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Sexual Desire Among an Online Sample of Men Sexually Attracted to Children

Renae C. Mitchell, Alex P. Bravo, and M. Paz Galupo

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ABSTRACT

Sexual attraction to children occurs in roughly 3 to 9 percent of the population. However, most knowledge about such desires comes from forensic samples, and most studies fail to assess preferred sexual activity and sexual partner. A new multimodal assessment of sexual desire was used to investigate interest in consensual and nonconsensual sex with adults and children in an online sample of men sexually attracted to children ($n = 101$). Desires were compared across history of sex offending behavior and preferred gender of child victim. Men who have and have not acted on their sexual attractions to children reported similar levels of sexual desire. Men primarily attracted to girls reported greater desire for sex with adults than did men primarily attracted to boys. Results highlight the heterogeneity of men sexually attracted to children as well as possible distinctions across gender of children to whom they are primarily attracted.

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child sexual abuse; community sample; measurement; pedophilia; risk factors; sexual offending

Sexual attraction to children has long been identified as a risk factor for recidivism among men convicted of child sexual abuse (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Mann, Hanson, & Thornton, 2010). To date, little is known regarding such desire (and risk) among men in the community (Bailey, Bernhard, & Hsu, 2016; Bailey, Hsu, & Bernhard, 2016; Gannon & O'Connor, 2011). What is known, however, is that sexual attraction to children is not limited to forensic populations (Nagayama Nagayama Hall, Hirschman, & Oliver, 1995; Wurtele, Simons, & Moreno, 2013). In fact, it is estimated between three and nine percent of all men experience sexual attraction to children (Ahlers et al., 2011; Briere & Runtz, 1989; Byers, Purdon, & Clark, 1998; Hayashino, Wurtele, & Klebe, 1995; Santtila et al., 2010; Wurtele et al., 2013). Understanding the link between sexual attraction to children and child molestation behavior among men in the community is an important step in early prevention of child sexual abuse.

Heterogeneity of community men sexually attracted to children

Although sexual attraction to children is a risk factor for sex offending behavior, recent research efforts have highlighted the heterogeneity of individuals who

experience such attractions (Bailey et al., 2016, 2016; Cantor & McPhail, 2016; Houtepen, Sijtsma, & Bogaerts, 2015; Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a, 2016b). Not all men who are sexually attracted to children commit sexual offenses against them, just as not all men who commit sexual offenses do so to satisfy sexual urges (Cantor & McPhail, 2016; Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a; Seto & Fernandez, 2011). Furthermore, differences between men who are sexually attracted to children who do and do not act on those attractions are beginning to be observed in the research literature.

In a series of studies investigating differences between men who have and have not acted on their sexual attraction to children, Mitchell and Galupo (2016a, 2016b) have identified particular areas of difference between these two groups. Specifically, differences were observed both in terms of the decision-making process when deciding not to sexually offend a child (Mitchell & Galupo, 2016b) as well as in general proclivity for child molestation (Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a). Specifically, individuals who report never acting on their attractions are more likely to describe potential harm to the child as stemming from the child's own perspective rather than from social forces condemning adult-child sexual activity (Mitchell & Galupo, 2016b). Men who report never acting on their attractions also report less behavioral propensity for child molestation scenarios involving coercion but not aggression, as assessed by Gannon and O'Connor's (2011) Interest In Child Molestation Scale (ICM; Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a).

These findings call attention to potential differences in the perception of consent between men sexually attracted to children who do and do not act on those attractions (Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a, 2016b). Prior literature has suggested that among community men in general, scenarios of child molestation describing apparently consensual adult-child sexual encounters are more arousing than scenarios involving overt coercion or aggression (Gannon & O'Connor, 2011; Hall, Hirschman, & Oliver, 1995; Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a). Furthermore, during the development of the ICM, the only subscale that corresponded to child sexualization (assessed via an adapted implicit-association test) was the low-force scale describing sexual arousal to coercive, but not aggressive, acts of child molestation (Gannon & O'Connor, 2011).

Together, this line of research highlights the heterogeneity among community men sexually attracted to children. Findings to date suggest such differences occur across a history of sexual encounters with children and potential harm to the child in regulating sex offending behavior as well as overall behavioral propensity for low-force child molestation scenarios (Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a, 2016b). Yet to be investigated among community men sexually attracted to children are potential differences across demographic characteristics of their preferred child victim. Research from the literature regarding convicted sex offenders, however,

suggests there may be patterns of differences across groups of men and boys based on the characteristics of their previous victims (Knight, Carter, & Prentky, 1989; Seto & Fernandez, 2011; Turner, Rettenberger, Lohmann, Eher, & Briken, 2014; Veneziano, Veneziano, & LeGrand, 2000). A review of this literature follows, shedding light on potential patterns of difference in nonforensic samples of men sexually attracted to children.

Offender characteristics: Patterns across victim gender

Research suggests clear differences between sex offenders based on victim gender. A history of offending against boys has been included in actuarial assessments of sex offender risk since their development, based on evidence that men who sexually abuse boys are at increased risk for further offenses (Freund & Watson, 1991; Hall & Hall, 2007; Hanson, Helmus, & Thornton, 2010; Worling, 1995). Likewise, having at least one male victim may be one characterization of higher deviancy offenders who generally require a longer time in treatment to achieve the same results as low-deviancy offenders (Beech, 1998; Beech, Friendship, Erikson, & Hanson, 2002; Hanson & Thornton, 2000). Furthermore, male, but not female, victims are correlated with perpetrator history of sexual abuse, suggesting offending against girls may be associated with more normative experiences (Worling, 1995). This interpretation is further supported by findings suggesting individuals in the community view instances of child molestation with female victims as less abusive than similar scenarios with male victims (Maynard & Wiederman, 1997).

To date, the research described has centered on characteristics of convicted sex offenders based on the gender of their victims. This research has only recently been extended to community men sexually attracted to children (Bailey, Bernhard, et al., 2016), where preliminary results support the association between male victims and greater risk for offense. However, preference for male victims has not been linked to other offender characteristics, and measures of sexual attraction in this population do not specify the type of desired sexual activity or, if dyadic, the characteristics of the desired victim (Bailey, Hsu, et al., 2016). Thus, a realistic investigation of preferred child victim characteristics as they relate to sexual desire for consensual or nonconsensual sex with adults or children has been out of reach.

Purpose of the present study

The purpose of the present study was to further investigate sexual desire among an online sample of community men sexually attracted to children. Prior research has highlighted the heterogeneity of this population, suggesting potential differences in a variety of contexts (Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a, 2016b). While no differences in overall sexual desire have been observed

across these groups (Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a), the measures of sexual desire used thus far have precluded assessment of potential differences across demographic characteristics of preferred child victim. Thus, the first aim of the present study was to evaluate the psychometric properties of a new measure of sexual desire in an online sample of men sexually attracted to children. The scale was originally developed for use in a local sex offender treatment program to monitor levels of sexual desire for various stimuli across time. The second aim of the present study was to assess group differences in the clinical scales across gender of primary minor attraction among an online sample of community men sexually attracted to children.

The clinical scales used in the present study evaluate sexual desire across four domains: desire for consensual sex with adults, nonconsensual sex with adults, desire for child-rape, and desire for apparently consensual sex with children. Desire in this case is a multimodal construct consisting of thoughts, fantasies, and solo sexual behavior (i.e., masturbation). Based on findings that men with a history of sex offending behavior are more likely to act in child molestation situations requiring coercion (Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a) and are less likely to take the perspective of the child when reporting reasons for not acting on their attractions (Mitchell & Galupo, 2016b), it is first hypothesized that men with a history of sexual offenses against children will report higher child-rape desire scores than men without such a history (hypothesis 1). Furthermore, prior research suggests boy victims (Freund & Watson, 1991; Hall & Hall, 2007; Hanson et al., 2010; Worling, 1995) are associated with more deviant sexuality. Thus, it is hypothesized that men primarily attracted to girls will report higher desire for consensual sex with adults than will men primarily attracted to boys (hypothesis 2).

Method

Recruitment procedure

Participants were recruited as part of a larger online study on potential protective factors for sex offending among men sexually attracted to children. Participants were recruited online with the help of B4U-ACT, an organization that promotes professional services and resources for individuals attracted to children. Two distinct announcements were used to recruit men who are sexually attracted to children consisting of men who had and had not acted on their sexual desire of children.

Initial recruitment announcements with a link to the online survey were posted to B4U-ACT's website and social networking forums to which they belong. Some of these sources were general websites for individuals attracted to children, while others specifically targeted individuals attracted to children who do not want to act on their attractions. In addition, some websites were specific

to individuals attracted to boys or girls; others did not specify. A majority of participants were recruited via online forums specifically directed toward adults attracted to boys (34.7%) or girls (36.6%); the remaining participants were recruited from B4U-ACT (14.9%) and other online forums (13.9%).

Participant demographics

Prior to completing questions regarding sexual desire, participants answered basic demographic information. Participants provided information about their gender, the age and gender of the children to whom they are primarily attracted, and how they heard about the study. To protect participant anonymity, exact age and geographic location were not collected; rather, participants indicated where they fell within a broader age range and geographical region.

Of the original 211 participants, 108 adult men (18 or older) completed the variables of interest. Of those, 7 participants were removed from the sample—5 who were currently receiving sex offender treatment and 2 participants who reported sexual attraction to both boys and girls (because our analysis focused on gender of minor attraction). Of the remaining 101 participants, most were primarily attracted to children between the ages of 7 and 13 ($n = 87$). Of these individuals, 40.6% were attracted to boys and 45.5% were attracted to girls. A minority were attracted children under the age of 6 ($n = 14$), with individuals reporting being attracted to boys (5.0%) or girls (8.9%). Only men were recruited for the present study: 99% confirmed their gender as (cis) men, one individual identified as transgender (1%).

Participants selected their age within a range: 28.6% were between 18 and 25, 25.5% were 26 to 35, 17.3% were 36 to 45, 18.4% were 46 to 55, 9.2% were 56 to 65, and 1% were 65 and older. Participants represented all regions of the continental United States: 26.8% resided in the Northeast, 24.4% resided in the Midwest, 22% resided in the South, and 26.8% resided in the West. Participants were predominantly White (91%), with the remaining participants comprising Asian (2%), Black (1%), Hispanic (1%), biracial (3%), and other (2%). Most participants reported being a member of the middle class or higher in terms of socioeconomic status (65.7%) and had at least some postsecondary education (79.2%).

Sexual Desire Inventory

The Sexual Desire Inventory (Spector, Carey, & Steinberg, 1996) was used to assess general dyadic and solitary sexual desire. This measure contains 14 questions regarding the desired frequency of sexual behavior, the strength of this desire in various contexts, the importance of sexual fulfillment, and peer comparisons of desire. In this sense, sexual desire is conceptualized as a

cognitive variable. Rating scales vary within the measure between 8-point and 9-point Likert scales. Items are averaged and produce two subscales: Dyadic Sexual Desire and Solitary Sexual Desire.

This scale has demonstrated high internal consistency for both subscales ($\alpha = .86$ and $.96$ for dyadic and solitary, respectively). Test-retest reliability was adequate over a one-month period ($r = .76$), and both scales were positively correlated with frequency of corresponding sexual behaviors (this correlation was weaker for dyadic desire, as would be expected given the necessity for a sexual partner with whom to engage in the behavior). In addition, the scale is negatively associated with measures of social desirability. Originally normed on male and female college students, psychometrics for the current sample are included in the Results.

Sexual Desire Clinical Scales

The Sexual Desire Clinical Scales were developed for this research and modeled after unpublished assessments used in a clinical practice with sex offender populations. Sexual desire was independently assessed on four subscales: (a) Adult (consenting adults), (b) Adult-Rape (nonconsenting adults), (c) Child (apparently consenting), and (d) Child-Rape (nonconsenting child). Participants were asked to rate how often they had these sexual desires during the past seven days. Each sexual desire scale assessed the frequency of sexual desire based on three dimensions: thoughts/fantasies (e.g., “I had sexual thoughts/fantasies about consenting adult(s)/nonconsenting adult(s)/a consenting child or children/a nonconsenting child or children”), masturbation (e.g., “I masturbated (‘jerked off’) while thinking about consenting adult(s)/nonconsenting adult(s)/a consenting child or children/a nonconsenting child or children”), and urges (e.g., “I desired to engage in sexual activities with consenting adult(s)/nonconsenting adult(s)/a consenting child or children/a nonconsenting child or children”).

Procedure

In order to be included in the study, participants had to meet the inclusion criteria for one of two groups. Participants in the Not Acted group all indicated that they have *never* had a sexual encounter with a child, while participants in the Acted group were asked to affirm that they have had at least one sexual encounter with a child. Participants were not asked any further questions regarding their personal sexual encounters with children and were reminded that they could exit the survey if they did not wish to respond to this prompt. Participants provided demographic information about themselves and the individuals to whom they are sexually attracted.

The present analysis focuses on participant responses to the measures of sexual desire described previously (see Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a, 2016b for additional findings).

Analysis

A series of quantitative analyses were conducted to establish the psychometric properties of both the Sexual Desire Inventory and the Sexual Desire Clinical Scales and to compare SDCS scores across group status (Acted vs. Not Acted) and gender of participants' minor attraction.

Sexual Desire Clinical Scales: Psychometric assessment

Reliability analyses using Chronbach's alpha were conducted for both the Sexual Desire Inventory total and subscale scores as well as the Sexual Desire Clinical Scales. Correlations between SDI and SDCS scores were assessed using biserial correlation analysis.

Sexual Desire Clinical Scales: Group differences

One multivariate analysis of variance was used to investigate group differences across group status and gender of minor attraction for all four Sexual Desire Clinical Scales: Adult, Adult-Rape, Child, and Child-Rape.

Results

Prior to investigating the Sexual Desire Inventory and the Sexual Desire Clinical Scales in the current sample, psychometric properties of both scales were established and biserial correlations were conducted among subscales. Sexual Desire Clinical Scale scores were then compared across group status and gender of participants' minor attraction.

Sexual Desire Clinical Scales: Psychometric assessment

Results of reliability analyses using Chronbach's alpha suggest that all three scales of the Sexual Desire Inventory (Dyadic, $\alpha = .82$; Solitary, $\alpha = .82$; Total, $\alpha = .85$), as well as the four scales encompassing the Sexual Desire Clinical Scales (Adult, $\alpha = .84$; Adult—Rape, $\alpha = .81$; Child, $\alpha = .84$; Child—Rape, $\alpha = .86$) are reliable measures for use with this sample. Biserial correlation results are displayed in Table 1. Significant positive correlations were observed between SDI Total, Dyadic, and Solitary scores and the Child scores of the SDCS but not with the Adult, Adult-Rape, or the Child-Rape SDCS scores.

Table 1. Correlations Between the Sexual Desire Inventory and the Sexual Desire Clinical Scales.

	Sexual Desire Inventory			Sexual Desire Clinical Scales			
	Dyadic	Solitary	Total	Adult	Adult–Rape	Child	Child–Rape
Sexual Desire Inventory							
Dyadic	—						
Solitary	.35*	—					
Total	.87*	.74*	—				
Sexual Desire Clinical Scales							
Adult	.18	.04	.17	—			
Adult–Rape	.01	.00	.03	.40*	—		
Child	.53*	.44*	.57*		.03	—	
Child–Rape	.17	.10	.16		.08	.14	—

*Significant at the $p < .01$ level.

Sexual Desire Clinical Scales: Group differences

Participant responses for the SDCS are reported across gender of minor attraction in Table 2. M-box test was not significant, indicating homogeneity of variance among the data could be assumed, Box's $M = 38.64$, $p = .02$. Findings are thus considered using Wilks' lambda test statistic. Results from a multivariate analysis of variance revealed a significant main effect of gender, Wilks' lambda = .901, $F(4, 94) = 2.58$, $p = .042$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .10$. There was no main effect for group status (Wilks' lambda = .99, $F(4, 94) = .242$, $p = .91$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .01$), and the interaction between group status and gender of minor attraction was nonsignificant (Wilks' lambda = .96, $F(4, 94) = .97$, $p = .43$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .04$).

Follow-up analyses of variance revealed differences across gender of minor attraction in sexual desire for consensual ($F(1, 97) = 8.36$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .08$) and nonconsensual ($F(1, 97) = 5.26$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .05$) sex with adults. Specifically, individuals primarily attracted to girls reported more desire for sex with consenting adults ($M = 2.22$, $SD = .16$) than those primarily attracted to boys ($M = 1.54$, $SD = .17$). No differences were observed in either apparently consensual ($F(1, 97) = .001$, $p = .97$, $\eta^2 = .00$) or non-consensual ($F(1, 97) = .022$, $p = .88$, $\eta^2 = .00$) sex with children.

Table 2. Sexual Desire Clinical Scales Across Gender of Minor Attraction.

Sexual Desire Clinical Scales	df	df error	F	Gender of Minor Attraction	M (SD)
Adult	1	97	8.36*	Boys	1.54 (0.17)
				Girls	2.22 (0.16)
Adult–Rape	1	97	5.26*	Boys	1.07 (0.78)
				Girls	1.31 (0.71)
Child	1	97	0.00	Boys	3.49 (1.33)
				Girls	3.48 (1.19)
Child–Rape	1	97	0.02	Boys	1.37 (0.67)
				Girls	1.37 (0.72)

*Significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Discussion

The current study is the first to compare sexual desire across history of sex offending behavior and preferred victim gender among an online sample of men sexually attracted to children. The first aim of the study was to investigate a new measure of sexual attraction to children, the Sexual Desire Clinical Scales. This scale proved useful as an assessment of sexual desire among the online sample of community men sexually attracted to children in the current study. The second aim of the study was to compare SDCS scores across preferred victim gender. These comparisons revealed more normative sexual desire among men primarily attracted to girls. Comparisons did not reveal significant differences in desire between men who have and have not acted on their sexual attractions to children.

The Sexual Desire Clinical Scales

Clinical scales assessing sexual desire among men in treatment for sexual attraction to children and/or sex offending behavior were adapted for the present study to assess sexual desire among community men sexually attracted to children. These scales differentiate normative desire (consensual sex with adults) and desire for nonconsensual sex with adults as well as sexual encounters with children perceived to be either forced or consensual. Thus, the SDCS assesses sexual desire among men sexually attracted to children while considering both preferred partner (adult or child) and activity (consensual or forced). Results from reliability assessment of the SDCS suggest this scale is a useful measure of sexual desire among community men sexually attracted to children.

The multimodal assessment of sexual desire inherent in the SDCS facilitated the evaluation of differences in desire for normative and child sexual encounters across group status and preferred gender of victim among community men sexually attracted to children. Such an investigation expands current research regarding differences among convicted sex offenders across victim characteristics (Knight et al., 1989; Seto & Fernandez, 2011; Turner et al., 2014; Veneziano et al., 2000) to a nonforensic sample of online men self-reporting minor attraction. That the scale assesses both normative and child sexual desire and was revealed to be reliable for this sample further highlights the heterogeneity of community men sexually attracted to children established by prior research (Bailey et al., 2016, 2016; Cantor & McPhail, 2016; Houtepen et al., 2015; Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a, 2016b). Thus, the SDCS may prove useful in future research investigating differences among men sexually attracted to children, particularly those related to interest in normative vs. pedophilic sexuality.

Differences across child characteristics

Differences in sexual desire across group status and gender of children to whom participants were primarily attracted partially supported the authors' hypotheses. The first hypothesis was not supported: men with and without a history of sex offending behavior reported no differences in their desire for apparently nonconsensual sex with children. The second hypothesis, however, was supported: men who are primarily sexually attracted to girls reported greater desire for sex with adults (either consensual or nonconsensual) than men primarily attracted to boys.

Prior research suggests men with a history of sex offending behavior report a greater propensity to molest children and are less likely to report perspective-taking as a reason to refrain from acting on their attractions (Mitchell & Galupo, 2016a, 2016b). Therefore, it was anticipated that men sexually attracted to children with a history of sex offending behavior would endorse greater desire for apparently nonconsensual sex with children. This was not the case in the current sample of men sexually attracted to children. Men with a history of sex offending behavior did not report different levels of desire for apparently nonconsensual sex with children compared to men without a history of sex offending behavior. Furthermore, overall levels of desire for child rape encounters was low. This finding is consistent with prior research, which suggests men sexually attracted to children prefer child molestation scenarios requiring little to no force and in which the child is perceived to be consenting (Gannon & O'Connor, 2011; Hall et al., 1995). In the current study, this appears to be the case for men sexually attracted to children, regardless of their reported history of child molestation behavior.

That men primarily attracted to girls reported more sexual desire for adults than did those attracted to boys is consistent with available research regarding convicted sex offenders. Historically, the presence of girl victims is associated with less sexual deviancy in this population (Schmidt, Gykiere, Vanhoeck, Mann, & Banse, 2014). Furthermore, among men with a history of sex offending and/or sexual dysfunction who are primarily attracted to adult women, many report some attraction to prepubescent girls at a rate higher than their attraction to males of any age (Lykins et al., 2010). Taken together, findings suggest there may be overlap between community men sexually attracted to prepubescent girls and women, and that this overlap may be greater than it is for individuals attracted to prepubescent boys and men.

Limitations and directions for future research

Limitations of the present study are consistent with the use of online, self-report surveys. Demographic trends of predominantly White, middle class, and educated participants are consistent with online research (Couper, 2000). An added

consideration regarding selection bias, based on the sensitive nature of the survey content, is that participants who are able to use IP address obfuscation tools as well as participants who have already been adjudicated for sex offending crimes may be overrepresented in the present sample. Online sampling was used despite these limitations because it is helpful in recruiting samples of individuals underrepresented in the general population (Birnbaum, 2004).

There were additional limitations associated with the self-report design of the survey. Participants may have selected answers to survey questions that reflect socially desirable responses, particularly regarding their sexual interest in children. However, participants were provided with a level of anonymity and confidentiality that may have contributed to increased comfort in disclosing such information. It is also important to consider that participants were not provided definitions for “rape” nor “consent,” therefore results should be interpreted to reflect participants’ own perceptions of their sexual desire for preferred partners and activities.

Conclusion

The present study is the first to investigate sexual desire among an online sample of men sexually attracted to children utilizing a novel measure of sexual desire. The Sexual Desire Clinical Scales used in the present study enabled assessment of desire as a multimodel construct consisting of both normative and deviant desire and demonstrated reliability and validity for use with the current sample. Comparisons of desire as assessed by the SDCS across gender of participants’ primary minor attraction revealed attraction to girls was associated with both consensual and nonconsensual sex with adults. Sexual desire did not vary, however, according to participants’ self-reported history of sex offending behavior. This study expands current knowledge of men sexually attracted to children by identifying a connection between sexual attraction to girls and sexual desire for adult sexual encounters in a community sample of men primarily attracted to children. Overall, this study highlights the heterogeneity of community men sexually attracted to children as well as distinctions between men sexually attracted to children based on the gender of children to whom they are primarily attracted.

Ethical standards and informed consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

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Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts to report.

Notes on contributors

Renae C. Mitchell, MA, earned her master's in clinical psychology from Towson University and is currently pursuing her PhD in clinical psychology at the University of Kansas. Her research interests include human sexuality, sexual violence prevention, and paraphilic disorders.

Alex P. Bravo, BA, is a graduate student in experimental psychology at Towson University whose research interests include gender and human sexuality.

M. Paz Galupo, PhD, is professor of psychology and director of the Sexual and Gender Identity Lab at Towson University whose research interests center on the intersections of identity with a focus on sexual orientation and gender identity.

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