

## Review:

**Sarah D. Goode, *Understanding and Addressing Sexual Attraction to Children: A Study of Paedophiles in Contemporary Society*, Routledge, 2010, ISBN: 9780415446266.**

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Adult sexual attraction to children is generally only to be mentioned in terms of outrage: national and international press stories construct anyone possessing, let alone acting on, such desires as a vile 'sex offender', thoroughly without morals, a hateful, cruel, vicious predator who is absolutely unlike the 'rest of us'. He (though occasionally, she) must be locked up, punished, reviled. But, as Sarah Goode argues, paedophiles 'are not rare and horrific monsters out there lurking in the undergrowth, ready to pounce on our unwary children. They are living with us. And we must learn to understand them.' (2)

Her book *Understanding and Addressing Adult Sexual Attraction to Children* is a brave attempt to get beyond the sensationalism of the moral panics. Her approach

view[s] paedophilia and the sexual abuse of children as complex human experiences which take place within relationships and communities, and which are the outcomes of an irreducibly intricate mix of beliefs, understandings, histories, fantasies and desires. (187)

By listening to their stories Goode offers a more nuanced picture of the men and women who live with their demonized sexual preference. Over a number of years, she contacted more than fifty adults (54 males, 2 females) who self-identified as sexually attracted to minors. This is not the first project to engage with self-identified paedophiles - work in criminology and psychology is fairly plentiful - but it differs from research in those disciplines in that Goode doesn't follow the usual, and certainly easiest, route for obtaining testimony about sexual

desire for children. Early on in the process, she decided against interviewing men already convicted of having sex with children - her particular interest lies in understanding how and why some people have acknowledged their sexual attraction for children but do not act on those desires.

Divided into eleven chapters, *Understanding and Addressing Adult Sexual Attraction to Children* is something of a mixed bag – the middle section (chapters 3 to 5 which outline the project ‘Minor-Attracted Adults Daily Lives Project’ and chapters 6 to 9 which explore the questionnaire responses) is the strongest and most persuasive. These chapters give much needed space to the narratives of daydreams, fantasies and hopes alongside descriptions of despair, fear, horror and self-disgust which a number of her respondents offer as characteristic of their ‘discovering’ and coming to terms with a sexual preference so roundly condemned. Goode’s intentions to uncover more than the stock figure of the bogeyman/woman are amply demonstrated and the stories she uncovers are fascinating, instructive and certainly worth hearing.

However, the sections which bookend this empirical information are less satisfactory. The book details the difficulties and successes met in undertaking her research - from peers who questioned her motives through to the difficulties at getting at the experiences of those who identified as paedophiles while not encouraging them to incriminate themselves in the process of the research. Her outline of the particular ethical minefield is interesting and instructive for those of us who also wish to explore sensitive research questions with respondents.

Even so, the discussion of research difficulties is pretty much limited to the practicalities of doing this kind of research and sure, these are important but Goode fails to examine the difficulties of formulating the theoretical and conceptual issues appropriate to a topic as emotive as adult sexual attraction to children. In particular, in her discussion and analysis of the definitions of the ‘paedophile’ Goode draws attention to the problematic history of the definitional projects of early sexology and their continuing influence on contemporary thinking about what is ‘normal’ and what is ‘perverse’. And yet, that recognition doesn’t seem to impinge on her later engagements with the stories told by her respondents even though the definitions of paedophilia as a kind of disease seem to underpin many of the melancholic and despairing accounts she uncovers. Moreover, for me, there should have been some sustained critical examination of the public presence of the figure of the ‘paedophile’ - the ways in which this label circulates in the media, both as a criminal category and as a menace,

its place in psychology, psychiatry and the legislative environs – drawing out how the language and definitions of that public presence permeates her respondents' own assessments of their experiences, expectations and histories.

Furthermore, there is little acknowledgement of the problematic status of the 'child' within public accounts of paedophilia, incest or child sex abuse; in part this results from Goode's determination to condemn intergenerational sexual relations and to view as absolute the need to protect children from sex. The final chapter proposes various means of keeping children safe - some of them eminently sensible and others admirably radical. However, the desire to protect often bleeds into control and this really ought to have been debated here alongside the theories of 'healthy' child development and their implications. This is not to argue *for* adult/child sexual relations but to draw attention to the fact that, just as the figure of 'the paedophile' resonates through the stories we allow to be told or heard, so too, the figure of 'the child' and 'healthy sexual development' act as constraints on our examinations of children's and young peoples' sexual interests and their own expressions of sexual agency. Goode glosses over the inclusion in her interview material of the voices of Freddy (16), Ulf (16) and Ed (17) who are legally of age to have sex but within much development theory would also not be considered 'properly' adult. The definitional projects of contemporary psychology and the more widespread willingness to expand childhood to fit protectionist impulses (cf current campaigns against the 'sexualisation' of children) too often refuse to acknowledge the agency of young people, conflating children having sex with 'child sexual abuse'. I'd have liked to read some critical unpacking of the wider literature on 'normal' sexual development which surely contributes to the identification and classification of the paedophile.

Despite those criticisms, this is a book deserving of attention, in particular, because it is one of the few titles to take seriously the idea that those with a sexual interest in children actually have something to tell us.