

Why the Rush to Create Dubious New Sexual Disorders?

[Letter to the Editor]

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The seven published critiques to Blanchard et al.'s (2009) study justifying "hebephilia" as a mental disorder identified numerous scientific flaws.¹ These flaws demonstrate the scientifically suspect nature of the construct. My critique (Franklin, 2009) also addressed the broader implications of creating a formal psychiatric disorder that will be used to justify the civil commitment of sex offenders. In his latest salvo in this debate, Blanchard sidesteps any engagement with the substantive arguments, instead presenting a misshapen little straw man that he then easily demolishes through smoke-and-mirrors statistical machinations.

In Franklin (2009), I mentioned that heterosexual men's sexual attraction to pubescent girls was "evolutionarily adaptive." As Blanchard rightly notes, that term refers to adaptations that enable a species to better survive across time. Scientists regard heterosexual men's preference for younger female partners as one potential reproductive strategy under harsh environmental conditions, such as those of Neanderthal cave dwellers (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; see also Heaton, Lichter, & Amoateng, 1989). My argument here is not with Blanchard's definition of evolutionary adaptation, but rather with both his logic and methods in attempting to rebut my previous critique.

As all students of Darwin know, evolutionary success strategies must be understood on a population-wide basis, not an individual level. Moreover, social scientists generally agree that biological evolution is rarely sufficient to understand human behavior in modern, complex social systems. Thus, to say that a trait may have

¹ For the interested reader, I have created a web page, www.bit.ly/hebephilia, with the citations for Blanchard et al.'s original study and all seven critiques published in *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 38 (3), 2009. The page has links to the publisher's summaries and contact information for each author.

emerged as evolutionarily adaptive in prehistoric times implies nothing of its presence or function on an individual level in contemporary society.

More to the point: Blanchard's new study is far from a scientifically valid debunking of any evolutionary component. One cannot test the theory that consumption of chili pepper -- eaten daily by more than one billion people -- is evolutionarily adaptive simply by locating a convenience sample at a random diet clinic, dividing the patients into groups based on their liking for the spice, and then measuring some putatively related outcome variable such as bouts of food poisoning, presence of ulcers, or level of thrill-seeking temperament (Rozin, 2000).

Ergo, one cannot test whether men's attraction to younger females was at one point evolutionarily adaptive by asking a group of white male patients in 21st-century Canada how many children they have fathered. Since the foundational study is yet unpublished, we know little about Blanchard et al's subject pool or methods. However, from his letter, it appears that -- with the exception of race and sexual orientation -- the study did not control for any of the myriad co-variables that contribute in complex ways to number of offspring. These include (just to name a few) economic status, urbanicity, culture, fertility, women-controlled birth control strategies, periods of incarceration (particularly relevant here, given that sexual contact with young minors is illegal in Canada), and even gender of first-born child. Plunging birth rates in developed nations alone create a low ceiling effect for this outcome variable; without reported population norms we cannot properly interpret the findings.

Ultimately, the fertility of so-called hebephiles is a red herring that has no relevance to either the possible evolutionary basis for the attraction, or to the broader

scientific issues raised in the seven critiques to Blanchard et al's 2009 study. The essential question remains: Why the urgency to create this new mental disorder, in the absence of independent cross-validation? Mental illness is not defined by the legality and/or morality of a behavior, nor should it be. Yet forensic experts retained by prosecutors have seized upon hebephilia and two similarly problematic proposed diagnoses – paraphilic coercive disorder and hypersexuality – as pretextual tools to civilly incapacitate men with no true psychiatric disorders. In the absence of civil commitment laws, it is doubtful that this pell-mell rush to pathologize would be meeting such an enthusiastic reception.

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