

# The Argument for Adult–Child Sexual Contact: A Critical Appraisal and New Data

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In her book, *The Secret Trauma*, Diana Russell writes, “Reality must not be twisted to suit ideological needs” (1986, p. 312). However, when reading her book and the other social scientific literature about adult–child sexual contacts, it seems difficult for researchers to stick to reality. Sexual abuse of children is a serious problem, but some scholars seem to take this problem too seriously.

Until now most investigations in this field have dealt with the following four questions: How often does it happen? To what sort of child is it most likely to happen? What are the consequences to the child? What do these consequences depend on? The sex contacts considered in these investigations are almost exclusively those between adults and children. The results of these studies will not be summarized here since detailed reviews are available elsewhere (Brown & Finkelhor, 1986; Constantine, 1981; Draijer, 1985; Kilpatrick, 1987; Steele & Alexander, 1981).

A principal criticism of these studies concerns the a priori assumption that sexual contacts between adults and children are always a form of sexual abuse. It will be documented how this assumption influences the way in which investigations are carried out. Data will be presented from research in which sexual contacts between adults and children have not been a priori considered to be abuse.

## ABUSE AS PREMISE

Most of the studies about adult–child sexuality begin with the premise that each sexual contact between a child and an adult is a form of abuse. This premise influences both the structuring of the research and its

results. The arguments for using the "abuse premise" are not very convincing. They are in general based upon moral convictions; sometimes they are even in conflict with what an investigation really shows.

Some researchers, such as Herman (1981) and Travin and colleagues (Travin, Bluestone, Coleman, Cullen, & Melella, 1985), use the abuse premise because they claim that every sexual contact between child and adult is by definition harmful to the child. They do this despite the findings of several studies in which no harmful and some beneficial effects were found, at least for a part of the sample that had been studied. Other researchers, such as Finkelhor (1979a) and Russell (1986), justify the use of this term by appealing to the norms of society. Consequently, in their own studies they characterize experiences labeled by respondents as pleasurable or neutral as sexual abuse.

In my view, social norms cannot simply be incorporated into the conceptualization of social scientists. Researchers must base their findings on what they observe, not what society tells them they ought to observe. Rather than accepting those social norms, it would be better to be critical of them (see Kilpatrick, 1987; Renshaw, 1982).

Another widely held assumption, as in Finkelhor (1979b), is that children can make no real choice. They don't yet know what is and what is not pleasurable; they don't yet appreciate the social meaning of sexuality; they also cannot appreciate the possible consequences of sexual contacts with an adult. It is remarkable that the people proposing this have no trouble with sex among age-mates. It seems that in these cases boys and girls do have a real choice. One might also ask whether the opportunity to choose is really such an all-important criterion. In raising and educating children there are numerous things done with them and to them for which their consent is never asked (see also O'Carroll, 1980).

The ability to choose is also a difficult criterion because the ability to make conscious choices is something that is gradually learned throughout childhood. It is like any other learning process, and one shouldn't put in the same category children of different ages—or even children of the same age—since each boy and each girl learns at his or her own tempo.

In support of the "inability to choose" argument, it is claimed that the adult has a natural power advantage. The child, then, has no opportunity to express oneself and realize his or her own desires (Burgess & Holmstrom 1975; Peters, 1976). But the existence of a power advantage does not necessarily mean that it will be used (Sandfort & Everaerd, 1990; Schulz, 1982). If misuse of power is the criterion, then not just the existence of a power imbalance must be examined but also its implementation, whether it is detrimental or beneficial to the child. Only in the former case can misuse of power be established.

A final argument is an appeal to the law: According to Finkelhor

(1979a), sex with somebody younger than a certain legally determined age of consent is abuse per se because it is a criminal act. Kilpatrick (1987), however, says that in social scientific research a distinction must be made between abuse and violating a law. Disobeying the law doesn't have to be abuse, and conversely, there are undoubtedly acts of abuse that do not violate any criminal statutes.

Despite the fact that all these arguments and justifications are not very convincing, the sexual abuse premise still continues to influence the structuring of research and thus what is "known" about sex between adults and children.

### CONSEQUENCES OF THE ABUSE PERSPECTIVE

The abuse perspective influences the way studies are designed and results are interpreted in several ways. Automatically categorizing sex between an adult and a child as abuse puts a negative light on the subject right from the start. The term "abuse" suggest harm, although there doesn't have to be any harm at all, maybe even the opposite of harm. In this respect, Russell (1986) forms a clear example. She defines the sexual contacts that she investigated as "exploitative," but included in that category experiences that the women themselves considered consensual. In this way her norms and values influenced the data.

By considering all adult-child sexual contacts as abusive, a variety of experiences are lumped together. Sexual contacts are considered as abusive regardless of the way they came about or the way they have been experienced by the child. Some investigators even included in their concept of "sexual abuse" events in which no physical contact took place, such as exhibition of the sexual organs, making improper suggestions, showing pornography, or talking erotically about sexual matters. As for physical contact, touching the breasts through the clothing and even "passionate kissing" is sometimes included. These acts may seem morally improper, but do they inevitably cause harm? Does the term sexual abuse not start to lose meaning when it comes to encompass virtually every kind of sexual experience a child can have with an adult? The use of a single term for very different things might explain some of the conflicting research findings (see also Kilpatrick, 1987). Fromuth (1986), for example, found virtually no negative consequences of sexual involvement with adults. This is most likely because of her broad definition of abuse, which included even the most superficial contacts. If she would have selected those experiences that constitute real forms of abuse, she might have found some consequences.

From the abusive perspective, all problems in later life are auto-



matically attributed to "the abuse," shutting out consideration of other causes (Steele & Alexander, 1981), such as things that happened as a result of the sexual experience becoming known, such as questioning by the police or upset reactions from parents (Corsini-Munt, 1980). Later "consequences" might even be caused by factors that had nothing whatever to do with the sexual experience (Powell & Chalkey, 1981). This kind of labeling makes it difficult to learn why and when certain experiences do have negative consequences and others don't.

Even when negative effects are reported, one should consider how these effects have been measured. In the research that is available now, the quality of the assessment procedures varies greatly. Finkelhor states, referring to his own research, that victims in a normal population "had identifiable degrees of impairment" (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). The manner of presentation conceals that this conclusion was based upon only one question in a written questionnaire dealing with whether the experiences in retrospect appeared positive or negative. Because of the way in which the conclusions were presented, a more negative image was created than was justified by the factual data.

All of this, of course, does not mean that real sexual abuse doesn't occur, and one certainly shouldn't minimize its seriousness. However, research should give a more accurate view of reality by making the proper distinctions. The term sexual abuse is too broad and suggestive and should be used only when there are good reasons for doing so (see also Kilpatrick, 1987).

## OWN RESEARCH

### Introduction

A retrospective survey was conducted to study sexual contacts between adults and children, without a priori conceiving them as forms of abuse (Sandfort, 1988). This study also included sexual experiences that children had had with their peers. The aim of the study was to assess the possible consequences of voluntary and nonconsensual sexual contacts in early youth, for sexual functioning in later life. To minimize the possible effects of retrospective forgetting and distortion, the survey was carried out among young people between the ages of 18 and 23. For practical reasons only sexual experiences before the age of 16 had been addressed. In this survey an adult was considered to be someone who, at the moment the sexual contact occurred, was 17 years of age or older and at least 6 years older than the respondent.

## Sample

Sampling was designed in such a way that young people with divergent sexual experiences and a variety of backgrounds could be included. To do this, subjects were obtained in two different ways. A general approach was primarily directed at finding young people who had had no sexual contacts or only contacts with peers. For this purpose, random samples were drawn from the population registration offices of 10 larger and smaller municipalities. Through this approach, 92 boys and 83 girls had been reached to be interviewed; 9% of them had had sexual contacts with adults as well.

A specific approach was directed at recruiting a sufficient number of people with voluntary as well as nonconsensual sexual experiences with adults. To reach them, a variety of channels have been used, including advertisements, a television spot, and letters to students, sexual reform groups, the Society Against Sexual Abuse of Children, and so on. In these announcements it was explicitly stated that the survey was about pleasurable as well as negative experiences, superficial ones as well as ones that had been far-reaching. Through this approach, 31 boys and 77 girls were interviewed.

Of the 283 respondents, 54% were still living with one or both of their parents, and 36% lived on their own, while the remaining 10% were living with a steady partner. The occupational levels of the parents indicated that the respondents came from a variety of social backgrounds.

## Method

The respondents have all been interviewed face to face, using a structured questionnaire with a few open questions and sections that had to be filled in by the subject. The mean duration of the interviews was 2 hours and 15 minutes.

The questionnaire addressed the following topics: general background information, educational background, masturbation and sex play, sexual contacts and relationships before the age of 16, and sexual and social functioning at the present time.

Sexual experiences involving different people have each been discussed separately. Altogether 572 experiences that took place before the age of 16 have been discussed. Instead of a priori labeling each sexual contact with an adult as abusive, the subject's own opinion about them had been asked. After discussing the interpersonal context, each subject was asked whether the sexual contact was something the other person

wanted, the subject himself or herself, or both of them. Thereafter the interviewer asked: "Did the sexual contact ever take place when you didn't feel like it, or did things occur that you actually didn't want at all?" For some people the answer to this question was clear. When that wasn't the case, the interviewer added: "If you didn't want the sexual contact, had you been able to prevent it or could you have withdrawn from it?" This way of differentiating between experiences had been chosen because we expected that possible effects of sexual experiences wouldn't depend on our labeling of the experience, but on the way the subject himself or herself had perceived it.

The following aspects of the current sexual functioning had been addressed: sexual desire, sexual arousability, sexual anxiety, sexual problems, general sexual satisfaction, and psychic and somatic complaints. *Sexual desire, arousability and anxiety* were measured with a card sort task (Barlow et al. 1977); subjects had to sort out several forms of sexual contact along three dimensions. Scores on these dimensions could range from one to five. *Sexual problems* were indexed, based on verbal answers and items from the written questionnaire; the index could range from 1 to 7—a range from no sexual problems to many problems. Subjects were asked to rate their general *sexual satisfaction* with a score ranging from 1 (low) to 10 (high). *Psychic and somatic complaints* were measured with an abbreviated version of 33 items of the Symptom Check List (SCL-90; Derogatis & Clearly, 1977); scores could range from 1 to 5, meaning respectively no complaints and a lot of psychosomatic complaints.

## Results

Of the total group, 119 respondents (42%) had had at least one sexual experience with an adult. Altogether, 183 sexual experiences with adults had been discussed. In 95% of these cases the adult was male. More than a third of 183 sexual experiences with adults had been characterized by the subjects as consensual. It was especially the boys who had experienced the contacts with adults in a consensual way; according to them, about 71% of their experiences with adults had been consensual. For girls, almost a quarter of the sexual experiences they had had with adults were characterized by them as consensual. The remaining non-consensual experiences with adults encompass a wide range, from superficial trifling to evidently traumatizing experiences. To be able to differentiate among these experiences, they were given so-called "severity scores." These scores were based on several aspects of the experience, including the kind of force that had been used, power differences as a



consequence of relational aspects, and the way in which the things that had happened had been experienced by the subject (interrater reliability was .88). Here, we will be primarily concerned with the voluntary experiences with adults.

If we examine the way the young people themselves labeled a substantial part of their experiences with adults, there is no reason to label them as sexual abuse. In almost all of these voluntary experiences, the subjects acknowledged that next to the difference in age, the adult had been sexually more experienced. This didn't automatically imply for them that there was a power difference as well. The subjects said that there was a power difference only in 26% of all the consensual contacts with adults. So in the other cases the subjects considered themselves to have power, from one source or another, which counterbalanced the power advantage of the adult.

Some quotations from the interviews will illustrate the kind of experiences with adults that the subjects considered to be consensual. Mark told of a sexual relationship with his father:

My father and mother were divorced, and I lived for a while with him. There was only one bed, and that's how it happened—because we slept together. I was the one who took the initiative. It was the first time I had an orgasm. He showed me how you do it. He did it to himself first, and then he did it to me.

Peter said that when he used to sleep over at his aunt and uncle's home, his aunt would often come to him at night:

If they'd gone out that evening her husband always came back stone drunk, and she wanted to do something so she would come into the room where I slept. We always had to be careful that her husband didn't notice anything, but that didn't make the contact any less pleasurable.

Bart was picked up by a stranger:

He came there looking for somebody. He thought it was nice to have sex with me. I myself determined how far we were going to go, and then I'd go off home. It was very nice. I found it so pleasurable I thought I'd like to do that again. And when I went to visit him at home, his friend opened the door and told me he didn't care what his friend did cruising, but that didn't mean I was welcome just to drop in that way.

A girl named Cindy told us:

Well, we were in love, and with an older man you start to have sex sooner than you would with somebody your own age. I don't think it was a matter

of power. . . . We'd run away from home and went to live together in the same room. I was very much financially dependent, but he didn't really have more power. At the most, he had power because he was a Turk, and Turks think differently about women—they're supposed to be obedient. He was very jealous. I could never go out alone, and that's why our relationship wound down, I think.

As these examples illustrate, sexual experiences with adults were more often consensual when they occurred at a later age. Before the age of 10, sexual experiences with adults were more often considered by the subjects to be nonconsensual.

The subjects had been asked why they had wanted the sexual contacts with adults. We asked them to check a list of possible reasons. The reasons mentioned most frequently were liking or loving the other, sexual pleasure, curiosity, and physical attraction. When these reasons are compared with the reasons for having sex with peers there are no significant differences.

Assessing the relationship between the sexual experiences and later functioning is problematical for several reasons. If they had had any, most of the subjects had had sexual experiences with more than one person. This was especially the case when they had had voluntary experiences. Additionally some subjects had had both, voluntary contacts as well as nonconsensual ones. To deal with this, subjects were grouped according to their "sexual contact history." The classification of histories was based on whether the other person was an adult or a peer, and whether the contact had been voluntary or not. In general, the resulting subgroups were, however, too small to compare. Things become even more problematical when possible influences of background factors have to be taken into account.

For the purpose of this study, comparisons were made between the group of subjects who did not have any sexual contact before the age of 16 and two other subgroups: the group of subjects who exclusively had voluntary contacts with peers and the group that had voluntary contacts with adults (exclusively or in addition to contacts with peers). Comparisons were carried out with an analysis of covariance, controlling for potential influences of the background factors such as family climate, first masturbatory experience, parents' attitude toward sexuality. Results are presented in Table 3.1. As a way of "statistical triangulation," additional statistical techniques were applied to on several combinations of subgroups. The results of these analyses confirm the results as presented in Table 3.1.

The results of these analyses suggest that there is no significant difference in the effects of voluntary sexual experiences with peers, compared with adults. There are relations with three of the aspects of



TABLE 3.1  
Present Time Functioning of Subgroups with Different Sexual Contact Histories

	<i>No sexual contacts</i> (n = 72)	<i>Voluntary contacts with peers (exclusively)</i> (n = 63)	<i>Voluntary contacts with adults</i> (n = 23)
Sexual desire	3.04ab	3.55a	3.63b
Sexual arousability	3.62ab	3.93a	3.98b
Sexual anxiety	2.23a	1.72a	1.73
Sexual problems	3.12	2.92	3.20
Sexual satisfaction	6.92	7.32	7.61
Psychodynamic complaints	1.49	1.58	1.63

Note: Mean scores with the same letter differ significantly according to an analysis of covariance, controlling for background factors ( $p < .05$ ).

later functioning. Compared with others, subjects who had had consensual experiences before 16 had, at a later age, a stronger sexual desire and a higher level of sexual arousability; their sexual anxiety was also less. With respect to the other aspects there are no statistically significant differences.

## Discussion

Of course one should be careful in drawing conclusions from these results. Possible negative effects of the sexual involvement with adults may show up later in life. We only looked at selected aspects of later general functioning; other aspects might be more important to assess potential effects. Furthermore, the group that has been studied is not representative; so it is not possible to say something about the relative frequency of consensual and nonconsensual contact with adults in the general population. There are other reasons why we should be cautious in interpreting the results.

However, these data don't support the generally accepted idea, that sexual contacts with adults are always harmful to a child. Likewise, the results don't warrant the label "abuse" for these experiences. There are sexual contacts with adults in which young people participate willfully and with satisfaction. These results are an invitation to take a more serious look at child sexuality itself, a research subject that at this moment is heavily neglected.

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