

Pedophilia as Age Sexual Orientation: Supporting Seto's (2012) Conceptualization

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Abstract

Emerging research has examined the experiences of individuals who are sexually attracted to children and adolescents, also termed *minor attraction*. *Minor-attracted person* is a self-referential term, used to describe an individual who is sexually attracted to individuals under the age of consent, which varies by legal system. This study collected both quantitative and qualitative data from minor-attracted persons ($n = 116$). Several analyses were used to assess whether the sample characteristics support Seto's (2012) conceptualization of pedophilia as a sexual orientation. The three developmental characteristics of gender-based sexual orientation were explored with respect to data. Expected patterns with relation to age of onset, expressions of both sexual and romantic attractions, and stability of such attraction over time were found. As noted by Seto, there are clear clinical, and potential legal, implications associated with the shift in the conceptualization of sexual attraction to children and adolescents. Such attempts to shift have been met with hostility thus far; despite this hostility, the findings indicate that age sexual orientation closely mirrors the developmental trajectory of gender sexual orientation, as outlined by Seto.

Pedophilia as Age Sexual Orientation: Supporting Seto's (2012) Conceptualization

Contemporary research has indicated that sexual attraction to children and adolescents may be more reflective of a sexual orientation than a mental health disorder or paraphilic interest. Seto (2012) proposed that pedophilia should be conceptualized as a sexual orientation rooted in biology, rather than a deviation that is triggered through environmental processes or trauma. According to Seto, sexual attraction to children is characterized by the primary features indicative of gender sexual orientations. These features include the following: (a) primary age of attraction beginning in adolescence, often recognized as puberty commences; (b) sexual attraction that coincides with other aspects of attraction, such as romantic feelings and subjective notions of love; and (c) stability of attraction over time. This conceptualization was expanded upon in Seto's (2017) article outlining sexual orientation from a multidimensional framework incorporating gender, as well as age and/or pubertal development.

Chronophilias, which refer to primary sexual attraction to age/maturity categories other than young sexually mature adults, are being increasingly examined as possible sexual orientations (Seto, 2017). The expected attraction to young sexually mature adults among adults is termed *teleiophilia*. Chronophilias are often discussed within the context of sexual attraction to children, but Seto also posited the presence of additional orientations such as *gerontophilia* (i.e., attraction to elderly adults). Therefore, sexual attraction to children could be considered on the lower end of the age and/or pubertal development attraction continuum, whereas teleiophilia and gerontophilia would fall to the mid- and end-range of the continuum, respectively. A growing area of research is examining the experiences of *minor-attracted persons*, a commonly used self-referential term (Global Prevention Project, 2019). The term *minor attraction* is more encompassing than pedophilic interests, as minor attraction can refer to individuals having a

primary attraction to persons under the legal age of consent. This includes sexual attraction to infants (i.e., *nepiophilia*), pre-pubescent children (i.e., *pedophilia*), or pubescent children and adolescents (i.e., *hebephilia*). Despite the use of this term, it is important to note that recent research across a breadth of forums has suggested that clinical terminology, such as *pedophile*, may be the preferred label for many minor-attracted persons (Martijn et al., 2020). The presence of internalized stigma and sensitivity to such labels has yet to be examined among minor-attracted persons, but may play a role in such label preferences.

Emerging Literature on Sexual Attraction to Children and Adolescents

Research investigating sexual attraction to children among individuals who have not offended has grown recently but remains in its infancy. Cantor and McPhail's (2016) review of the literature suggests a non-trivial number of minor-attracted persons exist. As noted, factors such as emotional congruence with children have been suggested to be related to sexual attraction to children (Babchishin et al., 2011; Babchishin et al., 2015; McPhail et al., 2014). Minor-attracted persons may conceptualize minors as potential sexual and romantic partners; therefore, assessing the social meaning within this context is critical.

Emerging research suggests that those who identify as sexually attracted to minors experience subjective feelings of falling in love, especially when exclusively attracted to children (Martijn et al., 2020). There is the possibility that strong emotional connections and/or romantic feelings towards minors (alongside sexual attraction) cause such individuals to be more resilient to engaging in problematic sexual behaviours. Conversely, it is also possible that strong emotional connections and/or romantic feelings towards minors may work in the opposite manner, leading an individual to seek out a sexual relationship with a minor. Given that Konrad et al. (2018) found that emotional congruence with children did not differentiate between minor-

attracted individuals who did and who did not offend, more research is needed to examine, and better understand, how emotional congruence with children is related to sexual attraction to children.

Cash (2016) found that minor-attracted persons have higher levels of loneliness and lower levels of self-esteem than the general population. Within their sample of minor-attracted persons, presence of attraction to adults and accepting attitudes towards child-adult sex were positively associated with self-esteem. Cohen et al. (2017) found that minor-attracted persons who had acted on their sexual interests reported higher levels of abuse in childhood and general criminality, longer duration of pedophilic attraction, and greater attraction to boys than minor-attracted persons who had never acted on their sexual interests. Bailey et al. (2016) conducted a large-scale study ($N = 1,189$) of minor-attracted persons examining sexual attraction patterns and found a wide variety of age and gender combinations among the sample. Further, Bailey et al. (2016) reported that older age, presence of childhood sexual abuse, accepting attitudes towards child-adult sex, and frequently engaging in sexual fantasies about children were related to engaging in problematic sexual behaviours.

Research has started to examine how sexual attraction to children impacts individuals. Yet, differential experiences of sexual attraction to children have not been examined. Despite a primary sexual attraction to children and/or adolescents, minor-attracted persons represent a heterogeneous community (e.g., Levenson et al., 2017). In providing suggestions regarding research in this area, Cantor and McPhail (2016) recommended a multimethod approach given the population of interest and the ability to provide rich information. Consequently, a multimethod approach was taken within the research program to explore resiliency factors among minor-attracted persons.

Relevance of Etiology to Assessment and Treatment

The orientation perspective of sexual attraction to children continues to develop in emerging research, but thus far remains a contentious notion. Sexual attraction to children has typically been approached therapeutically in terms of removal and/or reduction of the attractions, due to its conflation with child sexual abuse. However, movement towards an orientation perspective of sexual attraction to children would question the efficacy of such approaches. Instead, acceptance- and strengths-based practices may prove more beneficial, as is the case with many other issues related to sexuality (e.g., DeBord et al., 2017) while continuing to acknowledge the inappropriateness of acting on such attractions.

Whether sexual attraction to children should be conceptualized as a sexual orientation is of critical importance to the development of therapeutic approaches to the challenges related to the attraction. Questions have been raised whether to define sexual attraction to children as unchangeable, as we have with gender orientation, and the negative impact that this may have on treatment (e.g., Briken et al., 2014). Tozdan and Briken (2015) suggested that approaching the attraction as unchangeable may negatively impact self-efficacy and the ability of the individual to potentially modify or reduce their sexual attraction to minors. From this viewpoint, self-efficacy beliefs can influence the treatment process and subjective experiences of the attractions (Tozdan & Briken, 2017).

Some research has claimed to show that pedophilic interests can be modified and reduced (e.g., Fedoroff et al., 2015); however, these findings have been challenged due to methodological and statistical issues suggesting that no such changes occurred (e.g., Bailey, 2015; Cantor, 2015; Mokros & Habermeyer, 2016). Thus far, treatment models aiming to reduce or eliminate the attraction have showed no treatment gains for minor-attracted men (Beier et al., 2015). Cantor

and McPhail (2016) have stated that if sexual attraction to children is unchangeable, then treatment needs to focus on behavioral change and how to enhance well-being. If sexual attraction to children is conceptualized as a sexual orientation, clinical strategies should focus on accepting, but refraining from acting on the attraction, rather than attempting to remove it completely. The mental health needs of minor-attracted persons who do not sexually offend are largely unmet, due to factors such as lack of qualified therapists willing to treat minor-attracted persons, mandatory reporting, and shame. The consequences of living with sexual attraction to children and the long-term ramifications on an individual's mental health remain relatively unknown. Recent projects (e.g., Prevention Project Dunkelfeld, Stop It Now!) have begun providing treatment to minor-attracted persons in the community, including a 24/7 phone helpline. However, there have been limited findings with regards to long-term outcomes for participants, particularly those who identify as non-offending (e.g., Beier, 2016; König, 2015).

As treatment for minor-attracted persons develops, focusing on the management of sexual attraction to children in everyday life will likely be crucial. This includes addressing issues such as sexual pre-occupation, sexual drive, and managing sexual arousal (Cantor & McPhail, 2016). Further, addressing correlated factors, such as internalized and perceived stigma, stigma-related stress, social distance, hopelessness, and loneliness may enhance treatment outcomes (Cantor, 2014; Cantor & McPhail, 2016; Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Jahnke et al., 2015). Reducing the stigma that an individual has towards themselves may also play an important role in treatment. Without such treatment, minor-attracted persons may be more likely to experience stigma-associated stress, leading to issues such as anxiety, depression, and alcohol use; such treatment issues have also been identified among other sexual minorities (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Pescosolido & Martin,

2015). Treatment aimed at reducing such stigma-associated stress may lead to improved psychological well-being and living a meaningful life.

Even if appropriate modalities are developed, treatment uptake with minor-attracted persons remains an area of concern. Levenson et al. (2017) found that barriers to seeking treatment among minor-attracted persons included confidentiality concerns, concerns about legal and social repercussions, shame and stigma (external and internal) regarding their attractions, and an inability to find a therapist offering such services. The authors suggested that if such individuals are to receive services, these barriers to service delivery must be addressed. Further, a recurrent theme in the emerging research on sexual attraction to children was therapists' perceived inability to focus on mental health concerns outside of their clients' sexual attractions (Levenson & Grady, 2019). This was noted to be a particularly problematic barrier. Such individuals were often seeking treatment to increase their well-being, but they felt shamed and were unable to establish effective treatment planning with their providers, so they disengaged from treatment (Levenson et al., 2019).

Study Objective

This research program focused on gaining a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of those who self-identify as minor-attracted persons. Despite the existing literature, there has been limited empirical evidence directly supporting the conceptualization of pedophilia and other forms of minor attraction as a form of age sexual orientation. The Kinsey Scale (Kinsey et al., 1948) was created to measure gender sexual orientation along on a continuum. With this scale, Kinsey argued that gender sexual orientation should be conceptualized on a continuum rather than the binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality (Kunzel, 2008). Previous research on minor attraction suggests that most minor-attracted persons

experience a degree of attraction to both minors and adults, with only a minority of these individuals identifying as exclusively attracted to minors (Cash, 2016). However, existing research on this issue is primarily qualitative (e.g., Houtepen et al., 2016). As a result, age sexual orientation has not been quantified, but a recent study examining whether age sexual orientation exists on a continuum like the Kinsey Scale suggests that such a measure may work in conceptualizing such attractions (Mundy et al., 2020). Therefore, the primary purpose of this research was to quantify the characteristics of sexual attractions to children, based on the developmental characteristics outlined by Seto's (2012) seminal paper examining exactly this. Further, this study sought to support these quantifications with qualitative examination of the same factors, using reflexive thematic analysis.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from the following support forums for minor-attracted persons: B4U-ACT (<http://www.b4uact.org>) and Virtuous Pedophiles (<https://www.virped.org>). Data collection began in September of 2018 and continued until the pool was expended; the survey was closed in April of 2019. A total of 62 minor-attracted persons were recruited from B4U-Act and a total of 54 minor-attracted persons were recruited from Virtuous Pedophiles. Complete data were acquired from 89 of the participants, and partial data from the remaining 27 participants. Minor-attracted persons who took part in the quantitative portion of data collection were provided with an advertisement for the study, and 23 participated.

Data imputation methods were considered, but ultimately rejected. It was unclear whether the completed data would be representative of the missing data, given the limited information

regarding characteristics of minor-attracted persons. However, demographic information was gathered for most of the individuals who did not later complete some measures ($n = 25$); therefore, potential differences in characteristics could be examined. Initial examination indicated that the completer and non-completer samples were similar in many ways, such as proportion of right handedness (83.5% vs. 91.7%), having at least a high school education (97.8% vs. 92.0%), being single (62.6% vs. 68.0%), being attracted to both adults and minors (36.0% vs. 33.0%), and being attracted to both males and females (25.0% vs. 20.9%). One difference appeared to be in identified ethnicity; the completion sample had a higher proportion of participants identifying as Caucasian or White (94.4% vs. 79.2%). The completion sample had a lower proportion of self-identified Hispanic individuals (3.4%) versus the non-completion sample (12.5%). As the completer and non-completer groups were largely discrepant in size, and there were variable levels of completion even among the non-completers, these differences were not statistically analyzed.

Measures

Interview protocol. The interview protocol was derived from the existing literature in which minor-attracted persons were interviewed (e.g., Houtepen et al., 2016). The interview questions addressed demographics, sexual identity, involvement with minors, use of child sexual exploitation material, social support and stigma, and quality of life.

Kinsey Scale. The Kinsey Scale (Kinsey et al., 1948) was designed to assess an individual's gender sexual orientation from 0 (*exclusively heterosexual*) to 6 (*exclusively homosexual*). In the present study, the Kinsey Scale was modified to measure age sexual orientation of the participants' degree of attraction to minors compared to adults. The wording of the Kinsey Scale response options was changed to 1 (*exclusively attracted to adult*) to 5

(*exclusively attracted to minors*) to measure age sexual orientation rather than gender sexual orientation.

Sexual Life and Sexual Behaviour Questionnaire Revised. The Sexual Life and Sexual Behaviour Questionnaire [SLSB] Revised is an English-translated version of the Questionnaire on Sexual Experiences and Behaviour/Fragebogen zum Sexuellen Erleben und Verhalten used in the Ahlers et al.'s (2011) study, subsequently revised and used by Mundy and Cioe (2019). Although few English studies have been conducted using this measure, it was chosen because it has been successfully used to assess paraphilias in non-offender samples, and provides a comprehensive evaluation of sexuality, sexual interests, sexual behaviours, and sexual arousal patterns. The SLSB has seven sections that assess personal information (e.g., demographics), views and experiences (e.g., sexual satisfaction, frequency of sexual behaviours, and sexual pain), sexual and gender identity, sexual tendencies (e.g., paraphilic interests and paraphilia-associated sexual behaviours), and medical illnesses and procedures. The revised questionnaire included assessing participants preferred Tanner Stage. The Tanner Stages outline changes that occur in secondary sex characteristics and provide a method of quantifying sexual development (Tanner, 1978). The Tanner Stages ascend from 1 (prepubertal) to 5 (fully mature); women are rated on breast development and pubic hair growth, whereas men are rated on genital development and pubic hair growth. Even though the stages are roughly associated with age, they are largely based on physical development. Research has indicated there are likely different orientations of sexual attraction to children and adolescents, which may be reflected by attraction to certain stages of pubertal development; these are typically referred to as pedophilia, pedohebephilia, and hebephilia (Imhoff et al., 2017; Stephens, 2016). Pedophilia is associated with attraction to minors in Tanner Stages 1 and 2 (pre-pubescent body morphology),

pedohebephilia is associated with attraction to minors in Tanner Stages 2 and 3 (pre-pubescent and pubescent body morphology), and hebephilia is associated with attraction to minors in Tanner Stages 3 and 4 (pubescent body morphology). According to this definition, the actual physical development of the child is crucial to the attraction, although age can be loosely associated with the Tanner Stages. As Imhoff and colleagues (2017) suggest, it may be the case that minor-attracted persons are, to varying degrees, insensitive to information about reproductive maturity, leaving them highly focused on youthfulness indicators of sexual attractiveness.

Procedures

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis from minor-attracted persons' support forums. An advertisement included a brief description of the study and an access link. When participants proceeded through the link, they were immediately provided with a consent form to review and the opportunity to ask questions. Once participants agreed to proceed, it was assumed that they had understood the implications of their anonymous participation in the study and had given their informed consent. Participants then completed the questionnaires. Finally, participants were taken to a debriefing page that described the researchers' focus in examining resiliency factors of minor-attracted persons, provided sources where participants could find out more information about the subject, and included mental health resources for the participant if the study resulted in any negative emotions. Additionally, the researchers' contact information was provided.

Participants contacted the author after participating in the quantitative study if they were interested in completing a more comprehensive interview. Interviews were completed with all participants using Zoom (<https://zoom.us>), the secured video/audio conference platform. The

protocol was used to keep the interview semi-structured; however, if the participants had other relevant factors to discuss related to their sexual attraction to children, the researcher accommodated. The shortest interview took 45 minutes to complete, whereas the longest interview took 150 minutes to complete. All interviews with the participants were completed by me; however, transcription was completed by two undergraduate students associated with the research program who had some understanding of sexual attraction to children.

Results

Quantitative Analyses and Results

Age Sexual Orientation and Type of Minor Attraction. Age sexual orientation varied across the modified Kinsey Scale. The largest proportion of participants identified their age orientation as “mostly minors” ($n = 45$, 40.5%), “both adult and minors” ($n = 36$, 32.4%), or “exclusively minors” ($n = 27$; 24.3%). Two individuals (1.8%) identified themselves as “mostly adults” and one participant (0.9%) identified their age orientation as “exclusively adults.”

The preferred Tanner Stage was used to assess the participants’ ideal body morphology, regardless of gender or age orientation. The majority ($n = 63$; 54.8%) identified Stage 1, followed by smaller proportions of preference for Stage 2 ($n = 34$; 29.6%), Stage 3 ($n = 14$; 12.2%), Stage 4, ($n = 3$; 2.6%), and Stage 5 ($n = 1$; 0.9%). Only those who identified a primary attraction to the first three Tanner Stages were examined in the remaining analyses, as these stages would fall under the pedophilic and pedohebephilic attractions that have previously been discussed in the literature (e.g., Seto, 2012).

A Likelihood Chi-Square test was used to assess the relationship between the modified Kinsey scale and the Tanner Stage the individuals were most attracted to. Observed frequencies and adjusted standardized residuals are provided in Table 1. The results were significant, $\chi^2(8) =$

29.81, $p < .001$, indicating that these categories were not distributed as would be expected by chance. The nominal-by-interval eta was .39-.43, dependent on direction of relationship; this was calculated using bootstrapping methods ($n = 1000$).

Table 1. Cases Counts (Adj. Residuals) for Age Orientation and Preferred Tanner Stage

Tanner Stage	Exclusively Adults	Mostly Adults	Both Adults & Minors	Mostly Minors	Exclusively Minors
Stage 1	0 (-1.2)	0 (-1.6)	15 (-2.2)	27 (0.6)	21 (2.5)
Stage 2	0 (-0.7)	0 (-0.9)	15 (1.7)	14 (0.1)	5 (-1.6)
Stage 3	1 (2.6)	2 (3.8)	6 (0.9)	4 (-1.0)	1 (-1.6)

Note. The adjusted residual indicates the standard deviations above or below the expected count that the observed count is, while considering the sample size. Bolded values have reached the level of significance ($p = .05$) of ± 1.96 .

Additional analyses were then used to assess the relationship of gender orientation and gender identity to the preferred Tanner Stage and age orientation. Observed frequencies and adjusted standardized residuals for the chi-square tests are provided in Tables 2 through 5. The Likelihood Ratio was calculated, as cells had counts of less than five.

The result for the analysis of gender orientation and preferred Tanner Stage was significant, $\chi^2(8) = 25.72$, $p = .004$, indicating that these categories were not distributed as would be expected by chance. The range for the nominal-by-interval eta was .36-.39, dependent on direction of the relationship; this was calculated using bootstrapping methods ($n = 1000$).

Table 2. Case Counts (Adj. Residuals) for Tanner Stages and Gender Sexual Orientation

Tanner Stage	Exclusively Males	Mostly Males	Both Males & Females	Mostly Females	Exclusively Females
Stage 1	9 (-0.4)	10 (1.5)	18 (2.0)	11 (0.1)	15 (-2.5)
Stage 2	8 (1.6)	3 (-0.7)	6 (-0.7)	6 (0.1)	11 (-0.2)
Stage 3	0 (-1.6)	0 (-1.4)	0 (-2.0)	2 (-0.2)	11 (4.1)

Note. The adjusted residual indicates the standard deviations above or below the expected count that the observed count is, while considering the sample size. Bolded values have reached the level of significance ($p = .05$) of ± 1.96 .

The result for the analysis of gender orientation and age orientation was significant, $\chi^2(12) = 33.09, p = .001$, indicating that these categories were not distributed as would be expected by chance. The nominal-by-interval eta was .27, regardless of direction of relationship; this was calculated using bootstrapping methods ($n = 1000$).

Table 3. Case Counts (Adj. Residuals) for Age Sexual Orientation and Gender Sexual Orientation

Tanner Stage	Exclusively Males	Mostly Males	Both Males & Females	Mostly Females	Exclusively Females
Mostly Adults	0 (-0.6)	0 (-0.5)	0 (-0.8)	0 (-0.7)	2 (2.0)
Both Adults & Minors	3 (-1.4)	1 (-2.0)	11 (1.5)	7 (0.4)	14 (0.8)
Mostly Minors	5 (-1.0)	12 (4.0)	5 (-2.3)	8 (0.1)	15 (-0.1)
Exclusively Minors	9 (3.0)	0 (-2.2)	8 (1.1)	4 (-0.4)	6 (-1.4)

Note. The adjusted residual indicates the standard deviations above or below the expected count that the observed count is, while considering the sample size. Bolded values have reached the level of significance ($p = .05$) of ± 1.96 .

The result for the analysis of gender identity and age orientation was not significant, $\chi^2(8) = 3.89, p = .87$, indicating equal distribution across the categories. The nominal-by-interval eta ranged from .10 - .15, dependent on direction of the relationship; this was calculated using bootstrapping methods ($n = 1000$).

Table 4. Case Counts (Adj. Residuals) for Age Sexual Orientation and Gender Sexual Orientation

Gender Identity	Exclusively Adults	Mostly Adults	Both Adults and Minors	Mostly Minors	Exclusively Minors
Male	1 (0.4)	2 (0.6)	30 (-1.4)	41 (0.9)	23 (0.3)
Female	0 (-0.3)	0 (-0.4)	4 (0.4)	3 (-0.7)	3 (0.5)
Other	0 (-0.3)	0 (-0.4)	5 (-1.5)	3 (-0.5)	1 (-0.9)

Note. The adjusted residual indicates the standard deviations above or below the expected count that the observed count is, while considering the sample size.

The result for the analysis of gender identity and Tanner Stages was not significant, $\chi^2(4) = 0.57, p = .97$, indicating equal distribution across the categories. The nominal-by-interval eta ranged from .01 - .03, dependent on direction of the relationship; this was calculated using bootstrapping methods ($n = 1000$).

Table 5. Case Counts (Adj. Residuals) for Tanner Stages and Gender Identity

Gender Identity	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Male	53 (0.1)	28 (-0.3)	12 (0.2)
Female	5 (-0.5)	4 (0.7)	1 (-0.3)
Other	5 (0.3)	2 (-0.4)	1 (0.0)

Note. The adjusted residual indicates the standard deviations above or below the expected count that the observed count is, while considering the sample size.

Characteristics 1: Development During Adolescence and/or Puberty. Questions

assessing longevity of interests were used in conjunction with preferred attraction to one of the first three Tanner Stages ($n = 111$) to explore for potential differences. The frequencies and proportional percentages associated with the development of such interests, whether regarding prepubescent/pubescent males or females, are provided in Table 6.

Table 6. Descriptive Table of Development of Sexual Attractions by Preferred Tanner Stage

Target of Attraction	When Attractions Developed	Tanner Stage 1	Tanner Stage 2	Tanner Stage 3
Prepubescent Girls	Childhood	20 (35.7%)	10 (41.7%)	4 (44.4%)
	Puberty/Adolescence	21 (37.5%)	11 (45.8%)	4 (44.4%)
	Post-Adolescence	15 (26.8%)	3 (12.5%)	1 (11.1%)
	Total	56 (100%)	24 (100%)	9 (100%)
Prepubescent Boys	Since Childhood	14 (31.8%)	11 (57.9%)	0 (0.0%)
	Puberty/Adolescence	22 (50.0%)	5 (26.3%)	1 (100%)
	Post-Adolescence	8 (18.2%)	3 (15.8%)	0 (0.0)
	Total	44 (100%)	19 (100%)	1 (100%)

Note. Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding. Results for pubescent girls and boys were indistinguishable from prepubescent children.

Characteristic 2: Sexual vs. Romantic/Emotional Attraction. Although primarily attracted to minors who they do not engage with, most participants identified sexuality as an important part of their life (see Figure 2).

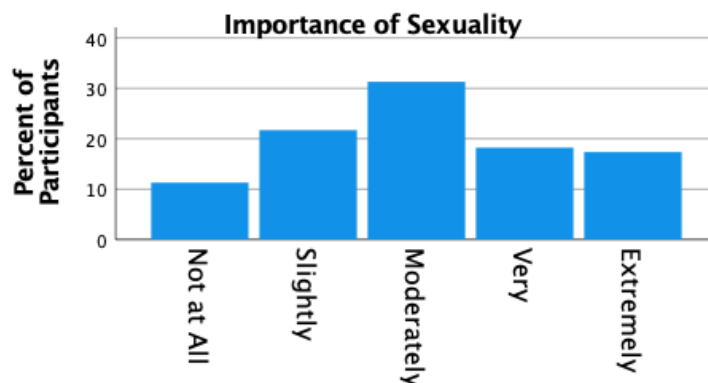


Figure 2. Percentage of agreement with how important sexuality is to minor-attracted participants.

When asked whether they have ever been “in love with a child,” 59 (64.1%) identified that they had, whereas only 33 (35.9%) identified that they had not. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was nonsignificant for preferred Tanner Stage, $F(4, 87) = 1.82, p = .13, \eta^2 = .07$, and gender orientation, $F(4, 87) = 1.58, p = .19, \eta^2 = .07$. This indicated that neither preferred body morphology nor gender orientation differentiated between those minor-attracted persons who identified falling in love with a child versus those who did not. Nearly all ($n = 86$; 98.8%) participants identified that they “love children.” and many reported that they find children “very attractive” ($n = 86$; 97.7%).

Characteristic 3: Stability Across Time. Stability across time was assessed using demographic information. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether the development of attraction to prepubescent girls differed depending on the individuals preferred Tanner Stage. The results were nonsignificant, $F(2, 78) = 0.03, p = .97$, indicating that when attractions to prepubescent girls developed, it did not differ depending on what preferred Tanner Stage (body morphology) was preferred. Further, the effect size was negligible, $\eta^2 = .001$; the effect size was calculated using bootstrapping methods ($n = 1000$). The results of the ANOVA for sexual attraction to prepubescent boys was similarly nonsignificant, $F(2, 61) = 1.08, p = .35$,

indicating that when the attractions to prepubescent boys developed, they also did not differ depending on what preferred Tanner Stage (body morphology) was endorsed. Further, the effect size was negligible, $\eta^2 = .03$; this was again calculated using bootstrapping methods ($n = 1000$). Relatedly, regardless of when attractions developed, the age range of participants was 18 through 65 years old for all groups; this indicated long-term attraction given most reported the attractions beginning in childhood or adolescence.

Qualitative Analysis and Results

Sexual Development During Adolescence and Puberty. All interviewees discussed sexual attraction to children from a sexual orientation perspective, of which several subthemes could be identified. The first related to the development of sexual attraction to children during adolescence. All but one interviewee reported identifying and recognizing their sexual interests prior to the age of 18. Most often, this occurred during early adolescence and puberty for the participants. Many participants described two clear, distinctive stages with respect to their sexual orientation. The first stage often involved a vague recognition of sexual interests, often in minors younger than themselves, even in adolescence. The second stage occurred as the interviewees began to realize their sexual attractions were not “growing with them” and they remained sexually interested in minors. As part of this stage, these attractions also began to be self-identified as problematic, and the labels of “pervert” or “pedophile” often became stigmatizing and distressing for the individuals.

P2. I was around the age of 13 when I first realized that I was drawn to younger children.

I remember having a crush on my best friend’s 4-year-old brother when I was 13.

P5. Alright, this is a complex question. This is the one that I answer differently depending on how it’s asked because when did I first start experiencing that? I suppose I can think

of instances when I was 11 or 12, and obviously I didn't understand, I didn't realize what it was at the time. My first, I guess what you would call a crush, that I can remember at least, the kid was 5, I was I believe 11 at that point. That's when it was specifically like – I don't remember any sexual components to it, and in general the emotional, romantic, that side of attraction is stronger for me generally. The first time it started really bothering me that I can remember, around 16. But I didn't actually admit it. I was pretty much still in denial until I was 18.

P18. Yeah, I think it's probably pretty common as well, it's as I was getting older and going through puberty, I started becoming attracted to other kids my age and a little bit earlier, so I thought that was pretty normal and as I got older then they sort of didn't, and I still wasn't really concerned about it until I noticed that all my friends are talking about the girls and I'm like maybe. So, yeah, right around puberty and as getting into my mid-teens, the younger kids were more attractive than the older kids.

Differing Attraction Components. During the process of recognizing their sexual interests, many interviewees identified differing components to their attraction to minors. This resulted in a second subtheme related to differentiating emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction among the interviewees. Several individuals noted attraction to the overall nature of children, including their innocence, ability to engage in the world completely, and to be spontaneous. Further, some noted that the naiveté of children, specifically the fact that they have not been exposed to negative aspects of the world, was attractive. These factors could be more of an emotional congruence with children, rather than romantic attraction. Regardless, many participants also noted a romantic attraction to minors, engaging in fantasies related to long-term relationships with minors rather than exclusively sexual relationships.

P8. Even when I was in college, I still sort of thought about romantic relationships, but as I moved on from there I started to think about what I wanted for my life and I really wanted to start a family and you know, when I recognized that I think the romantic attractions kind of died off. Because I was just like, you know, you can't wait around waiting for a kid to grow up and then marry her, that's just silly. And, yeah, I guess when I started thinking about marriage or dating girls for that purpose is sort of when those kinds of romantic attractions died off.

P16. There's an emotional attraction to... kind of wanting to be them or like a little jealous of wanting and wishing I was them and wishing I was a boy again. It's a way of kind of affirming that like connecting on that level of like you know uh a yearning for that. And there's some like mild fetishes. Just like emotionally charged objects around it. Which is, a lot of them are kind of boy like. Like, you know, a backwards baseball cap, skateboard, scuffy sneakers, stuff like that, that I'll find attractive. But it's weird, like socially, I don't particularly appreciate interacting with boys that much. They're just not complex enough, like socially, to really achieve what I want, you know? I mean, I'd like to have a deeper conversation with someone on a more complex level that adults would have, and boys don't.

P17. I like people who are earnest, who are enthusiastic about what they love, and who aren't afraid to look a little silly. I just find boys, and youth in general, mostly, fun to be around, and I find it easy to relate to them and kind of have a good time with them.

Sexual attraction to children was acknowledged by all the participants, although two participants noted limited sexual attraction with predominant emotional and/or romantic attraction. When describing physical characteristics that were attractive, aspects such as small

frame, larger eyes, and lack of body hair were identified. These aspects varied depending on their gender and age orientation.

P4. There are physical attributes that I prefer. And they're not stereotypical. They tend to fall outside the stereotypical view that maybe most males have towards most females in what they find attractive. So, I think curvy girls are cute. I think curves are attractive. Even though it's not something a lot of guys maybe like, getting a curvy girl or a bigger girl. And girls themselves probably judge themselves much harsher than guys probably ever judge them. But I really like curves. I think I'm really attracted to non-traditionally good-looking females. So, girls that have maybe imperfections or cute tummies, cute butts and to me cute tummies and cute butts is curvy.

P17. I'm not really interested in more like, large statures or body hair or anything like that. So, most of those don't tend to do anything for me. I've said to other people before that my three favorite parts of the body are probably the face, the arms, and the legs. I'm attracted to all three of those when it comes to boys. Face and legs especially I would say, because I love seeing all those different expressions and the way a boy's eyes are shaped.

Exclusivity vs. Inclusivity of Sexual Attraction. The extent, and whether, the participants experienced sexual attraction to, and/or engaged with adult partners, led to the identification of a third subtheme, identified as exclusivity versus inclusivity. Several interviewees discussed experiencing sexual or romantic attraction to adults, and how that interacted with their sexual attraction to children. Many participants identified that their sexual attraction was exclusive to minors, even if they engaged in adult-partnered relationships. There were several participants who identified sexual attraction to adults; however, it was rarely the primary attraction in comparison to the sexual attraction to children.

P1. As a teen maybe a little for boys, but not ever for adults, and not for lack of trying. I mean there was one time where, you know, I was in the situation to do it and I just felt no sexual attraction to the other person and that was embarrassing, so I just never tried it again.

P10. I should not have married, because I knew at the time I had only weak sexual attraction to my fiancée, although I was deeply in love with her. We were married for ten years and the sexual problem only intensified. We tried to cope using sexual fantasy, but it would have been much better if we'd not got together at all. That was entirely my fault and I blame no-one else. If I hadn't married, though, I would have been alone for all my life, and we did have many good times.

P14. I'm strongly attracted to adult men much more than I am to adult women, but I do still find some adult women attractive they just usually tend to have more of younger body types or younger features. Also, part of that attraction is purely sexual, like I'm not really romantically interested in adult women.

Discussion

When examining sexual attraction to children as a sexual orientation, several subthemes presented across the data. These subthemes included (a) the tendency for minor-attracted persons to identify their sexual orientation during early- to late-adolescence, (b) discrimination between sexual versus romantic attractions, and (c) the extent to which their sexual attraction to children was exclusive versus inclusive. Many individuals acknowledged the presence of a two-tier discovery of their attraction; initially discovering their sexual attraction to younger children, followed by the recognition of their desires as “bad” or “wrong.” Sexual attraction to children

was also often described as being comprised of emotional, romantic, and sexual components. Emotional attraction often included attraction to youthful activities and engagement and/or working with minors, whereas romantic attraction involved attraction to and/or longing for an actual relationship with a minor. Although some individuals were drawn to the innocent and vulnerable nature of minors, other expressed attraction to their physical development and key indicators of youth (e.g., small frame, lack of secondary sexual development, larger eyes). Finally, roughly one-quarter of these minor-attracted persons expressed an exclusive interest to minors; this was directly related to their inability to have meaningful relationships with adults. Those who experienced some to significant sexual attraction to adults generally reported more positive social relationships and experiences with adults.

Conceptualizing Sexual Attraction to Children as a Sexual Orientation

Historically, sexual attraction to minors has been conceptualized as a deviant sexual interest, one that develops out of traumatic childhood experiences and/or poor parenting practices (e.g., Finkelhor et al., 1986). More recently, sexual attraction to children has been proposed as another form of sexual orientation. Conceptualizing sexual attraction to children as a sexual orientation remains contentious and would require a significant theoretical shift. Seto (2012) challenged the dominant perceptions with respect to pedophilia by illustrating the parallels to the characteristics that are associated with accepted sexual orientations such as gender orientation. Seto (2017) later expanded upon this subject, suggesting that sexual attraction to children falls on the sexual orientation continuum of age orientation. Despite the term age orientation, this research program and other literature suggest that utilizing the Tanner stages and assessing sexual attraction to specific developing body morphology may be more useful when differentiating subsets of sexual attraction to children (e.g., Stephens, 2016). Seto (2017)

outlined how age orientation fits within the concept of a chronophilia, which involves sexual attraction to individuals of a specific age range.

Despite such emerging results, researchers, including me, have been accused of “normalizing” pedophilia and/or supporting the sexual abuse of children by suggesting that sexual attraction to children is a form of sexual orientation. It is critical to note that acknowledgement that sexual attraction to children and/or adolescents meets the developmental trajectory of a sexual orientation does not presume or suggest that acting on such attractions is ever appropriate. To use homosexuality as a parallel, not an equivalent, there are individuals who for religious reasons choose not to express their sexual orientation; to do so would violate their moral and/or spiritual values. This is but one circumstance in which an individual may choose to avoid engaging in sexual behaviour with their goal object.

Despite the importance such research, the discussion of sexual attraction to children as a sexual orientation has recently been banned from social media and other resources (e.g., podcasts). Specifically, Twitter banned the discussion of sexual attraction to children as a sexual orientation in their terms of service in October 2020 (<https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/sexual-exploitation-policy>). Twitter is an area of congregation for minor-attracted persons, where they can connect with researchers and clinicians with regards to the research. Removing the ability of such researchers to converse with those who provide them with critical information further impairs the uptake of related knowledge and services.

Age Sexual Orientation Continuum

The modified Kinsey scale successfully gathered information on the range of minor attraction. These findings suggest variability in age orientation among minor-attracted persons,

with individuals experiencing differing levels of exclusivity about their minor attraction. Like Cash's (2016) qualitative research, in which minor-attracted persons often described experiencing attraction to both minors and adults, our findings indicate that many minor-attracted persons also experience coinciding attraction to adults. Thus, our findings suggest that like gender sexual orientation, age sexual orientation is not a binary concept, but rather exists on a continuum (Kunzel, 2008).

Despite some attraction being acknowledged to minors in the pubescent and post-pubescent range, the clear majority of participants reported their primary attraction to minors in Tanner Stage 1 or Stage 2. This was regardless of gender identity, which is critical to note. Such minors do not show, or only show minimal, signs of sexual maturity. It is important to note that many individuals expressed interest in both pre-pubescent and pubescent minors; however, this question specified the preferred and primary sexual attraction with regards to body morphology, regardless of gender orientation. Most participants were also primarily attracted to minors, with a smaller portion being equally attracted to adults.

Developmental Characteristics and Trajectory of Sexual Attraction to Children

Research examining sexual orientations has established criteria regarding the developmental process of sexual orientation (Seto, 2012); these criteria were used when examining whether sexual attraction to children displayed similar characteristics to that of sexual orientation with respect to gender. According to Seto, the features that arise in relation to the developmental process of sexual orientation include the following characteristics: (a) primary age of sexual attraction beginning in adolescence, often recognized as puberty commences; (b) sexual attraction that coincides with other aspects of attraction, such as romantic feelings and subjective notions of love; and (c) stability of attractions over time. The developmental process

of the minor-attracted persons within this research program paralleled the theoretical expectations articulated within this framework (Seto, 2012, 2017).

From those interviewed, 22 of 23 minor-attracted persons reported identifying and recognizing their sexual interests prior to the age of 18. This often occurred in early adolescence, at times as early as 11 or 12. Most participants described a two-stage developmental process leading to recognition of their sexual attraction to children. They often reported initially recognizing having sexual interest in minors during the first stage, and then later labelled these interests as “problematic” in the second stage. This supports the first feature of a sexual orientation, with most minor-attracted persons recognizing their attractions before, or during, puberty. The third feature is also supported through the two-stage process, as most minor-attracted persons acknowledged a similar age orientation across their lifespan thus far. The second feature, involving the inclusion of romantic feelings and subjective feelings of love, was also supported by the research program, and will be further discussed later. No participants experienced a cessation of their attractions across time, clearly meeting the requirement of sustained attractions. Therefore, according to Seto’s (2012, 2017) developmental framework of sexual orientation, attraction to children likely meets the criteria of a sexual orientation within this sample.

Overall, the results support the conceptualization of sexual attraction to children as a long-lasting attraction comprised of both sexual and romantic components (Seto, 2017). Much remains to be uncovered with regards to how and why such sexual attraction to children develops. Evolutionary-based theories have suggested that a potential miswiring of neural pathways results in these attractions, along with neurobiological studies finding that specific brain areas appear to be involved (e.g., temporal lobes). Regardless of the pathway of

development, it appears that sexual attraction to children reflects the lower end of the age orientation continuum; whereas, most adults would fall on the mid-to-far end, dependent upon the adult's age. Future research should continue to examine whether different factors may impact how and when such attractions are acknowledged, and whether these interests change across time (McPhail, 2018).

Of continued interest is the extent to which minor-attracted persons experience sexual attraction to, and/or engage sexually with, adult partners; this is referred to as exclusivity or inclusivity. The results indicated that roughly one quarter of minor-attracted persons in this sample asserted that their sexual attraction was exclusive to minors, and that they did not experience any sexual and/or emotional attraction to adults. Individuals often described this leading to limited social relationships and a lack of sexual experiences. The remaining three quarters of minor-attracted persons did experience some attraction to adults, but it was always secondary to their sexual attraction to children. Further, some of those who did engage with adults reported selecting their partners based on characteristics that may be more indicative of a minor (e.g., slight frame). The results suggested that whether a minor-attracted person experiences any attraction to adults plays a significant role in their interpersonal interactions, with several participants trying to pursue adult relationships, but being unable to, often due to lack of attraction.

Exclusivity of sexual attraction also likely plays an important role in the ability to participate in a successful romantic relationship with an adult. In support of this notion, the gender of the goal object has been identified as a potentially moderating variable for exclusivity. Research has suggested that minor-attracted men who are oriented to female children exhibit less exclusivity and higher sexual desire towards adults; conversely, those oriented to male children

exhibit more exclusivity and lower sexual desire towards adults (Mitchell et al., 2017). Further, emerging research has suggested that exclusivity may increase experiences of romantic feelings and falling in love with minors among minor-attracted persons (Martijn et al., 2020).

Delineating Romantic and Sexual Attraction

The results of this research program, across the studies, clearly indicate that most minor-attracted persons view their sexual attractions to children as part of their sexual orientation. Rather than acknowledging uncomplicated sexual interest in minors, most individuals deconstructed their attractions into various components that would be associated with romantic relationships. These components may include sexual, romantic, and/or emotional attraction. Martijn and colleagues' (2020) research found that nearly three quarters of their sample of minor-attracted persons identified falling in love with a child during their lifetime. Many individuals identified experiencing infatuation towards minors; however, most also identified experiencing emotional attachments to minors. The authors noted that an attachment was suggestive of the long-term nature of the attraction being reflective of falling in love, rather than simply sexual attraction (i.e., more related to infatuation). These findings, in conjunction with the present study, clearly indicate that there is more to minor attraction than simply sexual attraction.

Outside of the use of child sexual exploitation material, fantasies involving children often involved long-term relationships with minors rather than exclusively sexual relationships. Within the fantasies, the participants often described the relationship as reciprocal, in which the minor could fully engage with them on a physical and intellectual level. Notably, most minor-attracted persons recognized that such fantasized reciprocal relationships are not reflective of the intellectual capacity of a minor; however, those capacities are included as a piece of the fantasy. Further, minor-attracted persons reported an attraction to the overall nature of children, including

their naiveté, mindfulness, and spontaneous nature. Although these factors arose in the context of romantic and emotional attraction, these characteristics may be more reflective of emotional congruence with children, rather than romantic attractions. Future research, building on the recent work of Martijn and colleagues (2020), should investigate whether the subjective experiences of romantic attraction and love are comparable to similar subjective experiences among non-minor-attracted persons.

Data Limitations

The sample of the research program was not intended to be representative of the entire population of minor-attracted persons. Nearly all participants had never engaged in sexual contact with a minor. Understanding inherent differences that exist among minor-attracted persons is critical to understanding the limitations of the data. The forums utilized for data collection are comprised of *anti-contact* child-attracted persons, meaning that the forums explicitly identified that their organization and members are against any form of child-adult sexual contact. Further, these groups also condemn sexualization of children and the use, or sharing, of child sexual exploitation materials.

Divergent forums and ideologies also exist; such groups would not identify as *pro-contact*, instead identifying as *pro-age of consent reform*. Such forums focus on whether, and what form, of interactions should be allowed between adults and children. Further, such groups often suggest that the harm from child sexual abuse results from the stigmatizing outcomes of the interaction, rather than the interaction itself. Despite attempting to include such forums in the research program, such users did not want to engage. The distinct nature of these forums and the associated ideologies are crucial to acknowledge.

Moreover, it is difficult to know the true prevalence of problematic sexual behaviours within the sample of individuals who completed the research program. Regardless, as most empirical investigations have examined sexual attraction to children in the context of forensic settings, any information pertaining to relevant factors of such attractions outside of the criminal justice system can help balance the research picture for this population (Freimond, 2013).

Due to the stigmatized nature of the population, it is necessary to ensure anonymity when engaging the research population. This often supersedes interest in attaining complete demographic information and restricts the methodological and analytic strategies of the research. For example, when gathering information on age, grouped categories were provided, rather than asking for their specific age, to reduce potential identifiability. Such research modifications may increase the willingness of participants to provide such information. Despite not completing most the survey questions, 25 minor-attracted persons provided complete demographics information at the outset of the study; this allowed for a comparative analysis between completers and non-completers regarding demographic characteristics.

Conclusion

The literature clearly indicates that although some individuals may seek out therapy to reduce behavioural manifestations of their sexual interest in minors, other individuals may not be concerned with their attraction at all and feel there is nothing to “manage.” Stigmatizing sexual attraction to children and refusing to acknowledge that there are minor-attracted persons who do not engage in child sexual abuse causes such individuals to refrain from seeking mental health treatment services unrelated to their sexual attraction to children. Regardless of their sexual attractions, minor-attracted persons need to receive compassion and be encouraged to build a satisfying and fulfilling life. This focus will provide enhanced well-being, thereby inherently

engaging in risk prevention without the stigmatizing nature of risk preventative methods.

Necessary for this focus is the recognition that age sexual orientation very closely mirrors the developmental trajectory of gender sexual orientation.

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