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What if the Child Appears to Enjoy It? Moral Attitudes Toward Adult–Child Sex Among Men With and Without Pedohebephilia

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This study attempted to measure cognitions about adult–child sex by approaching the issue from a perspective of moral attitudes. We assessed ratings regarding direct and indirect harmfulness, nonconsent, exploitation, and differences in adults' and children's sexualities based on a description of adult–child sex without apparent child discomfort among an online sample of 120 pedohebephilic and 89 nonpedohebephilic German-speaking men. The results showed that only 7.5% among pedohebephilic men had equal or less permissive attitudes than the average control, while 4.5% of nonpedohebephilic men had equal or more permissive attitudes than the average pedohebephilic man. Both groups did not, however, differ in their appraisal that children may suffer indirect harm via stigmatization. The findings also indicate that the moral perception of adult–child sex shows little differentiation among German-speaking laypeople. We discuss the relevance of these findings for clinical practice and propose ideas for subsequent research.

A small percentage of people (about 4%, according to a recent study among German men; Dombert et al., 2016) have pedophilia, that is, experience a sexual interest in prepubescents (usually age 10 or younger) or hebephilia, that is, experience a sexual attraction to early pubescents (usually ages 11 to 14; Hames & Blanchard, 2012). The term *pedohebephilia* has been proposed to describe a sexual attraction to prepubescent children and early pubescent adolescents (Beier et al., 2015). In this article, it is used as an umbrella term to refer to people with pedophilic and/or hebephilic interest (see also Bailey, Hsu, & Bernhard, 2016). In line with society's concerns about child sexual abuse, pedohebephilia has traditionally been approached from a perspective of therapy and social control. Besides pathologizing pedophilic interests (Malón, 2012), this involves labeling cognitions related to adult–child sex as “distorted” or “rationalizing,” as they may motivate (re) offending or be used to justify past abusive behavior (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007; Marziano, Ward, Beech, & Pattison, 2006; Ward, 1997). While this approach can be useful for forensic purposes (e.g., predicting recidivism among sex offenders; Mann, Webster, Wakeling, & Marshall, 2007), traditional measures of cognitive

distortions, as we will argue throughout this article, are likely to miss how pedohebephilic men actually think about adult–child sex. Therefore, we created a questionnaire assessing moral attitudes toward a sexual encounter that is likely to come close to the ideal of sex between a caring adult and a consenting child (as commonly discussed on message boards for pedohebephilic people; Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010; Malesky & Ennis, 2004). The scale was tested online among men with and without pedohebephilia.

As Seto (2012) pointed out, pedophilia and, by extension, hebephilia may be thought of as sexual orientations sharing many characteristics with teleiophilic (i.e., sexually attracted to postpubescent individuals) homo- and heterosexuality. There has also been a heated debate about whether the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) diagnostic criteria for pedophilic disorder should be extended to include attraction to early pubescent adolescents as well—a proposal that was ultimately rejected. There are a plethora of articles discussing the diagnostic validity of pedohebephilia (e.g., for an overview, see Rind & Yuill, 2012) and contributing to this debate is beyond the scope of the current article. Our primary interest lies in the moral evaluations of sexual contacts between adults and children as a high-profile concern in current Western culture, and the concept of pedohebephilia is used descriptively and without intention to enforce it as a diagnostic term. On a related note, we want to state explicitly that the term *adult–child sex* is used in this article

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because *child* is the common term employed to designate individuals under age 14. It should also be noted that sexual development and maturity varies tremendously among individuals and that some children, appear to be capable of experiencing a more adult-like eroticism at a younger age than others.

The Concept of “Cognitive Distortions”

How people with pedohebephilic interests think about adult–child sex is typically studied from a perspective of “cognitive distortions” or pro-offense attitudes (Abel, Becker, & Cunningham-Rathner, 1984; Seto, 2007; Ward & Keenan, 1999). Starting with an article by Abel et al. (1984), a number of questionnaires have been developed to assess these cognitions (e.g., Hanson, Gizzarelli, & Scott, 1994; Mann et al., 2007), with the Abel and Becker Cognition Scale (Abel et al., 1989) and the Bumby Child Molest Scale (Bumby, 1996) arguably being the most popular (Gannon & Polaschek, 2006). Although modifying such cognitions has become a central part of most treatment protocols for child sexual offenders, these scales have been criticized lately for a number of reasons (see, e.g., Beech, Bartels, & Dixon, 2013; Maruna & Mann, 2006). A major point of critique is the paradoxical finding that, although responses statistically differed (in most cases) between child sexual offenders and nonoffenders or other types of offenders, past research has revealed sexual offenders not to agree but to disagree *less strongly* with statements condoning sex with children (for an overview, see Gannon & Polaschek, 2006). This tendency of disagreement also appears to exist for community men with pedophilia (Jahnke, Schmidt, Geradt, & Hoyer, 2015) and cannot be explained entirely by social desirability bias (Gannon, Keown, & Polaschek, 2007).

Scales assessing offense-supportive attitudes differ regarding the extent of context they provide about the sexual act (e.g., the degree of violence or threat, the type of activity) and about the involved child (e.g., age, reaction). Yet as cognitive distortion scales are based on the implicit moral assumption that all sexual experiences between adults and children deserve equal condemnation and that differentiating between different types of sexual acts or relationships is cognitively distorted, they usually provide little, if any, specific description of hypothetical sexual encounters. People with pedohebephilia, however, usually attach great importance to characteristics of the sexual act, emphasizing, for instance, “that ‘child rape [not consensual love] is bad’” (Holt et al., 2010, p. 14; brackets in original document). In a rare vignette-based study on the context sensitivity of such cognitions, Stermac and Segal (1989) discovered child sexual offenders to be more likely to perceive the described sexual activity as beneficial for the child when he or she was smiling or passive, noting that “these perceptions may be modified only when a clearly negative and unambiguous consequence occurs, such as the child crying” (p. 582).

Hence, we argue that a research approach providing the context needed to form a moral opinion is a superior way to tap into attitudes about adult–child sex compared to the common strategy of assessing agreement with isolated statements more or less related to adult–child sex.

Studying Attitudes Toward Adult–Child Sex as a Moral Issue

Moral attitudes toward adult–child sex represent what a person thinks and feels about this subject and can be measured by a person’s level of agreement or disagreement with arguments for or against it (Thurstone, 1928). Generally, moral attitudes can guide and inform someone’s behavior (but note that the relationship between attitudes and behavior is complex; Greenwald, 2014). Although moral attitudes vary from permissive to restrictive, most people are likely to experience an “intense instinctive distaste” (Malón, 2015, p. 1072; see also Marzillier & Davey, 2004; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2011) when thinking about adults engaging in or desiring sexual activities with children (Jahnke, Imhoff, & Hoyer, 2015).

Most clinicians and researchers agree that adult–child sex is unethical, usually based on one of the following arguments:

1. adult–child sex is directly harmful for children;
2. children suffer harm indirectly because of society’s rejection of adult–child sex;
3. children cannot give (informed) consent to sex with adults;
4. adults engaging in sex with children exploit children’s vulnerability and lack of power; and
5. children are not able to understand and interpret the sexual nature of such actions (see, e.g., Finkelhor, 1979; Malón, 2015; Schmidt, 2002; note, however, that some authors have raised objections against these criteria; Card, 2002; Ehman, 2000; Kershner, 2001).

This consensus becomes less clear when we approach puberty (Rind & Welter, 2016a). In the following sections, we highlight each of the five ethical facets in more detail (but note that this discussion of primarily Western moral ideas should not imply that we are talking about human universals or final truths).

Direct Harmfulness

Child sexual abuse is considered to be one of the most severe forms of violence against children and to be accompanied by far-reaching short- and long-term consequences for the victim, such as post-traumatic stress or aggressive behavior (Beitchman, Zucker, Hood, daCosta, & Akman, 1991; Walsh & DiLillo, 2011). Yet the causal nature of these statistical associations has been the subject of a heated debate among scholars (Rind, Tromovitch, & Bauserman, 1998, 2001). Some authors have pointed out that, if comorbidity between experiences of adult–child sex and physical

or emotional abuse are taken into account, the supposed negative effects of adult-child sex appear much less dramatic (Rehan, Antfolk, Johansson, & Santtila, 2016; see also Münzer, Fegert, & Goldbeck, 2016, for a study comparing psychological symptoms among minors with experiences of adult-child sex and nonsexual maltreatment). There is even evidence for some positive adult-child sex experiences (Okami, 1991; Rind & Welter, 2016a; Sandfort, 1984; but note these authors mostly studied pubescent or postpubescent adolescents), which would likely be invisible to researchers focusing only on samples with high rates of mental disorders (Rind et al., 1998). Although one may argue that “adult-child sex exposes children to a high risk of being seriously harmed,” providing a “sound argument as to why it is wrong to engage in adult-child sex” (Moen, 2015, p. 116), it has been pointed out that “the idea that an experience causes harm is not sufficient in itself to earn condemnation” (Finkelhor, 1979, p. 694), especially when compared to (legal) experiences that also put the child at risk of psychological damage.

Indirect Harmfulness

Damage from adult-child sex may also stem from “the current taboo on children’s sexuality” (Houtepen, Sijtsema, & Bogaerts, 2015, p. 59). According to this view, adult-child sex may not be harmful per se, but may create harm indirectly because of the negative societal reactions surrounding such encounters (Ehman, 2000), which mediates the association between the abuse and negative effects. Stigmatization refers to all “negative connotations (e.g., shame and guilt) that are communicated to the child around the experience,” which the child may internalize into his or her self-image (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985, p. 532). Harm, therefore, may stem from the reactions of others who attribute negative characteristics to the child (e.g., blame, sexual waywardness) or perceive the child’s value as decreased (“spoiled goods”; Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; see also Rind & Welter, 2016b, for a discussion of nocebo reactions). Yet even if the activities are not disclosed or otherwise revealed, stigmatization may result from “the child’s prior knowledge or sense that the activity is considered deviant and taboo” (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985, p. 533; see also Constantine, 1983).

Consent

In contrast to sexual morals from the late 19th century, today’s Western societies have taken a much more liberal stance on sex. This permissive attitude usually hinges on a recreational conception of sex (i.e., the idea that sexual pleasure is morally legitimate) and the notion that the sexual partners involved have given free, informed consent to participate in these acts and possess the necessary mental and emotional capacities to do so (Finkelhor, 1979; Malón, 2015; Schmidt, 2002). Regarding children’s ability to give informed consent to sexual activities, Finkelhor (1979)

argued that they “lack the information that is necessary to make an ‘informed’ decision about the matter” (p. 694). More specifically, they lack an understanding of what sexuality means—a knowledge that would involve, for instance, cultural sexual standards, the criteria people use to choose their sexual partners, and long-term consequences of sexual relationships (Abel et al., 1984). Therefore, the idea that “the child does not consent and does not because it cannot” has been singled out by many authors as “the key to the wrong of sexual abuse” (Archard, 2004, p. 205).

Exploitation

The idea that a sexual relationship between a child and an adult harms the child is intertwined with the argument that such a relationship is necessarily exploitative. Considering the imbalance of power between adults and children, many authors have made the case that it is doubtful whether a child is free to reject an adult’s sexual advances. Children are taught to perceive adults as authority figures and rely on them for food, education, shelter, and a number of other vital resources. Even in the absence of physical violence or threat, there may exist a danger of exploiting the child “by ignoring its needs and wishes, i.e., childish needs and wishes” (Schmidt, 1991, p. 2). The question remains whether the child is actually capable of clearly expressing his or her rejection of something he or she does not wish to an adult, or to become aware of subtle forms of persuasion or manipulation. Nevertheless, it needs to be mentioned that there is a lack of research on adult-child sex apart from cases where sexual acts were forced or performed clearly against the child’s will, so it is largely unknown how these relationships play out. In a study of a small sample of boys between ages 10 and 16 who were engaged in sexual relationships with adults, Sandfort (1984) found that “what the boys did sexually for their older partners was always equal to or less than what the men did for the boys” (p. 131). Furthermore, in the eyes of the children, the adults did not misuse their authority, which puts into question whether adult-child sex is necessarily exploitative.

Incompatibility of Adults’ and Children’s Sexualities

In contrast to the aforementioned arguments, the incompatibility argument is based on the idea that eroticism represents a specific and different dimension of human interaction and that sexuality, at least when it is morally desirable, is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond mere physical pleasure (Malón, 2015). Children might often seek nothing sexual at all in physical intimacy with an adult (Schmidt, 2002). Even though prepubescents are capable of experiencing sexual genital-sensual pleasure and may be curious about others’ bodies, they do not feel sexually attracted to others and desire others’ bodies in the same way that adults do (Spiecker & Steutel, 1997; but see Rind & Welter, 2016b for an empirical discussion on how

adolescents experience sex). The sexuality of prepubescents is perceived as qualitatively different from adult sexuality, which, according to this perspective, renders it impossible to create a common and valuable sexual experience, that is, to reach a certain level of intimacy, real and reciprocal desire, and love (but note that experiences become more adult-like as puberty progresses).

The Present Research

Scientists still know relatively little about people with pedophilic interests outside of forensic or clinical institutions (Cantor & McPhail, 2016). Hence, the present research aims at assessing how men from the community with and without pedohebephilic interests would position themselves regarding the five aforementioned ethical arguments against adult–child sex when judging a vignette that presents a sexual interaction between an adult and a child that (apparently) does not involve a lack of love or caring. We hypothesized that men with pedohebephilia are more likely to disagree with moral arguments against adult–child sex regarding all previously discussed ethical aspects except for indirect harmfulness, where we expect to find an inverse pattern (i.e., pedohebephilic men being more likely to agree that those who oppose adult–child sex “represented the real problem,” Holt et al., 2010, p. 9). Scores on the scale assessing moral attitudes toward adult–child sex probably show moderate to high associations with scales assessing “cognitive distortions,” as these are based around similar ideas and using, in part, similar items. Beyond that, we hypothesized that pedohebephilic men with a criminal record regarding child sexual offenses will be disproportionately likely to report permissive moral attitudes toward adult–child sex. We furthermore explored links between moral attitudes, exclusivity of pedophilic interests, prior psychotherapy, social desirability, and sexual gender orientation (among pedohebephilic men), educational level, having fathered children, and age (among both groups).

Method

Procedure

Between January and March 2016, men with and without pedohebephilia were recruited online. Invitations for pedohebephilic men were posted on German message boards for pedohebephilic individuals (i.e., www.jungsforum.net, www.krumme13.org, and www.schicksal-und-herausforderung.de, all of which explicitly prohibit illegal activities on their websites); participants without pedohebephilia were recruited on different German psychology- or business-related websites (www.psychologie-heute.de, www.xing.com, www.szpinnwand.de, www.quoka.de, [\[nanzeigen.de\]\(http://nanzeigen.de\), \[www.caz-lesen.de\]\(http://www.caz-lesen.de\)\) and on Facebook \(e.g., the Facebook group “Psychological Studies for Everyone”\). If participants who reported exclusive sexual interests in adults entered the survey for pedohebephilic men, they were redirected to the survey for nonpedohebephilic men \(and vice versa\). The study received ethics approval by the local university ethics board.](http://www.ebay-klei-</p>
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Participants

Initially, 212 men participated in the study. The great majority of participants completed the survey without missing values. Three men with pedohebephilic interests (2.4%) left several items from the Moral Attitudes Scale unanswered, which we interpreted as deliberate omissions. We considered these participants to be not sufficiently motivated to disclose their moral attitudes and dropped their cases from the analysis (listwise deletion; but note that other reasons like frustration with certain formulations cannot be ruled out). One man without pedohebephilic interests omitted only one item from the Moral Attitudes Scale, which is likely to be due to negligence. We included his data in all analyses for which complete information was available.

Participants with self-reported pedophilic and/or hebephilic interests ($n = 120$) were categorized as pedohebephilic, irrespective of whether they also disclosed teleiophilic interests. The no-pedohebephilia group comprises all participants without pedohebephilic interests ($n = 89$). The absolute numbers of men with pedophilic, hebephilic, or teleiophilic interests (and all possible combinations of these interests) are depicted in the Venn diagram in Figure 1. Among the pedohebephilic sample, 21% reported to be mainly or exclusively sexually interested in girls, 15% reported bisexual interests, and 64% indicated to be mainly or exclusively sexually interested in boys (while 88% of nonpedophilic men reported dominant or exclusive heterosexual interests). Overall, participants with pedohebephilia were older and less likely to be in a relationship with an adult than participants without pedohebephilia (age: $M = 35.40$, $SD = 11.85$ versus $M = 30.70$, $SD = 9.47$; $t(207) = 3.085$, $p = 0.002$; relationship status: 22% versus 63% in a relationship, $p < .001$, two-sided Fisher’s exact test). Differences between participants with and without pedohebephilia in regard to having one or more children were nonsignificant (13% versus 24%, $p = .067$, two-sided Fisher’s exact test). Although both groups were highly educated compared to the general German population, participants with pedohebephilia were less likely to report having acquired the Abitur (i.e., the German school examination required for admission to college) than participants without pedohebephilia (63% versus 78%, $p = .033$, two-sided Fisher’s exact test). Among pedohebephilic men, 14% reported prior convictions for sexual crimes involving children, and 20% reported to have been in therapy due to their pedohebephilic interests.

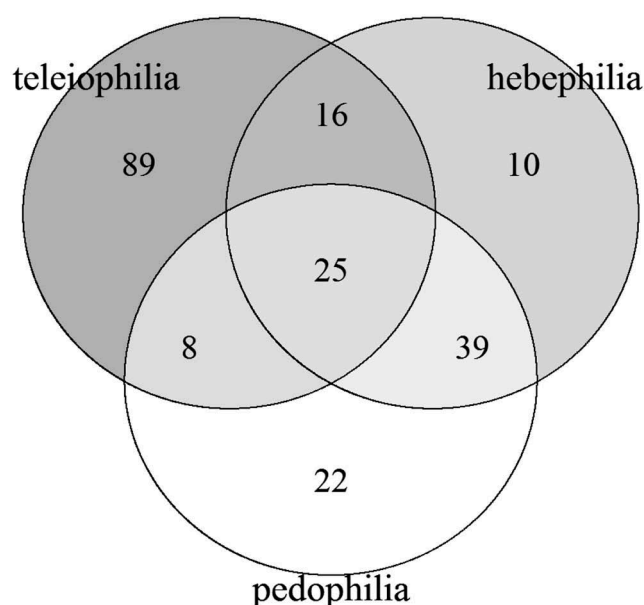


Figure 1. Sexual interests among participants (numbers represent frequencies). Note that participants were asked whether they experienced a sexual interest in prepubescent bodies (pedophilia), early pubescent bodies (hebephilia), or adult bodies (teleiophilia).

Measures

In the following paragraph, we first provide an overview of all administered questionnaires and their exact order. Please note that the results of the constructs not analyzed in this article will be featured in other publications (Schmitt, 2017; Schmitt, Jahnke, Geradt, & Hoyer, 2017).

Among pedohebephilic men, we assessed self-reported sexual interests in prepubescent children, early pubescent adolescents, and/or adults, assumptions about puberty, sexual gender orientation, personality traits, and assumptions about child and adult personality. Thereafter, participants completed measures about emotional needs, social desirability bias (Social Desirability Scale-17; Stöber, 1999), cognitions about sex with children (Bumby Child Molest Scale; Bumby, 1996; Moral Attitudes Scale), and sociodemographic variables (age, previous participation in studies on pedohebephilia, family status, education status, parental status, contact with children, prior psychotherapy to deal with problems related with sexual interests in children, and previous convictions for sexual offenses, in that order). Participants without pedohebephilia completed the same scales/items as pedohebephilic participants, but not the Bumby Child Molest Scale or the Social Desirability Scale; nor were they asked about a number of sociodemographic variables (previous participation in studies on pedohebephilia, contact with children, prior psychotherapy to deal with problems related with sexual interests in children, and previous convictions for sexual offenses). In the following section, the psychometric scales used for analyses in the current study are described in detail.

Self-Reported Pedophilic, Hebephilic, and Teleiophilic Interests

We assessed pedophilia, hebephilia, and teleiophilia (defined as sexual interests in “bodies with no secondary sex characteristics”; “bodies with partly developed secondary sex characteristics with a more childlike than adult figure”; and “bodies with fully formed secondary sex characteristics”), according to the Berlin classification by Beier et al. (2015). Participants were asked to position their sexual interests with regards to a Venn diagram structured like the one in Figure 1 with the options “exclusive sexual interest in prepubescent/early pubescent/postpubescent body schemes,” or mixed forms of these interests.

Social Desirability Scale-17

The Social Desirability Scale-17 was constructed to detect a potential motivation to give biased responses in order to present oneself in a more positive light. Its 17 items (e.g., “I always eat a healthy diet”) are rated on a binary scale as *False* (0) or *True* (1). Inversely formulated items (e.g., “I sometimes litter”) were recoded so that higher scores indicate a higher social desirability bias (Stöber, 1999). Reliability (internal consistency $\alpha > .72$; test-retest reliability $r = .82$ after four weeks) and convergent validity with regard to an older German version ($r > .67$) were acceptable (Stöber, 1999), as was the internal consistency within the current study ($\alpha = .71$).

Moral Attitudes Toward Adult-Child Sex

The instructions included a vignette illustrating an incident of adult-child sex, reading as follows:

A child between 10 and 12 years has sexual contact with an adult. They kiss, fondle, and touch each other's genitals. The adult does not use physical violence, threats, or money to make the child participate in these actions, and repeatedly asks the child's permission before going on. Afterward, the child spontaneously tells the adult that he or she has enjoyed the experience.

Participants were asked to rate 20 items with respect to this scenario on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Do not agree*) to 7 (*Fully agree*; see Table 1 for a list of items), irrespective of whether they believed this scenario to be common or uncommon. The scale consists of five subscales: direct harmfulness, indirect harmfulness, nonconsent, exploitation, and incompatibility of adults' and children's sexualities. Higher scores indicate higher agreement with arguments against adult-child sex.

Bumby Child Molest Scale

The Bumby Child Molest Scale questionnaire assesses agreement regarding different statements (e.g., “Sexual activity with children can help the child learn about sex”; “Many children who are sexually assaulted do not

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Percentages of Agreement/Uncertainty Among Pedohebephilia (n = 120) and No Pedohebephilia (n = 89) Group

No.		Pedohebephilia Group				Teleiophilia Group			
		M	SD	% Yes	% Neutral	M	SD	% Yes	% Neutral
1	It is likely that the child will suffer psychological harm as a result of the sexual contact. DH	2.46	1.74	16	8	4.73	1.83	53	18
2	The child will be stigmatized if others find out about the sexual contact. IH	6.01	1.20	89	7	5.89	1.33	88	7
3	The child probably could not understand what he or she was getting herself/himself into. N	3.35	1.68	23	17	5.61	1.63	78	10
4	The adult was more powerful than the child, which made it impossible to have an equal sexual relationship. E	3.02	1.94	25	11	5.81	1.52	84	6
5	The psychological needs of the child and the adult were too different to make a healthy sexual relationship possible. IS	3.08	1.94	26	12	5.82	1.70	87	3
6	As an adult, the child will probably have difficulties forming healthy relationships with other people as a result of the sexual contact. DH	2.30	1.63	12	9	4.53	1.83	52	18
7	The sexual contact was problematic for the child because society rejects sex with children. IH	5.14	1.76	67	13	5.10	1.94	69	11
8	<i>If the child had all the necessary information and the certainty that his or her choice was respected, he or she had the competence to consent to the sexual activity.</i> N	5.26	1.69	73	11	2.84	1.83	20	12
9	The adult cared for the child's well-being at least as much as for his own. E	4.98	1.90	67	10	2.33	1.51	10	10
10	The sexual contact probably deepened the bond between the adult and the child. IS	4.80	1.73	61	20	2.58	1.83	18	12
11	<i>It is unlikely for the child to be negatively affected by the sexual contact.</i> DH	4.59	1.93	57	12	2.89	1.90	21	11
12	<i>The child did not have to fear negative reactions from his or her environment.</i> IH	2.16	1.57	8	5	2.15	1.55	9	8
13	<i>The child was probably as competent as the adult to make decisions about participating in sexual contacts.</i> N	4.13	1.86	45	18	1.82	1.22	4	1
14	Consciously or subconsciously, the adult used the child for his own pleasure and interests. E	3.91	1.97	43	14	5.69	1.48	84	8
15	<i>The child had his or her desires met in the relationship with the adult.</i> IS	4.56	1.68	58	18	2.48	1.45	8	18
16	<i>This sexual contact was beneficial for the child's development.</i> DH	3.92	1.57	34	32	1.89	1.31	3	7
17	<i>Other people are likely to be understanding toward the child if they find out about the sexual contact.</i> IH	1.27	0.73	2	0	1.34	0.75	1	2
18	The child was probably in over his or her head when confronted with the adult's sexual wishes and needs. N	3.51	1.76	28	23	5.42	1.72	73	12
19	<i>Differences in age or social status between the adult and the child were overcome in this sexual contact.</i> E	3.69	1.93	36	18	2.02	1.38	8	10
20	The child did not actually want to have sex with the adult; even when it seems to have been the case, there were other reasons that motivated the child's behavior (e.g., the need for attention or friendship). IS	3.65	1.71	31	22	5.60	1.28	81	12

Note. All items in italics need to be recoded to calculate scale means. % yes = defined as a response of more than 4 on a Likert scale from 1 to 7; % neutral = defined as a response of 4 on a Likert scale from 1 to 7. DH = direct harmfulness; IH = indirect harmfulness; N = nonconsent; E = exploitation; IS = incompatibility of adults' and children's sexualities.

experience any major problems because of the assaults") on a 4-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating higher levels of cognitive distortions (Bumby, 1996). In the current study, we used a new 21-item abbreviated version of the German scale from Feelgood, Schaefer, and Hoyer from 2008 (Schmitt, 2017). Item selection was based on psychometric analyses and factor analyses conducted on a data set combining two samples of convicted child molesters ($N = 183$; original data from Neutze, 2013; Rambow, Elsner, Feelgood, & Hoyer, 2008). Among the current sample of pedohebephilic men, internal consistency was excellent ($\alpha = .91$).

Results

Item difficulty for the Moral Attitudes Scale ranged between .33 and .75 for pedohebephilic men (except for two items from the indirect harmfulness subscale which

had the indices .18 and .86), and between .19 and .83 for nonpedophilic men. Indirect harmfulness was the only subscale that showed an insufficient Cronbach's α (see Table 2). Therefore, items comprising the indirect harmfulness subscale were excluded from calculating the total score based on the Moral Attitudes Toward Adult-Child Sex subscales. All subscales were highly intercorrelated (again, with the exception of indirect harmfulness; see Table 3). Pearson correlations between items and the total score (not including the items from the indirect harmfulness scale) ranged between .64 and .93 (corrected for item overlap and scale reliability), indicating excellent item discrimination.

Descriptive results for the Moral Attitudes Scale are presented in Table 1. The majority of participants without pedohebephilia perceived the effects of the described adult-child sex as directly harmful for the child. Pedohebephilic participants, on the whole, did not agree that the child would suffer direct harm on a psychological level, but opinions were divided on whether the sexual act had positive effects.

Table 2. Comparison Between Pedohebephilia and the No Pedohebephilia Group Subscales and Indirect Harmfulness Items (Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test) Including Median Scores and Cronbach's α ($N = 209$)

Scale Name (Cronbach's α)	<i>Md</i> (PH)	<i>Md</i> (No PH)	<i>W</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	95% Confidence Interval
Direct harmfulness (.90)	2.75	5.25	1704	-0.58	< .001	[-2.75, -1.75]
Nonconsent (.91)	3.00	5.75	1532	-0.61	< .001	[-2.75, -2.00]
Exploitation (.86)	3.38	6.00	1384.5	-0.63	< .001	[-2.75, -2.00]
Incompatibility (.91)	3.00	6.00	1479.5	-0.62	< .001	[-3.00, -2.00]
Total score ^a (.97)	3.03	5.75	1385	-0.63	< .001	[-2.81, -2.06]
Indirect harmfulness (.42)						
Item 2	6	6	5575	-0.04	.565	[0.00, 0.00]
Item 7	6	6	5290	-0.01	.907	[0.00, 0.00]
Item 12 ^{b,c}	2	2	5222	-0.01	.887	[0.00, 0.00]
Item 17 ^b	1	1	5609	-0.06	.369	[0.00, 0.00]

Note. PH = pedohebephilia group ($n = 120$); no PH = no pedohebephilia group ($n = 89$).

^aThe total score is calculated based on the subscales with acceptable internal consistency (i.e., direct harmfulness, nonconsent, exploitation, and incompatibility of adults' and children's sexualities).

^bItems were inversely formulated, so that higher scores reflect higher rejection of the respective argument for indirect harm.

^cDue to pairwise deletion in case of missing values, $N = 208$.

Table 3. Spearman Correlations Between Moral Attitudes Toward Adult-Child Sex and Age, Bumby Molest Scale, and Social Desirability

	Direct Harmfulness (CS)	Indirect Harmfulness (CS)	Nonconsent (CS)	Exploitation (CS)	Incompatibility (CS)	Age (CS)	Bumby Molest Scale (PH)	Social Desirability Scale (PH)
Direct harmfulness	1.00	—	—	—	—	-.11	-.64***	-.18*
Indirect harmfulness ^a	.09	1.00	—	—	—	.13	-.12	-.10
Nonconsent	.87***	.06	1.00	—	—	-.09	-.60***	-.25**
Exploitation	.86***	.05	.91***	1.00	—	-.08	-.59***	-.22*
Incompatibility	.87***	-.01	.91***	.92***	1.00	-.12	-.57***	-.21*
Total score ^b	.94***	.05	.96***	.96***	.96	-.10	-.64***	-.23*

Note. PH = pedohebephilia group ($n = 120$); no PH = no pedohebephilia group ($n = 89$); CS = complete sample ($N = 209$).

^aDue to pairwise deletion in case of missing values, $N = 208$ (CS).

^bThe total score is calculated based on the subscales direct harmfulness, nonconsent, exploitation, and incompatibility of adults' and children's sexualities.

*** $p = .001$; ** $p = .01$; * $p = .05$.

By contrast, opinions among both groups were remarkably similar regarding indirect harmfulness, with the great majority agreeing that a child who was involved in sexual activities with an adult will be stigmatized by those around him or her. About half of the pedohebephilic sample perceived the child as competent enough to make a decision about whether to participate in the sexual act, while almost no nonpedohebephilic man shared this view. Furthermore, while pedohebephilic men generally acknowledged power differences between the adult and the child, the majority appeared to be convinced that the adult was trying to respond to the child's needs—an idea that the great majority of men without pedohebephilia strongly rejected. Whereas more than half of the pedohebephilic group saw adult and child sexualities as compatible there was a sizable number of pedohebephilic participants who disagreed or expressed uncertainty about this issue. The majority of men without pedohebephilic interests agreed that children's and adults' sexualities were too different to permit a reciprocal relationship. Total scores on the Moral Attitudes Scale ranged from

1.13 to 4.16 ($M = 3.33$) among pedohebephilic men, with almost three quarters (73%) showing lower scores than 4.00 as the midpoint of the scale (i.e., rejecting arguments against adult-child sex). By contrast, total scores on the Bumby Child Molest scale ranged from 1.00 to 3.57 ($M = 2.47$) among pedohebephilic men, with only 58% scoring higher than 2.5 as the midpoint of the scale (i.e., agreeing with pro-offense statements).

As subscale scores were not normally distributed, we conducted Wilcoxon rank sum tests (see Table 2). People with pedohebephilia had significantly lower scores than the comparison group on all tested variables, except for items measuring indirect harmfulness. Only 7.5% of participants with pedohebephilia showed equal or higher values on the total score than the no pedohebephilia group ($Mdn = 5.75$), while only 4.5% of participants without pedohebephilia showed equally low or lower values than the pedohebephilia group ($Mdn = 3.03$; note that indirect harmfulness was not included). To account for effects of potential confounding variables we carried out regression analyses with the group

Table 4. Beta Weights and Standard Deviations of Moral Attitudes Toward Adult–Child Sex and Potential Confounds (Logistic Regressions, $N = 209$)

	<i>B</i> (SD); Outcome: Group (0 = Pedohebephilia; 1 = No Pedohebephilia)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Age	0.10 (0.03)***	0.08 (0.02)***	0.09 (0.03)***	0.10 (0.03)***	0.09 (0.03)***	0.10 (0.03)***
Relationship status	–2.41 (0.49)***	–1.66 (0.34)***	–1.88 (0.46)***	–1.98 (0.48)***	–1.70 (0.44)***	–2.07 (0.49)***
Educational status	–0.59 (0.48)	–0.59 (0.37)	–0.37 (0.47)	–0.38 (0.49)	–0.52 (0.47)	–0.43 (0.49)
Children	–0.45 (0.29)	–0.56 (0.26)*	–0.63 (0.35)	–0.66 (0.32)*	–0.68 (0.33)*	–0.60 (0.34)
Direct harmfulness	–1.06 (0.16)***					
Indirect harmfulness ^a		–0.12 (0.20)				
Nonconsent			–1.01 (0.15)***			
Exploitation				–1.25 (0.18)***		
Incompatibility					–1.00 (0.15)***	
Total score ^b						–1.20 (0.17)***
Intercept	3.20 (1.02)**	–0.16 (1.29)	3.19 (1.01)**	4.34 (1.17)***	3.26 (1.00)**	3.91 (1.10)***

Note. Abitur = German university entrance qualification; Odds ratios: 0.35 direct harmfulness; 0.89 indirect harmfulness; 0.36 nonconsent; 0.29 exploitation; 0.37 incompatibility; 0.30 total score; relationship status: 0 = single, 1 = in a relationship; educational status: 0 = no abitur (a set of examinations taken in the final year of secondary school), 1 = has abitur; children: 0 = no children, 1 = one or more children.

^aDue to pairwise deletion in case of missing values, $N = 208$ (CS).

^bThe total score is calculated based on the subscales direct harmfulness, nonconsent, exploitation, and incompatibility.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .5$.

variable as outcome and sociodemographic variables (age, relationship status, having children, educational status) as well as one of the Moral Attitudes Toward Adult–Child Sex subscale scores or the total score as predictors. Results showed that the effects remained large and significant, which indicates that results were not biased by the aforementioned sociodemographic variables (see Table 4).

As expected, direct harmfulness, nonconsent, exploitation, incompatibility of adults' and children's sexualities, and the total score showed strong correlations with the Bumby Child Molest Scale (see Table 3). All Moral Attitudes Toward Adult–Child Sex subscales were significantly linked to pedohebephilic men's social desirability score (except for indirect harmfulness). However, instead of the hypothesized positive link, we found that the more participants from the pedohebephilic group tended to give socially desirable responses, the *less* they agreed with arguments against adult–child sex. There was no similar tendency for the Bumby Child Molest scale ($r = .09$, $p = .319$). Total and subscale scores on the Moral Attitudes Scale were unrelated to age, educational status, relationship status, exclusivity of pedophilic interests, prior treatment, or prior convictions (Tables 3 and 5; note that the Bumby Child Molest Scale was also not related to prior convictions, $r = .05$, $p = .570$). Exploratory analyses also revealed that men with a predominant sexual interest in girls were more likely to agree with the nonconsent argument, and had higher values on the total score (Table 4). We also discovered some evidence that having children was linked to less permissive attitudes toward adult–child sex, but only among nonpedohebephilic participants and only for the subscales direct harmfulness and nonconsent (Table 5). A number of dichotomous variables such as prior convictions did not reach a 50% base rate, which decreases statistical

significance for point-biserial correlations. We followed the recommendations from Babchishin and Helmus (2016) and calculated corresponding values of d as a (relatively) base rate independent effect size (using the formula provided by Rice & Harris, 2005). Results revealed small to medium effect sizes for the link between prior conviction and the two subscales (direct harmfulness: $d = -.28$, indirect harmfulness: $d = .41$) and trivial to nonexistent effects of $d < .12$ (absolute values) for all other subscales.

Discussion

In the present research, we showed that pedohebephilic men recruited in an online environment had more permissive moral attitudes toward adult–child sex compared to an online sample of men without pedohebephilia. These differences were found to be in “direction” and not only in “degree” (Gannon et al., 2007, p. 19); that is, in general, if members of the pedohebephilic group agreed with a statement, teleiophilic men disagreed, and vice versa (with the exception of statements referring to the stigma attached to adult–child sex). While these arguments might differ on a philosophical level, people who indicated agreement with one argument against sex with children also tended to agree with all the others. It is possible that the presented arguments represent overlapping constructs for laypeople or a generalized moral attitude across moral objects. Whatever might be the underlying reason, in sum, lay views on the topic are strongly determined by sexual interest and are not particularly differentiated. Also, having found some consensus between men with and without pedohebephilia about indirect harmfulness as a possible and uncontrollable consequence for the child after adult–child sex, discussing this

Table 5. *Point-Biserial Correlations Between Moral Attitudes Toward Adult-Child Sex and Educational Status, Having Children, Prior Convictions, Prior Therapy, Exclusivity of Pedohebephilic Interests, and Sexual Interest in Girls*

	Educational Status (CS)	Children (CS)	Children (No PH)	Prior Convictions (PH)	Prior Therapy (PH)	Exclusivity (PH)	Sexual Interest in Girls (PH)
Direct harmfulness	.09	.16	.24*	-0.10	0.08	-0.05	0.17
Indirect harmfulness ^a	.03	.03	-.01	0.14	0.18	0.12	0.01
Nonconsent	.14	.12	.26*	0.00	0.16	-0.07	0.25**
Exploitation	.16	.09	.19	-0.04	0.02	-0.07	0.09
Incompatibility	.11	.09	.14	0.00	0.10	-0.10	0.18
Total score ^b	.13	.12	.23*	-0.04	0.10	-0.08	0.18*

Note. PH = pedohebephilia group ($n = 120$); no PH = no pedohebephilia group ($n = 89$); CS = complete sample ($N = 209$). Exclusivity: 0 = also has teleiophilic and/or hebephilic sexual interests, 1 = has exclusive pedophilic interests; Sexual interest in girls: 0 = has sexual interest mainly or exclusively in boys or has equal sexual interest in boys and girls, 1 = has sexual interest mainly or exclusively in girls.

^aDue to pairwise deletion in case of missing values, $N = 208$ (CS) and $n = 88$ (no PH).

^bThe total score is calculated based on the subscales direct harmfulness, nonconsent, exploitation, and incompatibility of adults' and children's sexualities.

*** $p = .001$; ** $p = .01$; * $p = .05$.

moral argument could be a pragmatic and respectful way to reach a moral middle ground between a client and a therapist in a correctional setting (but note that even though not achieving statistical significance, indirect harmfulness was the only subscale that showed a positive correlation with prior convictions for sexual offenses).

We also explored potential links between the scale and the sexual gender orientation and found men with a sexual interest mainly or exclusively in girls to be more likely to agree that children cannot give informed consent to sexual activities with adults. This could indicate differing moral attitudes among men with a sexual interest in children of different sexes. As the gender of the child in the vignette was not identified, differences could also point to different attitudes toward sex with male versus female children (assuming that men with a sexual interest in boys would be more likely to interpret the question as referring to boys, while men with sexual interests in girls would be more likely picture a girl when reading the description). This would be in line with studies finding that the perception of adult-child sex depends on the sex of the child (Back & Lips, 1998; Broussard, Wagner, & Kazelskis, 1991; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997; but note that this perception might be grounded in differences in how boys and girls tend to react to these experiences; see Baumann, 1983).

Moreover, we found social desirability to be associated with a higher rejection of arguments against adult-child sex. This contrasts with earlier findings among incarcerated and nonincarcerated child sex offenders that showed a higher endorsement of cognitive distortions to be negatively associated with measures of social desirability (e.g., Hanson et al., 1994; Kalichman, Henderson, Shealy, & Dwyer, 1992) as well as the fact that a similar link did not exist between social desirability and the Bumby Child Molest Scale. This result may indicate that pedohebephilic men perceive permissive moral norms regarding adult-child sex, which are often found on message boards for pedohebephilic individuals, as

more relevant than the more common restrictive norms. Malesky and Ennis (2004) reported that validation of beliefs and relationships was present in more than 20% of the posts in a Web forum for people with a sexual interest in boys. It may be that pedohebephilic men with nonnormative (i.e., permissive) moral attitudes toward adult-child sex and a high need to be accepted by others are disproportionately likely to frequent message boards for like-minded peers and to show tendencies of social desirability, which could also explain this correlation.

Against our expectations, we found no significant link between prior convictions and moral attitudes toward adult-child sex. While it is possible that such attitudes are indeed not related to offending behavior, we believe that this finding is most likely due to methodological problems. For instance, we did not differentiate between different kinds of child sexual offenses, which might be evaluated based on different sets of moral criteria (especially in child pornography cases that did not involve real children, such as short stories or simulations using child avatars). The sexual offense could date back many years, while attitudes might have changed over time and pedohebephilic participants without previous conviction might have committed offenses that have remained undetected. The findings are further compromised by the low base rate of convicted child sex offenders in our sample, which is to be expected among community samples of pedohebephilic men. An alternative effect size that is less sensitive to base rates indicates that disagreeing that adult-child sex causes harm directly and agreeing that it leads to stigmatization of the child has a small to moderate association with prior convictions, but more research is needed to corroborate this relationship.

Limitations and Outlook

Naturally, our findings are subject to a number of caveats. It is not clear whether our participants would have used the

same arguments to defend or condemn the described sexual act if we had not provided a list of arguments. Especially for moral transgressions evoking disgust, people are usually not aware about why they feel that way and often provide tautological explanations, such as “Pedophiles are disgusting because they are gross” (Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013, p. 344). One pedohebephilic participant contacted us to inform us that, for him, more information about events that have happened before (e.g., sex education in school and at home or parental permission) and after the sexual act (e.g., whether the adult remained emotionally available) would be necessary to judge moral permissibility.

Another limitation was that we did not assess sexual interests on a continuous scale and therefore cannot make statements regarding the intensity of these sexual interests relative to others. This is problematic, as many men predominantly attracted to adult women also experience some attraction to pubescent or prepubescent body schemes that steadily decreases when female stimuli become more child-like (Lykins et al., 2010). While we find it unlikely that a man with only a minor sexual interest in, for instance, prepubescent or early pubescent children would report these interests as seemingly on par with his teleiophilic interests, we cannot rule it out. Future studies should assess sexual interests in prepubescents, early pubescents, and postpubescents on absolute scales (e.g., ratings from zero to highest interest).

The current study was conducted online and shares problems associated with this type of research (Kraut et al., 2004; Wright, 2005), such as self-selection bias, deception/social desirability bias, limited control of the setting of data collection, and the unavailability of objective information about, for instance, prior convictions (Seto, 2007). To minimize the risk of negative consequences for our participants, we refrained from assessing information about undetected child sexual offenses. While a few recent studies sampled pedohebephilic men offline (Freimond, 2013; Houtepen et al., 2015; Okami & Goldberg, 1992), their sample sizes were usually very small due to the stigma attached to pedophilia (Imhoff, 2015). Therefore, we believe that, at the moment, online research is the only method to achieve samples of community men with pedohebephilic interests that are large enough for quantitative research. Due to non-probabilistic sampling (and participant characteristics that deviated from the German average with respect to educational status and age), our findings cannot be generalized to all men with or without pedohebephilia.

Future research might explore moral judgments among pedohebephilic individuals by experimentally varying the age of the child, as sex with younger children is arguably more problematic on a moral level (and less likely to be judged as positive or pleasurable by the child; Okami, 1991). Also, the type of the described sexual act (e.g., penetrative versus non-penetrative) and its context (e.g., whether the adult gave the child money or gifts before touching him or her in a sexual way, whether the child regrets the experience) may be manipulated experimentally to examine their effects on moral judgments. Researchers may also test participants' responses to

further arguments, such as the conception of pedophilia as a sexual perversion (Nagel, 1992) and/or its status as a mental illness (Malón, 2012; Wakefield, 2011), that would make these experiences intrinsically immoral.

Conclusion

Despite being able to statistically differentiate people with pedohebephilic interests from others, previous scales assessing cognitions about adult-child sex have struggled to capture how these individuals think about the issue. This problem might, at least in part, be due to the fact that authors have tried to measure attitudes toward a complex moral problem by assessing agreement with isolated statements that child sex offenders have expressed during clinical examinations (Ward, 1997). Pedohebephilic men are not to be expected to share society's absolute moral stance on adult-child sex, but they are also unlikely to be ignorant of or insensitive to the moral problems attached to adult-child sex. The results of the present research, therefore, contributed another piece to the puzzle of how people with pedohebephilia think and feel about adult-child sex.

Also, we believe that addressing cognitions about this issue from a moral perspective could be an interesting and maybe more legitimate approach to study such cognitions compared to past scientific and therapeutic efforts. This involves acknowledging that our moral evaluations are culturally relative and that there are no “universal facts” to justify Western morality or any other. Ultimately, studies that measure sexual attitudes in a relatively neutral way may also help build trust between researchers and study participants with pedohebephilia who may otherwise be hesitant to contribute to research efforts that they perceive as biased (and probably rightfully so). This would help further expand our knowledge about pedohebephilia as a human phenomenon worthy of scientific interest in and of itself, and help separate it from phenomena such as antisociality or low intelligence, which are often ascertained among samples of child sexual offenders.

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