

[https://wapercyfoundation.org/?page\\_id=1037](https://wapercyfoundation.org/?page_id=1037)

**Steven Angelides, *The Fear of Child Sexuality: Young People, Sex, and Agency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019; 269 pp.)**

This book is a must-read for anyone who recalls themselves growing up sexually during their teenage years. It is also a perfect introduction to anyone wishing to think critically about the topic of youth sexuality in the anglophone context. Steven Angelides, professor at Australia's La Trobe University, has written many extensively researched and theoretically substantive essays in the past. These include his award winning [2004](#) essay *Feminism, Child Sexual Abuse, and the Erasure of Child Sexuality*, and related works such as *The Emergence of the Paedophile in the Late Twentieth Century* ([2005](#)). This book acts much like a "best of," combining and expanding on insights and examples developed throughout the author's corpus.

Given the title, readers could be forgiven for thinking at first glance that Angelides will be discussing fears around the sexuality of toddlers, but the author's focus resides with adolescents and teenagers instead. Indeed, this is one of Angelides's points. In contemporary Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) literature inflected by American standards, "child" typically refers to anyone under 18 years of age, whereas laypersons might hear "child" and erroneously think of prepubescents.

Scholars have been scathingly critical of this development when considered against global and anthropological standards of functionality, with titles such as Helmut Graupner's *The 17-Year-Old Child: An Absurdity of the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century* ([2005](#)). For Angelides: 'the category or axis of age increasingly operates in the West as the definitive, primary marker shaping notions of childhood sexuality and sexual capacity. Age tends to subsume other conventional indices of difference' such as sex, gender, class and race which were more readily acknowledged prior to the 1980s (p. xv). This has the effect of collapsing distinctions between the varying biological, cognitive, and agentic capacities of prepubertal, pubertal, and postpubertal persons.

The book takes readers on a journey from cultural panics around pre-marital sex to more recent controversies surrounding teenage sexting. Pre-marital sex panic is particularly bizarre and eye opening for the modern, Anglophone secular reader who cares less about whether one is married before consummating a union as compared to whether one has contraception handy. It becomes clear that anxiety and fear around youth sexuality proceeded from a discourse conceiving the young as either inherently ignorant of, or indifferent to, any potential risks of engaging in sexual behavior. The chapter makes an apt starting point, as readers are presented with cases of adults imposing their own norms, which tend to clash with those of child subjects if anyone bothers to ask them. The chapter thus develops a point of historical continuity where a tendency to speak for and over the views and experiences of youth, or in Angelides's language, to place children's sexual subjectivity "under erasure," has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Chapter 3 discusses the emergence of the "Child Sexual Abuse" (CSA) discourse in the 1980's, and various issues relating to the erasure of child sexuality. In chapter 4, "Homosexual Pedophilia," Angelides discusses how the figure of the pedophile has been mobilized and transformed from a rather benign figure prior to the 1970s. Since then the pedophile has come to figure omnipresent danger, with "pedophilia" commonly and incorrectly invoked as an action when the term denotes feelings and dispositions. The term has been radically divorced from its etymology "paedo" and "phile," together literally meaning "child lover" / "lover of children," with such feelings being

explicitly borne out in recent research (Martijn et al. [2020](#)). This shift in discourse during the 1980s was not an isolated development. Rather, Angelides delineates how discourse transformed through a huge array of scandals, movements, and discursive strategies. These include both feminist victimology discussed in chapter 3, the anti-pornography movement, and the McMartin Day Care hysteria. Alongside these movements came a vociferous right-wing homophobic backlash spearheaded by Anita Bryant's famous "Save Our Children" and "Protect America's Children" campaigns, which stoked fear by propagandizing the notion that gay men were pedophiles and a threat to young people. Throughout all of this, Angelides shows how discursive strategies and cultural panics function to place teenage sexual subjectivity under erasure. Instead of asking young people and letting them speak for themselves, Angelides argues that sex / moral panic discourses tend to foreclose discussion of their voices, sexuality, and agency, which often conflict with an expansive image of "the child" – a label increasingly mobilized in oversimplified and reductionist narratives that erroneously situate anyone under 18 as innocent of sexual knowledge, desire, or experience.

One of Angelides's key insights is the claim that power is relational. One only has power in relation to other things, human or otherwise, and one cannot exist without being in relation to other things. Thus, no one exists outside of power. Power is not something owned like an object one can wield. As he writes: "Young people of all ages are not positioned outside networks of power, only to become bestowed with 'its force' as they age incrementally. Like all subjects they are inextricably and ceaselessly constituted and reconstituted within networks of power" (pp. 123-124). Rather, the author presents case studies as clear evidence of child subjects actively traversing and negotiating power differentials. To that effect, Angelides forwards a non-exhaustive "multidimensional model of intersubjective power relations" (p. 105) in his chapter on power.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide particularly powerful examples.

"[I]n the way that it happened, you could say I was a predator," [Ben] Dunbar asserted confidently to Liz Hayes in a *60 Minutes* interview two years after the offenses. "I mean, I went after her ... I took my chances. And I just went for it." (p. 128).

Here, Angelides takes time to delineate this particular case of teacher-student sex, it being one of many powerful indictments which present a child sexual subject subverting the idea of children's powerlessness, inability to be sexual, or to self-sexualize. Many of Angelides' examples involve cases of male youth both initiating and engaging sexually with older females, challenging the dominant image of an older male imposing themselves on a young female who remains innocent of sexuality and perennially risky / at risk until reaching a given age threshold. Angelides bolsters the feminist work of scholars such as Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose, Danielle Egan, and Gail Hawkes respectively, to further illustrate how Anglophone discourses around child sexuality have renewed sexist gender and generational stereotypes that essentialize females under a given age as necessarily innocent / asexual, passive and/or non-agentic. Bringing old ideas into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, females are once again cast as mere objects who can only be acted upon, never sexual subjects until they transform on the day of their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Angelides' work bravely challenges these reductive images and discourses.

Angelides' bibliography is extensive and informative for those looking to delve deeper into the subject. His footnotes also contain comments of note. Particularly noteworthy is Angelides' criticism of the scholar Joseph J. Fischel, author of the seminal work *Sex and Harm in the Age of*

*Consent* (2016) which, as outlined by the book's blurb, "cautions against the adoption of consent as our primary determinant of sexual freedom." For instance, in a footnote from Fischel's own book, the author responds to a "Consent Is Sexy poster campaign" slogan: "Sex with consent is sexy. Sex without consent is rape. Respect yourself. Respect your partner." (footnote 33, p. 282).

Fischel writes: "Despite my respect for the ethical impulse of the campaign, it saddles consent with more normativity than it can or should bear. Sex with consent is not always sexy – sometimes it is unpleasant, mediocre, or only slightly better than the nonsexual alternatives of the moment. Sex without consent, legally defined, is not always rape. Consent might be necessary for mutual sexual respect, but certainly not sufficient. It might also be the case that mutually respectful sex dissolves consent as a salient feature of the exchange. BDSM and prostitution contracts aside, the goodness of good sex might be measured by the very degree to which consent is *not* tokenized or detectable as a singular moment of concession or acquiescence." (*Ibid*).

Angelides' concern is Fischel's prescriptions surrounding power. For him, Fischel "does not question normative socio-legal assumptions about power in relationships of so-called dependence and authority" – that is, teacher-student relations. Fischel "therefore accepts the utility of the concept of sovereign power for adjudicating harm and for accurately describing the dynamics of such relationships of so-called dependence and authority. In so doing, although he advocates 'for the creation of adolescents as a discrete class under law,' he also argues for 'tighter regulations around relations of dependence and authority' (24). His argument [...] reiterates the unquestioned assumption that sexual relations between teachers and students are necessarily asymmetrical with regard to power (in favor of the teacher)" (footnote 20, p. 215). If we take the voices and sexuality of child subjects seriously, rather than dismissing or ignoring them when their realities challenge western cultural assumptions, Angelides shows readers that such asymmetry need not be an inevitability.

The major criticism one could have, is precisely that the book does not address prepubertal persons who do not conform to an asexual, innocent ideal. I suspect this is because the subject is already controversial enough when limited to teenagers, and perhaps also that the author is less familiar with literature concerning prepubescents. It should be noted, however, that a relational theory of power has been explored by Naomi Holford et al., in their essay "*What (else) can a kiss do? Theorizing the powerplays in young children's sexual cultures*" (2013). Researchers, anonymously, pseudonymously, or in their own names if brave or socially suicidal enough, might build on Angelides's work by seeing gaps as opportunities. Starting points for exploration could include: Bender & Blau, 1937; Bender & Grugett, 1952, Priscilla Alderson et al.'s research on decision-making and capacity for expression (see Waites, 2005, pp. 22-32), philosophical / theoretical approaches (Leahy, 1988; 1994; 1996; Ehman, 2000; Malón, 2015; O'Carroll, 2018; Kershner, 2001; 2015), research on love (Hatfield et al. 1988), normativity (Frayser, 1994; Friedrich et al. 1998; Rademakers et al. 2000) and development (Graaf and Rademakers, 2006), education (Yates, 1978; Blaise, 2013; Robinson, 2012), and cultural differences (Friedrich et al. 2000; Larsson et al., 2000; Johnston and Deisher, 1973, pp. 324-325; Constantine, 1977).

Further, although Angelides explains that gender norms clearly affect how an experience comes to be understood and responded to, he stops short of explicitly exploring the influence of gendered sexual socialization on the development of traumatogenic symptoms. If feelings of guilt, shame, regret or trauma can be alleviated or expunged through enacting a gendered socialization premised on empowerment that leads child subjects like Ben Dunbar to respond positively and circumvent

potential adverse symptoms, then there is no excuse for failing to take up such questions in further research.

Nevertheless, the book is a cogent, well-researched, and powerful indictment of an Anglophone milieu that increasingly places the child sexual subject under erasure. In the process such a milieu has enacted a conspiracy of silence over young people's identification as consenting agents. It has collapsed distinctions between ages and agentic capacities and wanted and unwanted experiences. As Angelides demonstrates in his chapter on sexting, it's a society where teens are being criminalized, branded as creators and distributors of child pornography for sharing media of themselves with any hint of erotic significance. And, perhaps worse for children placed on the sex offenders' register, it's a discursive regime which has facilitated the expansion of the carceral state, currently burgeoning with non-violent offenders facing the omnipresent threat of indefinite incarceration and readily exploitable as psychiatric patients or cheap labor.

Against this backdrop, it is this reviewer's hope that *The Fear of Child Sexuality* will prove to be what Jane Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001) and *Vibrant Matter* (2010) were to New Materialism. That is, pathbreaking and transformative. The book is a perfect introduction to the fraught and fascinating topic of youth / intergenerational sexualities, and ought to be required reading for anyone who dares to speak with any pretense of knowledge about such issues.