

“Say it Ain’t So, Charles”— *The Normalization of the Sexual Exploitation of Children*

by Benzion Sorotzkin, Psy.D.

Heinz Kohut, a past president of the American Psychoanalytic Association, founded the school of Self Psychology, which has become increasingly prevalent on the American psychotherapy scene.

A biography of Kohut was recently published by Charles B. Strozier¹, a professor of history at John Jay College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York (CUNY). Strozier is also a training and supervising psychoanalyst.

In discussing Kohut’s childhood years, Strozier describes the classic triadic family relationship that research has associated with the development of homosexual feelings.

According to Strozier, Kohut’s father was distant, uninvolved and unfaithful to his wife. His mother Else, in contrast, was “extraordinarily involved” in all details of Kohut’s life, with his

“body...mind and soul.... [S]he regularly searched for any blemish on his skin...Else refused to allow a separation between herself and her adored son.... She... seldom let him out of her sight [and] could not even stand to let him go to school... Whenever he attempted something independent, especially in the direction of maleness... it evoked her icy withdrawal from him...”

Kohut’s mother engaged a private tutor to be a father figure for “his intensely lonely charge.” This tutor, who was a young man somewhere between 19 and 23 years of age, sexually seduced 11-year-old Heinz. This sexualized relationship continued for a number of years.

Strozier tells us about Kohut’s “frequent... addictive masturbation accompanied by masochistic fantasies,” and presents considerable evidence of lifelong homosexual inclinations and perhaps even a homosexual relationship in adulthood when Kohut was married.

How does Strozier explain Kohut’s experience with his tutor?

“By current standards, what went on sexually between Heinz and [his tutor] can only be defined legally as



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childhood sexual abuse.... If such a seduction of a prepubertal boy by a man around 20 or older were to occur in contemporary America... the man would most likely be punished and possibly be incarcerated. It is called pedophilia.

“It may be that Kohut [who minimized the exploitative nature of his tutor’s actions] was deluded about the nature of his own victimization and confused about the way tender feelings are often an integral part of exploitation.” [pp. 25-26]

Does Strozier then go on to condemn this sexual abuse of a vulnerable child? No!

Instead, he reinforces Kohut’s own rationalization and his minimization of the significance of this exploitation:

“But we also need to take seriously Kohut’s own interpretation. [He] insisted that sexuality had not been prominent: it was an affectionate relationship.... What mattered in their relationship was the empathy and affection. It seems a reasonable argument.

“This is not to defend child abuse, which is abhorrent. **But it may well be that our sense of the exploitation of children has become too ideological and leads us to miss the subtlety of love and connection that can arise even in deeply unequal relationships.**” [p. 26, emphasis added]

While Strozier may claim that he is not defending child abuse, it is impossible to logically interpret his apologetic comments in any other way.

“Unharmful” Children May Repeat the Molester

Lest we underestimate the social harm of minimizing the damage inflicted by childhood sexual abuse, it is important to recall the work of Freda Briggs². In her extensive research on male child molesters, she found that the major factor that predicted victims of childhood abuse becoming offenders themselves was their downplaying of the harm caused by their molester:

“[M]en who normalize their own experience of sexual abuse, may be more likely than other victims to perpetuate the abuse.... Ryan (1989) has suggested that

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repression of the traumatic aspects and acceptance of the pleasurable aspects of sexual abuse [often leads] to victims defending against the effects of their own abuse...

"...perpetrators who discounted the effects of abuse on their own lives also discounted the damage they did to other children; they rationalized that boys liked and wanted what they did to them..." [pp. 231-232]

By downplaying the harm done to Kohut by his tutor's molestation, Strozier is contributing to the type of attitudes that make childhood sexual molestation more acceptable and excusable for those predisposed to such deviant behavior.³

Perhaps NARTH could encourage child advocacy groups to urge Strozier and his publisher to retract these damag-

ing and harmful statements.

Endnotes

- (1) Strozier, C.B. (2001). *Heinz Kohut: The Making of a Psychoanalyst*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- (2) Briggs, F. & Hawkins, R.M.F. (1996). A comparison of the childhood experiences of convicted male child molesters and men who were sexually abused in childhood and claimed to be nonoffenders. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 20, 221-233. See also, Briggs, F. (1995) *From Victim to Offender: How Child Sexual Abuse Victims Become Offenders*. Australia: Allen and Unwin.
- (3) See also Sorotzkin, B. (2002). The denial of history: Clinical implications of the denial of abuse. *The Journal of Psychohistory*, in press, and Ondersma et al. (2001) Sex with children is abuse, *Psychological Bulletin*, 127, 707-714.

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