Psychologists Seek to Quell Sex Furor

The American Psychological Association (APA) wants help from the scientific community to quell a political controversy over a study published in one of its most prominent journals that has been depicted as condoning sex between children and adults.

Last July psychologist Bruce Rind, a part-time faculty member at Philadelphia's Temple University, and two colleagues published, in the APA's *Psychological Bulletin*, a meta-analysis of 49 studies with college students that concluded that childhood sexual abuse (including exhibitionism and consensual relationships with adults) is not always damaging to the child. The study, unnoticed for months by most people outside the North American Man/Boy Love Association, became a national cause among conservative groups after an irate father complained to radio talk show psychologist Laura Schlessinger. The furor peaked last week when the House of Representatives passed a resolution "rejecting the notion that sex between adults and children is positive."

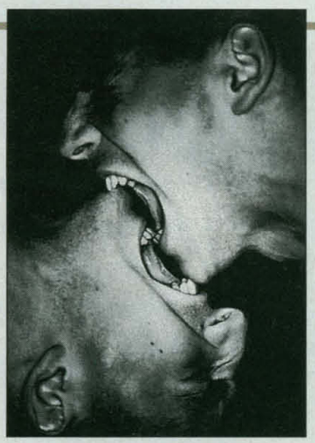
The APA has been strenuously attempting to dissociate itself from the Rind paper. In May it issued a formal "resolution opposing child abuse," followed by a request to the AAAS (publisher of *Science*) program on Scientific Freedom, Responsibility and Law for an "independent expert evaluation" of the sex article. It has also pledged to remind its journal editors to "fully consider the social policy implications of articles on controversial topics." Richard McCarty, head of APA's science directorate, says this is not an attempt at censorship but simply means the APA wants a "heads up" if something controversial is about to be published.

Although some psychologists think the APA has made the best of a bad situation, others say it is overreacting to political pressure. Psychologist Edward Katkin of the State University of New York, Stony Brook, calls APA's response to congressional complaints "groveling and cowardly."

The AAAS is expected to make a decision this week on whether to accept the APA assignment. If it does, says program director Mark Frankel, "it will be a substantial and very complex undertaking."

Seeing Double

Identical twins are very trendy these days—after all, they're just like clones. And twins have been subjected to some very trendy photography (this picture is called "kiss:bite") for an exhibit opening this week at the Wellcome Trust's Two10 Gallery in London. The photos are by David Teplica, a cosmetic surgeon who says, according to the Wellcome press release: "It's amazing to ... see things like two 12-year-old [identical twin] girls whose acne has erupted in exactly the same spot on the nose." The exhibit, which runs through 24 September, is timed to coincide with a new BBC1 series on twins.



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Amateurs Debunk "Doomsday" Asteroid

If the world comes to an end in 2044, it won't be because of asteroid 1999 AN_{10}, a kilometer-wide rock that caused a media sensation earlier this year (*Science*, 23 April, p. 565). Thanks to the diligence of two German amateurs, the world can relax: The "doomsday asteroid" appears to be harmless.

Initial calculations by astronomers at the University of Pisa in Italy hinted at a slim chance that the rock, discovered in January, would slam into Earth in 2039. In May, based on photos by an Australian amateur astronomer, NASA astronomers predicted a 1 in 500,000 chance of an impact in 2044.

From their home in Berlin, Arno Gnädig and Andreas Doppler recently searched through a set of plates from the Digital Sky Survey, obtained at Palomar Observatory in California in the 1950s, which have been digitized and put on the Internet. On 11 July they discovered the asteroid's trail (the faint streak in the photo) on a plate dated 26 January 1955. They reported their find to the Minor Planet Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where astronomers Brian Marsden and Gareth Williams used it to calculate a new orbit. The upshot: Calculations good through 2076 show that 1999 AN_{10} doesn't pose a threat. "We were a little bit surprised," says Marsden. Indeed, NASA astronomers recently did an automated search of the Palomar plates and came up with nothing.

Building Theories on Sand

French scientists have used the low-gravity atmosphere of a sounding rocket to stage an experiment with sandlike particles that apparently mimics the way planets are formed.

The behavior of granular material like sand or stardust in space, when subjected to vibration, has been difficult to study in the lab because of gravity. Scientists from several French laboratories therefore have been doing experiments aboard a rocket. They put different numbers of 0.3-mm bronze "spherules" into each of three 1-cubic-centimeter cells. As the rocket curved back toward Earth, it spent 200 seconds in low gravity. This enabled researchers to do nine short experiments, shaking the cells and watching the granules with a tiny camera.

In the two cells with the highest densities of spherules, a stable cluster of particles formed in the middle; this didn't occur in the cell with the lowest density, the scientists report in the 12 July *Physical Review Letters*. Physicist Stéphan Fauve of the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris explains that the vibrations trigger collisions, which cause the particles to slow down. In a high-density situation, there will be spontaneous local fluctuations where particle collisions and slowdowns eventually result in stable clusters.

A similar phenomenon may explain how the dust swirling around young stars coalesces into planets, says astronomer Larry Esposito of the University of Colorado, Boulder. "Potentially, we can take results of [Fauve's] experiments and use them to prepare models of ring dynamics and the origin of planetary systems," he says.