

More on Age of Onset of Attractions and Sexual Development in Pedohebephilic Individuals:
Response to Tozdan and Briken (2018)

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In this Letter, I respond to comments made by Tozdan and Briken (2018) on my earlier Letter to the Editor (McPhail, 2018). In this response, I will focus on making clarifications to ideas in my earlier Letter that, potentially due to a lack of specificity, have given rise to misreading by Tozdan and Briken. I will also comment on some interpretive problems that remain in Tozdan and Briken's line of reasoning and the new data they kindly provided. I will also take this opportunity to briefly expand on some issues related to age of onset in pedohebephilic interests and the sexual development of pedohebephilic individuals.

Clarifications and Corrections

A minor first clarification to make is to some of the language I used in my Letter. The title of the Letter was, "Age of Onset *in* Pedohebephilic Interest" (emphasis added), which Tozdan and Briken interpreted as, age of onset *of* pedohebephilic interest. This clarification has to do with what exactly I was discussing in my first Letter and what Tozdan and Briken take me to be talking about. Some of their comments are perhaps due to the implied meaning behind my title that I should have made more explicit and a drift in language in my Letter. Part of my initial Letter was about the age of onset of attractions to others in men and women who are pedohebephilic in adulthood, some characteristics of those first attractions, and some ideas of the developmental processes involved as these individuals move through adolescence toward their sexuality in adulthood. The other aspect of the initial Letter was to discuss some problems with earlier research on one of these processes: the so-called age of onset of pedohebephilic interests. I hope the focus of my Letter becomes a bit clearer and reinforces the points I make below.¹

¹ As well, I am compelled to address an especially unkind and incorrect point in Tozdan and Briken's reading of my Letter, mainly because it is inflammatory, not because it is scientifically interesting. Tozdan and Briken (2018) say, "We consider it ethically inappropriate to assume a paraphilic disorder in 8–10-year-old children when they feel attracted to other children of the same age, even retrospectively." Indeed. In my Letter, there is no mention of paraphilic disorder and I did not explicitly make such an argument. It is inaccurate to cast aspersions on a colleague's ethical compass when an explicit, reasoned, and supported argument has not been presented for an unethical position. If I had made such a direct statement and provided argument to support what Tozdan and Briken

After reading their Letter, I have the emerging sense that Tozdan and Briken are defining pedohebephilic interests in a way that is similar to the definition found in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). That is, they are defining pedohebephilic interests as sexual interest in a child at least five years one's junior. In their definition of age of onset, they are studying adult (or late adolescence) sexuality and trying to understand when an interest in much younger individuals develops. This is a reasonable definition and their attempts to identify age of onset appear to be guided by this formulation and examine a discrete event in the lives of pedohebephilic individuals. My arguments have been about describing developmental processes that start before or at first attractions to others, involve adolescent and adult sexual identity development, and continue to variations in adult sexuality. Part of the divergence in views and misunderstanding might be found in differing approaches to the phenomena of interest, though I doubt that Tozdan and Briken have an issue with a developmental approach to understanding pedohebephilic individuals.

If we take a developmental perspective on the sexuality of pedohebephilic individuals, we would be looking to understand first attractions to anyone, sexual identity development, and sexual and romantic behaviour throughout the lifespan. A limitation with my conceptualization, at least from a practical or clinical standpoint, is that understanding exactly when someone is first attracted to a much younger person is less of a focus. The age of onset of sexual interest in children, as such, is more likely to be seen as a process of sexual identity development or part of a developmental process that involves biological, social, psychological, and experiential features

accuse me of, then they would be correct in their statement. As it stands, they have chased a phantom in their reading of my Letter and arrived at an inflammatory admonishment. A smaller misread of my Letter is in the sentence, "By verbally separating sexual orientation (i.e., hetero-, homo-, or bisexual) and sexual interest in children (i.e., pedohebephilic), McPhail (2018) indicates that these two characteristics are mutually exclusive." This is not present in my thinking, and again, Tozdan and Briken should comment on the arguments I do make, not imputing arguments that seem to be present.

that began prior to the person first experiencing a sexual interest in children.² The overlap that I see between the ideas in my initial Letter and Tozdan and Briken's approach is that what they call age of onset of sexual interest in children, I might be more apt to call the age of onset of sexual age identity. My assumption is that onset of sexual interest in children is not a discrete development, but it is a time when someone first notices that they are sexually interested in a child or children more generally. This assumption rests on the larger assumption of ongoing developmental processes relevant to human sexuality and interpersonal behavior that occur prior to realizing pedohebephilic interests.³ I will not argue for the correctness of one view or the other, but drawing out these differences and similarities, to my mind, identifies an area where our thinking may diverge.

Tozdan and Briken seem to misread the bulk of my comments and criticisms of the previous research on age of onset. Indeed, in a criticism of my re-interpretation of the past research on age of onset, Tozdan and Briken arrived at the same place I did. On this point, we agree: age of onset of first attractions in those who are teleiophilic in adulthood is around the age of 10. My point was that past empirical literature into age of onset in pedohebephilic individuals have not crafted survey questions in such a way to shed light on when first attractions emerge and the targets of these first attractions. Nor do past studies seem to be capturing the definition of pedohebephilic interests that Tozdan and Briken are using (i.e., onset of first attractions to much younger people). Instead, past studies appear to be measuring age of onset of sexual age identity development in individuals that are pedohebephilic in adulthood. This interpretation is suggested

² Admittedly, almost every concept and process in this sentence has yet to be examined empirically and research in the near future will rely on retrospective self-reports of pedohebephilic adults, which will result in a memory-dependent descriptive account of these concepts.

³ However, given the emotional valence of first noticing a sexual interest in children, this will be an important point in the lives of pedohebephilic adults/adolescents to examine, as Tozdan and Briken and other authors who have examined age of onset have started to do.

to me by the previous research asking questions about realizations about or recognizing one's attraction to children.

The point about realizations of an interest in children brings me back to Tozdan and Briken's (2015) article. I did indeed misquote their age of onset question in saying they asked participants when they "realized" their attractions. Tozdan and Briken (2018) are correct in saying they reported asking about when participants "recognized" their attractions in their 2015 study (p. 1603). While Tozdan and Briken might believe their previous study does not contain the same interpretive problem as the other studies I cited, recognize is a synonym of realize. It seems that the men in their 2015 study reported on when a process of sexual identity development started for them, despite Tozdan and Briken's (2018) claims to the contrary.⁴

In fairness to Tozdan and Briken (2015), they were not able to anticipate my criticism, which I do not think is a fatal flaw to their work. Rather, my criticism of their work is an appeal to re-interpret what their data are telling us about pedohebephilic individuals. Indeed, re-interpreting past research that claimed to be measuring the age of onset of pedohebephilic interests as actually measuring onset of sexual age identity development helped to make sense of the discrepancy between first attractions in homosexual and heterosexual individuals (i.e., around 10 years on average) and the onset of attractions in pedohebephilic individuals (i.e., between 14 and 18 years on average). I do not think my initial Letter will be the last word on the topic of sexual age identity and age of onset in pedohebephilic individuals, but I do think it is a start and may help us think more clearly about what we are measuring.

Discussing New Data

⁴ Admittedly, whether the English translation presented by Tozdan and Briken (2018) was used in their 2015 article is not entirely clear to me. If this is the case, it is also not clear why they would report in their 2015 article that they asked about when individuals recognized their sexual interest in children. This may be a case where the exact wording and meaning is lost in translation.

Tozdan and Briken (2018) were kind enough to provide summary statistics from their new research on age of onset of pedohebephilic interests. From my view, their new research adds something to our understanding of age of onset, but it is also open to similar methodological and interpretive criticisms. Tozdan and Briken (2018) indicated that they asked participants, “The following question refers to the age of onset of your sexual interest in children. When did you start feeling sexually attracted to children (boys and/or girls)? Please enter (in years) how old you were when you felt sexually attracted to children for the first time.”

They report mean ages of onset of pedohebephilic interest in their three sample that ranged from 17 to 20 years. The SD were 6.5 to 10.7 years and the median ages were all less than the mean ages in the sample (medians ranged from 15 to 16.5, though one median was incompletely reported in their Letter). These latter two summary statistics suggest the age of onset data are positively skewed and that the majority of the sample reported an age of onset below the mean in the sample. Given the magnitude of the SD, a sizeable portion of participants may have reported ages of onset well below the mean age in these samples. While Tozdan and Briken (2018) claim that people do not develop sexual interests in children in childhood, men in their studies seem to be self-reporting that their sexual interest in children began during their own childhood or adolescence. While I agree that we need to be careful how we label such early interests, especially if we intend to use these data for clinical or applied purposes, we also cannot ignore what some people tell us in our surveys.

The main problem with Tozdan and Briken’s new operationalization is that asking about age of first sexual interest in children is vague. Specifically, this operationalization is problematic because most everyone, teleiophilic, pedophilic, hebephilic, etc., is attracted to children at some point in their lives, notably, when we are children and are attracted to our

peers.⁵ Do Tozdan and Briken mean age at first sexual attraction to children when the person was an adult, an adolescent, or a child? Do they mean sexual interest in terms of an early childhood, late adolescent, or adult form of sexuality? Late adolescent or adult sexuality then somehow different from child sexuality and experiences of attraction towards same-aged peers? How are these sexual interests in children different? Tozdan and Briken's operationalization does not help participants sort through these ambiguities. Cash (2016) has mentioned that pedohebephilic participants in his study appeared to have difficulty interpreting a question about their age at realizing their attractions to children. The summary statistics Tozdan and Briken provided may suggest that their participants may have had similar problems understanding the meaning of this item.

I am unsure how much of the foregoing is actually a problem, how much of the problem is due to the researchers' not operationalizing this question adequately enough, or how much of it is due to the fact that operationalizing questions about age of onset of sexual interest in children is a difficult task. The concept of age of onset of attractions, even for teleiophilic heterosexuals and homosexuals, seems amorphous. I am inclined to think that operationalizing this concept as applied to pedohebephilic interests is difficult and requires theoretical work to support it. Part of Tozdan and Briken's task might be operationalizing questions in such a way to differentiate childhood attractions to other children and adolescent/adult interest in much younger children.

I would urge Tozdan and Briken to consider what exactly they mean by sexual interest in children and to clarify how they would operationalize the following: "We think it is in the nature of things that sexual interest in children has a later onset than sexual orientation since one can only be attracted to children if he or she grows older but still feels sexually attracted to

⁵ To avoid misinterpretation and being accused of making unethical arguments, I am not suggesting that we are all pedohebephiles as children.

significantly younger children.”⁶ This may be true to some extent and for some people. I would counter that it may be the case that because of different phenomena involved in pedohebephilic interest, people do not realize or recognize their sexual interest in children until an age that is later than what typically happens for sexual gender orientation. For instance, given the social contexts in which these individuals grow up, it is not likely that being pedohebephilic is the first sexual orientation they consider as their own. Social contexts, and even one’s own psychology, are likely very antagonistic to recognizing a sexual interest in children. This would result in a much later age of onset of realizing one’s sexual interest in children, but for some people, not necessarily a later age of onset of processes that result in late adolescence/adulthood attraction to children. The narratives of how pedohebephilic individuals discovered their interest in children in Cash (2016, see pp. 22–26) are instructive in this regard. This opens up additional problems of whether age of onset of sexual interest in children is a discrete event, or part of ongoing developmental processes, and whether it makes sense to ask about a discrete event outside of the context of ongoing developmental processes.⁷

Perhaps one way to ameliorate these issues is to take an approach to asking questions that was outlined in my initial Letter (McPhail, 2018). Age of onset of attractions to anyone likely starts in middle childhood for most of us and an interesting avenue of inquiry is about the further psychosexual development of people who are attracted to prepubescent and pubescent children in late adolescence or adulthood. We might simply ask about age of first attractions to anyone, such as the age the person was when this first attraction emerged and the age of the person that they

⁶ As an ancillary criticism, perhaps it is not in the nature of things, but in the content of one’s conceptualization of and approach to the phenomena under study.

⁷ I hope Tozdan and Briken take these comments as offering alternative interpretations of what they have found and pointing out areas of complexity in interpreting their results. I do not think my criticisms harm or diminish the value of the data they have collected, but I do think my criticisms create issues for what their data are interpreted as telling us about pedohebephilic sexuality.

were attracted to. We might also ask about who a person was attracted to throughout their childhood and adolescence (see Greisemer, 2006 for a good example of this methodology), the ages of these other people, whether they were in dating relationships, the content of their sexual fantasies (e.g., ages of people in fantasies; whether they fantasized about children/adults they knew), age at first masturbation and the ages of people in their fantasies, frequency of masturbation, pornography consumption, sexual behavior, and so on. Asking about the age when they were first attracted to a significantly young person (in adulthood/late adolescence) is likely more meaningful in the context of the other information I have outlined.

An astute reader will read this list and see that what I am saying is that we need basic data on the childhood and adolescent sexuality of people who are pedohebephilic in adulthood. I hope that others will think this is a worthwhile pursuit and will have more items to add to this list. I am less convinced of the value of trying to identify when one “becomes” pedohebephilic. It does seem important, however, to examine age of onset of sexual age identity development in individuals who are pedohebephilic in adulthood. This may have some relation to important correlates, such as exclusivity of interest in children or pedophilia versus hebephilia.

Further Ideas on Development of Attractions in Pedohebephilic Individuals

Since my Letter was published, I have received feedback from pedohebephilic individuals and have reflected more on the ideas I presented. This reflection and feedback have expanded my thinking in a few directions that I briefly outline.

There may be for some pedohebephilic individuals a pattern of adolescent attractions that includes both adults and same aged peers until a certain age, perhaps late adolescence or early adulthood, at which time their attractions transition to be exclusively oriented towards children (R. Kramer, personal communication, April 3, 2018). In my initial Letter, the view I took for

exclusive pedohebephilic individuals was that their attractions were solely to children and fluctuated very little. It will be important for researchers to remain open to identifying transitional processes, or how attractions to adults or same-aged peers fades, in research on the psychosexual development of pedohebephilic individuals.

A focus on timing of different aspects of sexuality, features of those one is first attracted to, and the correlates of these ages of onset and features is all interesting data to collect. However, there are other ways to conduct research into these developmental processes. For example, research with non-heterosexual individuals has examined how individuals experience the recognition of their homosexual feelings (Savin-Williams, 1996). Other research has identified differences in experiences of same-sex attractions in non-heterosexual women and men (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Some research has examined individuals' experience of recognizing their attraction to children (Cash, 2016; Houtepen, Sijtsema, & Bogaerts, 2016), but more research into the experience of the onset of pedohebephilic sexuality and the processes of sexual age identity development will be important.

There seems to be a large avenue of research to be done on these aspects of pedohebephilic sexuality. While views may diverge, I hope there continues to be robust debate of the issues involved, including definitions, the developmental processes involved, and how best to operationalize the constructs under study. We are indeed just beginning to understand the developmental antecedents of adult pedohebephilic interests.

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