

## Sexual Victimization of Boys by Men: Meanings and Consequences\*

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Abstract: Sexual abuse of boys by men and older boys has been misunderstood in the professional and lay literatures. Confusing same-sex victimization with homosexual orientation, many abused boys, and people they talk to about it, understand it as a sign of the victim's or the abuser's homosexuality. This confuses how a boy processes his victimization, whether he was previously headed for a homosexual or heterosexual orientation. Gay boys may see it as a sexual initiation rather than an abusive exploitation; straight boys may understand it as a sign that they are "really" gay. In addition, gay boys may fear that their orientation derives from their sexual abuse history. Both straight and gay boys may consider that the abuse is a sign that they are unmanly and weak.

In the outpouring of books and papers on childhood sexual abuse that have appeared since 1980, the emphasis has primarily been on sexually abused girls and their reactions to the abuse as women. While most writers acknowledge that boys are also subject to sexual abuse, the focus on women has misleadingly implied that the occurrence of sexual abuse among boys is rare. But, as Holmes and Slap (1998) conclude, "the sexual abuse of boys is common, underreported, underrecognized, and undertreated" (p. 1860); approximately one in six boys experiences direct sexual contact with an adult or older child by age sixteen (Urquiza and Keating, 1990; Lisak, Hopper, and Song, 1996). Often abusers are parents or other adults who violated positions of power and trust. This results in a shattering of the natural trust a boy has in the adults who care for him.

I have elsewhere (Gartner, 1999; see also Gartner, 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, and 1997b) addressed a number of issues related to the sexual abuse of boys and its aftermath as boys become men. These include how to define sexually abusive situations for boys; sexually abused men's social isolation and shame; the effects of masculine

gender socialization on processing boyhood sexual abuse; the likelihood that sexual abuse of boys by women will be encoded as “sexual initiation”; the impact of boyhood sexual abuse on adult sexual and other intimate relationships; the benefits for sexually abused men of same-sex analytic group therapy; and the intense transference/countertransference interplay in the treatment of these men. In this article, I will focus on the meaning and aftereffects of same-sex molestation for boys, whether they are headed for predominantly heterosexual or predominantly homosexual orientations.<sup>1</sup>

### Same-Sex Abuse, Masculine Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation

Same-sex abuse is often interpreted as a sign of the victim’s or the abuser’s homosexuality. Yet victims are frequently headed for predominantly heterosexual orientations at the time they are sexually abused, and continue on that path, albeit with negative aftereffects; and, as discussed below, virtually all male abusers consider themselves to be heterosexual. Confusion of same-sex abuse with homosexuality or a gay identity gets further complicated when considered in the context of masculine gender ideals. In turn, they both interact with a man’s understanding of his own sexual orientation and any ambivalence he feels about himself as an erotic, sexual being. These are all complex, interrelated subjects for a male victim of childhood sexual abuse. As such themes emerge in treatment, both therapist and patient may be unclear about which is the crucial thread at any given moment. A man may easily confuse shame about

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<sup>1</sup> For ease of expression, I usually refer to sexual orientation as predominantly homosexual or predominantly heterosexual. However, I note that this ignores the full possible spectrum of sexual orientations and also may misleadingly convey that sexual orientation has a static nature.

victimization with shame about same-sex behavior, or shame about homosexual wishes, or even shame about feeling sexual desire. It is important to track the patient's subtle shifts in focus as he moves from one of these feelings to another.

Most studies of boyhood sexual victimization demonstrate that boys are more often abused by men and older boys than by women and older girls.<sup>2</sup> In one large sample of college men, among those who reported boyhood sexual abuse histories, 61 percent had male abusers, 28 percent had female abusers, and 11% percent reported having both male and female abusers (Lisak, et al., 1996). Thus, large numbers of men in the general population have histories of same-sex sexual victimization as boys.

As they attempt to process their abuse histories, many of these men are trapped by cultural norms that regard "real" men as being in charge of themselves and, therefore, who cannot be victimized, that masculine men don't express emotions, and that men are competitive and resilient, and "independent" rather than "needy." Men abused as boys may be particularly affected by these norms, which can create great confusion and internal turmoil for them. In addition, self concepts in relation to both sexual orientation and gender identity have not yet coalesced for boys and adolescents. Fears, prejudices, and misinformation about both sexual orientation and gender identity are particularly prominent in adolescence, when both are being consolidated. Because of their traumatization, sexually abused boys may continue to understand their own or others' masculinity and orientation in the literal and concrete way they conceptualized them at the time they were victimized (Shapiro, 1994). Thus, sexual abuse may cause boys to retain the black-and-white views of homosexuality, heterosexuality, masculinity, and

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<sup>2</sup> Note, however, that sexual victimization by female abusers may be underreported because it is less likely to be encoded as sexual abuse than molestation by men (see Gartner, 1999).

femininity that are characteristic of childhood and adolescence.

A sexually abused boy may have particular trouble in relation to sexual orientation and masculine identity if he encodes his experience as a “feminizing” victimization. In the context of their masculine gender socialization, most men cannot even visualize themselves as victims (Morris et al., 1997). Lew (1988) explains that “our culture provides no room for a man as victim. Men are simply not supposed to be victimized. . . . If men aren’t to be victims . . . , then victims aren’t men” (p. 41). Or, as Crowder (1995) puts it, “Our culture has no mythology to identify the process of male victimization and boy victims are emasculated by this bias. They are either seen as being like a woman and therefore feminized, as being powerless and therefore flawed, or as being interested in sex with men and therefore homosexual” (p. 12).

Masculine gender identity struggles are rooted in a fear of forfeiting a self-definition as a man. This self concept can be thought of as achieved through disidentifying with qualities that signify being female (see Greenson, 1966, 1968; Stoller, 1968, 1985; Fast, 1984; Weeks, 1985; and Pollack, 1990, 1995, 1998). The disidentification with femaleness seems to originate in a very young boy’s need to define himself as different from the mother with whom he identified in his earliest years. In this schema, “homosexuals” are seen as men who have not successfully differentiated themselves from their female identity. Since women and “homosexuals” are seen as passive and penetrable, men must experience themselves as active and impenetrable to maintain a sense of themselves as men. Therefore, sexual victimization brings up concerns about sexual orientation when a boy equates victimization with passivity, and passivity in turn with homosexuality (Nasjleti, 1980). This is especially true when a boy

is sexually victimized by a man. Such a betrayal is apt to be regarded by the boy or by anyone who hears about the molestation as something to hide, specifically, a worrisome indication that the boy is gay (see Johanek, 1988; Sepler, 1990; and Struve, 1990). Fears of homosexuality thus may especially interfere with the ability to process same-sex abuse, whether a boy is headed for a predominantly heterosexual or predominantly homosexual orientation.

Molestation by a man is likely to undermine any boy's sense of both his gender identity and sexual orientation, as well as bring up worries about why he was chosen as a victim (Nasjleti, 1980; Finkelhor, 1984; Bruckner and Johnson, 1987; Dimock, 1988; Lew, 1988; Bolton, Morris, and MacEachron, 1989; Struve, 1990; Mendel, 1995). In most instances, sexually abusive behavior is fundamentally about power and aggression rather than about sexuality. Even when homosexual desire is not the motivating force in a molestation, however, as Pescosolido (1989) notes, "[T]he victim's perception is that of being involved in homosexual behavior. As a result, [he] is left with emotional confusion regarding his developing psychosexual identity. Essentially the victim may believe that something within himself almost magically communicated a homosexual invitation prompting the molestation" (p. 89; emphasis added).

Pescosolido adds that there is even more uncertainty for the victim if he becomes erect or ejaculates during the abuse (see also Ehrenberg, 1992). While these are the normal physiological responses to stimulation, the abused boy may feel they provide proof of his participation in the act. Thus the boy, and later the man, may ask himself, "Was I chosen because I seemed interested? Was I interested? Did he know I was not man enough to resist? Did my 'femininity' or 'sissiness' show enough to attract his

attention?"

Clinical work with Greg<sup>3</sup> illustrates a number of these confusions about masculine gender identity and homosexual orientation. He was a boy growing up gay who had already in some ways integrated or accepted his sexual interest in men before he was abused by his father and grandfather. (These early abuse experiences set the stage for a prolonged sexually abusive relationship with the pastor of a religious cult when Greg was a young adult). Indeed, Greg's early recognition of his homosexuality actually helped him confirm for himself that he had been abused.

Greg remembered being interested in boys and men from early childhood. As an adult, he recalled his earliest pubescent fantasies and came to feel that they were confirming evidence of sexual abuse by his father. Although he had clear memories of his grandfather exposing himself to Greg when Greg was of latency age, his memories of abuse by his father were more shadowy. But he told me, with great embarrassment, that as a young adolescent he had had overwhelming, frank, consuming sexual fantasies about his father. Later, he began to think this was abnormal, and said, "I used to think it was because I was gay -- yet another shameful thing about being gay -- that I had sexual fantasies about my father. Then, as I grew up, I suddenly wondered -- do straight men have sexual fantasies about their mothers? I don't think so -- not like I did, not all the time. Something was definitely going on between us if I was having fantasies like that. But I always thought it was just me and my dirty, evil mind." Thus, while Greg was never in doubt about his homosexual orientation, the way he thought about his homosexuality (and, indeed, his sexuality) was adversely affected by his sexual abuse.

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<sup>3</sup> I have elsewhere (Gartner, 1999) delineated at greater length the histories and treatments of all the men described in this article.

Greg discerned at one point that his bewilderment about his gender identity as a boy might have been related to a similar confusion on his father's part. He revealed that his father used to say to him when he was small, "When I was your age, I was a girl." At first, Greg interpreted this as an example of his father's inauthenticity. But as we investigated the meaning behind the father's words we both began to wonder what the father's fantasy had meant. Given his father's general inexpressiveness and rigidity, it seemed impossible that he was playfully conveying a flexibility about his own internalized gender self-concepts. We wondered whose "girl" the father had been. His mother's? His father's? Was the father ever allowed by them to be a girl, whatever that meant to him? Or did he have to hide his fantasy from the adults in his life? Had the father been abused? Did he feel like a girl because of such childhood sexual abuse? Greg noted that when he was a child his father had often acted in hypermasculine ways. For example, he used to do handstands on the beach and show off his physique. Greg now wondered whether this was a counterphobic reaction to a "girlness" he felt inside. He also remembered that, unusually in their culture, his father had not minded when Greg dressed up in girl's clothes as a little boy, though the father later seemed ashamed of this behavior. Was Greg living out unresolved gendered fantasies for his father?

We then wondered about his father's reactions to Greg's homosexuality. Did the father himself have secret homosexual wishes as represented by the fantasy that he had been a girl when he was young? Had he communicated these wishes to Greg by saying he used to be a girl? Had whatever sexuality that went on between Greg and his father, whether overt or covert, been an acting out of such homosexual desires on the father's part? Or was it a representation of the power relationship between the two, as sexual

abuse and rape often turn out to be? Considering questions like these gave us a more complex understanding of Greg's responses to his abuse as well as to his homosexuality and self-concept as a man.

### Primary Object Choice and Gender of the Abuser

A boy's confusion about his masculinity and sexual orientation is particularly problematic if his abuse runs counter to his own object choice. Men are especially likely to think of their abuse as "sexual initiation" if the abuser is not a parent and is of the same sex as the boy's eventual primary sexual object choice. In other words, a straight man who was abused by a sister or a female baby-sitter, or a gay man who was abused by an uncle or a male camp counselor, often thinks of the episode as one he should have liked or actually did like, rather than as anxiety-laden or abusive.

Thus, a boy who has been headed for a predominantly heterosexual orientation is likely not to consciously consider molestation by a woman to be abusive. If he is abused by a man, however, he may perceive the very fact of his molestation as a shameful sign of "queerness" or femininity (Sepler, 1990; Struve, 1990). He may fear that he somehow invited the abuse and therefore is "really" interested in men. Or he may wonder why he was chosen by a man as a sexual target, and whether having been chosen means he is "truly homosexual." Whether he is aroused or not during the abuse, he may fearfully assume he is "really" gay.

Meanwhile, a boy with even a partial awareness of being headed toward a predominantly homosexual orientation may be repulsed and frightened by sexual activity



with a woman. When the abuser is a man, however, he may feel excited by what he considers a “sexual initiation.” On the other hand, sexually abused boys who are predominantly homosexual may feel the abusive experience prematurely rushed them into defining themselves as gay. The problem is thus made more complicated when we take into account how far the boy's conscious understanding of his sexual orientation and identity has developed at the time of the abuse.

Among the gay men I have treated, many did not initially encode premature sex as betrayal. Men in this subgroup considered the sexual events they experienced to have been pleasurable, even though each demonstrated sequelae that suggested the experiences had abusive and traumatizing aspects. Owen, who is discussed at greater length below, maintained that at age twelve he could not have been abused by an older man because he was already interested in sex with men. It was not until late in his psychotherapy that he considered whether his life-long propensity to be exploited and to feel victimized might be related to this early “affair.” Similarly, as a boy and adolescent Jared thought he was not especially affected by what he considered excited, willing, and pleasurable participation in sex at age five with a teenage boy. In his case, however, he realized before ever entering therapy that the experience had severe, adverse effects on his adult relationships.

The picture is very different when the abuser's gender does not match the boy's eventual predominant primary object choice. What follows are brief examples of the likely reactions of boys abused by adults of the opposite sex from their eventual predominant primary object choice. Yale, for example, was a gay man who was abused by a nun when he was a second grader. His scornful attitudes toward others, especially

the women in his adult life and the presumably straight boys he seduced in high school, were closely connected to his continuing clear inner sense of having been abused and exploited by her. He openly loved “getting back” at heterosexuals, whom he considered to have mistreated him in many ways all his life. Conversely, Quinn, a straight man who was abused by his grandfather for years from the time he was a preschooler, and Harris, a straight man abused by his father during his latency years, both felt victimized and continued to harbor both rage and dread about men, particularly those in authority. Each felt a mixture of fear, yearning, and contempt about the possibility of intimate relatedness with other men (see the discussion of these issues below).

### Encoding Male Abuse of Homosexual Boys

Like a heterosexual boy abused by a woman, if a boy growing up to be gay is abused by a man he may think he deliberately sought or at least enjoyed his victimization. Such sexual activity may indeed sometimes appear consensual. In most cases, however, true assent is not possible in this interaction. Children do not have the capacity to give informed consent to sexual activities with adults. A child is not developmentally capable of considering or comprehending the emotional implications of sexual behavior with an adult. For this reason, sexual acts between children and people who have power over them are implicitly abusive. This is true if the power derives from the actual structure of the relationship (as in the case, for example, of a child abused by a baby-sitter, teacher, or parent). But it may be equally true if the power is inferred by the child because of the age difference between him and the abuser (as in the case, for example, of a young boy

abused by a neighborhood teenager who is not his caretaker). It is also usually true even if the child appears to ask for or participate in the sexual activity. There is a big difference between the inviting flirtatious behavior characteristic of children whose sexuality is beginning to emerge and a child's actual wish, for example, to have a penis in his mouth. When this difference is ignored, the child is abused by having the natural developmental unfolding of his sexuality violated and hurried into awareness. His very childhood is assaulted.

I differentiate here between abusive behavior and the traumatic or nontraumatic impact of this behavior. Sexually abusive behavior involves using a power relationship in order to satisfy the abuser's needs without regard to the needs of the person being abused. By contrast, trauma refers here to the devastating effect sexual abuse usually has on the victim. It is possible for a child to be abused without suffering severe symptoms of trauma. Behavior that is abusive and betraying may therefore in some cases not be traumatic to the victim. In these relatively rare situations, a boy who has been sexually abused may not feel traumatized, particularly if he is past puberty, if the abuser is the same gender as the boy's sexual object choice (whether same or opposite sex), and if the abuse was not violent or otherwise obviously coercive. However, the nontraumatic impact on the victim does not make the behavior itself less abusive. The adult is acting to alleviate some sort of internal psychological pressure. However he rationalizes his behavior, he is not acting in the interests and needs of the child, who in most cases is better served by not being sexual in an "adult" way.

Some boys who seem willing to engage in sex at the time, or who even appear to welcome it, may nevertheless suffer traumatic responses from their sexual exploitation.

An adult has no way of knowing whether a specific boy will be traumatized by a sexual experience. For example, Abe was a gay man who as a boy was locked into a relationship with his narcissistic mother that was simultaneously sexually overstimulating and verbally abusive. By age twelve, he was regularly looking to be picked up by older men. Many of these men were interpersonally cold and hurtful to Abe during sexual encounters. Yet at the time he felt good about being chosen by them. It did not occur to him until he was in his fifties that he had perpetuated with them a pattern of being exploited and abused, and that they had been pedophiles who took advantage of his neediness, an interpersonal pattern he had continued throughout his adult life.

Gay men have occasionally asserted -- sometimes convincingly -- that they were not hurt by premature sexual experiences with men. Far more often, however, as in Abe's case, there are both subtle and obvious negative sequelae. The possibility of trauma is therefore always present. Since it is not possible for an adult to know whether a set of behaviors will be traumatic to a boy, I believe that an adult's sexual behavior with a child is exploitative and abusive even if in a particular case the results turn out to be benign and/or nontraumatic.

We have to be very careful when considering this issue, as gay boys are likely to think of premature sex as "sexual initiation." Later on, as men, they may continue to think of their early sexual experience as positive, and not connect it to a whole range of symptomatology often associated with sexual abuse histories. These may include social isolation, nonintimate relationships, sexual dysfunction, dissociative episodes, secrecy, shame, emotional and behavioral constriction, suicidality, inability to control rage, and compulsive behaviors like drug addiction, alcoholism, gambling, overeating, and sexual

compulsivity. Such symptoms are more likely to be present in men with histories of premature sexual activity who come for treatment -- even those who do not consider sexual abuse to be a problem -- than in nonabused men who enter psychotherapy.

Nevertheless, if a man claims that premature sex that took place in an abusive situation was not traumatic, or even claims that it was desired by him, this must be accepted as a possibility. At the same time, the therapist should continue to listen for other, less conscious reactions. For instance, the therapist should evaluate whether the patient has an exaggerated capacity for denial and a consequent inability to appraise realistically the effects of abusive behavior. Likewise, the therapist and the abused man need to look at how the man's life is going, assessing, for example, whether on some level there are repetitions of abusive patterns in his current relationships, and judging whether there is a general emotional sparseness and constriction in his life arising from deprivations that accompanied the betrayal. Even if we accept the man's positive or neutral feelings about the experience and his belief that the outcome was benign or positive, the therapist may need to help him come to terms with the feelings that he was exploited.

Encoding sexual victimization by a man may be especially complicated because being involved in erotic same-sex behavior may itself be experienced as shameful, and may give cause for others to consider the boy himself depraved or wanton. Wright (1995) describes how a thirteen-year-old boy, not a hustler, was arrested along with the adult man who was having sex with him. Instead of being treated as a victim of a crime, however, the boy was himself charged with sexual immorality. This makes sense only if we believe the socialized masculine gender norm that boys, whether gay or straight, are

in charge of themselves, sexually and otherwise, and therefore are totally responsible for all their actions.

Consider Owen, who came to treatment in his retirement years. He was a man with complex reactions to his homosexuality, to being exploited by his family, and to his sexual betrayal by an older man throughout his adolescence. The complexities of these experiences led him to believe for the rest of his life that he had not been sexually abused, even though he freely acknowledged that if he were to hear of a child going through experiences identical to his own, he would try to protect the child from them.

Owen grew up in a family whose roots in its Midwestern community went back many decades before his birth. His family was respectable and hardworking, though never wealthy. Indeed, during Owen's formative years in the Great Depression they were quite poor, although never in an absolutely disastrous financial situation. The oldest of six, Owen was raised with a strong sense of duty to his family, and in particular was given considerable responsibility for his younger siblings. This became more pronounced when a younger sister became an invalid for several years due to a life-threatening debilitating disease requiring frequent hospitalizations and constant, special care.

Owen's interest in other boys was well established by age eight, when he was involved over a period of time in consensual sex play with a ten-year-old friend. At age twelve, Owen began a long-term "affair," as he called it, with Calvin, a twenty-nine-year-old man. Calvin was a man of some wealth, a member of the town's most prominent family. He openly courted Owen, though the sexual nature of this courtship seems not to have been apparent to others, and showered him and his family with various gifts and

favors. He was a constant visitor in Owen's home. He owned a car, something of a rarity in the town at that time, and willingly gave rides to various members of the family. Owen recalled his father requesting him to ask Calvin if the father could use the car, so it appears that the specialness of the relationship between Owen and Calvin was clear and openly acknowledged. Owen was ashamed of having to ask Calvin to do such favors for his family, but only in therapy nearly sixty years later did he begin to think about how the family used him to get what they needed from Calvin. Owen's father once asked him if Calvin ever did anything with Owen that "he shouldn't." Owen quickly answered "No," and the question was never brought up again, even when Calvin took the family on vacations at his own expense and shared a room (and bed) with Owen while the rest of the family shared another room.

When Owen went away to college, the sexuality in the relationship with Calvin ended at Owen's request, though a friendship continued until Calvin's death. After Owen married, Calvin also married, and even asked Owen to be his best man. Owen declined because he was afraid that somehow people would know that he and Calvin had been sexually involved if he filled this role (see below for a discussion of the self-discordant nature of Owen's homosexuality). Calvin later had children of his own, and only in his treatment with me did Owen begin to wonder whether Calvin had abused his own children.

It was in the context of our exploring Owen's attitude toward his homosexuality that he told me about his "affair" with Calvin. Owen never considered the relationship to have been abusive, even though, as stated earlier, he acknowledged that if he heard about such a relationship between a twelve-year-old boy and a twenty-nine-year-old man he

would feel it was inappropriate and exploitative. But he maintained that there was no abuse from Calvin because Owen knew how interested he was in sex with men and with Calvin. Owen insisted that since he had always loved sex and was delighted to be sought out as a sexual partner by nearly any man, he could not have been abused by Calvin. Equally important, and not unrelated, Calvin was very loving in manner to Owen and emotionally supportive in a variety of ways. This support was largely lacking elsewhere in Owen's life, where he was expected to nurture his younger siblings while much of the parental attention was focused on his dangerously ill sister. In addition, for many years Calvin was the only person Owen knew who seemed content about his homosexuality.

It was almost an afterthought for Owen that he never felt he loved Calvin, and was far more interested in boys his own age. That Calvin loved him was sufficient for them to have a six-year "affair." This seems to be primarily related to Owen's inner sense, which lasted all his life, of being homely and perhaps unlovable. He experienced himself simultaneously as highly sexual but unattractive, and learned that sexualized responses from men, starting with Calvin, ultimately made him feel both loved and sexually fulfilled. He therefore could not imagine that such attentions could be abusive.

### The Fear That Sexual Abuse Turns a Boy Gay

A boy like Owen, with an early consciousness of being gay, may welcome aspects of his sexual experience with male predators, especially if he has felt isolated and freakish in relation to his sexual desire. This attitude is discussed more fully below. On the other hand, such a boy may feel hurried into considering himself gay. For boys like



this, there are complicated questions about their victimization beyond those heterosexual boys might ask themselves. Such questions might include, "Did I ask for it? Was my interest in men so obvious? Did I really want it? If I found it exciting does that mean it was not a molestation?" and, finally, "Is this why I'm gay?"

Any boy growing up gay in our society is likely to endure painful psychological and social struggles as he comes to understand his orientation and deal with people's reactions to it. In reacting to these struggles, he will probably go through a period of wondering about how he came to be homosexual. At such a time, he will look everywhere for an answer to the question "Why am I gay?" And, if he has been sexually abused by a man, it is easy for him to "blame" his sexual orientation on the abuse.

Many boys or young men who have been sexually abused share the commonplace view that sexual abuse by a man makes a boy gay. Beau, for example, took it as a matter of course that any man sexually abused in childhood was molested by men, as he had been, and grew up to be gay, as he had. He was astonished to hear that some men in the group for sexually abused men he was joining considered themselves straight and that some (not always the same ones) had been abused by women.

Paradoxically, however, a young gay man abused by a woman in childhood may use the reverse logic to account for his homosexuality. In that case, he may assume that fearful reactions to his female abuser generalized to all women, and made him later turn to men for sexual pleasure. Thus, whether the abuser is male or female, the betrayal complicates how the homosexually-oriented victim deals with being gay, and he may view abuse as the origin of his orientation.

But if we were to assume sexual orientation is changed or directed by sexual

abuse, similar logic could be applied to heterosexual men. Thus, straight men abused by women would think their early sexual experience with women turned them heterosexual. If abused by men, they might assume that fears of men made them turn to women. But heterosexual men do not seem to consider these possibilities, nor is there any reason for them to do so. By the same token, there is no reason for gay men to believe sexual abuse caused their orientation.

Note that I am talking here about how the individual encodes experiences that coincide in his life. A boy or man knows he has been sexually abused and also knows he is attracted to men. As he puts together this knowledge, he is likely to add a causality between the two that is in fact logically specious. Interestingly, this conflict seems to get resolved for many sexually abused gay men by their middle to late twenties. Most gay men I have seen at this age no longer link their orientation to sexual abuse, a finding also reported by Lew (1988, 1993) and Gonsiorek (1993, as cited in Mendel, 1995).

Is there indeed a link between sexual molestation and subsequent predominant sexual orientation? As Mendel (1995) says, “The relationship between factors associated with childhood sexual abuse and sexual orientation is complex and controversial” (p. 169). In discussing the higher incidence of childhood sexual abuse among homosexual men, Finkelhor (1981, 1984) considers the possibility that boys growing up to be gay are more likely to be vulnerable to sexual victimization, but he favors the explanation that abuse fostered the homosexuality. This is contradicted, however, by the fact that most researchers believe predominant sexual orientation is established before latency, while most sexual abuse of boys occurs later (Mendel, 1995). Nor does it explain Simari and Baskin’s (1982) finding that most of the abused gay men they studied

had a clear sense of a homosexual orientation before their abuse or incest. I will return to the issue of gay boys being especially vulnerable to sexual abuse later in this paper.

The sexual confusion and homophobia seen in boys who were sexually abused by men is also discussed by Bolton et al. (1989). They conclude that there is no reason to believe that sexual abuse alone fundamentally changes or shapes sexual orientation, despite the conventional wisdom that premature sexual activity with a man can “turn” a boy homosexual. Like Lew (1988, 1993), Bolton et al. (1989), Gonsiorek (1993, as cited in Mendel, 1995), and Rosenberg (1995), my clinical impression is that sexual orientation is nearly always determined for reasons other than premature sexual activity. On the other hand, it is not at all uncommon for a straight man who suffered same-sex abuse to go through a period of sexual acting out with men, sometimes in a compulsive way, while he struggles to answer for himself whether the abuse either means he was always gay or turned him gay. A man named Andreas, for example, at one point in his thirties experimented sexually with men because of the numbness he felt during sex with his wife. Eventually, he decided he had even less interest in sex with men than in sex with women.

Consider several other men whose boyhood sexual abuse by men seemed not to affect their predominantly heterosexual orientation, although their capacity to relate intimately was often compromised: Ezra was a socially shy and sexually inhibited heterosexual man; as a child, he had been lured to a wooded area by a neighborhood teenager who masturbated on his bare chest. Harris was repeatedly abused by his father; as an adult, he was sexually interested in women, often picking them up for one-night stands but unable for years to be available for a relationship. In his early teens, Julian

had an ongoing relationship with a priest; as a man, he was troubled by his compulsive, time-wasting interest in pornography, which was always heterosexual in focus. Quinn was abused by his grandfather starting as a preschooler; he grew up to be a heterosexual man who had severe problems with self-esteem and depression. Teo was a heterosexual man who, as a boy, was abused by his godfather for an extended period of time. He had two troubled marriages before meeting the supportive woman who became his third wife. Willem was apparently abused by more than one of his mother's lovers and husbands. He grew up to be a heterosexual man with severe problems of emotional detachment. Zak also grew up heterosexual following horrendous and prolonged emotional, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of his adoptive father.

By way of contrast, Bruno, a single man in his mid-sixties who suffered physical, verbal, and sexual abuse from several sources as a boy, is one of the very few men I have treated whose sexual orientation seemed fundamentally disordered by his reactions to same-sex abuse (a somewhat similar case is discussed by Gilgun and Reiser, 1990). With time, however, it became clear that sexual orientation was not as important in understanding him as much as the issue of his inability to relate sexually to anyone at all.

Bruno came to treatment hoping to discover his sexual orientation so that he could pursue either men or women with a vigor that had eluded him all his life. He had had multiple abuse experiences as a child: His father and brother had been physically abusive. The nuns who had been his teachers had been verbally abusive, and he described them as critical, derisive, terrifying, and cruel. His family doctor engaged in mutual oral sex with him during a physical examination at age twelve, and then told Bruno's parents to bring him back every week, which -- despite his protests -- they did

for three years.

Bruno's multiple abuse experiences left him afraid to expose himself to any possibility of further abuse or ridicule. This was true in all interpersonal situations, but especially in the sexual arena. Bruno enjoyed socializing with women, but in more intimate situations, he was terrified they would make sexual demands on him. He had some mild sexual interest in them but was sure he could not perform adequately and would be subject to ridicule from even the kindest women he knew. He did have homosexual encounters, but he eventually came to understand in treatment that his main interest seemed to be in attracting the other man rather than in having sex with him. While he often followed through and completed sexual acts with men, this appeared to be more out of a wish to placate them than from his own sexual desire. Indeed, as he got older, Bruno found that, more often than not, he would walk away from the other man once he knew the man desired him.

Bruno went through his entire adult life in this manner, only coming into therapy in late middle age, never having had an intimate relationship, uncertain about his sexual orientation. He sometimes thought of himself as "a homosexual who did not enjoy sex with men," and at other times considered himself a closet heterosexual who was afraid to have sex with women. As we explored this area, I felt his experiences with men supplied him with a way of functioning sexually, while his psychological paralysis with women prevented him from acting on the heterosexual impulses he also had. Yet his sexual desire never seemed to center clearly around men, and so I had trouble seeing him as fundamentally, or even predominantly, homosexual. As we clarified Bruno's sense of inadequacy and his feelings about men and women, and to connect both with his abuse

experiences in childhood, it became more and more evident that his ability to relate to anyone sexually was very limited. Indeed, the undeveloped quality of his interpersonal functioning indicated that in many ways he had never reached a level at which mature sexual relating was even possible. Instead, he was stuck at a preadolescent stage of psychosexual development. His repeated traumas in early relationships had left him functionally asexual, disabled in all relationships because of his primeval terror of feeling closely connected to another person. To the extent that he even wanted sexual relationships, the main desire seemed to be to find companionship and have his considerable dependency deprivations assuaged. Sexual orientation was almost beside the point.

### Gay Boys as Targets of Male Abusers

Among men with histories of sexual abuse, homosexually oriented men are more likely than heterosexual men to have had male abusers (Simari and Baskin, 1982; Finkelhor, 1984; Johnson and Shrier, 1985, 1987; Mendel, 1995). On the surface, this supports the common belief that boys having male abusers grow up to be gay. But the reasons gay boys are abused by male predators are tangled and complicated. Sensing themselves as different or “other” than their peers, they may project an air of vulnerability (Lew, 1993). Or they may have developed some awareness of their interest in boys and men, whether conscious or unconscious. And potential sexual predators, whether from inside or outside the family, are skilled at recognizing and taking advantage of such vulnerability or incipient sexual interest. Interestingly, the results of research

investigating whether straight men are more likely than gay men to have had female abusers are not as clear-cut (see Johnson and Shrier, 1985, and Mendel, 1995).

Some boys whose gay orientation is at least partly conscious at the time of their abuse may welcome aspects of the molestation. Many boys in this situation feel very isolated in their developing gay identities. Indeed, they may have no idea that any other boys or men have similar sexual interests. In such a case, the boy may pay far more attention to the escape from this feeling of total isolation than to the abusive aspects of his experience (Myers, 1989). As Uri said about his concurrent abuse and personal devaluation at age thirteen by the twenty-two-year-old brother of his best friend: "I felt such joy discovering that I wasn't the only one who was aroused by men that I didn't care who showed me or how. As far as I was concerned, I had been liberated. I was no longer alone in the world. The sex itself felt good, and up till then having sexual thoughts had always been terrible for me. At the time, I hardly realized how horribly he was treating me -- I didn't care about anything but my relief at not feeling like a total freak any more."

### Gay Bashing as Sexual Abuse

Sometimes when boys developing gay identities are sexually abused, the attack is a direct reaction to the abuser's recognition that the boy is homosexually oriented. This abuse has a different character from incestuous abuse or molestations by pedophiles in that the victimization arises from hatred and prejudice about homosexuality itself. Violent antipathy to homosexuality is common among some heterosexuals. It appears to

represent an attempt at mastery over fears about what is perceived as a threat to both masculinity and heterosexuality. This is especially likely among those who have never evolved beyond the concrete and simplistic views of homosexuality often held by adolescent boys whose sense of their masculine identity is not yet consolidated.

Hatred for “homosexuals,” in such cases, may result in what has come to be known as “gay bashing.” Its virulence can lead to particularly ugly outcomes. Witness the case of Beau, a gay man who suffered multiple abuses and a multiple rape as a teenager. Beau’s effeminate mannerisms appear to have preceded in time any conscious consolidation of his homosexuality. His traumatic introduction to homosexual behavior through a severe gay bashing incident in early adolescence further eroded his already shaky sense of himself.

An introverted boy, small for his age, Beau grew up in a conservative small town whose population included many “rednecks” and members of the religious far right. Both of his parents were well educated. He describes his mother as vicious and verbally abusive and his father as fussy and fastidious, a man who spent time on intricate, isolating hobbies and was passive with his wife and nonresponsive to his son. Beau was often teased for his effeminacy. In addition, on a number of occasions in his preadolescence and teenage years he was groped or otherwise approached sexually by adult married men. On one occasion, he was fondled at his grandmother’s wake by a professional man well known in the community. These incidents led him as an adult to be sneeringly infuriated at what he felt was the common hypocrisy of married men who were regarded as pillars of the community.

As a ninth grader in high school, Beau was anally raped by three student athletes.



They took him under the athletic field bleachers for the assault. An assistant coach passed by and saw what was happening. According to Beau, he said, "I want some of that too," and also raped him. At the time of this violation, Beau had already known he was emotionally drawn to men, but he had only the vaguest sense of what physical acts of sex involved. His rape trauma was therefore particularly profound, since it also served as his introduction to even imagining overt sexuality with men.

School officials knew of the rapes, but never punished the assailants. Indeed, the assistant coach was eventually made head coach at the school. Beau said that when school officials called his father to tell him about the assault -- it is not clear that they conveyed the news that his son had actually been raped -- he told them to send Beau back to class. According to Beau, when he got home that day his mother called him a "little bitch" for having caused so much disruption.

After the rape, Beau became an object of rampant abuse and derision on a daily basis at school. Boys would force him to choose either to fellate them or give them payoff money to leave him alone. Girls knew about this and openly called him a faggot and a sissy. He was miserable, frightened, and endangered until he graduated from high school and went away to college, never to return to his hometown again except for brief visits to his parents.

### Are Male Abusers Gay?

As indicated earlier, the folkloric myth that men who abuse boys are homosexual predators complicates dealing with the belief that abuse turns a boy gay. This myth

particularly extends to pedophiles who abuse large numbers of boys over time. While some pedophiles may consider themselves gay, it is far more often true that boys are abused by men who consider themselves to be heterosexual. Some of these men do not really differentiate between boys and girls, choosing whoever is most vulnerable and/or available (Dimock, 1989).

Groth and Oliveri (1989) studied sexual victimizers of children, focusing on pedophiles rather than incest offenders. They divide abusers into three categories: First, there are those with an exclusive fixation on children. Some of these are only interested in boys, some are only interested in girls, and some are interested in both or do not discriminate between boys and girls. Second are those with a nonexclusive fixation. While primarily drawn to children, they have a secondary interest in adults. A third category of abusers includes those whose pedophilia constitutes a regression. They are primarily oriented to adults, but during some periods of their lives they regress and are drawn to children.

Groth and Oliveri report that if homosexuality is defined as being primarily oriented to adult men, then there are virtually no homosexual pedophiles. Among over 3,000 offenders they studied, they did not encounter a single man who had regressed from an orientation to adult men to an orientation to children. On the contrary, the men they studied who were nonexclusively fixated on children or who regressed from an adult orientation universally described themselves as heterosexual in their orientation toward adults, and indeed were usually homophobic (similar findings are reported by Jenny, Roesler, and Poyer, 1994).

Pedophiles preying on boy victims often report that they are uninterested in or

repulsed by adult homosexual relationships and are attracted to young boys' feminine characteristics and absence of such secondary sexual characteristics as body hair (Groth and Birnbaum, 1979). This supports the accepted clinical picture of sexual offenders and pedophiles as people who are psychosexually immature and who therefore in some way identify as psychological and psychosexual peers of the children they molest (Groth, 1982; Pescosolido, 1989).

A related view of pedophilia, sexual abuse, and rape is that they are not primarily expressions of sexual desire but rather are abuses of power and expressions of aggression (Burgess and Holstrom, 1979; Groth, 1979; Pescosolido, 1989). This is congruent with the classical Greek concept of sexuality, in which sexual penetration was a means of further establishing the dominance of the penetrator over the person being penetrated (Halperin, 1989).

These are further arguments that in most cases when a man abuses a boy homosexuality is not fundamentally the issue. This is why I use the term "same-sex victimization" rather than "homosexual victimization" to refer to situations where perpetrator and victim are of the same sex (see also Pescosolido, 1989). To talk about "homosexual molestation" or "homosexual incest" implies that homosexuality is what caused the offense, rather than the many complex possible dynamics that are actually associated with child sexual abuse.

### The Intersection of Abuse and Self-Discordant Homosexuality

I have discussed boys who were already moving in some way along a path toward

confirming their homosexuality. What happens to a boy whose homosexuality is unacceptable to him? Many boys developing a homosexual orientation are bewildered by the meaning of their orientation. This confusion can last a lifetime if the boy never comes to terms with his sexuality. Homophobic and heterosexist biases are nearly omnipresent in our culture, although this is less true now than it was even a decade ago. These introjected societal convictions about homosexuality intersect with a man's developing attitudes about sexual abuse. Together, they may complicate a man's views of both his gayness and his abuse history. Sometimes a preoccupation with changing or hiding a gay sexual orientation distracts him from even thinking about the abuse.

Returning to Owen, the boy who was already developing a homosexual orientation and had found at least one other boy with similar sexual interests before his "seduction" by the twenty-nine-year-old Calvin, while apparently certain of his interest in men, Owen had extremely negative feelings about homosexuality, and was sure he would be ostracized by family and friends if he revealed his homosexual interests. Like many men, especially of his generation, he hid his homosexuality throughout most of his life. He sought treatment to "cure" his homosexuality, and apparently in his earlier therapies the focus on changing his orientation superseded any analysis of the meaning of his childhood "affair" with Calvin. Such a focus was common in the psychological treatment of gay men at that time. Yet the subtle effects of his having been exploited by both Calvin and his family, and his willingness to be so exploited, were also central to Owen's psychology. He never felt that his early sexuality with Calvin constituted molestation, but with time he agreed on the importance of analyzing his susceptibility to being manipulated.

Owen initially called me for a consultation two months after walking out of his previous therapist's office in a rage. He had been in treatment with this analyst for most of the previous thirty years, at frequencies of one to three times a week. A major focus in that treatment, and in Owen's life up till then, was his conflicted feelings about his homosexuality.

Even when involved with Calvin as a preadolescent and adolescent, and throughout college and a period in the armed services, Owen maintained and acted on the interest in boys and men he had evinced before meeting Calvin. He fell in love with other men several times. Some of these relationships were with heterosexual friends and were never completely enacted. Others were with more openly willing partners and included sexuality and, at times, living together, though the fact of their being lovers was never public knowledge. Most of these men eventually entered marriages with women, though Owen believed that many of these were basically marriages of convenience, as his own turned out to be. As was common in Owen's generation, these men, like Owen himself, seem to have been profoundly uncomfortable about homosexuality and appeared not to have dealt directly with the issue of whether they were gay. Indeed, for many years Calvin was the only person Owen knew who seemed content with his homosexuality.

Much of Owen's adult life struggle was about defining his sexual identity. He lived a conservative life, sure that his interest in men was pathological and that revealing it, particularly the "wanton" relationship with Calvin, would mean rejection by his family. In his mid-twenties, he married, at her insistence, a woman who accepted his lack of enthusiasm for sex with her. He was recurrently depressed and started to see a

psychiatrist a few years after the marriage. His depression continued and deepened. When he was about thirty, his wife called his psychiatrist, who met with her alone and, with Owen's relieved permission, told her that Owen was "a homosexual." She immediately told Owen that everything was "all right" and she wanted to stay married. Feeling that he could not bear to disappoint her further, Owen agreed. The couple, who remained childless, divorced after twenty-five years when his wife fell in love with another man.

Shortly after his wife learned of his homosexuality, Owen began to work with the classical psychoanalyst he saw for most of the next thirty years. According to Owen, this analyst confirmed his belief that homosexuality is a disease, and they set out to cure Owen of it. In general, Owen said, the analyst interpreted his homosexuality as an expression of anger toward women and maintained that he could get beyond this anger if he worked hard enough in treatment. Owen felt positively in many ways about his work with this analyst, and particularly felt helped during periods of major depression, when medication was effectively used in addition to an intensification of the psychotherapy. But it appears that the relationship with Calvin was never addressed except as a prime example of his early homosexual experience. Its exploitative aspects seem never to have been recognized.

Nor did the efforts to "work through" Owen's "anger toward women" result in any shift in Owen's sexual orientation. He never understood or accepted the idea that he was basically hostile to women. After his divorce, Owen began to live a relatively open gay life, though he never came out to any of his family members. He remained convinced that they did not know about the sexual nature of his relationship with Calvin,

and he felt certain they would be horrified by this knowledge. As a newly single man, he had a few relatively brief but serious relationships with men who seem to have been needy and dependent. In each of these affairs, Owen ultimately felt used by the other man, and the relationships all ended badly. In his treatment, the thrust of the work until the 1990s continued to be an analysis of the lower level of psychic adjustment supposedly represented by his homosexuality.

When Owen was in his early sixties, his analysis apparently shifted gears. He and his analyst began to focus on Owen's accepting his homosexuality and trying to develop a relationship with a man after all. But Owen and the analyst continued to have major ongoing arguments. The analyst said they disagreed "profoundly" about the origins of homosexuality, while Owen began to say more confrontationally that he never felt he had "chosen" one way or another to be gay. In addition, Owen felt he was being treated shabbily by his analyst, who sometimes called Owen several times over the course of a week, or even in a single day, to change appointment times for the convenience of the analyst's schedule. He also became aware of some ethically shady practices the analyst engaged in with regard to insurance billing. During one such argument, Owen left in the middle of a session and never returned.<sup>4</sup>

Two months later, Owen came to see me at the suggestion of a friend. He felt emotionally shaky, depressed, and bereft. Much of the beginning work with me focused on coming to terms with the way he terminated with his previous analyst. Despite my encouragement to do so, he did not feel he could go back and end the relationship more

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<sup>4</sup> It is, of course, difficult to make judgments about a lengthy psychoanalysis on the basis of the reports of a disappointed patient. Nevertheless, Owen's treatment, as he described it, appears to be an example of an analyst using his authority to ally himself with a patient's compliance and convince the patient of the analyst's views about homosexuality. This may change a patient's behavior, but does not address the internal conflicts or confusions a patient may have about his sexual orientation (see Drescher, 1998).

completely. Instead, he used those early sessions with me to articulate the ways he felt his analyst had failed him, his sense of loss over leaving that treatment, his positive connections to his analyst, and the ways he had allowed himself to feel used without confronting his analyst. Also, Owen's deep fears of interpersonal abandonment were delineated as we explored his relationship with his previous analyst. It was only much later that the earlier precursors of these patterns became clear to us both. He had been exploited by Calvin and his parents, and this pattern became the template in his adult life for his relationships with lovers and his analyst.

We also began to approach Owen's internal conflicts about being gay. As he talked about his conviction that he had not chosen to be "homosexual," he realized that I was not arguing with him, as he expected me to. He began to read, with my support, contemporary psychological and psychoanalytic texts in which homosexuality is depathologized. While he felt great relief at finding such validation for his own conscious beliefs, he continued to experience shame about being gay, and was unable to shake completely the internalized heterosexist and homophobic attitudes of a lifetime. In particular, he remained very fearful about revealing his homosexuality to his family or to his many old heterosexual friends. He was unwilling to risk being abandoned by them, even though his conscious belief was that most of them already knew he was gay. Thus, despite a partial amelioration of his shame about his homosexuality, he continued to suffer from internalized homophobic views. These were compounded by internalized shame about having been used sexually by a man as a boy, and having felt erotic pleasure in those early experiences.



### Intimate Relatedness

Whether a man's orientation is homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual, sexual abuse often affects the quality of his sexual relatedness (Rosenberg, 1995). I am referring here to such aspects of sexuality as sadomasochistic fantasies or activities, various erotic obsessions and compulsions, and the capacity for intimacy.

Consider, for example, Jared, a forty-year-old gay man who had never had a long-term relationship. He was abused by a seventeen-year-old neighbor, Kris, for two years starting at age five. From the beginning, Jared, who said he already had a strong sense of being sexually oriented toward men, found the time with Kris exciting; he claimed to have been a willing participant in the sex, which mostly consisted of Jared fellating Kris. Yet as an adult he considered himself to have been sexually abused because of the drastic effects the overall experience had had on his emotional and sexual relationships.

One day, Jared and Kris were nearly discovered having sex in Kris's bedroom. Kris panicked and pushed Jared into a closet. He told Jared to put his clothes on there, then lowered him out the first-floor window and told him to go home. Jared, age seven, wandered around alone for hours, crying. He claimed that for the first time he felt that what they had been doing was wrong. He was ashamed of himself, and was cut off from his relationship with Kris, which stopped abruptly at that point. This shame about sexuality and fear of imminent desertion by a loved one continued into adulthood, when he was involved with a series of much older men to whom he was initially attracted but could not commit.

Another, more insidious result of Jared's experience with Kris had to do with how

it informed Jared's relationship with his own father. When he was a child, Jared's father often walked around the house nude. Jared remembered his father coming in semi-dressed to kiss him good night. Afterward, Jared would cry himself to sleep because his father never attempted to have sex with him. He would sob to himself, "Why won't Daddy love me the way Kris does?" Having learned that sex was an appropriate way to express love, he concluded that he was unlovable to his father because his father did not engage in overt sexual acts with him. As an adult, he has, of course, had to deal with his memories of his father's seductiveness, including the likelihood that the overstimulating relationship with his father made him more receptive to Kris's advances than he might otherwise have been. His difficulty in dealing with these feelings about his father, however, was exacerbated by his experiences with Kris so that he continuously felt unlovable when men did not respond sexually to him. This was true even when he was neither attracted to them himself nor prepared to engage in sex. These feelings also entered into our individual therapeutic work, where he both longed for and feared sexual interest from me.

This transference dilemma was articulated by Lewis, a man who was physically and sexually abused for three years by various members of a family that baby-sat for him from ages three to six. Lewis was an attractive gay man, a recovering alcoholic who had shaved his head in order to look fierce and unapproachable. He was almost totally unable to be physically vulnerable, even with men he knew well and cared about, and had at times thrown lovers across the room during sex if he momentarily felt overpowered by them. When he stopped drinking, he could no longer have sexual relationships at all.

At one point, I said to Lewis that I wanted him to hear from me, even though he

might not ever believe it or fully take it in, that I would never sexually abuse him. I was talking here about frank sexual abuse, not the inevitable abusive countertransference reenactments described by Davies and Frawley (1994) that I have discussed elsewhere (Gartner, 1999). Nevertheless, I took a risk in making this declaration to Lewis; I might be stopping his expressions of fear rather than dealing with the fears themselves. When I made this statement to him, Lewis was silent at first, but then said, "I know I should be relieved to hear that, and I suppose that in some ways I am. But I have to confess to you that my first reaction was to think, 'Why not? Aren't you attracted to me?'"

These vignettes point up that many men who were sexually abused as boys have learned to use sexuality as interpersonal currency. For them, sexualized relating is a way to appease, gratify, and cling to people whose love they both desire and distrust. Therapists, of course, are often included among such people.

Having learned that his sexuality is valuable to others, a sexually abused man may make it the basis for his self esteem. If that happens, sexuality permeates all his interpersonal encounters. Interpersonal closeness often becomes eroticized because sex is the only way for the man to feel intimate (or seemingly intimate). Hungry for interpersonal contact but phobic about it, believing that sexual closeness is his chief opportunity to feel loved but experiencing love as abuse, a sexually abused man who allows himself to be sexual at all often solves his dilemma by engaging in frequent, indiscriminate, and dissociated sexual encounters. These are not free or joyous expressions of hedonistic, lusty sensuality. Rather, they represent a man's imprisonment in an empty behavioral circuit from which he feels there is no exit. Incessantly pursuing sex, he nevertheless achieves very little intimacy. Nonmonogamous sex is not

necessarily bad, but it is often not fully intimate (Glaser, 1998), especially when it involves compulsive seeking after partners. In these situations, a man usually looks for sexual release to allay his anxiety rather than because he feels sexually interested in or aroused by another person. He is momentarily soothed by impersonal expressions of sexuality, much as he might be by other compulsive or addictive behaviors like drinking, taking drugs, or overeating. Yet he does not feel loved once the sex act is concluded. These incidents leave him feeling empty and lonely, while the idea of fully pursuing interpersonal relatedness fills him with a dread of repeating his abuse history.

#### Sexual Orientation Confusion When a Male Abuser is Also Nurturing

When a male abuser is also a source of nurturance and pleasure, the boy's confusion about the implications of the abuse for his sexual orientation is especially painful and bewildering, as Ramon's case illustrates. Ramon was a patient who returned again and again in therapy sessions to his feelings about the neighborhood puppeteer who began abusing him when he was eight. He was particularly vulnerable to victimization at that time because his father had recently deserted the family and his depressed mother had started to leave Ramon to fend for himself when she went out to earn a meager living.

Ramon was initially afraid to voice his internal experience, afraid I would censure his positive feelings about their relationship, afraid that he or I might decide he was gay or bisexual if he put his obsessive thoughts into spoken words. Finally, though, he sputtered that this man had been tender, that he had known how to make Ramon feel

good, that the sex had been sensuous and arousing, and that he never felt pain, even when he had bled. He said, miserably, "It's never been so sweet, so nice with anyone again. What does that mean? Who am I?" I pointed out that with this man he had felt safe and cared for, that he had felt this was the one person who focused on him and was attentive to him at a time when his world was coming apart.

Later in treatment, Ramon revealed ashamedly that when he thought about his experiences with the puppeteer he felt an erotic "tingling" throughout his genital and rectal areas. He then talked about how during the period he had been abused by this man, he woke up every morning waiting for the moment he could go visit the puppeteer and feel his tender lovemaking. He said, "I've been looking for that again ever since. I wish every day I could feel so good. But I don't think I'm gay -- I never look that way at men on the street, and I like being with women. And if I tell anyone, my girlfriend, my friends, how I feel turned on when I think of being with him, they'll think I'm indecent -- they won't take care of me any more."

Ramon thus revealed that, like Bruno (see above), for him a prime motivation for being sexual at all was to feel cared about and to enjoy someone allowing him to be dependent. Ramon said he didn't really want to have sex with the puppeteer or someone like him again, although it was not clear to me whether he was saying this because he meant it or because he was trying to allay his own fears about being homosexual. Either way, he was obsessed with the sensations of safety, nurturance, and eroticism that had accompanied his abuse.

We talked about this many times, and finally arrived at a model for thinking about it that seemed to pacify his intense anxiety. I likened the abuse experience to Ramon's

thumb sucking as a very young child. In both instances, he felt comforted and calmed by the activity. He could remember those feelings with some longing in both cases, and yearn to have them again, but this did not automatically mean he as an adult actually wanted either to suck his thumb or to be penetrated again by a man like the puppeteer. That could be a separate decision for him. Ramon held on to this idea. At one point he actually resolved that to distract himself from his fears of homosexuality he would substitute sucking his thumb for the tingling in his rectal areas when he felt it again. Making this plan seemed to free him considerably, and he reported with relief some receding of his constantly recurring erotic sensations. While he remained confused about his sexual orientation, this confusion no longer interfered in the same way with his day-to-day life.

### Nonsexual Relatedness with Men

I have elsewhere written (Gartner, 1999) about sexually abused men's fears of men in authority and of men who may be sexual predators. For many men, this has generalized to an unconscious belief that they are in constant danger of one kind of victimization or another from other men. This leads them to lead isolated and lonely lives, with few if any same-sex friendships. The wariness and revulsion about being with other men is closely related to the unarticulated fear that victimization has made them into semi-eunuchs whose non-male status will subject them to further humiliation, ridicule, and shame from other men.

Seth was traumatized at age thirteen by a one-time molestation by a man who was

a family friend. He recounted with pain the continual sense of contempt he felt from men in groups. He was therefore phobic about being around men. Yet he desperately needed and longed for a positive experience with other men, never having had the chumship relationships in preadolescence that Sullivan (1953) describes as necessary for same-sex intimacy. He did eventually get such experiences in an all-male group therapy situation. Until then, he was caught up in an escalating and unrelenting cycle with men: he felt vulnerable to them, behaved in ways that probably communicated this vulnerability, then was easily mistreated by them, thus making him feel all the more threatened and insecure.

For example, his job required him to go by car from one venue to another to do his work. One day he discovered that his car was missing from a company parking lot, and the group of men working there seemed to be smiling knowingly at one another when he asked where his car was. Nevertheless, these men, colleagues with whom he worked on a regular basis, all claimed they did not know what happened to his car. He realized they were lying, and tried to treat the situation as a joke, but they started to get nasty, especially when he began to flush and, eventually, to weep in exasperation and helplessness. The men derisively mimicked his crying as he got angrier and angrier, before finally telling him that one of them had lent Seth's car to another worker who needed to take his wife to the hospital. It was not clear to Seth how much of an emergency the situation was, or whether another car might have been available whose owner was there to give permission. Seth was left feeling that once again he had been made a victimized fool by men who considered him odd and unmale. This was a feeling he had had since childhood, particularly because of his interest in solitary and artistic activities and his aversion to team sports; but it was far more pronounced after his sexual

victimization

Not surprisingly, it took an enormous effort for Seth to come to a group therapy for sexually abused men. It was a long time before he could even begin to let down his guard in the group, particularly about his rage toward other men, his accompanying fear of them, his longing to overcome his isolation from them, and his sense of not belonging to any group, particularly groups of men.

### Conclusion

The sexual abuse of boys by men has frequently been misunderstood, both in the professional literature and in the eyes of the lay public. Same-sex abuse is often confused with homosexual orientation, either on the part of the abuser or of the boy being abused. On the one hand, this often leads to fear, shame, and silence, and on the other, to a belief that because a boy has homosexual desires his sexual contact with a man or older boy does not constitute abuse. These reactions complicate how a boy processes traumatic reactions to sexual abuse, and therefore affect that boy's later capacity as a man to heal from the sequelae of that trauma.



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