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IN THIS ISSUE

PAGE

- 1 A.P.A. Symposium
- 3 International Academy of Sex Research Joins the Debate
- 5 Work of Bieber, Socarides and Its Relevance in the Debate on the Paraphilias
- 7 Canadian Teacher Harrassed for Expressing Views on Homosexuality
- 8 "Ex-Gay is Ok"
- 11 Recent Speaking Engagements of NARTH Officers
- 12 The American Journal of Public Health on Risks of Homosexual Practices
- 15 Letter to the Editor
- 16 Another Tribute to Harold Voth
- 17 Pediatricians' Groups Differ on Attitudes Toward Homosexual Parenting
- 18 Pediatrician Says Childhood Gender Identity Disorder Requires Treatment
- 19 Risk Factors Associated with Lesbianism May Be Higher than with Gay Men
- 20 The Condition of Female Homosexuality
- 25 Minnesota Psychologist Threatened for Pro-Reorientation Therapy Stance
- 26 New Zealand Study
- 27 Attorney Counters Gay Activism in Schools with NARTH Resources
- 28 The "Brave New World" of Men Who Breastfeed
- 29 Book Review: *What Some of You Were*
- 30 Interview with Louis A. Berman
- 32 The Sexual Deviations and the Diagnostic Manual
- 36 Faculty Opinions from Grove City College: Warren Throckmorton

A. P. A. Symposium Debates Whether Pedophilia, Gender-Identity Disorder, Sexual Sadism Should Remain Mental Illnesses

by Linda Ames Nicolosi

On May 19th, 2003 in San Francisco, at a symposium hosted by the American Psychiatric Association, several long-recognized categories of mental illness were discussed for possible removal from the upcoming edition of the psychiatric manual.

The mental illnesses being debated in the symposium at the APA's annual convention included the paraphilias—among which are pedophilia, exhibitionism, fetishism, transvestism, voyeurism, and sadomasochism.

Also being debated was gender-identity disorder, a condition in which a person feels persistent discomfort with his or her biological sex. Gay activists have long claimed that gender-identity disorder should not be assumed to be abnormal and is a healthy expression of pre-homosexuality.

Dr Robert Spitzer responded to the symposium as a discussant, urging that the paraphilias and gender-identity disorder be retained in the psychiatric manual.

Disagreeing, Psychiatrist Charles Moser of San Francisco's Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality and co-author Peggy Kleinplatz of the University of Ottawa presented a paper entitled, "DSM-IV-TR and the Paraphilias: An Argument for Removal." They argued that people whose sexual interests are atypical, culturally forbidden, or religiously proscribed should not, for those reasons, be labeled mentally ill.

First, they say, different societies stigmatize different sexual behaviors. Furthermore, the existing research cannot distinguish people with the paraphilias, they say, from "normophilics" (the term the authors use for people with conventional interests). Thus there is no reason to diagnose paraphilics as either a distinct group, or psychologically unhealthy.

Besides, Moser and Kleinplatz add, psychiatry has no baseline, theoretical model of what, in fact, constitutes normal and healthy sexuality to which it could compare people whose sexual interests draw them to children, animals, or sadism/masochism.

"Any sexual interest," Moser concluded in an earlier published commentary, "can be healthy and life-enhancing."

Psychiatry's Method for Defining "Mental Illness" Has Changed

Moser and Kleinplatz note that the A.P.A. once categorized a condition as a mental illness based on its psychological, emotional or developmental origins, along with the unconscious motivations that were theorized to cause the condition.

But during the last three decades, psychiatry has moved away from reliance on theories of causation—theories which, typically, cannot be verified—and instead sought direct, empirically

continued on page 2

provable evidence; not of the pathological origins of a condition, but of its disabling effect in the present. Without such evidence for observable distress and disability, a condition is generally not considered to be a mental disorder.

People with "sexually unusual" interests, Moser and Kleinplatz note, may in fact be quite happy and well-adjusted. But the APA's labeling of their conditions as "pathological" fuels social discrimination against them, Moser and Kleinplatz warn, which can lead to distress and discrimination that is psychologically damaging.

Furthermore, they say, since the A.P.A. has no concept of what "healthy sexuality" or even a "healthy personality" actually entails, then how can psychiatry presume to define "unhealthy" sexuality? And since many people engaging in these unusual behaviors are not "distressed" or "disabled" by their interests, how can the A.P.A. justify continuing to pathologize them?

"People with Paraphilic Sexual Interests Suffer Like Homosexuals Did Before the 1973 Decision"

"The situation of the paraphilias at present," Moser and Kleinplatz conclude, "parallels that of homosexuality in the early 1970's."

Following the presentation of the papers at the symposium, Dr. Robert Spitzer responded with a defense based on a concept of natural law, as established by evolution. Spitzer is the author of a study on change of sexual orientation that he presented at the 2001 American Psychiatric Association convention.

"Dr. Moser is incorrect," Spitzer said, "when he argues that there is no scientific basis for distinguishing the paraphilias from more common sexual behaviors. In all cultures, as children become adolescents, they develop an interest in sexual behavior. That is how we are designed - whether you believe this design is the work of God, or by evolution through natural selection. This design is clearly for the purpose of facilitating pair bonding and interpersonal sexual behavior.

"The paraphilias, when severe, impair interpersonal sexual behavior," Spitzer continued. "Sexual behavior that facilitates caring bonding between people is normal - and that which impairs it is abnormal, not merely an atypical

variation. What is needed is more research on the treatment of the paraphilias, particularly pedophilia. To remove them from DSM-V would be the end of this much-needed research."

"What is needed is not more research," NARTH's Joseph Nicolosi countered. "What psychology really needs for its advancement is not another study, but a more accurate worldview. That worldview must take into account our created design, which inevitably involves gender complementarity.

"And," Nicolosi added, "we must agree on those things that genuinely enhance human dignity. It's a measure of how low the psychiatric establishment has sunk, that it would even debate the idea that pedophilia, transvestism, and sado-masochism could ever be expressions of human flourishing."

Psychoanalyst Johanna Tabin, Ph.D., of NARTH's Scientific Advisory Committee, also commented on the A.P.A. symposium. "If the arguments prevail that are given for ignoring these psychological problems, then suicide attempts must be considered normal when they are desired by the participants. And what about the sociopath, who—having no conscience—feels quite content with himself?"

"Uncommon 'common sense,'" Dr. Tabin added, "is sure to reassert itself—but in the meantime, the mental health professions are failing many suffering individuals by rigidly adopting political correctness as the guide as to when people need help.

"And the saddest thing about the current climate," she added, "is that people who ask for help because they are not at ease with homosexual impulses, right now are frequently forbidden to obtain it."

References

1. Moser, Charles and Peggy J. Kleinplatz, "DSM-IV-TR and the Paraphilias: An Argument for Removal," paper presented at the American Psychiatric Association annual conference, San Francisco, California, May 19, 2003.
2. Special Section: Pedophilia: Concepts and Controversy, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 31, no. 6, December 2002, pp. 465-510.

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"Victory on the Bow of a Ship"