

# B4QR

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## Introduction by Allen Bishop, Editor-in-Chief

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Welcome to the fourth issue of the third volume of B4QR. This Autumn edition, which completes the third year of our journal's existence, primarily focuses on stigmatizing public attitudes towards MAPs. Four or our six reviewed articles address this theme, which plays a key role in the mental health struggles faced by so many MAPs.

Our first two articles are qualitative, theme-based analyses of Internet comments from the general population on MAP-related online content. Nematy et al. (2023) reviewed over one thousand comments from different YouTube videos involving presentations by credentialed experts on the topic of attraction to minors. The authors generated several themes ranging from outright hate to compassionate support for minor-attracted people. The other article, by Jimenez-Arista and Caldera (2023), is very similar in design but has two key differences with the first article: the public comments were taken from blogs and forums (rather than YouTube), and the retrieved content specifically concerned *adolescent* MAPs (rather than MAPs in general). The thematic analysis of the 67 selected posts also revealed a wide range of attitudes about young MAPs that could be found in the general population.

The other two articles similarly analyze public attitudes towards MAPs, but they do so by conducting their own studies with participants from the general population recruited online. Lawrence and Willis (2023) recruited 460 New Zealanders and randomly assigned them to one of two videos: an informative, factual video about MAPs, and a more personal, humanizing one presenting the daily experiences of MAPs. Nearly half of the participants said that their views about MAPs were not changed by the video (for both types), but the humanizing video had a generally more positive influence on individuals than the informative one. Maroño et al. (2023) conducted their own study with the goal of testing a very unusual hypothesis, which they call the "terror management" interpretation of MAP stigmatizing attitudes. The core idea is that the intensity of negative attitudes towards MAPs can be explained by the fact that the public image of "pedophiles" tends to "threaten a person's sense of symbolic immortality (the idea that life continues after death through offspring)". Their study, which presented to participants different vignettes comparing MAPs to other groups (people with schizophrenia and people with homicidal ideations), lended support to their hypothesis.

Our last two reviewed articles are theoretical explorations of distinct MAP-related topics. Lievesley et al. (2023) propose a research agenda on fantasy/fictional sexual material use by MAPs, with the goal of better understanding the impact of such material on the well-being of its consumers, as well as distinguishing between "risk-enhancing" and "protective" factors associated with their

consumption. Swaminath et al. (2023) develop a theoretical framework of the etiology of attraction to children. In a very old-school behaviorist fashion, the authors hypothesize that pedophilia and child sexual abuse – which they sadly tend to use interchangeably – are “learned behaviors” that result from classical conditioning processes.

Following our reviews are the *Author Responses* and *Meet the New Generation* sections. Amy Lawrence offers a brief response to our review in this issue of her article co-authored with Gwenda Willis, providing context for certain terminological choices in their article that were criticized in our review. We conclude with our honored young scholar, Agatha Melexina Chronos, a PhD Research Fellow at the University of Bergen, Norway, whose dissertation project focuses on the treatment needs and experiences of minor-attracted individuals. Agatha is also a member of the B4QR reviewing team.

We hope you find this issue on public attitudes towards MAPs informative and engaging.

Allen Bishop  
B4U-ACT Science Director  
B4QR Editor-in-Chief

## Reviewed Publications

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### **YouTube Commenters' Discourse of Paedophilia: A Qualitative Social Media Analysis**

Nematy, Z., Flynn, S., McCarthy-Jones, S. (2023)

*Sexuality & Culture*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-023-10117-8>

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Nematy et al.'s (2023) article is a qualitative examination of public perceptions towards minor-attracted people, conducted by analyzing public comments on YouTube videos provided by credentialed experts on the topic of attraction to minors. The authors generated several themes ranging from outright hate to compassionate support for minor-attracted people.

The introduction provides an overview of the important distinction between attraction to minors and child sexual abuse. The authors highlight two main factors that have historically contributed to their conflation: sampling bias within research as well as media portrayal of the topic. Regarding the first factor, the authors note that “[u]ntil the last decade, almost all studies about paedophilia relied on forensic populations.” As for the second factor, the authors mention that within the media, terms such as “pedophilia” and “child sexual abuse” are constantly used interchangeably. The introduction also reviews past quantitative studies that have focused on capturing public opinion of minor-attracted people, while highlighting the lack of qualitative studies in this area. The authors then

describe their own approach and goal, which is to examine public perceptions of minor-attracted people by attending to public comments posted in the comment sections of YouTube videos of scholars/practitioners in the fields of pedophilia and/or sexual offending.

The YouTube videos selected by Nematy et al. ranged from 5 to 28 minutes and were all produced for a general audience. All videos involved an expert presentation of the topic, and one of the videos included a first-person perspective of a minor-attracted person along with the expert opinion. Another video included a short narrative written by a minor-attracted person, but the narrative was read by the expert in the video.

A total of seven videos were selected for analysis. The top 100 comments from these seven videos were analyzed; all comments were included in videos containing less than 100 comments. For videos with more than 100 comments, additional comments were included until the authors believed they had “reached saturation”, which they define as “as a

point when nothing new appears in the data.”<sup>1</sup> This data collection strategy resulted in a total of 1234 comments for analysis. The authors present a total of four key themes that emerged for their analysis of these comments: “Haters”, “Critics”, “Fence-sitters”, and “Supporters.” Among these, eight subthemes (described below) were also identified, two for each key theme.

The first of the key themes, “Haters”, highlighted variations of hate and anger towards minor-attracted people within two subthemes, “Violent haters” and “Sophisticated haters”. The “Violent haters” subtheme consisted of comments containing violent, explicit, and graphic content towards minor-attracted people, negating sympathy and help while often denying the existence of MAPs who do not commit sex crimes. The other subtheme, “Sophisticated haters”, consisted of commenters harboring hate but attempting to justify or rationalize these attitudes. The authors note that the comments in this category “typically suffered from misinformation, implausible comparisons, or incorrect premises,” giving as an example a commentator who argued that attraction to children is a choice by claiming that it is “an acquired taste, just like doing drugs.” Although not equally violent, both “Violent haters” and “Sophisticated haters” expressed punitive attitudes, with the less-violent haters tending to “demand incapacitation measures such as long-term

incarceration or civil confinement as strategies to control” all minor-attracted people.

The second key theme, “Critics”, was divided into two subthemes, with the first being “Victim erasure”. This subtheme is mainly characterized by a concern that victims of child sexual abuse would be erased if general public attitudes shifted to a more factual and understanding approach to attraction to minors. Comments in this category tended to present a false dichotomy between the goals of abuse prevention and destigmatization of attraction to minors, claiming for instance: “Instead of caring about victims, these scientists are part of the problem!” The second subtheme, “Not a sexual orientation”, contained comments disagreeing or attempting to correct the experts by stating that attraction to minors is not an orientation, and that conceptualizing it as such has harmful consequences. Arguments to that end could take different forms, but one example given by the authors is: “Paedophilia is related to age, not gender; therefore, it cannot be a sexual orientation”.

The third key theme, “Fence-sitters”, was also separated into two subthemes. The first, “Ambivalent”, contained comments that included avoidance or hesitation surrounding the topic. A typical ambivalent commentator described the video they had just seen as “really uncomfortable yet informative.” The second subtheme, “Dispassionate arguers”, contained comments that refrained from

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<sup>1</sup> The authors mention the existence of at least four models of saturation, and they cite Saunders et al. (2018), but they do not further clarify their selection procedure beyond their remarks about “nothing new” appearing in the data.

expressing a concrete stance on the topic, yet frequently engaged other commenters in discussion. For instance, one such commentator mentioned: “I have a cornerstone belief that most desires that are within us are or had been functional to survive. But the attraction to a kid seems like an enigma.”

The final key theme of the study, “Support”, consisted of the subthemes “Implicit confirmers” and “Compassionate support”. Comments of the first type provided indirect endorsement of the information provided by the expert, such as: “If we could be persecuted for our thoughts, we’d all be in trouble.” In contrast, comments included in the “Compassionate support” subtheme directly supported the information provided by the expert, as well as expressed support and sympathy towards minor-attracted people. These were people who presented themselves as MAP allies, with varying words of encouragement, such as:

*“My thoughts are with those non-offending teenagers and adults out there. I have massive respect for you. Fight the good fight, guys”;*

*“I hope this video helps many adults and children with this condition to understand that they are not alone and that we care about them. Never give up”;*

*“They spend their whole lives repressing their most fundamental desires, something the rest of us don’t have to do, because they know not doing so would*

*cause harm to others. I think it’s incredibly brave of them”.*

While these compassionate supporters showed empathy towards MAPs who did not act sexually with children, they often expressed drastically different feelings towards MAPs who had committed sex crimes, contrasting (as the authors describe) “the evil child sex offenders” with the “desperate, innocent non-offending” minor-attracted person. It is interesting that even comments falling in the most supportive theme sometimes contained elements of hate towards a subgroup of MAPs.

The topics of hate and violence are explored at length by the authors in the discussion section. Citing Beck’s (1999) conceptualization of hate, they argue that “people develop hate when they feel threatened by a perceived image of the perpetrator, which is usually distorted by cognitive biases such as over-generalisation. This distorted image of the perpetrator takes the place of the real person and creates a category of ‘enemy’”. While such overgeneralizations are undeniably present in comments from the first “Haters” theme, which tend to reduce MAPs to a single (evil) characteristic, one finds them in the more sympathetic commentators as well, whose generalizations take the form of the binary scheme described above.

The main strength of this article is the great care and respect with which the authors address its



controversial topic. There is a clear concern to avoid stigmatizing language and to even denounce some of the unfounded generalizations about the MAP community found in the analyzed comments. The only terminological choice that can be questioned is the use of the expression “people with paedophilia” (PWP) throughout the paper. By using this term, the authors most likely meant to emphasize the fact that “pedophilia” is a *feature* or *characteristic* of an individual rather than an act; however, this expression has pathological undertones – we say “people with depression” or “people with cancer”, but never “people with homosexuality” – which is probably why it is the label least endorsed by MAPs, as revealed in Jahnke et al. (2022).<sup>2</sup>

While the overall delivery of the study is well executed, there are some sections that could have been further elaborated. The authors provide a detailed explanation of how the data was collected, as well as the choices made throughout this process, but a crucial part of the method is missing, since the exact type of qualitative analysis is not clearly stated in the paper. There is brief mention of thematic analysis in the abstract, as well as in the “Analytic Approach” section, but this should have been described more clearly. Understanding the exact type of qualitative analysis employed helps orient readers (and future researchers who wish to employ a similar analytic process), to the exact description and process of the qualitative analysis in the study.

Another critique is that the abstract mentioned six key themes, but only provided titles for four of these six themes. The two remaining themes were not introduced until much later in the paper as “overarching themes” (i.e., “Anger and Sarcasm”, “Different Faces of Help”). It would be helpful for the authors to provide concrete definitions for their conceptualization of both “key themes” and “overarching themes”. For example, overarching themes are intended to provide structure and organization to analysis and are rarely analyzed themselves.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, additional information could have been provided as to the number of comments that fell into each theme and subtheme. Presenting the frequency of comments within each theme would help provide a “bigger picture” of the public’s general attitudes towards experts and minor-attracted people.

More detail could also be offered in regard to the demographics of the leading scholars/practitioners in the fields of pedophilia and sexual offending, herein referred to as “experts” for brevity. The authors did well to explain their reasons for not including the list of videos from which the comments were collected, i.e., to protect the identity of the speakers and commenters, given the “highly sensitive nature” of the topics discussed. However, it would have been beneficial to provide some non-identifying information on the experts, such as the number of

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<sup>2</sup> Reviewed in B4QR 3 (1).

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<sup>3</sup> See Braun & Clarke (2016)



years of education completed, credentials, and basic demographic information such as approximate age and gender. This additional information could prove valuable in determining how comments from the public differed (or failed to differ) based on the presentation of the expert in the video. Furthermore, it would have been useful to know if there were differences between the comments on the videos that included perspectives of MAPs in comparison to those which only included the expert.

There is another theme that the authors could have included in the present study. Given that the central research question was “How do the public react to expert delivered presentations on pedophilia in the public sphere?”, a focus on public reactions to the experts themselves could have been discussed as an additional theme or finding. The authors provided several examples of negative comments throughout

each theme that were not only directed towards minor-attracted people, but also towards the experts in the videos. Data provided on frequency of comments and content directed toward the expert may assist in providing a more fulsome view of public attitudes towards minor-attracted people.

Overall, Nematy et al.’s qualitative study provides unique insight into how members of the general public perceive minor-attracted people. Many of the negative stereotypes found in previous quantitative studies were expressed in the comments selected for the current study, ranging from extreme hatred to sympathetic reactions towards minor-attracted people. The results of this study help provide a more in-depth understanding of how the public views attraction to minors and responds to information provided by credentialed experts on the topic of attraction to minors.

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**Public attitudes toward teenagers with paedophilia: a qualitative examination**

Jimenez-Arista, L. E. and Caldera, K. (2023)

*Journal of Sexual Aggression*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2023.2233552>

In this article, Jimenez-Arista & Caldera studied societal attitudes towards child-attracted adolescents (CAAs) through a qualitative analysis of blogs, forums, and articles with comment sections. Specifically, they aimed to find out how much the public supports or rejects the development of “preventative programs” for teenagers who are attracted to children. Furthermore, the authors believed these findings on public attitudes could be pertinent to clinicians when serving this population.

The authors began with an online search using keywords related to CAAs (e.g., “teen paedophile”). The search yielded 96 online posts from 31 blogs on 10 different sites. Only posts that contained an attitude towards CAAs were included, which resulted in a final dataset of 67 posts across 56 participants (none self-identified as a CAA). Using content analysis, the authors developed an initial coding frame by identifying the key themes in the literature on public attitudes towards child-attracted adults or youths who have committed sex crimes (the literature on attitudes towards child-attracted adolescents was too sparse to reference for a coding frame). The three themes found were condemnation, justification, and support. Using a deductive approach, the authors classified their dataset using this initial coding frame, then using an inductive

approach, these three categories were reformulated into the final four categories used throughout this examination: rejection, distortions, pity, and responsiveness. This last category, responsiveness, was split into three subcategories: acknowledgement, therapy and professional help, and public awareness.

The first category, rejection, consisted of responses of rage and disgust towards teenagers who express an attraction to children. Comments include: “you and all of your kind are evil and will be judged accordingly when the time comes,” and “...If you’re not so sick, why don’t you show your face like the rest of us? No? Because it’s shameful.” Teenagers’ assertions of their commitment to abide by the law were often ignored or directly challenged, with one user writing: “Can you provide a defense of why you believe that you should be allowed among society as a paedophile who promises not to act on your desire?”

The second category, distortions, included all “skewed views” on sexual activity between teenagers and children, such as one post which claimed, “psychological or legal harms are a product of the current society.” Another post questioned the concept of childhood innocence, and a third online

user framed the issue in evolutionary terms, writing, “You stake out your sex partner early and you guarantee [sic] you’re the one who impregnates her before the others realise she’s fertile.”

There are numerous flaws in this section. First, despite being commonplace in sexual offending literature, the concept of “cognitive distortions” is vague, and is a more useful concept when discussing automatic erroneous thought patterns or schema that lead to negative emotional states, as was its original purpose,<sup>4,5</sup> rather than specific opinions on sexual morality and jurisprudence. When applying the concept of cognitive distortions to specific opinions, the label only serves to reflect social mores, rather than being evidence-based. A more useful descriptor would be “offense-supportive beliefs” which can be tailored to specific offenses, and be more easily evidence-based. The second, and more important, concern is that it is unclear why this section was included in this study at all. The authors’ stated intention was to gauge public attitudes towards CAAs, *not* public attitudes towards sex between children and adolescents. Although these two phenomena are frequently conflated, they are quite different and researchers are on the front lines of making this distinction clear.

The third category, pity, included posts that exhibited attitudes of pity towards CAAs, which the authors conceptualized as “a form of sympathy or

sympathetic sorrow, as well as a condescending view toward those who are self-destructive.” One response to a mother looking for help for her child-attracted teenage son reads: “I am sorry your boy is so deeply broken at this point and I hope he will get therapy.” In a particularly poignant comment to another article on the subject, one user wrote,

*“At the end of the day, what I was left with was a deep pain for these boys and girls who, unless they somehow manage to fall in love with somebody close to them in age, are more or less faced with a lifetime of celibacy and loneliness. It’s a big burden to have at such a young age.”*

The authors relate that other studies<sup>6</sup> have shown that pity is a common attitude expressed towards child-attracted people, and claim that this could increase support for “treatment for youth with paedophilia,” although they recognize that some MAPs may find pity more stigmatizing than beneficial.

Lastly, the responsiveness category encompassed all comments from the public that expressed a general attitude of proactiveness — both in recognizing the fact that a not insignificant percentage of the adolescent population experience an attraction to children, and that, in one way or another, it is something which society must address. These attitudes of responsiveness were divided into three

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<sup>4</sup> Beck, 1972

<sup>5</sup> Burns, 1980

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<sup>6</sup> e.g., Jahnke et al., 2014

subcategories: acknowledgement, therapy and professional help, and public awareness.

Acknowledgement referred to those posts that expressed awareness of the fact that an attraction to children can be present in adolescents, and that not all of these teenagers will engage in sexual activity with a child. Often, users explicitly contrasted their attitudes towards CAA with those towards child-attracted adults, with one person writing:

*“No, I don’t believe minors [with paedophilia] should be given capital punishment because they are still developing and don’t necessarily have [the] same cognitive abilities as adults. And [sic] adult, however, should get the firing squad or [be] exiled permanently from society.”*

The authors do not specify whether or not this post was in reference to people who have committed sex crimes involving children, and this is important as, once again, the authors’ stated aim was the study of public attitudes towards child-attracted adolescents, not adolescents (or adults) who have committed sex crimes. Other posts in this subcategory were addressed to parents and referenced the unavoidability of this attraction, such as one which reads: “It could be your son or daughter,” and another, asking: “...Imagine your kid came to you with this problem?” The authors also found that some users in the acknowledgement subcategory

saw the importance of simply giving CAAs online a “space to vent” without judgment.

Posts which fell into the “therapy and professional help” subcategory emphasized the importance of clinical treatment for CAAs, specifically due to the fact that because of their age, there is “still enough time to intervene.” Some of these posts seemed to focus on the mental wellbeing of CAAs, such as one which told teenagers who are distressed about their attraction to children that “there is help out there.” Others, however, either assumed (future) criminal activity (“If the person wants to control their harmful behaviour, we should be giving them all the help we can”), or recommended therapy in ways that seemed to belittle or dehumanize (“I hope you’re honestly seeking help since you’re aware of your issues before you ruin a child’s life beyond repair”). Another post suggested that therapists may be more likely to work with teenagers who are attracted to children as they are minors themselves, and suggests that they “take advantage of it whilst [they] can.”

Finally, “public awareness” referred to posts intended to increase understanding of teenagers attracted to children for the purposes of “developing preventive programs at a macro level.” Many believed that the existing treatment for CAAs (typically only applied post-conviction) was insufficient, and that a cultural shift was superior to individual punishment, as evidenced in one post: “Young people who find themselves involuntarily

sexually attracted to children can be at risk of acting on that attraction. If we want to prevent harm to children, we need to create an environment which encourages staying law-abiding.” The need for open discussion and stigma reduction were also cited as important goals.

The authors of this article should be credited for bringing attention to this demographic of young sexual minorities and the intense stigma they experience. It does, however, contain some stigmatizing assumptions which must be addressed. On the positive side, the authors do have a thorough understanding of the nature of pedophilia (although “child/minor-attracted persons” is often seen as the less stigmatizing term), addressing its persistence over time, its age of onset around puberty, and the fact that it is often accompanied by feelings of emotional/romantic attachment, all of which fit the sexual orientation framework.<sup>7,8</sup>

However, the authors then use a stigmatizing framework when describing how these attractions are experienced and navigated, writing,

“Experts contend that paedophilia – the attraction to children – cannot be changed but can be managed so instead, treatment efforts are directed to avoid offences by regulating urges to engage in sexual behaviour with children, reducing “sexual preoccupation” (Beier et al., 2015, p. 536), making a

decision to change (“desistance”), moving “away from a potential offending trajectory” (Lievesley & Harper, 2022, p. 2), and practicing social safeness (Clayton et al., 2022).”

All of these treatment recommendations portray MAPs as being dangerous, suggesting they are characterized by impulsive and obsessive tendencies that must be contained, as opposed to being individuals with a marginalized sexual identity in need of protection. The use of therapy in helping these adolescents deal with issues such as wide-scale social ostracism, anxiety, and loneliness is given considerably less attention, or is only mentioned in relation to their primary objective of crime control.

This being said, the authors *are* aware of the reasons why many MAPs do not feel served by therapy “due to therapists judging them and assuming criminal behaviour”<sup>9</sup>, and why many others are hesitant to seek it out due to therapists’ mandated reporting responsibilities, disproportionate focus on offense prevention rather than patient wellbeing, shame and judgment from therapists, and difficulty finding therapists willing to work with them.<sup>23,10,11</sup> Additionally, according to Levenson & Grady, one in five child-attracted adults claimed a desire to enter therapy as teenagers, but were unable to do so without parental assistance. This demonstrates that the authors’ faith in the benefits of therapy for CAAs

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<sup>7</sup> Mundy, 2022

<sup>8</sup> Seto, 2012

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<sup>9</sup> Levenson & Grady, 2019

<sup>10</sup> Grady et al., 2019

<sup>11</sup> Shields et al., 2020

is tempered by their understanding that therapeutic practitioners need to develop a greater familiarity with their needs.

Some of the suggestions the authors recommend for improving mental health services for CAAs include professionals being informed of how CAAs' experiences of stigma affect their identity formation process, how a healthy identity can be developed that is based on a "law-abiding life," and the role that family dynamics and social support systems impact treatment outcomes.

Regarding the limitations of this study, the authors write that although the "blogosphere" is an invaluable resource for obtaining qualitative research, in that it provides researchers with access to hard-to-reach populations, and mitigates the risk of the research procedures influencing the opinions that the participants express, it alone is insufficient to entirely present the scope of public attitudes. Firstly, there is the issue of self-selection bias, in that all posts examined came necessarily from an online user interested and engaged enough to voice an

opinion. Furthermore, with web pages taken down and updated so frequently, results might be different depending on when the research was conducted. The authors suggest that semi-structured interviews could provide more in-depth information about people's attitudes towards child-attracted adolescents. Another method which may be applied is the use of fictional vignettes accompanied by questionnaires in order to compare the effects of specific variables.

This article provides much-needed information on the public's attitudes toward child-attracted teenagers, especially as much of the literature on this topic is focused on attitudes toward minor-attracted adults. It has the potential to raise awareness about the needs of this population, reduce stigma, and improve mental health practices to better assist them. However, the repeated characterization of people (adolescents or adults) with an attraction to children as axiomatically pathological and who need to make a special effort to "manage their urges" undercuts some of their loftier ambitions.



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## **Cognitive and Affective Impacts of Antistigma Interventions Surrounding People with a Sexual Interest in Children**

Lawrence, A. L. and Willis, G. W. (2023)

*Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2023.2224323>

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In their article, Lawrence and Willis investigate cognitive and affective impacts of exposure to videos depicting either factual information or the daily experiences of minor-attracted persons (MAPs) to a sample drawn from the general population in New Zealand. More specifically, this national sample of 460 individuals, predominantly female and of European descent, were invited to share their thoughts through an online platform regarding whether their viewpoints changed after viewing one of two videos addressing the topic of sexual attraction to children. This sample was previously described in Lawrence & Willis.<sup>12,13</sup>

The first video, referred to as the "informative intervention"<sup>14</sup> by the researchers, featured a male actor presenting information from empirical research related to attraction to minors. His speech presented fact-based information to counter common stigmatizing stereotypes about MAPs (e.g., it's a choice, it increases the risk of committing sexual assault, this type of person is abnormal), while exploring the consequences of social stigma and the potential benefits of better access to prevention

services. The second video, referred to as the "humanizing intervention"<sup>15</sup>, featured the same actor, this time relating the life and experience of a New Zealand man who is attracted to children. The actor discussed the emergence of this attraction, disclosure and coming out, battles with the self and stigma, his commitment to never engage sexually/romantically with a minor, and highlighted the need for support resources for MAPs.

After viewing either one of the videos, participants were asked to express their level of agreement with the following two statements: "The video challenged my views on people with a sexual interest in children" (choice of response: yes, somewhat, no) and "This video affected me emotionally" (choice of response: yes, no). Participants who answered "yes" (informative = 20.7%; humanizing = 16.4%) or "somewhat" (informative 34.3%; humanizing = 33.1%) to the first question were asked to provide further explanation, while those who answered "yes" (informative = 44.3%; humanizing = 57.8%) to the second question were asked to explain the emotions they felt. Finally, using a combination of content and

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence & Willis, 2002

<sup>13</sup> Reviewed in B4QR 2 (4).

<sup>14</sup> Also referred to by the authors as "psychoeducational intervention".

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<sup>15</sup> Also referred to by the authors as "narrative intervention".

thematic analysis, the researchers analyzed the participants' responses.

For the content analysis, the authors coded participants' responses into four categories, 1) positive, 2) negative, 3) mixed, and 4) other. Regarding the first question ("The video challenged my views on people with a sexual interest in children"), of the 140 participants who viewed the informative intervention video and reported that their views were at least somewhat challenged, 79% of comments were positive/supportive, 8% were negative, 6% were mixed and 7% were categorized as other. Of the 138 who viewed the humanizing intervention video and reported that their views were at least somewhat challenged, 69% of the comments were positive/supportive, 8% were negative, 22% were mixed and 8% were categorized as other.

Regarding the second question ("This video affected me emotionally"), of the 132 participants who viewed the informative intervention video and reported the video affecting them emotionally, 33% of comments were positive/supportive, 56% were negative, 13% were mixed and 14% were categorized as other. Of the 192 participants who viewed the humanizing intervention video and reported the video affecting them emotionally, 48% of comments were positive/supportive, 44% were negative, 17% were mixed and 15% were categorized as other.

In terms of thematic analysis, the researchers identified a total of nine themes, which were categorized into three main response groups: *Positive/supportive views and emotional responses*, *Negative views and emotional responses* and *Mixed views and emotional responses*. The first category comprised four themes: 1) challenging stereotypes, 2) gaining perspective, 3) personalized reflections, 4) recognizing the impacts of stigma. The second category was divided into three themes: 1) minimization and normalization, 2) personal experiences, 3) disbelief and mistrust. Finally, the third category was subcategorized into two themes: 1) difficulty reconciling emotional and cognitive responses, 2) apprehension and risk.

Regarding the first category, *Positive/supportive views and emotional responses*, the researchers report that many participants questioned a range of biases they held about MAPs. These biases included: conflating attraction with sexual contact with a child; that people choose to be attracted to children, or that being attracted to children precludes living a normal life. Challenging these biases induced empathy towards MAPs, and some participants expressed sadness about the difficulties MAPs encounter, including the barriers to receiving help when desired.

While only a few participants reported that viewing the videos negatively impacted their viewpoints towards MAPs, 56% of the participants across the

two videos reported negative emotional responses. These comments were grouped in the second category, *Negative views and emotional responses*. Participants expressed feelings of anger, distrust, disgust and discomfort, and reported that the material presented downplayed the risk posed by MAPs, brought back past memories of victimization, or sought to trivialize and normalize this sexual attraction.

Finally, in the third category, *Mixed views and emotional responses*, participants expressed a conflict between their emotional and rational responses following the viewing of the videos (e.g., empathy and annoyance, fear and understanding). This type of reaction was often related to a history of victimization among participants, or a desire to protect children from a potential moment of weakness from people with a sexual interest in children.

In light of these results, the researchers conclude that this type of open dialogue, involving as many people as possible from the community, is necessary to work towards reducing the stigma surrounding MAPs. The authors also propose concrete solutions to reach this goal and highlight that negative media portrayals of this population contribute to a sense of fear and hatred that needs to be addressed.

This article by Lawrence and Willis has several positive contributions. The researchers offer a

clearer picture of the reasons underlying societal discomfort towards sexual attraction to children. While discomfort with sexual attraction to children is often explained as rooted in a moral panic,<sup>16</sup> Lawrence and Willis go beyond these explanations and present a much more detailed and nuanced picture based on the comprehensive data collected. Finally, because of the quality of the discourse gathered from participants, Lawrence and Willis's paper has the potential to encourage a dialogue at the societal level about what an attraction to minors is, what the consequences of stigmatization are, and the avenues that should be prioritized in combating this stigma. By letting people express themselves about where their reluctance comes from and the kind of intervention that favors the re-examination of personal beliefs, the research conducted by Lawrence and Willis gives us reason to believe that it is possible to work towards reducing the social stigmatization of MAPs. While the authors do focus on prevention of child sexual abuse as the stated primary goal of reducing social stigma towards MAPs, they do also address its importance in improving the lives of MAPs.

The authors acknowledge four limitations in their study. First, this sample is both WEIRD (white, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) and predominantly female, so the potential generalizability of the results is limited. Future studies with a more diverse sample are warranted.

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<sup>16</sup> Jenkins, 1998

Second, the participants were not asked for an explanation if their views were not changed by the interventions. The authors acknowledge that this may skew the data to being more positive, though this warrants emphasizing further. Near half of the participants said that their viewpoints were not changed by the interventions. Given that there is a high degree of societal stigma towards MAPs, it is likely that the majority of those participants held negative attitudes towards MAPs. While it is heartening that many participants expressed a positive change, not having any information on the participants who did not express any change is a large limitation.

The third and fourth limitations are in regards to the depth of the responses. Participants were not asked to expand upon why they experienced a particular emotion, and their data collection methods did not encourage lengthy responses. Both of these limit the depth of the analyses that are possible in the data. However, there were many participants who did provide rich data, so the authors were still able to gain some deeper insight into the participants' reactions.

There are some additional areas that could have been improved. The authors refer to MAPs who have not engaged in sexual contact with a child as "refraining from acting on their interest," which is itself

stigmatizing, as it implies that MAPs require to put forth active effort to not engage in this behavior. Similarly, they use the term "sexual interest in children" throughout the paper, instead of more preferred terms, such as "minor-attracted person." When writing about attraction to minors, authors are urged to follow the same language as when writing about those attracted to adults. Finally, the authors generally referred to the two intervention videos as the "informative intervention" and the "narrative intervention." However, the authors occasionally label the videos the "psychoeducational intervention" and the "humanizing intervention," respectively. Using labels interchangeably can create confusion for the reader, so it would have been judicious to use the same labels throughout the manuscript to avoid any confusion.

In conclusion, although we have identified a few elements that we feel would have benefited from further clarification, this study contributes to a much needed body of knowledge about anti-MAP stigma reduction efforts. The authors wisely conclude that a combination of humanizing and informative techniques would likely be most effective in reducing stigma. Further, the emotional and cognitive disconnect highlights the importance of addressing emotions, along with biased cognitions, about MAPs in order to promote change in their life chances and societal treatment.

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## **Exploring the stigmatisation of offending and non-offending paedophiles: a terror management approach**

Maroño et al. (2023)

*Journal of Criminal Psychology 13 (4), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCP-07-2022-0021>*

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In this study, Maroño and colleagues (2023) aimed to explore the extent of stigmatization towards MAPs in comparison to other highly stigmatized groups and whether criminal history may influence judgments. The authors discuss the role of the media in exacerbating negative stigma and propose that public attitudes towards MAPs are amplified by confluences between their attraction, mental illness, and violent behavior. The DSM-5 definition of pedophilic disorder is also referenced; however, the authors' description does not clarify that a person would need to either experience significant distress or engage in child sexual abuse to meet the diagnostic criteria. Recurrent fantasies or "urges" alone are not pathological.

The authors aimed to explore the application of terror management theory (TMT)<sup>17</sup> as an approach to understanding this stigma. If people perceive MAPs to be a danger to their own or others' children, this may threaten a person's sense of symbolic immortality (the idea that life continues after death through offspring) and result in MAPs being more heavily stigmatized. The death-thought accessibility (DTA) hypothesis is also discussed as part of the terror management approach, suggesting that

individuals tend to show more death-related cognitions when their cultural values are threatened. This once again can result in stigmatizing views forming against a perceived threat, as humans are motivated to avoid cognitions about death. Research supports the idea that perceived stigma acts as a barrier to individuals engaging in help-seeking behaviors and accessing mental health support<sup>18</sup>; therefore research aimed at understanding and tackling the stigma directed towards MAPs, and the psychological underpinnings of this stigma, is timely and important.

The community sample, recruited using social media advertisements and word of mouth, consisted of 126 participants ( $M_{age} = 27$ ), including 90 women, 35 men, and one participant who did not specify their gender. This sample size was deemed to meet minimum sampling requirements according to a priori power analysis. Participants were randomly allocated to provide opinions on one of three stigmatized groups (paedophilia vs. schizophrenia vs. homicidal ideation) and were further divided into one of two criminal history conditions ("offending" vs. "non-offending"). While certain key terms were clarified for participants at the start of the study, the

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<sup>17</sup> Greenberg et al., 1986

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<sup>18</sup> Maroño & Bartels, 2020



authors did not provide a definition of pedophilia distinguishing attraction from the act of committing sex crimes against children to assess participant's baseline understandings of these terms and avoid biasing the results.

It is important to note that the authors use terms such as “paedophiles,” “non-offending paedophiles,” “people with paedophilic interests,” and “individuals with paedophilia” throughout the article. While these terms did not appear to be used with a stigmatizing intent, B4U-ACT recommends the term “people attracted to children” as an alternative to these terms for the following reasons: 1) the common conflation of “pedophile” and “person who has committed a sex crime involving children (as noted by the authors), 2) the implication of pathology when using the word “with,” and 3) the implication that “offending” is the default when the term “non-offending” is used to describe people attracted to children who have not committed crimes. The authors do ensure their intended meaning is clear by discussing common misconceptions about MAPs from the beginning of the article; thus, these suggestions are offered not as a criticism but as a consideration for those conducting research in this area.

The study used the Punitive Subscale from the Paedophilia Stigma and Punitiveness Scale<sup>19</sup> to assess attitudes and perceptions of dangerousness towards MAPs. Six vignettes were created for each

condition, detailing an individual's criminal history and characteristics related to their stigmatized group. Judgment questions were used to measure sentencing and moral character judgements. The salience of death-related cognitions<sup>20</sup> was assessed using a word-stem completion task, which involved presenting 25 incomplete word-stems, seven of which could be completed with either a neutral or death-related word. The study included 1 extra word-stem (CHIL\_\_\_\_) to examine if people in the pedophilia condition showed increased retrieval of child-related thoughts. The Aggression Questionnaire was used to measure whether past aggression on the part of the participant was a mediator against the stigmatizing group on death-related cognitions, exploring the DTA hypothesis. The chosen measures showed strong levels of internal consistency, and vignettes appeared to be an appropriate choice to differentiate between the 6 conditions based on similar previous research.<sup>21</sup>

A one-way ANOVA found no significant differences in punitive attitudes or perceptions of dangerousness among participants when reacting to fictional individuals in the three stigmatizing conditions. However, both sentencing and moral character judgments showed a significant main effect of the “offending” condition in a 3 x 2 independent ANOVA – individuals with criminal histories were thought to be more deserving of punishment in comparison to individuals without. While

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<sup>19</sup> Imhoff, 2015

<sup>20</sup> Buss & Perry, 1992

<sup>21</sup> Jahnke, 2018

differences between stigmatizing conditions for sentencing judgments were non-significant, participants assessing the combined “pedophilia” and “offending” condition held the least rehabilitative attitudes. When exploring the salience of death-related cognitions, a one-way ANCOVA found participants assessing fictional individuals in the “pedophilia” condition formed more death-related words compared to those assessing fictional individuals in the homicidal ideation and schizophrenia conditions. The increase in death-related words was also significantly higher in “offending” conditions compared to “non-offending” conditions. The participants assessing fictional individuals in the “pedophilia” condition (irrespective of criminal history) also formed the word “children” more often, according to a chi-square analysis.

Based on these findings, it was concluded that the negative stigmatization of MAPs is equally as high as the stigmatization towards individuals with severe mental illnesses and violent tendencies. The authors note that this was unexpected due to previous research suggesting that MAPs were the most highly stigmatized group aside from those with antisocial personality disorder,<sup>22</sup> and they suggest that perhaps negative attitudes towards MAPs are not as strong as they once were, or that there is an additional but unknown driver (e.g., feelings of disgust) linking these stigmatizing groups together. In relation to TMT, it was also concluded that exposure to

information about attraction to minors combined with criminal history contributes to increased perceptions of dangerousness towards children. This can increase a person’s death-related cognitions, as symbolic immortality is threatened because of the perceived risk. The conclusions drawn are consistent with TMT and the DTA hypothesis, and future research is needed to explore why these effects were observed.

While the study is novel in its use of a terror management approach to understand the stigma faced by MAPs, it remains important to consider limitations that future research may look to address. Firstly, the authors highlight that only a limited amount is known about the participants; information about age, gender and employment status is provided but parenting status, for example, is not. Symbolic immortality may be higher for participants who are parents and caregivers as this could influence their feelings of needing to protect children. This could similarly contribute to participants’ responses on the word-stem completion task, with the authors referencing that these tasks are sometimes criticized as a methodological choice.<sup>23</sup> The number of possible stems when presented with “CHIL\_\_\_\_\_” is limited, and participants in the “pedophilia” condition may have been primed to form child-related words simply because of the vignette content. Responses may have also been influenced by the authors’ decision to not disclose the true aims of the study, stating that “perceptions of criminality”

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<sup>22</sup> Feldman & Crandall, 2017

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<sup>23</sup> Soler et al., 2015

were being investigated. Although a significant main effect of the “offending” condition was found, it is still possible that participants were primed to display more punitive beliefs and this should be considered in future research exploring the influence of criminal history.

As previously discussed, the authors did collect information on participants’ employment status; however, this was not commented on further. Due to the recruitment strategy, including the use of word of mouth to share information on the study, it may be the case that some participants study or work in fields relevant to the research topic. This could influence attitudes towards mental health, stigmatization, and attraction to minors. Future research on public attitudes towards stigmatized groups may benefit from a deeper insight into participants’ backgrounds to ascertain if other factors contribute towards their attitude formation and to ensure samples are representative.

Despite these sampling considerations, the impact of Maroño et al.’s work is clear. The study advocates

the need for more focus on stigma-reducing strategies, particularly to educate the public and media outlets on the misconceptions around minor-attracted people and criminal behavior. However, despite emphasizing the distinction between people who are attracted to children and people who commit sexual crimes against children (which represents a strength of the study), the authors discuss the importance of stigma reduction only in the context of abuse prevention. It is essential to include the importance of stigma reduction for the improved mental health and well-being of people attracted to children for its own sake, particularly when one of the goals of the work is dispelling the harmful misconception that all people attracted to children present a risk to children. Still, this study offers a fresh perspective toward understanding stigma towards MAPs, as it is one of the first to utilize TMT in understanding this stigma. By identifying the role of mortality salience in the formation of negative public attitudes, progress can be made to better understand and reduce the stigmatization of MAPs, as well as other groups, such as people with severe mental illnesses.

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**Fantasy Sexual Material Use by People with Attractions to Children**

Lievesley, R., Harper, C., Woodward, W., and Tenbergen, G. (2023)

*Current Psychiatry Reports, 25 (9), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-023-01435-7>*

This article focuses on “fantasy/fictional sexual material,” or FSM, in the context of its potential benefits and risks in relation to MAPs and how it might be studied in the future. Lievesley et al. discuss and define sexual fantasy and FSM, compare the conventional wisdom of how FSM and fantasy affect rates of sexual violence (both with MAPs specifically and more broadly) against the scientific literature, and discuss possible policy implications for the legal status of FSM featuring children and adolescents, therapeutic interventions, and sexual abuse prevention.

Lievesley et al. begin by giving a brief overview of attraction to minors as a concept, noting that, although an attraction towards minors might at times act as a “motivating factor for abuse perpetration,” a large portion of those convicted of CSA are not MAPs. They caution against “simplistic association[s]” with MAPs and CSA, clarifying they aim to discuss uses of FSM for MAPs without assuming criminality.

Due to the lack of an accepted academic definition of FSM, the authors take the time to operationalize the term. They explain that FSM is sexual material which “does not include physical contact with a real person” and “is not based in reality,” but rather is

based in the realm of fantasy, art, and fiction, although those things may or may not depict a real individual. Additionally, the authors include sex dolls, including childlike sex dolls, in their definition of FSM.

In terms of the utility of FSM, the authors go on to say that, although many countries criminalize FSM depicting minors to different degrees, FSM allows individuals to engage with an aspect of their sexuality which would be problematic to engage with in reality. Thus, it has potential to be used in clinical settings for some individuals. The authors describe the “Dual Process Model for Sexual Fantasizing”, which considers both content (what is in the fantasy) and process (actions taken during the fantasy), as focusing on content over process runs the risk of the former being “overinflated.” Lievesley et al. use the example of a sexual fantasy involving children, arguing that while some might call the fantasy immoral because of the content, the “problematic nature” of a fantasy process which does not cause harm to the fantasizer or to others is “less clear-cut.”

A distinction is made between automatic arousal and a planned, intentional fantasy, clarifying that the article focuses on the latter rather than the former.

This is relevant for this particular discussion as the model they use takes the real-world effects of the fantasizing process into consideration before determining if engaging with a given fantasy is problematic. The authors propose that, without this approach, fear of hypotheticals dominates the discussion.

Recent cultural shifts have moved the popular view of sexual fantasy from a sign of sexual dissatisfaction to an “indicator of sexual well-being, freedom, and openness.” Sexual satisfaction is seen as a universal human desire which fantasy is thought to encourage. It is suggested that all individuals benefit from a healthy sexual fantasy life, “especially... those struggling with sexual dysfunction and physical intimacy.” Modern research surrounding the benefits of masturbation and sexual fantasy, despite historical, often misogynistic, stigma around the topic, demonstrates multiple psychological and physical benefits. However, the paper argues, when applying this to MAPs one must be “mindful of the potential for harm.”

The paper explores how sexual fantasy, and pornography use in particular, is related to individuals’ behaviors. Current literature is mixed on whether pornography induces sexually aggressive behaviors, but newer research finds that this is only the case when an individual has other criminogenic factors. While high sex drive somewhat increases

concordance between fantasy and action, this relationship may be reversed for MAPs, though other studies could not replicate these findings because too few participants reported sexual activity with children.

Another study found that concordance was primarily “contingent on... the plausibility” of a fantasy becoming a reality. The authors speculate that the illegality of sexual activity with children is a “situational inhibitor... being further compounded” by other factors. Despite the fact that MAPs are unable to fulfill their sexual fantasies in reality, their sexual needs are the same as for others.

While most child sexual content is visual, there are different types, such as “narrative” content and childlike sex dolls, both of which “typically do not involve real children” and fall under the category of FSM. The data on sexual aggression for sex doll users is then examined, both for owners of adult-like and child-like dolls. An initial study of adult sex doll owners found no relationship between ownership and sexual aggression, a trend which is supported in early research on child sex doll owners (owners were less likely to express proclivity for sexual abuse than non-owners). The authors speculate that other types of FSM use might have similar patterns, but further research is needed.

The “Motivation-Facilitation Model of Sexual Offending,” a model that explains sexual offending,

is applied to FSM use. It is divided into “motivational factors,” which relate to one’s sexual attractions and desires, and “facilitation factors,” such as problematic personality traits, substance abuse, and access to a victim. The authors describe two lines of thinking on this topic: The first argues FSM might increase the likelihood of an individual engaging in sexual contact with children by raising sex drive and causing an individual to develop alternative views on adults having romantic and/or sexual relationships with children and adolescents. However, the authors mention that FSM use could also be a “protective” factor by offering a sexual outlet and avoiding the detrimental effects of repressing one’s sexuality, with this view including notably more cited research.

The authors propose a research agenda which includes 1) gathering personal accounts from MAPs who use FSM, 2) understanding potential “risk-enhancing” and “protective” factors of FSM use for MAPs, and 3) understanding how FSM use among MAPs can be linked to treatment goals. They caution against FSM research that does not include the experiences of MAP FSM users and suggest that the first step should be comparing life outcomes between users and non-users of FSM with a phenomenological focus. One study demonstrated that, despite the assumption of atypical sexuality among sex doll owners, interviews “illuminated a number of motives” which were initially not considered. They speculate a similar effect might

occur when researching this topic, which would enable identification of “risk-enhancing” or “protective” factors.

They also argue that FSM research should be done in the context of the motivation-facilitation model. In addition to being able to explain sexual crimes, it allows researchers to test FSM as either a “motivating” or “facilitating” factor, depending on how the experiment is designed. Different factors are offered as possible variables that would be measured in different ways depending on the research style, with the ultimate goal stated to be “to understand how, why, and under what conditions FSM use might be risky or safe.”

It is currently unknown what effects using FSM for mental health purposes will have. The article suggests first implementing it in existing programs for persons who have committed sexual crimes, arguing it “provides a controlled environment” for measuring how FSM affects individuals’ potential risk. Outside of the legal system, the authors suggest researching the comfort and competence of mental health practitioners in addressing sexual frustration as a treatment need. The authors mention that, “where FSM might be a useful addition to their clinical toolkits, [they] fear both public and professional backlash while trying to work ethically.” Further, FSM as a treatment option might cause issues in remote therapy, where laws between jurisdictions may differ.



The importance of data-driven decision making on this topic is emphasized, since initiatives for research into FSM are often stifled by prominent papers detailing risks of FSM use without mentioning benefits. The authors express hope that exploratory research will yield results allowing better conceptualization of how FSM may be utilized both to help MAPs find fulfillment and reduce rates of child sexual abuse. The article ends with a general summary and a call for other researchers to pursue its proposed research agenda to support MAP community health and abuse prevention.

In this article, the authors delve into important issues which have been largely neglected in scientific literature. Sexual fantasy, especially sexual fantasy regarding children and adolescents, is poorly understood in modern society. They point out that engagement with sexual fantasy, counter to prevailing older theories, may increase sexual fulfillment and lower sexual aggression for individuals exclusively attracted to adults with no other criminogenic factors.

This article also shows a considerable amount of concern for MAPs' mental well-being for its own sake. While the noticeable focus on prevention in the article might occasionally make it seem that MAPs are being somewhat treated as a problem to be managed, the article often mentions benefits to

engagement with FSM purely focused on helping individuals meet their own mental health goals.

In defining FSM involving minors, Lievesley et al. acknowledge that, by definition, FSM does not involve any real children, and that the “problematic nature” of such sexual fantasies is “less clear” when nobody is being harmed. Later in the article, the authors refer to sexual imagery involving real children as “CSEM,” or “child sexual exploitation material,” because they felt common terminology (e.g., “child pornography”) undercuts the serious nature of the topic. They then proceeded to define types of FSM as a subcategory of “CSEM.” This undermines the article’s general purpose of disentangling the two topics in the public consciousness by explicitly tying them together. It is also categorically incorrect – as mentioned earlier, FSM does not involve any real children, and as such cannot be considered exploitation material. Certain forms of FSM may be illegal depending on jurisdiction, but this does not automatically make them exploitative. Further, Lievesley et al. speculate that the “illegality” of sexual activity with minors is the primary inhibitory factor which prevents MAPs from engaging in such behavior, with other factors being secondary concerns. However, other research found that the desire to avoid doing harm as their primary motivator, with the legal repercussions generally being a prominent secondary factor (Walker, 2021). This is an important distinction, as the former might lead to the impression that MAPs would engage in sexual activity with children and

adolescents regardless of harm if the law wasn't a concern, which is not necessarily the case for many, if not most MAPs.

A number of times throughout the article, Lielevsey et al. talk about individuals with alternative opinions about the effects of sexual contact between adults and children as if they are suffering from a delusion or other mental illness. While many in the mental health field might see this as a dangerous type of opinion to hold, and while such opinions may or may not be built upon varying degrees of cognitive bias, it is nevertheless problematic for mental health professionals to medicalize a person's unconventional opinions. To concede that censorship might be justifiable if a work of fiction did foster these viewpoints is also an inherently anti-democratic view; art that challenges dominant narratives is a vital part of democratic discourse. Walker (2021) found that even most individuals who held these opinions had principled reasons not to act on their beliefs, which might suggest that such opinions are not necessarily as much of a risk factor as is currently believed.

Finally, the motivation-facilitation model – originally put forth by Seto and used as a framework

in this article – positions attraction to children and adolescents as an inherent risk factor for committing sex crimes. It would be considered absurd to consider socially accepted sexualities to be risk factors (for example, heterosexuality in men is not described as a risk factor for sexually assaulting adult women). Yet, this model makes an exception for MAP sexuality and other non-normative sexualities, designating them as being potentially dangerous. This sort of thinking should be avoided when researching sexual minorities, as it is both incorrect and stigmatizing.

While the quality of this article's framing of certain issues can be mixed, its overall focus on creating a research agenda to further explore the effects on FSM use for MAPs is well reasoned. Its outlook in regards to sexual fulfillment for MAPs is positive, which is a necessary outlook. It also clearly demonstrates that sexual fulfillment for MAPs and prevention are not mutually exclusive goals, and in some ways are complementary. The research agenda set forth will hopefully provide useful data for further inquiry and a solid basis for advocating for ways MAPs to find sexual fulfillment.

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**Understanding pedophilia: A theoretical framework on the development of sexual pendants**

Swaminath, S., Simons, R. M., and Hatwan, M. L. (2023)

*Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 32 (6), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2023.2236602>

In this paper, Swaminath and colleagues propose a theoretical framework of the etiology of both attraction to children and child sexual abuse (CSA) perpetration by people attracted to children. Their theoretical framework is based upon Hayes' (2001) Relational Frame Theory (RFT): a behavioral-analytical account of human language and cognition which posits, broadly, that humans establish differential relationships to specific stimuli based on their unique histories of learning. Specifically, drawing upon various core tenets of RFT, the authors hypothesize that pedophilia and CSA perpetration are "learned behaviors" that result from classical conditioning processes in which cues associated with children are repeatedly directly or indirectly paired with positive emotional and/or physiological stimuli as well as sexual arousal. The authors emphasize that a strength of their theoretical framework is its flexibility; unlike existing psychological and neurobiological etiological theories, their behavior-analytic theory is capable of capturing a range of idiographic presentations of attraction to children and CSA perpetration, including instances that emerge in the absence of predisposing factors or direct learning (e.g., CSA victimization).

The authors augment their theory through discussion of the role of emotional learning in establishing relations between stimuli. They explain that all

learning may be facilitated and strengthened by emotional activation. For instance, when positive affect is evoked by contexts involving sexual attraction to or sexual interaction with a child, a positive relation is likely to be strongly established. Further, the authors explain that "pedophiles" (the quotes will be explained in the later critical section) experience more negative affect on average than controls (citing research only on samples of CSA perpetrators), thus they are particularly motivated to alleviate negative emotions or replace them with positive emotions, namely through CSA perpetration. The authors add that "pedophiles" additionally exhibit higher alexithymia (i.e., difficulty understanding and expressing their emotions) than controls (citing research only on samples of CSA perpetrators and people with unspecified paraphilias), and that alexithymia is associated with increased risk of impulsive behaviors including sexual risk taking.<sup>24</sup>

The authors illustrate an example of the theoretical framework using a fictional vignette of "Joe." Reserved and timid 15-year-old Joe was picked on and excluded by similar-aged peers, but treated with kindness and admiration by his nine-year-old sister and her friends. As such, Joe established relations between similar-aged-peers and sadness/crying, and

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<sup>24</sup> Hahn et al., 2016.

between nine-year-olds and acceptance/happiness. Separately, Joe learns from repeated consumption of pornography to associate sexual intimacy, sexual arousal, and sexual gratification with acceptance/happiness. As a result of combinations of direct, indirect, trained, and untrained relations, Joe ultimately solidifies relations between nine-year-olds, sex/intimacy, and acceptance/happiness, and solidifies opposite and nonsexual relations involving similar-aged-peers. He thus develops a sexual attraction to nine-year-old children, and begins consuming sexual material involving children or initiating sexual activity involving children in an attempt to alleviate or replace his negative affect; he learns that these strategies are effective, and incorporates these behaviors into his established relational networks.

The authors conclude that their theoretical framework could inform clinical interventions for “pedophiles” focused on reducing likelihood of CSA perpetration. They explain that, while RFT holds that established relational frames cannot be unlearned, clinicians may attempt to condition new relations that could compete with old ones. For instance, a clinician could engage Joe in enjoyable activities with similar-aged peers to begin to establish a new relation between similar-aged peers and acceptance/happiness.

Overall, this theoretical article offers a tentative etiological explanation of attraction to children and

CSA perpetration by people attracted to children. It is among few papers that contribute a behavior-analytic perspective. Credibility of the proposed theoretical framework is bolstered by its basis in the already-established theories of RFT and the emotions-learning link.

However, the authors’ theoretical framework suffers from several serious shortcomings. One of them is recognized by the authors: the fact that the framework requires empirical testing, and in particular, that the degree to which relational frames predict overt behaviors (i.e, CSA perpetration) remains unknown. In the case of the attraction to children, without empirical testing, the framework is speculative, much like discredited speculations regarding the cause of homosexuality.

Several other flaws go unrecognized by the authors. First, they highlight that a strength of their theoretical framework is its ability to capture the wide range of idiographic developments of pedophilia. However, while the authors mention in passing that they do not discount neurological or biological explanations of pedophilia, they neglect to discuss if and how their behavior-analytic framework accounts for instances involving such factors. Similarly, the authors state that any discussion of the age-based sexual orientation hypothesis (e.g., Seto, 2012) is “beyond the scope of this manuscript.” It is not possible to contextualize this theoretical framework without discussion of

how it fits with leading existing etiological theories – especially seeing as their framework appears to disregard or even contradict these theories.

Furthermore, the authors never clarify the explanatory scope of their theory, including whether it is meant to extend to other lasting/immutable sexualities. The fact that they draw parallels between pedophilia and psychiatric conditions such as major depressive disorder, but never draw on the human sexuality literature on the development of sexual attraction, suggests their unexamined assumption that pedophilia is an inherently pathological phenomenon. This is a major deficiency in their perspective that obstructs their theoretical understanding and could lead to counterproductive therapeutic practices. Their *a priori* rejection of pedophilia as a simple variation in human sexuality is similarly suggested in their abstract, where they claim that “the development of pedophilia, in the absence of such direct training (childhood adversities), is difficult to comprehend.”

Second, throughout the article, the authors consistently conflate the concepts of pedophilia (i.e., sexual attraction to prepubescent children) and CSA perpetration (i.e., engaging in sexual behavior involving a minor). The paper’s title, “Understanding Pedophilia”, is misleading, as in actuality the paper and proposed theoretical framework focus substantially more on CSA perpetration than on pedophilia. Further, the authors

repeatedly refer to pedophilia as a “*learned behavior*” despite pedophilia, by definition, involving an attraction and not an action. In addition, the authors often use the term “pedophilia” in discussions of CSA perpetration (e.g., titling a section “Pedophilia” that discusses the prevalence and societal impact of CSA perpetration, not of pedophilia, as well as etiological theories of pedophilia and of CSA perpetration simultaneously as if they are interchangeable).<sup>25</sup> Relatedly, the authors often make claims about “pedophilia” or people who are sexually attracted to children, followed by citations that specifically sample individuals who have committed a sex crime against a child wherein pedophilic attraction is not assessed. The conflation of pedophilia and CSA perpetration is problematic scientifically, clinically, and ethically, because it impedes theoretical understanding of each phenomenon, leads to potentially counterproductive therapeutic responses, and perpetuates the inaccurate and harmful stigmatizing belief that minor attraction is synonymous with child sexual offending. The authors’ error is perplexing given that, near the start of the article, they briefly distinguish between pedophilia, pedophilic disorder, and CSA perpetration, highlight the importance of avoiding

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<sup>25</sup> As an illustration of their quasi-synonymous use of “pedophile” and “CSA perpetrator”, in two separate sections of the text, the authors repeat the same point (with the same citations), but change the term “pedophiles” to “individuals who offend against children”. Compare:

1) “Individuals who offend against children present with significantly more negative affect than controls (Brankley et al., 2021; Garofalo et al., 2019).”

2) “Second, researchers postulate that pedophiles experience significantly more negative affect than controls (Brankley et al., 2021; Garofalo et al., 2019; Hanson et al., 2015a).”

conflation between the three, as well as acknowledge that some pedophiles do not perpetrate CSA.

The paper perpetuates additional stigmatizing beliefs through the unflattering description of a “pedophile,” “Joe.” (The term pedophile is in quotations because the authors’ conflation of pedophilia and CSA perpetration applies, too, to their vignette of Joe, and it is unclear whether Joe does in fact have a true attraction to children or whether he is strictly an opportunistic sexual offender.) Joe is described as a quiet and sad loner/reject who lacks impulse control, emotional awareness, and adaptive emotion regulation strategies, and who ultimately turns to sexual offending behavior in an attempt to feel better. While the authors acknowledge that “Joe’s journey towards developing pedophilia is unique and idiographic,” they could have illustrated their theoretical framework using a neutral vignette that does not reinforce negative stereotypes about MAPs’ personality, likability, emotional intelligence, or offending risk. In particular, the authors choose to highlight MAPs’ tendency toward impulsive risk-taking (especially CSA perpetration) and emphasize this assumed characteristic throughout, but make no mention of individual MAPs’ capacity for ethical or rational decision-making, empathy, or self-control. Similarly, the authors paint “pedophiles” as generally high in negative affect, and they argue that this may be one of the key causes of the development of pedophilic attraction, yet they

do not recognize the long list of evident factors (e.g., stigma, prejudice) which suggest that higher negative affect is more likely to be the outcome of society’s attitudes towards pedophilic attraction rather than a cause of the attraction.

Lastly, when the authors discuss clinical implications of their theoretical framework, they focus only on treatment aimed at CSA prevention. The sole specific intervention suggested is exposing minor-attracted patients to positive interactions with same-aged peers—the goal of this intervention is unstated but the implication is that this might spark more interest, including sexual interest, in these peers as opposed to children. The authors’ conclusions could have been more comprehensive and compelling had they included additional specific, and more convincing, intervention examples informed by their framework, as well as discussed how the proposed framework might inform treatments focused on MAPs’ wellbeing. This omission, along with the aforementioned limitations, suggests that the authors view MAPs primarily as likely or potential offenders.

In sum, among the research on pedophilia and CSA, this paper offers a unique yet unconvincing behavior-analytic hypothesis of the etiology of pedophilia and CSA perpetration by MAPs. As the authors note, empirical research that tests this theoretical framework is essential. It is strongly recommended that future work clearly distinguish



between pedophilia and CSA perpetration in their analysis of relational frames, that it draw on mainstream human sexuality research on the

development of sexual attraction, and that it generally avoid perpetuating stigma through unjustified assumptions and limited perspectives.

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## Author Responses

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### Response by Amy Lawrence to review of Lawrence and Willis (2023) in B4QR 3 (4)

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It was lovely to read such a favourable review.

I would like to make one comment regarding the use of language and terminology. The points/criticisms made are extremely valid. The terminology “people with sexual interest in children” was used throughout the survey and the interviews, as part of a wider project which began in 2019. When we started this project there was much discussion on the use of terminology and “people with sexual interest in children” which was decided upon primarily due to discourse reformation effects. That is, that when it

comes to shifting public perceptions, it is important to address things in stages, and given how emotive this topic is, providing too much of an alternate narrative (i.e., the concept of romantic and emotional connection) in the initial stages may have the opposite of the intended effects. However, we acknowledge the validity of the comments made about this use of terminology, and if we were starting the project now, it is very likely the terminology chosen would be different.

## Meet the New Generation

*In this section, we present a young scholar from the MAP-research community, typically a PhD student who is on B4U-ACT's email group for researchers. This is a way for B4U-ACT to honor individuals who demonstrate an authentic concern for the respect, dignity, mental health, and well-being of MAPs.*

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**Agatha Chronos, Psychology PhD Candidate**  
**University of Bergen, Norway**

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Agatha Chronos is a PhD Research Fellow at the University of Bergen, Norway. She first gained interest in sex research and forensic psychology during her postgraduate education in Investigative and Legal Psychology at the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute where she finished with honors.

She went on to pursue a career in research by earning a Research Master's Degree from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and has conducted research on deception detection, abuse, and paraphilia.

Agatha's current research focuses on the treatment needs and experiences of minor-attracted individuals, and the interaction between offense status and sexual attraction. Her PhD is part of the EU Horizon funded project 2PS - Prevent and Protect Through Support, which is a primary prevention-oriented project. Agatha believes that MAP wellbeing can be achieved through her current work, even if it is not the primary objective.

Going forward, Agatha hopes to work towards bridging the gap between primary prevention efforts and MAP wellbeing and mental health services, and to continue conducting research in the field.

## B4U-ACT Resources

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B4U-ACT is a 501(c)3 organization established to publicly promote professional services and resources for self-identified individuals who are sexually attracted to children and desire such assistance, and to educate mental health providers regarding approaches needed in understanding and responding to such individuals.

Our organization assists researchers from around the world, especially PhD students (<https://www.b4uact.org/research/research-collaboration/>). If you would like us to collaborate with you or your team on a project, and if you share our research ethos (<https://www.b4uact.org/about-us/statements-and-policies/research-ethos/>), contact us at [science@b4uact.org](mailto:science@b4uact.org). You can also email us if you would like to join our researcher email group.

We provide several additional services to support therapists, researchers, students, MAPs, and their family members:

- Workshops for professionals, researchers, and minor-attracted individuals (<https://www.b4uact.org/get-involved/attend-a-workshop/>)
- Advocacy/education (<https://www.b4uact.org/know-the-facts/>)
- Advice for MAPs seeking mental health services, including referral to approved professionals (<https://www.b4uact.org/attracted-to-minors/professional-support/>)
- Guidelines for therapists (<https://www.b4uact.org/psychotherapy-for-the-map/>)
- Online discussion group for professionals, researchers, and minor-attracted individuals (<https://www.b4uact.org/?event=dialog-on-therapy>)
- Peer support groups for MAPs (<https://www.b4uact.org/attracted-to-minors/peer-support/>) and their families (<https://www.b4uact.org/attracted-to-minors/support-for-family-friends>)