Foreword: The Debate on Pedophilia

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Pedophilia is one of the taboo topics in sex research. Sexologists carefully skirt and avoid the subject as much as possible; when they take it up they do so in conformist, moralizing, and faint-hearted tones. This attitude has a long tradition. In his immensely long and comprehensive work on homosexuality, Magnus Hirschfeld, who fought so indefatigably and courageously for the rights of homosexuals, only dedicates a couple of lines to pedophiles and then only uses standard phrases: pedophiles merely form a “subgroup” (Nebengruppe) of homosexuals who “undoubtedly have the most unfortunate sexual leanings” (Hirschfeld, 1917–1920, p. 213 and Hirschfeld 1920, p. 281). He does not say a word about the misery and persecution suffered by this “subgroup,” although he so clearly perceived and combated it on behalf of the “maingroup.”

Little has changed since then; there is still a tendency to draw the line at pedophilia and ostracize pedophiles, as the politics of the gay movement reveal. Solidarity only goes so far and stops where one’s own interests and reputation might be at stake (Thorstad, 1990) This means that the “subgroup” is—just as in Hirschfeld’s day—left to the mercy and hypocrisy of society at large. For many sex researchers and gay activists, a “decent” homosexual starts at the “age of consent” laid down by the state. These age limits are far too high in most societies; they aim to protect young people from their own sexual wishes than from sexual exploitation.

This volume is to be welcomed as a courageous attempt to break with bad tradition. One wonders which other publication in our field would be bold enough to make such a move. Of course the taboo still makes itself felt here (one could hardly expect otherwise): the underlying tone of many of the contributions is defensive and cautious; occasionally one comes across the euphemism of “intergenerational intimacy”; pedophilia is often presented as a particularly ardent form of paternal love and pedophiles as selfless helpers, aiding the children to discover and enjoy their sexuality. One sometimes has the impression that pedophilia is allowed to be anything as long as it is not sexual, an attempt to deny that pedophilia, just like other forms of loving, is first and foremost a physical affair, involving lust, sensuality, passion, and desire. To suggest
otherwise is, as Martin Dannecker remarked, “a monstrous denial of the sexual wishes” of pedophiles and nothing but apologetic kitsch (Dannecker, 1987, p. 79).

Speaking of pedophilia in the strict sense (i.e., sexual relationships between adults and prepubescent children—in contrast to relationships between adults and adolescents), there are two particular aspects which deserve our special attention because they make pedophile relationships particularly risky: First, the crucial and incontrovertible fact that in such relationships the adult and the child involved are not on an equal footing and the adult always has the upper hand. Because of this power differential, it is an illusion to suppose or hope that such a relationship is or can turn into a loving partnership between equals (a state of affairs which is rare in partnerships of any kind). The danger of exploiting the partner—in this case the child—by ignoring its needs and wishes, i.e., childish needs and wishes, is particularly strong in pedophile relationships, even where no physical force or pressure is involved. Being in a position of authority and power does not inevitably result in exploitation, but it all too often does. Children are subject to much pressure, not only from pedophiles, as the evidence on parental interference and abuse shows. Since there are far more parents than pedophiles, the power exerted by parents is potentially greater, and the havoc caused to their children’s sexual development far more frequent, even where no sexual abuse is involved. All this, however, does not alter the fact that a pedophilic relationship can all too easily have a repressive effect on the child.

This becomes clearer when we turn to the second special aspect. In the 1930s, Sandor Ferenczi pointed out that there is a fundamental difference between an adult’s and a young child’s sexual wishes, and that this difference becomes blurred in a sexual relationship between an adult and a child, at the child’s expense (Ferenczi, 1972). Ferenczi describes “the linguistic confusion between adult and child,” the “disparity between the child’s tender erotic wishes and the adult’s passionate desires” (Ferenczi, 1972, p. 312). Ferenczi maintains that children do not crave genital sex with adults and that if they submit to it, it is often to win the adults’ love and attention. Ferenczi warns, “if during the phase when the children long for tender affection, more love or love of a different kind is forced on them than they want, this will have just as pathogenic consequences as denying them love, which has so often been mentioned” (Ferenczi, 1972, p. 310).

The lack of equality between the partners and Ferenczi’s theory of the incompatibility of adults’ and children’s sexual wishes are two essential aspects in the debate on pedophilia. “The right of children and adolescents to sexual activity (which pedophiles often and rightly claim) does not include the right of the adult to the sexuality of the child,” as Günter Amendt puts it (Amendt, 1982, p. 142). And yet these aspects, provided one discusses them seriously, without any persecutory zeal and without defensively attempting to minimize them, are not enough to enable us to judge individual cases of pedophilia.

A person’s age, or the difference in age between the partners, says too little about the nature and quality of their relationship to justify making laws against such partnerships merely on the strength of this information. Pedophile relationships are extremely varied, despite their common features, too varied to allow us to use the term “sexual abuse” as a synonym without being guilty of discriminating against and defaming a whole group of people.
There are, even where no physical force or pressure is exerted, relationships which are exploitative, damaging, and blind to the child's needs; there are also relationships in which children realize that the adult is in a weak position because of the law and use this power in a blackmailing fashion. And there are successful pedophile relationships which help and encourage the child, even though the child often agrees to sex while really seeking comfort and affection. These are often emotionally deprived, deeply lonely, socially isolated children who seek, as it were, a refuge in the adult's love and for whom, because of their misery, see it as a stroke of luck to have found such an "enormously nurturant relationship," in John De Cecco's words (De Cecco, 1988, p.10).

It looks as though children who are not emotionally deprived are, so to speak, "immune" to the advances of an adult seeking sexual contact. Each individual case must be looked upon in its own merits and, for this reason the threat to make all pedophile acts punishable by law can barely be labeled civilized; on the contrary, it is unjust, for it implies the discrimination and persecution of a minority and should be abolished.

REFERENCES


