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Pedophiles and the Cycle of Abuse

by Liz Kelly

In referring to child abusers as pedophiles and subscribing to the notion of 'cycle of abuse,' one reduces sexual abuse of children to a 'small minority' of deviants and completely disregards the offenders' deliberate, calculating entrapment of victims. Liz Kelly warns of the pitfalls of such dangerous thinking.

I have become increasingly alarmed at the ways in which feminist perspectives of child sexual abuse are being undercut by the adoption and acceptance of flawed concepts and ideas. It would be bad enough if this was confined to professional perspectives, but more and more, I have encountered the use of, and support for, some of these ideas in women's organizations. The consequences of such sloppy thinking are immense, and it behooves anyone who thinks herself a feminist to take the meaning and implications of using the word 'pedophile' and subscribing to 'cycle of abuse' theories seriously.

What has happened over the last few years is an increasing awareness of, not just the extensiveness of sexual abuse, but also the ways in which adults organize abuse networks and the ways some of these are linked to child pornography and child prostitution. Although feminist analysis has had a profound influence on how sexual abuse in the family is understood, it has not yet been applied to these other contexts.

THE RETURN OF THE 'PEDOPHILE'

The issues became particularly clear to me while undertaking a review of what we know about sexual exploitation of children (Kelly et al, 1996). The spark for this piece was two seminars where the word 'pedophile' was used routinely, without question. I was the lone dissenting voice. One feminist suggested that there was no problem since "fathers who sexually abuse are also pedophiles."

I have heard French, Swedish and Belgian delegates (all senior women policy makers) link the concept of pedophilia with cycle of abuse. One neatly summarized their perspective: "It is deplorable that one out of three children could be a pedophile in the future."

During an international seminar in Brussels, there was marked discomfort at attempts to broaden the definition of sexual exploitation through reference to familial context where child pornography is produced and children are prostituted. Many participants wanted to maintain the 'commercial' element in the definition. Underlying this was a desire to shift attention from 'sex' to exploitation. This may make the issue easier to deal with for many, but to do so would result in a loss, rather than a gain, of perspective. While the motivations of ruthless entrepreneurs may not be the same as those of familial child abusers, children are exploited and sexually used in both contexts, and the legacies that such abuse results in do not stem from whether financial gain was involved.

Documentation of 'organized abuse' networks tends to preface this with the word 'pedophile,' and indeed many in the child protection field have begun using 'pedophile' as either a collective term for all abusers or to refer to what is presumed to be a particular type of abuser (invariably those who abuse children outside of familial contexts).

Immediately the word pedophile, appears we have moved away from recognition of abusers as 'ordinary men'—

fathers, brothers, uncles, colleagues—and are returned to the more comfortable view of them as 'other,' a small minority who are fundamentally different from most men. The fact that they have lives, kinship links and jobs disappears from view in the desire to fo-

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cus on their difference. Attention shifts immediately from the centrality of power and control to notions as sexual deviance, obsession and 'addiction.' Pedophilia returns us to the medical and individualized explanations which we have spent so much time and energy attempting to deconstruct and challenge. Sexual abuse should provoke us into looking critically at the social construction of masculinity, male sexuality and the family, but instead, the safer terrain of 'abnormality' beckons.

DISGUIISING AND DISTRACTING

The self-serving construction of pedophilia as a specific, and minority, 'sexual orientation' acts as a useful distraction to both the widespread sexualization of children, and girls in particular, in western cultures and the prevalence of sexual abuse. In one U.S. study, a significant proportion

of 193 male college students admitted that they could be sexually interested in children if they were guaranteed that there would be no legal consequences (Briere and Runtz, 1989). The representation of the 'ideal' heterosexual partner for men continues to be young women, small and slim, with minimal body hair. Across many cultures, sexual access to girls and young women is often the prerogative of powerful men—chiefs, priests and religious leaders—through customs such as *devadasi*. The western echo of this age-old patriarchal tradition can be seen in the prerequisite young girlfriend (occasionally 'underage') of older rich men. There is an important theme here that links male power, economic power and social status with sexual access to girls and young women.

In much of the clinical literature on sex offenders, the separation of 'pedophiles' not only from all men, but also from other men who sexually abuse, has implied a difference of one group from the other. Similarities—in the forms of abuse and the strategies abusers used to entrap, control and silence children—are ignored. The fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers who abuse are therefore hardly ever suspected of being interested in the consumption, or production, of child pornography. Nor are they suspected to be involved in child prostitution. This, in turn, investigations of 'familial sexual abuse' seldom involve either searches for or questions about these forms of abuse. All these contradict with what we hear from adult

survivors who tell of relatives showing them pornography, expecting them to imitate it and being required to pose for it. Some also tell of being prostituted by relatives. A significant proportion of organized networks are based in families.

Who are the clients of children and young people involved in prostitution? I suspect only a minority would fit clinical definitions of 'pedophiles'—men whose sexual interest is confined to children. Whether intentionally or not, calling a section of abusers 'pedophiles' is accompanied by an emphasis on boys as victims. The abuse of girls and young women outside the family thus becomes increasingly invisible. Unlike 'child abuser' or 'child molester,' the word 'pedophile' disguises, rather than names, the issue, and focuses our attention on a kind of person rather than kinds of behavior.

CONFUSED DEFINITIONS

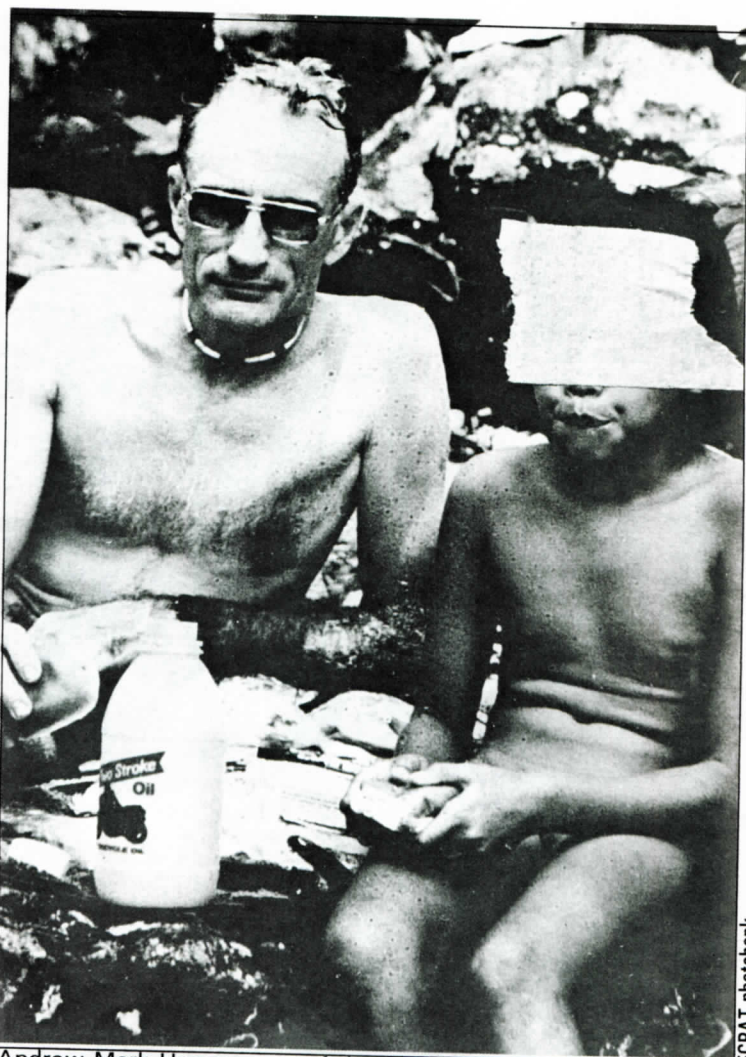
In much of the literature there are inconsistencies in how 'pedophilia' is defined, although the most common element seems to be the assumption that it is not just a preference for, but the restriction of sexual arousal to, children. This premise, fact; is just that, a premise, and the possibility that the 'pedophile' may have sexual contact with adults is never explored. Julia O'Connell Davidson's (1995) work, however, suggests that the dividing line between the men who exploit children and women in sex tourism is neither clear nor absolute.

The focus on sexual arousal gives rise to further

difficulties, moreover, since the recent emphasis by feminists (as well as some child-protection professionals) on individual men choosing to act or not to act, and having to take responsibility for those choices, is much more difficult to sustain as 'deviant' sexual arousal is presented as having biological basis.

Such confusions have contributed to, if not created, a context where men who seek to justify their wish to abuse have been able to organize politically and even to seek the status of an 'oppressed sexual

minority.' They also form the basis for a differential approach in terms of intervention, with the responses being proposed for 'pedophiles'—such as life licenses or denial of any contact with children—otherwise provoking outrage if applied in the case of abusive fathers. The issue here is not whether the proposed measures themselves are appropriate, but the distinctions being made between 'types' of abusers. With such spurious distinctions, the abuse by family members becomes less 'deviant', and therefore, less se-



ECPAT photobank

Andrew Mark Harvey, one of the few foreigners convicted of sexual abuse of minors with a girl victim in Pagsanhan, Laguna, Philippines



ECPAT photobank

Harvey with a foreign film crew, one of the many that make films in Pagsanjan

rious, than that by men outside the family.

The dangerous implications of a resurgence of the label 'pedophile' become more evident in an article in *The Guardian* on 17 January 1996 about the delay in the publication of first British commentary on Catholic Canon Law. This document includes two pages on priests who are 'pedophiles.' The church's position is that pedophiles

have diminished responsibility because their sexual urges are 'in effect beyond their control'—justifying the argument that abusive priests should not be punished except for 'perhaps only a mild penalty, a formal warning or reproof.' Anyone getting a sense of *deja vu* yet?

If we allow the term pedophile to re-enter discussions about sexual abuse, all the arguments about respon-

sibility for action will have to be raised all over again.

CYCLE OF ABUSE

Every cycle model attempts to reduce complex social realities, which have more than a little to do with structural power relations, to simplistic behavioral and individualistic models. Cycle of abuse has become the most commonly understood explanation of sexual abuse in childhood and has been accepted wholesale as 'the truth' by many. Virtually every speech I have recently heard from a politician about sexual abuse in childhood and violence against women contains some reference to it, and a significant number of workers in British refuges adhere to versions of it. This alarming and widespread acceptance of a flawed model needs to be challenged, both in terms of the evidence supporting the theory and its consequences for child and adult survivors of abuse.

In its simplest and most common form, 'cycle of abuse' proposes that if you are abused as a child you will in turn abuse others. But if we begin with what we know about the gendered distribution of sexual victimization, the proposition begins to fall apart. We know that girls are three to six times more likely to experience sexual abuse, yet the vast majority of sexual abuse is perpetrated by males. If there is any kind of cycle, it is a gendered one, and that, in turn, requires explanation. Granting that arguments of a hidden iceberg of female abusers have some validity to them, to reverse the gendered asym-

metry suggests an iceberg of literally incredible proportions.

If we limit our focus to perpetrators, the data is also equivocal. No study has yet demonstrated that there is an obvious 'cycle' even within samples of convicted offenders, with the range of those reporting experiences of abuse in childhood varying between 30 and 80 percent. Few of these studies define abuse in childhood in the same way. Some limit their data to whether the individual was abused in the same way that he subsequently abused children, whereas others include any form of child abuse in the individual's childhood while focusing on sexual offending in adulthood. The psychological mechanisms involved in moving from experiences of physical abuse and neglect to sexual abuse cannot be the same as those where the same form of abuse is involved. These crucial differences, however, are invariably ignored.

In all studies to date, either the majority or a significant minority do not fit into the theory. There is also seldom any exploration of the precise mechanisms involved whereby those who have been victimized become victimizers, since this is not simple repetition but a reversal of roles.

DOUBLE DISTORTION

A sleight of theory occurs when proponents of this pernicious idea recognize that women do not proceed in great numbers to abuse. There are two ways in which mothers who have been abused are implicated: experiences of abuse are presumed to make women less able to protect

their children or to choose an abuser as partner. These propositions are frequently used in tandem, but they are different arguments. (The influence of this idea has been so strong that some social services departments consider knowledge of a woman's abuse in childhood sufficient to place

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her children on the at-risk register!)

The first proposition is usually supported through reported cases, although few of its supporters take seriously what prevalence research tells us: that in any group of women, a substantial number will have a history of abuse. Harriet Dempster's Scottish study (1989) provides an explanation to why there may be a higher than predicted proportions: mothers who have been abused are more likely to report the abuse of their children. The link proposed here is precisely the opposite of that which 'cycle of abuse' presumes. These mothers are so determined to protect their children, their own experience makes them more willing to seek formal intervention. Presuming a negative link prevents researchers and

practitioners from countenancing an alternative 'positive' one.

The second position is remarkable. Very few women begin relationships knowing their male partner has abused children. Prospective employers have legal rights to information about Schedule 1 offenders, prospective sexual partners do not. Since no clinician has yet devised a certain way of distinguishing abusive from non-abusive men, how do women achieve this? If clinicians and researchers really believe that women have 'abuser detection antennae,' why are there no studies designed to discover how they do this? If 'choice' is operating here, it is made by the men. We know that some experienced abusers deliberately target single mothers. If we listened to what women have to say, we would also know that some men, when trusted with information about a woman's own abuse or that of her child by another man, use that as 'permission' to act similarly.

Recognizing the deliberateness of abusers' behavior (Conte et al, 1989) is disturbing; it is much more comfortable to believe that abusers and/or their partners are merely repeating what they learned in childhood. 'Cycle of abuse' theories rework old orthodoxies; transforming abusers into victims, and placing mothers back in the collusive frame. Quite how the theory is supposed to explain abuse outside the family (and more children are abused by known adults than by family members) has not yet appeared in print.

PSYCHIC DETERMINISM

'Cycle of abuse' is based on a psychic determinism—experience A leads to behavior B, with minimal choice/agency in between. Apart from allowing abusers *carte blanche* to avoid responsibility, it makes the thousands of survivors who, as a result of their own experiences, choose to never treat children in similar ways, invisible, even logically impossible. This theory does an outrageous injustice to countless women whose courageous and passionate testimony made sexual abuse in childhood a social issue. It also makes a travesty of the support given to the children, since the aim becomes preventing them from 'repeating the cycle' rather than enabling them to cope with having been victimized. A recent twist is the shift from talking about the sexualized behavior some abused children display as 'acting out' to defining children as young as three and four as 'abusers.' By foretelling the impact and meaning of abuse, we close off investigating the most important question of all: what makes the difference in how children and adults make sense of, and act in relation to, experiences of childhood victimization?

It is such psychic determinism that connects 'cycle of abuse' to the view that the effects of sexual abuse are in every respect, and in all cases, devastating—that survivors can only be rescued from an appalling future through intensive therapy. However, studies which use community samples, rather than adults or children in therapy, discover a wide disparity in effects, from

those experiencing extreme levels of distress to many who fit within the 'normal' range.

Disputing 'cycle of abuse' does not mean there are no examples where experiences of abuse are present in generations of families, or that some individuals have decided to deal with past hurts by in-

Some men, when trusted with information about a woman's own abuse or that of her child by another man, use that as "permission" to act similarly.

flicting pain on others. But the negative consequences of this 'idea' are being most strongly felt by child and adult survivors. It is now commonplace for adults who have been abused in childhood—women and men—to believe that they cannot be trusted around children, that there is an inevitability that they will abuse them. In my experience, however, when women are asked to explore the issues in more depth, none have felt a desire or wish to sexually abuse children. That they do so comes solely from ideas in the public sphere. Some adult survivors are very clear about the pernicious consequences of this model, as the following examples from a research project I am involved with illustrate:

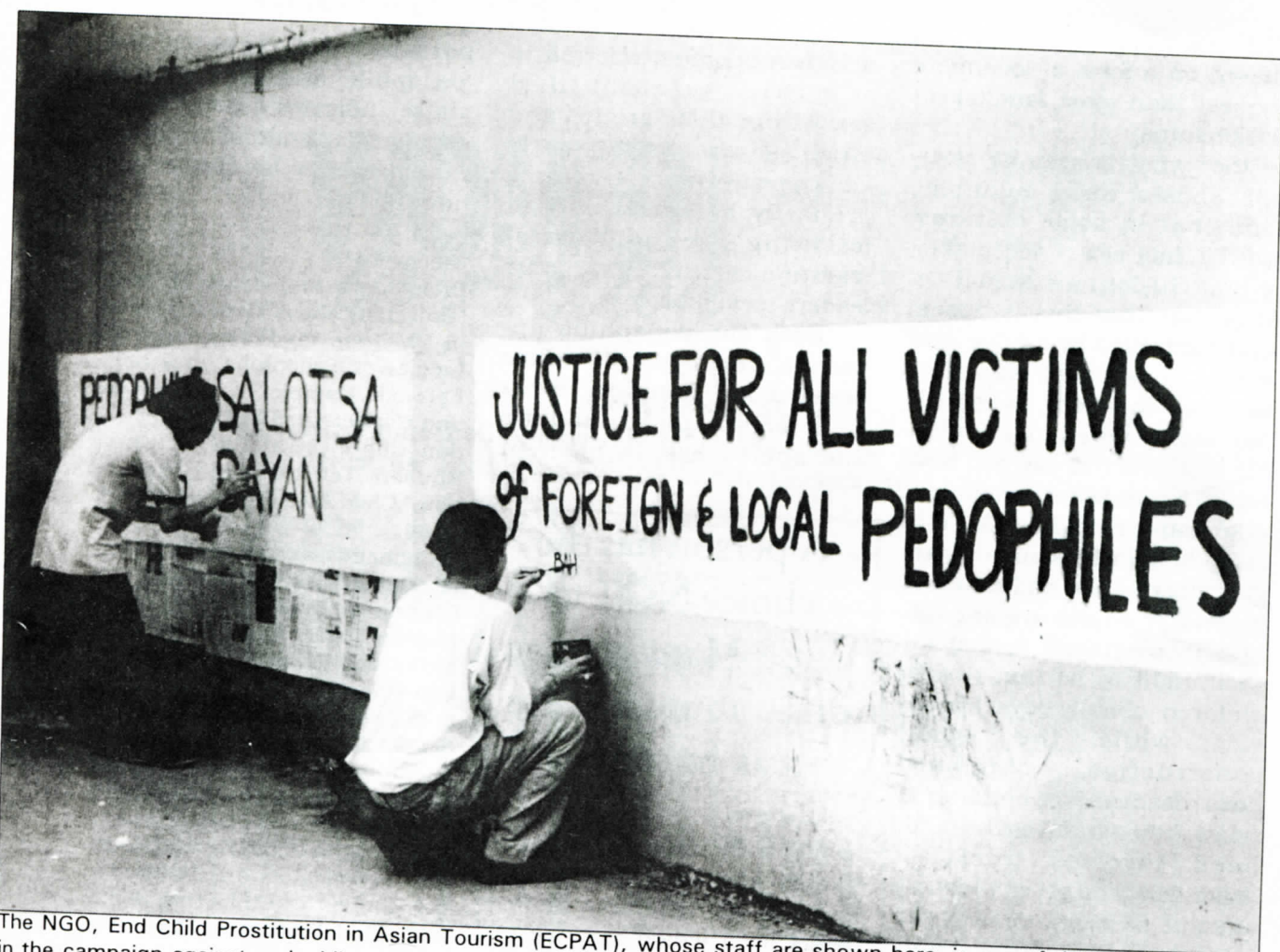
My mother was abused by men outside her family—she

hasn't abused myself or my brother. I know many people—male and female—who were abused, some continuously and severely. They have not become abusers. I am very skeptical about this theory. The majority of abused are female, the majority of abusers are male. Where are all the female abusers?

I don't agree—I haven't found myself fondling three-year-olds and don't feel any desire to. It's an excuse to avoid the real issues of abuse. A person has the choice NOT to abuse. Many men go on to abuse and use it as an excuse.

It confirms everything victims of abuse already believe about themselves. It offers no hope of healing. . . it denies the possibility of survival. It allows 'experts' to look at these distant men [as] bad, sad unfortunates, sexual deviants. . . . It removes any responsibility from perpetrators.

How is it that, even as the evidence is shaky and the implications for child and adult survivors so negative, this 'cycle of abuse' has become a widely accepted explanation? On one level it is a neat and accessible concept. This 'common sense' explanation represents abuse as learned behavior, as if it were the same as learning a nursery rhyme. Apart from the basic fact that abusing others is a very different action to being victimized, a thinking and decision-making process is involved before we act similarly or differently to events we have been witness to or experienced. Much of the knowledge on offenders developed over the last 10 years shows that they are careful, deliberate and strategic in



The NGO, End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT), whose staff are shown here, is one of the most active in the campaign against pedophiles.

entrapping children.

So powerful is this 'idea' of cycle of abuse, though, that even academics who recognize that most people do not 'repeat the cycle' simply refer to this as their 'having broken' it. The 'idea' excludes more challenging explanations—'breaking cycles' is a much easier and safer goal to discuss than changing the structure of social relations.

SOME IMPORTANT CONNECTIONS

There are two contexts when the concept of 'pedophilia' is used. One proclaims difference in order to protect 'normal' men, the other asserts difference to justify and legi-

timize abusive behavior.

The sexual-freedom model is frequently presented as an alternative and radical approach. It is based upon a belief that all laws on sexual conduct, except where explicit force or violence is used, are an incursion into individual freedom and privacy, and as such, are a form of coercive social control. This has been argued most cogently in relation to children and young people by self-defined pedophile groupings such as the PIE (Pedophile Information Exchange) in Britain and NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association) in the USA. The support for what

has been deliberately called 'intergenerational' sex in order to disguise the power differentials involved has extended in recent years to include some of those who have defended pornography from feminist criticism, such as Gayle Rubin and Tuppy Owens. The philosophical assumptions that form the basis of this perspective are:

- ◆ that pedophilia is a sexual orientation, and that pedophiles are therefore an oppressed minority with whom other sexual minorities ought to have a 'natural' affinity;
- ◆ that 'intergenerational' relationships are not just about sex, but are beneficial and

based on a form of love more honest than most familial relationships;

- ◆ that what is seen as sexually abusive varies culturally, and that in some cultures, adult/child sex is acceptable;
- ◆ that children are sexual beings, but that this is denied and controlled by adults; and
- ◆ that consensual sexual relationships are possible between children and adults.

Critics of this position have raised a number of uncomfortable issues including that it is overwhelmingly men who argue this position and that it is invariably adults arguing (albeit in disguised forms) for their right to be sexual with children, usually boys. Moreover, while the social construction of childhood does disadvantage children in relation to adults, early childhood involves levels of dependency on other which no amount of social change can remove. This material reality makes the notion of non-coerced consent between children and adults inherently problematic.

The most eloquent supporters of the sexual-freedom position clearly locate themselves within the gay and/or pedophile movements (Sandfort, 1987), although there are some heterosexual groupings promoting similar arguments, particularly, sexualized family relationships. The most well-known is the U.S.-based Rene Guyon Society, whose slogan is 'sex before eight or else it's too late'. The group, with an estimated 5,000 membership as of 1990, has been open in promoting 'kid porn' (O'Grady, 1992). A number of 'new religious

movements' (often referred to as 'cults') promote adult/child sex within their group, and much of what is currently known points to these as being primarily heterosexual and following the patriarchal tradition of privileging male leaders' sexual access.

Both the pedophilia approach and cycle of abuse explanation function to exclude feminist understandings and approaches. In different

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ways, both serve to excuse or justify abusive behavior and provide an extremely limited basis from which to work toward the right of children to live free from intimate intrusion. The importance of maintaining our perspective and of challenging approaches that refuse to name men and male power is graphically illustrated by the hysterical response to a recent report on sexual exploitation of children (Kelly et al 1996) where some male radio and newspaper journalists balked, not at the need to take sexual exploitation seriously, but at our temerity in questioning the distinction between 'pedophiles' and other men. Taking note of what resistance to feminist analysis turns on has always been an important guide for men in knowing that we are 'onto something' im-

portant. Talk about the 'pedophile' and the 'cycle of abuse' indicates a point of resistance to feminist analysis that needs to be challenged now.

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