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"I'm Not like That, So Am I Gay?" The Use of Queer-Spectrum Identity Labels Among Minor-Attracted People

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ABSTRACT

Largely based on an erroneous belief that individuals who are preferentially attracted to minors are necessarily sex offenders, queer communities have distanced themselves from this population over the past several decades. There are now those who object to the use of labels such as "gay" and "queer" by minor-attracted people (MAPs), raising the question, "to whom do queer-spectrum identity labels belong?" I engage with this question using data from my research with 42 MAPs, exploring their uses of queer-spectrum identity labels and the conflicts they have encountered regarding their use of these terms. I then discuss the potential consequences of accepting the use of these labels by MAPs.

KEYWORDS

Queer identity; identity labels; pedophilia; minor-attracted people

In October 2017, amidst a climate of celebrity sexual assault disclosures, bombshell allegations were made by actor Anthony Rapp against actor Kevin Spacey. Rapp accused Spacey of making sexual advances toward him when Spacey was 26 and Rapp was 14. Spacey responded the same day with a public statement, expressing regret for "what would have been deeply inappropriate drunken behavior," and coming out as a gay man. Responses to Spacey's statement from the media were fittingly critical, condemning him for attempting to explain away predatory behavior by pointing to his sexual orientation. These reactions were especially pertinent given the historical tendency to speciously link homosexuality to predation (e.g., Klassen, Williams, Levitt, & O'Gorman, 1989; Mogul, Ritchie, & Whitlock, 2011), which queer communities have spent considerable time and energy fighting. However, comments on these news stories took this argument a step further. One commenter stated that Spacey "...is a PEDOPHILE. He is not gay. Gay men are attracted to gay adult MEN—not children" (in Rubin, 2017). Similarly, another commenter stated, "Pedophiles are not gay men" (in Iacovino, 2017).

Now clearly, gay men and pedophiles are two distinct groups and these labels are not interchangeable, nor should it be considered acceptable to

point to attractions to the same sex as an excuse for sexual misconduct against a minor. On the other hand, these commenters were not only arguing that gay people and pedophiles are separate groups; they were arguing that individuals who are attracted to minors *cannot* be gay, and conversely, gay individuals *cannot* be attracted to minors. This attitude is unlikely to be challenged by members of queer communities. What, then, of those who identify as both: of those who consider themselves gay, who are also attracted to minors? And can minor-attracted individuals who identify as queer, or as other labels along the spectrum of queer identity, appropriately use such terms? To whom do identity labels along the queer spectrum belong?

In this article, I respond to these questions by exploring the legitimacy of the use of terms such as “queer” and “gay” by individuals who are preferentially attracted to minors, from a historical standpoint as well as through an examination of the various applications of the term “queer.” I then use data from my research with 42 people who are preferentially attracted to minors, exploring their own usage of queer-spectrum identity labels, and the conflicts they have encountered regarding their use of these terms. Finally, I discuss the potential consequences of accepting the uses of queer-spectrum identity labels by this population.

Minor-attracted people: an introduction

The phrase “minor-attracted person” is a relatively unfamiliar term to many. Its use refers to individuals who exhibit pedophilia, hebephilia, and/or ephebophilia. Pedophilia is defined by the American Psychiatric Association (2013a) as an attraction to pre-pubescent children in individuals over the age of 16. Hebephilia is defined as a preferential attraction to minors in the beginning phases of puberty (generally from the ages of 12 to 14); ephebophilia has been defined as a preferential attraction to minors in the late stages of puberty (usually between the ages of 15 to 19) (Blanchard et al., 2009). However, sources disagree over the use of the term “ephebophilia,” as well as which age ranges appropriately fit which definitions (Seto, 2008). To account for the disagreement over definitions, as well as to cover all age ranges of attractions to minors, I employ the term minor-attracted person (MAP) throughout this article to refer to individuals preferentially attracted to children, unless I am referring to identities explicitly stated otherwise. This phrase has been identified as a less-stigmatizing umbrella term by the MAP-led group B4U-ACT, as well as by other organizations that work with this population (B4U-ACT, 2012).

Despite a societal inclination to equate attractions to minors with sex offending, these concepts are not synonymous. While there are currently no estimates of the percentage of MAPs who have committed sexual offenses against a child, due at least in part to the stigma associated with attractions to children and the hidden nature of the population of MAPs (Hall & Hall, 2007), research does

indicate that the number of individuals who are attracted to minors is greater than the number of individuals likely to commit an offense (Beier, Alhers, Schaefer, and Feelgood, 2006, as cited in Seto, 2008; Briere & Runtz, 1989; Cantor & McPhail, 2016; Okami, 1994, as cited in Levine, 2002). Additionally, various studies have shown that between 50 and 70% of individuals who do commit sexual offenses against children are *not* MAPs—these individuals are not preferentially attracted to minors (Blanchard, Klassen, Dickey, Kuban, & Blak, 2001; Maletzky & Steinhauer, 2002; Seto & Lalumière, 2001; Seto, Murphy, Page, & Ennis, 2003). This research suggests most sex offenders who target minors do so for opportunistic reasons: power dynamics existing in modern society make children easier potential targets of sexual victimization than adults, and individuals who offend against children in the absence of pedophilia or hebephilia may be taking advantage of this rather than acting because of a persistent attraction to minors. Maletzky (1993) labels those offend against children who are not preferentially attracted to minors as “situational offenders” and notes that they frequently live with a victim or are well known to the victim, making the child an easy target. Seto (2008) presents the idea that situational offenders commit offenses due to intoxication or because they lack the social skills necessary to engage in consensual sexual encounters with same-age peers.

Although the scholarly literature provides evidence that MAPs and sex offenders should not be confused with one another, MAPs nonetheless face a high degree of stigma from the general population. In a pair of joint studies measuring social distance, 38% and 49% of participants from Germany and from an international sample, respectively, agreed that individuals who were attracted to children should be incarcerated, even if they had not committed a crime, while 14% and 27% agreed that individuals who were attracted to children “should better be dead” (Jahnke & Hoyer, 2013, p. 29).

In my own research with MAPs (Walker, 2017), participants revealed that, perhaps as a result of the stigma they faced, they frequently experienced depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations. They often thought themselves to be “monsters” upon realizing that they were attracted to minors, having grown up inaccurately believing that individuals with similar attractions were all sex offenders. Nonetheless, my participants were committed to refraining from acting on their attractions, most frequently because they recognized the harm that acting on them would cause. Those who were exclusively attracted to minors (as opposed to those who were attracted to both minors and adults) discussed the loneliness they felt upon realizing that they would never be in a relationship with someone they were attracted to.

Despite the fact that they had never committed a sexual offense against a minor, my participants faced stigma from a society, often including their own friends and family, who believed that minor-attracted people are all destined to offend, and were suspicious that they have already done so. Many

declined to disclose their attractions to loved ones, based on a fear of eliciting shame or disgust. Among those who did choose to tell their loved ones, some of the most negative consequences for doing so included being turned away from their families, kicked out of their homes, abandoned by friends and romantic partners, or even reported to the police (again, in spite of the fact that they had committed no offense).

History of association between MAPs and other queer communities

While MAPs often struggle to disclose their attractions to friends and family, LGBT individuals and other queer communities continue to have these struggles as well. Even with this and other commonalities, however, MAPs are not generally accepted by queer communities. This was not always the case. Multiple researchers have explored ties between gay rights organizations and MAPs lasting from the 1960s and declining until, in some cases, the early 1990s (Chenier, 2008; Janssen, 2017; Paternotte, 2014; Thorstad, 1991). Thorstad (1991) quoted a 1969 article in a gay newspaper as saying, “Off the consenting adults bullshit!” (p. 251). He added, “the Stonewall Generation [...] affirmed the joys of an outlaw sexuality in the face of the outmoded moral norms of the dominant society,” (p. 252), showing acceptance of individuals with attractions to minors.

At the time of the Stonewall riots, homosexuality was considered by society to be deviant, which, researchers theorize, may have contributed to acceptance and alignment with other deviant-labeled groups such as minor-attracted individuals. It has been noted that collaboration with the minor-attracted community was not a dominant goal of gay activists in the time surrounding the Stonewall riots. However, multiple gay activist groups, including New York’s Gay Activists Alliance – described as having “single-handedly made gay people a force in liberal politics in New York City and then nationwide” (Gosse, 2005, p. 149) – and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Rights Coalition publicly favored abolishing the age of consent (Thorstad, 1991). Even when gay rights groups began to formally disassociate themselves from minor-attracted populations, efforts continued to be made for alliances. Paternotte (2014) relates that in 1981, a speech presented at a group for gay individuals in Barcelona urged listeners to consider that both gay people and pedophiles “suffer from normative compulsory heterosexuality, and maintain[ed] that ‘a successful homo-emancipation should include pedo-emancipation’” (p. 128).

Despite efforts by some in the gay community to align with minor-attracted populations, as the gay rights movement became more mainstream, alignment between the two groups became more and more politically dangerous. In 1977, a moral panic about child pornography arose and the gay rights movement began to distance itself from minor-attracted groups (Paternotte, 2014; Thorstad, 1991). This distancing is especially understandable considering the

fact that so-called “homosexuals” were at the time considered to be both mentally ill and “child predators” (Mogul et al., 2011, p. 31), resulting in arrests and convictions for even consensual sexual activities between adults throughout the 20th century. The outcome of this social distancing, as Janssen (2017) notes, is that while in the 1970s, “cruising for a young male prostitute almost form[ed] a subculture in itself in the homosexual community,” by the mid-1980s, referring to gay men as “pedophiles” was considered not just a misrepresentation, but “slander” (p. 2). Indeed, even LGBTQ scholarship and queer theory have since sought to systematically separate temporally bound, culturally accepted sexual activity between adults and minors, such as pederasty within classical Athens society, from more recent understandings of “homosexuality” by pointing to potential differences in interests regarding power dynamics (e.g., Halperin, 1989). Clearly, this disparate view of queer communities and MAPs continues to the present.

Evidence of MAPs as a queer population

This distancing may explain the reluctance among some within queer communities to accept the potential queerness of MAPs. Whether MAPs can legitimately be considered queer depends upon on the definition with which one views the term. Many researchers have explored the contested meanings of “queer” (e.g., Ball, 2014; Giffney, 2009; Sullivan, 2003). Brontsema (2004) has reviewed the etymology of the word “queer” as it describes sexuality, beginning with its original, nonsexual meaning of odd or strange, tracing it through its usage to describe, as a pejorative, gay men, and then to the present. Currently, “queer” is accepted as an umbrella term, covering all non-normative sexualities (Brontsema, 2004; Giffney, 2009). Other scholars within the field of the queer theory have further broadened the definition, such as Butler (1993, p. 19), who argued against ownership of the term “queer” by any particular group(s), inviting continuous pushing of the boundaries of what it is to claim this term for oneself. Halperin (1995, p. 62, emphases in original) echoed this call by Butler in the words: “Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.*”

If queer individuals are people of any non-normative sexuality, MAPs could, therefore, be considered queer provided that their attractions constitute a sexuality – that their attractions are non-normative (at least temporally) cannot be debated. Debate does, however, exist over whether attractions to minors constitute a sexual orientation or would be better classified as a mental illness. The American Psychiatric Association (APA)’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) has historically classified pedophilia as a disorder, with diagnostic criteria changing with each iteration. Notably, the DSM-IV (APA, 1994) failed to specify the difference between pedophilia

and sex offending against children, as evidenced by the following statement: “Pedophilia involving female victims is reported more often than Pedophilia involving male victims” (p. 527), implying that pedophilia necessarily results in victimization.

Despite the historical tendency of the mental health treatment community to label pedophilia as a mental illness, a shift seems to be taking place toward the identification of attraction to minors as its own type of sexual orientation. Green (2002) contrasted the APA’s removal of homosexuality from the DSM to its opposing treatment of pedophilia, and examined whether pedophilia may logically be classified as a mental illness. He concluded that taking into consideration historical and cross-cultural acceptability of sexual activity between adults and children, pedophilia should not be given such a classification. Malón (2012) also affirmed that pedophilia cannot properly be categorized as a mental disorder, while acknowledging that diagnoses of pedophilia can have practical significance. In response to these conclusions and other dialogues (e.g., Blanchard et al., 2009), the DSM-V (APA, 2013a) was the first DSM to differentiate between “pedophilia” and “pedophilic disorder.” According to DSM-V, pedophilic disorder occurs when an individual a) has attractions to children and b) acts on them or is distressed enough by them to affect their interpersonal relationships. Pedophilia in the absence of distress or action was, divergently, identified in the first printing of the DSM-V as a sexual orientation. However, after the DSM-V was released, the APA received backlash regarding this wording, and responded by changing their phrasing of “sexual orientation” to “sexual interest” (APA 2013b).

The definition of the phrase “sexual orientation” is as contested as the meaning of “queer.” Organizations that may be seen as gatekeepers of queer identity frequently define sexual orientation specifically in terms of attractions to gender. GLAAD (2016, p. 6), for instance, defines sexual orientation as “The scientifically accurate term for an individual’s enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual (straight) orientations.” This definition is limited in many respects. Many see its distinction about attractions toward gender as arbitrary, and argue for an expansion of our understandings of sexual orientation. For example, Moser (2016) has put forward the perspective that sexual orientation need not be defined by gender, but instead by a variety of characteristics that distinguish sexual orientation from other sexual interests. These include attraction, relative permanence, fluidity, early age of onset, and importance to the individual. While these are relevant to sexual orientations toward a given gender (or multiple genders), they also have relevance to orientations that are not characterized by gender.

Using the definition proposed by Moser (2016), there is evidence suggesting that attractions to minors qualify as a sexual orientation. Seto (2012, 2017a) conceptualized pedophilia as a “sexual age orientation,” or a “chronophilia,” pointing to numerous similarities between attractions to minors and attractions to either the same or another gender. Seto (2012) showed that the emotional histories of MAPs mirror those of other sexual minorities in terms of romantic feelings, sexual history, the age at which awareness of attractions occurs, and persistence in attraction over time. MAPs often report becoming aware of their attractions to children during adolescence (Freimond, 2009; Freund & Kuban, 1993; Li, 1991; Marshall, Barbaree, & Eccles, 1991; Seto, 2012; Seto, Lalumière, & Blanchard, 2000; Seto et al., 2003; Walker, 2017), a trend that is typical of other sexual minorities. In addition to sexual attractions, MAPs also report feeling romantic attachments to children, which is also consistent with the discourse surrounding other sexual minorities (Goode, 2010; Li, 1991; Walker, 2017), providing further evidence for the existence of a sexual age orientation.

Like the APA, Seto has received criticism regarding his categorization of attractions to minors as a sexual orientation. He responded to this backlash in a follow-up article (Seto, 2017b) in which he defended his point of view and called attention to the value of the subjective experience of individuals attracted to minors. So, what of MAPs themselves? So far, their voices have been left out of this conversation. The ways in which MAPs use labels along the queer spectrum have thus far been an unexplored area of research.

Data and methods

Using data from my qualitative study of 42 non-offending MAPs, I address the current lack of empirical research about identity among individuals attracted to minors. I do so by discussing the ways in which individuals attracted to minors identify themselves within a context of stigma and suspicion. I explicitly engage with and challenge existing literature by discussing participants’ understandings of labels such as “gay,” “lesbian,” and “queer,” and how those labels may or may not apply to them. My data show that while some MAPs do use these terms to define themselves, others may not feel that they apply to them due either to feelings that they would be rejected by queer communities or to other understandings about these terms. The following section describes the methods used to obtain and analyze these data.

Sampling strategy

I recruited participants for this study using a purposive sampling design, largely from two online sources: B4U-ACT and Virtuous Pedophiles (VirPed). B4U-ACT is a non-profit organization that offers peer support for MAPs and advocates for mental health professionals to understand MAP-

related issues, in order to provide effective counseling services to this population. At the time of recruitment, B4U-ACT had about 100 individuals participating in its online forum. B4U-ACT also hosts conferences and research symposia designed to educate mental health practitioners and the public about MAPs. VirPed is a peer support group for MAPs that operates over an online forum, has an active chat service, and provides public education. At the time of recruitment, VirPed had about 1,800 individuals who had signed up for the forums: at present, the website indicates that more than 2,000 have signed up (Devin & Edwards, 2017). I began recruitment by advertising on the B4U-ACT website, after engaging in a series of conversations, and conducting two pilot interviews, with gatekeepers at the organization to elicit their assessment of my interview guide.

Participant recruitment began in January 2016. Within the first week of interviews, an individual who regularly contributed to both the B4U-ACT and VirPed forums posted an advertisement for this study to the VirPed forums, and I began to receive emails from potential participants via both forums. I asked participants to contact me either by email or telephone (all but two individuals initiated contact through email). In order to keep participants anonymous, the recruitment flyer detailed that those who contacted me should do so without revealing their true names, and any email addresses with which they contacted the researcher should not reflect their identities. Some potential participants created new email addresses for the express purpose of participating in the study.

Pilot study and interviews

Because MAPs who have not committed sexual offenses are a largely understudied population, there existed few examples of previous interview instruments to use as templates. The phrasing of various questions in the interview guide was, therefore, a concern, due to reservations that I may unintentionally sound offensive, or might not be understood by the MAPs in my study. Consequently, I developed a pilot study to be conducted in the spring of 2015 to seek advice from MAPs about the topics covered in the interviews, the wording of questions, and the flow of the interview guide. Two individuals from B4U-ACT participated. The pilot study was limited to these two participants due to concerns that the total number of individuals who could eventually be recruited into the study would be relatively small, and that those who participated in a pilot study might then be uninterested in participating in a later interview. Comments from both pilot study participants were integral to the development of the final interview guide, helping me to better understand nuances within identity and attractions among MAPs, as well as other subjects.

I conducted interviews between January 2016 and May 2017. Prior to each interview, I screened participants for age, attraction to minors, and non-

offending status over email or phone (depending on participants' method of contacting me). I also used email and phone exchanges to ensure that potential respondents had not contacted me using their real names, to inform them about the procedures surrounding interviews, to schedule interviews, and to allow individuals to choose their preferred platform for the interviews. I originally offered potential participants the possibility of engaging in interviews over the phone, Skype (video, audio, or text-based chat), or Google Hangouts. However, due to confidentiality concerns with the proposed platforms, some participants suggested other chat services such as TorChat (which uses The Onion Router, concealing user location), Chatzy (an online, private chat service), and CryptoCat (an open-source, encrypted chat service), and we spoke over those. Participants were not offered an incentive for their involvement in the research, thus ensuring that participation was completely voluntary. This approach was favored by participants, who expressed wariness when researchers wished to pay them, because of concerns that payment would make their identities traceable.

I conducted in-depth interviews with all study respondents, which have long been identified as a method that grants participants the ability to speak about their own experiences without having concepts synthetically pushed upon them by the researcher (Becker, 1967; Bogdan & Taylor, 1998; Wright & Bennett, 1990). I asked the 42 participants questions about identity formation, including questions about their history in figuring out their attractions for themselves and telling others about them (I was careful not to use the phrase "coming out" to describe these experiences in my interview guide for fear of co-opting a term used by queer communities; however, my participants frequently used the phrase for themselves). They were then asked about their experiences in facing stigma, including questions regarding the effects of their exposure to negative messages about minor-attracted individuals, and how they coped with stigma. Finally, they were asked about their strategies toward and motivations for resisting sexual offending, as well as more specific questions about seeking mental health services as an aid in resisting offending and for emotional wellbeing. The interview guide ended with demographic questions as well as a series of quantitative questions designed to measure emotional resilience and mood.

My own personal experience with coming out as queer, and the associated stigma, helped in developing follow-up questions that were directly relevant to the experiences of participants. Indeed, many study participants actively identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer. However, while disclosing my sexuality during initial interviews increased rapport and eased discussions with some participants, others indicated feeling abandoned by queer communities due to the mainstreaming of LGBT interests, and therefore I shared this information with participants selectively. My sharing (or

not) of this information may have affected the ways in which some participants discussed queer communities and associated labels.

Method of analysis

I used an outside transcription service for most interviews, although I transcribed three of them myself due to requests from participants. After the interviews were transcribed, I analyzed them using an inductive approach by open-coding for common themes (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Because I had conducted all of the interviews, transcribed three of them, and cleaned all of the transcriptions using audio files, I began to develop a sense of some of the major themes of the interviews before I started coding. Interviews were transcribed and open-coded on an ongoing basis, which was concurrent with data collection. Dedoose, a software program designed for mixed methods data analysis, was used to code the data.

Open-coding allowed for the identification of gaps in the data, and generated ideas about how to gather additional information that could help flesh out key concepts. Further interviews were then conducted, with the goal of generating this new information in mind. In some cases, participants who were interviewed in different segments were asked in a subsequent section of an interview for clarification; more often, new participants were asked about emerging concepts as they were developed. The last question of the interview protocol inquired about whether there was any topic that was omitted and that was deemed important to the research. In some cases, the highlighted items were included in subsequent interviews. After completing the interviews and open-coding, I conducted focused coding, using the most frequently-occurring and important codes from the open coding process to synthesize greater amounts of data.

Most of the segments used in this article come from questions that I asked about identity during participant emails. Specific questions included, 1) Could you share with me how you define yourself in terms of your attractions? 2) What does identifying as an [identity label] mean for you? 3) Thinking back, what were your feelings toward your attractions when you first realized you had them? 4) Have your feelings about your attractions changed since you first realized you were attracted to children? 5) Is there anything else you would like to share with me about becoming aware of your attractions, sharing them with others, your feelings toward them, or facing disapproval? After several interviews, I began to notice that male MAPs in my study who were attracted to males often referred to themselves as homosexuals, but not as “gay.” Once I noticed this pattern, I also began asking my respondents whether they referred to themselves in this way, after they indicated same-sex attractions. I also asked about my participants’ use of other labels along the queer identity spectrum as they came up organically.

Some segments used in this article came from other sections of the interview as well, such as sections about mental health and coping.

Sample characteristics

At the time of the interview, 29 participants lived within North America; 21 of these specified that they lived within the United States. The majority of participants were men, including one transgender man. Of the three women in my study, one was transgender. One participant identified as agender. Their ages ranged from 19 years old to their mid-sixties, with the largest age group in their 20s. The majority of participants were white, but one participant identified as biracial (Arab and white), one identified as Hispanic, one as Latino, and one specified multiple racial and ethnic identities (Latino, Native American, and white). Table 1 presents these and additional sample characteristics.

Findings

Identity labels used by participants

In order to participate in this study, respondents were required to identify as being preferentially attracted to minors, and have refrained from any sexual activity with minors since adulthood. While all participants, therefore, fell under the umbrella of “non-offending minor-attracted person,” there was

Table 1. Sample demographics (*n* = 42).

Gender	Male	90%
	Female	7%
	Agender	2%
	Transgender	5%
Age Categories	<20	2%
	20–29	45%
	30–39	29%
	40–49	14%
	50+	10%
Race	White	88%
	Other	10%
	Unknown	2%
Location	North America	69%
	USA	50%
	Outside of North America	29%
	Unknown	2%
Age of Attractions	Exclusively minors	38%
	Minors and adults	62%
Gender of Attractions to Minors*	Male only	33%
	Female only	45%
	Multiple	21%

*Some participants were attracted to different genders of adults than they were to minors.

great variability in the labels they chose to use to describe their attractions, and not all used the term “MAP” as an identity label. Many participants used the term “pedophile” to describe themselves, although they were self-conscious about this use of terminology, often quickly explaining that this term described their attractions, but not their actions. “MAP” was often seen by participants as accurate and less stigmatizing than “pedophile,” but also nonspecific or, as Robin put it, “clunky.”

In addition to “MAP” and “pedophile,” other common labels employed by study participants included “hebephile,” “boy-lover” (BL), and “girl-lover” (GL). Like the term “MAP,” participants explained that the last two labels carried less stigma. Other labels were less commonly cited, such as “ephebophile,” “pedohebephile,” “pedosexual,” “gray asexual” (lacking sexual attraction in general), “androssexual” (sexual attraction to males), “parasexual” (atypical sexual attractions), and “achronophile” (lacking age preference).

Along with labels that participants used to specifically describe their age of attraction, respondents used a number of labels commonly associated with more mainstream sexual identities. The MAPs in this study frequently referred to themselves as “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “queer,” sometimes in addition to labels that described their age of attraction (for instance, “bisexual pedophile”). Notably, study participants did not refer to themselves as “heterosexual” or “straight,” a choice which I further elaborate on later in this article. Study participants who were same-sex attracted also occasionally described themselves as “homosexual,” rather than “gay.” The majority of MAPs in this study referred to their attractions as either a “sexuality” or a “sexual orientation.” Overall, labels used by participants to describe their sexual identities were the result of careful consideration that was developed over years of reflection regarding level of attraction to age and gender, stigma, and knowledge and beliefs about MAPs and other queer populations. The next section describes MAPs’ experiences related to their use of terminology and their decision-making processes in using queer-spectrum identity labels.

Use of queer-spectrum identity labels

Attraction to minors as a sexual orientation

MAPs in this study overwhelmingly connected their attractions to a sexual orientation or a sexuality. A number of reasons were given for this line of thinking. Gene pointed out that he could not change his attractions, and that they were not a choice for him, either:

There’s a lot of debate about whether pedophilia is a sexual attraction [...] (sigh) I think that... I think that for me, I really have gotten to the point, quite a long time ago, where I almost see that as a moot point. A lot of people really get hung up on the orientation thing. And I go, okay, well, we have all these criteria for what is an orientation [...] the fact of the matter is, this is what I’m attracted to. You

can't change – even the professionals who have been working with this for a long time, [they] can't cure it; you can't change it. Once somebody is like that, they're gonna always be like that. It's what I'm attracted to. I didn't choose it. I can't change it. I'll always be this way. So [...] for all intents and purposes, it's an orientation. I'm oriented towards kids. I'm not oriented any other way and never will be. [...] I'm going to die that way.

Gene's conceptualization of his attractions as an orientation mirrored Moser's (2016) definition of sexual orientation in his belief that his attractions to minors were both immutable and permanent.

It is important to note that participants who labeled their attractions an orientation did not believe that this would justify sexual contact between adults and minors. For example, Mason specified gingerly, "I think it's an orientation, but not an orientation that can ever be acted on, but I think it's an orientation." My participants were unanimous in the belief that sexual contact between adults and minors would inevitably result in harm to a child, and respondents frequently spoke about children lacking the ability to consent to sexual activity from a developmental standpoint. Participants' conceptualizations of their attractions as a sexual orientation had no bearing on their ideas about the acceptability of sexual relationships between adults and minors.

Despite feeling that their attractions fit under the label of a sexual orientation, participants expressed sadness that this orientation was considered deviant while others were considered acceptable, due to societal assumptions about attractions to minors. When I asked Aiden what identifying as a MAP meant for him, he responded:

It reaches into every facet of my life. So it, just like any human sexuality, it hits everywhere. So, I mean, I consider it part of my sexual identity. [...] I almost consider it like an orientation, almost, or it's like an aged-fixed orientation. Because it feels immutable. So I mean, I consider it part of my identity. I always want to, I have the urge to express it [...] like being out, like a gay person would be. Like "uh!" Like out of the closet, you know? But of course I can't do that. So I just, it feels repressed and it feels like a secret that I have to keep from the world, and that makes me feel ostracized and alone.

Like Gene, Aiden's ideas about his attractions fell under the category of an orientation as conceptualized by Moser (2016) due to their irreversible nature. Nonetheless, he recognized that his attractions would not be considered equivalent to other sexual orientations and were especially not deemed an orientation that could be celebrated. Other participants echoed feeling jealous that people with other nonnormative identities, such as the gay community, could be out and proud about their identities, and enjoy comparatively greater societal acceptance. Oliver lamented:

[Most] people get to sort of celebrate and talk about who they love and find beautiful, but we have to sort of keep it a secret. So, I mean, I wish I'd be proud of

it and talk about it with people that are in my life, the same way a gay person might participate in gay pride or something.

Despite the similarities he saw between MAPs and other queer individuals, Oliver recognized that pride in his sexuality was not something he would be afforded.

While most participants did label their attractions to minors as a sexuality or sexual orientation, a minority expressed feeling that these attractions could not count as such. Participants referred to a long-standing debate within the MAP community, echoing that within the academic community, regarding whether attractions toward minors would better be counted as a mental illness or as an orientation. Harper, who was openly dating an adult woman but who struggled with her own attractions to young girls, felt that attractions to minors should not be counted as an orientation:

I never felt like, like being gay was a mistake. It was something that was almost kind of celebrated, like, “oh, that’s awesome, that’s a piece of you that God has created, and the whole diversity of creation, including the diversity of human beings, reflects the creativity and inventiveness of our creator,” and so that’s kind of the theology around that. This [being attracted to minors] is the part of me that I feel like is some kind of screw-up. Like something’s wrong there. It feels almost – to me – see, there’s a big debate about is it a sexual orientation or a mental illness – pedophilia. Not homosexuality, pedophilia. And I am more on the mental illness end of that spectrum. I feel like I have an illness that I have to learn to deal with. And it’s very different from having a minority orientation. And I actually think it’s dangerous to compare it to that. So I, I feel like I have something intrinsically wrong with me, like, internally disordered or something else.

Harper explained to me that she was not out about her attractions to minors to anyone in her life. She belonged to a religion that she described as liberal, and felt that she could be out regarding her attractions to adult women, but she was ashamed about her attractions to minors. Indeed, our interview was the first time she had ever said that she was attracted to minors out loud.

Aiden, quoted above saying that his attractions qualified as a sexual orientation, recalled originally believing that his attractions were a mental illness. He discussed studying research surrounding sexuality and attractions to minors, and his process in coming to terms with his attractions. Aiden referred to changing definitions of pedophilia within the DSM, noting that the APA had originally classified homosexuality as a mental illness as well (see Drescher, 2012 for a review). When I asked him what advice he might have for another MAP just coming to terms with their attractions, he offered:

For a long time I considered myself, you know, that I’m sick in the head. That I’m crazy, I’m fucked up, I’m a fucked up person for having this attraction. So that’s one of the things that I would tell someone. That you’re not mentally ill, and that there’s nothing wrong with you.

Although Aiden had thought of himself as mentally ill for quite a while, by the time of our interview, he no longer believed that this was true.

Ultimately, participants' beliefs about whether their attractions qualified as a sexual orientation or a mental illness say less about an objective truth regarding the nature of attractions to minors and more about the ways in which societal stigma has affected participants' self-image. As Hugo said of his therapist:

He asked me what theories I had about why I had become this way, and he was like, "well, here's a theory: it doesn't matter. And here's another theory: there's nothing wrong with it, there's just something wrong with the way society sees someone that has these feelings. Like, sure, there's definitely a lot of people who act on it, but that is not your fault; it's just part of who you are, so there's nothing wrong with that. [...] You gotta learn to accept society's view on it."

When Hugo originally recognized that he was attracted to minors, he became so depressed that he told me he "didn't really want to live." He sought therapeutic care to try to "fix" himself, but later conceptualized his attractions as a sexual orientation that could not be changed. Accepting that he was minor-attracted, and that this was his sexual orientation, helped him to move past the stigma he had taken on. He told me that while he still has "waves of depression every now and then," he nonetheless felt at the time of our interview that he was "in a pretty good place. Right now I'm happier."

Belonging with other queer communities

As most participants saw their attractions to minors as a sexual orientation, many of those who were attracted to the same or multiple genders used the labels "lesbian," "gay," or "bisexual" to describe themselves. For example, Brooke told me, "I have considered myself a lesbian for quite some time. I am attracted to girls and women [of all ages], and being a woman who's attracted to women, there's a pretty simple word for that. So, 'lesbian' works." Participants' reasons for referring to themselves with queer-spectrum identity labels were similar to those for referring to their attractions as sexual orientations: that they saw similarities between themselves and other individuals on the queer spectrum regarding attractions to the same or multiple genders and finding that their attractions were unchangeable.

In contrast to those who felt a fit with queer-spectrum identity labels, some MAPs referred to their same-sex attractions as "homosexual," but refrained from using queer-spectrum identity labels. A variety of reasons were given for this hesitance. Felix, for instance, told me that he is "homosexual" but not "gay." I asked him to tell me more about this identity and he said that "homosexual" describes male attraction to other males, but that "gay" is an identity that describes people with a common experience: one that he does not share. Similarly, Gene, who was attracted to young males,

reasoned that gay men's attractions were very different from his own. He elaborated:

While my attraction to boys is homosexual, to me, I don't really consider it to be – I'm the least homophobic person on the planet, but I don't consider that gay, just because to me, "gay" means – Well, a gay man is attracted to men. They are attracted to masculine features. They're attracted to masculine bodies. They're attracted to masculine faces. You know, broad shoulders, facial hair. You know, they like dudes.

Gene, on the other hand, was not attracted to masculine features, and therefore felt that the label of "gay" did not make sense for him.

Like Gene, Neil had a very specific image of gay men in mind. However, while Gene's stereotyped image of gay men was that they were all attracted specifically to masculine features, Neil originally believed that gay men were all feminine. When he began recognizing his own attractions to other males, he recalled thinking, "I'm not like that, so am I gay?" Nonetheless, he took on the label of "gay" for himself when he was quite young: 10 or 11 years old. But he began questioning it again when he recognized that he was exclusively attracted to younger males, this time out of confusion regarding whether MAPs could also be gay. Upon learning more about this, he said:

Eventually, I thought, "Okay, well, maybe there are gay MAPs," and then I started to feel guilty because I felt if I can't come out as gay, then that's not honest, but if I *am* honest and [I say] that I'm a MAP *and* gay, then this will give gay people a bad [reputation] [...] because gay people are often seen as, like, "evil pedophiles."

Neil now uses the terms "gay" and "MAP" for himself, but occasionally still feels conflicted about this, out of a fear that his use of the label "gay" could be damaging to the gay community.

While Neil was concerned about the effect that his personal identification could have on gay individuals, others pointed to queer communities' denunciation of MAPs as their reasoning for eschewing queer-spectrum identity labels. Bryan repeatedly used the term "gay" to describe himself, but he qualified this often, stating that he's "not a 'normal' gay." He referred somewhat bitterly back to the gay rights movement's historical separation from pedophilia in our text interview, stating, "society is disconnecting the concept of gay from pedophile (30 or more years of fighting to do that in which people like me were thrown under the bus for social progress)."

Like Bryan, Mitchell referred to the mainstreaming of the gay rights movement as a time when MAPs were "ejected [from] the gay community." He had identified as a gay man for many years before realizing he was exclusively attracted to minors. Now he refers to himself as a homosexual. He explained this choice to me in our interview:

Mitchell: Oh, I would call myself [...] to use clinical terminology, I would call myself a hebephile – homosexual hebephile, I guess. And I also call myself a boy-lover.

AW: So you use the term homosexual?

Mitchell: Mmhhh. Just because I'm attracted to the same gender. I'm not attracted to females at all.

AW: Gotcha. Do you ever use the term gay for yourself?

Mitchell: Well, I, I, every once in a while, I think, "should I call myself gay?" But I haven't; mainly because I think they, my impression is, certainly everything I've read, the gay community would reject me. So I guess I don't want to be part of a community that would reject me.

Mitchell had been involved with a gay Christian email group during the 1990s, but had refrained from discussing his attractions to minors with them. He recalled the group being supportive at the time, calling him "courageous" for the way he was managing his life. Feeling safe among individuals whom he considered to be like-minded, he came out to the group. Mitchell said that when he told them:

"But I'm attracted to boys instead of men," then all of a sudden, they didn't want to talk to me anymore. I wasn't "courageous" anymore. They said, "Please don't talk to me about this issue again." And it was like, I guess I was confronting the contradictions in their own values or whatever, and so they couldn't handle it. It was something like, "Well, we can be very supportive of gay people, but I can't support you," that whole thing. Even though I had never, ever, and never had any intention to, and I made pretty clear that I would never, act sexually with [any minor], it didn't matter.

Following his rejection from this formerly supportive group of people, Mitchell stopped referring to himself as a gay man.

Even MAPs who used queer-spectrum labels for themselves often felt that they did not belong in queer spaces. Multiple participants had tried to join LGBTQ groups, especially when they were in their twenties, but found they did not have enough in common with the other members, and felt that they could not be open about the ages to which they were attracted. Aiden discussed his frustration with feeling unwelcome among other gay men, saying:

I go to, like, a gay men's AA group. So they're all gay, right? So they think I am. I mean, I am, but I often feel like I'm this wolf in sheep's clothing. I'm dressed like a fraud because I'm not "really gay." They'll be pointing out hot gay guys on the street or whatever and it's like I can't, I can't relate to that. I'm not attracted at all. So, often I feel this dichotomy of, like, I can't explain it to them, I have to keep it a secret. If they knew they would probably be really offended, they would probably feel threatened, you know. For a number of reasons.

Like Mitchell, Aiden felt that if the men in his group knew that he was a MAP, they would reject him.

Nonetheless, some participants had more hopeful opinions about their acceptance by queer groups. Desmond told me that he thought the gay community was more accepting of MAPs than straight individuals would be, because he felt that it was not “as far as a leap for them” to understand an alternative sexual orientation. During our interview, Neil, a college student, was determined to come out about being a MAP to his university’s LGBTQ group during a meeting that would take place a few hours later. He wrote to me afterward to tell me that he had decided against it for the moment, but had not ruled it out for the future.

MAPs as a queer population

Along with “gay,” “lesbian,” and “bisexual,” participants frequently used the term “queer” to describe themselves and their attractions. Younger participants, in particular, tended to refer to themselves as queer, consistent with generational use of the term (Brontsema, 2004; GLAAD, 2016). They also more commonly identified as queer when they were attracted to the same gender as themselves. However, my participants who were attracted to the socially prescribed gender (i.e., the “opposite sex”) nonetheless often described themselves in ways that could be considered queer by default. Just as Mitchell declined to refer to himself as “gay” because he felt he would be rejected by the gay community, as described above, participants who were attracted to the socially prescribed gender declined to refer to themselves as “straight,” or even as “heterosexual.” Cody mentioned to me that because he was attracted to women, in addition to girls, he was “hetero-passing.” This surprised me, and I asked him if he did not consider himself to be heterosexual – after all, he had no interest in males, so had I assumed that he would. In response, he explained, “If I told someone else that I’m attracted to children, they wouldn’t see me as heterosexual.” He considered himself privileged to have some attractions to adults, and said that this privilege allowed him the ability to “pass” as heterosexual, implying that his attractions to children were at odds with a “straight” identity.

Participants noted that the word “queer” could be used as a catch-all label for alternative sexualities, which they often felt included them due to their attractions to minors. Additionally, Neil noted another use of the term. He specified: “I like that ‘queer’ is so inclusive and thereby also ‘unclear,’ which makes it more difficult for people to attack someone who identifies as queer.” In other words, for Neil, the term “queer” was useful because its meaning was flexible enough that it allowed him to openly and accurately identify as such, without creating suspicion that he was attracted to minors. This use was shared by others, who were publicly known to be queer but had not disclosed to friends or family their attractions to minors.

Queering “pedophile”

Ways in which participants’ experiences mirrored the experiences of other queer communities became an increasingly apparent theme throughout the interview process. Foremost in this theme were participants’ experiences with facing stigma. These experiences colored respondents’ use of language to describe themselves. For instance, Shawn had been reluctant to use any label for himself in conversation, but later referred to himself as a pedophile. When I asked him more about his use of this term, he backtracked, stating, “Well, maybe that was the wrong choice of words. Words mean something, and specifically a pedophile is somebody who collects photos of young children. [...] I don’t collect photos.” As no found definitions of pedophilia include any mention of the collection of photos, Shawn’s statement clearly reflects an erroneous and colloquial understanding rather than any official classifications of pedophilia.

Shawn’s own understanding of this term is indicative of the stigma and misunderstanding that MAPs face when forming their identities. Even some who more readily used the term “pedophile” to describe themselves indicated a certain degree of conflict in doing so: Bryan noted that, “the term ‘pedophile’ has too much baggage,” indicating that while he felt that the term was an accurate fit with his attractions, its use still made him uncomfortable due to others’ associations with it. Avery stated, “the description of ‘pedophile’ I see when I open up a dictionary describes me, though other people seem to use that term differently,” referring to the common notion that “pedophile” is equivalent to “child molester.”

While some participants were hesitant to use the term “pedophile” for themselves, others found a moral imperative in doing so. Hugo told me, “I’m not too afraid to call myself a pedophile,” indicating that while others were timid in their use of this word, he felt it important that people begin to understand the true meaning of the term. Vincent originally had been cautious to use the term for himself, even though he felt that it fit. He explained:

At first I was really not into [using the word “pedophile”] at all, but that’s, I think, mostly just because I, like most people, associated that with abuse. With committing crimes and hurting people. And I kinda thought, well, you know, maybe we should re-brand. (laughter) We better come up with another way to describe ourselves, because that’s always going to kinda creep people out to use that word. But I posted about this on VirPed and got a lot of negative reactions. Everyone’s like, “no, that’s the right word. People are just using it wrong, and it’s better to take back the word.” And I guess over time I’ve come to agree with that. It just took some getting used to, to kind of get that old idea of what it meant out of my head.

Vincent now felt that the word “pedophile” needed to be reclaimed.

These differing attitudes – rejecting the label of “pedophile” and reclaiming it – mirror two attitudes that Brontsema (2004) refers to regarding the reclamation of the word “queer.” In “Perspective One,” she writes that because “queer” had a history of use of the pejorative, its current use should be considered unacceptable. However, in “Perspective Two,” she presents the argument that the term “queer” can be separated from its historically pejorative meanings, and should, therefore, be considered acceptable. In this way, use of the word becomes *queered*; its repeated, reclaimed use making the term neutral or even positive. Thus, participants such as Hugo and Vincent were queering the term “pedophile.” Neil explicitly made this connection during his interview. He referred to himself as both queer and a pedophile. When I asked him to expand more on his use of the word “queer,” he told me, “I read that ‘queer’ was used in the past as a slur and has been mostly reclaimed by now, which [...] gives me hope that words like ‘pedophile’ can be reclaimed as well.”

Discussion and conclusion

Participants showed a range of uses of queer-spectrum identity labels during interviews. While many, especially those attracted to the same or multiple genders, used “queer,” “gay,” “lesbian,” or “bisexual” to describe themselves, and the majority of participants referred to their attractions as a sexual orientation, some individuals who used these terms felt guilt over doing so because of a belief that associating minor-attracted individuals with other queer groups would be harmful to those other queer communities. Others avoided these labels due to feelings that they did not belong in, or would be rejected from, queer communities, or because of a belief that their attractions ought to be categorized as a mental illness more than an orientation.

Consequences of MAPs’ use of queer-spectrum identity labels

From a societal standpoint, what is to be gained by excluding MAPs from queer communities? As discussed within this article, queer communities – gay men in particular – have worked for a considerable amount of time to distance themselves from false reputations as predatory that have followed them throughout history (Mogul et al., 2011). It is therefore understandable that queer individuals would not want to be associated with groups that are thought to be synonymous with sex offenders – some believe that this would provide fodder for those who continue to condemn queer communities. However, it is also important to realize that invalid and reductive historical assumptions that gay men were predatory are a mirror image of current assumptions about MAPs. Society now commonly believes that minor-attracted individuals are all

offenders, which is a flawed assumption that contributes to stigma felt by MAPs. For queer communities to distance themselves from MAPs indicates either agreement with that belief or a willingness to prioritize the wellbeing of some queer individuals at the expense of others.

On the other hand, what is there to be gained by including MAPs in the queer spectrum? After all, even MAPs within this study were split in their use of queer-spectrum labels and terminology. I am not attempting to make a normative statement about whether MAPs *should* use these labels for themselves. MAPs' use of identity labels within their interviews was the result of long and careful deliberation regarding the age and gender(s) of their attractions, societal reactions, and their personal beliefs. Rather, I argue that MAPs' use of terminology be accepted as the personal choice of a population who, like other queer individuals, did not choose their attractions, and are unable to change them. Accepting MAPs' preferences in their uses of queer-spectrum labels would go a long way toward reducing the shame felt by this population, and historically shared by other queer communities.

But is reducing the shame experienced by MAPs a worthwhile goal? I frequently come across the argument that to support MAPs in their wellbeing is to ignore the safety needs of minors. Under this line of reasoning, MAPs' shame regarding their attractions prevents them from committing offenses, and reducing that shame would put children in danger. My research with MAPs has yielded data that contradict this notion. Stigma, and the shame that results from it, keep MAPs from accessing resources, such as therapeutic interventions and other counseling services, that could otherwise support them in their own goals of resisting sexual offending (Walker, 2017). Many MAPs are also minors themselves, and the shame they experience diminishes their wellbeing as well, leading to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideations. Supporting MAPs' personal choices of identity labels, along the queer spectrum or not, is one step in the direction of reducing the stigma against them, which can, therefore, can help to reduce harm to minors in multiple ways: a worthwhile goal indeed.

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