

A Step too Far, for Now

The American Psychological Association backpedals on pedophilia.

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When the American Psychological Association's journal of record published an article saying that sex between children and adults might be OK, not too many people noticed. But such is the furor that has since arisen at the prospect of America's psychologists possibly normalizing pedophilia-as they already have homosexuality-that the organization is backtracking. Sort of.

Last July the APA Psychological Bulletin published an article by AIDS researcher Robert Bauserman, Temple psychology instructor Bruce Rind, and Penn graduate student Philip Tromovitch that made the argument that sex between children and adults should not be classified as "abuse," if the children were "willing." Furthermore, the study maintained that little lasting harm is done to children when adults seduce them.

While the APA has declared that homosexuality is not a mental or behavioral disorder, a dissenting group of psychologists, the National Association for the Rehabilitation and Treatment of Homosexuality (NARTH), has still been treating homosexuals, even at the cost of professional reprisals from the psychological establishment. NARTH members first publicized how the APA seemed to be sanctioning child molestation. Then the popular radio psychologist and moralist Laura Schlessinger got word of the research and subjected the APA to withering criticism over the air.

The APA was bombarded with letters, email, and editorials condemning and ridiculing the depths to which the psychological profession had sunk. "We've never, ever had a reaction like this," said Raymond Fowler, the organization's CEO.

One of the authors of the study protested that it was intended for scientists only, and that they never meant their findings to be discussed in the popular media. In other words, they responded to the criticism with condescending elitism. (Actually, the public would do well to scrutinize other academic journals. They would be surprised at the Marxism, hatred of America, apologetics for sexual immorality, and hostility to religion they are subsidizing with their tax dollars and children's tuition.)

But Mr. Fowler now concedes the journal made a mistake. The journal's editors, he said, should have introduced the article with a statement indicating the APA's stand against child abuse, and they should have printed it along with another article giving the other side.

From now on, Mr. Fowler promises that the journal will not print anything without considering its “social policy implications.” But he did not say that the journal made a mistake in publishing the article. As for the notion that having sex with children does not harm them, he said that the issue needs much more research.

The implication is that whether or not adults should have sex with children is an open question, as if psychological research is necessary to settle the question. But all the research in the world is unable either to establish or deny a moral truth. It is impossible to go from “is”—the province of empiricism—to “ought,” the realm of ethical absolutes.

The APA used to consider homosexuality “abnormal.” In 1975, the APA followed the lead of the American Psychiatric Association in declaring homosexuality to be normal. What changed was not a body of knowledge but a worldview.

Once sex began to be considered a means of recreation, rather than as the means of procreation and lifelong companionship established by God, the distinction between “natural” and “unnatural” was lost, as surely as the distinction between “married” and “unmarried.” And given contemporary attitudes—that what makes something moral or not is whether a choice was involved—why shouldn’t attitudes toward kiddy sex be affected in the same way? If the child chooses to have sex, as persuaded by a more powerful adult, shouldn’t he have that right?

For now, such thinking, as applied to children, remains repulsive to most people. But it may seem to make more and more sense, if the premises of such thinking remain unchallenged. The APA has responded to the public’s revulsion by backing away, but some psychologists are ready to accept pedophilia—including, presumably, the ones who testify at trials and commitment hearings.

Instead of pledging to consider “social policy implications”—which in practice may mean only “public relations” implications—it would be far more meaningful for the APA to pledge to honor “moral implications.” Until America’s social scientists can use language like that, they will remain nothing more than blind guides.