

# Punitive Attitudes Against Pedophiles or Persons With Sexual Interest in Children: Does the Label Matter?

Roland Imhoff

Received: 8 May 2014 / Revised: 23 October 2014 / Accepted: 10 November 2014 / Published online: 12 December 2014  
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2014

**Abstract** In the present research, we addressed the question of whether people harbor punitive attitudes against individuals sexually interested in children even if no sexual offense is mentioned and whether this effect is amplified by the clinical label pedophilia. In two online studies (total  $N = 345$ ), participants rated the extent to which they saw individuals sexually interested in children as necessarily committing child sexual abuse (*dangerousness*), responsible for their sexual interest (*intentionality*), and clinically disordered (*deviance*) before judging their endorsement of means of punishment (*punitive attitudes*). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which either the “pedophilia” label or the descriptive term “sexual interest in (prepubescent) children” was included in all items. Across both studies, results showed high degrees of punitive attitudes against sexually deviant men, an effect that was particularly pronounced if the pedophilia label was present. Whereas this was only latently observable in Study 1 (concealed by a suppression effect of reduced ascriptions of intentionality), in Study 2 no such suppression was observed. Unlike any other stigma we know of, punitive attitudes against pedophiles were associated positively with social desirability, suggesting that participants saw it as particularly socially desirable to condemn someone based on their deviant sexual interest.

**Keywords** Pedophilia · Sexual interest in children · Punitive attitudes · Stigma · Labeling theory · Suppression analysis

## Introduction

A growing body of research has been devoted to the issue of stigmatization of mental disorders and resulting social rejection. Labeling a certain condition as a clinically relevant mental disorder is sufficient to increase such negative reactions (Scheff, 1999). One of the most stigmatized mental conditions is a deviant sexual interest in prepubescent children, i.e., pedophilia (Feldman & Crandall, 2007). The negative attitudes toward individuals with pedophilic interest may be rooted in the assumption that there exist no legal and socially accepted ways to act out such a sexual interest, leading to the equation of pedophilia and sexual abuse of children. However, there is no deterministic relationship between pedophilic sexual interest and child sex abuse, even though these two are often confused and their interrelation is overestimated (Seto, 2008). As a result, people may harbor negative attitudes toward pedophiles (a non-juridical, psycho-medical condition) even if no case of sexual abuse is mentioned or it is explicitly denied that the person in question has ever actually committed an act of sexual abuse (Jahnke, Imhoff, & Hoyer, 2014). In the present research, we sought to test whether punitive attitudes against sexually deviant persons do exist and whether labeling their sexual interest as “pedophilic” would lead to even stronger stigma and penalization. Our hypothesis was that there may be harsher reactions to target persons who are sexually interested in children if they are labeled as “pedophilic.”

It is a well-established phenomenon that people hold negative attitudes about or socially reject individuals who carry a stigma or a negative mark (e.g., a physical or mental disorder; for an overview, see Heatherton, Kleck, Hebl, & Hull, 2000). It has been assumed that only labeling someone as mentally ill will lead to greater stigmatization even if behavioral descriptions of that person remain constant (Link, Cullen, Struening, Shrout, & Dohrenwend, 1989; Penn & Nowlin-Drummond,

---

R. Imhoff (✉)  
Sozialpsychologie: Social Cognition, University of Cologne,  
Richard-Strauss-Str. 2, 50931 Cologne, Germany  
e-mail: rimhoff@uni-koeln.de

2001). To the degree that this mental illness is subjectively associated with other harming or even criminal acts, social rejection is stronger (Feldman & Crandall, 2007), potentially to the point of calling for punishment of these targets merely on the base of their mental disorder. As recent work has demonstrated, individuals have a strong desire to keep people with pedophilia at a large social distance, more so than other groups whose mental condition will arguably put them at an increased risk of violating the rights of third persons (e.g., alcoholics, persons with antisocial personality disorder; Jahnke et al., 2014). We propose to take this logic one step further by testing whether respondents will endorse the punishment of people with pedophilia merely based on their sexual deviance without any actual act worthy of that punishment. In addition, we were specifically interested in the effect of the label “pedophilia” as opposed to a more descriptive term of their sexual interest as labeling theory holds that merely labeling individuals will increase their stigmatization. Such reasoning resonates well with the recent findings that showed that lay people were more likely to prescribe harsh prison sentences when they believed that the offender was pedophilic (Lam, Mitchell, & Seto, 2010).

We chose the mental disorder of pedophilia as it provides a case point of an extremely highly stigmatizing mental disorder. Pedophilia refers to primary or exclusive sexual interest of adults in prepubescent children (e.g., Hall & Hall, 2007) and constitutes a sensitive issue (McCartan, 2004; Spieckera & Steutela, 1997). Importantly, this sexual interest is not to be confounded with the act of sexually abusing a child, which is not a sexual interest but a criminal act. All too often, however, pedophilia (i.e., a sexual interest diagnosed as mental disorder) is confounded and confused with child sex abuse (i.e., a criminal act against sexual self-determination of a minor) (Ames & Houston, 1990; Feelgood & Hoyer, 2008; for differences in understanding of the concept pedophilia between clinical and legal context, see also Harrison, Manning, & McCartan, 2010), particularly in the highly visible media reports on cases of pedophilic child abusers (although some of these may very well not be pedophilic in the clinical sense).

This confusion of psycho-medical and legal categories and the resulting exaggeration of the danger of pedophilia (as it then seems inevitable that a person with pedophilic desire will sexually abuse children) is not restricted to lay perceptions but has also invaded scientific writing about the issue (Feelgood & Hoyer, 2008). As an example, in a recent set of studies on attitudes toward rehabilitation of sex offenders, Viki, Fullerton, Raggett, Tait, and Wiltshire (2012) used the label pedophile as synonymous with child sex offender (e.g., items read “Pedophiles should be given life sentences for their crimes”) without ever expounding on the problem of supposing that pedophiles necessarily have committed crimes. While there exists ample evidence for the fact that people hold negative attitudes against child sex offenders (with up to 50 % of respon-

dents favoring capital punishment; Mancini & Mears, 2010), evidence for the stigma associated with sexual interest in children (without the added burden of criminal behavior in the form of sexual abuse) is relatively rare (Jahnke & Hoyer, 2013). One exception is a study by Feldman and Crandall (2007) who found that among a list of 40 mental disorders pedophilia was outranked in negativity (i.e., social rejection) only by anti-social personality disorder.

### Disentangling Psycho-Medical and Legal Categories

Pedophilia refers to a dominant deviant sexual interest in prepubescent children and a desire to engage in sexual activities with them (Beier et al., 2009), whereas child sexual abuse refers to the criminal act of engaging in sexual contact with children (who per legal definition cannot consent to such activities). Clearly, the two categories are not logically identical as people with pedophilic interest (a psychological construct) do not need to act out on this in the form of child sex abuse (CSA; a legal category) and not all cases of child sex abuse need to be motivated by a dominant interest in children (Marshall, 1997; Schmidt, Gykiere, Vanhoeck, Mann, & Banse, 2014). For the latter relation, there exist estimations that less than half of convicted child sex offenders actually have a sexual preference for children over adults (Seto, 2008). The issue of how many pedophilic individuals commit a sexual offense against children is much more difficult to answer as pedophiles without an index conviction do not find their way into the legal statistics. From the fact that there exists a demand for recent programs offering treatment to pedophilic men who “allegedly have managed to restrict satisfaction of their desire for sexual contact with children to fantasies, and feel distressed about their preference without, however, fearing to commit a CSA offense” (Beier et al., 2009, p. 853) it can be concluded that there exist a considerable number of such cases. As we were interested in the stigmatization of pedophilic individuals, we explicitly did not refer to child sexual abuse (but assessed participants’ estimation of the contingency between the two; see *dangerousness* aspect of stigma below).

### The Present Research

We sought to empirically investigate stigmatizing beliefs and punitive attitudes toward persons with pedophilia, that is, toward people with sexual interest in children (independent of actual sexual abuse). Specifically, we were interested whether the inclusion of the label “pedophilia” would increase stigmatization and punitive attitudes. We thus conducted two studies in which stigmatizing beliefs and punitive attitudes toward sexually deviant men were collected. It was randomly manipulated whether this group was labeled as pedophiles or more descriptively as individuals who have sexual interest in (prepubescent)

children. The hypothesized label effect would be observable in harsher punitive attitudes in the condition with (vs. without) the pedophile label. We chose two different cultural contexts (Germany and USA) for the two studies to bolster the generalizability of the findings with a replication in a different context. Whereas our previous research has explored the extent of stigmatizing attitudes against people with pedophilia in comparison to other clinical conditions (Jahnke et al., 2014), the present research collected new original data in two studies independent to the ones reported by Jahnke et al. in order to expand these findings by (a) extending the stigmatization from negative evaluation to endorsement of punitive actions and (b) exploring the role of the pedophilia label in evoking harsher judgments.

## Study 1

### Method

#### Participants

A total of  $N = 142$  participants were recruited for participation in an online study via an e-mail list of participants in previous (unrelated) studies and a public website for online studies ([www.forschung-erleben.de](http://www.forschung-erleben.de)). Upon starting the online study, participants were randomly assigned to either the *pedophilia label* condition ( $n = 78$ ) or the *sexual interest in children* condition ( $n = 64$ ). Thirteen participants (pedophilia condition:  $n = 4$ ; sexual interest in children condition:  $n = 9$ ;  $\chi^2 = 3.37$ ,  $p = .066$ ) did not complete the full survey, resulting in a final sample of 129 participants. The 93 women and 36 men were equally distributed across experimental conditions,  $\chi^2 = 0.07$ , and ranged in age from 17 to 72 years,  $M = 27.60$ ,  $SD = 9.27$ , with no differences between conditions,  $t(127) < 1$ .

#### Independent Variable

To manipulate whether the label “pedophilia” or the more descriptive term “sexual interest in children” was present, we created two distinct surveys tapping into dimensions of stigma (dangerousness, intentionality, deviance) and punitive attitudes that only differed with regard to whether the label or the descriptive term was included in the items. Specifically, in the *pedophilia label* condition all items included the terms pedophiles, pedophilic, or pedophilia (see Table 1 for full wording). In the *sexual interest in children* condition, all items were fully identical except the fact that the term “pedophilia” was always replaced with “sexual interest in children” and the term “pedophile” was always replaced with “someone with sexual interest in children.”

### Measures

**Stigma Scales** We created a stigma scale regarding pedophiles (respectively persons with sexual interest in children) comprising three subscales: intentionality, dangerousness, and deviance. These three dimensions have been previously identified as the essential dimensions in accounting for social rejection of individuals with a mental disorder (Feldman & Crandall, 2007). Intentionality (*personal responsibility* in Feldman & Crandall, 2007) refers to the degree to which the sexual interest in children is self-chosen versus the result of a disorder the individual has no control over. Dangerousness refers to the perceived link between having sexual interest in children and the act of committing a crime of sexual abuse of a child. The deviance (*rarity* in Feldman & Crandall, 2007) scale measured the degree to which the sexual interest was perceived as a psychological disease. Each subscale was rationally constructed by creating between five or six items in a conjoint process with two additional researchers working on independent projects that also included a stigma scale (Jahnke & Hoyer, 2013). A translation of all items and the internal consistencies of the subscales can be found in Table 1. All items were responded on a seven-point scale ranging from *do not agree at all* to *completely agree*.

**Punitive Attitudes** A 13-item scale tapping into punitive attitudes was administered (see Table 1 for complete wording). To avoid a restriction of range and encourage the use of the full scale, we included psychometrically very easy items (e.g., “Citizens should have a right to get informed if a pedophile moves into their neighborhood”) as well as psychometrically difficult items (e.g., “Pedophiles should be sentenced to death as a deterrence”) and reverse-coded items (e.g., “One should not condemn pedophiles too harshly”). All items were responded to on the same seven-point scale as the stigma scales.

### Results

All scales proved sufficiently reliable (Table 1). Means indicate that there exist considerable punitive attitudes against individuals purely based on their sexually deviant desire, without further mention of corresponding criminal actions. There was almost no uniform rejection of the suggested punishment for any of the 26 items (13 items per conditions) as indicated by the fact that all except one (capital punishment for a person with sexual interest in children;  $p = .16$ ) mean score was significantly different from the lowest point of the scales, all  $ps < .02$ . Overall, there was a rather strong endorsement of the dangerousness stigma scale. Thus, participants saw a rather strong connection between pedophilic interest and child sexual abuse. Although mean scores also depend on the psychometric difficulty of the respective items, it may be informative to see that the mean score for the relevant five items (see Table 1), was above the

midpoint of the scale across conditions,  $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ,  $t(128) = 4.95$ ,  $p < .001$ .

On a correlational level, all three stigma dimensions were positively correlated and all three were also related to punitive attitudes. Replicating previous findings on zero-order correlations of stigma with social rejection (Feldman & Crandall, 2007; Table 1, p. 141), the strongest correlation of punitive attitudes existed with dangerousness, followed by intentionality and deviance. Also replicating previous findings for social distance (Feldman & Crandall, 2007), all three aspects predicted unique variance in punitive attitudes, as a regression analysis revealed (marginally) significant effects of dangerousness,  $\beta = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ , intentionality,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p = .073$ , and deviance,  $\beta = .17$ ,  $p = .037$ , when these were entered as simultaneous predictors of punitive attitudes,  $R^2 = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Regarding the effect of the label, the clinical term pedophilia led to lesser ascriptions of intentionality than the more descriptive term sexual interest in children (Table 2). Perhaps somewhat surprising, there were no effects of the label on estimations of dangerousness, deviance, or punitive attitudes (Table 2). However, in light of the reduced ascriptions of intentionality (a factor that dampens punitive attitudes), it is conceivable that a latent negative effect of the pedophilia label is concealed by the fact that the exonerating ascription of lesser intentionality might suppress this effect. We thus tested for this suppression account.

Statistically, suppression can be identified when the inclusion of intentionality into the analysis of the relationship between the label condition and punitive attitudes strengthens or changes the direction of the relationship between the latter two. After inclusion in the regression equation, a suppressor “increases the predictive validity of another variable” (Conger, 1974, pp. 36–37) and allows the initial effect to rise to its “true” level (MacKinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000; Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004). In order to test the mutual suppression hypothesis, our analyses were geared to the strategy employed by Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, and Bilewicz (2013). First, we performed a series of multiple regression analyses using punitive attitudes as the outcome variable. Regressing punitive attitudes on the label condition ( $-1$  = “sexual interest in children”;  $1$  = “pedophilia”) and intentionality separately provided results redundant to the zero-order correlation reported above (see results in parentheses for the standardized regression coefficients in Fig. 1). To test whether the simultaneous inclusion of the predictor and the suppressor would exhibit stronger relation between those two and the criterion punitive attitudes were regressed on the predictor and the suppressor simultaneously. The full model was significant,  $F(2, 126) = 16.59$ ,  $R^2 = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the relation between the pedophilia label and punitive attitudes became positive and significant (Fig. 1). The percentage of explained variance increased significantly in comparison to the model with the pedophilia label as a sole predictor,  $\Delta R^2 = .20$ ,  $p < .001$ . The amount of

**Table 1** Items and internal consistencies of all scales

Dangerousness (Study 1: $\alpha = .69/.82$ ; Study 2: $\alpha = .75/.77$ )
1. Pedophiles are dangerous for children
2. Pedophiles are perverse sex offenders
3. There exists no strong relationship between pedophilia and sexual abuse of children <sup>a</sup>
4. Many pedophiles never have any sexual contact with a child <sup>a</sup>
5. Pedophilia sooner or later always leads to child sex abuse
Intentionality (Study 1: $\alpha = .71/.87$ ; Study 2: $\alpha = .85/.82$ )
1. Pedophilia is something that you choose for yourself
2. If someone is pedophilic, there is nothing he can do about it <sup>a</sup>
3. If someone is pedophilic, it is his own fault
4. People can decide whether they are pedophilic or not
5. Pedophilia is a disposition that you cannot do anything about <sup>a</sup>
6. People with a pedophilic orientation have consciously decided for this orientation
Deviance (Study 1: $\alpha = .74/.79$ ; Study 2: $\alpha = .64/.76$ )
1. Pedophilia does not require treatment <sup>a</sup>
2. Pedophilia is not pathological <sup>a</sup>
3. Pedophilia is a mental disorder, like for example schizophrenia.
4. Pedophiles are normal people with an infrequent sexual orientation <sup>a</sup>
5. Pedophiles are sick
6. Someone who is pedophilic but never sexually abuses a child is not mentally ill <sup>a</sup>
Punitive attitudes (Study 1: $\alpha = .89/.89$ ; Study 2: $\alpha = .90/.90$ )
1. Pedophiles should be preemptively taken into custody
2. One should not condemn pedophiles too harshly <sup>a</sup>
3. Pedophiles should be castrated
4. Known pedophiles should be sentenced for life as deterrence
5. Pedophiles should be allowed to work with children <sup>a</sup>
6. Citizens should have a right to get informed if pedophiles move to their neighborhood
7. Pedophiles should be forced to undergo therapy
8. If all other means fail, it should be legal in exceptional cases to torture pedophiles
9. Pedophiles should experience leniency when dealing with the legal system <sup>a</sup>
10. There should be a website listing pedophiles with name, photo, and address
11. Pedophiles should be chemically castrated
12. The privacy of pedophiles is more important than information and safety needs of the public <sup>a</sup>
13. Known pedophiles should be sentenced to death as deterrence

For the sexual interest in children version, replace “pedophilia” with “sexual interest in (prepubescent) children,” “pedophiles” with “people with sexual interest in (prepubescent) children,” and “is/are pedophilic” with “has/have a sexual interest in (prepubescent) children.” Internal consistency for *pedophilia label/sexual interest in (prepubescent) children*

<sup>a</sup> Reverse-coded

variance explained by the model with two predictors also significantly increased in comparison to the model with intentionality as a sole predictor,  $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ,  $p = .031$ . In bootstrapping analyses (Preacher & Hayes, 2004), the suppression effect

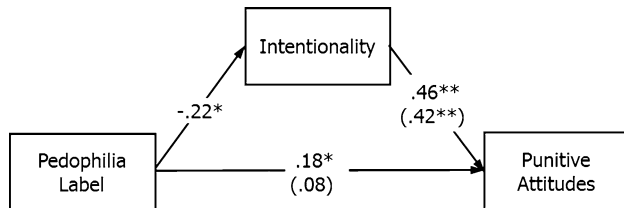


**Table 2** Descriptives, mean differences, and intercorrelations of three stigma scales and punitive attitudes in Study 1

	Pedophile label		Sexual interest in children		<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>	Intercorrelations			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			1	2	3	4
1. Dangerousness	4.53	1.00	4.39	1.20	0.70	0.13	–	.56**	.72**	.69**
2. Intentionality	2.57	0.81	2.99	1.13	–2.36*	–0.43	.47**	–	.47**	.49**
3. Deviance	5.45	1.30	5.30	1.08	0.70	0.13	.35**	.21	–	.59**
4. Punitive Attitudes	3.29	1.09	3.13	0.97	0.88	0.16	.58**	.44**	.36**	–

*N* = 129. All scales from 1 (do not agree at all) to 7 (fully agree). Correlations below the diagonal are within the pedophile label condition (*n* = 74), correlations above the diagonal within the sexual interest in children condition (*n* = 55)

\*\* *p* < .01



**Fig. 1** Suppressor effect of pedophilia label (–1: no label; +1: label) and intentionality on punitive attitudes in Study 1. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Results for simple regressions are presented in parentheses. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01

of intentionality was significant with a point estimate of  $M = -.10$  (95 % confidence interval,  $-.22, -.02$ ) and an effect size of  $ab_{cs} = -.10$  (95 % CI  $-.20, -.02$ ) (Preacher & Kelley, 2011). As the confidence intervals did not contain zero, a significant suppression was obtained,  $p < .05$ .

## Discussion

Our results provide evidence for a labeling effect of the clinical label of pedophilia on stigmatization. Using the label “pedophilia” to refer to a sexual interest in children led not only to lesser ascriptions of intentionality, but also to—at least latently—more punitive attitudes. It thus seems that the negative label of pedophilia does not only evoke negative evaluations but also has an effect on excusatory pathologization. While individuals generally have negative views of mentally ill persons, a mental disorder is also an exonerating condition in many legal systems. People who suffer from clinical conditions cannot be blamed for their actions to the same degree as “normal” people. This can be seen as an example of the more general phenomenon that (criminal) acts that are believed to be the results of freely chosen and willful behavior provoke more punitive reactions than if the behavior is thought to be attributable to external circumstances or constraints (Maruna & King, 2009). In our current data, we thus observed the combination of two contradictory effects of the pedophilia label on punitive attitudes. The negative label pedophilia increased punitive attitudes and (ironically) at the same time decreased punitive attitudes as potential blameworthy actions were not attributed to intentional decisions but to a psycho-medical condition outside of

control. Independent of this suppression effect and the effect of the pedophilia label, we observed quite remarkable degrees of punitive attitudes against targets merely defined by their deviant sexual inclination without any mention of actually committed sexual abuse.

In summary, although we had no strong a priori hypotheses about the suppression effect, the results are very well in line with our a priori reasoning that the label “pedophilia” increases punitive attitudes. Nevertheless, there were some potential limitations. One refers to the comparison category “sexual interest in children.” Although the German word for children (*Kinder*) has a strong connotation of prepubescence, it might be argued that participants could have construed “sexual interest in children” as less tabooed interest in adolescents (i.e., *hebeophilia*), whereas the label “pedophile” normatively implies (and would also be likely understood as) sexual interest in prepubescent children. Another shortcoming is the relatively little information we have about the constitution of the sample. It is one of the advantages of online research that participants’ anonymity can be kept at a very high standard, making maximally honest responses more likely. Obviously, this advantage comes at the cost of transparency. We did not collect any data from our participants except age and sex and thus know little about their educational, professional, or ethnic background. In light of these limitations, we sought to bolster the generalizability of the observed labeling effect by replicating it in a second sample from a different cultural background. To this end, we recruited participants from an US-based crowd-sourcing website (amazon M-Turk) that is becoming increasingly popular for empirical social science research due to the high quality of data obtained from MTurkers (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Shapiro, Chandler, & Mueller, 2013). The US context also allows for a national comparison, as recent studies have shown much stronger resentments against pedophiles in an American compared with a German sample (Jahnke et al., 2014).

## Study 2

For Study 2, we essentially replicated Study 1 with a few alternations. First, all materials were translated to English

separately by two independent researchers (*dual-forward translation*). Inconsistencies between the two translations were discussed and resolved among the researchers (*harmonization*). Second, to address a potential loophole in the current argument, the term “sexual interest in children” was changed to “sexual interest in prepubescent children” in all items. Third, we collected more data on the sample characteristics (see below).

## Method

### Participants

A total of  $N = 203$  participants were recruited through the crowd-sourcing service amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online marketplace where requesters can find workers to complete Human Intelligence Tasks (HITs). Over the past 5 years, MTurk has received an exponential increase in popularity among social science scholars as a research tool, as the population of MTurk workers is relatively diverse (compared to the typically used population of undergraduate students), but produces data of high psychometric quality (Buhrmester et al., 2011). Participants were paid \$0.25 for their participation. The final sample was relatively diverse with regard to sex (126 men, 69 women, 1 other, 7 missing), age (ranging from 18 to 63;  $M = 29.6$ ,  $SD = 8.6$ ), and occupational background (42 students, 7 unemployed, 2 professional MTurkers, more 80 other different named occupations). The majority of the sample described their ethnic background as White ( $n = 150$ ), and the largest religious affiliation was Atheist ( $n = 74$ ) or Christian ( $n = 57$  if Protestant and Catholic was combined). Average yearly household income was highly diverse with a median of about \$40,000. Almost half of the participants held a Bachelor degree or more ( $n = 92$ ) and another 89 had at least visited some college.

Upon starting the online study, participants were fully randomly assigned to either the *pedophilia label* condition ( $n = 101$ ) or the *sexual interest in prepubescent children* condition ( $n = 102$ ). Allocation to condition was independent of sex,  $\chi^2 < 1$ , and age,  $t(198) < 1$ .

### Procedure

The independent variable was realized by presenting all items as shown in Table 1 (pedophilia label condition) or by replacing it with descriptive terms referring to sexual interest in prepubescent children (see Table 1). Otherwise, all measures were identical to Study 1. After completing the items referring to the stigma aspects, participants indicated their punitive attitudes before they gave demographic information (see above). As further control variable, we included a short measure of social desirability (8 items on a 5-point scale;  $\alpha = .76$ ; Ray, 1984).

## Results

As in Study 1, all scales proved sufficiently reliable (Table 1), and the mean scores indicated substantial associations of sexual deviance with sexually abusive behavior (dangerousness scale) as well as substantial punitive attitudes against individuals purely based on their sexual deviance (Table 3). As in Study 1, the strongest predictor of punitive attitudes was perceived dangerousness,  $\beta = .62$ ,  $p < .001$ , followed by perceived intentionality,  $\beta = .17$ ,  $p = .002$ . Different from Study 1, deviance,  $\beta = .05$ ,  $p = .40$ , did not add a unique part in explaining variance in punitive attitudes,  $R^2 = .54$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Although we ruled out that the pedophilia label could be understood as the (potentially less stigmatized) hebephilia by explicitly marking the targets of sexual interest as *prepubescent children*, result showed the expected effect of the pedophilia label on punitive attitudes in that “pedophiles” provoked even harsher negative attitudes than individuals with a “sexual interest in prepubescent children,” Cohen’s  $d = .29$  (Table 3). Different from Study 1, this labeling effect was not concealed by a suppression effect of reduced ascribed intentionality.

In contrast to the German sample in Study 1, the current US sample did not ascribe less intentionality to “pedophiles” than to “people with sexual interest in prepubescent children,”  $t < 1$ . Instead, and unexpectedly, pedophiles were in this sample seen as less deviant than people with sexual interest in prepubescent children (Table 3). This unexpected finding was further explored by testing its relation to the label effect mentioned above. As deviance is positively related to punitive attitudes and the pedophile label is positively related to punitive attitudes despite the fact that pedophiles were seen as less deviant, it is conceivable that the true magnitude of the label effect was again concealed by suppression. To test for this, we conducted the same bootstrapping analysis as in Study 1, this time with deviance (and not intentionality) as the suppressor. Simultaneously including the label condition (predictor) and deviance (suppressor) yielded a significant model,  $F(2, 197) = 32.54$ ,  $R^2 = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ , that explained more variance than the predictor alone,  $\Delta R^2 = .23$ ,  $p < .001$ , or the suppressor alone,  $\Delta R^2 = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ . As can be seen from Fig. 2, the regression weight of the predictor increased when deviance was entered into the equation, indicating suppression. Bootstrapping analyses as in Study 1 yielded a significant suppression effect with a point estimate of  $M = -.12$  (95 % CI  $-.22, -.04$ ) and an effect size of  $ab_{cs} = -.10$  (95 % CI  $-.18, -.04$ ). As the confidence intervals did not contain zero, significant suppression was obtained,  $p < .05$ .

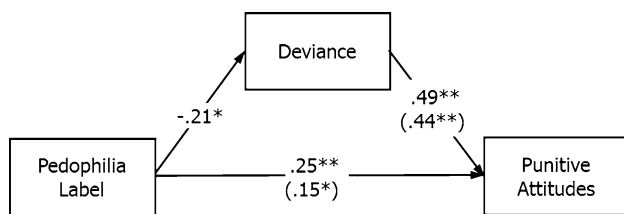
We also included a brief measure of social desirability to control for its effect on our results. Remarkably, high concerns for social desirability were associated with more (not less) punitive attitudes. This stands in marked contrast to the commonly observed dampening role of social desirability concerns on expressing stigmatizing views. As the zero-order

**Table 3** Descriptives, mean differences, and intercorrelations of three stigma scales, punitive attitudes, and social desirability in Study 2

	Pedophile label		Sexual interest in prepubescent children		<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>	Intercorrelations				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			1	2	3	4	5
1. Dangerousness	5.30	1.14	5.33	1.11	0.21	−0.02	—	.32**	.62**	.75**	.07
2. Intentionality	3.80	1.62	3.93	1.50	0.56	−0.08	.47**	—	.12	.38**	.09
3. Deviance	4.98	1.05	5.45	1.10	−3.08**	−0.44	.52**	.06	—	.48**	.02
4. Punitive attitudes	4.42	1.15	4.07	1.24	2.06*	0.29	.71**	.49**	.49**	—	.10
5. Social desirability	3.38	0.69	3.30	0.67	0.78	0.12	.11	.20*	.15	.27**	—

*N* = 203. First four scales on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 7 (fully agree); Social Desirability on a scale from 1 (definitely no) to 5 (definitely yes). Correlations below the diagonal are within the pedophile label condition (*n* = 101), correlations above the diagonal within the sexual interest in prepubescent children condition (*n* = 102)

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$



**Fig. 2** Suppressor effect of pedophilia label (−1: no label; +1: label) and deviance on punitive attitudes in Study 2. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Results for simple regressions are presented in parentheses. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

correlations (Table 3) suggested that this association of social desirability with punitive attitudes was particularly strong in the condition with the pedophilia label, we conducted a moderated regression analysis to test for difference between this relation, as a function of the label condition. Regressing punitive attitudes on the effect-coded label condition,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p = .054$ , and social desirability,  $\beta = .18$ ,  $p = .009$ , led to an explanation of a significant amount of variance,  $R^2 = .05$ ,  $p = .004$ . Including the cross-product of these two predictors to test for a moderation effect did not lead to a significant increase in explained variance,  $\Delta R^2 < .01$ ,  $p = .288$ . Social desirability was thus positively associated with punitive attitudes independent of the label.

## Discussion

Study 2 provided further support for the notion that the label pedophilia bears additional negative connotation compared to a more descriptive naming of the sexual interest. Although the target group of people with a sexual interest in prepubescent children provoked marked punitive attitudes (in the absence of any mention of sexually abusive behavior), this was even more pronounced if the group was labeled as pedophiles. Compared to Study 1, this effect was not concealed by reduced ascriptions of intentionality to pedophiles. Curiously, in this sample from a different national background (US), the pedophilia label was associated with decreased perceptions of deviance—a

factor also associated with negative stigma. Suppression analyses revealed that statistically controlling for this difference led to an even clearer negative impact of the pedophilia label.

At present, we can only speculate of why pedophilia was associated with less deviance than sexual interest. One reason might be that participants feared that admittance of a pathological state would imply exculpation of acting on one's desires. In that sense, being sick and needing treatment might be seen as an indirect sign of reduced responsibility and intentionality. If that was the case, we would expect a negative correlation between deviance and intentionality. Across the sample, we neither observed such a negative correlation,  $r = .09$ ,  $p = .190$ , nor did we find a positive correlation which we did in Study 1:  $r = .30$ ,  $p = .001$ . It may thus be that—at least for some participants—deviance is seen as more exculpatory in the US compared to the German sample.

An overall comparison of the two studies suggests that although the principle effect of the pedophilia label is virtually identical in both samples, the US sample has even more pronounced negative associations with pedophiles. One indication is that they do not grant them the benefit of the doubt of having less control over their desire. Another, more direct indication is that the mean scores for dangerousness, intentionality, and punitive attitudes are almost one scale point higher in Study 2 than in Study 1 (although both studies used the same 7-point Likert scale). This corroborates recent research findings that similarly found more pronounced negative attitudes toward people with pedophilia in a US compared to a German sample (Jahnke et al., 2014).

One of the most remarkable findings of Study 2—although not at the center of the current article—is the correlation between punitive attitudes against sexual minorities and social desirability. It is a common finding in stigma and prejudice research that individual social desirability (Henderson, Evans-Lacko, Flach, & Thornicroft, 2012) or experimental manipulations of allowing social desirable responding (Imhoff & Banse, 2009) are associated with less negative and less stigmatizing responses, suggesting that respondents perceive it as socially

desirable and normatively expected to express positive views about other groups. In the present study, we find the exact opposite: social desirable responding was associated with greater punitive attitudes suggesting that respondents saw it as socially endorsed to express particularly negative views about individuals who have a sexual interest in children. On an individual items level, we can see that social desirability positively predicted the endorsement of sentencing known pedophiles to death ( $r = .23$ ,  $p = .021$ ) despite the fact that there is no mention of any criminal action they have ever committed. Taken together, these findings suggest that stigmatizing and punitive attitudes against pedophiles appear in a perceived climate of social support for such attitudes. As argued elsewhere (Jahnke & Hoyer, 2013), it may be particularly such a climate that makes it so hard for people with pedophilic interest to seek therapeutic help.

## General Discussion

Despite some nuances, two studies provide consistent support for the ideas that (a) people harbor immense punitive attitudes against people with pedophilia even if they never committed an act of sexual abuse and (b) this effect is exacerbated by the label “pedophilia” compared to more descriptive terms. Importantly, there were no differences between the two conditions on perceptions of dangerousness, that is the perceived association of deviant sexual desire with incriminated acts of abuse. Thus, independently of whether participants expressed their perception of “pedophiles” or “people with sexual interest in (prepubescent) children,” they saw an almost deterministic relationship between such sexual interest and the likelihood of committing crimes against children’s sexual self-determination. This constitutes exactly the confusion of clinical (desire) and legal (abuse) terms that other authors have previously identified (e.g., Feelgood & Hoyer, 2008) and that was discussed in introducing our hypotheses.

As another important empirical finding, punitive attitudes were not only predicted by this perceived association but also incrementally and uniquely by the perceived intentionality of the desire and (in one of the two studies) its deviance. This suggests that the confusion between sexual desire and actual likelihood to commit CSA is only part of the story in explaining the wish to punish people with such a desire: the belief that sexual interest in children is a self-chosen desire predicts punitiveness above and beyond the contribution of seeing a risk of sexual abuse. It is thus clearly the desire itself and not just its assumed negative consequences that evokes a desire for punishment.

These findings have important implications as they not only add to the evidence that stigmatization of people with pedophilia is alarmingly widespread (Jahnke et al., 2014), but also that the label itself is laden with negative connotation

above and beyond its actual meaning. Why do we characterize the degree of punitive attitudes against pedophiles as “alarming”? In response, it might be arguable that the harsh condemnation of individuals with sexual interest in children is not alarming but justifiable to some degree in light of (a) the perceived severity of child sexual abuse and its strong effects on the victims and (b) the relatively high proportion of offenses committed by pedophilic child sexual abusers. In addition, stigmatization might clearly communicate that the society at large is not willing to tolerate such behavior and thereby scare pedophilic men from acting on their sexual interest. While this may seem plausible at a lay level, we caution against such a simplistic approach to ideas of general prevention. As argued in more detail by Jahnke and Hoyer (2013), a strong stigmatization of pedophilia might do disservice to the overarching goal of reducing sexual abuse of children. Men sexually interested in children will likely be discouraged from seeking help and confessing their desires to a professional if they perceive the public stigma too strong to overcome. It is thus dangerous, not only for the target of stigmatization if such negative views are publicly endorsed.

In our current research, we focused on sexual interest in children as one of the most stigmatized but simultaneously severely under-researched stigmas. Future research may elucidate whether the double-edged sword of labeling on stigmatization also occurs for other stigmas. It is conceivable that also for other mental diseases a stigmatizing label would increase negative reactions but at the same time decrease ascribed intentionality, which in turn dampens negative reactions (as reduced intentionality commonly leads to exculpation). In that sense, the label of schizophrenia alone is likely to lead to greater perceptions of dangerousness (Imhoff, 2014), but this may also be more excusable for labeled individuals. Also, people might be more willing to suppress the expression of punitive attitudes that they may have toward people with schizophrenia, because they are aware of strong social norms prohibiting such actions. In contrast to (arguably) the majority of mental disorders, holding punitive attitudes toward people with pedophilia appears to be a fully socially accepted or even desirable act, rather than its opposite.

As a limitation to the current studies, we have solely relied on online samples. Although, such samples have become increasingly popular as they commonly result in more representative samples than undergraduate student samples and although the online nature may facilitate more sincere responding due to greater trust in respondents’ anonymity, there are drawbacks of such data collection methods as respondents may be more distracted than respondents in laboratory studies. As another limitation of the present argument, we have refrained from discussing potential explanations for the notable degree of stigma against pedophiles and the role of media representations. Media reports on sexual crimes are not only drastically overrepresented and more emotional than reports on other forms of



crime (Harper & Hogue, 2014a), but also regularly focus on unrepresentative and extreme, allegedly prototypical, cases that might increase punitive policy support (Harper & Hogue, 2014b). It is thus highly plausible that the negative stigma is not primarily deducted from first-hand experience but socially constructed via biased media representations.

In summary, lay people endorse calls for punishment of individuals with a deviant sexual interest even if no actual sexual or non-sexual offense is mentioned. Labeling this sexual interest as pedophilia (in contrast to a more descriptive label) functions in two opposing ways, as it would lead to even harsher endorsement of punishment but this effect is dampened by the fact that clinically relevant labels exculpate by reducing perceptions of intentionality. Future research might highlight the consequences of stigma against pedophilia for targets of these stigmata and their willingness to undergo treatment.

**Acknowledgments** I would like to thank Sara Jahnke for valuable comments and the productive collaboration in constructing the scales.

## References

- Ames, M. A., & Houston, D. A. (1990). Legal, social, and biological definitions of pedophilia. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 19, 333–342. doi:10.1007/BF01541928.
- Beier, K. M., Ahlers, C. J., Goecker, D., Neutze, J., Mundt, I. A., Hupp, E., et al. (2009). Can pedophiles be reached for primary prevention of child sexual abuse? First results of the Berlin Prevention Project Dunkelfeld (PPD). *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 20, 851–867. doi:10.1080/14789940903174188.
- Buhrmester, M., Kwang, T., & Gosling, S. D. (2011). Amazon's Mechanical Turk: A new source of inexpensive, yet high-quality, data? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6, 3–5. doi:10.1177/1745691610393980.
- Conger, A. J. (1974). A revised definition for suppressor variables: A guide to their identification and interpretation. *Educational Psychological Measurement*, 34, 35–46. doi:10.1177/001316447403400105.
- Feelgood, S., & Hoyer, J. (2008). Child molester or pedophile? Socio-legal versus psychopathological classification in sexual offender research. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 14, 33–43.
- Feldman, D. B., & Crandall, C. S. (2007). Dimensions of mental illness stigma: What about mental illness causes social rejection? *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 26, 137–154. doi:10.1521/jscp.2007.26.2.137.
- Golec de Zavala, A., Cichocka, A., & Bilewicz, M. (2013). The paradox of in-group love: Differentiating collective narcissism advances understanding of the relationship between in-group and out-group attitudes. *Journal of Personality*, 81, 16–28. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.2012.00779.x.
- Hall, R. C. W., & Hall, R. C. W. (2007). A profile of pedophilia: Definition, characteristics of offenders, recidivism, treatment outcomes, and forensic issues. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 82, 457–471. doi:10.4065/82.4.457.
- Harper, C. A., & Hogue, T. E. (2014a). The emotional representation of sexual crime in the national British press. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. doi:10.1177/0261927X14544474.
- Harper, C. A., & Hogue, T. E. (2014b). A Prototype-Willingness model of sexual crime discourse in England and Wales. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*. doi:10.1111/hoj.12095.
- Harrison, K., Manning, R., & McCartan, K. (2010). Multi-disciplinary definitions and understandings of 'paedophilia'. *Social & Legal Studies*, 19, 481–496. doi:10.1177/0964663910369054.
- Heatherton, T., Kleck, R., Hebl, M., & Hull, J. (2000). *The social psychology of stigma*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Henderson, C., Evans-Lacko, S., Flach, C., & Thornicroft, G. (2012). Responses to mental health stigma questions: The importance of social desirability and data collection method. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 57, 152–160.
- Imhoff, R. (2014). *Zeroing in on the effect of the schizophrenia label on stigmatizing attitudes: A large scale study*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Imhoff, R., & Banse, R. (2009). Ongoing victim suffering increases prejudice: The case of secondary anti-semitism. *Psychological Science*, 20, 1443–1447. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02457.x.
- Jahnke, S., & Hoyer, J. (2013). Stigmatization of people with pedophilia: A blind spot in stigma research. *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 25, 169–184.
- Jahnke, S., Imhoff, R., & Hoyer, J. (2014). Stigmatization of people with pedophilia: Two comparative surveys. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. doi:10.1007/s10508-014-0312-4.
- Lam, A., Mitchell, J., & Seto, M. C. (2010). Lay perceptions of child pornography offenders. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 52, 173–201. doi:10.1353/cj.0.0087.
- Link, B. G., Cullen, F. T., Struening, E., Shrout, P. E., & Dohrenwend, B. P. (1989). A modified labeling theory approach to mental disorders: An empirical assessment. *American Sociological Review*, 54, 400–423. doi:10.2307/2095613.
- MacKinnon, D. P., Krull, J. M., & Lockwood, C. M. (2000). Equivalence of the mediation, confounding and suppression effect. *Prevention Science*, 1, 173–181. doi:10.1023/A:1026595011371.
- Mancini, C., & Mears, D. P. (2010). To execute or not to execute? Examining public support for capital punishment of sex offenders. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38, 959–968. doi:10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2010.06.013.
- Marshall, W. L. (1997). Pedophilia: Psychopathology and theory. In R. D. Laws & W. O'Donohue (Eds.), *Sexual deviance: Theory, assessment, and treatment* (Vol. 1, pp. 152–174). New York: Guilford Press.
- Maruna, S., & King, A. (2009). Once a criminal, always a criminal? 'Redeemability' and the psychology of punitive public attitudes. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 15, 7–24. doi:10.1007/s10610-008-9088-1.
- McCartan, K. (2004). 'Here there be monsters': The public's perception of paedophiles with particular reference to Belfast and Leicester. *Medicine, Science and the Law*, 44, 327–342. doi:10.1258/rsmmsl.44.4.327.
- Paulhus, D. L., Robins, R. W., Trzesniewski, K. H., & Tracy, J. L. (2004). Two replicable suppressor situations in personality research. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, 39, 303–328. doi:10.1207/s15327906mbr3902\_7.
- Penn, D. L., & Nowlin-Drummond, A. (2001). Politically correct labels and schizophrenia. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 27, 197–203. doi:10.1093/oxfordjournals.schbul.a006866.
- Preacher, K. J., & Hayes, A. F. (2004). SPSS and SAS procedures for estimating indirect effects in simple mediation models. *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers*, 36, 717–731. doi:10.3758/BF03206553.
- Preacher, K. J., & Kelley, K. (2011). Effect size measures for mediation models: Quantitative strategies for communicating indirect effects. *Psychological Methods*, 16, 93–115. doi:10.1037/a0022658.
- Ray, J. J. (1984). The reliability of short social desirability scales. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 123, 133–134.
- Scheff, T. (1999). *Being mentally ill: Sociological theory* (3rd ed.). Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction.
- Schmidt, A. F., Gykiere, K., Vanhoeck, K., Mann, R. E., & Banse, R. (2014). Direct and indirect measures of sexual maturity preferences

- differentiate subtypes of child sexual abusers. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 26, 107–128. doi:[10.1177/1079063213480817](https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063213480817).
- Seto, M. C. (2008). *Pedophilia and sexual offending against children: Theory, assessment, and intervention*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. doi:[10.1037/11639-000](https://doi.org/10.1037/11639-000).
- Shapiro, D. N., Chandler, J., & Mueller, P. A. (2013). Using Mechanical Turk to study clinical populations. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 1, 213–220. doi:[10.1177/2167702612469015](https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702612469015).
- Spieckera, B., & Steutela, J. (1997). Paedophilia, sexual desire and perversity. *Journal of Moral Education*, 26, 331–342. doi:[10.1080/0305724970260307](https://doi.org/10.1080/0305724970260307).
- Viki, G. T., Fullerton, I., Raggett, H., Tait, F., & Wiltshire, S. (2012). The role of dehumanization in attitudes toward the social exclusion and rehabilitation of sex offenders. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 42, 2349–2367. doi:[10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.00944.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.00944.x).