Spanking and the corporal punishment of children: The sexual story

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Introduction

In the late 1970s there was a report in the British tabloid press that a manufacturer of school canes or straps (memory is uncertain after 25 years) was apparently indignant that his products were being sold in London sex shops, where they were favoured by “perverts”. The tone of the article comprised that mixture of moral outrage and titillation with which those familiar with the media will be well acquainted. With the cover of indignation, readers are allowed vicarious excitement and sexual thrill (Conrad, 1999). In the very different social climate of the early 21 century, it is hard to imagine this story being either told or received in quite the same way. Even in the UK (the last western European country to outlaw school corporal punishment), beating has been banned in all schools, and the recognition that spanking is for many people a sexual practice is widespread and would no longer count as news. Yet there remains at least a sense in which the story still works, if only in a diluted form. We have not gone all the way in seeing any sexual activity between consenting adults as acceptable, and smacking children is generally seen as an unequivocally non-sexual act and as regrettably necessary or even a good thing (McGillivray, 1997). Debates on corporal punishment still generate an extraordinary amount of heat on the part of those insisting on its legitimacy. It is even claimed that it is a religious duty – witness the christian parents in the recent BBC documentary “A Good Smack?” (2002) who state that “the Bible . . . does sanction smacking within a loving family environment”. The Labour Government has refused to extend to children that freedom from assault that all adults have, and have even famously defended the value of “loving smacks” (Gittens, 1998).

In this article, we want to examine the way in which violence towards children still appears to be more acceptable than consensual adult sexual activity. We will contend that this paradox rests on an objectivist epistem-
ology and an associated discourse of the natural. By this we mean that human knowledge is assumed to be an exercise in serial discovery, one that leads to nature giving up its secrets as it is subjected to the relentless inquiry of science. In the social sciences, it is human nature that is supposed to be the object of inquiry. In contrast to this “objectivism”, we will advocate a constructionist or constructivist stance (we will use the former term to code this whole family of approaches). Chiari and Nuzzo (1996) argue that a vital feature of constructionism is that it transcends the split between subject and object, or between the person and their world, asserting that knowledge is made as well as found. We will begin by elaborating the constructionist position, before highlighting the construction of sexual meaning in spanking. We will then contend that children are certainly able to construe sexual meaning. Finally, we will examine the reasons why the sexualization of corporal punishment is not considered in most academic and lay discussions of the topic, even by those opposed to its use. Our conclusion is that the contemporary elaboration of the sexual interpretation of spanking serves to underline the importance of its abolition as a punishment in all aspects of life.

The construction of sexual meaning

The Enlightenment in 17th century Europe marked the launch of modern science. The work of Galileo and Newton changed the way that people saw themselves in relation to the world. The radical questioning of scientific observation and experiment shook the foundations of Christian dogma that had preceded it. As the scientific project sought laws that governed the physical world, the comfortable notion that a humankind created in the image of God was at the centre of the universe could no longer be maintained. The power of science has since been repeatedly underlined by discoveries that have produced prediction and control of various aspects of the natural world. Modern existence is both longer and less painful as a result and the pragmatic value of the natural science project is not in doubt, although many still express doubts as to whether natural science can really ever conquer and control the world in the ways it often claims to be able to do. However, the importing of its assumptions and methodology into the social sciences has been much more problematic. The hallmark of natural science inquiry is a clear separation of subject and object; the observer necessarily adopts a disinterested and detached stance from the world. Events in the world are seen as independent of our constructions of them, and causal relationships are sought. Discovery is the aim, while the constructions and meanings of the observer are irrelevant at best and impediments at worst. But in the social sciences, where the object