigate the family's mistreatment of children, which is in many cases outrageous. The feminists are calling it patriarchy, I think that needs to be taken much more seriously by non-feminists.

Yet the feminists, who are precisely the ones who most condemn the family as patriarchy, are also the ones who most condemn paedophilia. Do you have any comment on that?

The feminists have their own dilemmas, and their own contradictions. To the extent that they have taken on the identity of women, which puts them at a disjuncture to all of men, and all of humanity that's not woman, to the extent that they are women-identified women, they've backed themselves into a corner because this category of "woman" then has to have unique characteristics, which will set them off from men. They have had to come up with such things as 'women are nurturant', whereas

men can never be, and to the extent that they are nurturant, of course, this puts them into a very traditional role, protecting women from these awful males who are all bad anyway, because one of the characteristics of males is selfish aggressiveness. So the only posture that a male adult could have toward a child would be one of exploitation, not one of nurturance. In fact, I think these feminists are jealous of men who show the kind of nurturance that only females are supposed to possess, because from what I know of paedophile relationships, they are supremely nurturant, in a way that should make most parents crumble with shame. The children respond so well to the care in paedophile relationships because they are getting what they want, their desires and their needs are getting met. The fact that these relationships are seen as only sexual is a way of hiding the inadequacies of biological parents. We also don't have to look at what paedophile relationships with these kids really consist of.

Could you enlarge on what needs of kids you see being met in paedophile relationships?

Men who have paedophile relationships may have insights into the kid's need for freedom and at the same time for guidance and protection, for a home base to come back to, and I think you need to tell about that out of your own understanding of these relationships. I don't think you're going to get this from most heterosexual researchers. I would certainly not leave out the fact that these kids are finding in paedophile relationships something that they cannot find in their parents. Even in the well established homes of the professional class, kids turn to paedophile relationships, to men who have time to give them, men who are cultured and who are responsive to them. Child abuse can be seen as the other side of this coin. That kids are being beaten is partly because they are expressing needs and desires, or even satisfying them, in ways that the family cannot accept, for one reason or another. If you're a heterosexual moral majoritarian you can say the breakdown in discipline is because parents have been neglecting their duties as parents. But another way of look-

ing at the breakdown of discipline is that many parents do not satisfy the needs of their children, that the children have outgrown their family, and the parents are not allowing that, and are beating them as a last desperate effort to shore up the foundations of their authority.

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One of the other problems in the family is incest, which is often lumped together with paedophilia. Do you have any comments on it?

I have heard that often the men who have been involved in incest are men who have been defeated, who feel their failure as men and as fathers. They haven't been able to sustain employment—that's why they are home with the daughters in the first place—and they feel that they have not met the expectation of their wives, in many cases that they've never been adequate lovers, breadwinners, parents, and in some desperate moment they often turn to a teenage daughter who intuitively senses this defeat in the father and will give in to his sexual needs. It doesn't take any great wisdom to realize that sexuality is complexly related to other things in our lives and that often what looks like a grossly sexual act is really the expression of other things. In incest, the sexual act expresses the need of the defeated man to regain power. Incest has been depicted as so horrible and the adult has been so terribly stigmatized that we've been afraid to even get into the dynamics of it, but I know some stories that my students have told me and they're terribly complex. I think the guilt that the young person carries into later life is not only the guilt of the sexual exploitation, but it's the fact that they were encumbered with this feeling of defeat in an adult and tried some form of nurturance, and it couldn't work because the child could not shoulder this reversal of responsibility. But again, sexuality is a nice neat category used by

the establishment to run away from the examination of problems, because they're afraid of looking at the failures of the family very closely, and it's much easier to prosecute a few individuals for sexual abuse.

Can we return to the question of why it should be now, at this time, that the hysteria against paedophilia, and other sexual acts that threaten the family, should be growing?

I think Jeffrey Weeks is right. He's saying that the establishment is really besieged right now, the family is really besieged, there's a lot of failure, in marriage, in love, in affection, in bonds between children and parents, that we're confronted with a whole area of great social failure. Now Weeks contends that there is a whole other movement coming in, which is typified by the gay movement; I think that's terribly optimistic. I think that we've simply got to take another view of what individuals are, what few real choices we have in our lives, which are much more limited than we once believed they were. We've got to incorporate that all in our dealings with children, we've got to learn to deal with children in ways that keep us in contact with them but also out of their lives. They've got to have the space to understand who they are, to know their desires, and there's where I think men who have paedophile relationships often achieve that balance better than parents. The parents feel so overwhelmed by the task that they move between total neglect and total control, and the kids need something else, they need a distancing from the adult, and yet the adult's presence at crucial moments. I think men who have paedophile relationships also have some insights into the balancing of distance and closeness.

In your discussion of paedophilia, in terms of the exploration of childhood sexuality, you don't seem to take into consideration the reality of the paedophiles themselves, especially in the midst of oppression. Are the paedophiles themselves getting lost here?

I think that you have an obvious need, you have a help that you can provide one another, be-

cause you're not getting it from any other place. I have total respect for that, and I'm poignantly aware of it since I've been in Amsterdam, where there is this whole emigre group of men who have been run out of their countries because of the so-called "abuse" of children. For those who know nothing of your persecution, you need to describe your experiences, but you need to ask questions, that is, why it is happening, and I think the why questions will take you in many different directions. They will certainly take you back to the family, to the guardianship of childhood sexuality, that is why I dwelt so much on that. A question that always comes up when spokesmen for paedophile groups speak to my classes in San Francisco, is 'You talk so much about the welfare of these kids, and how much you're doing for them, but what are you getting out of it?' I think what men who have paedophile relationships get out of them needs to be clearly delineated. The fact that the relationships are parental and affectionate and that the sexuality is worked into that much larger framework is not understood. That there can be that combination is surprising to most people, who still think of sex when it's cross-generational as exploitive and manipulative. I think your telling of your relationships is very important, particularly how you must balance your own fulfillment against theirs, if there come moments when these are not harmonious. I think many parents need to learn how to do that with their own children, and maybe you have insight into that that they don't have.

We've got to learn to deal with children in ways that keep us in contact with them but also out of their lives. Men who have paedophile relationships often achieve that balance better than parents.

You are a professor of psychology. One of the major social forces opposing paedophilia is the psychological pro-

fession. It provides research which opposes paedophilia, and takes an active role in the courts, giving testimony to convict paedophiles. It also advises courts on sentencing, and in Sexually Dangerous Person procedures. Do you have observations on the state of psychological research in this area, or on its funding and responsiveness to power?

Psychology has played a shameful role carrying out the government's research priorities. You must understand the process of getting research grants. The grants I got from the Federal government were to study only aspects of homosexuality which represented failures or victimization. If I were to go to the government and say, I think there's an inventiveness in relationships between two men or two women that married heterosexuals really could profit by, how the going in and out of these relationships is negotiated with much less trauma, and sometimes with enormous care and understanding, that we could well use in the present era of divorce, I would never have gotten a single grant. But I could get a grant to study jail rape, for studying ageing homosexuals who presumably the government believes never have sex anymore, or for discrimination. Today psychologists will get grants for incest and for child abuse, and violence against children and pornography. Also these studies can be experimentally designed, and the government now prefers controlled experiments: it fits in with their idea that all sexuality should be controlled, even within the context of research. So psychology has been opposed to paedophilia because the government has been opposed to paedophilia, and that's where psychology gets its money.

Psychology pretends to be a science, in the sense of a natural science. It can never be that; it shows a terrible misunderstanding of the natural sciences and of its own biases. It can never be a perspectiveless discipline; that is, any human being looking at another human being, at human conduct or relationships or studying human phenomena, does so from one, or several, of various human perspectives, whereas in the natural sciences, presumably, we come up with the truth that will stand the test from many different perspectives, so that in essence science be-

comes perspectiveless. But that is never the case when human beings are studying other human beings.

Psychology also is not a predictive science. Again, it is a pretense to being a natural science. I know one forensic clinical psychologist, who has practically dropped his private practice now. He gets involved in child abuse cases, and it's very lucrative. He's flown all around the country, he's paid for every day that he's away from home and works on the case, all of his hotel accommodations, and it's a whole profession.

Power and Consent

One of the principal attacks on paedophilia has been in the area of power differentials between the participants in the relationship, and over the question of consent. How would you formulate the issue of consent: what constitutes consent for the minor partner? What about power in the relationship?

The issue of consent is a difficult one. We have trouble with it even in peer relationships. It would at least include knowledge of what one is consenting to.

How much knowledge? Here we touch on the argument of "informed consent", which holds that it is impossible for the child, out of his experience, to imagine what he will feel like thirty years later about the experience, and therefore cannot truly consent.

Yes, that's it. As if any woman who is consenting to have sex with a man can!

But she at least has had some parallel experiences on which to base a decision. By the time one is twenty or so you have been around a little in the world at least...

Well, why don't we outline what consent must minimally require, what the criteria of informed consent must be. It has to be some knowledge of what the act is, right at that moment, what one is consenting to, and that, in fact, what one consents to is what really transpires. Add to that the anticipated consequences of the consent, not only personal in the sense of

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'Will I really enjoy this?', 'Will it harm me in some way?', but also the social consequences of reputation, of societal judgement, parental interdiction, and so on. If you lay out all those qualifications, I don't think there are many adult acts of full consent. In a way, if we could know that much ahead of time, much of the sexual excitement would be gone, because what we often hope for, I think, in a sexual encounter, is that something new and unexpected might occur.

So you are suggesting that there actually are no relationships where there is truly full consent that meets all of those criteria?

Yes, I would be hard pressed to believe that that could occur, and even that people want it to occur. There are certain non-consensual elements which people value in emotional and sexual relationships. What is romance? Romance is when you get onto this roller coaster, you know, and you go up and down. If you could anticipate all the suffering that's going to be involved, you probably wouldn't start it, but you know there's at least going to be this thrilling undulating effect.

To say there is no true consent in any relation doesn't answer the question of what exactly consent should be in the power-charged, unequal situation of an adult and a minor.

Well, I'm not trying to evade your question. I think that sexuality is not exempt from ethical constraints, nor is any other area of our lives. We have not arrived at a social consensus on what sexuality is, on what forms of touching, of conversation, on what we see in a picture—police can see pornography where others don't.

For better or for worse I think we have not arrived at a consensus as to what it is we are consenting to. So what can a person do in a situation in which the culture provides only very confused and disordered notions of what it is that one's consenting to, what can an adult, operating within some kind of ethical community, do? I think the answer must be that one must show enormous respect for the desires of the child, and the feelings of the child, and some sense of who that child is, and how whatever transpires is going to fit into the larger frame of that child's life.

So, in other words, the adult's experience should compensate for the child's inexperience. If it's two adults, each one has a little better idea of what they may be consenting to; in the case of a cross-generational relationship the adult must be especially considerate of those things.

Exactly, but I think it's only in the area of ethical responsibility. I don't think you can substitute adult experience for childhood experience, and vice versa. And I don't think you should even be required to, it can't be done. But what you can do is, the adult must take a full ethical responsibility, for himself, that is, you must operate within ethical constraints, which I hope would include the respect for the fact that this child is a unique human being, whose uniqueness must be valued, and that the experiences that you have with the child would then somehow make it more possible for that uniqueness to develop rather than curtailing or suffocating it. This may mean giving up sex even when it is possible. In a particular case, this might mean that you would be even more sexually responsive, possibly, knowing that the child at that moment desires it, welcomes it and would benefit from it. But the ethical responsibility is a heavy one because this society is not defining what those ethical considerations should be, and because the child may or may not yet be a part of any ethical community, so that he can't make these judgements, or she can't, very well. That is why an enlightened law must have a role in protecting the child. Because the child, less than the adult, can know the consequences of his acts, there is still a place for laws that protect

the child from clearly demonstratable exploitation or immediate harm. But the enforcement of such laws would have to respect the perceptions, judgements and desires of the child.

This leads into another question, about how paedophiles can develop a healthy relationship in the midst of a society that condemns them.

The word 'healthy' is here a substitution for ethics. It's the medical profession taking over the cleric's responsibilities; I prefer to have those definitions remain with the people who think and know about them. I would just say again everything I said about the ethical considerations; I would prefer them to be frankly phrased, as moral and ethical considerations, rather than 'health', because I think that plays right back into medicine and the medical control of sexuality. Medicine is embarrassingly involved with sexuality. I think that at one point it was an adventure, a huge expansion of its institutional power; I think today it's terribly embarrassed and would like to get out of the business if it could.

In relation to the whole question of power within their relationships, might looking at sexual relationships rather than sexual identities clarify the whole matter, because inequalities of power are one of the things that are common within all sexual relationships, which might help to clarify the question of inequalities of power within paedophile relationships.

Or vice versa. The exploration of paedophile relationships, when the adult often is extraordinarily concerned with the issues of imbalance of power, is an exploration of how power can be handled in interpersonal relations in which we're entrusting people with our emotions, and our bodies. These relations inevitably revolve around power, so that ethical notions of what is fair and equitable are crucial. Women are beginning to complain about the kind of sexist treatment that they have been subjected to: there are any number of books on the American market now you know, 'Women Who Love Men Who Hate Women', and so on. Those books have a very angry tone, yet I get the im-

pression, are still written without any real examination of the dynamics of the whole structure of the relationships women have with men, which themselves result in those dynamics. They want to change the dynamics without changing the structures. Thoughtful adults who have sexual relations with children have had to look at everything, the dynamics and the whole structure of their relationships, which have been forbidden in Western society. So again I think these individuals have a lot to contribute, as in the case of childhood sexuality, in the case of adult sexuality, and now in the case of relationships. I believe that it's the quality of the people involved that often determines the quality of the relationship. If you have sleazy characters you are going to have a sleazy relationship, and two people who have a sense of fairness and mutuality are often going to have a good relationship. You've got to have ethical people to have good relationships, and ethics is a matter of persons.

Can you pursue that a little further, how you see paedophiles restructuring traditional roles in their relationships?

The persons I have met here in Amsterdam who identify themselves as paedophiles certainly don't impress me as being stereotypical macho American males, thank God, but in many ways they are also extraordinarily brave and pioneering men, which is part of the male stereotype. So what I guess this means is that they show a kind of androgyny, this incredible nurturance, and yet this rather fearless dedication that shows that maybe men can be men in a way that does not require brute force. In other words, that men can be powerful, but powerful in a moral way, that there can be a kind of moral power that can combine with nurturance, so that power and nurturance don't have to be seen as opposing attributes. So I think that these men redefine what it is to be a man. And then, of course, you constitute another threat, because one of the great threats that adult child relation-

ships have, especially, is that the adult is not reproducing the model of the father, of the stern, aggressive totally self-confident male. You're providing another kind of a model, with another kind of a very subtle, pervasive power that comes from understanding and knowing and responsiveness. That, you see, doesn't fit the image that we have of the totalitarian father. Therefore, even though you're providing an understanding of how males can be quite different people than they stereotypically are, that poses a threat. It is possible for males to have this enormously nurturant relationship to kids. Your authority in a kid's life, comes to the extent that you represent something that he wants to trust, but doesn't completely, and can not completely understand at the moment, but something that he will someday understand and then assume himself, which is not the transmission of male power as we think of it in the family. There are not many options open, but there are a few things that we could be doing with kids that we're not doing today, and I think paedophiles have an intuitive and often an experiential understanding of them.

Do you have any summary you wish to make?

There are two points I would stress. I think the idea of sexual identity reduces the importance of the individual, and that the focus of inquiry must be, should be, would most profitably be, on how the sexuality of a given person fits into that person's life, and how that person's life fits into the broader social context. We ought to use the current categories of sexuality, at best, as categories of desire and behaviour, but not as categories of people. I think my other point is that the investigation of paedophilia could be important because it can be one means by which we can shed light on childhood sexuality, on issues of consent in all sexual relations, not only intergenerational relationships, and how sexual relationships are regulated not in the interest of the individuals but in the interest of our rulers.