ON THE IATROGENIC NATURE OF THE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE DISCOURSE

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Abstract: In the last decades of the 20th century there was an unprecedented surge of anxieties and alarm over erotic experiences involving minors and adults, which has continued as a social and scientific discourse in which these relationships invariably are seen as abusive, harmful, and criminal. In this paper, the fundamental characteristics of this discourse, whose basis and pertinence are questioned, are analyzed for their possible iatrogenic effects; i.e., those induced by professional intervention, in four key areas of social reality: the erotic dimension of human beings, individual responsibility, the use of penal law as a mechanism of social control, and fostering better relations between the sexes and generations. Critical reflection on the social and professional handling of the problem includes the undesirable effects which such treatment may be producing.

Keywords: Sexual abuse, social discourse, iatrogenic, child, generation

Part One: The Discourse

Introduction

The "abuse discourse" (Malón, 2004) and the ever more frequent recourse to the rhetoric of violence and victimism increasingly have been applied to sexual issues in recent decades. Ideological campaigns which purportedly fight against the coercion and harm that one sex – or one generation – supposedly inflicts on the other claim to seek the betterment of humanity in general, however, this discourse and these campaigns would not seem to be uniformly helpful in improving the human condition. On the contrary, there may be good reasons to suspect that these propagate what might be called a paradigm of sexual conflict with potential iatrogenic dimensions, inadvertently exacerbating the problems they claim to be combating. The inquiry into the sexual dangers that are assumed to lay in wait for minors is a prominent part of this discussion, which revolves around academics, professionals, and ideological activists; however, the primary interface between this discourse and the general public is the media.

Society currently is inundated by what Jenkins (1998) refers to as a new wave of "moral panic" regarding the sexual activities of minors with older persons, the latest in a recurring series

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that has emerged intermittently in the past century or more, principally in the US, UK, and Australia, but to some degree in other nations. These social anxieties are reflected in the academic, political, and media immoderation regarding the questions of child sexual abuse. One striking example of this sensationalism is the TV series *To Catch a Predator*, in which adults posing as minors lure men into what they believe are consensual sexual situations, only to be arrested while being filmed for later commercial broadcasting (Salkin, 2006). Neither are these excesses in any way balanced by scholarly dialogue with and by academics and professionals; indeed, the discourses of many of these "experts" differ little from those of the media. Early sexual experiences with older persons are much more common than is generally recognized (Martinson, 1994; Rind, Bauserman, & Tromovitch, 1998), and it is appropriate for professionals to provide counsel when intervention seems to be necessary. However, it is essential to clarify the nature of specific situations – which of these do or do not require intervention, and what is the best form of such intervention if and when it is indicated. The current media obfuscation, exaggeration, and exploitation, which are endorsed by some activists and are not adequately examined and challenged by academic and professionals, are counterproductive to rationality in both academic and public deliberations and decisions in these matters, and in all probability materially contribute to the iatrogenic problems to be discussed later in this paper.

The Panorama

The last decades of the 20th century have seen a surge of social anxiety in the western world over what has come to be called the question of sexual abuse (Malón, 2004). This concept of abuse, in its diverse forms, can be characterized by three fundamental traits: (a) it is defined in a very clear manner as to its perpetrators and its victims, with the former being men and the latter being women and children; (b) it is a question of a type of abuse which is distinct from other kinds because it is based on male sexuality, which is viewed as a source of criminal impulses or strategies of oppression and domination, and (c) the inclusion of these issues under the umbrella of the legal system have resulted in what some have called the "criminalization of sex," in which the increasing transformation of the socially and/or religiously unacceptable into the illegal has gone hand-in-hand with the socio-legal intrusion into the realm of the personal and the intimate. In this way, concepts belonging to criminology, such as "victim" and "perpetrator," have become common not only in the arenas of education, research, medicine, health, or social assistance (Goodyear-Smith, 1993; Money, 1999; Nelson, 1989; Renshaw, 1982), but also in our daily lives. While these traits and concepts are present in all areas of sexuality, they are especially emphasized in the current discussions regarding relationships between minors and older persons (Mirkin, 1999).

The Battleground

The western world is obsessed with childhood and its sexuality (Aries, 1987; Boas, 1966; Egan & Hawkes, 2007; Elschenbroich, 1979; Kincaid, 1998; Neuman, 1975). The 18th century saw the beginning of the masturbatory insanity hypothesis (Hare, 1962; Szasz, 1970), the 19th became disturbed over the guilty, rebellious, or delinquent child, and the 20th was obsessed with the child victim (Best, 1990; Mosher, 1991). This latter potent image was developed with more emphasis later in the 20th century and was based on the assertion that all psychological and social problems originate in childhood and are determinants that both predict and explain personality and behavior (Kagan, 2000, Ch. 2). In this paradigm the child was seen more and more as the innocent victim of an evil society, and the psychoanalytically oriented theories of

authors like Miller (1983) were very influential in establishing the rhetoric of children as being perpetually victimized by adults in all societies.

Following the "sexual revolution" of the 1970s, where traditional morality was relaxed and the discussion was of a right to pleasure, there occurred a kind of sexual counter-revolution, in which the struggle for freedom and pleasure that had characterized the previous era mutated into a fight for "victims" and against "perpetrators" (Money, 1999). The affirmative watchword of "liberate yourself!" similarly mutated into an anxious "protect yourself!". Multiple issues came to the forefront: abuse, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, assault, harassment, “date rape," prostitution, pornography, sexual tourism, pedophilia, sexual addiction, AIDS, etc. If the sexology of the first two thirds of the 20th century established that repression of desire was the problem (Robinson, 1977), the criminology of the last third stressed that the problem is the control of this desire.

In this context the question of minors and their sexuality is prominent in an apprehensive society which is characterized by a social organization increasingly structured around "risk" (Beck, 1986). The discourse of abuse emerged out of a series of institutions, organizations, movements, researchers, and professionals who articulated its discussion around the threat of the erotic and, therefore, around fighting eroticism (Jenkins, 1998), in which a particular ideological and rhetorical use of "abuse" and "childhood" increasingly was employed.

The rhetoric of the child victim (Best, 1990) is particularly useful to ideologues as a strategy of symbolic substitution, presenting children as being threatened potential victims in order to denounce other phenomena such as homosexuality, pornography, consensual prostitution, differences or inequalities between the sexes, social groups which diverge from what is customary, problems with adolescence, etc. In the US, for example, a frequent recourse against unpopular groups has been to accuse them of tolerating and practicing sexual relations with minors (Delgado, 1992; Goodyear-Smith, 1993). An extreme example is the Waco massacre in the early 1990s, where, under the pretext of saving children from supposed sexual abuse – later found to be false – dozens of people, including twenty-four minors, ended up dead (Nathan & Snedeker, 2001; Underwager & Wakefield, 1994). Neither are the accusations of pedophilia within the Catholic church exempt from similar misappropriation (Jenkins, 2001).

From this perspective, at the beginning of the 21st century there are various phenomena in Western countries which illustrate the rise of child sexual abuse as a perceived increasing threat (Malón, 2004). The route utilized by these social movements is not, as occurred with Onanism, primarily the medical (Neuman, 1975), although the reintroduction of a theory of trauma and treatment (Oellerich, 2001; Wakefield, 2006a) is present, but rather, the criminal, and the already-cited criminalization of sex (Money, 1985, 1999). Various social ideologies appear to share the goal of establishing erotic desire as a special source of evil and suffering (Goodyear-Smith, 1993; Levine, 2003; Malón, 2004; Nathan & Snedeker, 2001); some of these are:

1. The new moral right, especially in the US and UK, which has configured the erotic as a source of disorder (Cañeque, 1988), accusing modern sexual permissiveness of being a direct cause of the many ills afflicting society, ranging from the abuse of minors to unwanted pregnancies, and on up to the problem of single mothers and AIDS (Jenkins, 1998).

2. A few of the more militant feminists, with their view of the erotic as an agent of men's oppression against and domination of women, have condemned masculine eroticism as violent by definition, with pornography being its signal reflection. Women and children are, then, the victims of a patriarchal society which seeks to terrorize them via sexual aggression (Lipovetsky, 2000; Osborne, 1989, 1993; Vance, 1989).
3. The child protection movements and institutions which resort to the erotic as a threat against minors and as an especially terrible form of maltreatment (Rind, Bauserman, & Tromovitch, 1998), thus relegating other – surely higher priority – problems to the back burner.
4. Certain social panics in which the sexual abuse of minors are situated within the context of supposed networks of pedophiles, pornographers, and abusers involved in such things as Satanic cults which commit unimaginable atrocities (Nathan & Snedeker, 2001; Victor, 1996). Exaggeration, absurdity, and falsity are the hallmarks of these never-proven reports.
5. The therapeutic model of the "recovered memory movement," according to which an enormous range of problems in adult life are explainable in terms of repressed memories of sexual abuse in childhood (Bass & Davis, 1988; for criticism see Underwager & Wakefield, 1994). In this hypothesis, healing is the natural consequence of the recovery of these memories in therapy.

These and other similar ideologies, within a reinforcing cultural, social, and moral context, engendered the rise of a rancorous public discussion based on, as well as nourished by, an increasing scientific involvement in the issues surrounding minors and sexuality which, unfortunately, frequently would exhibit characteristics of pseudo-science, i.e., questionable premises, inappropriate procedures, faulted research, and unsupported conclusions (Malón, 2004; Nathan & Snedeker, 2001; Ofshe & Watters, 1996; Underwager & Wakefield, 1994).

The Discourse

The current abuse discourse of these erotic experiences involving minors is built upon profoundly puritanical, victimistic, and anti-erotic ideological foundations (Levine, 2003; Malón, 2004; Money, 1985, 1999; Underwager & Wakefield, 1993). There also is, however, a significant counter-discourse of research and critiques of these matters (Constantine & Martinson, 1981; Goodyear-Smith, 1993; Nathan & Snedeker, 2001; Ofshe & Watters, 1996; Rind, Bauserman, & Tromovitch, 1998; Underwager & Wakefield, 1994).

But regrettably, what is heard the most is the nearly universal criminalizing perspective. From it, any experience with erotic connotations between a minor and an adult is, by definition, a criminal act and tragic in its consequences. It is portrayed as one of the worst things that can happen to a minor, as well as one of the most atrocious villainies that an older person can commit, therefore deserving of the most draconian of punishments. Since "abuse" is ambiguous and vague and has as many definitions as there are definers, statistics are readily inflated, thereby giving the impression that society is dealing with a ubiquitous catastrophe. Resorting to emotionality brings rationality to grinding halt, and that infinite variety of experiences and acts that are encompassed by the dark label of "abuse" is reduced to an all-encompassing universal calamity.

In this way of thinking, sex is equated with aggression. The sexual motives or sexual nature of the older person are redefined as evidence of violence, independently of whether force, coercion, or deceit had or had not been present. This gives rise to three distinctive effects: (a) the criminalization of all of these experiences, (b) the assumed victim status of all of the minors involved, and (c) the demonization of all of the adult – or even older minor – participants. The most evident and direct form for the implementation of these three strategies, whether it be in media or scientific accounts – which are not all that different from one another in this respect – is what might be called "terminological saturation," a strategy which consists of the repetitive and indiscriminate use of terms like victim, perpetrator, abuse, harm, injury, survivor, violence, aggression, submission, trauma, exploitation, etc., to pejoratively label all sexual experiences between a minor and an older person (Goodyear-Smith, 1993; Nelson, 1989).

Part Two: Iatrogenesis

Introduction

It is sometimes said that the solution is the problem; some minimally harmful experiences may well be severely exacerbated by overemphasizing their presumed invariable dreadfulness; indeed, essentially benign or neutral experiences can thus be made harmful. These iatrogenic tendencies may exist in four areas: the modern problematization of the erotic, the crisis of responsibility among individuals with a victimistic bent, the questionable penalties imposed on the "perpetrators," and the damaging distractions between the sexes and generations.

The Erotic

Although the sexual abuse discourse insists that combating these perceived evils does not mean renouncing our erotic humanity, the question remains if the end result is the criminalization of erotic desire and its pleasures, thus doing away with what were some very hard-won gains in this area (Levine, 2003; Malón, 2004; Underwager & Wakefield, 1993). Certainly, a good portion of the abuse discourse has its origins in various "anti-erotic" referents – e.g., the feminist fight against pornography (Osborne, 1989, 1993). Nevertheless, the majority of those who say they are combating sexual abuse do not object to erotic encounters between adults which are free from intimidation, coercion, or, as in the case of prostitution, economic considerations. Some but not all even allow for such things as non-penetrative sex play between younger children. Significantly, however, they reject the possibility, even as an exception, of any consensual and positive experience between a minor and an adult. This combative and dogmatic attitude, and especially their implications and the ideology that surround it, may further erode the level of harmony between children and older persons, and to some degree between men and women. In fact, these messages generally attack – directly or indirectly – all aspects of the erotic, which are seen more and more as a source of new dangers, harms, and anxieties. Additionally, a significant aspect of this discourse is the sometimes convoluted and duplicitous manner in which the erotic is described, making it necessary for the investigator to search for the real intent of the allegations.

A review of the discourse of sexual dangers facing childhood and adolescents discloses this negative and problematized view of the erotic. From the pedophilic danger to unwanted pregnancy, from Internet child pornography to abuse among children themselves, a powerful discourse of sexual dangerousness has fostered an increase in sex education programs that

promote abstinence and chastity, while prohibiting any discussion of pleasure, masturbation, contraception, or desire (Levine, 2003). There is a trend towards exaggeration, towards regarding desire as something which is always disposed to get out of hand and which it is necessary to control carefully, an argument that inevitably degenerates into seeing all desire as criminal. The multiple dimensions of the erotic are problematized (see Underwager & Wakefield, 1993): eroticism is genitalized at the same time that the genitals have become taboo, and the child's body becomes defined as a fortress that must be protected against any incursions; at the same time body/spirit dualism is re-established, the spiritual self is alienated from its corporeal and sexual counterpart, desire for the other becomes a problem, and wishing to make oneself an object of desire becomes ever riskier.

In the area of the erotic, power is postulated as the source of many ills, but what is forgotten is that power is inherent in the human condition, and that it is neither good nor bad in and of itself. Nevertheless, every erotic relationship is presumed to be potentially abusive and traumatic in the search for a Utopian and impossible equality. Even relationships which are theoretically free and consensual, e.g., an affair between a student and a professor (Dank, 2008), are questioned and even criminalized as abusive, on the premise that one party is the victim and the other the victimizer. Likewise, any emotional stress, effects of past child sexual abuse, influence of alcohol, etc., are considered to adversely affect and undermine the capacity to give meaningful consent (Freyd, 2003, pp. 155-157). In the case of juvenile consensual relationships with adults (e.g. Hines & Finkelhor, 2007) the younger is considered to have no responsibility, whereas the adult – usually male – is considered guilty until proven innocent (Goodyear-Smith, 1996).

Encounters are deconstructed to the point of absurdity in the search for "pure consent," the erotic becomes aggressive and violent, violence is eroticized, and seduction loses the ambiguous and diffuse character that gives it meaning (Bruckner, 1996). Experimentation and play between children is seen as abuse, harassment, and aggression, and their erotic status is denied (Angelides, 2004), or at least problematized, at the same time that young children are seen as potential sexual perpetrators (Lamb & Coakley, 1993; for criticism see Okami, 1992). Every feeling, emotion, experience, thought, etc., of an even vaguely erotic nature that occurs within the family is rejected and condemned as abusive and criminal (Renshaw, 1982), and erotic nonconformities such as children's sexual experiences with older persons are characterized as monstrous.

Victimism versus Responsibility

There has been an increasing recourse to the model of the child-victim, with the purported objective being improved understanding and treatment (Best, 1990, 1997). However, the balance of the consequences of this is problematic; compassion for the unfortunate has devolved into either induced or voluntary victimism (Sykes, 1992). It is tragic that children who do not feel victimized are sometimes forced by their elders to accept the unwanted status of victim (Goodyear-Smith, 1993; Wilson, 1981), but others, even adults, choose to declare themselves a victim of something or someone because this typically brings with it a high degree of recognition; activists and social groups wanting to further their agenda therefore resort to the image of the victim in order to obtain public and media attention. It has become useful to manufacture victims whether it be for ideological or simply pragmatic reasons. In *The*

manufacture of madness, Szasz (1970) developed a critical analysis of the disturbing expansion of psychiatric “diagnoses”, a practice which may have been well intentioned, but whose effects were disastrous for both individuals as well as society as a whole. In a similar vein, Dineen (2000) in her critical analysis of the "Psychology Industry," views the increase of diagnoses of "victims" as a product of that industry and reiterates Szasz' evaluation of the effects.

Various authors (e.g., Hughes, 1994; Bruckner, 1996; etc.) have denounced these politics of victimism, in which showing oneself to be vulnerable is more profitable than taking responsibility; where complaining, making another person feel culpable, or practicing emotional blackmail turns out to be more advantageous than asserting, assuming, or showing oneself to be strong. For Hughes, the "omnipresent recourse to victimism culminates in the traditionally highly-esteemed American culture of therapeutics. Seeming to be strong may simply conceal a teetering scaffold of 'denial of the evidence,' whereas to be vulnerable is to be invincible. The grievance gives you power, though that power does not extend beyond emotional bribery or the creation of untold levels of social culpability. Declare yourself innocent and you win." (1994, p. 19). Bruckner takes up this question again, alerting us to its negative implications for social harmony, and defining victimism as the tendency on the part of the pampered citizen to think in terms of the schema of persecuted peoples, an attitude which is frequently associated with other characteristics of our society like infantilism, which implies appropriating the privileges of the child while avoiding the obligations of the adult. In Bruckner's reflections on this phenomenon, the combative discourses against the exaggerations of sexual violence never cease to occupy a position of importance.

In today's world, assumed victimization is a very popular political strategy (Mould, 1997). The mythology surrounding victimization guarantees that differences between genuine victims and those who merely assume that role become diffuse or disappear. A dichotomization of two aspects of the relationship between those who are designated as victim and perpetrator is required: The first relates to the difference in power, defining one as absolutely devoid of it, and the other as possessing it. The second aspect is a moral one, for the victim is defined as morally innocent, and the aggressor as evil (ibid.). The simplicity of the resort to victimism contrasts with its powerful influence on modern societies.

Following Todorov (1998) and Lipovetsky (2000), the origins of victimism may be found in the perversion and exaggeration of otherwise legitimate values such as liberty, equality, and justice. Victimistic excess has, among its other consequences, that of identifying individuals with the victim groups to which they belong, the construction of the personal identity as victim, and the refusal to take responsibility for one's own existence, even to the extent of excusing one's own criminal conduct in terms of previous experiences of abuse in childhood. Justice is supplanted by compassion for the victim and vengeance against the aggressor. Those who adopt the role of victim find themselves, in turn, morally justified in reprisals against the foe in a righteous tale of good conquering evil (Mould, 1997).

The problem of contemporary victimistic excess is inevitably associated with the search for security and the notion of a perfect life. The habit of blaming others for every bad thing that happens to us is an inherent part of our unrealistic expectations in this society of well-being, obsessed with avoiding all risk (Goodyear-Smith, 1993, p. 129), in which there is an assumed

inalienable right to a perfect existence, with neither problems nor suffering. Thus when any event, accident, or circumstance does disturb our ideal of life, there emerges that potent tendency to blame others, especially those who are perceived as having some sort of past or present authority over us.

The discourse against violence, sustained by compassion for victims, should include the fact that resorting to victimism is a risky proposition, and assuming the role of victim is as complicated as being a saint, for it involves an unreal and inhuman degree of purity. As Sontag (1989) noted, the victim suggests innocence and innocence suggests blame. Victimistic zeal, obsessed with the theory of zero tolerance where not even one victim should exist, leads society to pursue a mythical world in which the absence of any suffering would become the ultimate good. Victims and their salvation end up being placed above qualities like freedom and justice, and the common realities of human existence are ignored.

In a strange twist, this false victimism could end up harming real victims, who continually feel obliged to revisit their experiences because of a social atmosphere of complaint, denunciation, and sensationalism. There is also the danger of the creation of victims where they do not exist (Schultz, 1973). The final paradox may be that by shunning any shades of gray and treating all situations as having equal levels of seriousness and traumatic power, what ends up being generated is an indifference or insensitivity towards the truly serious cases (Brucker, 1996). Victimistic rhetoric leads to the trivialization of real suffering.

Penalties

Few would dispute that the best gift that could be passed on to future generations is a more humane, more just, and more reasonable society, and a good indicator of the humane quality of a society is the way in which it deals with those individuals who, for whatever reasons, are seen as having transgressed cultural norms. In direct contrast to such humaneness is the way in which many activists and professionals demand Draconian punishments of those who are involved sexually with children (Silverman & Wilson, 2002). Retribution and control over those who are regarded as social dangers are the mainstays of Western social management of offenders (De Georgi, 2005), who frequently remain under close social supervision – if not incarceration – for life, despite having already served their judicial sentence (Silva, 2002). Crimes perceived as sexual, driven by social and media hyperbole, are addressed through longer sentences and strengthened control. Some have denounced as excessive and inappropriate this increasing symbolic use of the penal law (Díez Ripollés, 2002; Tamarit, 2000) and called attention to the inherent dangers thereof. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the penal law has never been a particularly effective or useful recourse in the handling of sexual offenses (Díez Ripollés, 1981, 1985).

It is clear that in this paradigm offenders against children are seen as the most contemptible of persons and the monstrous epitome of degenerate wickedness. The socio-religious myth of the devourer of innocent souls has been resurrected; the pedophile is the successor of the ogre. The child-snatcher with the burlap bag has been replaced by the "man with the candy" (Delgado, 1992, p. 180); a hysterical society has returned to the stake where it used to burn homosexuals and witches. Those who are imprisoned for any form of sexual conduct with a child are seen as the worst of the worst; their status is that of outcasts among outcasts, and they

are permanently dehumanized and banished from any hope of ever participating again in civil society under the "criminal law of the enemy" (Gracia, 2005). Even the person who kills for drugs or revenge is more respectable.

The insistence on the minor's indisputable absolution of complicity or cooperation, so characteristic of the modern discourse of abuse, reinforces the other side of the coin: the axiomatic culpability of the older person and the justification of his demonization and dehumanization. But within the amalgam of pejorative terms – aggressors, violators, abusers, perpetrators, predators, *ad infinitum* – is surely found a diverse variety of individuals, to whom perhaps more humanizing judgments should be applied. The use of intimidation, coercion, and/or violence in these encounters is actually quite unusual, not only because these are rarely necessary, but because in many cases they are neither the means nor the end of the older party, who does not wish to intentionally harm the child. Yet, as some authors (Krivacska, Freel, Gibb, & Kinnear, 2001; Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004; Wakefield, 2006b) have pointed out, the media, politicians, and victim groups have conflated the image of pedophilia with that of sexual violence and predation, in spite of the fact that "pedophiles are not generally violent" (Levine, 2003, p. 25). Pedophiles also have a very minor rate of recidivism, which, although very difficult to research conclusively, is low in some studies (Langan, Schmitt, & Durose, 2003) or at least not as high as is generally assumed (Seto, 2008).

According to Quinn et al. (2004), many politicians have used these sorts of fears to transform pedophiles into scapegoats for various unrelated ills that plague society, converting them into objects of punishment-by-example, which does nothing but convey a false sense of security. This trend in penal philosophies has led to significant changes in the way that these sorts of offenders are dealt with, with control mechanisms that go beyond the completion of established penalties being regarded as valid (Silva, 2002), a trend which some see as an example of questionable harshness in social control policies (De Georgi, 2005).

Distractions

The abuse discourse shifts the debate over harmony between the sexes and the generations away from important matters and causes us to labor under useless stereotypes and prejudices when it comes to the significant questions. What is known about the logic and processes by which human sexuality functions is ignored and replaced by victimology and criminology; and the resulting sense is that of mistrust and deterrence. The implicit indictment of one sex or age group and the consequent sanctification of the other cannot bring palpable benefits to our mutual human condition, and indeed, is more the problem than its solution. Suspicion, reproach, conflict, exasperation, and anguish have supplanted desire, bonds, trust, negotiation, and agreement, and the hypothesis of the war between the sexes and the generations has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The state of our human condition tends to be focused on unhappiness in the same way that relations between the sexes and generations are seen through the lens of violence, and the unquestionably erotic status of the human being labors under these pejorative implications. Thus the search for the other, for a connection, which is what all people want, has been redirected to a terminology which is clinical or forensic, as opposed to simply human. But an Arcadian fable of sexual happiness and innocence is no less unrealistic, the sexuality of human beings, of men and

women, of boys and girls, plays out in ways that are complex, intricate, and delicate, and resolving the multiple issues of one's erotic life is challenging.

It is presumed that by prosecuting and punishing the evil of socially unacceptable sexual desire it can be eliminated; once it is possible to detect such perpetrators, then either controlling or isolating them will bring an end to the problems. But that is only another distracting mirage, it simply is not so. There is the potential for evil within all of us, and in any event it is not wickedness which drives our actions but a failure to rise to the highest aspirations of what it means to be fully human. One's unhappiness, including sexual frustration, may be what leads to committing real abuse, and, paradoxically, may be exacerbated by the very discourse that says it is combating this evil. Promoting individual and collective psychosexual understanding and responsibility is a far better course than accusation, blame, and punishment.

There is much to be gained from improved relations and greater harmony between men and women, and between generations, and we should not allow ourselves to be sidetracked from this goal. Children would benefit greatly in feeling secure in having parents who genuinely wanted and cared for them, and secondly – but of no less importance – in being encouraged by example to freely and unreservedly both give and receive verbal and physical affection. Obsessed with “sex," we have lost track of the real and more relevant problems. Some authors (Levitt & Pinnell, 1995; Ney, Fung & Wickett, 1994) argue that emotional abandonment and abuse are more destructive to the child than the “sex” experience per se, while Furedi (2002) emphasizes that the lack of a positive family and social environment is a better predictor, albeit not necessarily a determinant, of later emotional maladjustment. The abuse discourse, by concentrating on what it insists are specific and primary evils, tends to overlook other much more numerous and urgent structural social problems which have profound impacts upon children as well as adults (Nathan & Snedeker, 2001).

Summary and Recommendations

In the second half of the 20th century the foundations were laid for what would become the hegemonic referent of Western sexual politics: childhood and feminine innocence and the evil of masculine eroticism. In this context, child sexual abuse has been painted as a great and terrible social problem, an important part of, to borrow a phrase from physics, a "theory of everything" regarding our lives and our problems. The victimological concepts of danger and criminality as integral aspects of male sexuality seem to have been a factor in the ideology of child sexual abuse as promoted by Finkelhor (1984) and others. In this context the issue of child sexual abuse became a strategy, orchestrated by various forces including certain feminists, conservatives, child advocates, and therapists, of dramatizing "sex" as inherently dangerous and a cause of disorder, trauma, and domination (Malón, 2004). Exacerbated by sensationalistic media hyperbole, this hysteria has reached unprecedented levels (Jenkins, 1992; Nathan & Snedeker, 2001; Ofshe & Watters, 1996; Victor, 1996).

The initial proposals of these groups included rationales which most people would regard as legitimate, and which were justified by the perceived need for greater recognition of the problems of violence against children and women as well as the need for better social and institutional responses (Goodyear-Smith, 1993, 1996). But in the eagerness to combat what they saw as a terrible plague (Malón, in press), that which could have been a reasonable plan for

confronting these problems was converted by many of these experts and activists into a sweeping crusade whose excessive costs have now become apparent (Adams, 1997; Badinter, 2004; Besharov, 1986; Dineen, 2000; Furedi, 2002; Jenkins, 1992, 2001; Ma1ón, 2004; Nathan & Snedeker, 2001; Ofshe & Watters, 1996; Underwager & Wakefield, 1993, 1994; Weeks, 1993; Weinbach, 1987). One of the more egregious examples of sensationalism superseding science is the "condemnation" of the Rind et al. (1998) article by the US Congress, when the vast majority of the congresspersons had not even seen – much less read – the article they voted to condemn. This highlights how unacceptable it is to dare to question – even with scientific evidence – entrenched moral beliefs (Mirkin, 2000; Oellerich, 2000; Rind, Bauserman, & Tromovitch, 2000; Wakefield, 2006a; for criticism see Ondersma et al., 2001; Spiegel, 2000).

Real child sexual abuse, in which the presence of violence, coercion, deceit, or lack of meaningful consent, or where the minor is not cognizant of, or comfortable with, the potential adverse social reactions, does in fact exist, and there is a need for protecting children from this reality as well as dealing with those responsible. However, it is also true that social problems are social constructs, in this case within a context in which there are better as well as worse alternatives for social action. Therefore any intervention, though it be done in the name of a supposed good, may have secondary consequences that are so counter-productive that they not only do not solve the original problem, but instead generate unforeseen, unfortunate, and sometimes catastrophic iatrogenic effects. The following are proposed as better alternatives:

1. As suggested by Seligman, it would be advantageous to "turn the volume down" (1993, p. 235) on individual incidents as well as on social and media anxiety over these types of incidents, and to avoid, to the extent possible, the rhetorical and demagogic excesses on the part of certain social, political, professional, and academic groups (Malón, 2004).
2. In order to emphasize a social vocabulary and pedagogy which employs a more reasoned and circumspect utilization of terms, replace words like molester, aggressor, victim, pedophile, etc., which are so hackneyed and vague that they confuse more than clarify the problem, with less value-laden and pejorative terms (Rind & Bauserman, 1993).
3. Call attention to the great diversity of situations, experiences, and implications (Baurmann, 1983) which are now encompassed – without any shades of gray – by the one-dimensional phrase "child sexual abuse," an ambiguous and elastic concept whose current utility is questionable, especially in the arena of scientific investigation.
4. Refrain from the improper citations of the most extreme – but fortunately, rare – cases to typify and interpret each and every case of child/adult sexual interaction, thus avoiding the sense of alarm and epidemic that the data simply do not justify. (Kilpatrick, 1992; Levitt & Pinnell, 1995; López, Hernandez & Carpintero, 1994 ; Rind et al., 1998).

The current rhetoric of trauma and horror is not supported by unbiased and empirical evidence, and is counter-productive to the well-being of children and their families (Durrant & White, 1993; Goodyear-Smith, 1993; Renshaw, 1982). Furthermore, the pervasive academic, media, and public dehumanization and demonization of all older parties in these relationships not only is unreasonable and unfair, but all too often "indirectly scapegoats a [child] who has been involved in a sexual relationship with an older [person], ... and does so with an impact that severely damages both..." (Wilson, 1981, p. 133). Such extremes are in no way beneficial to the child, his parents, the older party, or to society in general.

In this paper some of the iatrogenic effects of our current anxieties about child sexual abuse have been pointed out and discussed. As many authors have pointed out from different perspectives (Comfort, 1977; Dineen, 2000; Illich, 1978; Szasz, 1970) when adequate consideration is not given to our own limitations and to the complexities and implications within which we are attempting to solve our social, health, education, sexual, and other problems, we can create more harm than benefit. When society began to be more aware of sexual experiences between minors and adults, the overreaction was a "moral outrage" in which there was little balanced and critical thinking, but much alarm and sensationalism. There certainly is a need to protect children from experiences, sexual or otherwise, which may be harmful to them psychologically or physically, or that simply can damage their self-respect. But for the ultimate benefit of both minors and society, it is also necessary that these protections are reasonable and balanced and without the potentially iatrogenic effects that have been presented in this paper.

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