

# Intergenerational Sex: Consent Isn't the Problem

Bill Andriette

**T**houghtful discussions of intergenerational sex in the lesbian and gay community—ones that get beyond mainstream culture's instant condemnation—often conclude with hand-wringing at the profound complexity and ambiguity of sexual consent between an adolescent or child and an adult.

That conclusion is inadequate. It misses the source of the biggest problems with intergenerational relationships and encourages lesbian and gay complacency toward the campaign of repression under way in the United States to stamp out this form of sexuality.

From my own experience, I can appreciate the impulse to paint the consent issue in shades of gray. I started having gay sex with men as a 14-year-old boy. Most of my relationships were positive. They were the field on which I learned how to negotiate the sexual terrain (not so much the romantic terrain—the people I had crushes on were usually my age or younger, a pattern which continues for me). In these sexual encounters I found pleasures I hadn't anticipated based on what I knew from fantasizing or childhood sex play: the physical warmth and tenderness of love making, being the object of another person's arousal, the excitement of breaking the rules. But at the same time I often felt ambivalent and slightly troubled: by my lack of confidence in avoiding or initiating sexual situations, by my uncertainty about the criteria I should use in deciding whether or not to have sex with someone, by the fact that these relationships were completely separate from the other sets of relationships that constituted my fairly ordinary, suburban-New York adolescent life.

Some sexual relationships between older and younger people are not ambiguous. There is no question about someone who has sex with a child against her or his objections. Some positive encounters I think should also count as unambiguous. I remember with unalloyed pleasure, for example, at a physical exam when I was five, lying naked on the table with a roaring hard on and relishing the sensation as the doctor felt my cock. It may or may not have been a sexual experience for her, but it certainly was for me. A number of times in childhood I tried to manipulate situations so that other people, usually adults, would have an excuse to undress or fondle me. On the conception of sexual abuse current today, these sexual experiences should have been extraordinarily damaging, since they took place when I was presumably most powerless and when my sexuality and psyche were the

most fragile. Yet within their admittedly much narrower horizons I remember them less ambivalently than relationships I had with adults as an adolescent, when I had presumably more knowledge and power.

That discrepancy points to something given insufficient credence in most discussions of consent: the impact on intergenerational relationships of our society's condemnation, of our society's deliberate mis-education of children about sex, and of its failure to let children and adolescents make sex openly a part of their lives. I think these were the important factors behind my ambivalence toward my more socially-immersed adolescent relationships as compared with my enjoyment of the more private sexual experiences of childhood. It is not that sex is so extraordinarily troublesome and foreign that even young children cannot assimilate it into their understanding. I had no trouble knowing the kinds of sexual situations I liked even when six years old; when life did not provide, I created them nightly in my fantasies. Rather, it is our society's bigoted intolerance that deliberately and at great cost makes intergenerational sex troublesome, and not the *nature* of children or adolescents and the *nature* of sex.

## Between the Centuries: Intergenerational and Interracial Sex

For a useful model of how society trips up intergenerational sex, consider the status of interracial sex between white women and black men in the southern United States in, say, the 19th century, when such relationships were, as intergenerational relationships are today, forbidden and scandalous. A white southern woman could easily pick up from her culture radically ambivalent emotions about sex with black men. On the one hand, interracial sex was taboo (at least for white southern women and black men), while on the other, black men were implied to be sexually voracious and fabulously potent, qualities that could invest them with allure. A white woman might consensually have sex with a black man, enjoy the relationship (in part perhaps because it was forbidden), yet feel troubled and conflicted afterwards. Her emotions might include shame at having had illicit sex, guilt at having enjoyed it, anxiety at having to keep the relationship secret, and a sense of having been tainted and ruined, not only by compromising her womanly virtue but by intimacy with a racial "inferior." If the relationship were found out, these conflicts could come to a head.

Yet the white woman's culture would offer a ready interpretative schema to resolve these powerful conflicts. Simply by saying that she was raped, the woman would be absolved of all responsibility for what happened and allowed to return to good grace, something she would resolutely lose were she to, say, escape to Canada with her black paramour. Quite possibly, the woman wouldn't even have to say she was raped because it would be the automatic conclusion of the white authorities when faced with evidence of sex between a black man and white woman—a sort of union so unnatural and barbaric that it had to be coerced by the only party who stood to gain from it.

With her relationships with family and community as stake, the woman would be under enormous pressure to play along. Circumstances would now encourage her to portray a sexual encounter that was voluntary and enjoyable at the same time it was devastating. That portrayal would not necessarily be dishonest, since in the pressure cooker of racial and sexual bigotry even the memory of the experience could imaginably transubstantiate into something monstrous. Anything the woman said bolstering a monstrous image of the sex would be readily accepted because it would retell a deep cultural myth serving to justify racial boundaries, into which extraordinary cultural energy was invested. Toward the preservation of those boundaries, the black man would likely be executed or lynched.

The ideological pressures that tended to transform consensual interracial sex into rape in the South parallel contemporary society's ideology around intergenerational sex. The blind rage of the lynch mob closely resembles that expressed today toward men who have sex with children or adolescents; indeed, calls for the killing of such men are a staple of the contemporary rhetoric. Just as with interracial sex in the old South, intergenerational sex today is seen as intrinsically evil because it violates socially constructed boundaries across which sexuality is taboo. Those who violate these boundaries are severely punished, and "victims" themselves face ostracism if they fail to embrace a role carefully laid out by therapists, media, and the rhetoric of police and prosecutors.

This is not to say that sexual coercion of children is not widespread any more than it is to say that black men did not sometimes really rape white southern women. Moreover, one has to consider how in the above scenario the ideological baggage that each person carried into the interracial relationship could have poisoned it. One can imagine the relationship going badly because the black man couldn't help thinking about the lynching he risked, and the white woman the loss of her social status. I think that the corresponding pressures make many noncoercive intergenerational relationships problematic. But thanks to the political

struggles of black people, most readers today will have no trouble seeing that it is racial bigotry that is the root of the problem in the above scenario, not interracial relationships, which in a non-bigoted society are as difficult and fraught with ambiguity as relationships between straight-haired and curly-haired people.

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Anyone wanting seriously to deal with the problem of rape in 19th century southern culture would have had to deal first with racism and the myth of the black rapist. Dealing with the real problem of rape in southern culture would have meant making the South safe for interracial sex. Likewise, if we are seriously to deal with the problem of the sexual coercion of children, we will have to make the world safe for consensual intergenerational sex.

#### **Necessary Changes in Attitudes and Policies**

This is not a utopian project. There are concrete changes in attitudes and policies, many being tried in other western countries, that would make intergenerational relationships safer.

- The distinction between coercive and consensual sex must be accepted. In Massachusetts a person 16 years old can consent to sex with an adult, while in California, where the age of consent is 18, that relationship is punished as rape. The claim that any sex with a minor is rape demeans the seriousness of real rape and prevents police and prosecutors from dealing reasonably with intergenerational relationships. The best solution is replacing an age of consent with more subtle and informal mechanisms to regulate relationships where there is a difference in age. A start would be lowering the age. A number of western countries that have not shirked from the reality of sexual abuse have nonetheless chosen an age of consent far lower than in the US. In Canada, a relationship between a person 14 years old and an adult can count as legally consensual, and in the Netherlands, the younger partner can be 12 years of old.

- Intergenerational relationships need to take place openly. Young people need the support, guidance, and perspective from family and friends that they rely on as a context for their other relationships. Openness helps keep everybody involved honest and minimizes the chances for abuse.

• Adults with erotic feelings for minors need to be allowed to organize so they can learn from each others' experiences, overcome internalized phobia, and become sensitive to the issues around consent. Some of the worst sexual abuse is committed by isolated men who have erotic feelings for children or adolescents and who have internalized the hatred this society heaps on them. After boys complained about their relationships with him, a man in Germany last year was compelled by a judge to attend meetings of the local pedophile support group.

• Young people need sexuality education and a sense of control over their bodies. Telling children and adolescents that they can "just say no" to sex with older people is as disrespectful of their personhood as insisting they have to say yes. Young people need the sexual knowledge and the freedom to make their own decisions about their bodies, even when those decisions upset adults' expectations.

Policies and attitudes like these suggest the path our society could take to confront sexual abuse and deal rationally with intergenerational relationships. Instead, the United States is now proceeding on a course of vicious repression against men sexually attracted to adolescents or children. The clippings cross my desk every week: a Texas man gets 99 years for sex with boys in which no coercion is alleged, 43 years in Tennessee, 26 years in California—sentences that would be imposed in virtually no other western country. The number of people in jail for noncoercive sex with minors runs probably into the tens of thousands. No nation has ever imprisoned as many people as the United States now has for consensual sex, and there is no end in sight to the repression. A 1990 federal law makes private possession of three or more photographs of a person under 18 having sex or even just posing nude a felony. Last year Washington state passed a law that allows for *permanent civil incarceration* of anyone who has ever had sex with a person younger than 16 years of age, in Washington or anywhere else, no matter whether that person has already served a sentence. Other states appear set to enact similar legislation as the medical establishment comes to conclude that people who have erotic feelings for children or adolescents cannot be "cured," any more than men attracted to men or women attracted to women.

#### **Role of the Lesbian and Gay Community**

The lesbian and gay movement occasionally gives umbrage to man/boy lovers. But more typically, from fear of playing into stereotypes about "child molesting," it stands by in silence. Gay and lesbian publications today almost never cover news about gay men who are prosecuted for sex with boys or entrapped by government pornography stings. In practice, gay political groups will ignore any law, no matter how

dangerous and unjust, whose stated purpose is the "protection of children." Last year, Massachusetts' gay and lesbian political establishment supported the reelection of an attorney general who made as the centerpiece of his campaign a law imposing a mandatory 10-year sentence for anyone producing, selling, or displaying a photograph or drawing of a nude model younger than 18 years. The last time the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund spoke publicly about man/boy love was to support the prosecution of a gay man, the then-editor of the *North American Man/Boy Love Association Bulletin*, who was charged with consensual sex with teenage boys, a prosecution instigated by the police for relationships about which neither the boys nor parents had complained.

The lesbian and gay community's neglect of this oppression shows how deeply it has been affected by the ideology of hatred prevailing toward men with sexual attraction to adolescents or children. This bigotry is as consuming, as deeply layered into consciousness, and as distorting as racism or homophobia. It has compromised the political integrity of the gay and lesbian movement to the point where its leadership is incapable of publicly opposing laws under which any gay bookstore could now be raided for selling a book of photographs by Wilhelm von Gloeden, under which possession of certain back issues of *Christopher Street* and *Fag Rag* is now a federal felony, under which a gay man whose sexuality follows the path of Walt Whitman or Oscar Wilde faces life in jail. To argue that it is the complexity of consent and the lesbian/gay movement's depth of concern about sexual abuse that underlies this silence shows nothing but bad faith, for it will be impossible to get a handle on consent or abuse in a culture where these laws seem acceptable.

As the only recognized sexual minority in the polity, lesbians and gays are in a unique position to diagnose and fight the panic over intergenerational sex, since it repeats in crucial respects what the medical and therapeutic establishments, the police, and the moral authorities have done to homosexuals. Whether the lesbian and gay movement overcomes its indifference to and sometimes complicity with the oppression of intergenerational relations will be a crucial test of its integrity. In the end, will that movement have served mostly to reformulate and redistribute this culture's still-profound sexual bigotry? Or from the struggle of lesbian and gay people for freedom will we have gained a larger sense of justice?

*Bill Andriette studied philosophy at Cornell. He is editor of the North American Man/Boy Love Association Bulletin and features editor of The Guide. He contributed to One Teenager in Ten: Writings by Gay and Lesbian Youth, and has written on sex and censorship in Gay Community News, Playboy, Newsday, and elsewhere.*

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