

Letter to the Editor Dr Richard Yuill, 28 October, 2020

In this Journal David Pilgrim published an article entitled, 'Academic Disputes about Adult-Child sexual Contact: A Critical Realist Appraisal' (2018) in which he made several assertions about the position I took on this issue in my 2004 PhD Thesis on 'Male age-discrepant intergenerational sexualities and relationships.' These claims were also reproduced in his 2018 book, 'Child Sexual Abuse: Moral Panic or State of Denial?' I have written a critical review of the latter, debunking the bulk of Pilgrim's assertions for a forthcoming edition of the 'Journal of the International Network of Sexual Ethics.'

There is not enough word space to cover the full scope of how Pilgrim errs in a number of fundamental and essentially crucial aspects, rendering his central conclusions problematically flawed. However, what needs to be tackled at this juncture is the fact that Pilgrim misstates and mischaracterizes key facets of my work. For example, within the broader debates on intergenerational sexual relationships he wrongly describes my position as one informed by 'libertarian pleading', 'pro paedophilia' and allied in some way to 'moral panic theory'. In fact, I hold none of these positions. The three were certainly covered as competing discourses but were not central to the theoretical approach I adopted.

To substantiate his case Pilgrim cites only from the abstract of my PhD thesis (failing to even address the main body) or indeed more recent publications I have had on this topic. For example, see my 2013 chapter entitled 'Intergenerational Sexualities: a case study on the colonisation of late modern sexual subjects and research(er) agendas', in *Censoring Sex Research: The Debate over Male Intergenerational Relations* (ed. B. Verstraete and T. Hubbard). If Pilgrim had actually bothered to read these he would have had to retract his assumption that my position was informed by 'moral panic logic', pro 'paedophilia', or that I could be labelled a 'libertarian pleader.' My perspective on intergenerational sexuality is in fact informed by a variety of sociological and philosophical perspectives, notably Michel Foucault's approach to power and subjectivity. Indeed such an approach was used most effectively by Steven Angelides in his superb critique of some tenets of CSA theory and practice in *GLQ* (2004), 'Feminism, Child Sexual Abuse, and The Erasure Of Child Sexuality'.

Furthermore, Pilgrim's tone and use of straw men arguments do a disservice to academic discourse and professional conduct. The debate on intergenerational sexual relationships, such as it exists, should be constructive and not one reduced

to peddling falsehoods, lowering the tone to tabloid mudslinging and invoking contrived attributions. I myself experienced the full force of uninformed vitriol when I carried out my PhD 1999-2004. This involved media door-stepping, physical harassment and material being stolen from my office and passed on to a scurrilous tabloid journalist.

The issue of protecting children and young people from sexual abuse is certainly one that academics and policy makers should take seriously. There is no argument there and I actually carried out interviews with several male survivors of abuse. The fact that I conducted research which also looked at marginalised positions (boylovers and positive accounts from young people of their sexual relationships with adults) should be the bread and butter of any serious ethnographic researcher. It is also a central tenet of any liberal democracy that minority positions should be respected and not attacked, as Pilgrim clearly does, adopting as he does an aggressive and confrontational tone against anyone who does not share his position on CSA.

This approach does not protect children from abuse, nor help adults navigate the difficulties faced with sexual attraction to children. With a more considered approach to tackling these issues it may indeed be possible in the future for policy makers to find the correct balance between giving children and young people the opportunity to develop their own sexuality, free as much as possible from adults peddling their own agendas and protection from unwanted sexual contact.

Dr Richard Yuill