

## INTERVIEW: KENNETH PLUMMER

Dr. Kenneth Plummer is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, Essex, England. As early as the beginning of the 1980's, his contributions to the study of paedophilia included the essay "Pedophilia: Constructing a Sociological Baseline," which appeared in *Adult Sexual Interest in Children* (London & New York: Academic Press, 1981), edited by Mark Cook and Kevin Howells, in which he reviewed the research sources available at the time and strongly argued for an assessment of paedophilia free of prejudice and stereotyping, and "The Paedophile's Progress: A View from Below," which appeared in Brian Taylor's collection *Perspectives on Paedophilia* (London: Batsford, 1981), in which he assessed the early history of paedophile organizing on the part of the Paedophile Information Exchange and the reactions it was receiving. In 1975 he published *Sexual Stigma: An Interactionist Account* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul). His article "Understanding Childhood Sexualities" will appear in the forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* on paedophilia in 1991. Dr. Plummer's analysis reflects the social construction theory in the study of sexuality, which argues that sexual behavior is, in all significant aspects, a product of social and cultural interaction rather than biological factors. The interview was conducted in Amsterdam in February, 1990, by the Co-Editors of *Paidika*.

## Definitions and Identities

**Question:** *In an early essay, "Constructing a Sociological Baseline for Paedophilia," you seem to discuss paedophilia as a phenomenon that is separate from other forms of sexuality. In fact, in a footnote you wrote of "the now incorrect stereotype that homosexuals are boylovers." Where do you today locate paedophilia among the sexualities and how would you define it?*

**Kenneth Plummer:** I don't think that I was saying that paedophilia is an individual phenomenon. I see it as part of the massive flux of sexuality, not as a discrete or separate category. What I was trying to do in the article you mentioned was unpack and unravel the notion of paedophilia. I do not see it as a unitary fixed phenomenon, nor as an individual type of sexuality. This was part of a much bigger project that I've been involved with, which is to see sexuality as experiences which the modern world encodes for us. They are given to us in neatly packaged forms, almost as if we can't bear living sexualities without labels, without fixed structures being given to them. I don't think that adult-child sexualities are in any way clearly given or clearly frozen. After all, the notion of, should I even say it, "the paedophile" is an invention of the 19th century, which tried medically, clinically, pathologically, to describe in a coherent way certain groups of people, certain packages of experiences, in order to regulate and control them. The problem, of course, becomes that, after a period of time, because of these definitions and descriptions, these encoded forms, a group does come to exist, so that now we have to say clearly that there are paedophiles. Paedophiles become socially constructed.

What I was trying to do in the article was to debunk that socially constructed image. A whole chunk of the article is given over to breaking down first of all the idea of a fixed type, and secondly breaking down the very notion of the paedophile. Partly it tried to invent new language to think around the notion of the paedophile, and paedophilia. The investigation led me increasingly to think about the role of language and desire. But, the central point really is that there is nothing intrinsically given in sexuality, or as we

now call them, sexualities. Or gender for that matter. And that children aren't fixed either, nor men and women fixed. The whole thing is basically a flux which we encode, on which we put whole sets of categorizations in order to regulate lives and control them and our experiences. It allows societies to function. Recently, we might call it the post-modern moment. We're recognizing that no category can do justice to experience, and there is no fixed truth about sexuality anymore than there is one fixed truth about adult-child relations. They are all far more complex things.

*You say that you want to deconstruct categories of sexuality, but then you also maintain that "paedophile" has become an actual category, an identity. On the one hand you're saying that sexuality is a flux. On the other hand you admit the ability of society to fix and construct sexual identities. Isn't this a contradiction?*

No, not really. I can describe it as three stages. There was a moment in history when sexualities were not encoded the way they are now and the word paedophile didn't even exist. There were certainly, there always have been, sexual relations between adults and children. But they weren't coded the same way as they are now. Then there comes a moment when they are coded in a particular way, in this case partly with the invention by Krafft-Ebing of the word "paedophile". Society finds the category helpful in regulating these relations and, ironically, for some people the category "paedophile" is helpful in coming to know the sort of person they think they really are. It gives their lives a coherence. Then there's a third phase, which is the future in some ways, where—and I would see the same thing for homosexuality and all the other types of sexuality we've been landed with in the past century—there comes a period when you could live a life engaging in various forms of paedophilias that don't lead you to organize your life essentially as dominated by them. The culture begins to see paedophilia and paedophile relationships in a broader context and can come to terms with some of them. At present it certainly can't. It loathes them but that only hardens the identity. I'm more

a social constructionist than a deconstructionist in the sense that, given this flux of desires, societies pattern them in different ways in different times, so we now have got "paedophilia". I don't deny the existence of paedophilia. I don't see a contradiction.

I would also add that if there really were, as the 19th century theorists taught us, all these different types, then the world is populated by a endless array of rather specific types of sexual people. And we could invent new ones right now. The foot fetishist, for example, is one of my favorites. People who love feet exist in very large numbers and there's a literature for them. They haven't quite hardened into an identity, but they could over a period of time. And things we haven't even thought about could become clear sexual types too. It worries me, the way this is going on. It worried me about homosexuality and it worries me about paedophilia.

*Now that you view paedophilia as having come into existence, how would you describe it?*

What I can do is describe how it is defined in the literature. The first thing you see is that it is described paradoxically: defined as child-love, literally involving the love of children, and yet was invented as a pathological category. Now, child-love doesn't sound to me pathological. But the original descriptions were clearly of people who were not lovers of children, but disturbed psychologically in relationship to children. So there's an immediate contradiction established in the terminology.

Also, if you're talking about child-lovers, then that presumably means all the genders right across the board: women loving girls, women loving boys, men loving boys and men loving girls. Yet reading the literature you'd be left with the impression that child-love is largely about men loving boys, whereas the term itself doesn't mean that at all. So, the word can be defined, and is defined, in any number of ways. In England at present the word paedophile means the devil. Certainly the word means all sorts of different things to all sorts of different people. People I interviewed in the seventies, for example, who saw

themselves as paedophiles described it as a very loving experience, gentle, caring and all that.

What I am trying to say, however, is that all these definitions of paedophile lead to the belief that there is a truth to the category. But, the category exists only in the way people organize debates around it. It becomes a real phenomenon when people define it as a real phenomenon, and that is so on many different levels. After all, people lead their lives around it, and people fight about it. It's very real in that sense.

But in a deeper sense it is also real insofar as, probably across all cultures at all times in history, there have been different patterns of relating erotically between adults and children in a multiplicity of complex ways. So, it's real in the sense that there is a very open ended universal form of experience going on here, that takes on very concrete and specific, different forms at different historical moments. It's real in both those ways.

*Does paedophilia take on different forms from culture to culture, or historical period to historical period, or is it that different meanings are ascribed in different times and places to the same phenomenon?*

My point here is the same debate as I have with homosexuality. There is a slender thread of continuity here, but the meanings shift dramatically, and around these meanings the whole cultural organization is fundamentally different.

I think it's even dangerous to suggest that modern paedophilia is anything at all like Greek love. For example, in the ancient Greek model women were pretty much left out of the picture, they were pushed aside. The whole society was organized at the very least with a different meaning regarding women attached to it. There was no modern education system; there was a military basis for society. The society was organized in a very different way, so I do not think you can make simple comparisons between Greek and modern homosexuality or paedophilia. Some would think this is heresy, because when people tap into these experiences they build up massive historical arguments for defending themselves. Paedophilia is no different in this regard. People want to build up a history, want to make sense of their lives his-

torically. So people raid the past to show that it was like the present, to make their own lives more sensible and plausible now. In the case of virtually all sexual minorities now, including the Women's movement, one of the big enterprises is to rediscover their history. In England right now, the lesbian radical workshop claims there have always been lesbians, and their history has been denied them, that you can go right back to Sappho and it's all there. They use it as a way of politically organizing. But I don't think it's a straightforward historical truth they're discovering; it's using history in the present to justify future acts. Politically this seems fair enough to me.

### The Three Discourses of Paedophilia

*If social forces constructed paedophilia, that would suggest it is not something fixed for all time. How do you see and describe it now? Is it evolving and, if so, into what?*

I would say that there are at present three—probably more, but certainly three—major forms of discourse, or ways of encoding adult-child sexual experiences. You can also say that there are a multiplicity of discourses within each of these discourses, and that none are straightforward or clear cut. They also proliferate, change and jostle with each other.

Now, one is a “paedophilia” language, of which I suppose *Paidika* is one embodiment. It talks about love, and clearly has a positive image of these relationships described in many different ways, though they are seen as complicated. This language is largely concerned with man-boy love, and it has a minimum organization around it. It's a discourse which is almost taboo; it functions in small worlds, it doesn't function outside of those worlds very much.

Then there is the currently dominant discourse, which is “child sexual abuse”. The child sexual abuse discourse is the one people adopt when they start thinking about adults and children and sex. It excludes the possibility of even talking about paedophilia as a love relationship. It inexorably draws the paedophilia discourse into it and doesn't engage in it the way paedophiles would engage it in their own terms.

The child sexual abuse discourse has been around for a long time, in the child molester image and so forth. But it really has become now a major discourse, especially in the U.S. and in England. It became a very big issue by 1986, although it was already an issue by 1978 when the Paedophile Information Exchange was accused of child molestation. But the real institutions of the child sexual abuse industry were set up in England around 1986 because of the Cleveland scandals which hit the papers day after day after day. There was an enormous coverage, allegations of massive abuse apparently going on in Middlesboro.

The child sexual abuse discourse is obviously a very important discourse. It raises issues that were being neglected. That is to say, I have no doubt that there are large numbers of children being forced by adults into sexualities that they do not want, and which cause them scars and pains. Yes, it's a very important discourse, but that said, my worry about it is that it traps all the other discourses. It doesn't allow any notion of a benign adult-child love to come into it. No way is permitted for debating issues around love, or consent. Those involved in the child abuse campaign deal in atrocity stories and escalating statistics; they play up particularly the image of a really small, helpless child that is powerless. And of course, nobody—at least I don't think anybody in their right mind—would advocate relationships between big, strong adults and powerless infants, but this is offered by the child abuse campaign as the only possibility!

The third discourse is the childhood sexuality discourse, which I suppose is the one that I'm most interested in now. Both the paedophiles and the child abuse lobbyists touch upon this, but never in a complex way. For many of the people who use the paedophile language, the child is sexual, and the child's sexual needs need to be tended to. They say, the child is sexual and we're the ones to meet those sexual needs. These two thoughts don't follow logically at all, but you often hear that in the paedophile discourse.

And of course, in the main, the child sexual abuse lobby doesn't see the child as sexual at all. By denying the child's sexuality they construct an

image which is in itself, I think, abusive, namely that children have no sexual or sensual needs. And certainly they cannot make any decisions about their erotic lives. Yes, the child sexual abuse lobby abuses children by denying them any kind of sexuality, and in the process can cause them a lot of suffering.

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\* ↓ These three discourses are all talking about related phenomenon, but in radically different ways. The abuse lobby brought out the fact that real abuse was going on, but they overstated their case and created an hysteria. The paedophile discourse sometimes over-romanticizes and often is self-deluding. A large amount of paedophile writing talks as if there is a sort of natural gravitation, that things are very wonderful and there's a lot of care and love. Realistically a lot of it is not like that at all. My own preference of the three would be to look at childhood sexuality.

I could add that there is a fourth discourse, which uses the phrase intergenerational sexuality. This is a much broader phrase, which is slowly creeping into the language, but which is much decried by the child abuse campaign because they see it as another way of defending adult-child sexual relations. But it is much bigger, because it doesn't just deal with adult-child, it also deals with very old adults and much younger adults. It also includes older women and young men. People don't like that sort of thing, you know, older women and younger men. They laugh at it. They don't think it's a good thing: it's bound to break up, it can't last, the man's motives are questionable, etc., etc. In our culture you are expected to move around with people your own age. The elderly move around together, the young move around together, the middle-aged move around together. We regard it as odd to step over that boundary erotically, and we regard it as disgraceful.

\*phenomena

\*woman

↑ \* It is less of a taboo when you have a much older man with a much younger woman. It's quite acceptable—perhaps looked at a little askance, but nevertheless relatively respectable—for an older man to have a relationship with a younger women. That fits into a certain gender hierarchy. As a sociologist I try to construct a category which would enable me to see the spectrum of things happening within tabooed relationships between people not roughly within the same age category. Likewise, I have tried to relate these other categories of intergenerational relationships to paedophile relationships.

### Childhood Sexuality

*Your most recent interest and work has been in the area of childhood sexuality. What are your views about childhood sexuality?*

One of my concerns during the mid-1980's was with the process by which children currently construct their sexuality. What is a child's sexuality like? I don't take the view that the child is either naturally sexual or naturally nonsexual. There is nothing biologically given in either the adult or the child. Children build up their sexual meanings through the groups they move around with. Girls develop them in some ways and boys in other ways, depending upon the ways in which girls and boys are treated differently. It is also important that there are always adults around responsible for giving children sexual messages.

The child has to interpret its body. It has to make sense of its feelings. It has to make sense of its genitals. It has to make sense of its relationships. Children are given complicated messages by adults, educational messages, about language, about just ways of conducting their lives, for example. But as for the body, or the emotions and the interpersonal they are not given messages. They are given great big gaping voids into which all sorts of negative things rush in. They are not given clear messages. So, the children grow up stumbling around sexually and interpersonally.

I am not talking here about giving children straightforward sex manuals. What I'm saying is that there are all sorts of subtle messages that

adults give off to children and that therefore, the first area to be considered is the way in which adult sexualities impinge upon children. This goes back to my point about the child sexual abuse lobby perpetuating another abuse by not seeing the child's need to make sense of it's sexual world, or even recognize that there was such a sexual world for the child.

Perhaps the clearest example I can give of this is those young men and women who grow up thinking that they could be gay. They have no resources at all to turn to for dealing with the issue. Most young people really can't turn to their mothers and fathers and say: "Look, I think I fancy the same sex. What should I do about it, how can you help me?" They don't say that sort of thing in the main.

Of course, very often young children are attracted erotically to other young children, but there's no climate to talk about it for them. Actually, we don't know an awful lot about children's sexual feelings. I might be supposing that young children are attracted to other young children; I don't know that. But it seems plausible that they might well find some of their closest friends to be emotionally and interpersonally attractive and they would like to be involved in a closer way with them. This would be complicated for them and not like adult sexuality.

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*In a forthcoming article in the Journal of Homosexuality you speak about childhood sexuality as a "potential", and even seem to indicate that no such thing exists. But while discussing it right now you were talking about it as a given, in fact a given to which meaning is ascribed. Is there a contradiction between these things?*

It's like using the word "paedophile", isn't it? It's the difference between the social construction

and the actuality. Let me try to put this clearly if I can.

I don't think there is any such thing as childhood sexuality, or adult sexuality, straightforwardly. The culture creates prescriptions about what it is to be a child and what it is to be an adult, and about childhood and adult sexualities. I see the child as a set of capacities which roll through life, co-mingling with all sorts of people, friends, parents and other adults, authority figures, even the mass media. The child, right through life into old age, is trying to make some sort of sense of the interpersonal, its body and the sexual, all of which will constantly be changing as they meet new groups. They are constantly redefining themselves in different ways. Some very young children might have quite sophisticated notions of sexuality if they happen to live in that sort of world, and some adults could know nothing at all about sexuality. Individual lives are not going to be encountering the same groups and the same meanings. I don't see sexual development in linear stages or fixed patterns, but rather developing according to differing social contexts.

*You're saying then that some children might have a more developed sexuality than some adults? Given that, how would you begin to describe adult-child sexual relationships?*

There are in general physical limitations to what people can do with their bodies at particular ages. There are also the physical consequences of doing certain things with your body at certain ages. These set broad boundaries which are given by the body. There are also loose age categorizations which begin to dissolve very quickly after a certain minimal age. We can see it as a struggle for autonomy. Very young infants, as one example, are involved in various struggles of sensuality with their mothers—usually their mothers, not their fathers—to establish who they are and to establish what they like about the world and so forth. Even as infants they are already involved with this struggle, a struggle which goes on throughout life. I'm not sure at what age the cut-off point comes where you can say: That person has reached a certain level of understanding and

they can now function autonomously sexually. I see life as a constant struggle between this craving to be autonomous and make your own decisions about your own sexual demands and in a sense, being drawn into other people's definitions, or constriction, of you.

That was a long introduction, but let me go back to your question. I'm now saying two almost separate things. I don't hold the view that children and adults can do anything they like sexually at any moment. That's just nonsense. Sexual behaviour is socially patterned, profoundly organized and it says that certain things can take place and can't take place. If things take place which shouldn't take place they become engulfed in the social prohibitions. This is bad for the child. So, there will be problems for a child who engages in adult-child sexual relations in a context in which they are known to be bad. If the context were known to be good, it would be quite different.

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*There will be problems for the child, and there will be problems for the adult. Are you therefore saying that because of the problems caused by the social strictures these sexual relationships should not take place?*

Well, no. It has to be looked at. The same can be said about some homosexual relationships. Many young homosexuals, and many old homosexuals, were wracked with guilt because society said: 'Don't!' To say, 'I don't care what society says, it's perfectly alright for me to engage in this', that is a difficult step to take. It comes with a certain degree of autonomy and self-confidence. A child may not have that as readily as an adult, but nevertheless might under certain circumstances.

*In other words, it depends on the point a person is at in their individual development?*

Yes. The problem is between personal life and the

structural world out there. The structural world out there in all sorts of ways regulates my life, even though I have some control over my personal life and my immediate encounters. You can never divorce an adult-child sexual relationship from that wider culture which views it with hostility.

I studied paedophilia fairly sympathetically in the 1970's, but I also encountered certain strong feminist friends, not the child abuse lobby, but a certain strand of feminist who made it very clear to me that when they were girls the experiences they had with adults were not anything like the experiences being described to me by the adult male paedophiles. The girls were experiencing abuse, they were coming out as abuse survivors and the experiences were traumatic.

There was a parallel for me between coming out as a young gay male and coming out as an abuse survivor. Just as young gays live with this for a long period of time on their own, with no one to tell, filled with guilt, locked in secrecy and shame and all those things, many young girls were living the same way. Their fathers or their step-fathers or a friend of the family, had been systematically forcing them to have sex in ways that they did not like. But they had no one to turn to, they blamed themselves, they felt awful about it and they were living with this, just like the young gays and lesbians were. So, there is a direct parallel. They came out to survivors groups and hotlines to help incest-victims and so forth. And that seemed to me to be very good.

Now, for a while, I had taken on the paedophile language almost lock, stock and barrel, and I was in a sense deceived by the paedophile lobby, by their claim that these relationships were all loving and kind and caring and all the rest of that. Some were abusive. And they were about, particularly in relationship to the girl, male power. That got me into the debate about masculinity, which I think is a very important element in the discourse right now. In the main, there aren't many women making claims for adult-child sexuality.

The feminists claim that adult-child sexual relationships are about men extending more zones of sexual access for themselves. It has nothing at all to do with sexual libertarianism or sexual

freedom. The bottom line of that argument is that all sexuality is male and that therefore the central enemy of women is male sexuality. For these feminists paedophilia becomes the worst form of that. It exposes the fact that adult men are seeking out the youngest people they can find and trapping them in male sexuality and these sorts of power relationships.

I have to say there is a lot in that argument that I find very persuasive about some forms of experience. Where it goes wrong, is that it's once again dreadfully essentialist. It implies that all relationships are like this, all sexuality is male, all women are the objects of male desire, all men have an urge, an inner impulse of aggressive sexuality. That's just not true. Structurally, it's nearer the truth than not. But it's not true individually.

*You take your ideas from feminism which has a certain agenda. Isn't this the same as taking your criticisms of paedophilia only from the child abuse lobby, or, we might add, your positive views only from paedophiles. You are criticizing paedophiles, standing back from them objectively and saying that not every relationship is loving. That's certainly true. But you seem to be going beyond that, over to the feminist point of view, just as you said you were too much influenced by the paedophiles.*

I did state reservations: by saying their argument was too essentialist. Also, I should add, large numbers of feminists don't hold that view. It's a view common to particularly revolutionary feminists. I have to admit though that I'm very sympathetic to that position. They made different images for me from what the paedophiles had made. The image was more abusive. That large numbers of relationships between adult men and little girls and little boys inside families quite frequently were abusive. It's probably correct that the child is trapped in the family, has no way out of it. The child has no choice in the matter.

*Now you have suddenly shifted the terms of the discussion from paedophilia to incest. Aren't incest relationships different in kind from paedophile relationships?*

Incest relationships are in a different category from paedophile relationships. But they are use-

ful in our understanding certain things. One strong image I got was a girl being coerced into sexuality, coming to see herself as having no way of saying no, dreading it and all the rest. I have accepted that image. When feminists describe it I can identify with it.

Even in 1978 and 1979, I made a constant distinction between child abuse and paedophilia. At the same time I took over completely a notion I got from the paedophile movement and which I could identify with, that there are many adult men, mostly men, who have been denied any kind of contact with children. They find that they are very fond of children and would do no harm to a child, might only remotely want an erotic relationship with a child if the child clearly wants to be affectionate, and would do nothing to harm the child. That is one, positive image I would now oppose with the feminist's image. There's quite a distance between the two positions.

Let me say, I'm not at all happy with the paedophile movement when it sounds to me like it's double dealing, when it says: 'We are for children's rights. We love children,' but then in some way is trying to impose its definitions upon the child's desire. I don't like the idea of the adult imposition of meaning on the child.

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**In our culture you are expected to move around with people your own age.**

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*There are many paedophile points of view. Not all of them are self-pleading.*

I wish I could develop a better language to talk about this. You know, that's the constant problem. I'm trying to recognize that there is good and bad in both positions. There are multiplicities of feminist and paedophile positions, and they are at war with each other all the time about these things. I was quoting the revolutionary feminists, but even then they wouldn't always agree with each other.

The book I am now writing is about these de-



bates. It recognizes the importance of the social construction of different patterns of desire and the need to have politics around them, the need for identities to crystalize around them, for cultures to develop strongly within them, and for all sorts of sexualities to be recognized that hitherto haven't been. So much sexuality is denied us by deep structures of sexual hatred, by people not being allowed to explore different aspects of sexuality.

I am equally concerned with the politics of sexism and gender and the way in which you can see throughout many cultures that there has been a regular exclusion of women from all the key points of power, control, of government, of almost everything you can find. It's overwhelmingly women that seem to get the brunt of male sexualities. I term this the politics of defilement, and the former the politics of desire.

The trouble is, the politics of desire, what some people feel they want erotically, is very often the politics of defilement on the other side, when

people are forced to do what they don't want. How much proliferation of desire is possible? The politics of defilement seems to lead to a denial of sexual intercourse, which becomes the ultimate degradation of women. And, as I argued before, child abuse campaigns become the ultimate denial of the personhood of children. There has to be a way of resolving these two positions.

My position is that both should be kept going simultaneously. Sexism, patriarchy, and the degradation of women need to be guarded against, but not at the expense of getting rid of desire. That is too extreme. And the proliferation of desires is important, but not when it results in the degradation of women or children.

Paedophilia, child sexual abuse, and childhood sexualities are constantly moving between these poles of desire and defilement. There is no straightforward path. I cringe when I hear, what should I call them, revolutionary paedophiles, or revolutionary feminists, defend one position to the exclusion of the other.