Book Reviews


Reviewed by Bruce Rind, Ph.D.¹

Sex between adults and minors, generally referred to as child sexual abuse (CSA), is widely seen as uniquely psychologically destructive. A vast establishment of social workers, therapists, and law-enforcement is currently dedicated to treating and preventing CSA with a priority that far exceeds related issues (e.g., physical abuse and neglect). Legislators have focused on CSA as a crime in a league of its own, passing community notification and indeterminate involuntary commitment statutes that do not even apply to homicide. Are these beliefs about CSA realistic and responses to it measured or is this a social hysteria? Jenkins, a historian, has done an outstanding job in attempting to answer these questions.

Jenkins begins his book by listing common stereotypes that have grown up around CSA (e.g., it invariably causes lasting damage; it is transmissible from adult to minor like a vampire’s bite; offending is a compulsive pathology resistant to cure). He rushes to add that, even if any of these stereotypes is objectively true, none should be accepted as demonstrated fact because they all developed virtually overnight a quarter century ago from advocacy, not science. He explains this dramatic shift in thinking using the social constructionist framework, wherein modern concepts of sex offences and offenders are viewed as constructed realities reflecting social, political, and ideologically influences. As he notes, the utility of this approach is evident in recent times, the past, and other cultures where conceptions of normal and acceptable sex varied widely according to other prevailing social beliefs and concerns. Jenkins identifies the key players in the current construction: psychiatrists and therapists, women’s groups, moral traditionalists and conservatives, a sensationalizing medical community, and criminal-justice administrators and politicians. He characterizes response to the sex crime problem as a “moral panic,” borrowing from British sociological moral panic theory, which holds that a wave of irrational public fear exists when official reaction is out of all proportion to the actual threat, when “experts” perceive the threat in all but identical terms and speak with one voice of rates, diagnoses, prognoses, and solutions, and when media representations universally stress sudden and dramatic increases in the problem that far exceed sober appraisal. He spends the remaining chapters detailing these panic characteristics, which occurred in three distinct periods in the twentieth century—at the beginning, middle, and end.

In Chapter 2, Jenkins describes the rise and fall of the first moral panic during the “Progressive era” (1890–1934). He notes that morality laws up to the late 1800s forbade, with threat of severe punishment, a wide range of sex acts, because they were regarded as grave sins. Age of consent was generally 10, predicated on protecting economic interests (keeping girls from becoming “damaged goods” with respect to marriage), not psychological health. Following the lead of English moral crusaders, feminists and religious reformers in the 1880s campaigned to raise the age of consent, decrying the trafficking of young girls and spread of venereal disease. Medical writers reformulated sex offending as a biological defect rather than just an act. Legislatures, galvanized by a wave of journalistic accounts of sex crimes and killings, substantially increased ages of consent and introduced castration statutes. This “progress,” Jenkins notes, “included a substantial dose of sexual and moral repression” (p. 45), wherein legislatures passed sweeping laws based on flimsy “science.” Jenkins attributes the decline of this first panic to the fragmenting of political feminism, the discrediting of moral activism due to the Prohibition fiasco, and a shift in media attention to other issues, such as Prohibition gangsterism.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Jenkins describes the second panic—the “age of the sex psychopath” and the sex psychopath statutes (1935–1957). As in the Progressive era, well-publicized sex killings shaped the public image of the sex offender, casting him as violent and a potential child-killer. Media sensationalism was accompanied by law enforcement hyperbole. Psychiatry and psychology gained in numbers and prestige from assisting the government in attacking the “menace,” increasing the medicalization of sex in the process. Legislators profited politically through increasingly aggressive legislation, which proceeded apace despite government commission findings of vast exaggeration of the problem. Sex psychopath

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Sex psychopath legislation continued into the 1960s, but retaining sex offenders even after their sentences expired. "tors" (p. 76), aimed to close the "revolving door," re-

child pornography and "pedophile rings" played in re-

neglect as prescribed by the Mondale Act, had become child abuse establishment, originally physical abuse and "child abuse" (p. 143). By 1977, the chief focus of the issue, creating a sense of national urgency. Legislators re-

sponded, taking the stance that "no policy would be seen as ruinous. This dogma was amplified by moral con-

cepts and rhetoric to frame the issue. CSA became equated with incest, and soon, even in its lesser forms, came to be recognized male "oppression" shifted to incest, using rape con-

venience to psychiatric pronouncements of pathology, seen as artificial by-product of labeling, used by power holders and special interest groups to invent rather than discover deviance; increasing hostil-

ity to psychiatric pronouncements of pathology, seen as ideological and self-serving. In this climate, with greater concerns for individual rights and due process, and a gen-

eral liberalization of sex laws, sex psychopath statutes fell.

In the second half of his book, Jenkins details the third panic—the current one. In Chapter 6, he describes the "child abuse revolution" (1976–1986), showing con-
vincingly that current conceptualizations of sexual abuse are largely social constructions erected by special inter-
est groups. Increased interest in physical abuse led to the 1974 Mondale Act, which funded state programs to curb this problem. Feminist campaigns against rape and associated male “oppression” shifted to incest, using rape con-

cepts and rhetoric to frame the issue. CSA became equated with incest, and soon, even in its lesser forms, came to be seen as ruinous. This dogma was amplified by moral con-

servatives. The media enthusiastically sensationalized the issue, creating a sense of national urgency. Legislators re-

ponded, taking the stance that "no policy would be seen as too severe in combating a vast and unqualifed evil like child abuse" (p. 143). By 1977, the chief focus of the child abuse establishment, originally physical abuse and neglect as prescribed by the Mondale Act, had become CSA.

In Chapter 7, Jenkins discusses the crucial role that child pornography and “pedophile rings” played in re-

defining sexual abuse. The palpability of the former and vividness of the latter gave advocates extra leeway in exagger-
ated claims-making. In Chapter 8, he documents some of the more blatant manifestations of the panic; Satanic ritual abuse in day care, the proliferation of multiple person-

ality disorder diagnoses, and recovered memory therapy. Chapter 9 details the legislative response engendered by these and related manifestations: community notification laws and the revival of sex psychopath statutes, now called sexual predator statutes. As in earlier panics, this response was sparked by notorious sex killings sensationalized by the media. In this atmosphere, a “sex offender, however nonviolent his crime, was felt to cause a far more immedi-
ate menace than the mugger, robber, murderer, confidence trickster, or corporate polluter, who were not subject to like restrictions” (p. 200).

In his final chapter, Jenkins effectively pulls together the three moral panics, coherently summarizing common themes to identify advocates’ motivations in creating and maintaining them. Psychiatrists, therapists, and social workers, often allied with law-enforcement interests, gained considerably in numbers, opportunities, and pres-
tige from the sexual threat. Feminists gained in their cam-
paign because this advanced their more general struggles against perceived victimization and oppression. Politicians benefitted by appealing to constituent sentiments of "law and order" or “protecting the weak.” This issue gave moral conservatives a rock solid front to press for wider morality enforcement. The media enhanced ratings and profitability through their crusading stance.

Inimical to sex panics, Jenkins argues, are counter-
vailing ideologies of libertarianism, sexual freedom and experimentation, and distrust of the state and its agencies—precisely the conditions that obtained in the 1960s and 1970s. He speculates that the current panic will be enduring owing to its meta-narrative power to explain all social ills and because of irreversible social changes: women’s much more influential roles; the institutional-
ization of the child-protection idea in social welfare and psychiatry; law-makers’ bidding war to impose harsher penalties. He concludes by noting the scapegoat status of “predators, psychopaths, and pedophiles,” who repre-
sent “a very minor component” of real threats to children, yet have attracted a vastly disproportionate share of offi-
cial attention simply because they are the easiest targets (p. 238).

Jenkins’ well presented social constructionist appro-
ach offers a fresh perspective on current beliefs and policies concerning CSA. It persuasively challenges the integrity and wisdom of these beliefs and policies, demon-
strating that they have been built on advocacy unstrained by serious concern with objective reality and rational