

# **Book Review: “Harmful to Minors,” by Judith Levine**

**Why Did You Ask Me to Read This.**

narcissus

April 5, 2023

# Contents

The Short Version and the Long Version . . . . .	3
Politics and Context of: John Money and “Sexual Rehearsal Play” . . . . .	5
Tangent One: We Are Not Talking About The Same Thing . . . . .	11
Levine’s Unexpectedly Reactionary “Science” . . . . .	11
Politics and Context of: False Memory Syndrome . . . . .	12
CSA Denialism as “Objective Neutral Science” . . . . .	14
Politics and Context of: Bruce Rind . . . . .	17
Tangent Two: “Boy”-Love? . . . . .	19
Conclusions: This Review Was Originally Supposed to be One Paragraph Long . . . .	22

## The Short Version and the Long Version

This was supposed to be a one-paragraph blurb.

Numerous times since I began talking about youth liberation, consent, and rape culture, friends and radicals have asked what I think of Judith Levine’s highly recommended book, *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children From Sex*. Until recently, I haven’t had either the time or the inclination to read it. This turns out to be for the best, because I went into the reading already armed with a significant (some might say, unhealthy) amount of research about the social and academic milieus of sexologists and activists from which Levine draws much of her evidence. I think for most people who read this book, the things that stand out to me will go entirely unnoticed. Levine presents a seemingly reasonable and measured, seemingly well-researched case. Many people who read it will be persuaded both of its good points and its bad points, and indeed the seamless blending of good and bad together goes a long way to obfuscate the seriousness of its flaws.

And... oh boy. It is not good. It is bad.

Short version: this commonly recommended book, written by a civil libertarian, combines a number of generally and genuinely *good* and insightful arguments (e.g., sex education makes young people safer, teens have a right to access sexual and reproductive healthcare, and so on) with a number of other, much more pernicious claims that on the whole tend to favor certain ideological frameworks that privilege the “rights” of adults to sexually access the bodies of adolescents and children at the expense of young people themselves, their autonomy, and their liberation.

The cover design of the ebook edition is... a choice.

Now the long version.

The overall arc of Levine’s thesis is well-trodden ground in the year of our Lord 2023. For this reason, I won’t be spending much time retreading it — you can read this review by Liz Highleyman for a general idea of its themes and reception, especially in left and radical milieus — but instead I want to focus on Levine’s *actual research*: namely, the way she selects and frames scientific sources, and how she constructs a vision of “science” as an epistemic authority on the lives of children. And in no small part I want to explore the unspoken, but crucial background information about that “science,” its political context, social agenda, and how it reaches the conclusions she then draws on as evidence.

Levine makes numerous claims (stated as facts) throughout *Harmful to Minors* that are based entirely on evidence drawn from widely criticized, often outright pseudoscientific research conducted by trans-antagonistic pedophilia-sympathetic sexologists — including some who are associated with the “Man-Boy Love” and “Pedophile Emancipation” movements, like Theo Sandfort, who is referenced numerous times. Someday I hope to be able to write something breaking down the serious methodological problems — from massaged data to outright fabrication — that are ubiquitous in the research produced by this academic milieu, (I do discuss a few of the characteristic problems with some of them below, but in nowhere near the detail they deserve). For now, you can find a reasonably thorough review of one of Sandfort’s “boy-love” studies in Sarah D. Goode’s *Paedophiles in Society: Reflecting on Sexuality, Abuse, and Hope*, (although I also have reservations about that book on a whole, Chapter 5 is currently the only published work breaking down Sandfort’s “Boy-Love” research in detail that I am aware of).

Another example of Levine’s casual reliance on highly problematic sexology is Gisela Bleibtreu-Ehrenberg, whose work “Pederasty among Primitives: Institutionalized Initiation and Cultic Prostitution,” Levine references as evidence that “intergenerational sex has been normal as sexual initiation in many preindustrial societies.”<sup>1</sup> It should be stated clearly that Levine is not citing this claim with approval but rather as part of an argument problematizing the metric of “normality,” itself — *not* implying that what is “normal” is therefore “ethically acceptable.” She also cites feminist Susan Brownmiller in this section as a source for the claim that rape has been considered “normal” in wartime. In other words, she is *criticizing* “normal” as a value judgement, *not* endorsing it. But my reason for pointing out the reference is that she treats this source, like many other problematic sources, as legitimate, authoritative *science*. And, despite Levine’s argument being *against* “normality” as a value, the source she is drawing from actually directly opposes her point. “Pederasty among Primitives” is found in *Male Intergenerational Intimacy*, the book Sandfort co-edited with Alex van Naerssen and “Pedophile Emancipationist” politician Edward Brongersma. All three of them at one time sat on the editorial board of a “Boy-Love” pseudoacademic journal<sup>2</sup> (More on this journal later.) Despite Levine’s good intention in this section, this evidence she cites *is* part of a political movement seeking to portray “intergenerational sex” as “normal” and therefore as “harmless.” The difference in motivation between Levine and her source doesn’t resolve the problem that Bleibtreu-Ehrenberg *just is not reliable* as a *factual* source. She’s trying to make a generally good point — normality is socially constructed — by pointing to a fundamentally unreliable source that *has an agenda*. That agenda is to reach a predetermined conclusion with the end goal of downplaying the harm of adult-child sex by portraying it as “normal.” This conflict of interests creates an irreconcilable friction between her stated goal and the evidence she actually uses to support it.

Although I am convinced Levine likely was not aware of many of the misleading and problematic claims of her sources, it does seem *frustrating* to me that she seemingly did not notice the patterns in their publication histories. Another source she cites in support of the same claim (“intergenerational sex has often been considered normal”) is William H. Davenport, “Adult-Child Sexual Relations in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *The Sexual Abuse of Children: Theory and Research*, vol. 1, edited by William O’Donohue and James H. Geer. Just looking at the table of contents, the second chapter of this volume is Theo Sandfort’s contribution, titled “The Argument for Adult-Child Sexual Contact: A Critical Appraisal and New Data.” I wonder if she read this chapter, and if she did, what she thought of it — and did she see any red flags about repeatedly citing Sandfort’s other work as credible science? Did she not *notice* that Sandfort was on the NAMBLA list of recommended readings?<sup>3</sup> Was she *unaware* of his most infamous works written explicitly with the goal of influencing policy toward abolishing the age of consent<sup>4</sup> or did she just not see it as compromising to his credibility on other matters?

This is what I mean by the way Levine seamlessly blends the good and the bad: **the persuasiveness of her good points lends legitimacy and persuasiveness to the propagandistic and misleading content of her very bad sources by proxy.** This becomes especially problem-

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> *Male Intergenerational Intimacy* was originally published as a special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality*, whose current editor-in-chief, John deCecco, was also on the editorial board of the same Boy-Love journal as Sandfort, Brongersma, and van Naerssen.

<sup>3</sup> Goode, Sarah (2011). *Paedophiles in Society: Reflecting on Sexuality, Abuse, and Hope*. p. 131

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

atic when she *isn't* making good points, but instead just uncritically agreeing with the conclusions of her sources' misleading claims and presenting them as though they were unproblematic rigorous science.

Among Levine's many assertions drawn from this dubious body of research are claims about the degree to which children may be harmed by sex with adults, claims about so-called "pedophilia" that are implicitly premised on biological gender essentialism, and claims that sympathetically portray men who are incarcerated for sex with children as overcome with remorse and shame and thus unlikely to abuse again. (This is in contrast to social science research suggesting that men who sexually abuse children often accumulate hundreds of victims before they are ever caught, and the vast majority of them are never caught in the first place — an even smaller percentage ever see the inside of a prison.) This is where things go very seriously wrong.

Some of the scientific theories that form the basis of Levine's body of evidence include the long-debunked theories of *actual sexual abusers* like John Money. For example, Levine discusses Money's theory of "childhood sexual rehearsal play," and presents it as scientifically valid consensus. Levine doesn't directly cite Money as a source concerning the theory of "sexual rehearsal play," but the sexologists she does cite are evidently influenced by him: it was John Money who pioneered the theory.<sup>5</sup>

## Politics and Context of: John Money and "Sexual Rehearsal Play"

The theory of "sexual rehearsal play," which Levine presents as scientific consensus,<sup>6</sup> formed the basis of one of the most infamous unethical experiments in social science history: the "scientific" sexual abuse of the Reimer twins, both of whom later died by suicide.<sup>7</sup> GCs and RWers love to bring up John Money and claim he was influential in the development of trans-affirming healthcare, but it's actually the exact opposite. Money, along with his collaborator Richard Green (more on him in a minute), innovated and heavily influenced the field of trans conversion therapy for children. As they wrote in their co-authored work: "*part of the successful rearing of a child is orienting him, from birth, to his biologically and culturally acceptable gender role.*"<sup>8</sup> Green and Money even hypothesized that the "taboo on sex in the early years" was a causal factor in the development of "effeminacy in boys." In other words, one of the apparent "perils of protecting children from sex," according to John Money anyway, is that they will become trans later in life because they did not do enough "rehearsal" of cis heterosexual intercourse in childhood.

This is no exaggeration: Money heavily based the theory on his observations of the indigenous Yolngu culture, which he claimed was completely free from "gender confusion" (his words)<sup>9</sup>, writing:

"The straightforward attitude of the Yolngu towards nudity and sex play in young children allows these children to grow up with a straightforward attitude towards

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<sup>5</sup> Colapinto, J. (2001) *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*. New York. Harper. *passim*, but see pp. 136–143. I am using the ebook edition, so page numbers may not line up with other copies of the book.

<sup>6</sup> Levine, p. 138. Once again I am using the ebook edition, so page numbers may not line up with other copies of the book.

<sup>7</sup> Colapinto, J. (2001) pp. 136–143.

<sup>8</sup> Green and Money (1960), *Incongruous Gender Roles: Nongenital Manifestations in Prepubertal Boys*, p. 147

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

Theo Sandfort

# BOYS *on their contacts with* MEN

A study of sexually  
expressed friendships

**GLOBAL  
ACADEMIC  
PUBLISHERS**

With an introduction by  
Dr. John Money  
who called this study  
"One of the most valuable  
works of research  
scholarship on the topic  
of pedophilia that has  
ever appeared in print."

# **Male Intergenerational Intimacy**

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**Historical, Socio-Psychological,  
and Legal Perspectives**

**Theo Sandfort, PhD  
Edward Brongersma, JD  
Alex van Naerssen, PhD  
Editors**



**sex differences, towards the proper meaning and eventual significance of the sex organs, and towards their own reproductive destiny and sense of identity as male or female,”** (emphasis mine)<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, he claimed, Western society’s putative restriction on childhood sexual activity was the root cause of “psychosexual confusions” like, (again, in his own words,) “homosexuality.” In case it was at all ambiguous, he claimed in an Oprah interview that there were “no bisexual or gay people” among the Yolngu, as a result, he believed, of their supposed practice of early childhood sexual rehearsal play. It turns out his observations about the Yolngu may have been fabricated, and at minimum seem to be based on extremely thin evidence: other anthropologists who worked with the Yolngu were baffled by the claims, both about the alleged practice of “sex rehearsal,” which no other anthropologist observed, and about the claim that the Yolngu were free of queer and gender-variant people.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it turns out... people are gay, John.

Levine indirectly references this theory (the idea that Western society’s “taboo” on childhood sexual activity, is responsible for adult non-normative sexualities and gender identities) elsewhere in the book:

“According to Johns Hopkins University’s John Money, one of the world’s foremost authorities on sexual abnormalities, ‘the majority of patients with paraphilias’—deviant sexual fantasies and behaviors—‘described a strict anti-sexual upbringing in which sex was either never mentioned or was actively repressed or defiled.’”<sup>12</sup>

I remind you that one of those “paraphilias” or as Levine puts it, “deviant sexual fantasies and behaviors,” is *literally being trans*.

Again, this is not an exaggeration: the title of the book she is pulling this quote from is Money’s *Lovemaps: Clinical Concepts of Sexual/Erotic Health and Pathology, Paraphilia and Gender Transposition, Childhood, Adolescence and Maturity* (emphasis mine).<sup>13</sup> (Incidentally, she also cites Money as the apparent source of the claim “[t]he majority of reported acts of sexual abuse of children are not committed by pedophiles.”<sup>14</sup> Go figure.)

It was this belief — the belief that children had to “rehearse” cis heterosexual penis-in-vagina intercourse from an early age in order to properly internalize their “reproductive destiny” that motivated Money’s experimentation on the the Reimer twins, in which he forced them to mimic heterosexual intercourse in various positions, and took pictures of them. He forced them to do this repeatedly for several years, and terrorized them if they attempted to resist, all with the goal of conditioning David Reimer (the twin who had been surgically assigned “female” after a botched circumcision) to learn to internalize an externally assigned, *binary*, heterosexual gender role through “sex rehearsal.”<sup>15</sup>

So-called “Gender-Criticals” and TERFs often claim that John Money is responsible for the idea that “gender is a social construct,” and that his experimentation on the Reimer twins was intended to prove the validity of trans-affirming healthcare, but this is not true. Money was not

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Colapinto, J. (2001) p. 143.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Levine, p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> cited in Levine, p. 584

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 111

<sup>15</sup> Colapinto, J. (2001). pp. 136–143.



trying to prove the legitimacy of trans-affirming healthcare but the opposite: *he was trying to prove the efficacy of the methodologies and theories that form the theoretical basis of trans conversion therapy.* He was trying to prove that a child could be therapeutically coerced into accepting a gender identity they did not feel or identify with, and one of the key components of his theory was that children needed to learn their “biologically and culturally acceptable” “reproductive destiny,” through childhood (hetero)sexual activity.

Money’s idea of the “social construction of gender” has nothing in common with, say, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. Instead, it is what might be called “vulgar social constructionism,” but really amounts to a Lockean blank-slate theory: children are simply malleable clay, with no subjective experience or capacity to reason about, be critical of, or reject the “socialization” imposed on them. They can be made to accept any identity into which they are molded. Money’s theory has nothing to do with social construction proper: it’s the most extreme possible version of the very same socialization theory TERFs cite to claim that trans women are “socialized male.”

Money’s research has not been used to support trans-affirming healthcare, but instead quite the opposite: he is one of the most influential scientists in the literature on “desistance” and conversion therapy for trans children, and his work has been used to justify thousands of coercive sex-assignment surgeries performed on intersex children in order to force them to conform to the gender binary.

***This is the theory which Levine presents as the scientific consensus.***

To be clear, Levine does not go into any of this background information about John Money’s theory of “sexual rehearsal play.” As I already mentioned, he is not even the source she actually cites in discussing the theory. My point here is not to suggest that Judith Levine was knowingly, maliciously propagating some of the most hateful homophobic pseudoscience I have ever heard in my life, nor that she was knowingly and maliciously propagating Money’s sexual abuse advocacy. However, at the same time, it’s not as if she could not possibly have known that the science she was citing was problematic: *Harmful to Minors* was published in 2002. John Colapinto’s award-winning 20,000 word *Rolling Stone* expose on Money’s horrifically unethical experiments on the Reimer twins, *The True Story of John/Joan*, was published in December of 1997. In it, Colapinto interviews members of the Intersex Society of North America about why they are critical of the practice of performing sex reassignment surgery on infants, a practice heavily based on Money’s claims about the Reimer twins, and in turn on “sexual rehearsal play.” Quoting one of Money’s former patients, an intersex person who was surgically assigned “male” at age two and who did not learn of her intersexuality until puberty, when she began to menstruate through her phallus:

She describes how Dr. Money, evidently attempting to ascertain whether she had assumed a male or female gender identity, questioned her about her sex life – in the frank language for which he was well known. “Have you ever fucked somebody?” she remembers Dr. Money asking. “Wouldn’t you like to fuck somebody?” She also describes how Dr. Money showed her a pornographic movie. “He wanted to know who I identified with in this movie,” she says. Contrary to Money’s theory that an intersex reared as a boy will likely develop a male gender identity, Triea’s sexuality and sense of self were far more complicated than that. At 17, she agreed to undergo feminizing surgery to create female genitals, but when she became sexually active for the first time, at age 32, her erotic orientation was toward women.

Something this quote highlights strikingly (aside from John Money asking a teenager “wouldn’t you like to fuck somebody”): Triea demonstrates both the truth that gender and sex are socially (and medically) constructed *and* the truth that Money’s particular version of “social construction” — the notion that children can be malleably shaped by adult guidance to accept whatever gender identity is assigned to them, akin to the “socialization” theory now frequently appealed to by TERFs — was wrong on its face.

Colapinto’s followup book, *As Nature Made Him*, which details the background of Money’s “sexual rehearsal” theory, was published in 2000, and was a *New York Times* bestseller. It was reviewed in numerous publications from high profile pop science site Psychology Today to medical urology journals. Everything I have just explained about John Money was not only completely available to Judith Levine at the time of writing *Harmful to Minors*, but was in fact likely inescapable. It was a huge scandal that severely harmed Money’s credibility. The criticisms of intersex rights advocates were readily available in the pages of *Rolling Stone*, as was the evidence that his “sexual rehearsal” theory was heavily discredited. *So why is the only thing Levine has to say about Money is that he is “one of the world’s foremost authorities on sexual abnormalities”?*

It’s that word, “authority” that I think answers my question. Levine is constructing a position of *epistemic authority*.

I hope by now you can see why, quite apart from the book’s central thesis and general arguments, I found its science so seriously flawed. This is, to my mind, fundamentally irresponsible and misleading research; the problem is not just one or two problematic sources, but a consistent pattern of relying on “science” that is at best seriously discredited and at worst linked to oppressive anti-feminist, anti-youth-liberationist political movements, while systematically omitting these contexts, the criticisms of marginalized groups, and all counter-evidence even when that counter-evidence was virtually impossible for her to not know about.

But let’s explore a few more of Levine’s scientific sources.<sup>16</sup>

*EDIT: the above section has been modified to include and examine the timing of Harmful to Minors’ publication with respect to the public scandal about John Money’s experimentation on the*

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<sup>16</sup> I would like to point out something both John Money and Judith Levine express when they endorse the idea that insufficient childhood sexual exposure causes later psychosexual disorders, “paraphilias” and “deviant fantasies.” It’s in the way they frame proactive *allosexual* normativity as a necessary (compulsory) part of a “healthy” life and a “healthy” childhood. To have an insufficiently proactively (allo)sexual childhood is, according to Money (and thus to Levine), to be unhealthy, disordered, and a potential (future) *child molester*. Levine probably means to imply that childhood *repressed* sexuality is a potential culprit in adult sexual “deviancy,” (itself a highly problematic notion anyway), but that is not what she actually sets up as her argument; the *mere absence* of sexuality is sufficient to make someone more likely to become a child molester later. The John Money quote above, in which “active repression” and mere absence of mention are both equally blamed, is specifically offered by Levine as part of an argument suggesting that rapists and child molesters were themselves produced by what might be called “insufficiently allosexual” childhoods. In countering the conservative argument that early childhood exposure to pornography and sexuality causes later sexual deviancy, for example, Levine argues that “researchers have found evidence that the opposite is true,” that “children who eventually became [rapists and child molesters in adulthood] were usually exposed to pornography less than other kids...” (Levine, p. 248) In other words, it is (inadvertently on the part of Levine, very purposefully on the part of Money) suggested that the *mere absence* of sexuality is a potential factor in later *committing rape*. *It’s the acephobia*. The through-line of John Money’s framework is that any way of childhood being that fails to proactively engage in sexual rehearsal of your eventual “reproductive destiny” is the true root cause of later “psychosexual confusions.” Money was not unfamiliar with the concept of asexuality, which is mentioned in the archives of the Kinsey Institute at least as far back as the 60s. (In fact, I once read a letter from Wardell Pomeroy, Alfred Kinsey’s co-author, addressed to a mother worried that her son was asexual. Pomeroy suggests that the boy’s asexuality — using that exact word — was evidence of “homosexual tendencies.”) For Money, it is asexual ways of being that *create* queer ways of being.

*Reimer twins. Previously, I assumed Levine simply was not aware of these problems, but the timing of publication makes that assumption impossible to sustain.*

## **Tangent One: We Are Not Talking About The Same Thing**

I am worried that some will read the above passage as suggesting that there is nothing wrong after all with raising children with harmful “anti-sex” beliefs, which are often used to force especially queer children to internalize tremendous shame and fear. John Money says it’s bad and causes transness, so it must be defensible? No, not at all: as I said at the beginning, some of the actually good and important points made in *Harmful to Minors* include the ways that withholding information from kids, about their own bodies, about consent, about queerness, etc. does serious harm. The problem is that when your average leftist hears “anti-sex,” they imagine queerphobia and prudishness (which is also likely what Levine imagines). But when John Money says “anti-sex,” he *means* “anti-sexual *abuse*.” This is a quite common type of manipulative use of language. Consider, for example, antisemites who say “banks” and “capitalism” when what they mean is “Jews.” I once had a self-identified communist send me an article by an antisemitic intellectual Marxist whose work was published on Holocaust denial websites. Basically, the Marxist author was successful at presenting his cryptofascist views in the aesthetic register of intellectualism, and this person consequently failed to hear the difference between what communists mean when they say “Capital” and what antisemites mean when they say “*Capital*.”

That, I think, is what Judith Levine (and by extension, the many people who read and recommend this book) has fallen for.

(For a vastly superior analysis of the ways in which concepts like “childhood innocence,” function to oppress children and make them *more* vulnerable to abuse, as well as the numerous ways in which adult-supremacy silences children’s resistance against abuse, I recommend Jenny Kitzinger, “Who Are You Kidding? Children, Power, and the Struggle Against Sexual Abuse.”)

(Incidentally, at one point Levine mentions the addition of “gender dysphoria” to the DSM as an example of the pathologizing of children’s sexualities, and suggests gender dysphoria was added to replace “homosexuality” after it was removed from the DSM.<sup>17</sup> If she knows that Richard Green and his collaborator John Money, the person she describes as *one of the world’s foremost authorities on sexual abnormalities*, were instrumental in developing psychosexual/pathological diagnoses of childhood gender variance, she does not mention it. Richard Green sat on the DSM-IV committee on gender identity disorders, she does not mention it.)

## **Levine’s Unexpectedly Reactionary “Science”**

There are some claims where it is difficult to disentangle exactly what is being claimed or what evidence is being used to support it, so it is difficult to say exactly what the scientific background is. For example: Levine suggests that child sexual abuse statistics are drastically exaggerated, (e.g., on page 116 in the ebook edition). This, I should note, is simply, categorically **false**. Childhood sexual violence is extraordinarily common. Full stop.

In keeping with my theme of examining Levine’s use of sources and construction of “science” as epistemic authority, what interests me is that the claim *appears* to have been at least

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<sup>17</sup> Levine, p. 203

partly based on evidence drawn from the heavily criticized theory of “false memory syndrome.” Specifically, she cites Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters, *Making Monsters: False Memories, Psychotherapy, and Sexual Hysteria*, in support of the claim that reports of past sexual abuse without any actual memory of abuse, but rather based on the advice of self-help books and lists of symptoms she considers outrageously implausible, (like physical disability and hygiene neglect,) were among the factors leading “to huge inflations of the statistics.”<sup>18</sup> In the reference for this claim, she also cites Paul Okami and Bruce Rind, whom I’ll discuss below, but it’s not clear what studies she is referencing. What interests me is the credibility she is affording to the work of Ofshe and Watters, which won a Pulitzer prize, and was one of many influential works in turning the tide toward doubting the memories of adult and child survivors. The main subject of the book is the phenomenon of “recovered memories” and “False Memory Syndrome.” The book has been criticized for leaving out many cases that would contradict its thesis and for focusing only on challenging the memories of survivors while being “remarkably uninterested in the vagaries of memory of those who have sexually abused children.” In other words, it subjects victims’ memory to harsh cross-examination while having no interest in asking whether abusers’ memories can be trusted. The book is not, according to the criticism of reviewer Katy Butler (hyperlinked above), a dispassionate work of science, but a work of anger on behalf of the (supposed epidemic of) falsely accused adult cis men, an anger that is manifested in harshly attacking the memories of women and children. My only question for Ofshe and Watters is whether they feel the same anger on behalf of victims of rape and child sexual abuse, and if not, why is the prospect of a man being falsely accused so much more outrageous and unjust than the prospect of a child being sexually assaulted? Why is only one of these things an outrageous miscarriage of justice?

## Politics and Context of: False Memory Syndrome

This is by far the most tenuous thread that I’m going to chase, but I hope by the end I’ll be able to convince you why this is relevant. False Memory Syndrome, or FMS, which is not actually a recognized syndrome, has been used in courtrooms to attack the credibility of thousands of rape survivors, including those who are still children and whose immediate *recent* memories are automatically suspected of being “false.”<sup>19</sup> FMS became culturally prominent through the activism of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, which was founded by Peter and Pam Freyd in a retaliatory campaign to discredit their own daughter’s private claim of childhood sexual abuse by Peter. (Their daughter, Jennifer Freyd, later went on to coin the term “DARVO,” meaning “Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender,” to describe a consistent pattern in abusers’ strategies for silencing their victims and protecting their own credibility.) Like some of Levine’s sources, the FMSF is strongly linked to transphobic sexologists, including infamous trans conversion therapist Richard Green — John Money’s research collaborator — who sat on the FMSF’s advisory board. Also on the FMSF advisory board was Paul McHugh, now famous for saying trans people have a mental disorder, but who also served on the Catholic Church’s internal sexual abuse review board in 2002 following the Boston Diocese sexual abuse scandal. Members of the FMSF are also linked

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<sup>18</sup> Levine, p. 598

<sup>19</sup> Suzanne Zeedyk and Fiona Raitt, (2000) *The Implicit Relation of Psychology and the Law: Women and Syndrome Evidence*, Chapter 5, *passim*

to the pro-pedophile and Man-Boy Love movements, particularly the scientists who helped found the FMSF, Hollida Wakefield and Ralph Underwager.

Underwager, who was also a Christian minister, incidentally, was also a founding member of the far-right anti-feminist organization, Victims of Child Abuse Laws, or VOCAL, that explicitly positioned itself as backlash against the gains of the feminist movement and that *always* supported cis men accused of sexual abuse by children, regardless of actual guilt. VOCAL's activism was extremely aggressive, including picketing the offices of doctors and therapists who treated child victims and adult survivors of sexual abuse.<sup>20</sup>

Wakefield and Underwager lost a lot of credibility in the public eye after giving an interview to a pro-pedophilia pseudoacademic journal, *Paidika: The Journal of Paedophilia*. (Amazingly, this is the very same journal whose editorial board included Theo Sandfort, Edward Brongersma, and Alex van Naessen were on, alongside members of the North American Man-Boy Love Association.) But they continued to provide "expert witness" in defense of *hundreds* of cis men accused of sexually abusing their children, for decades. Wakefield remained associated with the FMSF for many years. Through their in-house, non-peer reviewed journal, *Issues in Child Abuse Accusations*, Wakefield and Underwager continued to act as a highly active vector through which Boy-Love propaganda was disseminated as "science" throughout the nineties, including several publications by Richard Gardner, the inventor of another debunked "syndrome" that has been used to successfully defend thousands of cis men accused of sexually abusing their children, so-called "Parental Alienation Syndrome."<sup>21</sup>

Levine does not cite Wakefield and Underwager or talk about FMS at all, and in fact cites Ofshe and Watters only in passing. So bringing these political contexts up at all might seem like I'm playing guilt-by-association, but my point in this is not to indict Levine for the FMSF's actions. Rather, I mention the history of the FMSF and the scientists associated with it to illustrate a broader problem with the way politically motivated anti-feminist right wing backlash against CSA survivors can present itself so effectively as "reasonable, rational science" pushing back against "sexual abuse hysteria" that it quickly becomes embedded in "common knowledge," even among radicals, as scientific "truth."

I'm trying to highlight an "epistemological path" (so to speak), that goes like this: right wing rape culture backlash against believing child sexual abuse survivors produces a set of knowledge claims and "truths," about "sexual abuse rates being dramatically exaggerated," and "epidemics of false accusations," that then become codified as "science" through the invention of "False Memory Syndrome," which explains away the testimonies and memories of countless survivors. This benefits the right wing political sphere with which folks like Underwager and Wakefield were associated, i.e., the Father's Rights anti-feminist backlash, the "Man-Boy love" movement, (which, make no mistake, was and is distinctly reactionary, but that's a story for another essay) and so on. The massively effective political activism of the FMSF — which legitimizes itself through the epistemic authority of "neutral science" produced by its board of advisors filled with respectable sexologists and psychologists — then allows these knowledge-claims to become commonly accepted cultural "truth," as the "debunking" of the supposedly "hysterically exaggerated" statistics about sexual violence against children. Various psychology books and research papers are

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<sup>20</sup> Hechler, D. (1988). *The Battle and the Backlash: The Child Sexual Abuse War*. Lexington, Massachusetts; Toronto, Lexington Books.

<sup>21</sup> For more information about the devastating history of FMS and the FMSF, see this thorough and excellent article by Katie Heaney.

written further codifying the “neutral scientific truth” of these knowledge-claims, and further positioning them as the rational curative to the “abuse hysteria.”

Eventually, one of those authoritative scientific sources, *Making Monsters: False Memories, Psychotherapy, and Sexual Hysteria* by Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters, becomes a source in Judith Levine’s book *Harmful to Minors*, in support of the claim that CSA rates are grossly exaggerated, as a “debunking” of the surveys based on self-reports of survivors and victims suggesting extremely high rates of childhood sexual abuse. *Harmful to Minors* then becomes a widely popular and highly recommended book on the *left*, completing a process of *entryism* through which far-right reactionary sexual politics gradually become integrated into the “reasonable, rational” leftist’s arsenal of “truths.”

What happens when the right wing effectively controls *both sides* of the argument about sexual violence against children? When the right wing can invoke the specter of “groomers” to paint trans people as predators, but the only tools the left and radicals have to fight back are inextricably intertwined with *the right wing’s own rape apologia*?

*EDIT: since writing this, it has come to my attention that Richard Ofshe was also on the advisory board of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, alongside Richard Green, Ralph Underwager, Hollida Wakefield, and Paul McHugh. The book “Making Monsters” is advertised in glowing terms in his biography for the FMSF’s website. In my opinion, this reinforces the criticisms I have laid out here concerning Levine’s use of scientific sources, even though, again, Levine cites Ofshe and Watters only in passing. The overarching problem that I am outlining here is that Levine uses so many such sources cited credulously in passing, presented as factual truth, and often in quick succession, that it would require another entire book to list them all and bring out their political contexts and background. The book’s scientific authority is constructed through overwhelming the capacity of the reader to meaningfully engage with it.*

## CSA Denialism as “Objective Neutral Science”

In any case, Ofshe and Watters are not the only source Levine uses to suggest that CSA statistics are heavily inflated by “hysteria.” For example, in the passage below on page 117, she again says something true followed by something that subtly undermines the credibility of children’s claims of sexual abuse. It is true that the majority of child victims are abused by someone they know, especially a family member, but it is false that the federal government recording “217,000” cases is a reliable “proof” of how often children *actually experience* abuse. She contrasts this relatively low number with “the media hysteria.” Of course, today we know that between 1/3 and 1/6 children, depending on how you measure it, experience sexual abuse before they are 18, which means tens of millions of victims. But using this statistic drawn from the epistemic authority of the state to discredit the “hysteria” — that is, adult survivors’ memories and children’s reports of abuse — still works to undermine the notion that CSA is meaningfully commonplace.

Although she tempers these claims by paying lip service to the degree to which victims are disbelieved and ignored, she leans very strongly on downplaying CSA statistics and “proving” them false and exaggerated.

Levine further makes significant claims about whether adult-child and adult-adolescent sex is harmful, for which one of her sources is the work of Bruce Rind, Philip Tromovitch, (and possibly Robert Bauserman.) Although she ultimately seems to conclude that adult-adolescent

At any rate, reliable sources show that more than half, and some say almost all, of sexual abuse is visited upon children by their own family members or parental substitutes.<sup>36</sup> The federal government recorded over 217,000 cases in 1993 (fewer than the media hysteria would indicate, but still plenty).<sup>37</sup> Research confirms what is intuitively clear: that the worst devastation is wrought not by sex *per se* but by the betrayal of the child's fundamental trust. And the closer the relation, the

It seems worth observing that the claim here is a little strange — what is it about the abuse that constitutes a betrayal of trust, if not the *sex per se*? By which I mean, the child trusts their parent to care for them and not to harm them. So why would they experience incest as a betrayal of that trust if the *sex per se* were not registered as a form of harm inflicted upon them by the person whom they trusted not to harm them? (She goes on, by the way, to argue that sex with an unrelated adult is not as bad as incest.)

sex is neither necessarily “victimization” *nor* necessarily “unproblematic,” she appears to agree with the findings of Rind and Tromovitch’s meta-analysis — or at least to present them, again, as though they represented an unproblematic scientific consensus — and argues that boys are less harmed by sexual contact with adults, and in fact that “negative experiences” for boys are “uncommon.”<sup>22</sup>

these. Boys are used to thinking of themselves as desirers and initiators of sex and resilient players who can dust themselves off from a hard knock at love. So among boys, “self-reported negative effects” of sex in childhood are “uncommon,” according to psychologists Bruce Rind and Philip Tromovitch’s metanalysis of national samples of people who have had such experiences.<sup>41</sup> Girls and women, on the other hand, are far more often the victims of incest and rape than boys are, and gender compounds whatever age-related power imbalances an intergenerational liaison may contain. Phillips found that girls spoke of entering

Levine’s discussion of the Rind-Tromovitch meta-analysis, on page 248 of the ebook edition

The explanation given, that boys are less at risk of harm because they are tough, resilient players, and less at risk of rape, seems to roll several common myths about male victims of sexual violence into together and then present them without comment as a fact. It’s truly strange to me in a way that is difficult to describe.

She later describes the research of “Bruce Rind and others” as a rare example of “careful work”<sup>23</sup> on child sexual abuse, (in contrast to the research of social scientists who, unlike Bruce Rind, systematically find that adult-child sex does harm).

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<sup>22</sup> p. 248

<sup>23</sup> Levine, p. 598. This is the same note in which she cites Ofshe and Watters.



## Politics and Context of: Bruce Rind

One small problem: Bruce Rind's work, including his work in collaboration with Philip Tromovitch, is very far from "careful," and is in fact extraordinarily sloppy in ways that systematically serve to downplay the harms of sexual abuse. Following the Rind et al. controversy in 1999 – when the APA was pressured into condemning one of Rind's many meta-analyses "proving" that children (especially boys) are unharmed by sex with adults after public outcry started by conservative interest groups – Rind's methodology has been harshly criticized as "pederasty propaganda" by other social scientists.<sup>24</sup> For example, Rind's most famous work (the one that caused the Rind et al. controversy) seems to have selected studies for inclusion in the meta-analysis in ways that would "fluff up" the number of cases in which the victim seems to have suffered comparatively less long term trauma: they select very large studies of primarily teenagers who *successfully fought off their attacker*, and then weight those studies heavily, yet then combine those studies with smaller sample sizes of cases involving children repeatedly forced into sex with adults, including family members. They then use the heavily weighted outcome to implicitly conflate these samples to produce their generalizations about "children who have sexual contact with adults," as a *whole group*, "not being seriously harmed." The result is the suggestion that children who are forced into sex with no means of escape were not more seriously harmed than teenagers who fight off their attackers and actually *escape* the abuse. The metrics they use to determine the "severity of harm" *do not include post-traumatic stress disorder or its attendant symptoms*,<sup>25</sup> which seems like an extraordinary oversight. This is, of course, all further problematized when you consider that attempting to "objectively measure" the "severity of harm" caused by what is by nature always a highly individualized, personal experience, by comparing vastly different traumatic and adverse experiences is... well it's just nonsense? You can't "objectively" measure the comparative "severity" of two different people's different experiences in different circumstances and contexts. There *is no single objective metric*. Furthermore, Rind's arguments in his 1998 meta-analysis with Tromovitch and Bauserman about children (especially boys) who "willingly" have sex with adults are based on data that – I cannot stress this enough – *literally does not exist*. Their own study *did not include any actual data* on boys who self-reported "willingly" "consenting" to sex with adults. The group Rind labeled as "consenting" included victims of physically forced sex and familial incest.<sup>26</sup>

Sympathetic versions of the story are always quick to emphasize that the initial outcry against Rind's 1998 meta-analysis was triggered by right wing special interest groups who aimed to portray Rind's work as representing the "gay agenda." But the fact that someone (such as Rind or, indeed, Judith Levine) has been attacked by bad people for bad reasons is not actually a good enough reason to reject all criticism of that person or their political goals and "research." Progressives are frequently quick to close ranks to protect and defend figures who "get targeted by the right," which has had the long-term effects of further embedding reactionary abuse apolo-

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<sup>24</sup> Dallam, (2000). Science or propaganda? an examination of rind, tromovitch and bauserman (1998). *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 9(3-4):109-34. doi: 10.1300/j070v09n03\_06; See, e.g. Tice, P. P., Whittenburg, J. A., Baker, G. L., & Lemmey, D. E. (2002). The real controversy about child sexual abuse research: Contradictory findings and critical issues not addressed by Rind, Tromovitch, and Bauserman in their 1998 outcomes meta-analysis. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 9 (3/4), 157-182.

<sup>25</sup> Spiegel, D. (2000), The price of abusing children and numbers. *Sexuality and Culture*, 4, 63-66.

<sup>26</sup> Consent? Rind et al.'s examination of consent as a moderator

gia in the arsenal of progressive “debunkings” of “right wing hysteria.” Bruce Rind was once the keynote speaker at a pedophile activist conference whose stated purpose was to shed light on the “positives” of adult-child sex.<sup>27</sup> Robert Bauserman, his co-author on his most famous meta-analysis (alongside Tromovitch), published his first article, “Man-Boy Sexual Relationships in a Cross-Cultural Perspective” (1989) in *Paidika: The Journal of Paedophilia...* the very same pro-pedophilia journal that Theo Sandfort was on the editorial board of! The same journal that Wakefield and Underwager, two of the the primary proponents of “False Memory Syndrome,” got caught giving an interview to! Nearly all of Bruce Rind’s (and Robert Bauserman’s) published works are dedicated to proving the thesis that boys specifically are unharmed by sex with adults, despite the overwhelming consensus produced by most social scientists working with children who have had sexual contact with adults consistently producing the opposite results.<sup>28</sup> And Rind and Bauserman are far from the only deeply problematic sources Levine relies on when discussing the “harm” of adult-child sex. She relies on Paul Okami, another researcher whose work is commonly peddled by “boy-love” and “pedophile emancipation” advocates, for example, more than she relies on Rind. (Okami’s research, including one of the studies Levine cites as a source, is listed as a resource by the IPCE, or “International Pedophile and Child Emancipation” website.) In fact, it’s the volume of sources and the way they are strung together quite rapidly that makes it hard to break them down. The main thesis of the 1997 Rind-Tromovitch meta-analysis she primarily draws from states:

“We found that, contrary to the implications and conclusions contained in previous literature reviews that were focused on biased samples, in the general population, CSA is not associated with pervasive harm and that harm, when it occurs, is not typically intense.”

This particular source, in my opinion, Levine has more serious responsibility for than some of the previous sources I talked about. Previously, I focused on excavating the problematic contexts and backgrounds and theoretical bases of the research she cited, although she was likely unaware of those problematic backgrounds, and although those frameworks — like transphobic sexology — were widely accepted by public “common sense” thinking, despite (or to a degree, because of) their abuse apologetics.<sup>29</sup> But in this case, the problematic nature of the source is right on its face. She *knows* that its main argument is that CSA simply isn’t all that bad, but she fails to disclose that fact when she represents this specific study as factual scientific consensus.

It must be said: there are and were *countless* better-designed studies and meta-analyses that virtually unanimously find the opposite of Rind and Tromovitch (1997), yet Levine singles out, as scientific truth, the one researcher who insists CSA is harmless? This is the level of scientific rigor that Levine considers to be “careful”?

It should also be noted that among the array of sources for Levine’s claims are the defense attorneys of cis men caught with child sexual abuse material... and *police sources*. She presents

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<sup>27</sup> January 1999: The full text of Rind et al.’s keynote address in the Netherlands is printed in the *International Pedophile and Child Emancipation Newsletter (Number E 4, January 1999)*. [https://www.ipce.info/library\\_2/rbt/examination.htm](https://www.ipce.info/library_2/rbt/examination.htm)

<sup>28</sup> See an overview here: <http://www.leadershipcouncil.org/1/rind/bak.html>

<sup>29</sup> EDIT: although this was before I had realized that the publication timing of Levine’s book makes it virtually impossible that she was unaware of the issues with some of her sources — like John Money’s sexology.

cops, who have startlingly high rates of committing sexual violence against teenagers, as truthful and reliable sources about sexual violence against teenagers.

And I don't bring up the cop sources just to be petty: this, to me, is the perfect encapsulation of so many of the "scientific" sources drawn on in *Harmful to Minors* — that is, they are very often deeply, unexpectedly, ubiquitously *Right Wing*. As in, links to Men's Rights and Fathers Rights activism, political alliances with conservative crusaders against "interference in the family home," *the sexologists who invented conversion therapy for trans kids for fucks sake*. The word "radical" is often used to describe works that seem to or are claimed to "challenge" the "consensus" that adult-child sexual contact always inherently involving a disparity in power that makes consent impossible — a "consensus" that was extremely hard-won through decades of brutally exhausting feminist activism, and which is in fact very far from hegemonic or ubiquitous, despite what people claim. But again and again, when you actually peel back the curtain, what you find is never very radical at all, but in fact, profoundly conservative in its epistemic relationship to "science," its anti-feminist politics, its patriarchal sentiments, and its insistence on fighting for the rights of the *most powerful* to extract value from the *least powerful*. In this case, the right of adults, especially adult cis men, to extract sexual pleasure from the bodies of children and adolescents, the most structurally marginalized and silenced class in contemporary society, the class trapped at the absolute bottom rung of the patriarchal hierarchy of violence.

## Tangent Two: "Boy"-Love?

"willing man-boy sex accompanied by positive reactions may be better informed by the ancient Greek model [i.e., sexual relationship in which the older male also acts as a teacher and guardian] than by models based on the female experience (e.g., rape and incest models)." — Bruce Rind

I cannot help but ask what seems to me like the obvious question:

how many of these "boys" are actually boys? By which I mean, given the extensive inter-relations between trans conversion therapists, trans-antagonistic sexology, and this weird little cluster of "Man-Boy Love" advocacy pseudoscientists, to what extent is it possible that *buried in all this bizarre partially falsified data, which works so hard to obfuscate its politics, are an unknowable number of trans girls?*

The word "Paidika" is from Ancient Greek παιδικά, meaning "boyish." The aesthetics of "Greek love" i.e., Ancient Athenian pederasty was and is a major theme in "Boy-Love" sexology and publications

It stands out strikingly to me that, in the worldviews espoused by sources like *Paidika*, the assignment of gender and gender roles often figures centrally in the production of sexual desire: categories like boy, girl, and man are strictly delineated as gendered positions — subjects or objects of desire — in a matrix of sexuality and power. But if the "boy's" body is not really a boy's body at all but in fact a girl's, in defiance of the meanings assigned to her, (or if the "girl" is not really a girl,) the adult's capacity to inscribe their own sexual meanings, sexual truths, onto the child's body, onto the child's words, is *abruptly truncated*. What happens to the authority of the adult's — or "expert's" — interpretation of the child as an object of investigation, and as an object

# PAIDIKA

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**NOTE: color version of illustration added by the archivist**

Cover of *Paidika: The Journal of Paedophilia*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (1995). The art features a painting depicting the Greek myth of the death of Hyacinthus.

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## CONTENTS

- Interview: Gunter Schmidt 2
- Boy Love in the Urdu *Ghazal Tariq Rahman* 10
- Man-Boy Sexual Relationships in a Cross-Cultural Perspective Robert  
Bauseman 28
- Jérôme Duquesnoy the Younger: Two Studies  
Introduction 41
- A Distinguished 17th Century Uranian: Jérôme Duquesnoy: Flemish  
Sculptor *Georges Eekhoud* 44
- "For the reason that thou, Hieronymus Duquesnoy..." *Geert Debeucke-  
laere* 50
- Book Reviews: *De pedagogische Eros in het geding, Die Knabenliebe in Mittela-  
sien and Het Belang van de Ervaring* 58

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[p.1]

Table of Contents from *Paidika: The Journal of Paedophilia*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1989).

of desire, if the child themselves defines their own selfhood, and person, and relationship to their own body in ways that are illegible to the adult desiring gaze?

## **Conclusions: This Review Was Originally Supposed to be One Paragraph Long**

Some will probably think I have not given Judith Levine a very fair trial here. I have, after all, focused heavily on the theoretical backgrounds of research she often only cites in passing, and have said little about her overall goals and thesis. But that's kind of my point — she casually relies on systematically bad sources, often for relatively minor components of her argument, but the effect is a kind of gish-gallop. It takes much longer to *debunk* these sources than it takes Levine to rattle them off as credible science. *She* only has to call John Money an expert on sexual abnormalities. *I* have to draw up the man's entire history and lay out the theoretical basis of his science in order to show that the conclusions he comes to, which then become Levine's evidence, are fundamentally rotten. *She* only has to cite Ofshe and Watters in a footnote to justify arguing that CSA statistics are vastly inflated, one of a long string of claims in succession concerning the supposed exaggeration of both the frequency and the harm of CSA. *I* have to trace the intellectual and and social scientific background of their core thesis in order to show that this *one* piece of evidence is not only biased but enmeshed in a broad political movement whose goals are fundamentally organized around protecting the reputations of adult cis men and discrediting children's claims of abuse. *She* only has to call Theo Sandfort an expert, *I* have to dig up PDFs of the editorial board of a decades-old niche pseudoacademic Boy-Love activist journal to show that his research on "child sexuality" is agenda-driven.

Part of the problem is *that* all this context is obfuscated in the background, unmentioned by Levine, who casually relies on their findings and theories while any understanding of the *politics* and *social agenda* intrinsic to her sources is completely absent from the book. She treats her sources as neutral, objective, and apolitical. She never examines the contexts or conflicts of interest implicit in their claims and never applies any scrutiny to them.

I have tried to make it clear that I think Levine also brings up some important criticisms of "protectionism," and to be clear, she *does* also include studies that *do* recognize the potential for serious harm deriving from adult-adolescent sex — e.g. studies finding various forms of harm suffered by cis girls who "willingly" enter into relationships with older men are contrasted with the Rind et al. study purportedly showing that "boys" do not suffer much harm from sexual abuse. And as I mentioned briefly before, the conclusions she ultimately comes to have the appearance of greater nuance than the reactionary sources from which she draws some of her "scientific" claims — she concludes that adult-adolescent sexual relationships should not be treated as either "really" victimizing or "really" unproblematic and consensual, tempering the eagerly positive presentation of "harmless abuse" found in some of her more pernicious sources. But I find that, despite these efforts at moderating the more reactionary and patriarchal suggestions, her project is compromised at its roots.

There is much to be criticized about *Harmful to Minors*. What I have provided here is a cursory overview of only a handful of the things that stand out to me, and the main thing I have focused on has been Levine's presentation of specific studies and use of scientific sources, relying on the credibility of certain scientists as epistemic authorities, in the process of constructing a vision of

“scientific consensus.” (Rather than focusing on the broad arc or her arguments or general thesis.) It must be stressed that I have only discussed only very few examples, without even going into much detail about exactly *how* these sources play a role in her overall thesis. A significant portion of my time has been spent exploring the *backgrounds* and *contexts* of those few example sources, going far beyond Levine’s specific reasons for using them. But what it boils down to, for me, is that much of the research that forms the backbone of some of *Harmful to Minors*’ most significant arguments is systematically unreliable and, despite presenting itself as neutral scientific inquiry, is clearly politically motivated, and repeatedly implicated in political movements seeking to liberate *adults* from barriers to sex with the children they desire.

To be clear, I don’t think there’s any reason to believe Judith Levine is herself an abuser, or that she was intentionally peddling abuse apologists, or even that she was ever *aware* of how fundamentally misleading so many of her sources are. Nor do I think she was or is consciously allied with the rape-apologist anti-feminist political movements from which much of her research is drawn. Rather, in my opinion it is more likely that Levine was so invested in making her case that she failed to do due diligence, failed to verify her sources, and presented the propagandistic work of anti-feminist backlash as though it were neutral science. Even more, I think that Levine’s work is a product of its time: criticisms of transphobic sexology were largely unheard of, and in fact this kind of “psychosexual science” was genuinely popular and widely accepted as legitimate and authoritative. John Money went on Oprah, after all. The popularity of these often profoundly reactionary “sciences” cannot, however, be disentangled from the widespread backlash against the gains of the feminist anti-rape movement and backlash against CSA survivors that was charging at full speed at every level of culture at the time the book was written. Yet, even in that era, Levine did not *have* to make these kinds of choices. *Harmful to Minors* was published originally in 2002; Jenny Kitlinger’s essay (above) covering similar arguments (against protectionism, against concepts of “childhood innocence,” etc.) but stridently from the point of view of elevating children’s power to to fight back, was originally published in 1997.

Ultimately, in my opinion, *Harmful to Minors* is fundamentally just *irresponsible* research.

*Harmful to Minors* was explosively popular on the left when it was originally published and continues to be highly recommended. As is often the case, its popularity on the left sparked outrage from the right, which in turn caused the left to close ranks around defending its scientific legitimacy and social responsibility as a work of social advocacy. It concerns me that Levine has, even unintentionally, provided a respectable “radical”-seeming platform for the anti-feminist backlash politics of trans-antagonistic, abuse *propagandists* who otherwise may not have found legitimacy outside their niche academic and pseudo-academic milieus. Take the review by Liz Highleyman I mentioned in the beginning, which states: “Harmful to minors offers a plethora of findings, from studies showing that exposure to sexually explicit images does not harm children, to evidence that **teens’ sexual relationships with adults are not uniformly devastating** (emphasis mine).” This quote almost certainly directly reflects the findings of the likes of Paul Okami, Bruce Rind, and Robert Bauserman, as they are presented in Levine’s construction of “scientific truth.”

The foremost rhetorical spin used in the works of these “pederasty propagandists” is a claim to be advocating for the liberation of young people from the repressive, prudish constrictions of society. This rhetorical spin seems to be what overlaps with Levine’s more general and more reasonable goals.

As is, adults (barely) risk facing legal consequences for sexually assaulting young people, a potential consequence which the apologist movements wish to erase, lowering the risks and negatives for adults, with no drawbacks — granting adults sexual access to young bodies, reducing the (already pretty minimal) risk of negative (legal, social, and personal) consequences for adults who want to have sex with children. Adults are, in every material way, the oppressor class in the adult-child hierarchy. The strongest claim apologists can make is that perhaps not *all* adult-child sexual contact is *universally traumatic* (a claim already made based on incredibly dubious research). But even that still admits that the *potential* for trauma is 100% laid on the shoulders of the young. Adults simply do not risk being traumatized by their own choice to coerce a child into sex. No matter what, even in a hypothetical society where youth are vastly more empowered and considered the social equals of adults, what the apologists are asking for is that children and adolescents bear *all* the risks of trauma and coercion, accept the attenuation their (already narrow) avenues for obtaining justice when an adult wrongs or coerces them, making it *even harder* for a child to be believed when their allegations stand to tarnish the precious reputations of adults.

So here is my question: if your liberationist crusade stands to *definitely benefit* the oppressor class with *no drawbacks*, while only *arguably maybe benefitting* the oppressed but with very high potential for *catastrophic drawbacks* that could greatly increase their oppression through rape and abuse by adults, *then who is actually being liberated?*



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