

Toward a Sexological Paradigm of Childhood Sexuality

Current research on childhood sexuality in the United States is in a precarious state.

Due to legal changes moving toward ever-increasing restrictions on research subjects, institutions lack the scientific freedom and the necessary data to pursue studies in the advancement of childhood sexuality. Continuing challenges from extremist organizations when discussing childhood sexuality, sexual abuse and sex education have disrupted efforts at rational scientific discourse (Herdt, 2007). Childhood sexuality research has remained less problematic in Europe, whereas the political climate in the United States has served to polarize scientists versus politicians and has made pseudo-theorists out of agitators. Given the lack of recent data, it has become difficult to create a new paradigm and engaging in the objective study of children's sexuality, even while new sexual scripts continue to evolve in the dominant Amerocentric culture. However, the role of sexology in conceptualizing children's sexuality demands a theoretical framework. This essay attempts to provide suggestions for a sexological paradigm of childhood sexuality, sex education and the participation of caregivers in the same.

Theories influencing sexology

Modern underpinnings for sexological inquiry into childhood sexuality can be said to have originated with Freud, who in 1905 proposed that all children possess an innate sexual drive, expressed in psychosexual developmental stages. Freud's conceptualization of the child as a being of sexual capacity contrasted sharply with the previous Rousseauian-Victorian concept of the child as

"innocent," which in turn appears to have been a reaction against pre-pubescent laborers in workhouses and parentified children just prior to and during the Industrial Revolution. Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the epigenetic stages – oral, anal, phallic, latency and genital – became conflated with developmental theories focusing on physiological aspects of childhood development, and Freudian conceptualizations of childhood sexuality dominated the general scientific sexual discourse in the United States until Gagnon and Simon's social scripting theory gained prominence in the early 1970s.

As an ideological counterpoint to essentialism rooted in tradition, hierarchical relationships and pre-determinism, Gagnon and Simon's theory on sexual scripting posits that sex, like any other activity in society, functions by modeling and association within its own societal cosmos rather than through innate qualities or heredity (1973). They cite the public versus private value system in adult sexual interactions, as well as the prescribed gender roles within the sexual dyad, and how these systems contribute to a "sexual script" – a certain behavioral matrix which evolves according to conditions in society, and which is accompanied by a set of socially constructed roles where rules are taken for granted and transmitted through modeling to future generations, i.e. children. Gagnon questions the Freudian "emphasis on the instinctual character of the sexual energy source in the child" (1968, p. 222) and the epigenetic concept of certain functions, e.g. bowel control, as being related to the sexual functioning of the child. On the other hand, early conflictual messages regarding the child's expression of sexuality may become transmitted to the child who later as an

adult will perpetuate the mislabeling or non-labeling of behavior. This type of modeling, whether conscious or unconscious, lays down templates for scripting which organizes sexual behavior in the developing brain.

Support for Simon and Gagnon's theories can be found in cross-cultural and anthropological studies, which have been very beneficial in broadening the general sexological knowledge base and also in imparting a certain cultural relativism into what sometimes may be construed as solipsistic disciplines, particularly within the non-sexological fields investigating human sexuality. One such anthropological example would be the ethnographic study of the Mangaia Polynesians (Marshall, 1971), which in its description of the Mangaia's polymorphously pleasure-oriented sexual practices contrasts sharply with the findings on Irish peasants of Inis Beag and their lack of engaging sexually for no other reason than procreation (Messenger, 1971). While other disciplines and ideologies may view these behaviors as cultural artifacts, sexologists may cite these and other cross-cultural studies to show distinct variability in human sexual behavior, and that the conceptualization of ourselves as sexual human beings is far more diverse and inclusive than if simply predicated on innate biological capacities. From the standpoint of childhood sexuality, both cultures aptly illustrate the plasticity in molding a child's sexuality and its behavioral consequences in terms of the social acceptance of the group. Just like the inhabitants of Inis Beag, the Mangaia are not without roles and rules, although they may be on opposite sides of the behavioral spectrum.

Moving from anthropology to its distantly related discipline, a literature search

within evolutionary psychology demonstrates a paucity of research data on the development of childhood sexuality. Evolutionary theorists such as Symons (1979) or Barkow, Cosmides and Tooby (1992) have not made any specific attempts at presenting either evolutionary adaptations or unifying theories within childhood sexuality. This is perhaps more problematic for the field of evolutionary psychology in particular, rather than for childhood sexuality in general, in that the theoretical lack may detract from evolutionary psychology otherwise proposing a complete theory of human sexuality. Buss (1994) and many other evolutionary psychologists have paid much attention to sexual attraction, strategies of human mating and the sociobiological concept of parental investment in its offspring, but as for the sexuality of said offspring during pre-pubescent years, evolutionary psychology is curiously silent. It may be that evolutionary psychology is simply a vehicle for explaining behavior and not encouraging or modeling behavior in a conscious direction. Much of what is presented in terms of the EEA (Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness) constitutes the environment in which the organism has adapted itself to survival; the mechanisms for such adaptations have evolved throughout the millennia, but they are not constituted as conscious behavioral prescriptions for how to manage issues of childhood sexuality per se.

Selected research on childhood sexuality

In comparison with unipolar disciplines such as psychology, sociology and the strictly biological sciences, sexology examines childhood sexuality from a multi-disciplinary perspective. It adds a behavioral component bolstered by theory to effect a sex-positive

environment in which children can explore their sexuality and sensuality at their own pace. While adhering to principles of informed consent and the law, sexological research is nevertheless guided by a conscious restraint in terms of ideology. This is in contrast to most social science research which for the past 20 years appears to have focused on negative aspects of childhood sexuality, the bulk of which comprises data on childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and which receives funding, political bi-partisan support, and attention in the media. Empirical knowledge about child sexual behavior is no longer gathered by direct interviews of children partly due to ethical considerations, but rather through observing children being treated for problematical behavior such as use of force in sex play, often using dolls having genitals; by recollections of adults; and through observation by caregivers (Weis, 1998). Hence, the field has become truncated in terms of recent phenomenological observation and sexologists must rely on data that may be at least 30 years old, for lack of more recent comparative research. This, however, does not make the data less relevant. Ernest Borneman, child psychologist and one of the earlier post-Freudian childhood sex researchers, conducted a longitudinal study of male and female informants aged 5-30 beginning in 1960 during 30 years. Summarizing his findings in 1983, with remarkable prescience concerning contemporary sexual issues, Borneman asserted that:

“if children, during the imprinting stage, are not allowed to use their five senses in observing the mating procedures of their species, and if they are encouraged to acquire their sexual knowledge belatedly via words and pictorial images, they inevitably develop a fixation on words and

pictures. This is the etiology of addiction to pornography in restrictive societies” (p. 207).

Floyd Martinson who combined retrospective interviews with observational data, championed the theories of Piaget’s cognitive schema in terms of the child’s ability to assimilate and accommodate sexual information (1976). This may have implications for the educational aspect of sexology, in that the child may readily assimilate information related to the pleasure-oriented, non-reproductive aspects of sexuality, while removing the focus on sex for reproductive purposes to a later stage in the child’s cognitive development. Since a majority of sexual behaviors are of the distinctly non-reproductive variety, masturbation and other sex-positive self-pleasuring activities can be taught and encouraged in a more optimal order and at a much earlier age than which has occurred within the dominant sex-educational paradigm in the United States.

The value of early sex education has been echoed in Goldman and Goldman’s collaboration (1982) in a cross-national descriptive study of children’s biological and sexual thinking from 5 to 15 years of age, with a total sample of 838 children located in North America, Australia, the United Kingdom and Sweden. The study was primarily done to create a research basis for sex education in schools. Areas of inquiry such as the origin of babies, children’s perceptions of sex differences in newborns, and children’s understanding of sexual vocabulary were investigated. The Swedish scores generally demonstrated a cognitive advanced state in which Swedish children were able to identify the correct anatomical words for sexual organs, assess sex differences in newborns and

understand general sexual terminology at a significantly younger age than their English or transoceanic counterparts. The researchers concluded that early sex education in primary schools, consistent usage of correct sexual terminology, and reinforcement of sexual activity as pleasure-oriented and not only conception-based, were supporting factors of the results. And while the data may not be new, the results of the study underscore the sexological concept of continuous sex education beginning in childhood, which in turn may lead to non-judgmental opinions of sexual behaviors over the lifespan.

One of the more recent longitudinal studies on outcome correlates of sexual experiences in early childhood, noted by the authors as "sex play," was undertaken during an 18-year period at the University of California at Los Angeles (Okami, Olmstead and Abramson (1997). Seventy-seven percent of the mothers enrolled in the study reported that their child had engaged in sex play with others prior to age six; no significant associations were found between early childhood sex play and long-term mental health adjustment, and no significant gender differences in the responses of boys and girls were found in terms of the amount or quality of pre-pubescent sex play activity. As the data was provided initially by caregivers observing the children, it is very possible that the number of children engaged in sex play would have been higher, had the young children spoken about their activities directly to the investigators. This research validates and cements the cornerstone in the sexological basic belief system, namely that all children are sexual and that they need to explore and derive pleasure from their own bodies, both in solitude and with others for optimal development and socialization.

Legal and forensic aspects of childhood sexuality

In 1970, the U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography uncovered no link between adult exposure to pornography and the delinquency or criminal behavior among youths and adults. Psychologists such as Larry L. Constantine began advocating for children's sexual rights in using the perspective of "open families," where children would become equal partners in their respective family constellation (1977, 1981). In 1977, Mary Calderone called for the fundamental sexual rights of children to include:

"the right to *know* about sexuality, the *right* to be sexual, the right of *access* to educational and literary sexual materials, the necessary correlative right to *produce* and *distribute* these materials,...[and] the right of the unwilling or inappropriate audience to have its privacy or peace of mind protected" (cited in Constantine & Martinson, 1981).

These rights, supported by anthropological and cross-cultural research where children engage in permitted, ritualized and sometimes encouraged sexual activity without any adverse consequences, do lend themselves to the sexological perspective of a sex-positive education where children and young adults become responsible, informed and care for their sexuality much like learning how to care for one's general physical health. Constantine pointed out, however, that such rights may easily become unenforceable, based on the "unwilling or inappropriate audience" being the adult majority which may continue to engage in an emotionally protectionistic stance (1981).

Subsequent to a 15-year period of relative calm and freedom for childhood sexuality researchers, the Reagan presidency brought forth a renewed Commission on Pornography. Popularly named the "Meese Commission" after the U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese in Reagan's office, the commission sought to overturn the findings of the 1970 Commission and to establish a link between sexually explicit materials and antisocial behavior (1986). This was also an organized response to increasing stories in the media of daycare sexual abuse, stranger abductions, tainted Halloween candy and repressed memories of survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Ofshe & Watters, 1996). While the report failed to achieve its goals, the commission itself, consisting of several members of clergy from the Christian Evangelical churches, law enforcement officials and anti-pornography activists, seized upon the psychosocial climate of fear already present among the general population. Martinson (1990) examined the historical paradigm of children as universal property, in which adults have the complete power to alter, mutilate or use the child's body sexually without his or her consent. From a legal standpoint, the tenet becomes problematic, since property cannot be endowed with its own rights. Still, this view does not negate that the child may have sexual feelings and may even illicitly or surreptitiously enjoy the sexual activity in question. In contrast, the "protection paradigm" which has increased prominently during the last three decades construed the child as an entity of sexual potential, but without the ability to consent to any form of sexual contact, regardless of the age of the putative sexual partner. This stance became mirrored in laws on statutory rape; an age of consent which still has not been lowered in response to earlier pubertal

development during the last century; and within the treatment of sex offenders, even though the offenders themselves may be minors. Constantine's conclusion was that "it is now becoming common in the Western world to grant that children *are* sexual though they may still be denied full rights to behave sexually" (1981, p. 255). Presently, the only country in which such rights have been formally acknowledged is the Netherlands, where a decision by the Dutch parliament in 1990 made sexual intercourse for people between 12 and 16 years of age legal, but allowed its young citizens the option of invoking the statutory age of consent at 16 if they felt coerced or exploited. Parental authority has been diminished in that the Council for the Protection of Children needs to hear a parent's strong case for overruling the child's preferences (Levine, 2002). Thus, the Dutch have granted their adolescent population the sexual self-determination that may be necessary in order to develop a healthy behavioral sexual matrix. It is doubtful that the religious and sociocultural traditions in the US will make the conditions favorable for such sexual laws; from a sexologist's perspective, however, staying aware of sexual legislation in other countries provides the much needed research-based evidence for change and material for the continuing evolution of the sexological paradigm.

With social advocacy increasingly posing as science, researchers in the field of human sexuality began to question the "slippage" in research, particularly with reference to CSA (Okami, 1994). Research on childhood sexuality during the latter part of the 1980s had become focused to a high degree on the sequelae of CSA, with claims that over 60% of all American women had been victimized (Russell, cited in Okami, 1992). This notwithstanding, the definition of a

“child” being close to 18 years of age and still not capable of giving consent is highly problematic. It ignores physiological as well as sexual maturation and it also criminalizes those adolescents under 18 who do consent to engage in sexual relations – at least with one another. In addition, the lack of positive sexual modeling in childhood can lead to exploratory sex play which may be construed by caregivers as outright sexual abuse, which is precisely how the research literature has presented it with increasing frequency. Psychologist Toni Johnson (1989, cited in Okami, 1992) asserted that “explicit sexual behavior in children needs to be reported, investigated, and/or discussed.” The consequences in labeling psychosexual and developmentally appropriate activities as unhealthy and worthy of “punishment,” would be not only instrumental in engendering misinterpretations of normative childhood development but also contributing to the confounding of data and the confabulating of effects among actual victims of CSA. As a result, the growing literature on the sequelae of CSA has begun to invite meta-studies; Rind and Tromovitch (1997) found that CSA often occurred along with physical abuse and that when controlling for variables of physical abuse and neglect, the effects of CSA frequently disappeared. In addition, negative social factors predispose children and adolescents to CSA, rather than the reverse. Hence, when CSA is accompanied by situational factors or temperamental variability such as the use of force with concomitant incest, CSA may produce psychological harm; if the child or adolescent engaged freely and willingly, however, harm may have been absent. The authors thus found that combining the two divergent experiences into one category labeled CSA is

confusing, since both negative and positive effects can become confounded.

The endorsement of research data which shows that children may actively seek out and derive pleasure from sexual interaction with adults has been controversial, inflammatory, and has been the cause of many childhood sexuality researchers growing increasingly silent on the topic or completely disappearing from the academic research arena. Particularly the scientific inquiry into pedophilia, incest and other factors in which children are the agents of subjective sexuality have become tainted with socio-political overtones. Two qualitative studies on the sequelae of incest, undertaken during the 1980s, were funded by the researchers and received no support from conventional sources, despite the clear need for unbiased data. Nelson’s qualitative study of 104 non-clinical subjects on the impact of incest and factors of self-evaluation showed that over half of the incestuous relationships were described as positive (1981); among those who described consensual and positive experiences, problems reported were community opinion, guilt, shame and fear of discovery. Farrell’s qualitative study of incest in which 200 male and female non-clinical subjects retrospectively reported on 300 incestuous relationships of various family constellations yielded some unexpected results. Among mutually consenting adults, almost 99% of the relationships were reported as positive; in addition, women whose sexual relationships with their fathers were positive made the transition to other relationships described in predominantly favorable terms (1986). In both studies, negative effects involved force and/or intimidation toward the child, substance dependence of the adult partner and previous family breakdown, e.g. divorce or separation occurring prior to the

incest. In addition, the women in all samples reported becoming affected by societal messages of sexual guilt, rather than initial intrinsic feelings of unworthiness or low self-esteem.

Contrary to the dominant paradigm, the sexological stance toward incestuous relationships does not necessarily divide the participants into categories of "victim" and "perpetrator." This type of polarization is a simplistic designation which does not serve any deepened inquiry into the complex relationship of what may be a positive experience for both parties. It is also important to note that many of those who have been classified as perpetrators of incest are children who may be responding to cues of sexual play initiated by a younger sibling; thus, children, no matter what age, may be active agents in initiating sexual activity. Yates' conceptualization of "eroticized children" (1990) indicates that the English-speaking culture [*sic*] tends to inhibit or delay the eroticization process of children and that this may contribute to high rates of sexual dysfunction among adults (1990). In using incest as a vehicle for her hypotheses, Yates suggested that prepubescent children who participate in such relationships may display heightened sexual interest, and that their sexual interest, activity and responsiveness is directly related to the intensity and duration of the experience, regardless of the presence or absence of coercion in the relationship. The eroticized child invariably becomes pathologized in most industrialized cultures, including the United States; in addition, children who observe human beings or animals engaged in sexual activity also become eroticized. According to Yates, such children continue to seek erotic gratification much akin to their previous experience. In terms of assessing the impact of such experiences, however,

Yates points out that "not all children sustain damage, and that most incestuous children who come to the attention of the system have been living in socially and psychologically disordered families" (p. 328). This appears to concur with the results of the earlier Nelson and Farrell studies and clearly indicates that the quality of the non-sexual aspects of the relationship is crucial in affecting the child's overall well-being. Yates also points out that eroticized children may be placed in one foster home after another, particularly if there has been family instability beyond the incestuous factors; in such cases, the child may resort to seeking sexual contact from any and all adults in an attempt to avoid abandonment and feelings of despair. Interestingly enough, Yates recommends that reparative therapy, particularly for female children, be initiated by male clinicians who may be able to model and restructure a non-sexual relationship with the eroticized female. She concludes that the damage these children may have sustained is further compounded by the children's position as official victims where any positive feelings of sexuality become nullified in the eyes of society and the law. The sexological paradigm of recognizing that the expression of sexual behavior in children, no matter how acquired, is not shameful but a necessary developmental process. This may be infinitely more useful than the restructuring of a cognitive sexual schema in which the eroticized child is made to feel that sexual feelings toward an adult are unhealthy, wrong and need to cease.

Sexological strategies in sex education

According to a longitudinal 17-year study on the perceptions of sources of sex education among young adults, more than 6,000 American college students during the years of 1990 to 2006

responded that they received more information about sex from peers, particularly same-sex friends, rather than from any other source. Other common sources included dating partners, the media and self-selected readings; mothers, teachers and fathers, in that order, provided the smallest amount of information. The most significant finding, however, may have been how the importance of various sources of sex education had changed over time; over the 17-year period, young adults reported receiving increased amounts of information from peers, professionals and the media, although it should be noted that the amount of information obtained specifically from parents held steady throughout the 17 years of investigation (Sprecher, Harris and Meyers, 2008). In view of these results, the question that needs to be addressed from a sexological perspective may thus be: are parents relying increasingly on other sources of sexual information, including schools and newer media such as the Internet to supply their children with sex education and thereby absolving themselves of communicating a potentially confrontive educational topic? There are many possibilities as to why parents as well as their offspring are reluctant to discuss sex; one reason may be because these "talks" are held too late in the child's life. A wide range of behaviors, based on our culture, are common in children: masturbation, playing doctor, inserting fingers in orifices. As discussed previously, these activities are normative and constitute a developmental matrix for the future sexual health of the child. If parents and caregivers find themselves uncomfortable and negative with such behaviors and transmit their conscious or unconscious discomfort to their children, the psychosexual stage is set for both parties to ignore any mutual discussions of sexual activities in the future. In

addition, the current sex-negative societal climate with its emphasis on victimology, sexual predators on and off the Internet, incurable transmitted diseases and a generalized fear connected to the exploration of sexuality may make parents reluctant to delve into information beyond the most skeletal, imparted at a time when the older child already has obtained the desired information from other, more forthcoming sources. In addition, parents may describe a behavior to a child and offer a value judgment along with it. From an empirical standpoint, this would require that the adult has had some personal exposure to the behavior in order to assign a value to the behavior, but this is not always the case. Religious, conservative parents may indeed have exposed themselves secretly to the behavior but may feel such internalized shame and guilt that the only way to justify their own emotions may be the assignation of a negative value to the behavior in question.

Sex education takes place through the prism of sexual scripting theory and the culture in which we live. While over 85% of all American adults agree on the fact that such measures need to become part of the educational curriculum (Levine, 2002), socio-political influences, diverse cultural traditions and individual differences have conspired to fragment the attempt at unifying a theory of what may be optimal in terms of learning and applying what is being taught. It has become abundantly clear that abstinence and a cursory knowledge of risk factors in sexually transmitted diseases have become the foci of sex education all across the country. Despite multiple research data indicating that abstinence-based education has failed to prevent the highest rates of teenage pregnancy among the world's industrialized nations

(Levine, 2002), sex educators in the United States have consciously avoided employing a sexological paradigm of sex education targeted toward non-procreative sex for pleasure. This may be a grave mistake, considering that the main reason for sexual activity in young adults is mainly directed toward physical and psychosexual exploration, the expansion of internal boundaries and simple curiosity. Rather than struggle against this fact, a sexological educational matrix would do well in focusing on educating children from an early age in the ways which one can make the body "feel good," either while alone or together with one or more partners. The focus on contraception should be paramount, but only if the reason behind it is to emphasize that sex is overwhelmingly *recreational* and not *procreational* in its scope. This thinking requires a fundamental shift from a shame-based ideology of avoidance to a sex-positive and sex-acquisitive stance. Some examples of this shift would be the reframing of nudity from a sexual scripting equating nakedness with vulnerability, to one of the comfort with one's body and the overt delight and encouragement in experiencing the skin functioning as a highly erotic organ from infancy to old age. Other major shifts would be the wholesale acceptance of masturbation and sex play among children where parents would simply defocus their anxiety on such activities and regard them as normative and uncomplicated, much like playing with toys. In this context, the nature of such sexual activity demands focus and hence an undisturbed environment. Adults accept this as an emotionally experienced fact, but many will not accord the same privilege to their children. In addition, parents and other caregivers may need to learn not to filter children's sexual behavior through their own adult

experiences and project their sexual anxieties on to developmental sex play. By applying the Piagetian cognitive schema as well as the understanding of developmental limitations, it becomes clear that a pre-pubescent child is not having "intercourse" in an adult sense with all the concomitant sensations and attending psychological meanings attached to such actions. The experience of attempting intromission, fellatio, cunnilingus or any other sexual behaviors for a child who has not yet been exposed to pubertal gonadal activity will simply be akin to experimenting with sexual rehearsal "play" in preparation for adult activity which may include deeper emotions and ultimate psychological meaning. Nevertheless, such play is necessary for creating a normative sexual matrix for the future adult; curtailing or limiting it may very well contribute to sexual dysfunction, which in turn may perpetuate a deleterious familial cycle of sexual misinformation, repression and ignorance. One type of such misinformation includes the reticence and possible shame among parents to communicate the correct names for body parts while children are still in their toddler years. As per Goldman and Goldman's research data (1982), Swedish children demonstrated their ability to name genitals correctly, in addition to being advanced by several years in terms of knowing the origin of babies and their sex differences. There are clear cognitive and maturational advantages to imparting such information as early as possible, while being aware of the fact that each child will assimilate and accommodate the information according to his or her individual cognitive abilities.

Last but not least, sexology as a humanistic discipline must endeavor to honor the diversity and gender differences which may have evolved

within the interaction between biological and cultural adaptations. For females, the patriarchal dominance throughout millennia, and the biological imperative of gestation and its limiting physiological aspects have created a particular set of circumstances unique to the species. The infantilization and invalidation of female desire; the sociocultural condemnation of a sexually appetitive female; fear of uniquely female bodily functions; and, the uncovering of the largely hidden female sexual anatomy, as well as the prominent function of the clitoris as a unique pleasure organ responsible for orgasm – these are issues of paramount sexological importance which must be considered and transformed into positive sexual knowledge to all children at an early stage. Female children in particular need to be taught in a very concise and directive manner how to affirm their sexuality; this can only happen if they become familiar with their bodies and are encouraged to experiment sexually within the limits of their cognitive development. In terms of early childhood gender variance and budding same-sex desires, all children need to be taught that the object of adult affection and sexual pleasure may not always be a person of the opposite sex. The sexological paradigm would expose children to examples in not only literature but also actual individuals from real life where children would be able to experience and derive valuable modeling from same-sex dyads. These behaviors and sexual preferences need to be communicated at a very early stage of childhood in order to attenuate the predominantly heterocentric view existing not only in the United States but practically worldwide, despite the best intentions of pluralistic sex educators. To teach sexual diversity to very young children is a challenge, but if there were ever a group of professionals

to write such an agenda, sexologists may just be the ones to do it.

Christine Milrod, 2008©

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