

# Heritability of Older Male Sexual Attraction to Boys

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## Abstract

There are many overlapping hypotheses of the etiology of the sexual attraction of some males to boys ("pedophilia"), some of which are largely speculative while others lend themselves to empirical testing, which, however, too often is based upon unrepresentative prison and clinical samples. Etiological hypotheses include neurological or psychological disturbance or disease; boyhood sexual experiences with an older male (the "vampire" theory); and familial transmission or "heritability" (Gaffney, Lurie, and Berlin, 1984); as well as many others. This paper uses an anonymous Internet convenience sample to examine evidence relevant to heritability by asking men who self-identified as Boy-Attracted Pedosexual Males (BPM) about blood relatives with similar attractions. Due to the population sampled, attractions to minor females were not a part of this investigation. Of  $N = 390$  respondents, 95 reported a total of 115 such relatives.

The etiology of the sexual attraction of some males to boys is unclear, and the extent of the effect of social pressures on the development and expression of that attraction, while most probably highly negative, is equally uncertain. Various theories have been proposed, some of which are not well supported, while others seem to be more valid. It is not likely that any one of these theories, three of which are discussed briefly below, constitutes the exclusive cause of this attraction; it is more probable that the interaction of various causes coupled with social pressures produces the motivations and behaviors that are present in BPM.

*Disturbance/disease hypotheses.* A common position is that the sexual attraction of some males to boys is an a priori psychopathology for which causes must be determined and treatments found (e.g., Cohen & Galynker, 2002). Thus Seto (2004) and various others postulate "prenatal neurodevelopmental problems" or maternal immune reactions (Rahman & Symeonides, 2008); Mihailides, Devilly, and Ward (2006) propose cognitive distortions via a "semantic-motivation hypothesis"; Tardif and Van Gijseghem (2005) suggest possible disturbances in gender identity, and there are others. However, some researchers take the position that this attraction is not necessarily psychopathological, but rather another part of the normal spectrum of human sexuality (e.g., Constantine and Martinson, 1981; Ford and Beach, 1951; Green, 2002; Murray, 2002; Sandfort, 1987; Tindall, 1978; Trobriands, 1993; Vanggaard, 1969; Wilson, 1981).

*"Vampire" theory.* The concept that a boy who has had sexual contact with an older male will, when he himself is older, be predisposed to seek out sexual contacts with male minors (i.e., the "Abused to Abuser" model) was proposed by Groth (1979) and subsequently endorsed by many other researchers and therapists (e.g., Glasser et al., 2001; James, 2006; Seghorn, Prentky, & Boucher, 1987; Seto, 2004). But a study by Riegel (2004) found that "73.8% ( $N = 214$ ) of the 290 respondents ... reported no sexual experiences with a significantly older male during their boyhood" (p. 54), and concluded "the data from this particular investigation are in sharp disagreement with the ... assumptions made by Groth (1979), Seghorn et al. (1987), and many

others who have argued that males... developed that [BPM] orientation primarily or exclusively because of one or more sexual experiences with an older male during their boyhood"(p. 55).

*Heritability.* In 1984, Gaffney, Lurie, and Berlin investigated "familial transmission" by examining inpatient records at the Johns Hopkins Biosexual Psychohormonal Clinic for evidence of socially unacceptable sexual attractions ("paraphilias"). Such attractions were identified in 54 male patients, 33 of whom were attracted to minors. A control group of 33 patients with depression was also identified. It was found that 15.2% (N = 5) of the men attracted to minors had family members with similar attractions, while 18.5% (N = 10) of the overall study group of 54 had family members with some form of socially unacceptable sexual attractions. Only 1 member of the control group had such a family member. These authors concluded that sexual attraction of men to children is "familial," and that "Further studies are needed to elucidate the manner of transmission." (p. 548). This present study provides further empirical and statistical support for "familial transmission," although the specific manner of that transmission remains speculative.

## METHODS

In today's sociopolitical climate, males who are sexually attracted to boys (BPM) and who are free from prison or clinical constraints constitute an almost totally hidden population, and as such are not available to traditional sampling methods. However, the development of the Internet opens up a new possibility for reaching such males. Krantz, Ballard, and Scher (1997) and Stanton (1998) reported the Internet to be a valid and suitable means of gathering behavioral data. Pettit (2002) and Cronk and West (2002) have made comparisons of web based and "paper and pencil" data collections and have concluded that there are no significant differences in the quality or validity of the data. Duffy (2002) and Rhodes, Bowie, and Hergenrather (2003) have commented on the ability to reach otherwise inaccessible respondents and populations through the Internet. For these reasons the Internet was the venue of choice for this investigation.

### *Recruitment and procedure*

Potential BPM participants were recruited by requesting a link on the Internet site "Boylinks" (<http://www.boylinks.net>), a site visited by BPM and others interested in finding web sites that deal with "boy-love" issues. On the linked page, men who were of legal age in their place of residence, and who self-identified as BPM, were invited to respond anonymously to a brief questionnaire concerning their own attractions and those of male blood relatives. A special plea was made for those who did not have relatives who were sexually attracted to boys to respond so as to minimize response bias. It was emphasized that participation would be totally anonymous and that beyond date and time, no identifying information would be attached to the data or otherwise recorded. Respondents were informed that this study was being conducted by an independent researcher and was not connected with any professional organization or group, were presented a disclaimer in accordance with the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct, and were advised that by proceeding they were both identifying themselves as BPM and agreeing to the terms and conditions of the research project.

On the second page, they were reminded of the legal age requirement and the anonymity of the study. They were encouraged to answer truthfully, and were asked not to participate if they

felt they could not be truthful. They then were instructed how to respond to the survey questions, and advised that if they failed to respond to any of the required questions, the processing software would reject their submission until they responded, after which they were presented with the questions described below. The processing software also included a "lockout" that prevented multiple submissions in rapid succession.

### *Measures*

The instrument designed for this study was an interactive online questionnaire consisting of 35 questions in four sections. The first section asked the respondents' age group (Under 15, 15-17, 18-21, 22-25, 26-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51 or more), their race, where they lived, about their mental health and problem solving capability, and the degree of their attraction to boys three or more years younger than themselves (almost exclusively to boys, primarily to boys, equally to boys and to other persons, primarily to others, or almost exclusively to others with only a very minor attraction to boys). It was not felt that the gender of the "other persons" was germane to this investigation, so that question was not asked. The attraction question then was restated by asking their attraction to boys under 18, girls under 18, males 18 or older, and females 18 and older, on a scale of 1 (*none*) through 7 (*intense*). This section concluded by asking how many male blood relatives they had for whom they had reasonable cause to believe were also sexually attracted to boys. At this point, if they had no such relatives, they could exit the survey.

The second, third, and fourth sections covered one relative each and asked how this person specifically was related to the respondent (with 13 options plus "other"), his general mental health, and how aware the respondent was of this person's attraction, on a scale of 1 (*minimal*) through 5 (*confirmed by this person*). These were followed by the same five questions about attraction that were asked of the respondent. At the end of the second and third sections the respondent was given the option of exiting the survey if he had no further relatives on whom to report. Each of the latter three sections ended with an optional "text box" for comments, and a general comment text box ended the survey.

### *Participants:*

There were  $N = 390$  responses. The mean age of participants was in the 26-30 range, while the median was in the 31-40 range. 86% of respondents identified as white, and more than half (53%) were from the U.S. and Canada, 27% from Europe, and 6% from Australia/New Zealand. Self-reported general mental health of the respondents, on a scale of 1 (*extremely poor*) through 7 (*excellent*) showed a mean of 5.21 (above average) ( $SD = 1.34$ ), and coping with problems, on a scale of 1 (*poorly*) through 5 (*extremely well*) of 3.53 (between fairly well and very well) ( $SD = 0.84$ ). As a precondition for participation in the survey, all respondents were to some degree sexually attracted to boys, and this attraction was almost exclusive in 27% and primary in another 44%, while only 29% had equal or greater attractions to persons other than boys. The Pearson correlation between the degree of respondents' attraction to boys versus other persons (descending scale) and their degree of attraction to boys under 18 (ascending scale) was significant at  $r(390) = -0.340$   $p < .0000$  (two-tailed), indicating that higher degrees of attraction to boys were associated with higher attraction to boys relative to other persons.

## RESULTS

Of the 390 respondents, 95 (24.4%) reported one or more boy-attracted male relatives, with 17 of these reporting a second relative and 3 a third, for a total of 115. Of these, 40 were either the father or related through the father's side of the family (paternal uncles, paternal grandfathers, cousins, and half-brothers by the same father); 33 were related through the mother's side of the family (maternal uncles, maternal grandfathers, cousins, half-brothers by the same mother.); and 42 were either related through both the mother and father (brothers, nephews) or the exact relationship could not be determined ("Other from the preceding/same/succeeding generation"). Using shared variance in genes as the criterion of relationship, there were 38 first-degree relatives (e.g., father, brother), 36 second-degree relatives (e.g., uncle, grandfather, nephew, half brother), and 41 third-degree or apparently more distant relatives (e.g., cousins, "other"). The distribution of all relatives is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of relatives with reported attractions to boys.

Father.....	14	Half brother (Same mother).....	1
Paternal uncle.....	7	Cousin (Father's side).....	12
Maternal uncle.....	11	Cousin (Mother's side).....	19
Paternal grandfather.....	1	Other from your generation.....	1
Maternal grandfather.....	2	Son.....	0
Other from preceding generation.....	9	Nephew (Brother's son).....	5
Brother.....	24	Nephew (Sister's son).....	3
Half brother (Same father).....	6	Other from succeeding generation.....	0

Full brothers ( $N = 24$ ) and cousins on the mother's side ( $N = 19$ ) constituted the two largest groups of relatives, followed by fathers ( $N = 14$ ), cousins on the father's side ( $N = 12$ ), and maternal uncles ( $N = 11$ ). It is interesting that 5 of 8 nephews were related through a brother, while 11 of 18 uncles and 19 of 31 cousins were related through the mother's side of the family. Few respondents were able to evaluate the mental health of the relative, and the respondents' degrees of awareness of the relative's attraction to boys were highly variable,, but seemed to tend toward less awareness as the relative was more distant. The degree of the relative's sexual attraction also was not consistently known. The few comment responses were of minimal significance.

## DISCUSSION

This report is based on an international Internet sample of completely anonymous self-identified BPM, a population which in all probability could not be sampled in any other manner. These respondents, while identifying themselves as being sexually attracted to boys, have not admitted to acting on their attractions, so there are no ethical issues regarding reporting them to authorities – which would be impossible anyway, given their complete anonymity. Self-reported mental health was good, as were coping abilities. In potential contrast to clinical or prison samples (Cohen & Galynker, 2002), these respondents perceived themselves as reasonably stable and well-adjusted people.

These data and observations about them are subject to all the uncertainties inherent in a self-selected convenience sample, including in this case self-reporting and self-serving biases, the possibility of a disproportionate number of responses from those having such relatives as opposed to those who do not, and deliberate false reports. It would seem improbable, however, that very many of the participants would have had much motivation to inflate, deflate, or otherwise falsify their reports for self-justification or other reasons. Also, the size of the sample would seem likely to minimize the impact of any deliberately false reports. However, given these limitations, there is no way of determining or even estimating the degree to which this sample is or is not representative of the population of BPM, although it is possible that such a voluntary sample is less constrained and therefore more representative than prison or clinical samples. Also, since the survey dealt exclusively with self-defined BPM volunteers, there was no way to create any kind of a parallel control group. Even so, this present study tends to support and reinforce the findings in this area by Gaffney et al. (1984) that sexual attraction of males to children is to some degree "familial."

The etiology of older male sexual attraction to children would seem to involve some combination of genetic propensity and environmental influences. The fact that some one fourth of the BPM respondents to the current survey reported one or more male blood relatives with similar attractions tends to lend statistical support to the probability of some form of genetic transmission. Lack of data on the total number of participants' first- and second-degree male relatives makes it impossible to estimate the exact rate of attractions to boys among these relatives. However, even without such data and without a control group, it would seem highly unlikely that the overall general population of adult males would have anywhere near this same percentage of BPM relatives. One possibility for a mode of transmission would be a widespread but highly variable group of recessive alleles interacting with one another in random and unpredictable ways, although this issue is one that must be dealt with by geneticists rather than the social sciences.

Using phallometry, Freund (1970) observed arousal to nude pictures of prepubertal and adolescent boys in 20 to 30% of his 48 Czech army subjects, and while this arousal cannot be regarded as directly equivalent to the self-recognized sexual attraction to boys that is the subject of this present paper, it does seem to indicate that the potential for this attraction is widely distributed in the general population, rather than perhaps being restricted to a few familial lineages. Some authors (e.g., Feierman, 1990) have suggested that this attraction, and the reciprocal sexual attraction of boys to older males which various authors propose (e.g., Sandfort, 1987; Vanggaard, 1969; Wilson, 1981; etc.), might have been adaptive in an evolutionary sense, and was therefore selected for and retained in the gene pool.

In addition to questions of etiologies, there are differing views within the social sciences of the effects of older male sexual interactions with boys. Victimologists hypothesize that such interactions are intrinsically, pervasively and severely harmful to younger partners (e.g., Conte, 1985; Fink, 2005; Finkelhor, 1981, 1984, etc.), a view that is embraced and promoted by the media (West, 1998), and which has resulted in a moral panic (Jenkins, 1998) which makes rational consideration of these issues very difficult. Other researchers, however, have suggested that in situations where the boy is a willing participant there may be not only a lack of harm, but even positive benefits (e.g., Constantine & Martinson, 1981; Ford & Beach, 1951; Hertoff, 1993;

Levine, 2002; Murray, 2002; Sandfort, 1987; Tindall, 1978; Trobriands, 1993; Wilson, 1981; etc.). Further investigations into these apparently mutually exclusive hypotheses would seem to be in order, as well as into the relevant etiologies of these possibly bilateral attractions between boys and older males.

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