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# A content analysis of a “boy love” support forum: Revisiting Durkin and Bryant

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**Abstract** *In 1999, Durkin and Bryant analysed an online “boy love” support forum and categorized justifications given by self-identified paedophiles for their sexual interest in children. The present study replicates this to identify how this forum is currently being used, given the changes in technology over the intervening years. It remains unclear whether or not interacting online influences the commission of offline sexual offences; however, receiving support from like-minded individuals is thought to promote pro-offending beliefs in socially isolated individuals. The results of this study offer an insight into the types of justifications used to account for a paedophilic sexual orientation and help to demonstrate how this forum functions to fulfil the needs of the “boy lovers” who make up the membership of this internet site. The study highlights changes over the last nine years, but provides support for increased use of such a forum, in spite of it being “old technology”.*

**Keywords** *Internet; paedophilia; community; “boy-love”; justifications; excuses*

## Introduction

The growth of the internet has created a new medium through which sexual offending can occur (Tomak et al., 2009). Empirical research into this increasing problem is quite limited thus far, with a particular scarcity of research into groups of non-convicted viewers of child abuse imagery. In order to add to the existing body of research in the area of internet sexual offending, this research revisits an investigation carried out 10 years ago into the excuses and justifications offered by members of an online support forum for self-identified paedophiles (Durkin & Bryant, 1999).

## Background

Durkin (1997) described the four main activities of online paedophiles. The first of these activities was trafficking child abuse images. The second major function of the internet for paedophiles was to aid in locating child victims for contact abuse. Both of the remaining functions of the internet for paedophiles described by Durkin (1997) relate to communication: with children and with each other. The internet provides an environment where some people

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with a sexual interest in children can renegotiate their real identities safely and present themselves to children as age-appropriate peers in order to engage in sexually inappropriate chat with them, and gives the opportunity to engage with one another through chatrooms, discussion forums and private e-mail. These four misuses of the internet represent dangers for some children (ISTTF, 2008) and immediate positive reinforcement for offenders. However, it should be noted that sexual crimes against young people that do not involve the internet outnumber those that do (Wolak et al., 2003), and the majority of sexual molestations are perpetrated by those the victim knows offline, such as family members or acquaintances (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

Paedophiles are one of the most isolated groups in most societies, and as confronting social stigma is one of the most significant challenges facing members of deviant groups, such as those who have a sexual interest in children, it is necessary for them to carefully manage the impression they impart on society. Scott and Lyman (1968) introduced the formulation of the accounts model to explain how language is used to neutralize questionable activity. Accounts can take the form of either excuses or justifications. Excuses involve acknowledging that a particular act is wrong but denying complete responsibility for the action. In contrast, justifications entail taking responsibility for behaviour but refuting its pejorative nature. The theory of accounts has been applied to research in many forensic areas, including domestic violence (Loseke & Cahill, 1984), shoplifting (Kraut, 1976), teen mothers' perspectives on statutory rape (Singer et al., 1999) and social constructions of illegal drug use (Weinstein, 1980). Such accounts may serve several functions, the first of which is exculpatory.

According to Hamlin (1988), involvement in deviant activity has a negative impact on self-identity by eliciting feelings of guilt. If individuals can account for their abnormal behaviour using an excuse or justification, the aberrance is neutralized and the individuals can alleviate guilt and feel positive about themselves. In addition, accounts aid in impression management because an individual is protected from societal contempt, as the deviant behaviour is presented in such a way as to minimize the personal responsibility of the actor. The final and perhaps most dangerous function of accounts is that they may facilitate future deviance. If accounts are successful in allowing an individual avoid social stigma and mitigate for atypical behaviour, the actor will suffer minimal negative consequences. Weinstein (1980, p. 578) suggests that "the reasons given for an act are often the conditions for its continuation". According to Durkin and Bryant (1999), accounts are generally accepted as occurring subsequent to an act of deviancy and would seem functionally similar to the notion of cognitive distortions in the sex offender literature (Gannon, Ward & Collie, 2007).

Maruna and Mann (2006) argue that the concept of "cognitive distortions" is one that has suffered problematic definition and inconsistent usage in existing literature. In their review, Maruna and Mann observe that when challenged about bad behaviour, almost everyone will tend to account for their actions by employing excuses or justifications that lay the blame on external factors. However, by enshrining the notion of cognitive distortions in criminological literature, society has transformed excuse-making into an offender-exclusive action. Schlenker, Pontari and Christopher (2001, p. 15) explain this phenomenon succinctly, saying that excuses and justifications enjoy the awkward position of being "universally condemned while being universally used". In other words, focusing upon cognitive distortions in treatment has pathologized for offenders something that is conducted routinely by most others in society and may, in fact, be an adaptive coping mechanism to relieve stress and maintain self-esteem (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). It is also worth noting that in Howitt and

Sheldon's (2007) study comparing the role of cognitive distortions in offending for internet and contact offenders, they report that: "The most commonly endorsed cognitive distortions consist of statements lacking the sort of bizarre and extreme elements conjured-up by the phrase 'cognitive distortion'. The items most strongly agreed with are those which appear superficially to explain child molestation in terms which in earlier decades might even be redolent of the views of professionals" (Howitt, 1992, p. 481).

While the exact relationship between viewing internet abusive images of children and the commission of contact offences still remains unclear (Hanson & Babchishin, 2009), it is apparent that in the United Kingdom the number of people convicted with child pornography offences has continued to grow. Middleton et al. (2009) reported that in 2006 internet-related sexual offences accounted for almost one-third of all sexual offence convictions. What is apparent is that the internet has facilitated the emergence of many communities of interest, such as those with a sexual interest in children (Durkin et al., 2006). Various levels of engagement with the internet coincide with differing distorted attitudes, and Taylor and Quayle (2003, p. 104) identify that "it is clear that cognitions change when the offender moves from a relatively isolated position as 'downloader' to be involved in the larger social network that has many of the characteristics of a community". While the easily accessible wealth of child pornography available online is a considerable draw for paedophiles, it is arguably the sense of community and belonging that may prove ultimately to be the most attractive aspect of the internet for this group.

An unpublished study by Linehan et al. (2001) examined how engaging with a particular online Bulletin Board System (BBS) may have influenced members' identities and activities. The authors described the internet as a social consolidation mechanism where individuals can go beyond the limitations of physical meetings to become part of the lives of geographically widespread others. One of the most salient features of community found by these authors was what was termed "evidence of group dynamics". This involved naming different types of contributors, such as newbies, wise ones, regulars, trolls, etc. which was linked to interactions involving challenges to, or attempts to establish, credibility. This designation of labels to members was an important part of how a sense of community was created and builds a discourse about "us versus them".

One such community was studied by Durkin and Bryant (1999), who conducted an analysis of the justificatory accounts offered by paedophiles communicating on a Usenet group dedicated to the support of "boy lovers". The study sought to identify the exculpatory and justificatory accounts of those with a sexual interest in young boys in order to supplement existing knowledge about paedophilia. The online Usenet group alt.support-boy.lovers was identified as a ready pool of paedophiles who were not necessarily active as contact offenders, but who could offer insights into how those with a sexual interest in children accounted for their deviant sexual orientation.

The types of accounts offered in Durkin and Bryant's study were consistent with many of those widely accepted cognitive distortions of sexual offenders, and included denial of injury to children, denial of victim and condemning the condemners. Interestingly, none of the 41 self-proclaimed paedophiles in the Durkin and Bryant study offered excuses. Instead, all the accounts identified during the analysis were justifications, which deYoung (1989, p. 114) describes as accounts in which "the individual or group accepts responsibility for deviant behaviour or belief but denies the pejorative or stigmatising quality of it". The dominance of justifications over excuses implies that the participants in that study did not consider that sexual contact with children was wrong, but simply that it is viewed negatively by wider society.

*The current research*

The present study seeks to replicate Durkin and Bryant's (1999) earlier work with a view to identifying how the support forum is currently operating. Availability and use of the internet has changed substantially in the intervening 10 years, therefore it would seem reasonable to expect that the usage habits of this forum's membership may also have changed.

**Method**

Content analysis methodology was employed to analyse the data, following the previous research upon which this paper is based. Content analysis is a scientific methodology and thus reliability, validity and the opportunity for replication are central advantages of using it as an analytical tool. Content analysis will use manifest content illustrating justifications and excuses to infer the values and intentions of the authors. Despite the lack of independent sources available to corroborate the conclusions of the present research, inferences made about the contributors to the website provide descriptions of probable attitudes and cognitions that replicate other findings from the existing literature (e.g. deYoung, 1988, 1989; Durkin & Bryant, 1999).

Using the same coding categories for analysis as Durkin and Bryant (1999) means that the themes begin to become standardized and results can be compared easily. Consequently, knowledge about the justifications used by paedophiles becomes cumulative and so the quality of inferences may be supported and improved. This research uses content analysis to investigate how techniques of persuasion and justification are used by the website contributors to account for their sexual orientation towards children.

Before the entire data set was coded, a sample was subjected to analysis by two independent judges to assess the reliability of the categories. The data sample consisted of 13 randomly selected postings, equalling approximately 10% of the data, and was taken from 12 contributors in order to obtain a wide range of texts. The second rater was given details of the operational definitions for the coding categories and then asked to analyse the data. The coding reliability was measured using Cohen's kappa (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002). The level of agreement between raters was 0.83, which was described by Neuendorf (2002) as being acceptable in most situations. It was also noted by Lombard et al. (2002) that Cohen's kappa is quite a conservative measure and thus more liberal acceptance criteria can be applied.

*Sample*

The study sample was made up of contributors to an internet support forum. Each of the 23 contributors had a self-identified sexual interest in children. All the contributors had been members of the support forum for a minimum of several months, with some holding membership for up to 10 years. Currently, there are 1570 subscribed members to the group and it is categorized as a medium-level activity group. Demographic information such as age, sex and geographical location was unavailable from the sample, as most had not created user profiles and, given the disembodied nature of the internet forum, assumptions could not be made as to the accuracy of any such information mentioned in their postings.

## Data

The research data consisted of postings made to the forum by the above sample. When Durkin and Bryant conducted their original study in 1999 there was an average of 150–200 postings made per month. However, within the first four months of 2008 the average number of postings had increased to 1310 per calendar month. Given the increase in activity on the forum, time constraints allowed for only the postings from one month in 2008 to be analysed.

In adherence with Durkin and Bryant's (1999) research, only the text from self-identified paedophiles was collected for analysis. A substantial percentage of postings contained only links to pornography websites, and these were excluded from the final count. In addition, a significant number of contributors to the site are antipaedophilia and post frequently to undermine the contributions of the admitted paedophiles on the site. Again, these types of postings were excluded from analysis, as they do not fit the category of content of interest to this research. It should also be noted that the support forum offers contributors the option of having their postings excluded from the site archives. Given the sensitive nature of the writings, and keeping in mind the ethical issues involved in internet research, it was decided that if postings were marked as unavailable for archiving, they would be expelled from the data set. With these exclusion criteria in place, the final number of postings collected for analysis was 127 and comprised text from 23 unique authors.

Durkin and Bryant (1999) did not include the denial of victim account as an independent category but instead coded the data for polythematic accounts. Following a discussion with Durkin it was decided that this category was meaningless as the sample invariably used more than one justification in accounting for their deviance, and introducing a polythematic category did not yield any particular theoretical insights on the use of accounts (Durkin, personal communication, 2 April 2008); therefore, this category was not used in the current research. The reliability of coding was measured using Cohen's kappa (Lombard et al., 2002). Before the entire data set was coded, a sample was subjected to analysis by two independent judges to assess the reliability of the categories. The level of agreement between raters was 0.83, which was described by Neuendorf (2002) as being acceptable in most situations.

## Results

In total, 65% of the sample offered a minimum of one justification. In addition to the account categories that were coded specifically in the data, a number of other themes emerged to a significant degree during analysis and will be included in the following discussion. With the anonymity of contributors in mind, the quotes given in this section to elucidate themes will be identified alpha-numerically with each contributor having been assigned a letter and the posting identified by number; e.g. E3 signifies the third posting obtained from the particular contributor "E" (Table I).

The majority of contributors included more than one justification in their postings to the website (60.8%). The most common combinations of justification were: condemnation of condemners and claim of benefit; condemnation of condemners and denial of victim; and denial of injury with claim of benefit. The latter mix of denying injury while claiming benefit would seem to make the most sense, as the claim of benefit directly negates any accusation of wrongdoing. There is no existing theory to explain the other combinations, but employing multiple justifications within an account may function to strengthen one's attempt at a credible argument in defence of paedophilia.

**Table 1.** Breakdown of categories showing the percentage of each justification

Account	Percentage offering
1. Any type of account	65%
2. Condemnation of condemners	57%
3. Denial of injury	35%
4. Claim of benefit	17%
5. Denial of victim	13%
6. Appeal to higher loyalties	13%
7. BIRGing	4%

BIRGing: basking in reflected glory.

### *Condemning the condemners*

The most common type of account found in the data was the “condemnation of condemners”. This justification has been well documented in the literature and is used by individuals to transfer attention from them to the alleged misdemeanours of those who disavow their deviant behaviour. With regard to paedophiles, the common targets of condemnation include law enforcement officials, parents and social workers.

The sex hysteria is being used as a pretext to distract the people from the failings of the government and to make them fear the government. (R1)

Another noteworthy target of condemnation was the other users of the site who promote an antipaedophile position. This is unsurprising, given that the assaults from those in opposition are attacking the website’s fundamental purpose—to support individuals with a paedophilic sexual orientation. A substantial amount of the text on the website is made up of arguments against paedophilia and subsequent responses promoting it as a valid lifestyle.

I have always wondered quite what people like . . . and . . . and several others—really hope to achieve by making nuisances of themselves on the Internet. It certainly doesn’t do anything to reduce child abuse. Indeed it could even increase it. I’d like to know just what these people do to help the children they profess to care about. (H2)

. . . you are here calling people names and trumping up false charges which you level at them with no evidence at all. I often wonder how many children have been harmed because your activities on this group have not allowed someone to get the help and support they want and need. (H12)

The implication that speaking out against adult/child sexual relationships may in fact cause such behaviour is a typical technique employed by the individuals in this forum to neutralize their behaviour. Although a less recurrent recipient of criticism than law enforcement and other website users, some critiques were also directed at parents and educators for their lack of attention to sex education with young children.

Keeping it sexual, kids are taught, NO NO NO NO No. Do NOT DO THAT. NOT EVER, EVER, EVER. And then suddenly they are adults, and it is turned loose on the world. If those kids were taught the “responsible” expression of those desires, then it stands to reason that child abuse, rape, assault etc. would naturally decline”. (C13)

The argument asserts that if better sex education were given to children, victimization of minors would decrease. The notion is not elaborated or clarified, but suggests that if children were taught about sex, then sexual activity with adults would no longer be viewed as abusive

or aggressive, but instead as a healthy and normal expression of children's sexual desire. General society-wide attacks are not uncommon on this support forum.

Several postings were not targeted specifically at an individual or group, but simply attack a general "them" or "they". This may mirror society's habitual condemnation of paedophiles as a homogeneous group, where distinctions between non-offending paedophiles are rarely distinguished from convicted child molesters.

As soon as they hear the word "paedophile" all reason goes right out the window (F5). What troubles me most is that crusaders like this consider a frank, open and honest treatment of sexuality to be "grooming". (G6)

The function of using a condemnatory justification is straightforward—if the actions of those who condemn paedophilia can be shown to be more exploitative or dangerous than the impact of adult/child sexual contact, antipaedophilia rhetoric can be discounted as irrelevant or hypocritical and the positive self-concept of forum users is preserved.

### *Denial of injury*

The second most common account emerging from the data was the denial that any harm or injury was caused by adult/child sexual activity. The denial of injury account involves an attempt to justify behaviour by "redefining the activity in such a way as to negate its negative qualities such as injury, harm or wrong" (Pogrebin, Poole & Martinez, 1992, p. 244). For paedophiles, the denial incorporates an admission that they advocate sexual activity with children, but the rejection that this is inherently harmful to those children.

One of the basic precepts of law (until recently when a bunch of braindead nannies started making laws) is that harm or damage must be done before a crime is committed (B1).

Questioning the law on child abuse suggests that sexual activity with children does not constitute a crime, because it does not necessarily cause damage or harm. Several authors asserted that there is no innate harm associated with adult/child sex, and that the psychological injury to children often stems not from the sexual relationship itself, but rather from the aftermath of disclosing the relationship to other adults.

We don't USE children. (F1)

Paedophiles are innocent if they have not used force, deception, intimidation, drugs, and if their acts have been consensual. (R1)

Below is evidence that paedophilia is not harmful. (R1b)

This last statement goes on to reference various reports and studies that allegedly support the claim that paedophilia does not damage children, including the Rind Report, the Kinsey Report, Judith Levine's "Harmful to Minors" and Karl Menninger's "Love against Hate". The Rind Report is particularly controversial, as its findings from a meta-analysis of 59 academic publications found that not all children are traumatized by early sexual experiences. This finding is particularly supportive to the denial of injury justification, as it was reached by non-paedophile academics and therefore purportedly represents independent and objective evidence that not all incidences of child abuse are damaging and traumatic for the children involved.



*Claim of benefit*

An extension of the denial of injury account is the claim that children can, in fact, benefit from being sexually involved with adult partners. This account is not separated from the denial of injury justification in some earlier studies; however, Durkin and Bryant (1999) extended it into an independent category. The claim of benefit defends paedophilia as a positive experience for children and was offered by 17% of the current sample.

The paedophilia scare is a fake. It is not harmful. That is why they refuse to allow anyone to discuss the issue openly. It would reveal that there is much evidence that it is harmless and can be beneficial. (R1c)

I am aware that some children were sexually active with adults, enjoyed the experience and came to no harm through it. (H11)

Another poster acknowledges the advantages of child pornography as a therapeutic tool to help paedophiles avoid contact offending.

These groups and the images and videos [of child pornography] we get from them, provide us with a masturbatory outlet for those fantasies and we keep a solid line between them and our real lives. (W2)

On the theme of child pornography, several posters entered a discussion on the merits of legalizing its production to benefit the child "actors".

Not all of these children are "abused", that many of them enjoyed or at least WANTED to participate in child porn. (G3)

In addition, the same writer notes that not all child pornography involves adults, and chastises people from changing "children having sex" to "adults having sex with children".

*Denial of victim*

Denial of victim is not employed as an independent category by Durkin and Bryant (1999) but is encompassed by the denial of harm account. However, in previous studies by deYoung (1988, 1989) the denial of victim was distinguished as a separate category, and several postings include this justification in the present study therefore it was decided that it warranted discussion independently. In this justificatory account, the victim of child sexual abuse is re-conceptualized as having deserved or attracted sexual advances from adults.

I would \*happily\* engage in a discussion with you about our views on what is an appropriate age for differing levels of sexual activity for children. Because I do believe, given my own history, that children \*can\* make those decisions. (C11)

It's interesting that ... thinks it's such a crime that they did not give their "victims" the right of informed consent that they should be in an asylum. (F7)

The use of quotation marks suggests that the contributor does not consider children who are sexually abused by adults to be victims. There also appears to be an admission that the paedophiles in question do not receive consent from the children involved, but that because the children are not "victims", this point is overlooked. It is unlikely that pro-paedophilia activists will ever be in a position to overcome the fundamental issue of convincing society that young children are capable of giving consent for sexual activity. Indeed, deYoung (1988) predicted that consent would be the single most important issue in keeping paedophiles misaligned with society in general.

*Appeals to higher loyalties*

Appealing to higher loyalties is a strategy by which pro-paedophile organizations attempt to normalize their position by highlighting their interest in serving a higher principle. In the case of most such organizations, this higher principle is the sexual rights of children and campaigning for children’s liberation from the repressive rules of society.

Thus comes the potential for abuse, the instinct to do what we want, to \*force\* others to do what we want. For myself, I think that a lot of that comes from being forced \*AS CHILDREN\* to repress so much of our normal desires. (F13)

Another contributor speculates that when children become adults they will resent the sexual restrictions placed on them when they were young and argues that society’s so-called “protection” of children is in fact detrimental to their quality of life.

These “children” are going to spend the majority of their lives as adults—I wonder if in another generation or so, as adults, if they’re going to thank us for destroying their rights in the name of “protecting” them. (L7)

Appealing to higher principles most often concentrates on advocating for children’s right to develop and grow into “full human beings” with the protection and support of adults. This is clearly not at odds with the public’s common interest, but when the matter of sexual freedom is introduced to the argument, the pro-paedophile position diverges markedly from that of the general society.

*Basking in reflected glory*

Basking in reflected glory (BIRGing) was a rare account in the data collected for this study. This justification involves broadcasting widely some link with successful others in order to position oneself or one’s organization in a positive light. With regard to paedophiles, this justification tends to involve claims that “great men” have also had a paedophilic orientation; for example, Durkin and Bryant (1999) found references to the German photographer Hermann List, as well as Socrates, Plato, Oscar Wilde and several others. The current research represents an untraditional type of BIRGing, where instead of basking in others’ glory the contributor gives an example of successful others to highlight what he believes to be wrongful conviction for child pornography possession.

Here in Canada, many of the targets of child pornography criminal prosecutions have been artists and writers (the Langer and Pecciarich cases come immediately to mind). Neither of these people had \_ever\_abused a child, yet they were targeted for criminal prosecution based on either their art or their writings (actually both in Pecciarich’s case). (L2)

Although this does not use the glory of prominent individuals to reflect positively on paedophilia, it utilizes the case of well-known artists and authors to illustrate what are seen as injustices in the legal system that target people for possession of child pornography.

While the above accounts are the most prolific in the literature and accounted for a large proportion of the text, some other themes also emerged during the data coding stage. The extent to which these additional themes appeared in the text warrants a brief discussion, as they serve to demonstrate further how the website is used to fulfil the needs of its users. Three main themes were evidenced during data analysis, which were unexpected a priori. These were: presenting self as victim; attacking the opposition; and creating a sense of community (Table II).

**Table II.** *Additional emergent themes showing percentage and frequency of occurrence*

Emergent theme	Frequency	Percentage
1. Self as victim	8	6.3%
2. Attacking the opposition	14	11%
3. Creating a sense of community	9	7%

*Creating a sense of community*

According to Durkin (1997) one of the major functions of the internet for paedophiles is to communicate with like-minded others. Given the stigma attached to paedophilia in general society, individuals whose primary sexual attraction is towards children can find themselves isolated from the wider community. For this reason, the internet provides an ideal virtual space for paedophiles to communicate openly with each other. Linehan et al. (2001) describe how an impression of community is created both by establishing an environment of “us versus them” and by members being concerned with the board status.

The sense of “us versus them” that is established by website members enhances the support offered by pro-paedophile contributors to each other, as they seek to protect themselves from what Linehan et al. (2001) call “infiltrators”.

You’ve all been so supportive I need to be here in spite of the slime. (A3)

The point of alt.support.boy-lovers is to provide support for each other and to help each other NOT become child users. It’s ok to look—it’s not ok to touch. If you are interested in that, then it’d be great to have you here. (F1)

Strategies such as this consolidate the bond between those who find themselves marginalized and under attack from wider society. Evidence of board status is also apparent in the data, when contributors make explicit references both to the status of the board and to the kind of learning environment it provides for members. This investment in learning and educating other members indicates that some contributors are so engaged with the activities of the website that it represents a real community to them.

I will gladly share any information, and help anyone who might need it and at the same time, learn from others. (E1)

If you feel you have something to share, please do, but “how to find boys” is not what we’re here for. (H6)

A typical reference to group status is where a new member asks for information and offers help and support to other existing members. The response shows how a regular contributor to the site outlines what is expected from new members and dismisses incorrect perceptions about the function and activities of the forum.

*Excuses and admitting harm*

In light of the previous literature on how paedophiles account for their deviance, it was entirely unanticipated that the data would reveal any excuses or admission of harm. In keeping with the general pattern in existing literature, the sample in this research overwhelmingly offered justifications rather than excuses. However, one exception did emerge from the data:

I think that an awful lot of men, and also honestly some women, would find it hard to \*really\* put the interests of the child first, and know when to stop. Know that taking things past a certain point, while technically legal, would be harmful to the child. (C12)

The use of excuses by paedophiles is so rare because an excuse is a type of account in which the individual admits that behaviour is wrong but denies being fully responsible for it. Because the paedophiles on this website seek to assert that sexual contact with children is *not* wrong, excuses are counterproductive to their objectives and so are not employed. Both Durkin and Bryant (1999) and deYoung (1988, 1989) report that justifications have been used exclusively in their data sets, and excuses are not employed. However, the above quote does constitute an excuse named the “appeal to biological drives”. The writer admits that sexual activity with adults can be harmful to children, but appeals to biological drives as a mitigating factor in “taking things past a certain point”. In the text preceding it, the author wrote:

men in general find it harder to really control their lust than women do. It is like, pardon this, but, once a guy has a hard-on, he simply \*has\* to find some place to put it.

Appealing to biology attempts to lessen personal responsibility for engaging in sexual contact with children. The contributor admits that harm may be caused to children, but tries to mitigate for this by referencing “uncontrollable lust”. While there was only one excuse offered in the data, this in itself was unprecedented. In addition, it is evident that some other contributors who identify as paedophiles are willing to concede that adult/child sexual activity is harmful to children, which again has not been found in previous studies.

I do not support the distribution and possession of illegal materials. And I despise people who create the stuff by raping children for their own financial profit or their own pleasure. (F16)

I think it's far too risky to take such a chance when we know just how devastating it can be to a child. (F28)

While these statements may not be surprising in themselves, the fact that they are made by self-identified paedophiles makes them entirely unexpected. By accepting that sexual activity with adults is harmful and traumatic for children, the above contributor undermines other attempts to justify and normalize paedophilic behaviour. Consequently, this distances the website members' perspective from that of wider society rather than attempting to bring those perspectives closer together.

## Discussion

As the results show, a significant majority of the sample used a justificatory account to explain their sexual interest in children. The large proportion of the sample that used accounts as a neutralization technique suggests that an important part of the discussion on this support forum involve the sharing of justifications between members.

Given the hostility that paedophiles frequently face in society, individuals whose primary sexual attraction is for children can find it difficult to maintain a positive self-concept. Durkin and Bryant (1999) suggest that semantic manipulation is an important mechanism for boosting both the self- and public images of those with a paedophilic orientation. It may be for this reason that the members of the website in this study refer to themselves as “boy lovers”, rather than paedophiles. In addition, the attraction these individuals hold for children is portrayed as a romantic relationship rather than sexual exploitation or abuse. It is unlikely that presenting themselves as “lovers” of children or their sexual activity with minors as

"consensual romantic relationships" will make a significant impact on how society views paedophilia, yet it may serve an important function for these individuals in preserving a positive self-concept.

Condemnation directed at non-paedophilic others shapes the general tone of this newsgroup. An overwhelming number of the postings relate to accusing groups such as parents, other website users and law enforcement of engaging in hypocritical and dangerous activities. A number of postings transferred blame for child sexual exploitation to the efforts made by these groups; for example, it was suggested that protecting children from explicit sex education raised the incidence of child abuse and rape. The individuals who use the forum to post antipaedophile messages were the group most affected by the condemnation account. Several posters insinuated that this victimization of paedophilic website users denied them the opportunity to receive help and support and thus increased the likelihood of their offending against children offline. The condemnation of condemners account has been found in all the existing published literature looking at the justification of paedophilia. In the current research, the invasion of a paedophile support forum by antipaedophile protestors has forced its members to engage in defensive and very hostile arguments, with the opposition as a central focus for condemnatory attacks. DeYoung (1988, 1989) and Durkin and Bryant (1999) all noted that shifting condemnatory focus to others is used as a strategy to discredit opponents of adult/child sex. In the latter study, the authors reported that condemning law enforcement and mental health workers may make paedophiles less amenable to treatment, because they consider themselves as victims of a draconian-style witch-hunt.

The denial of injury account was also instrumental in the defence of paedophilia and has similarities with the statements endorsed by offenders in Howitt and Sheldon's (2007) sample. Denying injury functions as an exculpatory strategy, whereby paedophiles reject the assumption that engaging in sex with adults is inherently traumatic for children, thus assuaging the guilt associated with such activity. More than one-third of the sample gave multiple examples of denial of injury in their postings, a result that reflects the findings of previous work (e.g. Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Pogrebin et al., 1992). This account may be particularly pertinent for paedophiles, given the plethora of published studies that recount the negative impact of child sexual abuse on young victims. In spite of the popularity of the denial of injury account, it is unlikely to exonerate paedophiles successfully in the face of the general consensus that adults engaging children in sexual activity is abusive, exploitative and deviant.

An extension of the denial of injury account is the claim of benefit. This justification furthers denial that paedophilia is harmful and to assert that it is actually beneficial for children. A related account used in this research is the denial of victim justification, in which children are portrayed as active and willing participants in sexual activity with adults. The function of these accounts is to diminish the responsibility of contact child abusers by asserting that the victims actively sought out sexual activity and that they benefited in some way from their involvement. While both of these justifications may have advantages for the adults involved by minimizing guilt, it is doubtful that they will ever be strong enough to convince the wider society that paedophilia is innocuous. The same is true for the BIRGing account, which was used minimally in the current data. The use of this account has diminished, perhaps because it has been ineffectual.

Despite the commonly held assumption that excuses and justifications are disadvantageous for achieving treatment goals, a growing body of literature illustrates that using these accounts is normal, expected and non-deviant. This implies that the use of accounts by paedophiles is not necessarily risky behaviour, and Maruna and Mann (2006, p. 171) conclude that "future work should maintain a more open, unbiased mind in regard to offender accounts and seek to avoid misattributions of labels such as cognitive distortion".

One of the most notable findings of this research was the increase in activity on the support forum since Durkin and Bryant studied it in 1999. The number of members on the site has grown significantly, with a current active membership of more than 1,500 and an average of 1,300 new postings per month. These figures represent an almost 10-fold increase in the size and activity of the group, and this intensified use of the site raises questions as to why this growth has occurred, given that newsgroups are a relatively basic and outmoded medium for internet communication. While the Usenet newsgroups were popular in the 1980s and 1990s, their unattractive interface and low signal-to-noise ratio had web users predicting that they would be obsolete by the 21st century. Newsgroups, Non-stop (2008) writes that innovations accompanying the rise of internet technologies should have challenged the existence of the newsgroups as a communication tool, yet their popularity has remained steady. They conclude that the reason usage of the Newsgroups has not declined is because the forums are mainly uncensored by hosts, and thus groups can exist on any topic and host almost any type of content. Because of this, the success of the Usenet forums is the fact that they fit the ideal of internet communication in that they are uncensored, peer-moderated spaces for sharing information. Although the forum studied in this research does not aim to host illegal child abuse imagery, the content of its discussions is objectionable to most of the general public and thus could expect to be censored if located in a different medium on the internet. Because Usenet is peer-moderated, there is no external individual to regulate its content and so members are free to discuss whatever they wish in relative privacy. This should appeal to a membership made up of potentially socially isolated individuals who use the forum as a support and community mechanism.

Caution should be exercised in the interpretation of the results of this research. Although the research design addresses a gap in the literature by analysing the accounts of a non-convicted, non-incarcerated group, it cannot be generalized to a wider paedophile population. Given that incarcerated child molesters often have a vested interest in justifying their behaviour, it is important to examine the accounts of a wider group of non-offending paedophiles to gain a better understanding of their beliefs. While researching this population on the internet may glean insights that would not be disclosed in face-to-face interaction with a researcher, it also poses the problem of validity. There is no way to verify if the sample involved is genuine in their use of justificatory accounts, or if they merely recount them to defend themselves against an opposing societal belief. Without this verification, it is difficult to surmise how important it may be to address such accounts in treating internet offenders.

The following points summarize the main findings of this research:

- Contrary to expectations, the use of Usenet newsgroup as a communicative medium for this group of paedophile supporters has not declined. In contrast, both its membership and activity level have increased significantly over the past decade.
- The use of previously identified justifications is still common. These justifications serve to minimize the negative impact of their disclosure for "boy lovers" and include denial of injury, claim of benefit and condemning condemners.
- Some members of this site acknowledge that sexual contact with children can cause harm. One member employed an excuse appealing to biological drive. The use of this excuse was unexpected, as it contradicts the core beliefs of the group.

## Conclusion

Owing to the pervasive judgemental attitude towards paedophilia in society, those who are sexually attracted to children are extremely marginalized from others in the community. This

can lead to serious social isolation and loneliness, which in itself has been suggested as a risk factor for contact offending (Beech, Fisher & Thornton, 2003). The growth of the internet has changed the landscape of communication for paedophiles, allowing them to interact with others in a virtual space free from the potential sanctions present in their offline lives. Creating a supportive community-like environment allows paedophiles to manage actively the impression they impart to society by giving an account of their atypical sexual orientation.

However, this may also pose a danger for society. The ability to share with other individuals in a community-type environment could, potentially, provide a setting for the normalization of paedophilic attitudes and behaviour. This research has identified the main justifications used by paedophiles to explain their sexual attraction towards children. Importantly, it has also highlighted that membership of this particular site is growing, despite expectations to the contrary. This implies that the support forum is in some way fulfilling an important function for its members; the ways in which it achieves this should be a target for future research.

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