

Innocence Lost?

The American Psychological Association refuses to withdraw a badly flawed study that suggests that sexual abuse is not harmful to children who 'consent.'

By Kelly Patricia O'Meara

Few thought the day would come when sexual abuse of a child might be called "a positive experience." Not long ago it was unimaginable that, in an attempt to bring legitimacy to criminal and immoral sexual acts, the term "child molestation" would be restyled into value-neutral language such as "adult-child sex."

But the American Psychological Association, or APA, published in July 1998 in its prestigious *Psychological Bulletin* a study by three professors — Bruce Rand from Temple University, Philip Tromovitch from the University of Pennsylvania and Robert Bauserman from the University of Michigan — which basically redefines "child sexual abuse." Called the "Meta-Analytic Examination of Assumed Properties of Child Sexual Abuse Using College Samples," the objective of the study was to determine "in the population of persons with a history of child sexual abuse, does this experience cause intense psychological harm on a widespread basis for both genders?"

The professors say their study shows that the experiences suffered by sexually abused male and female children are different, which seems reasonable enough. They also claim that child sexual abuse does not necessarily produce long-term negative consequences. Their conclusions further suggest that when negative effects do occur they often are temporary, and that consensual sex between children and adults, and adolescents and children, should be described in more positive terms, such as "adult-child sex" and "adolescent-child sex."

Anthony Falzarano, director of P-Fox, a national organization of homosexuals who are seeking "reparative therapy" and heterosexual orientation, couldn't be more outraged by the study's findings. "We're in big trouble if the APA is working toward the



decriminalization of pedophilia. Seventy-five percent of homosexuals were raped or molested as children, and to suggest that it has no lasting effect is ludicrous." He continues, "I'm an ex-homosexual and I was molested multiple times as a child. The ex-gay community is very upset about the study because we know what it suggests simply isn't true. It is utterly incredible to think that a child can 'consent' to sex with an adult. Believe me, there are lasting, harmful effects."

Falzarano is just one of a great many Americans who are expressing shock and anger at the implications of the new APA advocacy. Last week several members of Congress, radio personalities and private organizations gathered at the National Press Club in Washington to call on the APA to denounce the study's premise. House Majority Whip Tom DeLay of Texas expressed the emotions of many: "The lack of judgment shown by the APA in publishing [the study] absolutely confounds me!" he declared. "I will not equivocate on this issue. Sexual activity between an adult and a child is criminal at all times and in all cases."

Republican Rep. Matt Salmon of

Arizona, who visibly was angered by the APA's position, said, "It is beyond the realm of possibility that we're even here today talking about this. But what are we to do when we have groups like the APA who don't stand up and say that this is sick and twisted. I don't want to understand pedophiles, I want to put them in prison." In mid-May Salmon sponsored a resolution calling on President Clinton to join Congress in rejecting the conclusions of the report. The House leadership is considering bringing the bill, H.Con.Res.107, to the floor for a vote during the week of June 14, which coincidentally is designated Week of the Family.

Resolutions of outrage also are being offered in the states. The first of these passed the Alaska state Senate by a 20-0 vote. But the APA has stood its ground. Although it is the APA's position that "sexual abuse of children is wrong and harmful to its victims," the association is treating the study as science instead of advocacy. "If they don't support the findings," asks Falzarano, "why are they giving it credibility by publishing it?"

Rhea Farberman, director of public communications for the APA, explains the group's resistance. "We publish hundreds of articles that are chosen from thousands submitted. The qualifying factor is the methodology — is it sound?" She continues, "I think this issue is not so much about pedophilia, but whether science should be allowed to ask tough questions. Just because we published the study doesn't mean we support its findings or its authors. But we do stand behind the methodology. That is what science is about. You ask the question, and it begets another. If you don't report the data, then there is never any progress."

"The methodology of this study is the weakest part," says radio's "Dr. Laura" Schlessinger, an outspoken critic. "A Meta-Analytic Examination ... means you don't do your own work; you go into the literature, grab a lot of



Bad science: Falzarano says he is an ex-homosexual, molested as a child, who suffered lasting, harmful effects.

papers, all done by different people, put them all together, do a lot of math and publish." She continues: "The researchers chose 59 studies to review. Of these, 38 percent have not been published. They were unpublished master's-degree or doctoral dissertations. So 23 of the 59 studies were not even subject to any kind of peer review — that is, to the technical scrutiny of the psychological community."

Farberman does not dispute Schlessinger's statement. "Twenty-three papers that were used in the study were papers that had only been reviewed by a dissertation committee in the university setting," says Farberman. "But dissertation is a different level of review — a review nonetheless. Junk doesn't get accepted by dissertation committees."

But Dr. Laura tells *Insight*, "According to an analysis by the Leadership Council on Mental Health, Justice and the Media, 60 percent of the data in the APA piece concerning self-reported effects of child sexual abuse were drawn from a single 1956 study, which measured the effects of mild adult-child interactions involving no physical contact. It isn't surprising that these encounters resulted in little permanent harm, but then the authors of the study generalize the findings to all sexual-abuse victims without informing the reader that the data they drew from were skewed."

Meanwhile, the "other" APA, the American Psychiatric Association, is doing its best to dissociate itself from the study by contacting every reporter who attended the recent press conference to erase any confusion between the two groups. Critics tell *Insight* they consider this action strange, given that in their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, or *DSM-IV*, the American Psychiatric Association has determined that patients who molest children no longer are to be defined as "pedophiles" unless they feel bad or are impaired in their work or social relationships as a result.

Harold Pincus, a psychiatrist and deputy medical director of the American Psychiatric Association, explains to *Insight* that "it's important for society to distinguish between the criminal act and the mental illness. There is a big difference." The difference comes into play, according to Pincus, when "a pedophile gets caught and is charged with a crime."

One group that has been vocal in its support of the study is the North American Man-Boy Love Association, or NAMBLA, a pedophile group advocating laws to permit sex between adults and "consenting" children. On its Website, NAMBLA praises the APA's study as "good news." And while the APA has refused to back away from the findings of the study, it at least has distanced itself from NAMBLA, saying, "The APA in no way supports NAMBLA's position."

Bob Flores, senior counsel for the

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National Law Center for Children and Families, isn't surprised by NAMBLA's elation. "The report will validate many pedophiles. It will make them think that what they're doing to the child is actually helping them. This isn't brain surgery. Even the village idiot understands what this study is suggesting. In fact, if someone had come out today with a study that said blacks and Hispanics lack the brains to learn, the APA rightly would be all over them, condemning the study. So what you have to ask," he says, "is why the APA is supporting the study by publishing it? As a prosecutor, I'd want to know the background of the authors — what their relationship is to the homosexual community and are they homosexuals?"

The authors were unavailable for comment. However, Flores' question is common among opponents of the study who believe history is repeating itself. They note that slow but steady steps were taken nearly three decades ago when the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, explaining that the condition was normal as long as a person didn't feel bad about it. "When homosexuality was dropped from the DSM, the agenda became, 'homosexuality is normal,'" says Dr. Laura. "If you said anything to the contrary, that meant you were hateful and bigoted. Deviance became redefined as diversity, and tolerance became defined as acceptance, then celebration. It sounds like we're taking the next step with pedophilia."

Falzarano also is concerned that the APA has taken the first step toward normalization of pedophilia. His recommendation is simple: "We need to start protecting the children. Instead of backing studies like this, the APA should be stepping in and saying this is wrong. It's time to hold the APA accountable for their behavior." ●