

The Internal World of the Paedophile

Gavin Ivey

Of all sexual offences, child sexual abuse is often considered to be the most reprehensible. The paedophile is regarded as a social pariah, the extreme embodiment of deviant sexuality. Laws consequently exist which prohibit adult sexual contact with children, and identify child sex offenders as a particularly heinous group from which the community needs to be protected. This is the case despite the now accepted understanding that children are sexual beings, and despite Freud's compelling claim that the myth of Oedipus captures the developmental reality that adult figures, in the form of parents, are the first objects of children's sexual love.

Interestingly, despite the extensive publicity of their crimes, our psychological knowledge of paedophiles is still very limited. An agreed upon psychological profile of the 'typical' paedophile has yet to be developed, and perpetrators appear to constitute a varied group (Greenberg, 1990). Even psychoanalysts, who are expert at tracking the role of sexuality in psychological disorders, have written very little about paedophilia.

In Freud's comprehensive study of sexuality and its permutations, he pays little attention to it, incorrectly stating that children only come to play the role of adult sexual objects "when someone who is cowardly or has become impotent adopts them as a substitute or when an urgent instinct...cannot at the moment get possession of a more appropriate object" (p.60).

While all paedophiles are child sexual molesters, very few child sexual molesters are paedophiles. Most adult perpetrators of child sexual contact do not regularly pursue children for sexual gratification. In fact, only 10-25% of adults convicted of child sexual offences go on to re-offend. Furthermore, incest usually involves complex familial dynamics that are not consistent with paedophilia. What distinguishes the paedophile is the largely exclusive and persistent pattern of repetitive sexual interaction with children.

But what is the meaning of the paedophile's behavior, and why does he feel so compelled to pursue children for sexual gratification? The popular stereotype of paedophiles as 'depraved monsters' serves to obscure, rather than illuminate, the internal world of these individuals. It is a curious fact that, despite the social anxiety aroused by this form of perversion, there has been very little research investigating the psychological meaning of the paedophile's sexual focus. Many years ago, prompted by the gap in the research literature, a student co-researcher and I decided to address this gap by exploring the meaning of paedophilia from the perpetrators' perspective in order to better understand the nature of this destructive compulsion

Qualitative research

Qualitative research involves the attempts to make sense of people's experience and behavior through the in-depth engagement with and immersion in their experience, by trying to feel our way into their unique world and then rigorously describing what we see from this experience-near perspective. Good qualitative research should make the familiar seem strange, by virtue of putting aside taken-for-granted assumptions about it and seeing it through fresh eyes, but it should also make the strange feel familiar, by deepening our empathic engagement with

it. My hope is that what appears to be grotesquely strange, namely paedophilia, will in the course of this evening become slightly more comprehensible. The aim of our research was deceptively simple: to put aside our own preconceptions, beliefs, and feelings about paedophilia in order to enter, as fully as we could, the internal psychological world of convicted paedophiles.

Participants

Our participant sample comprised six white, male volunteers from a Child and Family Treatment Unit child molester psychotherapy group, aimed at the rehabilitation of identified child abuse offenders. Only male participants were included as there were no available female abusers. These men ranged in age from 26 to 58.

The criteria participants had to satisfy were, firstly, that their sexual interests and responses were repeatedly directed toward children and adolescents under the age of 16 years; and secondly, that they were willing and able to provide a detailed account of their sexual interest in children. Each participant was individually interviewed, often more than once, after which we transcribed and analysed the audio-recorded interviews. While mindful of what was individually specific in the experience of our participants, we sought to develop a general description of what appeared to be common to our sample. It is this general description that I will now present to you.

General description of the essential meaning of paedophilia

The male paedophile is only nominally an adult himself, and is psychologically arrested at the childhood point that he failed to elicit love, recognition, and affirmation from his parental figures. Participant 1 stated, 'I'm a 29-year-old male, but all the time I feel like a seven-year-old ... always scared. I've always just been a child who has never grown up.'

A general lack of self-worth, dating back to this point, is manifest in a pervasive sense of powerlessness, inferiority, and inadequacy. He typically describes himself as having been a 'loner' who never felt accepted by his biological or adoptive parents, or even his peers. An aura of failure and self-disappointment colours his interactions with others, alienates him from the comfortable give- and-take of social interaction, and saturates each potential erotic adult encounter with anticipated rejection and humiliation.

His childhood history of physical abuse, emotional neglect, and experience of parental rejection predestines him to experience each new adult relationship as a repetition of his original parental interactions. His mother, frequently perceived to be strict and unresponsive to his needs for affection and physical contact, informs his later perceptions of adult women as critical and rejecting, and his related self-perception of being inadequate and disappointing. Participant 2 conveyed this as follows: 'I feel that I disappointed my mother so much that she rejected me ... I guess I'm afraid that other women will do the same to me.'

In addition, a cold, distant, and harshly authoritarian father tends to prevent identification with adult masculinity, making it seem remote and inaccessible. Exploratory sexual play in the paedophile's childhood years, frequently culminating in intimate sexual activities with same-sex peers during early adolescence, is consequently invested with the significance of substitute intimacy and acknowledgement.

In this context the transition from boyhood to adult emotional potency is impossible, and adult sexuality is fraught with the immanent threat of being recast in the humiliating role of inadequate, unlovable child. Early adult heterosexual contacts are thus imbued with varying degrees of sexual anxiety, fear of loss, or actual experiences of rejection.

When they do risk entering the world of early adult sexual relating, they experience their partners as sexually unresponsive, disinterested, or unsatisfied, thereby confirming feelings of inadequacy, rejection, and alienation. Participant 3 expressed this as follows: 'Right from the beginning I felt that I couldn't satisfy my wife sexually, and I always had that thrown in my face, so that turned me off.' For others, the possibility of adult sexual attachments appears too perilous and threatening, and is consequently never explored.

We found two styles of paedophilic sexuality, based on the onset of sexual interest in children. Two of the participants reported adolescent onset sexual attraction to children, while the remaining four displayed adult onset. Adolescent onset occurs in those molesters who, from a young age, consciously experience themselves as being emotionally and sexually drawn to young children. Interestingly, adult onset molester behaviour is associated with moralistic sexual attitudes and a general suppression of sexual interest and activity during adolescence.

Adult onset molesters report having no sexual interest in children prior to the unpremeditated and largely accidental sexual contact with kids. Both adult and adolescent onset molesters, however, are obsessed by sexual fantasies about children, and engage in opportunity-seeking and risk-taking behaviour in order to fulfil their compulsive desire for sexual contact with children. One participant stated, 'I was hooked on something and I had to have it. If I couldn't get it I was like a mad person.'

In many cases the paedophile-to-be's childhood discovery of sexual meaning is suffused by explicit parental moral/religious antipathy toward sexual matters. In this prohibitive family environment sexuality is a forbidden zone, charged with anxiety and guilt. Thus, despite his deviant sexual conduct, the paedophile ironically often has high ethical standards and moralistic attitudes toward sexual behaviour. Participant 6, who began molesting his stepdaughter after having felt sexually rejected by his wife remarked, oblivious to the irony, 'I guess I should have had an affair, but I thought that would be wrong.'

His self-perceptions tainted by the experience of parental rejection, his psychological maturation retarded by unmet needs for love and affirmation, his sexual curiosity repudiated by a moralistic family environment, his access to masculinity and emotional potency barred by a father with whom he cannot identify, the paedophile-to-be forsakes the critical, depriving, and rejecting world of adult erotic relating. Experiencing himself as a child exiled from the possibilities of adult loving, the paedophile turns to 'other' children for the affection, love, and affirmation denied to him as a child.

The close association of physical affection and sexual intimacy, together with a history of conflicted sexual feelings, colours his emotional attraction to children with compelling erotic meaning. His inability to discriminate between sex and affection, and his tendency to relate to children as extensions of himself, allows him to misperceive children's responsiveness to him as a sexual invitation. Participant 6, for example, denied he was a child molester because, he said, 'I never started it with these girls, they started it with me.'

Based on our research we discovered that the obsessive and compelling attraction to children is powered by three interrelated motives:

Firstly, by projecting his own unmet needs on to children, and then 'loving' them physically, he loves himself and remediates his own childhood lack of affection. Although intensely attracted to children's youthful appearance and physical beauty, the primary significance of the paedophile's behaviour lies in his attempt to fulfil unmet childhood and adult needs for emotional and physical intimacy through sexual contact with children;

Secondly, his adult status in the eyes of a child gives him a sense of power and influence notably absent in his encounters adults. The paedophile feels strong, dominant, important and sexually adequate through his contact with children, frequently as a result of his self-perceived ability to arouse sexual desire and pleasure in them. Participant 3 stated, 'I had a very powerful feeling ... I could do something to a child sexually and he would actually enjoy it like I did.'

Thirdly, children's naive emotional responsiveness, affection, and uncritical acceptance contrasts with his experience of adults as judgmental, punitive, and rejecting. Childhood and children are thus idealized, while adulthood and adults are perceived to be emotionally 'dangerous'. This helps us understand that whether children are male or female seems to hold no real importance for the paedophile. Rather, it is their positive responsiveness to him that magnetises them as sexual targets.

The paedophile interprets his sexual overtures as being an expression of his love for children, and is aggrieved that his actions are considered destructive by others. Most participants expressed feelings of affection toward their victims, and one participant elaborated on his 'gentle' handling of children as follows: "I like responsiveness and closeness, and rape and penetration doesn't have that for a little girl because of the pain. That interferes with the fantasy and doesn't turn me on.'

The psychoanalyst Franco de Masi (2007), in one of the few recent contributions to the topic, distinguishes between 'romantic' and 'cynical' paedophiles. The romantic paedophile falls in love with the children he has sex with, and his relationship with them is typically affectionate. The cynical paedophile, however, is sadistically motivated, and sexual excitement is bound up with real or imagined violence directed toward children. None of our participants appeared to fit this cynical profile but, given the proliferation and consumption of sadistic child pornography on the internet, cynical paedophilia is clearly not uncommon.

Concurrently, however, many paedophiles experience guilt and shame, an indication that they judge their own sexual conduct as immoral. He seeks to minimise the discomfort of these conflicting feelings and justify his actions through the belief that children desire sexual contact with him and, in some cases, initiate this contact. One participant, after acknowledging that he had abused his position of authority and power to make sexual contact with children added, 'But I never once forced a child to do anything he wasn't willing to do'.

Here we see how self-deception operates in paedophilia: by banishing any awareness of the power differential between him and them, children are perceived to be consenting participants rather than victims, and the paedophile shows no conscious awareness of any harmful consequences of his behaviour for the children involved.

Orgasm, frequently attained by masturbation, may occur during sexual contact with children, or later through masturbatory fantasies related to this sexual contact. It is noteworthy, though, that while their sexual need for children feels driven, many attempt to curb their behavior, indicating an awareness that it is somehow wrong. Whether this stems from a fear of legal consequences or moral self-judgment is important, because the latter speaks of internal conflict and possible remorse. Some paedophiles simply fear getting caught, and appear conscienceless, while others, when their defences are down, experience considerable self-recrimination.

Whatever the case, paedophiles episodically attempt to curb their sexual behaviour by suppressing their fantasies of children, and refraining from masturbatory activities incorporating these fantasies. Despite conscious efforts, the compelling attraction of children cannot be completely suppressed, and the paedophile is painfully suspended between a fearful adult sexual world and the forbidden realm of regressive childish fulfilment.

Discussion

Symptomatic sexuality, like other psychological symptoms, can be regarded as an attempt to avoid or manage psychic suffering (McDougall, 1995). By bringing this perspective to bear on paedophilia, a different picture of the molester emerges, one that contrasts sharply with the popular portrayal of him as a depraved monster. Some points emerging from the general description are of special interest and I will spend some time fleshing them out.

Most striking, perhaps, is the recurrent theme of deficient parenting, and the resulting unmet needs for emotional intimacy and physical affection during the paedophile's childhood years. This does not provide an explanation for all molester behaviour, but should rather be viewed as an indication of the nonsexual motives and meanings embedded in ostensibly sexual behaviour. The paedophile experiences his sexual contact with children as an emotionally satisfying source of intimacy, thereby suggesting that sexual contact is a vehicle for childhood emotional needs that were inadequately met by parental figures.

As a result of childhood emotional deprivation, paedophiles remain emotionally arrested at this childhood level, and attempt to give the love they missed or wished they had to children who they identify with. This narcissistic mode of relating to children as extensions of themselves was evident in most participants and partially accounts for their perception of their behaviour as an expression of love rather than sexual exploitation.

All of the participants expressed a pervasive sense of powerlessness, inferiority, and inadequacy dating back to childhood. The paedophile experiences himself to be a vulnerable and inadequate child, rather than an adult. Relating sexually to children enables him to feel a sense of power, dominance, importance and control, which temporarily compensates for a long-standing experience of inadequacy and impotence arising from perceived parental emotional neglect or maltreatment.

Another common theme to emerge was that of the paedophile showing little efficacy in his social relationships, and as being blocked in his ability to meet his sexual and emotional needs in adult relationships. He relates to adult sexual partners in a way that echoes his experience of parental figures - they reject, criticise, and make him feel inadequate. Pervasive feelings of inadequacy may also be related to explicitly sexual humiliation. One participant recalls how his step-mother, observing him in the bath, would say: 'You've got such

a small penis. You have nothing to hide, you're never going to be a man.' Evident in most participants was a history of conflictual maternal relationships, making it difficult or impossible to relate normally to adult women.

The critical, rejecting and humiliating maternal image does not hold in all cases, however. One participant observed: 'I never came out of the cocoon my mother had spun for me; she was too overprotective. Whenever I liked a girl, I would always see my mother in her and it would feel like a mother-child relationship. In this case the participant's perception that his mother refused to allow her son to separate from her meant that he could not successfully manage his Oedipal anxiety. In his mind, sex with an adult woman was therefore equated with incest. Paedophilia, in this instance, represents a misguided and maladaptive solution to an unresolved Oedipal dilemma. While the general importance of Oedipal dynamics in the origin of paedophilia is debatable, varying degrees of sexual anxiety, and fear of loss or rejection in early adult relationships are characteristic of the molester's heterosexual history.

Our research suggests that a history of perceived childhood failure to elicit parental love predisposes the paedophile to experience adult heterosexual contact in terms of rejection and a personal sense of inadequacy. Even for adult onset molesters, the origin of the disorder appears to lie in the childhood experience of emotionally deficient parental provision and the impact this has on how the child feels about himself.

An interesting finding to emerge was that the sex of the child seems to have little importance for the paedophile. All of the participants had either had sexual contact with, or fantasised about, children of both sexes. This fact may be interpreted in a number of ways, but if the primary motive force driving the paedophile's actions stems from the craving of unmet needs for emotional intimacy, recognition, and affection, then the sex of the child is understandably not important. Any child who responds to the paedophile's emotional needs will be perceived as desirable.

From this perspective, sexual contact is a maladaptive vehicle for emotional connectedness, rather than *vice versa*. One participant initiated sexual contact with two sibling children. He perceived the male child to be a willing participant but, upon initiating sexual contact with the female child recalls, 'It was like doing something to a dead fish, she was all taut and stiff... that's why I didn't carry on'. This indicates that it is children's perceived emotional receptiveness to the paedophile, rather than their sex, that feeds the paedophile's sexual attraction.

A popular perception of paedophiles is that they all lack moral conscience, and coldly pursue their selfish pleasure without guilt or concern for the moral standards of society. However, some researchers (Kant, and Hartman, 1973) have found that child molesters are the most sexually repressed of all sex offenders. These findings are supported by our study, which reveals most participants to be moralistic individuals. In most cases the participants' moralistic attitudes toward sexuality reflected the reported negative attitudes towards sexuality held by their parents.

Sexual abuse of the molester, with this contact being experienced as either emotionally fulfilling or traumatic, was evident in the childhood histories of two participants. In cases where they have been molested themselves, paedophiles may be attempting to master their own experience of being abused by reversing roles in the victimisation they suffered. In other words, the molester might need a sexual relationship with children in order to overcome the sense of humiliation and powerlessness experienced as a child at the hands of a sexually abusive adult.

While personal experience of childhood sexual abuse was not common to most of the participants, physical abuse by maternal and/or paternal figures was, along with emotional deprivation and feelings of powerlessness experienced in parent-child relationships. It is possible that childhood trauma need not be as extreme as sexual abuse in order to activate a need in the molester to combat his childhood feelings of powerlessness through 'identification with the aggressor' (A. Freud, 1936).

Perceived sexual accessibility of children in the context of a caretaking role, and reduced sexual inhibition to sexual contact with non-biological children, were prominent themes in this study. Disinhibition also clearly results from the molesters' perception of children as willing participants. A lowering of inhibitions through the use of alcohol at the time of sexual contact with the child was evident in only one participant, and generally poor impulse control was manifest in another. Both these factors have been cited in the literature (Gebhard *et al.*, 1965; Kempe & Kempe, 1984) as reasons for the absence or weakness of conventional moral inhibitions against sex with children. It is noteworthy, however, that these factors did not feature in most of the participants in our study.

All of the participants acknowledged that they had taken advantage of their dominance and the trust invested in them to pursue sexual relations with children. Despite the resulting guilt and shame, indications of their awareness of the moral unacceptability of their actions, paedophiles do not take into account the status and power differentials between themselves and children. They therefore do not consider the implications of these differentials for children's freedom of choice, autonomy, and thus mutuality in relationships. The children are viewed as being willing and responsive participants, who desire and enjoy sexual contact with adults.

Children elicit strong emotional reactions in many people, reactions usually labelled 'parental' or 'affectionate', but the molester clearly misreads these reactions as sexual, and acts accordingly. Additionally, children's desire for emotionally intimate relationships with adults is assumed by molesters to be an indication that children want sexual contact, further reinforcing the paedophile's sexual responses.

It is possible that, as a result of emotional deprivation during childhood, and the lack of fulfilment of emotional and sexual needs in adult relationships, paedophiles mistakenly label their emotional arousal to children seeking closeness as sexual interest. They then respond accordingly, viewing the children as willing participants. Having mislabelled their responses as sexual, molesters may reinforce this through repetition and fantasy, and thereby acquire a more specifically sexual arousal to a particular child, or children in general.

The paedophile clearly experiences his sexual pursuit of children as an overwhelming urge, and compulsively masturbates to images retained from sexual contact with children. It is possible that the activity of masturbation increases the compelling quality of the abusive behaviour, a theme evident in all participants. Feelings of sexual arousal, enjoyment, adequacy, emotional intimacy, and dominance in adult-child sexual contact, evident in varying degrees in all of the participants, strongly reinforces paedophilic behaviour, giving it the addictive quality experienced by the molester.

Despite participants' reported attempts to curb their sexual behaviour, there was little evidence of insight into the possible harmful consequences of such behaviour for the children concerned. In view of this, together with participants' belief that sexual contact was facilitated by the children's desire for sexual intimacy, it is evident that denial is a frequently employed defensive strategy against the guilt and shame associated with their predatory and self-serving behaviour.

There are, however, a number of additional factors preventing the paedophile from acknowledging the potentially damaging impact of his behaviour. The first is the apparent absence of consciously aggressive intent, and his investment in maintaining affectionate ties to his victims. A number of participants mentioned that they avoided sexual intercourse with children because this may be painful or harmful to the victims, thereby disrupting the children's emotional responsiveness. The absence of aggressive intent, together with the concern about not physically harming his victims, appears to make it more difficult for the paedophile to acknowledge the possibility of psychologically harming children.

Another factor which prevents paedophiles from appreciating the adult-child power differential, and the harmful effects of their behaviour, is the underlying feeling that they themselves are not really adults. One participant conveyed this very clearly: 'I feel like I'm not threatening to kids because I see myself as a kid.' If the paedophile experiences himself psychologically as a child, it is hardly surprising that he struggles to appreciate how others may perceive him to be an abusive adult.

Psychotherapeutic possibilities with paedophiles

The psychological profile of the paedophile which emerges from this research differs radically from popular portrayals of a sadistic, ruthless, and deranged child rapist. The paedophile, rather, is himself an emotional child, psychologically small, inadequate, and ill-equipped to negotiate a world of adult social and sexual relating. His deviant behaviour, though sexualised, expresses the regressive longing for emotional warmth, recognition, and affirmation absent from his own childhood.

The meaning of this involvement with children is usually not primarily sadistic or aggressive, but mainly concerns the experience of feeling sexually and emotionally adequate, accepted, and in control, all of which temporarily compensates him for an underlying sense of inadequacy and rejection in relation to actual or potential adult partners.

It is one thing to understand paedophilia, but another thing to successfully treat it. Most of the treatment programs involve CBT, which doesn't really address the damaged personality nucleus of the paedophile. The cynical paedophile is probably immune to real therapeutic influence because he is not in conflict with himself. Consequently, he feels no guilt or remorse, which are central motivators of change in those responsible for sexual crimes. Even if mandated to receive treatment, the cynical paedophile may go through the motions of attending therapy but without ever being in therapy. He is in thrall to a perverse personality structure in which power, subjugation of others, and sexual gratification are welded together, and any remnants of affection, vulnerability, and dependency are eroded to the point where they largely cease to exist. He may hide his cruel sexual interest in children out of fear of legal retribution, but he sees no reason to change who he is.

The romantic paedophile, however, is more therapeutically amenable, particularly if he is able to acknowledge that the children he has affectionate feelings for are actually hurt by his sexual engagement with them, even if they are sexually responsive to him. This is a precondition for guilt, which is the therapist's greatest ally in treating perverse sexuality. If the paedophile is at odds with his destructive sexuality and capable of feeling remorse about the harm he invariably causes, then he may be sufficiently motivated to undergo the long and painful discovery that his sexual behavior serves to mask and anaesthetize his own childhood trauma.

Conclusion

Freud famously embraced the Latin Playwright, Terence's, aphorism from about 163BC. In translation it reads: "I am a human being: I deem nothing human alien to me." While to most people nothing seems more alien than paedophilia, my hope is that by entering into the paedophile's world with me tonight, it may seem a little less alien.

Good qualitative research, I suggested earlier, should make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Perhaps, after listening to me talk about the deviant sexual strategies that some individuals employ to avoid psychic pain, you may find something to relate to, something familiar in the otherwise dismaying internal world of the paedophile.

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