

The Shadow of the Disgust Reflex

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Abstract

The term “disgust reflex” used in the title originally came from the treatment for eating disorders, but I would particularly like this in the context of this article on pedophilia to typify the much-seen reaction as soon as the topic of pedophilia comes up. One gets a disgusted expression on the face, stops weighing, thinking, reasoning etc. One immediately loses all sense of nuance and every sense of complexity seems to be lost, resulting in attitudes and statements that even question the (continued) existence of pedophiles or reduced to “detain, deport or castrate”. Just like the phenomenon of pedophilia itself, this disgust reflex occurs in all layers of the population, among lay people somewhat more than among professionals, and in recent years somewhat more than before: in the 1970s and 1980s the overall attitude toward this phenomenon was remarkably tolerant. Despite the radical negative change in tolerance since the nineties, child pornography can have a strange and complicated attraction to people who would not define themselves as Pedophiles.

Keywords: *Pedophilia; Disgust Reflex*

Pedophilia and sexual “revolution”

At the end of the 1960s the moral belief in progress was so great that there was almost a collective expectation that a new era was dawning, which also gave everyone the opportunity to develop their own inner world, also sexually, and especially to fully explore their own sexual possibilities [1]. This was especially true for sexual subcultures that had until then been in the margins: homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and also pedophiles. In addition to traditional marriage and family, all kinds of manners and cohabitation were investigated. And research mainly meant: practical practice. Although sexual abuse of a child was still prohibited, the creation and reading of child pornography (leaves with pictures of bare children or adults who perform sexual acts with children) did not seem much harm, particularly because it was believed that for the Pedophile, it was mainly about the love for children, and not about sex. Actually, it was often overlooked that when it came to sexual feelings, it was mainly about the feelings of the adult.

More than 50 years later, from this naive belief in progress, no matter how inspiring, have remained mainly shady sides. Destructive research results on the prevalence of abuse by acquaintances [2] and extensive reporting on unscrupulous child rapists such as Marc Dutroux and Robert M have radically stripped the image of “child love” and - as far as not yet - disgusting reflex [3]. Optimistic naivety has given way to fear, hysteria and popular hatred towards child abusers and pedophiles, who - and that is actually the greatest carelessness - are constantly being confused. The distinction between the secretly operating family member on the one hand and the unknown ‘stranger-danger’ on the other, is relatively relative: quite a few child abusers (pedophile or not) put a lot of time and energy into building

up contact and relationship with the child - boy or girl - and the parents! (“Grooming”) before they engage in sexual acts. They are therefore no longer strangers. Consider for example the supposed extensive initiatives of Michael Jackson to win over boys and their families, in his “Neverland” paradise.

Pedophilia as orientation

In the last decade, academic and treatment circles have increasingly come to a consensus on understanding the phenomenon of pedophilia as a sexual orientation. It has all the characteristics of it: stable sexual preference, immutability, accompanied by romantic emotional feelings, experienced as part of identity [4]. Just as with other modes (straight, gay, bisexual), there are all kinds of behavioral variants, shapes and sizes in pedophilia, so all the complexities that we can find in any sexual orientation: people with a lot of sexual needs, sexual anxiety, rapists/assailants, with or without respect or feeling for boundaries etc. In short: one pedophile is not the other; Sexual orientation is not a guideline for risk behavior, but rather the further personality structure, degree of control, empathy and impulse regulation. Most pedophiles, incidentally, are not constantly suppressing their sexual impulses, but try to sustain themselves as a celibate living human being under the yoke of social isolation and condemnation.

At the same time, the production of child pornography is still increasing worldwide (and implicitly also the child abuse situations that are filmed to make this porn). Deep in the cracks of the internet (Dark Web), there are constantly changing and self-transforming networks of child porn producers, who are also consumers. The mandatory hierarchical principle applies here “if you want new material, you must also submit”; a construction whereby someone like Robert M could acquire an important position in that world.

“.. by no means all perpetrators [of sexual violence against children] are pedophile. Only 20% of the suspects about whom a psychological report is made have a deviating sexual preference or disorder, including pedophilia (...) And by the way: not all pedophiles are perpetrators”. (Quote from the Op Goede Grond report, published in 2014 by the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children) [5]. This conclusion raises questions about the effectiveness of the focus on pedophiles in combating child abuse. Apparently, children are not primarily at risk from people who have pedophile fantasies about them, but especially from those who have power over them or who are parents or family members, have impulse control problems, an antisocial personality development, a low IQ, a lack of conscience or have other than pedophile- sexual preferences. This considerably complicates a perpetrator profile: apparently evil can come from all sides and does not occur along predictable lines.

“STOP IT NOW” [6], the telephone helpline for people who are struggling with hands-on/hands-off child abuse of children, conducted research among (anonymous) callers in 2019: The vast majority of people (93.2%) who are scared losing control over the consumption of child pornography is straight/gay/bisexual and not pedophile. But how do people without a preference for children end up in the grip of child pornography material?

For this it is important to know a little more about the intensity and content dimension of erotic/pornographic material: sexual excitement, just like every emotion, has a physiological and a conscious emotional/cognitive dimension. The physiological dimension is non-specific, which means that an emotion can be interpreted differently cognitively than ever started. For example, if you watch a horror movie together with a date, this can lower the threshold for sexual arousal: fear/horror becomes arousal [7,8]. Another example is: make-up (“repair”) sex soon after a big fight: the intensity (adrenaline) is interpreted differently, gets a different content. This also applies to strong emotions such as fear and disgust: for some people the intensity of disgust can turn into (unwanted) sexual arousal. This may explain how people without pedophile preference can become entangled in downloading child pornography.

Pedophobia and alternative stimulus material

Now that it is clear that child pornography is viewed by both pedophiles and non-pedophiles, we go one step further. It is no secret that the “War on Child Porn”, as the worldwide fight against child pornography is called, is not easy to win. In addition to the bad faith of producers of child pornography (filmed abuse practices), this is most likely also due to the actual absence of legal alternatives to the

generation and regulation of pedophiles who want to regulate their sexual impulses and fantasies with excitement material for solo sex. Research into the effect of alternative stimulus material such as virtual (digital/signed) child pornography on the perception of pleasure and the stimulation of regulation of pedophiles and pedophile/non-pedophile child abusers, would be desirable to refute unfounded assumptions of proponents and opponents about this. This would be useful for pedophiles who are not abusive and who can use the material risk-free as an aid in masturbation, but also for convicted child abusers, for whom the responsible use of stimulus material can be used in treatment programs to gain more control over their own fantasies in favor of the impulse regulation and the prevention of recidivism.

The government is not yet prepared to facilitate such research. A proposal for an impact study of virtual child pornography submitted to the Ministry of V&J in 2015 was finally rejected after a year of official enthusiasm in preparation, without clear justification (initiative by Van Beek, De Graaf, Laan and Van Lunsen). Initiatives by various members of parliament (in 2013 and 2015) to investigate virtual child pornography as an alternative to pedophiles were not echoed.

In 2014, the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children personally stated that they had no fiducy in the protective (read: motivation for reducing abuse) effect that virtual child pornography would ultimately have for children; an opinion that is apparently widely propagated in Dutch politics without proper substantiation. What is bitter is that it is precisely the refusal to investigate the operation of alternative coastal regulation and thus to test its own abstinence policy, that makes the government partly responsible for the unbridled increase in (digital) pedo networks and the ever-growing market of real child porn [9,10]. Why do I think so? Because of the following reasons.

Justice usually mentions 3 arguments regarding the prohibition of virtual child pornography:

- 1) Virtual material is sometimes technically difficult to distinguish from filmed real children. In order to avoid the often difficult evidence that a virtual film is derived from a real film, the judiciary concludes a priori that virtual material is "contaminated".

This is actually called "Guilty by association".

- 2) The assumption that sexually stimulating fantasy material encourages the viewing of real child pornography or the perpetration of child abuse, and also has the objective of glorifying child abuse and thereby promoting the spread and reinforcement of a subculture.
- 3) Finally, virtual material, precisely because it sometimes looks cartoon-like, would be of interest to children and could therefore be used as "luring" material (grooming).

Since 2002, possession and distribution of virtual and real child pornography are equally punishable in the Netherlands (8 years in prison). That is strange in itself, because real child pornography is demonstrably made of filmed abuse situations. In principle, this is not the case with Virtual Child Pornography. As far as we want and can, let us try to empathize with the motives of child porn lovers (pedophile or not): we can assume that child porn consumers and producers calculate risks in their actions. Therefore, given the severity of the penalty, it does not give the consumer in question any advantages in choosing virtual material, because no higher penalty threshold is raised for real material. It is also plausible, regardless of the way in which the material is created, that consumers experience real images as more realistic, exciting and therefore more attractive than virtual ones (which are nonetheless derived from reality). The OM is apparently not prepared to make a distinction between a minor and a major crime, and to separate 'the experience of solo sex using derived virtual fantasy images' from the 'unscrupulous, instrumental and commercial child-exploiting creation and indulgence of those fantasies'. My view is that the decision to make both forms of sex material equally punishable, constitutes a dynamic that I would describe as 'moral inflation': consumers will not be motivated for virtual material, but will opt for 'the real thing', real child porn.

An additional reasoning, also from a criminal perspective, is that producing virtual child pornography is technically probably much more complicated, difficult and time consuming than making real child pornography; this also does not speak in favor of virtual material.

The argument concerning the use of virtual material for grooming (luring children) is, in particular, primarily a theoretical construct, since there is hardly any case law on cases where virtual material has been used for this purpose.

International developments

In recent years justice seems to be expanding criminalization to include other images, such as drawings (hentai, manga, child erotica), paintings of minors, 3-d representations (dolls), robots, written child pornography and even novels such like "Lolita" by Nabokov. This is an international wind-up: The United Nations, through its Committee on the Rights of the Child, works - under the influence of private, sex-conservative organizations such as ECPAT, which also wants to thwart the position of sex workers, through the so-called Luxembourg Guidelines - to ban all possible representations of imagined erotic situations with children: "...Visual material such as photographs, movies, drawings and cartoons; audio representations; any digital media representation; live performances; written materials in print or online; and physical objects such as sculptures, toys or ornaments" [11,12].

Skeptics argue that a lot of haste is being made with this global policy in connection with the upcoming organization of the 2020 Olympics in Japan, a country that is traditionally known to be very tolerant of fetishes and other deviant sexual preferences and (graphic) expressions thereof.

I have already argued before that in my opinion capital errors are made with regard to the choices with regard to the location of the "evil", and the means chosen to combat this evil and to increase the safety of children.

- 1) 80% of child abusers are not pedophile. According to international estimates, only 7% of all pedophiles are prone to child abuse. Ergo: observing legal or illegal networks of pedophiles, whether or not using the "trawl law", is a method that is as ineffective as privacy-violating.
- 2) Making real and virtual child pornography equally punishable will unintentionally increase the popularity of real child pornography for consumers and will not diminish the demand for new material.
- 3) There are indications that child pornographic material can also cause intense excitement among non-pedophile consumers, possibly precisely because of disgust about the material, according to the principles of "(mis) attribution of arousal" and excitation transfer.
- 4) The justice department focuses on consumers and their sexual orientation, while the producers of child pornography are of course the real criminals, who deliberately produce the material to trade it.

Conclusion

It is unlikely that in the coming years there will be room for another attempt to actually investigate the effectiveness and relevance of virtual child pornography material. From a legal perspective, this space still exists in the Netherlands with regard to child dolls and child robots, but will, given the forthcoming policy developments from the U.N. not be encouraged either. This is unfortunate because all this material is declared a priori, without sound scientific substantiation, already contaminated in advance, on emotional, associative and unscientific grounds. On the basis of assumptions, understanding and definition confusion, a strategy is adopted that will leave those who want to harm children relatively indifferent, while the liberties of individuals who boldly regulate sexual experience and arousal are seriously curtailed.

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