

Title:

The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse Research

Summary:

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In July of 1998 Psychological Bulletin published a meta-analysis of the long-term impact of child sexual abuse on college students. The article sought to debunk a belief that had gained widespread currency in mental health culture: that childhood sexual abuse was inevitably traumatic and inevitably led to later mental health problems. Most controversial was its suggestion that a morally neutral term such as „adult-child“ sex might be used as the broadest rubric of investigation in this area, because child sexual abuse implies a particular and inevitable negative outcome. The authors argued that the mental health field has been governed by a bias toward viewing intergenerational sexual contact as inherently pathogenic, and that this bias has produced a highly narrow understanding of the association between child abuse and adult psychopathology.

The controversy that erupted in response to this article has been most frequently framed as a dispute between science and public morality. On the one hand, there are various professionals, victimsrights advocates, and moral conservatives casting Rind, Tromovitch, and Bauserman-the authors of the now infamous study-as recklessly neglectful of public morality. On the other hand, equally pious investigators are coming to their defense, insisting on the political and moral autonomy of science. Much like the polarized debate over the reliability of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse in psychotherapy, neither position captures the complexity of the issues.

In this essay, we “unpack” the findings of the Rind et al. study, exploring key issues raised and placing them within a wider cultural context. While scientific inquiry is always embedded in a cultural and political framework, research that engages in redefining sexual boundaries is particularly rife with potential for arousing what has been termed “moral panic.” Whether the

issue is homosexuality, teenage sexuality, abortion, or rape, sexuality seems to carry surplus freight as a combustible topic. In recognizing that there is an element of hysteria associated with public outrage to the Rind et al. article, we do not mean to imply that there is no basis for criticism of this study. Indeed, there are legitimate bases for criticism. But our primary focus here is on what forces, historically and in this present, contribute to the subcurrents of this debate about it which are so easily obscured by the turbulence.

We agree, in part, with those critics, including Raymond Fowler, president of the American Psychological Association (APA), who have argued that scientists must be sensitive to the social implications of research findings, and that taking care in explaining controversial findings need not imply censorship. In the last two decades, incest and other forms of sexual abuse have been at the forefront of the women's and children's rights movements. Sexual violations have acquired tremendous social symbolic power in American political culture so that any challenge to the gains of these movements is perceived to be a threat to victims. But the controversy over the Rind et al. article stirs deeper uncertainties over the place of child sexual abuse in politics, the place of sexuality in children's lives, our understanding of trauma and recovery, the boundary between childhood and adolescence, and the place of scientific inquiry in adjudicating moral questions. We address each of these issues, attempting to steer a middle ground between a social constructionist or culturally relative position on sexuality on the one hand, and an approach that emphasizes universal principles of justice and care on the other.

Some of the controversy associated with the Rind et al. study involves hierarchies within science. Most social-scientific studies are modest in what they can claim. They are bound by the populations from which subjects are drawn, by the limitations of their measures, and by various additional methodological constraints. The power of the meta-analytical method lies in its capacity to rise above the terrain of a particular field, and to assess the overall strength of findings from a series of studies. It is, in effect, a study of studies, "meta" suggesting a more encompassing viewpoint, a higher level of analysis than that produced by the limited vantage point of a single investigation.

A Study of Studies

When performing a meta-analysis, researchers collect none of their own data, but sort through the data collected by others. In the Rind et al. metaanalysis, the researchers selected a sample of studies done on college students which addressed the issue of outcome from sexual abuse. In choosing which studies to include, they required that each study used in the meta-analysis meet certain minimal criteria such as adequate sample size, use of a control group, and a report on one of 18 symptoms they had identified. Previously, Rind and Tromovitch (1997) had performed a meta-analysis of community studies which showed that the effect size with regard to longterm adjustment is small. This means that, in community samples, those people who had been sexually abused as children were, over time, only slightly worse off psychologically than those who had not been sexually abused.

This newer meta-analysis of 59 studies of college students who had been sexually abused as children suggests that not all of them were still wounded by adulthood, not all of them were traumatized as children. While child sexual abuse (CSA) was associated with poorer adjustment, the magnitude of the effect, as in the community study, was small and, in the authors' words, "the negative potential of CSA for most individuals who have experienced it has been overstated" (p. 42). They also found that two-thirds of male CSA experiences and almost a third of female CSA were reported not to have been negative at the time of the abuse. Three of every eight male

experiences and one of every ten female experiences were even experienced as positive at the time. When the long-term outcome was negative, it was difficult for the authors to figure out why because of so many confounding variables. In fact, family environment was found to be confounded with and to account for current adjustment in college students more than CSA.

The article was published in July of 1998 with little incident. It had gone through two revisions and two sets of reviewers before *Psychological Bulletin* saw fit to publish it. The drama that ensued drew its emotional strength from two primary sources: one was politically and religiously conservative anxiety over sexuality, and particularly homosexuality; and the other was psychology's professional concerns with maintaining social legitimacy.

It is not uncommon for fringe groups to seek out support for their causes in the scientific literature. Like the Bible, the scientific literature is vast enough to support a wide range of opinions and viewpoints. So it was not surprising that the North American Man-Boy Love Association, on their web site, seized this research as supporting their idealized view of the man-boy sexual relationship. Just as predictable was the moral panic of conservatives, gripped by the fear that homosexual pedophiles would, en masse, tear down legal and cultural sanctions against adult-child sex. Talk-show hosts like Laura Schlessinger as well as the Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council (a fund-raising group for conservative causes) began to rail against the article on the air. Matt Salmon, a Republican congressman from Arizona, denounced the article along with Florida Republican Dave Weldon at a press conference that the Family Research Council hosted.

Conservative organizations routinely monitor sexual research, looking for signs of relaxing sexual mores-signs which become associated with the weakening of social boundaries between the "good" and the "bad" elements of society. Sexual control becomes associated with social and moral order, but sexuality also becomes a domain where more diffuse social anxieties are imported. Public problems such as the widening of the income gap, the growth of poverty among youth, and the excesses of consumer culture, (problems the political right is highly resistant to address), are masked by the moral righteousness of sexual crusades. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of the meta-analysis was its finding that the effects of poverty and other broad indicators of family well-being outweighed sexual abuse as a factor associated with mental health problems in adulthood. But the heat of sexual hysteria readily obscures these less dramatic forms of "abuse." Poverty and neglect of children do not mobilize the same moral outrage in American society as does the specter of weakening sexual taboos.

Anxious about appearing "lax" on moral issues, the American Psychiatric Association eventually joined conservative organizations in calling for APA to retract the article. Matt Salmon even introduced a resolution to condemn the article in Congress and the House voted, almost unanimously (14 abstained), to condemn the article on the grounds that it gave a green light to pedophiles. After initially supporting the scientific validity of the article (Rind, personal communication, 1999), Raymond Fowler, the president of APA, retracted his support and in June wrote a letter to Congress denouncing it, saying that the article included opinions inconsistent with APA's views. He also set up a board to review future articles that have the potential to raise public concern.

In support of Fowler and the APA, Patricia Kobor, director of science and policy at the APA, argues that psychologists are "participants in a social contract with Congress and the public: if we don't work with them to explain how and what we are about, they can and will assume the worst and act on it. If psychological scientists value public support and federal funding for

research, if they hope to be of some service to the common welfare, then we have to work with members of Congress and other groups, and we have to safeguard a reputation for straight talk and fair play.”

Funding of psychological research is increasingly governed by a more conservative mood in the nation, rather than on more liberal principles of the “common welfare.” Both psychology and psychiatry have a long history of dependence on the state, and particularly on its conservative wing. These professions gained initial prominence during World War I, with the testing and treatment of soldiers, and made monumental gains with the funding of training programs and research again after subsequent wars. Since the 1980s, an increasingly conservative political agenda dominates the funding of research, emphasizing biological over social causes and individual mental health over social change. While a cause like child sexual abuse unites politicians and psychologists, declaring one’s opposition to child sexual abuse is a risk-free stance; indeed, only highly marginal organizations such as the North American Man-Boy Association defend such practices that others might call abuse.

It would be misleading to conclude, however, that all of the criticisms of the Rind et al. study emanated from a conservative political agenda. Some criticisms come from child welfare advocates fearful of a cultural swing in the direction of minimizing the impact of sexual abuse, just as there was a previous tendency in the mental community toward overstating sexual abuse as a single causal determinant of adult distress. The APSAC Advisor (a newsletter of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children) published a commentary responding to the uproar by pointing out that those in the sexual abuse research community have actually known for some time that a significant number of sexually abused children have no measurable long-term negative outcomes (KendallTackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993). That does not negate, they argue, the responsibilities of clinicians to treat those who have been harmed. Taking issue with the interpretation of “small effect size,” they point out the well known fact that we accept that smoking causes lung cancer while the effect size for this association is small and comparable to that of child sexual abuse to long-term psychological problems. These authors also point out that the meta-analysis only looks at one kind of outcome, mental health, and that there are other outcomes that may be measured as indicators of long-term trauma (for example, quality of life, successful adjustment, capacity for pleasure).

One of the more problematic critiques leveled at the meta-analysis is that victims may not be a reliable source of data on the effects of their abuse experiences. The authors of the APSAC critique argue that an abused child may learn from the abuser that such experiences are normal and positive, and accept the abuser’s view of such events to his or her own detriment. They suggest that when considering outcomes, the idea that a child learns that adult-child sex is acceptable is, in and of itself, a poor outcome. This is an interesting critique because it brings up important issues of believability as well as multiple perspectives on the truth. Ironically, Rind et al. seem to be advocating “believing the child” (or, rather, believing the college student’s perspective) when they argue that perhaps the term child sexual abuse should not be used to describe all forms of “adult-child” sex.

And, while Rind et al. argue that, on the one hand, college students are telling us that some acts we consider child sexual abuse may not be abusive, they also argue that “the findings of the current review should not be construed to imply that CSA never causes intense harm for men or women-clinical research has well documented that in specific cases it can” (p. 42). And although they embrace these two perspectives they reveal their own bias for a single cause or a single perspective by stating “classifying a behavior as abuse simply because it is generally viewed as

immoral or defined as illegal is problematic, because such a classification may obscure the true nature of the behavior and its actual causes and effects.” This notion that there is an “essential” reality that empirical investigation has the power to uncover belies their strongest argument: that sexual experiences are open to multiple meanings and interpretations.

Sexual Abuse Research in Historical Context

During the first wave of research on incest and child sexual abuse in the 1970s and 1980s, researchers routinely pointed out the relative paucity of literature on incest or child sexual abuse. Influenced by the children’s rights and women’s movements of that period, sexual abuse researchers had a sense of venturing into culturally forbidden territory, of finding what previous researchers and clinicians were not inclined to see.

Having won this ground, researchers and professionals on the forefront of the sexual abuse awareness movement have been understandably wary of assessing the costs of the victory. But there were costs, some of which emerged in zealous campaigns to ferret out histories of sexual abuse, whether in day care cases or in the history of psychotherapy patients. The mere suspicion or question of a history of sexual abuse seemed definitive evidence because the general thinking in the field throughout the 1980s was that the effects of a history of sexual abuse were denied, minimized, or otherwise concealed, and that the risk of “false positives” was negligible. It seemed counter-intuitive that children or adults would produce, or could be led to produce, disturbing sexual scenes or memories not based on actual abuse incidences. By the late 1980s, child sexual abuse had achieved a tremendous cultural potency as a primary cause of adult psychopathology, particularly for women.

Although in basic agreement about the trauma of sexual abuse, there was a tension between child welfare advocates who situated child sexual abuse as a family problem and feminists who described it as a product of a history of patriarchal oppression. The writing of child welfare proponents focused on public health, which tends to emphasize prevention and protection as well as therapy. Sometimes lumped together with issues of physical abuse and neglect, mothers as well as fathers were examined as perpetrators, and mother-blaming was acceptable practice in this literature. Mothers became the focus of blame for sexual abuse for “not knowing” and thus not protecting their daughters. While feminist responses were also concerned with protection of children and especially girls, the focus became the maniacal male, which produced an easy target for women’s anger. Both feminists and child welfare advocates, however, were united in their use of the long list of symptoms from trauma to argue for greater child protection, more insurance benefits, and therapy for victims.

The rise of sexual abuse as a moral crusade coincided with changes in the mental health community and institutions as well. Women entered the field in growing numbers during the 1970s and 1980s, creating a more responsive mental health culture to female concerns. The expansion of the field and the growing public acceptance of psychotherapy meant that issues of happiness and wellbeing were taken seriously as mental health issues. But by the 1980s, restrictions on mental health coverage contributed to the movement to focus on trauma; extreme indicators of psychological distress displaced this earlier focus on “strains and stresses” (Haaken, 1998).

It could be argued that women’s interest in child sexual abuse and the discovery of the commonality of abuse in women’s histories paved the way for their greater voice and professionalization of therapy for abuse and victimization. But with the decline of an activist women’s movement during the 1980s, the struggle of women against patriarchal control took on

a more individualistic cast. The social problem of exploitation of women and girls was increasingly defined as a mental health problem.

With the decline of the broad-based social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the mental health issue of child sexual abuse emerged as a unifying issue around which health professionals, women's organizations, and conservatives alike could organize. Right-wing conservatives were frightened by sex, whereas leftists and feminists were critical of the patriarchal family. As we noted earlier, it has been much harder to win the struggle against poverty, inequality, or even non-sexual physical abuse of children than it has the struggle against pornography and child sexual abuse. The child advocacy movement, the growing cadre of psychotherapists, psychologists, and social workers, as well as feminist activists found unity around the conviction that child sexual abuse was not only wrong, but that it had devastating effects on the lives of children, on women as a group, and on the mental health of women and girls in this society. This conviction certainly had support from the devastated lives of many victims. Clinical histories and consciousness-raising groups were rife with stories of such damage. But it is important to recognize how abuse stories may be mobilized for multiple political ends, and that some stories gain more political currency than others.

Women Angels, Child Innocents

Narratives and research on child sexual abuse that emerged out of this post-activist era positioned women as innocent and simultaneously damaged. Middle class women were able to rebel against patriarchal controls and break from familial entanglements through the position of innocent child-victim, in a way that was more difficult to achieve from the perspective of more morally ambiguous and conflicted adult sexuality. There is a long history of cultural splitting between the portrait of evil temptress, on the one hand, and virtuous maiden on the other. During periods of broad-based activism, women have been able collectively to resist these narrow and repressive images, refusing the positions of either „angel of the house“ or evil temptress. But during periods when feminism gains seem more precarious, the ideal of female moral purity assumes a more central social symbolic position in the movement for women's rights.

Just as casting women as the „angels in the house“ concealed deeper currents of female rebellion during the 19th century, casting children as innocents obscures the more complex reality of their lives. The romanticizing of childhood in nineteenth-century Western culture took place during an era of massive child labor and of displaced children in the growing urban areas of the country. During this same period, the family was portrayed as a womb-like refuge from the ravaging effects of industrial life. This fantasy of the family as a „haven in a heartless world,“ shielding children from adult life was itself a reaction to the harshness of industrial life. And it was a cultural fantasy that thrived in an era when childhood was becoming increasingly dangerous for the children in the working classes. Protection of children from wanton influences became the hallmark of nineteenth-century moral reformers.

Similarly today, the debate over „protecting“ children from adult sexual predators is symptomatic of a broader range of concerns over children and „loss of innocence.“ This has been a period of shifting cultural borders: the borders of gender, sexuality, and normative conceptions of family life. Protections and supports for families have declined, even as the rallying cry for protection of the „sexual innocence“ of children becomes more strident. The movement to increase social awareness of child sexual abuse signified both the vital advances of feminism, and the limited terrain of its victories by the 1980s. No paid parental leave policy, no national health insurance, and no subsidized child care existed. Disparities in income widened and child poverty rates grew.

Women were working more hours than ever, still carrying the lion's share of housework and child care within the family. Set against these defeats were notable victories in the area of sexual rights: the legalization of abortion and the passage of sexual harassment and reformed rape laws were among the main gains of this era in addition to removing discriminatory barriers in employment.

Child sexual abuse acquired symbolic importance as a social problem - as the „epidemic“ of the late 1980s and early 1990s - because it registered many concerns that unified women. Protection of children is an area where „failures“ fall particularly harshly on women as mothers. Child sexual abuse more often implicated men as fathers, shifting the axis of mother-blaming. In a sense, it was a historical redistribution of guilt - a collective project of coming out from under the load of unequal social responsibilities for the adult fate and happiness of children.

Contemporary Sexual Politics

The sexual politics of second wave feminism - the women's movement that emerged in the 1970s - was organized around sexual liberation and emancipation from traditional constraints. Debate about the role of patriarchy centered on the repression of female desire - the inhibitions and constraints imposed on women by the law of the father - rather than on the legacy of overt violations. Yet as the movement achieved significant advances and women entered public life and the professions in historically unprecedented numbers, there was a significant shift in the sexual politics that took hold within the movement. At the same time, sadomasochism, queer politics, and female pornography became publicly more visible.

But these lack of developments lacked a popular base in feminist informed practice, e.g., in the mental health field, social services, crisis services. While there has been greater public discussion of sexuality, greater tolerance for diverse sexual practices among adults, and greater use of sex for commercial purposes, the idea of protecting children from sexuality is quite salient. Many states still restrict sex education programs from speaking about sexual intercourse in any way that does not promote abstinence. And although advertisers dress up children to portray sexual images on television and magazines, the majority of the public believes that children are not sexual beings. One study of mental health professionals indicates that psychologists generally believe that two eight-year-olds exposing their genitals to each other is „wrong.“

One of the important issues raised in the Rind et al. meta-analysis, obscured in the heat of moral outrage, is that child sexual abuse has widened to encompass so many experiences and degrees of abuse that it loses any discriminative power as a concept. A recent trend in the child advocacy literature illustrates this trend, with the profile of the perpetrator shifting to youth - with a high percentage of perpetrators identified as adolescent boys - and a focus on sexual acts committed between children. Since children are understood to be asexual, it is assumed that sexual explorations in childhood are either initiated by adult perpetrators or are part of some cycle of abuse whereby adults enact sexual acts with children who then compulsively reenact them with peers their own age or younger.

Two critiques are missing in this mental health literature on child perpetrators. The first is one that explains the effects of adolescent boys growing up in a culture that supports male sexual entitlement and group denigrating of girls. This critique focuses on the socialization of gender roles - a socialization process that places adolescent sex offenders on a continuum of dominating behaviors of males toward females and their acts as somewhat normative in male socialization. The finding in the Rind et al., study that the first sexual experience of girls is more often

described as negative than positive suggests that the boundary between the normative sexuality and abuse for girls is a murky one. The second missing critique focuses on „normal“ childhood sexuality.

Freud’s theory of infantile sexuality was among his most radical „discoveries,“ a perspective that incensed Victorian romantic portraits of the asexuality of children. Of course, adult fantasies are perpetually projected onto children: the creation of an imagined oasis of childhood innocence and purity, which must be defended against predatory adult incursions, expresses anxieties on the part of adults over their own sexual impulses and desires.

The uproar over whether sex between adults and children is abusive or not stems from the idea that any kind of adult-child sex is abuse, no matter what the outcome and no matter what the feelings of the child or the adult. It is important to recognize, however, that children can never be equal participants in relation to adults and sex, and by imagining they could we leave open the way to exploitation. The moratorium of adolescence speaks to this issue of equality, saying that children are a special category because of their vulnerability to being exploited, adolescence a time of transition. But this kind of categorization does not necessarily need to mean that before adolescence, children are asexual or innocent.

Anthropological work not only reveals enormous variation in sexual activity in children but also many cultures which encourage children’s „hands-on“ learning of sex. In our own country research has shown that children as young as age 3 can reach orgasm and that in latency-aged children, mutual sexual play is quite common. Sexual activities of children do not, as Freud suggested, decline in latency years, but continue with increasing frequency throughout childhood.

In spite of this evidence of common childhood sexuality, we hold onto an image of the child as a sexual innocent. And what seems particularly hypocritical in the moral outrage over the Rind et al., study is that children who are not enclosed in this imaginary enchanted space of childhood innocence in American society are routinely discarded. Once children cross the threshold , leaving childhood behind, they increasingly lose this sentimental veil of adult protection. There are three notable examples: adolescent perpetrators of sexual abuse; teen mothers; adolescents who kill. In each of these cases, children are treated as if they were adults. How can we send adolescents to prison and adult court for murder and also say that an adolescent boy who seeks to have sex with an adult can give no consent? Are children only to be protected when they fit our fantasy of innocence and passivity?

Science and Sexual Abuse

In order to understand the heat generated by the meta-analysis, we also need to think through the relationship between politics and science. For many trained in the procedural rules of science, professional identity is based on the ideal of social distance and objectivity. From this perspective, the scientist takes his or her inquiry wherever it leads, with a dispassionate commitment to results uncontaminated by subjectivity. There is always something to be said for this tradition - for seeking out evidence contrary to one’s assumptions or hypothesis about the world. But this ideal has come in for considerable scrutiny over the years, as critics have pointed out how embedded research is in cultural assumptions and subjective factors.

Deciding on the primary causes of human suffering is a cultural process as much as it is a scientific one. Indeed, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle the two. It is very difficult to separate, for example, how much of the trauma associated with rape is the result of

the sexual violence, and how much results from cultural beliefs that women who are raped are damaged goods. Human acts operate within a meaning system that provides interpretations, including the right to feel violated and to demand redress.

The uproar over the Rind et al. study is also affiliated with a history of struggle on the part of women in resisting male control of science. There is an understandable suspicion of science among people who are more apt to be the objects of study than participants in deciding on the terms of inquiry. Furthermore, some areas of feminism exhibit a wariness toward science because so many aspects of women's lives are not readily open to empirical verification. In the aftermath of the contemporary feminist movement, the distresses women began to articulate focused largely on events in private life, behind closed doors and beyond the reaches of the observational methods of science. Women moved into the professions, as scientists and mental health practitioners, with a commitment to reveal formerly concealed truths, and to confronting resistance within the professions to investigating women's concerns. This emphasis on the motivational side to science, and the understanding that it has a close affinity with powerful scientific interests, was a central galvanizing insight behind establishing women studies as an academic discipline.

In 'Whose Science, Whose Knowledge', the scientist Sandra Harding addresses the issue of feminist epistemology with regard to women entering scientific fields. Her use of the phrase „standpoint theory“ was intended to show that there is a way of doing science that might set aside objectivity and begin from an individual perspective, and, as she puts it, the dailiness of women's lives. In honoring this perspective, women researchers have exalted women's individual experiences as an equal and viable source of knowledge to empirical inquiry, not only because empiricism is wrought with biases and often in the hands of men but because empiricism can never answer some questions that are vital to women's lives.

It is with this understanding that we question the use of the phrase „true nature“ in reference to the sexual acts described. The victim advocates who responded in the APSAC Advisor questioned whether we can trust that a positive response to adult-child sex is a „true“ response or one conditioned by the abuser. We take the position that there may not be a „true“ nature to these acts, even if there are important reasons to view them in certain ways over others.

Let's examine three examples, the first two of which are introduced by Rind et al. in discussing the historical determinants of sexual taboos: masturbation; first sexual experiences for women; and date rape. The culture no longer believes that masturbation is an evil that produces blindness. And yet Jocelyn Elders was fired from her position as surgeon general because she suggested that school sex education programs might introduce this as an educational topic and as an alternative to sexual intercourse in the high school years. This is all to say that although we have changed in our opinion of the effects of masturbation, it is still an area of social control over youth. While science can debunk the belief that masturbation produces blindness, social prohibitions make it less likely that research would generate findings that masturbation is associated with increased mental health or with the enhancement of later sexual relationships.

There is no universal boundary between normative and pathological sexuality, nor are there precise definitions of any of these acts. Furthermore, definitions are contested because of conflicting values and ideas in the culture which affect how they are framed and interpreted. Broader patterns of cultural influence and positions of power structure the effects of various social encounters. Men are not treated as if they were damaged goods when abused. Rather, man who cross „authorized“ sexual boundaries are more apt to be viewed as adventurous.

Statistical analysis of competing data sets do not do justice to what is at stake in the battle over the status of child sexual abuse as a cause of adult suffering, and particularly women's suffering. We need an alternative means of entering into the psychological and social meaning of these accounts and of understanding why and how they came to carry such import for vast numbers of contemporary women.

Likewise, we need an alternative means of entering into an understanding of children's agency and sexuality. Ironically, it may be that a general change in our attitudes towards children which allows them their sexuality and some capacity for consent would work better to prevent sexual abuse, in the same way that sex education works to prevent teen pregnancy. But whether we refer to CSA as adult-child sex or not, we are not released from the moral dilemmas, from working through moral questions about appropriate behavior towards children, about their exploitation and about their care. Conservative responses that make facile statements issuing zero tolerance in the area of sex and sexual abuse ignore broader issues of poverty and poor education that both compound the effects of sexual violations and are far more chronic and pervasive in American society.

There are many good reasons for adults not to have sex with children that do not require a romanticized picture of children that casts them as true innocents, easily damaged, or unable to give consent. Common morality should argue against sexual exploitation of children and for a duty or obligation of every adult to protect and care for children. From a feminist perspective, we might expect that the loosening of such boundaries, before there is equality among the sexes, would most certainly lead to greater misuse of them in their own homes. And we need to take into consideration that we live in a culture that still equates sexuality with shame, where parents do not routinely tickle the genitals of their children (as they do in some cultures) but have routinely beat their bare bottoms.

Science has much to offer and yet scientifically produced knowledge cannot, in and of itself answer questions of morality or questions about the relative value of subjective experience of such events. To say that women and men who have been abused as children do not necessarily suffer longstanding trauma is not the same as saying that abuse is fine. To say that children might experience abuse as pleasurable sex is not to say that abuse is acceptable. All of these claims require a deeper exploration of abuse and sexuality, an exploration that has been limited by the anxieties often evoked in talk about sex. All of these ideas are worth further investigation, further debate.

Suggested Further Readings

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