



# Born This Way? A Qualitative Examination of Public Perceptions of the Causes of Pedophilia and Sexual Offending against Children

Kelly Richards

Faculty of Law, School of Justice, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane Queensland, Australia

## ABSTRACT

Understanding public opinion about the causes of pedophilia and/or child sex offending is vital, as the views of the public influence how governments respond to sexual offenders. However, little research has been undertaken on this topic. This study addresses this gap by examining the causes that members of the public ascribe to pedophilia and/or child sexual abuse using qualitative data from online forums. The etiological accounts that the public gave provide important information for those developing public prevention policies and/or education campaigns about child sexual abuse. Key implications of these etiological explanations are analyzed in this regard.

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The research on public views about sex offenders clearly shows that the public feel anger and disgust (Harper and Harris 2016; Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer 2015; Spencer 2009) and hold punitive attitudes toward this group (Schiavone, Stacey, and Ackerman 2008; Katz Schiavone and Jeglic 2009; Kleban and Jeglic 2012; McCartan, Kemshall, and Tabachnick 2015; Mears et al. 2008; Rogers and Hirst 2011; Sundt et al. 1998; Willis, Malinen, and Johnston 2013), and support punitive and exclusionary policies such as sex offender registries, community notification, preventative detention, and residency restrictions (Brown, Deakin, and Jon 2008; Comartin, Kernsmith, and Kernsmith 2009; Katz Schiavone and Jeglic 2009; Levenson et al. 2007; Mears et al. 2008; Thakker 2012). The public supports harsher penalties for sexual than non-sexual offenders (Rogers and Ferguson 2011), and for child sex offenders than those who offend against adults (McAlinden 2007; McAvooy 2012; Mears et al. 2008; Rogers and Hirst 2011; Viki et al. 2012). Despite often supporting treatment for sex offenders (Kleban and Jeglic 2012; Levenson et al. 2007; Mears et al. 2008; Willis, Levenson, and Ward 2010), including child sex offenders (Esser-Stuart and Skibinski 1998; Rogers and Hirst 2011), the public remains doubtful about its efficacy (Schiavone, Stacey, and Ackerman 2008; Mancini 2014; McCartan, Kemshall, and Tabachnick 2015; Payne, Tewksbury, and Mustaine 2010; Quinn, Forsyth, and Carla 2004; Sundt et al. 1998; Willis, Levenson, and Ward 2010). Indeed, the notion that child sex offenders are untreatable has been identified as “probably the most deeply entrenched belief about sex offenders” (Federoff and Moran in Thakker 2012:160).

Understanding public perceptions of the causes of sexual interest in children and/or child sexual offending is vital as sex offender policy is heavily influenced by what the public wants (Harper and Harris 2016; Schiavone, Stacey, and Ackerman 2008; Pickett, Mancini, and Mears 2013) (or at least, what governments think the public wants (Allen 2002; Quinn, Forsyth, and Carla 2004)). Furthermore, the causes that individuals ascribe to child sexual abuse ostensibly inform their views about this phenomenon and how they believe that it should be responded to (Daro 2002; Furnham and Haraldsen 1998; Mancini and Pickett 2016; Overby 2014; Purvis, Ward, and Devilly 2003). Despite this, little research exists on this important topic.

Before this literature can be reviewed, it is important to clarify the terminology being employed in this article. Pedophilia—defined as a dominant sexual interest in prepubescent children (Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer 2015)—is not synonymous with sexual offending against children (McDonald 2016). Many individuals with pedophilia do not act on their sexual interest in children (Cantor and Ian 2016; Goode 2010), and conversely, many individuals who offend sexually against children are not pedophiles, but rather act opportunistically or for reasons other than sexual interest (Smallbone and Wortley 2001; Wortley and Smallbone 2006). There is, however, little understanding of this critical distinction among members of the public, with community members assuming that “pedophilia is closely linked to, or even synonymous with, the criminal conduct of child sexual abuse” (Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer 2015:29; see also; McCartan 2010). As a consequence, and as discussed in more detail below, this article examines public perceptions of these two discrete but related phenomena.

As Mancini and Pickett (2016: 274) recently lamented, very little research has been undertaken on public perceptions of the etiology of sexual interest in and/or offending against children (see also Paulauskas 2015; Pickett, Mancini, and Mears 2013). Indeed, to say that the extant literature is uninformative which would be an understatement. A number of complementary studies offer an insight into professionals’ views about the causes of child sexual offending (McCartan 2010; Purvis, Ward, and Devilly 2003; Ward et al. 1997), offenders’ own views about the causes of their offending (Mann and Hollin 2007; McKay, Chapman, and Long 1996; Paulauskas 2015), and public views about the causes of sexual offending against adults (Cowan and Quinton 1997), but are not directly relevant to the question of public perceptions about the causes of sexual interest in and/or offending against children. A related body of literature focuses on “attributions”—that is, the “causal theories” (Purvis, Ward, and Devilly 2003:103) or “explanations [that] people hold for social events” (Collings 2002:1136)—but this is also of limited utility. Attributions research on child sexual abuse tends to collapse the distinction between causes (i.e., what brings about behavior) and motives (what people try to achieve through the behavior) (Mann and Hollin 2007). It furthermore often conflates causal responsibility and moral responsibility (i.e., how an event could occur and who is responsible for it) and thus ultimately tends to focus on “variables relating to the attribution of blame to child sexual abuse victims” (Collings and Payne 1991: 513; see also; Collings 2002) rather than beliefs about the etiology of this abuse *per se*. Thus, despite the potential for research using an attributions framework to elucidate public perceptions of the etiology of sexual attraction to and/or offending against children, the existing literature ultimately provides little insight into this topic. Nonetheless, as discussed below, attributional studies provide a useful framework with which to analyze this topic, and as such have been utilized in the current research.

The remaining literature on this topic lacks conceptual cohesion, with researchers measuring and exploring varying phenomena (e.g., sexual interest in children versus sexual offending against children) and is beset by methodological limitations. Chief among these is reluctance on the part of researchers to differentiate sexual offending against adults and children (see e.g., Mancini and Pickett 2016; O’Neil and Morgan 2010).<sup>1</sup> A related conceptual limitation in the research is the grouping together of offending against prepubescent children and older adolescents and thus a lack of differentiation between child sexual abuse and statutory rape (e.g., Fontes and Tabachnik 2001; Walker and Panfil 2016). Most of the remaining relevant literature is heavily quantitative, and while it sheds light on the extent to which various etiological explanations are subscribed to by members of the public, it offers no insight into the nature, nuance or complexity of these explanations (see e.g., Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer 2015; Furnham and Haraldsen 1998; McCartan 2004; Paulauskas 2015).

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<sup>1</sup>Mancini and Pickett (2016:276, footnote 3) do not differentiate between sexual violence against adults and children on the grounds that “the public does not distinguish between offender “type,” but instead appears to endorse similar judgments toward a range of sex offenses,” despite evidence that the public does in fact support harsher penalties for child sex offenders than those who offend against adults (McAlinden 2007; McAvoy 2012; Mears et al. 2008; P.; Rogers and Hirst 2011; Viki et al. 2012; for a general discussion see Harper and Harris (2016)).

Despite these limitations, a number of common themes emerge from the literature that provide context for the current study. Chief among these is the public adherence to the cycle-of-abuse theory—that is, that victims of child sexual abuse develop a sexual interest in children and/or offend against children as a consequence of their own experiences of abuse. For example, Furnham and Haraldsen (1998) surveyed 105 adults about their views on the causes of four paraphilias. “Early relationships” (e.g., “they were sexually abused as children”) were the cause most commonly cited in relation to pedophilia (although a definition of pedophilia is not provided to the reader, and it is not clear whether the authors are examining sexual interest in, and/or abuse of, children). Fontes and Tabachnik (2001:112) likewise found a strong adherence to the cycle-of-abuse theory among their Latino/a and African American focus group participants ( $n = 20$ ): “Participants spoke frequently of abused children turning into abusers.” Participants in this study also put forward a range of other etiological explanations for child sexual abuse, including the sexualization of female children, the sexual needs of parents not being met within marriage, and immigration causing a breakdown of cultural norms (Fontes and Tabachnik 2001).

O’Neil and Morgan (2010) likewise found a mix of etiological explanations among their interviewees (20 American adults), including genetics, (moral) sickness, and the cycle-of-abuse. Predominantly, however, perpetrators of sexual violence were conceptualized as “made, not born” (see further Paulauskas 2015), with participants commenting, for example, that “[perpetrators] experienced [sexual violence] when they were young so they grew up thinking it’s right,” and “they always say that an abused child becomes an abuser” (cited in O’Neil and Morgan 2010:16).

In the only existing study that includes a focus on public perceptions of adult sexual interest in children, Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer (2015:25, 28) administered a brief in-person survey with 405 individuals in Dresden, Germany, and a brief online survey with 201 individuals via a USA-based crowdsourcing service. They found that substantial proportions of respondents (29% and 44%, respectively) agreed with the statement “people have the choice whether they have a dominant sexual interest in children or not.” (The other statements put to participants did not relate to the causes of sexual interest in and/or offending against children).

In summary, due to very limited research, as well as a variety of methodological limitations and a lack of conceptual clarity, little is known about the etiological explanations that the public holds in relation to pedophilia and/or child sexual abuse. Taken together, findings from the scant research on this topic suggest some adherence to the view that sexual interest in children is innate (Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer 2015), and that sexual offending against children is caused by the cycle-of-abuse (Fontes and Tabachnik 2001; Furnham and Haraldsen 1998; O’Neil and Morgan 2010).

The current study begins to address this gap in knowledge by exploring public perceptions of the etiology of sexual attraction to and/or offending against children using qualitative data sourced from online forums. The research sought to understand both how the public makes sense of this problem (i.e., what they think causes it), and whether and how their etiological explanations inform views about the blameworthiness and rehabilitability of child sex offenders. This article makes a significant contribution toward our understanding of this topic, given the lack of existing research, particularly qualitative research.

The remainder of this article is presented in four main parts. First, the conceptual background to the study—the use of attributions theory—and its relevance to the current research are outlined. Following this, the methodology used for the research is described. In the third section, findings from the qualitative data analysis about public views on the causes of sexual attraction to and/or offending against children are presented. This section includes a detailed discussion of the various ways in which public etiologies inform beliefs about the blameworthiness and rehabilitability of pedophiles and/or child sex offenders. In the final section, this article considers the implications of this research, and argues that while the etiologies proposed by the public seem divergent, they all act to “other” pedophiles and/or child sex offenders. It concludes by outlining the importance of this main finding for policy, practice, and future research.

## Conceptual background

As noted above, attributions theory has been utilized in the existing research on etiological explanations of sexual attraction to and/or offending against children, but with limited effect. Nonetheless, attributions theory provides a useful framework for investigating this topic. Attributions theory is concerned with people's explanatory thinking—it seeks to understand the explanations that individuals give to social events and how behavior and motivations are affected by these explanations (Collings 2002).

Four dimensions or “continua of causal explanation” (Benson 1989:308) constitute attributions theory: locus of control (or internality); stability; controllability; and globality (Benson 1989; McKay, Chapman, and Long 1996; Purvis, Ward, and Devilly 2003). Locus of control considers whether causes are internal or external to the individual; stability considers the changeability of causes over time; controllability refers to the degree to which causes are within the control of the individual—“the degree of volitional influence that the individual could have exerted over a cause” (Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer 2015:23); and globality refers to the “degree to which the cause is generalizable to all areas of the individual's behavior or confined to specific areas” (Benson 1989:308).

A key assumption of attributions theory is that a logical relationship will exist between individuals' etiological attributions about a particular problem and the solutions that they support in relation to that problem. For example, Furnham and Haraldsen (1998:690) hypothesized a “clear, logical...relationship between lay people's attributions of etiology and [beliefs about] treatment/cure of paraphilia”. More specifically, it has been argued that where causes are deemed to be internal and controllable, the responsibility of the individual is heightened (Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer 2015): “individuals are more likely to be held personally responsible if their actions are viewed as the result of internal, controllable factors” (Whitehead and Baker 2012:489). Indeed, “controllability,” which Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer (2015:23) posit as virtually synonymous with “responsibility,” leads to “reduced pity, increased anger, and aggressive behavior, where people suffering from a condition that is perceived as controllable run a higher risk of being devalued” (Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer 2015:23). Conversely, a condition that is “natural” or uncontrollable “usually leads to more favorable responses as people are convinced that the other person is not to ”blame” for his or her condition” (Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer 2015; see also Overby 2014). For example, research indicates that a belief that homosexuality results from natural or genetic factors informs more favorable attitudes toward lesbian and gay people (Whitehead and Baker 2012), and support for gay marriage and adoption (Overby 2014). This is important in the context of the current study because this research sought to examine both public opinion about the etiology of sexual attraction to children and/or sexual offending against children, *and* ways in which these etiological explanations inform beliefs about the blameworthiness and treatability of pedophiles and/or child sexual abusers. As outlined in the following section, in contrast to the existing literature, this research combines attributions theory with a qualitative methodological framework.

## Methodology

Social media analysis is a relatively new method in public opinion research (American Association for Public Opinion Research [AAPOR] 2014; Anstead and O'Loughlin 2015; Prichard et al. 2015). A number of limitations of using social media in place of traditional data collection techniques to gauge public opinion have been identified and are relevant to the current study. Perhaps the principal criticism is that this approach lacks the representativeness that can be attained by traditional surveys that use random sampling techniques (AAPOR 2014). Data obtained from social media sources can, however, provide an insight into the qualitative nature of individuals' views. As such, the current study seeks to examine the *nature* of etiological explanations of sexual interest in and/or offending against children, rather than to quantify the *extent* of these.

A further criticism is that data obtained from social media have been characterized as involving a low signal-to-noise ratio (AAPOR 2014); that is, without the guidance of a researcher or instrument, those who make comments on social media tend to go “off topic.” The “topic,” of course, is what the researcher wants “participants” to discuss, rather than what “participants” themselves want to discuss. A counter-argument to this criticism is therefore that social media allow data to emerge organically—in a “natural setting” (Collings 2002:1136)—rather than according to constraints imposed by the researcher; this arguably provides the researcher with an insight into what is important to posters, without the influence of the researcher. In this sense, their responses might be considered akin to data produced via a loosely-structured focus group in which participants are given scope to raise topics of importance to themselves in response to an initial topic posed by the researcher. This approach is advocated by O’Neil and Morgan (2010:8; italics in original), who argue that a key to eliciting data that reflect ways of thinking about etiologies is giving participants “freedom to follow topics in the directions *they* deemed relevant and not in directions the interviewer believed most germane.”

Finally, using social media data to examine public opinion is limited as it is usually impossible to determine the demographic characteristics of posters, such as age and sex (Malesky and Ennis 2004), leaving researchers unable to explore relationships between demographics and public opinion (AAPOR 2014). The current study does not, however, seek to examine such relationships, and in any case, the literature on public opinion about sex offenders clearly shows that demographic characteristics are not consistently related to individuals’ opinions (e.g., Center for Sex Offender Management 2010; Rogers and Ferguson 2011; Willis, Malinen, and Johnston 2013; Rogers and Hirst 2011).

Data for this research came from four online forums, all of which emerged in response to the announcement in March 2015 of the first Australian trial of the Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) program. COSA are an innovative measure that seek to reduce reoffending by convicted child sex offenders by creating networks of trained community volunteers to assist offenders to reintegrate following their release from prison (Petrunik, Murphy, and Paul Federoff 2008). While COSA have been long established in North America and Europe, Australian governments have been reluctant to fund COSA programs (Richards 2011). However, in March 2015, journalist Elise Worthington (2015) published an article for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation announcing the first Australian trial of COSA, to be managed by a nongovernment organization in Adelaide, South Australia. This announcement was met with much online debate and discussion among members of the public, providing a unique and rich insight into public views about pedophilia, sexual offending against children, and preferred responses to these issues. The four online forums on which this public debate took place form the dataset for the current study. The data are as follows:

- all comments ( $n = 361$ ) made by members of the public on the Facebook page of current affairs television program *Insight* in response to Worthington’s (2015) article between March 19, 2015 (when the article was first posted) and March 22, 2015 inclusive (no new comments were posted after this date; see [https://www.facebook.com/InsightSBS/posts/10153133194670902?\\_\\_mref=message\\_bubble](https://www.facebook.com/InsightSBS/posts/10153133194670902?__mref=message_bubble)). (Worthington’s story was initially aired on ABC radio and posted online on the ABC News website on March 19, 2015, and was posted on the *Insight* Facebook page on the same day);
- all comments ( $n = 103$ ) posted on the Facebook page of current affairs television program *Today Tonight* in response to Nielsen’s (2015) *Today Tonight* story about the Adelaide COSA program (see <https://www.facebook.com/ttadelaide>) between 9 April (when the program aired) and April 18, 2015 (the period during which the vast majority of comments were posted);
- all comments ( $n = 112$ ) posted on the Fighters Against Child Abuse Australia (FACAA) Facebook page in response to the announcement of the COSA program between 25 March (when FACAA posted the story on its Facebook page) and April 18, 2015 (the period during

which the vast majority of comments were posted) (see <https://www.facebook.com/facaau/photos/a.130983213613915.12907.104181729627397/865920913453471/>); and

- all comments ( $n = 192$ ) posted in the [www.change.org](https://www.change.org/p/south-australian-parliament-stop-the-COSA-trial-in-south-australia-immediately-south-australia-are-trialing-a-program-to-offer-child-rapists-friendship-and-support-instead-of-prison-time#petition-updates) petition “Stop the COSA Trial in South Australia Immediately” (see <https://www.change.org/p/south-australian-parliament-stop-the-COSA-trial-in-south-australia-immediately-south-australia-are-trialing-a-program-to-offer-child-rapists-friendship-and-support-instead-of-prison-time#petition-updates>) between early April (when the petition was created) and April 18, 2015 (the period during which the vast majority of comments were posted).

Although other media stories appeared on Australian television and radio following the announcement of the COSA program, no online comments were posted in relation to these. A *population* rather than a *sample* of comments (Bachmann and Schutt 2012) relating to the introduction of the COSA program has therefore been analyzed for this article (total  $n = 768$ ).

An important consideration in relation to these forums is whether they attract predominantly liberal or conservative readers and posters, and therefore, whether the data might be biased in favor of either a liberal or conservative political orientation. The first online forum listed above is associated with media outlets considered liberal in the Australian context. Worthington’s (2015) story was published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Australia’s government-owned national public broadcaster, which is considered to reflect a liberal bias. In contrast, television current affairs program *Today Tonight* is considered a conservative, “shock jock”-style current affairs program. The remaining two forums were not initiated by a broadcaster, but rather by members of the public themselves, and therefore cannot be categorized in these terms. Rather, they attracted members of the public keen to express their views on the COSA program. Views posted across the four forums therefore are likely to represent a mix of political persuasions; certainly, there was no distinctive flavor in any of the forums about either support for COSA (Richards and McCartan, *in press*) or causal beliefs about pedophilia and/or child sex offending. In any case, while political orientation has been shown to be related to punitive views about criminal justice policy *generally*, it does not predict opinion about sex offender policy *specifically*, with members of the public largely supporting punitive and exclusionary measures irrespective of their political leanings (Duncan 2012; Mancini 2014). For example, Mancini (2014) attempted to identify factors such as race and political orientation that might predict views about sex offender policy but found that few social and demographic controls consistently predicted these. Mancini (2014:464) thus concluded that “views directly related to sexual offending (and not simply social and demographic characteristics) may serve as more robust predictors of public perceptions of sex crime policy” (see also Mancini and Mears 2010; Payne, Tewksbury, and Mustaine 2010). It is to addressing this topic—public views of the causes of sexual attraction to and/or offending against children—that this article seeks to make a contribution.

All comments were copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word file before being imported into qualitative data analysis software program NVIVO for coding. Prior to this, the data were read through twice in order for a process of familiarization to occur; this process is vital when thematic analysis is being undertaken in order to avoid superficial analyses (Caulfield and Hill 2014). Open or inductive coding was then undertaken to identify the broad etiological categories reflected in posters’ comments. Open coding involves undertaking a detailed reading(s) of the data and allowing new (i.e., not pre-determined) themes to emerge (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Four main categories (sexual orientation; mental illness; choice; and cycle-of-abuse) were identified by this process as discussed in the following section.

A thematic analysis, involving “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006; Grbich 2013), was then undertaken. Thematic analysis is appropriate for research projects that aim to “explore the views, perceptions and/or experiences of groups or individuals, and any differences or similarities in these” (Caulfield and Hill 2014:183). The thematic analysis of the four coded categories (sexual orientation; mental illness; choice; and cycle-of-abuse)

was conducted using two analytic frames. The first was the attributional dimensions of locus of control, stability, and controllability. (As it has been well established that sexual interest in and/or offending against children constitutes a “totalizing identity category” (Angelides 2005:273), the attributional dimension of globality was excluded from the current analysis (see also M. McKay, Chapman, and Long 1996)). Second, the analysis was concerned with the blameworthiness and rehabilitability of pedophiles and/or child sex offenders that these in turn imply. In other words, the analysis of the data was concerned with: how the public construct the causes of sexual attraction to and/or offending against children; the attributional dimensions that these etiologies reflect; and the ways in which these etiologies inform public opinion about the blameworthiness and treatability of this group.

The use of comments posted to online forums for research raises a number of ethical issues (Prichard et al. 2015). Chief among these in the current study is that posters’ comments have been used without their consent. As obtaining consent from every individual poster would have been impracticable, and as comments were posted to public forums, a waiver of consent was obtained from Queensland University of Technology’s Human Research Ethics Committee to undertake the research (approval #1600000209). In accordance with this approval, all posters have been deidentified in this article.

## Findings

Posters’ comments indicated that they held a complex array of beliefs about the causes of sexual attraction to and/or sexual offending against children. Four primary etiologies were identified via the process of data analysis described above: sexual orientation; mental illness; choice; and the cycle-of-abuse. These are discussed in turn in the following subsections.

### Sexual orientation

One of the four etiological explanations that the public proposed was that sexual attraction to children (and in some cases, child sexual abuse) is a sexual orientation, akin to hetero- or homosexuality. Many comments reflecting this view were posted across the four online forums, including:

They do it because their sexual orientation is children.  
I don’t believe that anyone chooses who they are attracted to.  
If their brain says its children [there is] nothing anyone can do to change that.  
The idea that it is a choice is bullshit! It’s like saying people choose to be gay.

This etiological category clearly reflects the attributional dimensions of internality and stability, with members of the public frequently proposing biological explanations for sexual interest in children, such as making reference to “the part of the brain that controls sexual tendencies”, and the “wiring” of pedophiles and/or child sexual abusers (see also O’Neil and Morgan 2010). The perceived biological basis of pedophilia is perhaps best captured in the comment that “U can’t “cure” a persons eye color! And u can’t cure the way these child rapists think or behave.” For the most part, those who subscribed to this explanation also viewed pedophilia as uncontrollable, as the preceding comments demonstrate. However, a small number of posters differentiated between sexual attraction to children and its expression in the form of child sexual abuse, commenting for instance that “I don’t think they choose to fantasies [*sic*] about a child. [But] they have a choice to act or not act upon it.” Thus, while the vast majority of posters in this category constructed pedophilia as internal, stable and uncontrollable, a small group of posters maintained that while pedophilia is internal and stable, its manifestation as child sexual abuse is not inevitable.

Predominantly, a belief in the intrinsic nature of sexual attraction to children informed a belief that pedophiles are inherently risky and untreatable. For example, posters stated that “it is their sexual preference, there is no ‘cure’ and the[y] won’t change”, “They are not curable because it is in

their genetic makeup!” and “if heterosexuality became an offence...[nothing]...could make me gay. These people are the way they are and can’t be changed.” This finding is largely unsurprising, given the public’s staunch adherence to the notion of sex offender untreatability (O’Neil and Morgan 2010; Thakker 2012). However, it advances on the existing research by illuminating the belief systems that inform this view.

What *is* surprising about this etiological explanation, however, is the degree of blameworthiness that posters still ascribed to this group, even though they adhered to the belief that sexual attraction to children is beyond the control of the individual. Indeed, in many instances, the view that sexual attraction to children is innate, and therefore incurable, actually *increased* the degree of blameworthiness that posters attributed to the individual. For example, the following comments demonstrate that for some posters, the intrinsic nature of sexual attraction to children—its internality, stability and (usually) uncontrollability—provides rationale for their calls for harsher responses: “If a person cannot control their sexual orientations, fantasies...[or]...desires where it may harm another human being, including children, we must act to deal harshly with these vile people”; “Hang them...they don’t get better..you can’t change your sexual preference.” Importantly, in these examples, it is not simply the case that a belief in the innateness of sexual attraction to children increases the perceived *dangerousness* of the individual, but that it increases the perceived *blameworthiness* of the individual. Furthermore, this apparently applies to individuals who are sexually attracted to children, irrespective of whether they have acted on this attraction.

### **Mental illness**

Another etiological explanation proposed by the public is that sexual attraction to and/or offending against children is a manifestation of mental illness, with individuals frequently making reference to an “illness,” “a mental health issue,” and the need for “mental health support” and to help “the mentally ill.” As this phraseology suggests, this etiological category reflects the attributional dimension of internality, with members of the public constructing mental illness and its expression as intrinsic to the individual (e.g., “pedophilia is also a sort of mental illness. Their brain isn’t “wired” correctly, causing them to be sexually attracted to children”). These comments, like a number of others posted in the online forums (e.g., “they have a brain malfunction and they cannot change”; “pedophilia is a disease there is no rehab”), likewise illustrate some posters’ adherence to the attributional dimension of stability. Others, however, conceptualized mental illness as amenable to treatment (and thus as unstable). For some, a belief that child sex offending results from a mental illness meant that the problem is treatable, like other mental illnesses. For example, individuals claimed that “therapy has been known to help and cure people. It is an illness,” and “these people have some severe mental issues. And if they recognize they need help before they act, then we should embrace it and help them.” While the above comments likewise reflect a construction of mental illness—and in turn, sexual interest in and/or offending against children—as largely uncontrollable, it stands to reason that those who believe that therapy may be beneficial ascribe a degree of controllability to the individual.

This construction of the cause of sexual interest in and/or abuse of children likewise informed individuals’ beliefs about the blameworthiness of offenders, again in complex and multifaceted ways. As might be expected, perceiving the cause of pedophilia and/or child sexual abuse as rooted in mental illness usually coincided with a view of this group as having reduced blameworthiness. This view is most clearly reflected in the claim that “these people are not, at the essence, evil....They are sick.” However, while perceiving the cause of pedophilia to be mental illness in the main underpinned more sympathetic responses, this was not uniformly the case. For others, a belief in the mental illness etiological explanation conversely informed punitive views, on the grounds that mental illness makes pedophiles an unacceptable risk: “They are mentally ill and should be kept out of society. The risk far outweighs their rights to freedom.”

Two points should be considered in relation to this etiological category. First, some individuals' beliefs that pedophilia and/or child sexual abuse is caused by mental illness are highly tautological. In some cases, it is difficult to establish whether members of the public believe that people sexually abuse children because they are mentally ill, or whether they are mentally ill because they sexually abuse children. In other words, it is unclear whether mental illness is a *cause* of the abuse or the abuse is *evidence* of a mental illness. As one poster put it: "its an illness. Whom in their right mind could perpetrate a sexual act upon a child". In this example, child sexual offending is constructed as evidence of an abuser's mental illness rather than an expression or realization of it.

Second, more so than the other public etiologies identified, there was strong resistance to the notion that mental illness is the cause of pedophilia and/or child sexual abuse. This conceptualization was disputed by some posters who felt that to class sexual attraction to children and/or child sexual abuse as a mental illness is offensive to people with mental illnesses: "They're not mentally ill. That's offensive"; and "That is not mental [*sic*] illness it[']s evil full stop." In some cases, posters were reluctant to categorize those with a sexual interest in children as having a mental illness as this may minimize the degree of responsibility assigned to pedophiles and/or child sexual abusers, and/or ascribe a degree of humanity to members of this group: "pedophilia is not a mental illness. It[']s a perversion"; "they are perverted..not mentally ill!"; and "People defending these filthy monsters and hiding it behind a "mental" illness are pathetic."

### Choice

Another etiological category is that of "choice." Those who adhered to this explanation of child sexual abuse referred to perpetrators' "CHOICE TO TAKE A CHILDS INNOCENCE AND LIFE AWAY" (emphasis in original), the "choice they have made to permanently destroy a child's life by raping them," "the choice to hurt a child," and their "sick cowardly choice that they make to destroy a child." A related group of posters viewed child sexual abuse as an expression of power and control over victims. Comments included: "they are the same as rapists, it's all about the control of the person [victim]"; "They do it because they get off on the power over their victims"; and "There are other sexual predators who do it for power." In these examples, child sexual abusers are conceptualized as calculating and rational, as making a deliberate decision, rather than being driven by a perceived innate or internal force such as a sexual orientation or mental illness.

Importantly, even sexual attraction to children in and of itself was explained by some posters as a choice:

For an adult to be fantasizing about raping children means that they have made a choice between having sexual feelings toward children over having sexual feelings towards adults.

An adult who spontaneously realizes that they are attracted to children is making a choice, a cowardly choice.

They have made a choice between having sexual feelings toward children over having sexual feelings toward adults.

While this characterization of the etiology of sexual interest in and/or abuse of children provides little insight into the attributional dimension of stability, it clearly reflects the dimensions of internality and controllability. As the preceding quotes attest, choice—about whether to be attracted to children and/or whether to act on this attraction—is constructed in particular as inherently controllable: "they have the same choice as all adults...[Will]...I be violent, alcoholic, drug addict or not." Unsurprisingly, attributing the cause of the problem to choice coincides strongly with the belief that members of this group are fully responsible—and thus blameworthy—for their thoughts and actions, as the above examples demonstrate.

Surprisingly, however, those who constructed sexual attraction to and/or offending against children as a choice often did not consider this to influence the treatability of this group. While it stands to reason that a chosen rather than innate sexual interest in children might be treated

(or unchosen), in the minds of some posters, this choice actually made individuals *more* responsible for their thoughts and actions and in turn, *less* deserving of and amenable to treatment:

We are talking about adults who have made the choice to fantasize about children rather than adults. Yes it is a choice a choice they have made to permanently destroy a child's life by raping them. No these people do not deserve pity they do not deserve help...because making that choice makes them a permanent danger to children everywhere.

It's a cultural issue...perhaps a lifestyle choice...these predators cannot be rehabilitated!

For these posters, choosing sexual attraction to children seems so perverse that it makes these individuals less deserving of, and therefore (ironically) less amenable to, rehabilitative measures.

A key point that should be considered alongside this etiological category is that for many posters, while sexual offending against children (and even sexual interest in children) stems from a choice on the part of the individual (i.e., is controllable), once abuse has occurred, perpetrators develop an uncontrollable, insatiable sexual appetite for children. This theme emerged strongly from the data, with comments including: "It is known by many that anyone who sexually abuses a child...they are not going to stop at one child, they are like a dog that once it has tasted human blood will go back for more," "Once they carry through with actually harming a child they WILL offend again" (emphasis in original), "once they have acted upon their fantasy they NEED it" (emphasis in original), and "Once they start they will never stop." In this narrative, a child sexual abuser is only in control of his desires until he offends, at which point he is constructed as insatiable and out of control. This distinction is important because it supports the public narrative of the insatiable, unstoppable, out-of-control child sex offender while maintaining the (seemingly contradictory) belief in choice (and therefore in the total responsibility of the offender).

### **Cycle-of-abuse**

Finally, posters commonly viewed sexual attraction to and/or offending against children as a manifestation of the cycle-of-abuse theory—that is, the notion that child sexual abusers were themselves abused as children, and go on to perpetuate the abuse as adults. For example, posters referred to the "vicious cycle" of abuse and claimed that "Most of them have been sexually abused as kids"; "They are almost always manifesting their own abuse"; "Most offenders were abused themselves"; and "Most are, themselves, survivors of the very abuse they perpetrate".

The cycle-of-abuse represents the only etiological explanation that is attributed to an external influence. Unlike the three etiological categories discussed above, those who perceive sexual attraction to and/or offending against children as a manifestation of the cycle-of-abuse construct its cause as external to the individual. This is significant as it is one of the few avenues via which members of the public make sense of child sexual abuse in a somewhat sympathetic way that may foster an acceptance of progressive approaches towards preventing and responding to it (such as Circles of Support and Accountability (see further Richards and Kieran [In press](#))).

Posters' narratives reflected a variety of positions along the continuum of the attributional dimension of stability. As members of the public overwhelmingly support therapeutic treatment for *victims* of child sexual abuse (Richards and Kieran [In press](#)), constructing perpetrators as victims usually requires them to acknowledge perpetrators' potential changeability as well. If perpetrators are victims, and victims can be helped to heal from their trauma (via increased therapy, for which numerous posters advocated), then it stands to reason that perpetrators too can be helped: "they are almost always manifesting their own abuse and can be helped as they can be healed from their trauma".

In some instances, the cycle-of-abuse explanation simultaneously lessens perceived blameworthiness and increases rehabilitability, as exemplified in the previous quote. This was similarly reflected in a number of other posters' comments:

The perpetrators were once victims themselves. It is a learned behavior and therefore can be reversed.

Most of them were abused themselves. It's a vicious cycle, ethically it's a complex issue....[I would support] Making them accountable to someone and providing a form of structure to prevent it from happening again.

However, this was not uniformly the case. Other members of the public adhered to the cycle-of-abuse theory but did not consider this to lessen the blameworthiness of perpetrators. As one poster stated, "they act out their own abuse...[against]...their peers and younger kids....a pedophile is created by other pedophiles and *of course the adult pedophile has a choice and keeps choosing*" (italics added). Narratives such as this seek to explain child sexual abuse while maintaining the image of the perpetrator as fully responsible for his actions and thus blameworthy. In this way, members of the public are able to make sense of the problem of child sexual abuse but continue to support policies that exclude and vilify offenders.

For another poster, the cycle-of-abuse theory may diminish the blameworthiness of the offender, but this does not have the effect of increases his rehabilitability:

Over 90% have been abused themselves they need help as what they have gone through does cause brain damage of sorts due to the trauma of sexual abuse. Getting help after will not help as their brains change beyond repair.

The above discussion supports previous research that has identified the cycle-of-abuse theory as a commonly-used explanation for pedophilia and/or child sexual abuse on the part of the public (Fontes and Tabachnik 2001; O'Neil and Morgan 2010). However, it advances on this existing research considerably, demonstrating that there is resistance to this etiological explanation, and also that while for some, it creates a pathway toward understanding, for others, it neither mediates the blameworthiness of perpetrators nor confers on them any hope of treatability.

## Discussion

The findings outlined above identify four discrete (indeed, competing) etiological explanations that the public use to account for pedophilia and/or child sexual abuse. These etiologies reflect varying points along the continua of the attributional dimensions of internality, stability and controllability. Moreover, they are closely intertwined with—they both support and are supported by—a range of competing and contradictory beliefs about the blameworthiness and rehabilitability of pedophiles and/or child sex offenders.

While these etiological explanations appear varied, however, they all act to individualize, pathologize and/or homogenize pedophiles and/or child sex offenders. They do this in a number of interrelated ways. First, while a small number of posters did consider "power" and "control" as antecedents of offending, as discussed above, this was exclusively expressed in individualized terms. Posters did not view abusers' desire for power and control in structural (feminist) terms, despite the highly gendered nature of child sexual abuse, and despite feminist efforts to frame the issue in these terms (Angelides 2005). In fact, not one poster viewed child sexual abuse as related to patriarchal social structures that promote male access to and control of the bodies of girls and women. In this way, the problem is pathologized, individualized and largely internalized. Even the one etiological explanation with an element of externality—the cycle-of-abuse theory—does not posit social forces or structures as part of the problem, but rather positions other, existing, child sex offenders as the cause of the problem.

At the same time, the public etiologies presented above homogenize pedophiles and child sex offenders. Much of the language utilized by members of the public not only conflates pedophiles and child sex offenders but also constructs members of both these groups as essentially the same: "*these people* are mentally broken and *they* can't be fixed"; "*they* don't see anything wrong in what *they* do"; "*these filthy monsters*" (italics added). In this way, "they" are different from "us", but not from one

another. This public focuses on “them” (an imagined group of individuals) rather than “that” (the social phenomenon of sexual attraction to and/or offending against children) again serves to pathologize pedophiles and child sex offenders. This is particularly incongruous in the online comments analyzed for this study, given that posters were responding to an article not about a group of people, but about a criminal justice program (Circles of Support and Accountability) designed to address a social problem.

These interrelated etiological processes also have the effect of delegitimizing—indeed, silencing—any consideration of social, structural, opportunistic and/or environmental causes of child sexual offending. While it has been well documented that much child sexual abuse is not committed by pedophiles (Walker and Panfil 2016) (i.e., is opportunistic rather than predatory (Smallbone and Wortley 2001; Wortley and Smallbone 2006)); this is virtually absent from comments posted in the online forums. Indeed, the very notion that child sexual abuse could be opportunistic is anathema to what members of the public (want to) believe. It implies that pedophilia is not fixed and finite, but rather that child sexual abuse may occur if the setting enables it, that any man or even all men might succumb under the “right” circumstances, raising the question of whether pedophiles’ “apparently clear distinction from the majority of men is absolute or a matter of degree” (West 2000:412). To countenance causes other than individualized ones would render false the palatable model of pedophilia that the public has constructed and is deeply invested in (that “pedophiles” are a coherent, identifiable category). The public’s conflation of pedophilia and child sexual offending, while understandable, might also be viewed as serving this purpose. To believe that some people who offend sexually against children are not pedophiles—that is, do not have an innate, enduring sexual attraction to children—is simply unacceptable and unpalatable.

The processes of individualizing, pathologizing, and homogenizing inherent in the public’s causal narratives construct pedophiles and child sex offenders as a “separate psychic identity” (Angelides 2005:276), and in doing so, produce a kind of extreme “other.” While it has been well established that sex offenders are constructed as the “other” in public discourse (Cowburn and Dominelli 2001; Jahnke, Imhoff, and Hoyer 2015; McDonald 2016; Spencer 2009), the current research demonstrates not only that the public engages in processes of extreme othering of pedophiles and child sex offenders, but that it creates causal narratives that produce, support and reflect this extreme othering. This process—which we might call “etiological othering”—serves an important purpose: it renders the public’s preferred response to child sexual abusers—that is, their total and permanent excision from the community, or as posters themselves put it, “delete them from society,” “absolute elimination is what is needed,” “they [should be] kulled [*sic*] from decent community”—seem plausible, when in fact it is not.

That members of the public almost invariably engaged in processes of etiological othering raises an important question about whether beliefs about the causes of pedophilia and/or child sex offending inform opinions about the “cure.” The findings outlined above demonstrate that—in contrast to the premise of attributions theory, which assumes that individuals’ understandings of the causes of phenomena shape their views about responding to them—in the case of pedophilia and/or child sexual abuse, *any* belief about etiology can be used to support *any* opinion about how this problem should be addressed. For example, a belief in the immutable nature of sexual attraction to children led to both calls for sympathy and support, and for harsher responses including the death penalty. Similarly, the other etiological explanations outlined above informed a complex matrix of beliefs about pedophiles’ and/or child sex offenders’ blameworthiness and capacity for rehabilitation, and in turn, about acceptable policy responses.

However—and perhaps more significantly—*any* causal explanation can be used to justify the dominant desired response: permanently eliminating pedophiles and/or child sex offenders from the community, either through permanent incarceration, banishment, or death. Indeed, despite this complex web of beliefs, the solutions put forward by the community overwhelmingly involved simply excising pedophiles and/or child sex offenders from the community: “send these people to Nauru”; “they should ship them all to christmas island! have no kids around, its a fact that you

cannot cure someones sexuality”; “bring back the death penalty or send them to Indonesia!!!!”; “som[e]where in the middle of the desert with no water would be a good place for them!”; “build a housing facility somewhere in the middle of nowhere and lock them up with each other”. (These proposed solutions have particular salience in the Australian context, as these locations—Nauru, Christmas Island, Indonesia, and the desert—the “middle of nowhere”—are those that the Australian Government has, or has sought to, detain asylum seekers—another group that much of the public despises and seeks to permanently exclude (F. McKay, Thomas, and Kneebone 2012)). The etiological explanations proposed by members of the public therefore reflect in a psychic and explanatory sense what they would like to have done to this group in a tangible sense.

Thus, while it stands to reason that viewing the cause of a problem as being beyond an individual’s control ought to engender sympathy for that individual—and this has been found to be the case with other perceived social “problems” such as homosexuality (Overby 2014; Whitehead and Baker 2012 )—pedophilia and child sex offending clearly present exceptions. As the preceding analysis shows, while members of the public ascribed a range of etiological explanations to pedophilia and/or child sex offending, variously constructing the problem as internal/external, stable/unstable, and controllable/uncontrollable, any and all of these causal categories could and did ultimately lead to the conclusion that pedophiles and/or child sexual abusers ought to be somehow eradicated. Thus, while etiological explanations for sexual attraction to and/or offending against children *might* lead to any preferred response, they apparently rarely *do*, with the public instead adhering to a variety of causal theories, each of which ultimately lends legitimacy to the public’s dominant desire to exclude and vilify pedophiles and child sex offenders.

In relation to blameworthiness and treatability, the above discussion likewise demonstrates that for the public, either those who are sexually attracted to and/or offend against children can’t be helped (and therefore there is no point trying), or they can be helped but as a corollary of this (that is, because the attraction is *not* innate), they don’t deserve to be. This contradictory constellation of public views about child sex offending and what should be done about it is perhaps best captured in the following comments:

Child abusers (in any form) cannot and will not be rehabilitated.

How do you rehabilitate someone who stuffed up a child’s life..or why would you want to.

Here, perpetrators are paradoxically constructed as both *unable* and *unwilling* to be rehabilitated, and as undeserving of opportunities for rehabilitation in any case. While this finding is largely unsurprising, given that the notion of untreatability has been identified as a “deep-seated, powerful and pervasive assumption” (O’Neil and Morgan 2010:23), the current analysis builds on this existing research by demonstrating that notions of untreatability inform and are informed by causal narratives about pedophilia and/or child sex offending.

This suggests that the direction of causality upon which attributions theory is premised ought to be revisited. Do members of the public favor particular policy responses because of the causal theories that they ascribe to pedophilia and/or child sex offending, or do they instead construct causal theories that support their existing views about acceptable policy responses? The analysis presented above suggests that views about how to respond may in fact inform views about causality, as reflected in the post “Hang them...they don’t get better..you can’t change your sexual preference”.

## Conclusion

This article set out to address an under-examined question in the broader area of public opinion about sex offenders and sex offender policy: what do members of the public believe causes sexual attraction to and/or offending against children? It addressed this question by analyzing qualitative comments posted to four online forums following the public announcement of Australia’s first Circles of Support and Accountability program. This analysis highlighted that despite the diversity of etiological explanations produced by the public, these almost invariably served to “other” pedophiles

and child sex offenders and construct them as distinct and external from the community. A number of implications stem from this analysis.

First, it suggests that changing the public narrative about the etiology of sexual attraction to children is unlikely to result in a change of public opinion, since beliefs are firmly adhered to by the public and essentially pre-rational: “people *feel* a response before they deliberately consider the issue” (Harper and Harris 2016; italics in original). Thus, while the dramatic increase in perceiving homosexuality as an innate sexual orientation has resulted in more favorable public views of lesbian and gay individuals and support for gay marriage and adoption (Overby 2014; Whitehead and Baker 2012), it does not follow that a shift toward perceiving pedophilia as a sexual orientation (a view that is increasingly supported by the scientific literature (Seto 2012; see Walker and Panfil 2016; for a discussion)) will result in similar levels of acceptance or support (even in the absence of offending).

Second, the current research provides important information for those developing and implementing programs or policy designed to prevent or respond to child sexual abuse, and/or public education campaigns around this topic. For example, it may help explain the public resistance to community-based initiatives such as Circles of Support and Accountability identified by Richards and Kieran *In press*, as in contrast with the public etiologies examined above, these operate on a model that assumes that child sexual abuse is neither fixed nor finite, and radically posit creating supportive communities around sex offenders as a pathway to desistence.

A related point is that the etiologies identified in this article may help explain the persistence of the “stranger danger” myth and the public adherence to it. Since the ways in which the public accounted for sexual interest in and/or offending against children all sought to “other” this group, it may follow that it is not that the public do not *believe* that family members and trusted others can be abusers, but that they do not *want* to believe this. The etiological explanations outlined in this article thus suggest that the stranger danger narrative plays an important cultural function by allowing members of the public to construct abusers as inherently and irredeemably “other.” This is again vital information for those developing preventative and public information measures around child sexual abuse.

A final point is that more research is needed—both into public opinion about sex offenders generally, and about views on causality specifically, due to the lack of existing literature. In particular, qualitative research is necessary to provide insights into the nuances and complexities of public opinion, which quantitative research has thus far failed to capture. Qualitative research using a large, representative sample of the public would best meet this aim, build on the research presented in this article, and contribute to our understanding of this important topic.

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## Notes on contributor

**KELLY RICHARDS** is a Senior Lecturer at Queensland University of Technology, Faculty of Law, School of Justice. Her research interests include youth justice, restorative justice and Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA). In 2010, she was awarded the Australian Capital Territory Government Office for Women Audrey Fagan Churchill Fellowship to study COSA in Canada, the USA and the UK.

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