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The World According to NAMBLA: Accounting for Deviance

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The North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) is a pedophile organization that advocates adult sexual behavior with male children. Given the considerable consensus in this society that such sexual behavior with children is exploitative and victimizing in nature, the techniques that NAMBLA uses to justify, rationalize and normalize its philosophy and its members' practices in order to avoid or neutralize censure and stigma, are of particular sociological interest. This paper uses Scott and Lyman's (1968) concept of "accounts" as a theoretical framework for the analysis of these techniques that are found in the publicly disseminated literature of the NAMBLA organization.

*Look tenderly on little boys
Their softness as fleeting as a flower,
The cheeks like petals such a little hour,
The deepest dimple theirs so transiently . . .
Look tenderly on little boys.*

The transience of childhood innocence is an enduring theme in literature and poetry, however the "Little Boys" poem from which those verses are taken did not appear in a literary anthology, but in the monthly *Bulletin* of NAMBLA—the North American Man/Boy Love Association. Organized in 1978 in the wake of the arrests of 24 prominent Revere, Massachusetts professional and business men for sexual activities with adolescent males, NAMBLA is a political, civil rights and educational organization that advocates and promotes adult sexual behavior with male children.

The taboo against adult-child sex indeed is consistently and ardently held in this and other cultures (Murdock, 1949), yet when NAMBLA was formed there already was an international network of organizations of self-proclaimed pedophiles that

served as organizational models. Norway, as an example, claimed two such groups: the Norwegian Pedophile Group, and Amnesty for Child Sexuality, an international organization based in Oslo. An arm of the Netherlands Association for Sexual Reform, the Werkgrupp Pedophilie was one of the earliest and most politically active of the European pedophile organizations. Both the Studiegroep Pedofilie in Belgium and the Paedophile Information Exchange in England enjoyed a long and lively tenure as they advocated for liberalized sex laws and provided legal defense and counseling for individuals criminally charged with sexual offenses against children.

Inspired by their European predecessors, two pedophile organizations which predated NAMBLA also were formed in the United States. The Rene Guyon Society, created in 1962 by a group of seven laypersons after attending a conference on sexuality in Los Angeles, took its name from the French jurist and Freudian psychologist who had been an outspoken advocate of adult-child sex. It also adopted his motto as its slogan: "Sex by year eight, or else it's too late." The Society advocates the abolition of statutory rape and child pornography laws, and encourages what it claims to be its 5,000 members to give their own children, and others, early sexual experiences with loving adults (O'Hara, 1981). While still maintaining a mailing address in the Los Angeles area, the Society is no longer politically and socially active in promoting its cause. Believing that affection transcends age differences, the Childhood Sensuality Circle was founded in San Diego in 1971 to champion sexual self-determination for adults and children. It also advocated the abolition of age of consent laws, promoted the early initiation of young children into sexual behavior with family members, and encouraged children to use their own standards in the selection of adult sexual partners (Davilla, 1981). The organization stopped publishing and mailing its *Nusletter* in 1984 because of the failing health of its elderly founder, Valida Davilla, a former student of Wilhelm Reich.

NAMBLA, then, is the only pedophile organization that remains active in this country, and has withstood the legal harassment that has closed down many of its European counterparts as well. Due to their beliefs and practices all of the pedophile organizations, in fact, have experienced a considerable amount

of legal interference ranging from searches of their headquarters and their members' homes, to seizures of materials for evidence, to the arrests and incarceration of their members. Social stigma also has been sustained by organization members. Some have lost jobs when their organizational affiliation was discovered; others have been forced to use pseudonyms to protect their identities; and still others have been ostracized by their professional colleagues and social companions (O'Carroll, 1982).

These pedophile organizations and their members consistently have come up against an unusual degree of consensus on the part of the larger society that adult sexual behavior with children indeed should be taboo, that it is victimizing and exploitative, and that its redress properly falls within the purview of the law. Although not uniform in extent, the strength of the consensus that does exist should not be underestimated. It continually has been demonstrated in studies of attitudes toward crimes and the law held by various ethnic and socioeconomic groups in this country (Finkelhor, 1984; Rossi, 1974; Sellin & Wolfgang, 1964), as well as in cross-cultural surveys (Newman, 1976). It may very well be that in the consciousness of the larger society, quite nothing is more repugnant than the sexual abuse children (Finkelhor, 1984).

And that raises an important question. In the light of that strong consensus that adult sexual behavior with children is victimizing and that it is reprehensible, how does NAMBLA justify and normalize its philosophy and practices? In other words, how does NAMBLA account for its deviance? It is the purpose of this paper to explore an answer to that question by reviewing the 1982 through 1985 newsletters, booklets and brochures published for public dissemination by NAMBLA. This paper does not provide a systematic analysis of the content of these publications; rather, it utilizes a data-reduction technique (Weber, 1985) by which textual material is classified into content categories generated by a larger theoretical framework. For the purposes of this paper, that framework will be Scott and Lyman's (1968) theory of accounts.

Accounting for Deviance

Sociologists have long noted that individuals and groups can and do commit acts and hold beliefs they realize are considered

wrong by others and that in doing so, they create a problematic situation that calls for resolution, or at the very least for explanation. The problematic nature of the situation arises because the behavior or the beliefs of these individuals deviate from the expected, the routine, or what the larger society may even consider the normal. In that problematic situation, then, the deviating individuals or groups are motivated to avoid or to reduce public censure and stigma by engaging in behavioral or verbal conduct that justifies and normalizes their deviance vis-a-vis the expectations of others and the norms of the larger society (Mills, 1940; Scott & Lyman, 1968).

Psychologists would refer to this conduct when it is verbal in nature as rationalization, but sociologists offer a broader framework for its interpretation. Such verbal behavior, or its correlate in written form, is considered an "aligning action" (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976). That metaphor of alignment is both descriptive and explanatory. By examining various techniques and strategies, it describes *how* deviating individuals and groups attempt to align their lines of conduct with others and with the norms of the larger social structure; and it explains *why* they do so. The techniques of alignment are varied, but the motivation for engaging in them is consistent: successful alignment will justify and normalize the deviant behavior or belief, thus reducing, if not eliminating, social censure and stigma.

Scott and Lyman (1968) refer to these various aligning actions as "accounts," those "linguistic devices employed whenever an action is subject to a valuative inquiry" (p. 46), and they propose two different types. The first, excuses, are those accounts in which the individuals or group admit the behavior or the belief in question is wrong, bad or inappropriate, but deny full responsibility for it. Excuses generally take the form of "appeals." An "appeal to accident" redefines the offending conduct or belief as the product of unforeseen or uncontrollable circumstances; an "appeal to defeasibility" insists that it occurred only because the individuals or the group were not fully informed or fully aware. An appeal to "biological drives" presents the deviant behavior or belief as the product of innate drives that cannot be predicted or controlled; and an "appeal to scapegoating" blames others for it.

The second type of accounts, justifications, are those in which

the individuals or group accept responsibility for the deviant behavior or belief, but deny the pejorative, or stigmatizing quality of it. This category of accounts has generated a great deal of research within the sociology of deviance. Based as it is upon the criminologic concept of "techniques of neutralization" (Sykes & Matza, 1957), it has been used as a theoretical framework for analyzing the verbal accounts of compulsive gamblers (Cressey, 1962), social dropouts (Polsky, 1967), moral offenders (Hong & Duff, 1977), and murderers (Levi, 1981). And in recent years, it also has been used to analyze the verbal and the written accounts of sexual deviants. In two interesting studies, Scully and Morolla (1984, 1985) used the concept of accounts to examine the justifications and excuses of convicted incarcerated rapists; a similar framework was used by McCaghy (1968) with child molesters. Writings by sexual deviants also have been scrutinized through this particular theoretical lens. Taylor (1976) reviewed the works of the so-called "Uranian poets," those pedophilic writers whose ranks included such notables as F. E. Murray, W. B. Nesbitt and Ralph Chubb, and discovered examples of the "uses of artistry as a motive-formulation resource for the justification and possible enactment of guilt-free sex" (p. 100). In a content analysis of the publications of the three pedophile organizations in this country, deYoung (in press) found persistent themes that could be categorized as justifications.

Justifications, then as a category of accounts, have demonstrated considerable utility as a theoretical framework for the analysis of the language and writings of deviant individuals and groups. It is this framework that will be used in this paper's examination of the publications of the NAMBLA organization. Justifications generally involve six different strategies (Scott & Lyman, 1968), four of which will be used in this paper: denial of injury, condemnation of the condemners, appeal to higher loyalties, and denial of the victim. Each of these will be explained as to its style and intended purpose and will be illustrated with selections from the publicly disseminated literature of NAMBLA.

Denial of Injury

With this justification, the individuals or the group acknowledge responsibility for the deviant act or belief but insist that

it is permissible because no one is injured or harmed by it. For NAMBLA, this justification involves the admission that the organization advocates adult-child sex, and that its members engage in that behavior, and the justification that neither the behavior nor the philosophy is in any way injurious to children.

This assertion is contrary, of course, to the strong consensus that adult sexual behavior with children is indeed harmful. The child sexual abuse literature is rife with empirical research and case studies that bolster that consensus (deYoung, 1985, 1987). Even the language that is part of the lexicon of both the lay public and professionals in the field—words like “abuse,” “victimization,” “exploitation,” and “trauma”—attest to what most people believe are the deleterious effects on children of adult sexual behavior.

In the face of that strong consensus, then, NAMBLA must redefine the impact of both its philosophy and its members’ behavior so as to stress the positive, rather than the injurious effects of adult-child sex. Its publications, therefore, are filled with anecdotal accounts, letters, poetry and articles that proclaim the benefits and advantages to children of having a sexual relationship with an adult male. Some of those advantages are very specifically detailed. Accounts of children having been rescued from lives on the streets, of children finding a loving alternative to an abusive home, or of discovering in the pedophile someone to talk to or to help them during periods of distress are prominently featured in every NAMBLA publication. Yet when examples of the benefits to individual boys are set aside, the more general advantages of man/boy love are much less clear. The rather esoteric tenor of these explanations is illustrated by the following examples from NAMBLA publications:

Man love is also something which has helped thousands of boys discover their own sexuality and get in touch with what they really feel (Lotringer, 1980, p. 1).

If sex is an expression of shared love (as man/boy love is), then it is beneficial to both partners, regardless of age . . . Nothing is more beneficial than to feel a sense of security in the love of another. It creates a euphoria. The (pedophile) take the young boys from the streets, give them a good home and material needs, and loves them (*Bulletin*, April 1985, p. 6).

NAMBLA, however, does acknowledge that harm may follow the adult-child sexual encounter; in the face of such overwhelming clinical and case study evidence, it can do little but acknowledge that. The organization, however, is quick to place the culpability for that harm on others who, it insists, respond inappropriately or prejudicially to adult-child sex. By displacing that blame, NAMBLA implies that there is nothing deviant about the sexual behavior, *per se*, but only in the public's reactions to it.

Why can't we here in America do as those in the Netherlands have done? That is, EDUCATE the public to see that, in proper context, a man/boy relationship can be of benefit to the boy and the trauma that the police so quickly point out as connected to such relationships are caused not by the relationship, but by what the police themselves subject the boy to? (*Bulletin*, December 1984, p. 4).

In no study known to us is there any suggestion that pedophile contacts are harmful in themselves. But in our culture we usually cannot consider just the actual contacts. If they lead to *other* things there might well be a lot of damage. First is the damage that can be done by the parents of a child who had contact with a pedophile. On discovery they often react in panic. They become furious or outraged. Such a reaction . . . is very harmful to the child . . . Then there is the damage caused by contact with the police and the courts . . . The reactions of society can cause great damage to the child (deGroot, 1982, p. 6).

Another tactic for denying injury is the publication of youngsters' accounts of the benefits they have experienced from sexual relationships with adult males. Here are the very persons the larger society views as victims adamantly disavowing that label and, at least by inference, rejecting the care and protection that would be afforded them because of that status. The NAMBLA *Bulletin*, for example, featured a column for some period of time by "The Unicorn," an eleven year old self-described "faggot" whose column was a testimony to the erotic superiority of sex with adult males as he described his various lovers and the positive effects each has had on his physical, emotional and even spiritual development (*Bulletin*, November 1983, p. 10). The organization also published a pamphlet titled, "Boys Speak Out on Man/Boy Love" (1981) which features short anecdotal

accounts by boys of the positive effects of their sexual experiences with adults males. A perusal of the titles of the selections in this pamphlet suggest the tone of the testimonials: "Thank God for Boy Lovers," "If It Weren't for Mark, I'd Probably be Dead Today," "I Need My Lovers," and "The Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me."

The NAMBLA *Bulletin* also publishes letters from youngsters that describe the benefits they receive from sexual relationships with men.

I am a boy of 13 and I hope you will read this letter. The spelling and stuff isn't too good . . . I wish I was one of the kids (in the stories featured in the *Bulletin*) with someone to love me like that . . . And I think it's wrong for people like police to bother men and boys who just want to love each other (*Bulletin*, April 1983, p. 3).

There are enough of us young people in the country to stand up and put our foot down. To tell our feelings in the way we want to be understood and the way we want to be loved . . . What we need is communication, peace, love, joy in our hearts, and happiness for people we are in love with. (Signed) Lover Boy Joe, age 13 (*Bulletin*, September 1984, p. 5).

The denial of injury, then, is a justification that redefines adult sexual behavior with children in positive terms. As a rhetorical strategy, it is used to convince those of the larger society who will read its literature, that contrary to what is popular belief, no injury or harm is incurred by children from engaging in sex with adult males; that the harm that has been stressed by other sources is really due to the inappropriate and prejudicial reactions of ignorant people and systems; and that even the children who have experienced this behavior will eschew the label of victim and proclaim the beneficial effects of sexual behavior with adults if only asked. The insistence of this justification is that there is nothing really deviant in adult-child sex, therefore any censure of the NAMBLA organization and its membership is undeserved.

Condemnation of the Condemners

The second justification is the condemnation of the condemners, a rejection of those who would reject. The utility of this strategy is that in redirecting the condemnation and censure it

has received from the larger society back on the society itself, NAMBLA can normalize its philosophy and the behavior of its members by demonstrating that they do not differ noticeably from that of the larger society. The condemners, real and potential, are thus characterized as hypocritical and as deserving condemnation themselves.

Since the censure given to adult sexual behavior with children is so strong, the condemnation of the condemners found in the publications of NAMBLA is equally strong. Much printed space is taken up with what are often sustained polemics against professionals in the field of child sexual abuse, and against the criminal justice and the mental health systems. Individuals are listed by name, cases are dissected and analyzed, and flaws in decision-making, and errors in judgment are highlighted, all in a tone that is more often mockingly derisive than not. The following illustration demonstrates the width and the depth of that condemnation:

Con men who once made their livings selling snake oil are now surfacing as "experts on child sexual abuse." They have deliberately confused expressions of love and affection with violent physical abuse . . . Police departments suffering from a bad public image due to internal corruption, excessive use of force, and for poor management have turned to boy-lovers as easy prey . . . District Attorneys needing a dramatic case for the voters to remember and psychiatrists needing public funds to build a private practice have turned to boy-lovers as the answer to their prayers. Demagogues in state and federal legislatures have also found the anti-boy-love hysteria tailor made for raising campaign funds and increasing name recognition through the sponsorship of laws pandering to the public's misconceptions (*Bulletin*, May 1983, p. 4).

(The children) continue to seduce adults and call those who reproach them for it "silly fools." The children had learned a bit about psychoanalysis. They said. "For every objection they were forced to abandon, these funny ladies and gentlemen immediately produce another. Could it be that they are really only unconsciously hiding the secrets of their own inner souls? Isn't it just that they are a little bit afraid of sex itself?" But nobody bothered to listen to what they said, for how could the truth ever be heard from the mouths of children? (*Bulletin*, March 1983, p. 9).

The intent of this justification strategy is both straightforward and clear: if the condemners can be reconceptualized as

engaging in the same or even more victimizing or exploitative acts as those for which NAMBLA members are accused, then their censure of the members is irrelevant at best, and hypocritical at worst. The sting of any subsequent criticism from them, then, is effectively precluded.

Appeal to Higher Loyalties

The third justification that can be found in the publications of NAMBLA is the appeal to higher loyalties, a strategy by which the organization and its members normalize their behavior and philosophy by insisting the interests of a higher principle to which allegiance is owed is being served. That higher principle, for NAMBLA, is the liberation of children from what it characterizes as the repressive bonds of society; the sexual liberation of children, then, is presented as a necessary step for achieving that larger goal. The following excerpt illustrates that point:

Members of NAMBLA are committed to the protection and development of the young. Our beliefs and activities have their foundation in values which say that all people are important and should have the inherent right to conduct themselves as they wish as long as the rights of others are not abused. Children are our special concern. We seek their freedom from the restrictive bonds of society which denies them the right to live, including to love, as they choose (*Bulletin*, December 1984, pp. 6–7).

We recognize that children need more than sexual freedom and self-determination; they need economic self-sufficiency and the right and power to control all aspects of their lives, with help from but without interference by adults. NAMBLA favors the empowerment of young people in our society. Children should be treated as full human beings, not as the private property of their parents and the state ("What is NAMBLA?" undated: 1).

This espoused higher loyalty has the character of what Hewitt and Hall (1973) refer to as a quasi-theory, an "ad hoc explanation brought to problematic situations to give them order and hope" (p. 367). Because it has structure and consequence, a quasi-theory permits otherwise deviant situations and philosophies to be perceived by others as meaningful and even normal in light

of commonsense notions of human behavior and social arrangements.

That children need to be treated "as full human beings," that their protection and development are preeminent concerns falls well within the rubric of commonsense and common-interest. It is both meaningful and normal to hold such an ideal, and on these issues alone, NAMBLA would not expect disagreement from the larger society. That larger society also may agree on some of the fundamental objectives that must be accomplished in order to achieve that goal, such as the empowerment of children, but when NAMBLA adds what would be considered a deviant objective, the "sexual freedom" of children to that logic, the appeal to higher loyalty takes on the character of a quasi-theory. It espouses a hopeful goal, the development of children into "full human beings," and develops a structure, that is a set of objectives for achieving that goal, and includes within that set an objective that the larger society would not under other circumstances accept.

Another facet of this appeal to higher loyalties involves the affinity NAMBLA has with the goals of other, nonstigmatized organizations and with social welfare concerns. The organization, as an example, has expressed a great deal of sympathy and support for the women's movement as well as loyalty to the gay rights movement, and views its own struggle for credibility and acceptance as analagous to their struggles. NAMBLA has also taken on such social welfare concerns as sexism, ageism, racism, nuclear warfare, abortion, unemployment, and the military draft, as well as esoteric concerns such as circumcision, and clitoridectomy (*NAMBLA Journal*, 1983, p. 3). This partnership with other legitimate organizations and with social issues that are concerns of the larger society as well is a strategy for aligning the organization of NAMBLA and its membership with that larger society.

These appeals to higher loyalties and the affinity with the goals of other legitimate organizations and with pressing social welfare concerns, allows NAMBLA to assume a mantle of legitimacy. That mantle, if successfully worn, further protects the organization and its members from the censure of the larger society.

Denial of the Victim

The final justification found in the publications of NAMBLA is denial of the victim. Here the victim, the child in this case, is reconceptualized as having deserved or brought on the deviant behavior; due to the victim's culpability, therefore, the responsibility of offending individuals for the behavior and its consequences is diminished.

This justification involves the conceptual transformation of children from victims of adult sexual behavior into willing partners. This transformation can only occur if NAMBLA is successfully able to convince the disbelieving larger society that children are able to give full and informed consent to sexual acts with adults. But this issue of consent is a thorny one. Long after the debate about the morality of adult-child sex has been aired, and long after the uncertainties about the effects of such behavior on children has been satisfactorily addressed, the issue of consent will remain the most basic and fundamental problem that larger society has with adult sexual behavior with children (Finkelhor, 1979).

And it is a persistent and difficult problem for the NAMBLA organization as well, and one that has engendered great dissension within its ranks. As an organization, NAMBLA has made such general statements on the consent issue as these: "If a child and adult want to have sex, they should be free to do so. Consent is the critical point . . . force and coercion are abhorrent to NAMBLA" (*Bulletin*, December 1984, p. 3); and, "NAMBLA is strongly opposed to age of consent laws and other restrictions which deny adults and youth the full enjoyment of their bodies and control over their lives" (*Bulletin*, September 1984, p. 7).

The problem, however, is not really with the definition of consent, the law spells that out quite clearly, but with the *age* at which it can be given in a free, knowledgeable, and informed manner. NAMBLA asserts that the current age of consent laws in this country which *pro forma* make its members' sexual behavior with youngsters illegal, are anachronistic and repressive. It strongly advocates for their repeal, as the following excerpt illustrates:

NAMBLA does not simply wish to repeal age of consent laws; rather, we have never accepted the validity of the frame of reference

on which such laws are based. Under the circumstances, we cannot name an age of consent . . . NAMBLA will not participate in an abstract, narrowly defined and ultimately pointless game of "pick an age" . . . Sex does not require highly developed "cognitive tools;" it ought to come naturally (*Bulletin*, April 1983, p. 1).

Does sex require highly developed "cognitive tools"? If the act itself does not, the consent to engage in the act certainly does, so despite the organization's resistance to engage in a game of "pick an age," the age at which a child can give full and informed consent to sexual acts must be determined if this justification is going to be successful in normalizing the behavior of NAMBLA members and avoiding public censure.

And the very debate over that age still wages within the ranks of NAMBLA. In a position paper created by the steering committee of the organization, consent was defined as "both informed (understood and accepted in advance) and with the intent and spirit of love" (Proposal, undated). Since understanding and acceptance at least imply some "cognitive tools," the committee backed off from its original insistence that it would not pick an age, and selected nine as the age of consent. Some members argued that it should be lower. One insisted that "a five year old aware of sexual feelings can act upon them at any time of his choosing. There are many five year olds who understand the meaning of sex more than many 35 year olds" (*Bulletin*, July/August 1983, p. 4). Other members, perhaps predicting how the larger society would respond to these proposed ages, advocated that the age be raised to thirteen or fourteen. Even while the NAMBLA organization vehemently argued this issue, one of its founding members went on record to defend all consensual sexual relations, "regardless of the age of the partners" (Lotringer, 1980, p. 21).

Obviously the issue of consent and the age at which children can freely and intelligently render it continues to be a problem for the NAMBLA organization. It is for the larger society as well as evidenced by the fact that the age of consent established by law tends to vary from one state to another. While the larger society may find some value in debating whether that age should be uniform across the country, and may find some interest in deciding what that age should be, the same attitude studies that

demonstrate such a strong consent that adult sexual behavior with children is harmful and exploitative, also show an increase in that consensus where very young children are concerned. In other words, the debate about whether that age should be thirteen, fourteen or fifteen may be lively, but there is little demonstrated acceptance of lowering that age, and virtually none for removing it.

Denial of the victim, predicated as it is upon this issue of consent, is unlikely to be a successful justification; indeed, it may be this single issue of consent and the failure of this justification that will always keep the deviant label on this organization and its members, therefore keeping them out of alignment with the larger society.

Conclusion

In the face of a strong consensus that adult sexual behavior with children is abusive and exploitative, and that its effects are negative at best and traumatic at worst, the North American Man/Boy Love Association has a vested interest in justifying and thereby normalizing its philosophy and its members' practices. This paper has utilized the sociological framework of accounts, with a special reference to justifications, to examine how that process is accomplished in the publications of NAMBLA.

The use of accounts by deviant individuals and groups is an area of research that has the potential of generating insights into deviancy. And in the area of sexual deviancy, where myth and misunderstanding abound, the study of these aligning actions may increase knowledge as to how individuals and groups labeled deviant attempt to negotiate and reconceptualize their beliefs and their behavior in the face of society's censure.

If the imputation of deviance is indeed a product of an interactive process between the individuals or group so labeled and the labelers (Schur, 1979), then the study of accounts may also lead to an understanding of that process. How accounts are given in terms of their manner and their style, and how accounts are accepted and the consequences of their acceptance are researchable hypotheses, and studies designed to address these issues and others will make rich contributions to the sociology of deviance.

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