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The Political Psychology of Cybersexuality: The Example of Child Pornography

Editor

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Abstract. This article analyzes rationales behind legislation banning certain aspects of cybersexuality.

The cyberworld is very much like the non-cyber world in that the involvement of a star of mass entertainment in possibly illegal, unethical, and immoral behavior can elicit interest and the opinion of the lay public and political psychologists alike. At Issue is the alleged involvement of a famous rock-and-roll guitarist in "using"--if not necessarily abusing--child Internet pornography (Lyall, 2003).

A hypothetical stranger to a strange land or virgin in our political world might go through the following thought process in assessing the alleged misbehavior of the entertainer in question.

A first question might be why an individual should not be allowed to engage in any behavior that the individual desires. An answer might be that an essential of the political world is that members of some collective of people trade off at least some of the infinitude of possible behaviors for the opportunity to remain in that world. Proscription may be necessary for some deontological and consequentialist versions of Good, so at Issue might be what those proscribed behaviors should be not the Issue of proscription.

A second question might, then, become what the proscribed behaviors should be. Some might argue that viewing sexual and sexualized pictures of children is no more endangering Good than many other behaviors. One counter to this is that the viewing of such pictures renders one more likely to engage in sex with children. Some social research on this assertion has supported it, while still other research has supported the notions that viewing such pictures (1) is an indicator or diagnostic feature of people who are more likely to engage in sex with children, (2) has absolutely nothing to do with sexual behavior, or (3) may have different consequences for different types of people. Additional notions that viewing such pictures may make it less likely that at least some types of people engage in sex with children are not often advanced.

Ambiguities arise in interpreting the above text concerning the construct of sex with children. The most common construct seems to comprise behaviors that can be externally observed by others and involve real-time touching of at least one person by the other in the service of orgasm. Other constructs may include masturbatory behavior in real-time with another person without touching that person, masturbatory behavior after being in real-time with another person, or masturbatory behavior when imagining the presence of some person with whom one has had no real-time experience. The last construct in particular brings us close to the notion of proscription of certain types of mental functioning in and of itself.

Before our stranger from a strange land or virgin in our political world jumps to a conclusion about whether a thought crime--i.e., viewing sexual and sexualized pictures of children leading to masturbatory behavior not involving the presence of children--should or should not be proscribed, three additional Issues need to be addressed. One is that sexual and sexualized pictures of children might or might not require actual children being sexually posed but instead only require images of children that

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could be constructed graphically. Another is that the engagement in masturbatory behavior in all its variants should or should not be proscribed regardless of whether it involves stimuli of children. And the third is the goodness or badness of sex with children.

In addressing all three questions, ultimately, the import of sexual cognition, emotion, motivation, and behavior for the political world must return to the impact on the Good--regardless of how the Good is defined. In the contexts of sexuality and cybersexuality and in the last analysis--after protestations about empirical research, methodology, and statistics--would arise the arbiter of faith. And faith is quite often impervious to, and may even feed off of, counters of reason, logic, rationality, and other publicly acclaimed tools of public policy. In the case of adult cybersexuality in the realm of children, such a conclusion bodes ill for the political adjudication of entertainment stars and the rest of us. (See Bacon, H., & Richardson, S. (2001). Attachment theory and child abuse: An overview of the literature for practitioners. *Child Abuse Review*, 10, 377-397; Delmonico, D. L., & Carnes, P. J. (1999). Virtual sex addiction: When cybersex becomes the drug of choice. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 2, 457-463; Gardner, R.A. (2001). The normal-sexual-fantasy consideration in sex-abuse evaluations. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 29, 83-94; Greenfield, D.N. (1999). Psychological characteristics of compulsive Internet use: A preliminary analysis. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 2 403-412; Lyall, S. (January 15, 2003). Britain's hunt for child pornography users nets hundreds besides Pete Townshend. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Cybersexuality.)