

“It’s Not Something I Chose You Know”: Making Sense of Pedophiles’ Sexual Interest in Children and the Impact on Their Psychosexual Identity

Sexual Abuse: A Journal of
Research and Treatment
1–27

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DOI: 10.1177/1079063217697132

journals.sagepub.com/home/sax



**Nicholas James Blagden¹, Ruth Mann²,
Stephen Webster³, Rachael Lee², and Fiona Williams²**

Abstract

Sexual interest in children is one of the most strongly predictive of the known risk factors for sexual reconviction. It is an important aspect of risk assessment to identify the presence of such interest, and an important task for treatment providers to address such a sexual interest where it is present. It has been argued that understanding pedophiles’ deviant sexual interest in children can enhance risk assessment, management, and treatment planning. This research study aims to explore the phenomenology of deviant sexual interest in children, the impact it has on pedophilic offenders’ identities, and their views on the treatability of that interest. The study used semistructured interviews and repertory grids to make sense of participants’ experiences. The results revealed three superordinate themes: “living’ with a deviant sexual interest,” “relational sexual self,” and “possible and feared sexual self.” The analysis unpacks these themes and repertory grid analysis is used to explore a subset of participants’ identities in more detail. The results reveal that there needs to be an acceptance from both client and therapist that their sexual interest in children may never go away. Through this acceptance, clients could work on enhancing sexual self-regulation, recognizing their triggers, and so managing their sexual thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Implications for treatment are also discussed.

¹Nottingham Trent University, UK

²The National Offender Management Service, England, UK

³The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, UK.

Corresponding Author:

Nicholas Blagden, Sexual Offences Crime and Misconduct Research Unit, Division of Psychology, Nottingham Trent University, Chaucer Building, Burton Street, Nottingham NG1 4LS, UK.

Email: Nicholas.blagden@ntu.ac.uk

Keywords

pedophilia, sexual deviance, sexual interests, sex offenses

Introduction

For anyone, the expression of one's particular sexuality can be difficult even within the framework of a close intimate relationship. While sexuality is an integral component of self and identity, it is the most difficult to express, explore, and to have positively validated (McKenna, Green, & Smith, 2001). For someone with a pedophilic interest/preference, this aspect of the self is likely to bring shame, threat, and social sanction.

"Pedophilia" has been defined as a persistent and recurrent sexual interest in children (Finkelhor, 1984; Seto, 2009) and as a sexual preference disorder that predisposes the individual toward sexual interest in prepubertal children (Schmidt, Mokros, & Banse, 2013). Pedophiles may be male or female, although the majority (90%) of sexual offenses against children are carried out by males (Finkelhor, 1994). The common principle across definitions is that pedophilia constitutes a stable sexual preference for prepubescent children, independent of arousability/intensity of sexual feeling or gender preference.

Pedophilia can be subdivided into several categories. One important distinction is ascertaining whether an individual is "exclusively" attracted to children (exclusive pedophilia) or attracted to adults as well as children (nonexclusive pedophilia; Hall & Hall, 2007). Groth (1979) made the distinction between "fixed" and "regressed" pedophilia, where the former relates to one's sexuality being directed only toward children, while the latter often has sexual relationships with other adults but when experiencing prolonged personal crises direct their sexuality toward children.

However, whether or not sexual preference for children is dimensional or taxonomic remains contested (see, for example, Mackaronis, Strassberg, & Marcus, 2011). Horley (2008) has argued for a dimensional view of deviant sexuality rather than to construe it as comprising discrete or "hardened" categories. He argued that this view best captures and reflects a more fluid view of sexuality. Indeed human sexuality has been found to exist as a continuum rather than as discrete socially constructed categories (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012). The issue as to whether pedophilia should be construed as akin to an orientation has been the subject of recent debate within the area (see Bailey, 2014; Cantor, 2014; Fedoroff et al., 2015; Muller et al., 2014). Muller et al. (2014) found that pedophilic interest was changeable and that more research was needed on the fluidity and stability of sexual interest in children over time. Fedoroff (2015) argued that pedophilic interest can change and that sexual interest in children should not be confused with sexual orientation. However, both Cantor (2014) and Bailey (2014) were critical of Muller et al.'s findings and their methodology and argued that their results were the result of statistical artifacts rather than actual changes in arousal patterns. Recently, Schmidt et al. (2013) found consistent support for a taxonomic interpretation of pedophilic sexual preference. Seto (2012) has similarly suggested that pedophilia (sexual preference disorder) should be thought of as a sexual

orientation. Indeed “the very fact that some child molesters exclusively choose boys and others choose girls would appear to be difficult to explain without invoking the concept of sexual preference” (Quinsey, 1986, p. 158).

The notion that sexual interest in children is stable and fixed has resonance with previous research examining pedophiles’ views on the treatability of their sexual interest. In Wilson and Cox’s (1985) study, one of the very few published studies that directly raised the question of treatability with pedophiles themselves, their participants generally ruled out the idea that their pedophilic interests were changeable. Wilson and Cox concluded that “what nearly all of [the participants] had in common was a belief that they were saddled with their predilection for life, that it was very central to their psyche” (p. 128). Other than this study, there has been a paucity of research that has qualitatively examined pedophiles’ perspectives on the changeability of their sexual interest in children, and the impact this sexual interest has had on them. Indeed, often the “sexual” component in sexual abuse is neglected (Tidefors & Drougge, 2006) and it is assumed that abusers choose and control their sexual interests at will. Tidefors and Drougge (2006) argued for the need for treatment to allow perpetrators the latitude to discuss the role of sexuality in their offending.

Deviant sexual interest (a term usually used to refer to sexual interests that if acted upon would involve criminal behavior), has been theorized to consist of three dimensions. The first dimension is sexual self-regulation, which Hanson (2010) defined as “the ability to manage sexual thoughts, feelings or behaviour in a manner which is consistent with self-interest and that protects the rights of others” (p. 402). The second dimension is atypical sexual interests, such as a sexual interest in, or preference for, children. The third dimension is sexual intensity: the extent to which sexual thoughts and urges are perceived as overwhelming, and the frequency with which they occur. Deviant sexual interest is an empirically supported risk factor for sexual recidivism (Mann, Hanson, & Thornton, 2010), meaning that when it is present, risk is raised. However, it needs to be emphasized that most men who sexually abuse children are not pedophiles, and neither do all pedophiles sexually abuse children. Empirically, across multiple assessment approaches, a subgroup of 20% to 50% of child sexual abusers can be classified as pedophilic (Marshall, Barbaree, & Eccles, 1991; Seto, 2009; Schmidt, Mokros, & Banse, 2013). In terms of better understanding deviant sexual interest and risk, recent research has focused on the development of response latency-based indirect measures that examine the individual differences in information processing in sexual offenders (e.g., Banse, Schmidt, & Clabour, 2010; Brown, Gray, & Snowden, 2009; Schmidt et al., 2013). There has, however, been much less attention on pedophiles’ own views of their sexual interest in children, how their sexual interest affects their psychological identity and the implications this may have for treatment. It is important to gain a greater understanding and insight of pedophiles’ sexual interest in children, as enhanced understanding could aid risk assessment, management, and treatment planning (Schmidt et al., 2013). Without a better understanding of how these interests arise and how they are experienced, attempts to curb the sexual abuse of children will be based on conjecture about the best way to intervene.

While sexual interest in children is a strong predictor of sexual recidivism, deviant sexual interest is not the preserve of incarcerated sexual offenders. The prevalence of deviant sexual interest in noncriminal (or rather nonconvicted) heterosexual men in the community is estimated to be approximately 5% (Dombert et al., 2015; Seto, 2009). A recent study of sexual interest in children in nonclinical/nonforensic populations using a nationally representative sample found that 4.1% reported sexual fantasies involving prepubescent children, 3.2% reported sexually offending against prepubescent children, with 5.5% reporting pedophilic interest. The prevalence of pedophilic sexual interest in community samples is unsurprising given that Ogas and Goddam (2012) found that the word “preteen” was the third most frequent search term in men’s online sex searches. Indeed, the growth of the Internet has changed the landscape of those with pedophilic interests in terms of accessing indecent images of children and interacting with others in a virtual space (O’Halloran & Quale, 2010). Deviant sexual interest in community samples is further compounded by the stigma faced by such individuals (Jahnke, Imhoff, & Hoyer, 2015). For example, the fear of discrimination and stigmatization may lead to social isolation and thus a reduction of social control of pedophilic sexual urges, as well as the chances to implement preventive measures (Goode, 2010). The fear of stigmatization, even from health care professions, has been found to affect those living with a deviant sexual interest in children from seeking out help (B4U-ACT, 2011; Jahnke et al., 2015).

Recently, research has begun to focus more on sex offender crime desistance and the need for individuals to address protective factors (goals that people can achieve), for example, positive self-identity as well as risk factors (the offender’s criminogenic needs; de Vries Robbe et al., 2015). Most research that has considered sex offenders’ identity has either focused on the shame and stigma associated with sex offender labels and the negotiation of those labels (Blagden, Winder, Thorne, & Gregson, 2011; Blagden et al., 2014) or on changes in sex offenders’ narrative identities as they negotiate their way through the criminal justice system and associated treatment programs (Hudson, 2005, 2013; Ward & Marshall, 2007). Investigation of sex offenders’ nonsexual identities has found that sex offenders deny, minimize, and put forward moral selves as a way of doing identity management (Blagden et al., 2014; Hudson, 2005). The concept of narrative identity is important to sex offender rehabilitation as those lacking a coherent narrative identity are often thought more likely to continue to offend (Ward & Marshall, 2007). In the desistance literature, identity change/transformation has been linked to “redemptive” episodes whereby the negative past self is reconstrued as positive because it has led to the transformation of that person; the past self is construed as qualitatively different from the changed self (McAdams, 2006). Consequently, shifts in personal identity have been argued as important for sex offender desistance (Göbbels, Ward, & Willis, 2012). However, rather curiously, discussions of the identity of those who have committed sexual offenses do not focus specifically on the challenge of living with a deviant sexual interest in children, the impact this has on identity, how this interest affects their daily lives, and the physical, social, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual impacts arising from the sexual interest.

This research aims to explore the phenomenology of deviant sexual interest in children, the impact it has on pedophilic offenders' identities, and their views on the treatability of that interest.

Method

Data Collection and Participants

Twenty men convicted of sexual offenses against children participated in a semistructured interview. A small subset of this sample ($n = 4$) also participated in a repertory grid interview. As definitions of the construct of pedophilia vary, and the word itself carries a range of connotations, we created the following operational definition for the purpose of this study. All participants were convicted sexual offenders currently serving a prison sentence for a sexual offense against one or more children. The initial criteria for participation was a self-reported sexual preference for, or persistent sexual interest in, children. The dominance or exclusivity of the pedophilic interest was confirmed in at least one of the following ways: (a) a clinical assessment that sexual interest in children was strongly characteristic in the participant's life generally and also was a central characteristic in the offense, (b) all four items on the Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests (SSPI is a brief screening tool to identify pedophilic interests among child molesters; Seto & Lalumière, 2001) applied, or (c) a penile plethysmographic profile indicated a strong sexual interest in children accompanied by a weak or absent sexual interest in adults.

The men recruited to the study were all residing in prisons in England and Wales and had all participated in cognitive-behavioral treatment designed to address their sexual offending, but, crucially, had not participated in any treatment designed to address their sexual interests. Quotas were set to prescribe the distribution of the key sampling criteria across the participant group (see Table 1). Purposive sampling aimed to enable exploration of the full range of factors, influences, views, and experiences associated with how pedophiles understand their sexual interests. The demographic and offense-specific characteristics of the sample are set out in Table 1. However, we did not screen for psychopathy or antisocial personality disorder.

Interview Conduct

Participation in the study was voluntary and all participants provided signed informed consent before each interview. Interviews were conducted by chartered psychologists in a private room within prison settings in England and Wales. Each interview lasted up to 1.5 hr and was digitally recorded to facilitate verbatim transcription and detailed readings.

The interviews were carried out using a topic guide. A topic guide is the vehicle through which the researcher can achieve a balance between listening to the participant's story and questioning to elicit information about their experience. The topic guide covered the key themes likely to be relevant in the interviews and helped to

Table 1. Demographic and Offense-Specific Characteristics.

Characteristic	Range	<i>n</i>
Age	18-25	1
	26-35	3
	≥36	11
	Not recorded	5
Previous convictions	None	5
	1-5	5
	≥6	4
	Not recorded	6
Number of victims	1	6
	2-10	6
	≥11	3
	Not recorded	5
Victim gender	Male	8
	Female	10
	Male and Female	2
Handedness	Left	3
	Right	13
	Not recorded	4
Head injury	Yes	7
	No	8
	Not recorded	5

ensure a systematic approach across different researchers. The interview questioning was responsive to participants' own experiences, attitudes, and circumstances and participants' contributions were fully explored to allow as detailed an understanding as possible. The topic guide (which is available from the first author on request) focused on their understandings and construing of their deviant sexual interest, their first awareness of that interest, how they explain that interest, the impact it has had on their lives, their identity, and on the treatability of their sexual interest.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using a phenomenologically grounded thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns and themes within the data. It aims to capture rich detail and interpret the range and diversity of experience within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It differs from other qualitative methodological approaches as it is not tied to an explicit theoretical assumption or position. The thematic analysis has been described as a "contextualist method," sitting between the two poles of constructionism and realism. This position thus acknowledges the ways individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings; thus, the analysis is seen as reflecting "reality"

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). This epistemological position was seen as important when triangulating data with the quantitative data. The analysis adhered to the principles of qualitative thematic analysis as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). Data analysis commenced with detailed readings of all the transcripts, then initial coding of emergent themes, which progressed to detailed sorting of initial patterns and finally isolating meaningful patterns and interpreting those patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were organized systematically and themes were identified and reviewed, with the final themes being representative of the participants. A type of interrater reliability was undertaken, with the analysis being “audited” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Seale, 1999, p. 467) by the coauthors as well as an independent researcher to ensure the interpretations had validity.

Repertory Grids

Repertory grids were conducted on a small subset of the population to gain a deeper understanding of how participants were making sense of their sexual interest in children through examining the construing of their past, present, and future sexual selves. The repertory grid analysis uses a case study approach to gain a more idiographic understanding of their sexual self. The use of a case study approach is in line with previous research (see, for example, Mason, 2008; Turpin, Dallos, Owen, & Thomas, 2009) and has been used previously to explore interview data in more in-depth detail (Blagden et al., 2014; Turpin et al., 2009).

Repertory (rep) grids allow for the assessment of personal constructs and allow an understanding of their worldview. The position is highly idiographic and can allow a unique insight into the way an individual construes aspects of his world (Houston, 1998). One of the primary aims of using repertory grids is to make underlying patterns of individuals’ thinking more apparent and this has clear benefits for research and clinical/forensic practice (Leach et al., 2001).

The basic repertory grid consists of four component parts: topic, elements, constructs, and ratings. Each grid is conducted in relation to a particular “topic,” whether it is for clinical or research purposes (Jankowicz, 2004). Elements of the grid are best construed as examples of the topic and generally take the form of people (though not always). In this case, the elements were “past sexual self,” “sexual self,” “future sexual self,” “self now,” “self-ideal,” “self as an offender,” “victim,” “boy,” “girl,” “adult man,” “adult woman,” “partner/wife,” and “person I don’t like.”

Before eliciting constructs, the researcher/clinician must decide whether to supply constructs, elicit them from the individual, or do a combination of both. If constructs are just supplied (i.e., are chosen by the researcher for the individual), it can allow for greater statistical comparison between different participants’ grids (Tan & Hunter, 2002). However, supplied constructs may not be personally meaningful for the participant and so a balanced approach is required (Adams-Webber, 2003). In this research, the constructs were both supplied and elicited from the individual, fusing both approaches, and thus allowing for personal meaningfulness and some degree of comparison. Constructs that were supplied included “sexually attractive—not sexually

attractive,” “happy with sexuality versus unhappy with sexuality,” and “sexually adventurous” (with the participant eliciting the opposite pole of this construct).

Constructs were elicited from the elements through the “triadic method of elicitation.” This involved presenting three elements (written on card) to the participant and asking them “for you personally, how are two alike but somehow different from the third?” For example, a person may be presented with the element cards “self now,” “self as offender,” and “self ideally” and they may say “‘self now’ and ‘self ideally’ are the two that are alike because they ‘can trust people’” (so “trust people” would become one pole), whereas “‘self as offender’ was unable to trust” (the contrast pole would then be “unable to trust”). There are no formally accepted ways of choosing which elements to present in the triadic method; elements are usually selected at random (though they can be sequential, see Tan & Hunter, 2002) and once a construct is elicited the cards are then replaced ready for the next iteration. The elicitation process is continued until the researcher is satisfied that all meaningful constructs have been elicited for that topic. Previous research suggests around 10 to 12 constructs are sufficient for gaining an understanding of an individual’s construing on a particular topic (Ryle & Breen, 1972; Tan & Hunter, 2002). The purpose of the grid is to elicit constructs from the individual, which make sense to them and have meaning to a particular context or experience (Jankowicz, 2004). The way two things are alike is referred to as the “emergent pole,” whereas the “implicit pole” is the opposite or contrast to the emergent pole. Our personal constructs, according to Kelly (1955), are dichotomous or bipolar and are the lenses through which the world is constructed by the individual (Horley, 2008).

Once constructs had been elicited, they were then rated by the participants. This study used a 7-point rating scale as this has been found to be more meaningful for statistical analysis of the repertory grid (Grice, 2002). The grids were analyzed using Idiogrid (see Grice, 2002), a statistical program designed for the purpose of analyzing repertory grids. In this analysis, narrative (interview) and repertory grid analysis will be presented separately, with the repertory grids used to further illuminate and make sense of the qualitative data.

Ethical Issues

All participants were given an information sheet before signing the consent form indicating that they agree to take part in the study. Individuals were given the opportunity to discuss the study with a researcher for as long as they wished before signing the form. It was made clear to all participants, both verbally and in writing, that there were no sanctions or consequences should they decide not to participate in the research or decide to withdraw at any point. The research was cleared by the ethics panel at the first author’s university and by the National Offender Management Service’s ethics panel.

Analysis and Discussion

The results of the data analysis revealed three superordinate themes that captured the impact of living with a deviant sexual interest. The three themes were “*living with a*

deviant sexual interest in children,” which focused on beliefs about their sexuality and the impact this was having on their self-identity; *“relational sexual self”*, which focused on the relational impediment/barrier of their sexual interest; and *“possible and feared sexual self”*, which focused on participants’ fears of and aspirations for their sexual self in the future.

Superordinate Theme 1: “Living” With a Deviant Sexual Interest

One of the main themes to emerge from the analysis was “living” with a deviant sexual interest or the impact that having a deviant sexual interest in children had on participants’ identities.

Extract 1:

Well it’s a big part isn’t it [their sexual interest in children], it’s all of me obviously, *it’s who I am*, it’s what I am, it’s the biggest part of me. I hate it obviously, but that’s what it is. (Emphasis added)

This extract highlights the dissonance and identity conflict of living with a deviant sexual interest. The participant articulates fatalist notions of the changeability of his sexual interest. The interest forms a core aspect of his identity; it’s who he is. The extract highlights how participants feel almost doomed to deviance through the stability of their sexual interest in children. Indeed most participants discussed how they would change their sexual interest in children if they could. The conflict in their identity is exemplified in the statement that he “hates” that aspect of himself and consequently hates a large part of himself. It is little wonder that pedophiles have been found to be anxious, have weak identity structures (Tardif & Van Gijsegem, 2001), and low self-esteem and self-worth (Marshall, 1997). Such ways of construing oneself in terms of negative self-appraisal is very likely to affect deleteriously on psychological well-being and could also affect on the change process for these individuals .

Related to the impact that living with a deviant sexual interest had on participants’ identities was their belief that their sexual interest was stable and enduring.

Extract 2:

It’s like sexual orientation, I don’t think you can just develop a sexual interest. You can’t turn around and say well, I’ve decided that I’m sexually attracted to women. If in fact, you know, you’re not. So I think in a way there must be something in your genes or wherever these things come from that dictates what sexually arouses you because you can’t, if you’re not sexually aroused by males and females, you can’t make yourself sexually aroused.

Here the participant is articulating that his sexual interest is not changeable and that furthermore any attempt to “make” those with entrenched sexual interests in children become attracted to adults was unlikely to be successful. This narrative supports the

arguments of those such as Seto (2012) and Cantor (2014) who argue that deviant sexual interest in children is fixed.

One aspect of living with a sexual interest in children was coming to terms with and accepting the permanence of that interest.

Extract 3:

I will never get rid of my sexual interests. I have realized that I will never get cured. I've got to get used to it because I'm going to have these thoughts for the rest of my life. It's not something I can just turn off so I've got to get used to it.

Although Extract 3 may seem fatalist with the participant expecting that he will always have such thoughts, it may be that realizing and accepting that his sexual interest will always be a part of him is a constructive way of both living with and managing such interests. This is a largely unexplored issue in the sex offending literature. It is a delicate matter to accept a deviant sexual preference, integrate this aspect of yourself into a new prosocial and nonoffending identity without concluding that you are "doomed to deviance" or deciding to express your sexuality with pride. We concluded from our interviews that our participants were attempting to achieve self-acceptance more or less on their own and the outcomes were very varied in their success. The treatment programs in which they had participated did not acknowledge the complexity of this task.

Linked to participants' beliefs that their sexual interest was relatively unchangeable was their position that their sexual interest was not something they would choose.

Extract 4:

It's not something *I chose* you know. I didn't deliberately go out there saying "I want to hurt children," I don't want to hurt their families. (Emphasis added)

As this extract illustrates, participants subscribed mainly to a belief that their deviant sexual interest was fixed, that is, something that was not chosen, could not be changed, and which was, despite the great social harm that came from their interest, something that they could not terminate. Participants articulated distress about their thoughts and feelings about the harm they have done (and potentially could do again). For participants in this study, their sexual interest came at a considerable cost to them, to their identity, self-esteem, and sense of worth. They talked about finding it "horrible" living with a sexual interest in children; knowing such feelings were "wrong," having to lead double lives by keeping things secret from loved ones and others, and feeling ostracized and isolated. The majority of participants believed their sexual interest in children would remain. However, some participants were very clear that despite having a sexual interest in children, acting on this interest was not a defined destiny. For those participants, treatment was seen as a key opportunity to help them address and manage their thoughts and feelings. Accepting sexual interest in children was not going to go away seemed a part of living and dealing with a sexual interest in children.

Superordinate Theme 2: Relational Sexual Self

The second important theme from the analysis, and related to the impact on self-identity, was the relational impediment that was caused by having a deviant sexual interest. Not only did their sexual interest affect their sense of self, it also affected how they related with others.

Extract 5:

It probably affected my mental state [sexual interest in children] and put barriers between me and society. Me feeling I was different. This isn't normal, people don't do this. Am I a pedophile? and then I offended . . . it was me against the world, I was on me own, I had nobody to ask questions to, no-one to talk to.

One reoccurring theme across the transcripts was the considerable extent to which the participants experienced social isolation throughout their lives. Participants discussed not feeling “normal,” “not belonging,” or not “feeling accepted”; they viewed themselves as being on the periphery of society. The participants in this study felt isolated because of the shame and stigma associated with their sexual interest. Every participant was aware of how they would be perceived by others—and their beliefs in this respect are not irrational: Those living with a sexual interest in children have been found to be one of the most negatively evaluated and stigmatized groups, even when compared with sexual sadists (Jahnke et al., 2015). Pedophiles do not live in hermetically sealed vacuums but are fully aware of how others think of them (Hudson, 2005). Unsurprisingly, given the shame and stigma experienced by the participants, living with a sexual interest in children led to strain in their interpersonal relationships. This led to further isolation and separation from others and, in some cases, led to a breakdown in relationships with family and friends, and a perception of rejection from the whole of society. The belief that others would reject a person with pedophilia is supported by Jahnke et al. (2015) who found that social distance was prevalent toward people living with pedophilia even when it is clear that they haven't committed any criminal or abusive acts. Given this, it is not surprising that some participants articulated that their sexual interest in children led to impairment in the connectedness with others. Feeling that they were different and that there was not anyone to talk to about dealing with their sexual interest was both a relational barrier and potential contributor to offending.

Extract 6:

You'd have mates and I had connections with people, but not being able to talk to people about certain things made a certain difference. Not being able to say this is what's going on and I need help from you made a lot of difference. There wasn't anything whereby you felt that you could go and let everything out.

Extract 7:

If I knew of an organization where I was able to talk about it, then hopefully I wouldn't have got to the stage that I got to in the end, which was commit the offense and create a victim.

Participants spoke about having no recourse in dealing with their deviant sexual interest. This is an important finding as evidence suggests that the stigma experienced by those who have a dominant sexual interest in children impairs help-seeking behaviors due to perceived and anticipated rejection (Goode, 2010; Jahnke et al., 2015). In Extracts 6 and 7, it is clear that both participants wanted and needed an outlet to discuss their sexual interest and to get help and support regarding their interest. In short, their sexual interest in children was leading participants to feel different with nowhere to turn for help. In recent times, although no one in the current sample discussed it, online forums/communities have been used to discuss pedophilic interests by individuals. The content of such forums often includes justifications and rationalizations for their sexual interest, which is understandable given it is difficult for those with a sexual interest in children to maintain a positive self-concept (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010). However, research has also revealed a more subversive side for such forums/communities: The values of the pedophile culture support and encourage emotional and, in some cases, sexual relationships with boys and girls in virtual and real settings (Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010). The conflicts in the literature and within the participants' narratives in this study highlight the need for more formalized support for those living with a sexual interest in children.

Extract 8:

You don't like it that you're different from other people.

Extract 9:

Interviewer: What are those thoughts [sexual interest in children] like to live with?

Participant: It was me against the world, I was on me own, I had no-one to ask questions to, no-one to talk to, it put a barrier up and split my life in two . . . almost like a gay person in the closet and all the mental anguish that comes with it.

Participants' sexual interest and their feelings of being "not normal" affected not only their interpersonal relationships but also how they viewed themselves. Given that people strive for consistency in their identity, having a sexual interest in children is likely to be a source of identity dissonance for the participant, particularly given that participants here articulate that their interest is unwanted, that they are aware of how others view them, and that it also goes against their own self-standards. The experience of dissonance is dependent on the self-standards made accessible in the context of discrepant behavior (Stone & Cooper, 2001), in this case living with an unwanted sexual interest in children. This dissonance and experience of difference is only likely to compound feelings of social isolation and lead to problem avoidance and deviance disavowal (Davis, 1961). In Extract 9, the participant again talks about his sexual interest as a barrier and describes the experience as akin to being homosexual but "in the closet." This narrative also suggests a construing of the participant's sexual interest

in children as an orientation. The use of the word “anguish” conveys the inner turmoil that is experienced by those who have a sexual interest in children.

Superordinate Theme 3: Possible and Feared Sexual Self

A possible self, or possible sexual self in this case, is a future orientated construct of “self” formulated by an individual in relation to hopes, fears, and aspirations for the future. Possible selves draw on versions of the self in the past and how they would like to be in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Meek, 2007). A possible sexual self in this study appeared to mean an aspiration to have a different sexual outlet that was seen as appropriate, healthy, and fulfilling.

Extract 10:

My hopes are to have good relationships with both males and females. If sex comes from that brilliant but it isn't going to be the be-all and end-all of it, which is how I saw it as before.

Extract 11:

I used to hate myself . . . I'm starting to like myself.

The articulated possible sexual selves were hopes of fulfilling and meaningful relationships; relationships not just characterized by sex, but by intimacy and trust. Such ways of thinking about relationships were also leading to a self-re-construal for some participants. Having a sexual interest in children had adversely affected some participants' self-esteem; however, some were beginning to construe themselves in a more positive light—they no longer “hated” themselves. This self-acceptance is important as positive self-image has been linked with positive outcome upon reentry into the community (Lebel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008). Though despite some participants developing more positive self-appraisals and wanting healthy relationships, they were uncertain as to whether this was achievable.

Extract 12:

I'd love to get a nice woman, nice job, loving relationship, caring relationship, a healthy sexual relationship. That's what I want. But realistically I don't think it's going to happen, because I'm always going to have these thoughts about the kids.

Extract 12 illustrates the uncertainty felt by participants as to whether they could achieve desired relationships in the future and this uncertainty returned the individual to the feared self and the feared sexual self. A feared self is an image of what a person does not want to become and can be a powerful motivator for change as it is an outcome that the individual wants to intentionally avoid (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

In a sense, participants appeared to be espousing what could be termed *feared sexual selves* when they spoke about selves characterized by past deviant sexual thoughts and behaviors.

One theme from participants' narratives was a recognition of the feared sexual self when offending.

Extract 13:

I hate (sighs) I don't think to masturbate to the thought of a child giving me oral sex is good, but when I masturbate to the thought of child giving me oral sex it can be exciting, but it's not good. It's not right but it's enjoyable . . . if I allowed myself to think about that fantasy in a positive way, no matter how much I didn't want to, if I did, it would still excite me . . . I think they're [deviant thoughts] are controllable I don't think they'll ever totally go away and I think would actually be looking for miracle, because be like saying "wow you're cured, you're not interested anymore" and you are not interested anymore until the time you're interested and then it's a problem.

This extract illustrates a reluctant acknowledgment that the feared self was always going to be a part of him. The extract also highlights how an awareness of the "feared sexual self" can be a motivator for not succumbing to such fantasies as it allows the individual to remain cognizant of problems surrounding his sexual interest. For example, Extract 13 states, "you are not interested anymore until you're interested," which implies that one needs to monitor sexual thoughts for deviant content, which suggests an acceptance of his sexual interest.

Some participants articulated that while they believed that their sexual interest in children would never fully go away, they also felt that they had the strategies to help them control their sexual interest. Participants had an awareness of the paths that led to their offending and these appeared to be the paths to the "feared self," suggesting that the feared self is one who acts on a deviant interest rather than one who experiences such an interest. However, for some there was an ambivalence regarding whether they could control their sexual interest and hence the "feared sexual self" felt dangerously possible at times:

Extract 14:

It's difficult because you don't know when it's going to crop up, it's not necessarily every time, you see . . . think everything is under control, it's fine, I won't do anything and happy with at home, I'm not offending or you know, not having sex with children, it's fine, it's under control . . . Then somebody will walk into your life and you think actually "I wonder if I can [control it]."

Extract 15:

I will never get rid of my sexual interests. I have realized that I will never get cured. I've got to get used to it because I'm going to have these thoughts for the rest of my life. It's not something I can just turn off so I've got to get used to it.

As Extract 14 reveals, it was clear that their sexual interest was anxiety-provoking for participants, and this anxiety was compounded by the unpredictability of their sexual interest. This again points to the “feared sexual self” in that some participants were not certain that they could control their interest. As Extract 15 highlights, participants believed that their sexual interests were not changeable and that they needed to accept and cope with them; “get used to them.” This links with analysis from the first theme, though, encouragingly, some participants were very clear that despite having a sexual interest in children acting on this interest was not a defined destiny. This is important as overly negative possible and feared selves have been linked to criminal behavior (see, for example, Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

Extract 16:

I’ve tried like taking me mind off it, doing other things but at the time I thought that’s a good way of doing it, but since I’ve done the courses it’s taught me that it’s just avoiding the situation, I’m not tackling it head on.

Extract 16 shows a participants’ conclusion that a possible way of coping with a sexual interest in children is not to distance oneself from it, but to instead accept it and also accept that you are in control of what you do now and that you do not have to act on it. This is a form of active responsibility taking and an attributional shift from the relative fatalistic notions of being “doomed to deviance” that claims ownership and agency for the individual. This shift in attribution is not unlike the self-narrative changes in the desistance literature where new selves are construed as “good people who have done bad things” rather than “bad people who do bad things” (see, for example, Maruna, 2001, 2004). As noted earlier, some participants have begun to view themselves in more positive light and this may help buffer against any negative consequences to the “self” accepting a sexual interest in children. This also links to previous analysis in that avoiding or distancing themselves from their sexual interest is likely to have negative consequences and may even contribute to their offense pathway.

Repertory Grid Analysis

The repertory grid analysis allowed for a closer examination of how some participants were construing themselves in relation to significant others and various self-elements; of particular interest in this research is how the participants were construing their sexual self. Grids are useful for exploring psychological change in individuals, the idiosyncratic construing of that person, and any discrepancy between different “selves” (Blagden et al., 2014; Horley, 2008; Houston, 1998). They are also particularly useful in adding meaning and further explicating interview data (Blagden et al., 2014).

Repertory grids were conducted on a small subsample ($n = 4$) to gain a more in-depth understanding of participants construing; this is in line with other studies using rep grids and interviews (Turpin et al., 2009). The four participants who had repertory grids interviews were selected as they were broadly in line with an emerging typology. Two of the participants (Participants 2 and 4) had delayed acting on their sexual

interest until adulthood, with Participant 2 having been abused as a child. Participants 1 and 3 had acted on their sexual interest in their early lives either by acting out sexually when they were younger or in their teenage years.

The repertory grids were analyzed using Idiogrid with principal components analysis (PCA) used to explore the internal relationship between elements and constructs regarding the people most salient to the participant's world (Mason, 2003). The PCA highlights the relationships between constructs and elements by plotting them in the same dimensional space and allows for an understanding of how the participant views himself in relation to other elements and constructs in his grid. A PCA provides a graphical output of an individual's construal system, which shows, in spatial terms, how the individual structures his own psychological space at that time (Blagden, Winder, Gregson, & Thorne, 2012). This involves the internal relationship (sometimes referred to as intrapersonal space) between people important in the participant's world (elements represented as points) and the way he understands and construes them (constructs represented as lines from the origin; Jankowicz, 2004). There are a number of key points to consider when interpreting a repertory grid PCA output. One of the main considerations is how well defined the constructs and elements are in the grid. This is determined by the distance from the point of origin (the center of the grid). If construct vectors and elements are close to the center, it indicates that they are not well defined by the grid (Grice, 2002).

Repertory Grid 1. In figure 1, Component 1 is characterized by feelings of "inappropriate sexual thoughts" and being "unloved," with Component 2 characterized by feelings of "happy with sexuality" and "sexually adventurous." The PCA reveals that "past sexual self" is defined by the negative pole of the first component, which is defined more by "inappropriate sexual thoughts," being "selfish," and feeling "useless." This was similar to "self as an offender" who was also defined by the construct, lonely/isolated.

Similarity between constructs is shown by those with a small angular distance between them. For example, the lines representing the constructs "innocent-domineering" and "passive-manipulative" are almost parallel, showing that these constructs are highly correlated. The length of the axes joining the two poles of each construct together reflects the variance explained by the two components, so that "powerful-vulnerable" has a large amount of variance captured by the two components (Leach et al., 2001). The spindle shape of this PCA output demonstrates that this is a meaningful grid (Jankowicz, 2004). Participant 1's construing of "sexual self" and "future sexual self" are not well defined by the grid as revealed by their position close to the origin. This may indicate that "sexual self" and "future sexual self" are ambiguous or ambivalently construed and that the participant is struggling to make sense of both their current and future sexual self (see Winter, 2003). This construing of sexual self and future sexual self appears in a state of transition. This was also noted in this participant's interview as he wanted meaningful relationships with women in the future, but still admitted a sexual interest in children and this was a source of conflict for him. This links with the qualitative analysis in that their sexual self is still not well defined

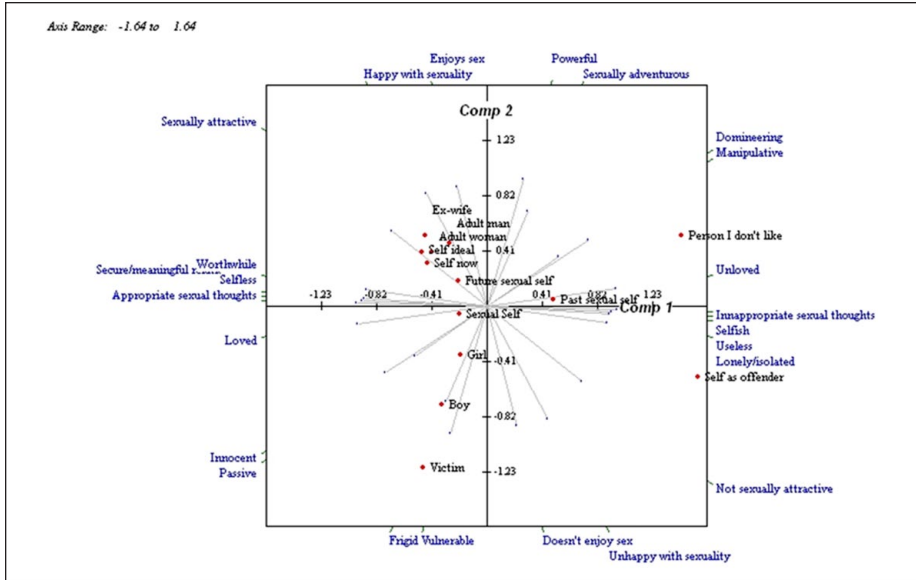


Figure 1. Participant 1.

and may act as a future relational barrier both in terms of romantic and friendship relationships. Given that all participants had gone through sex offender treatment, the positioning of the sexual self in this grid may reflect that their sexual interest in children is relatively unchangeable but that they are struggling to come to terms with this.

Repertory Grid 2. In figure 2, Component 1 is defined by the constructs “unhappy with sexuality” and “people pleasing,” whereas Component 2 is defined by “caring,” “loving,” and “lasting relationships.”

The relatively close positioning of self-elements (including current and future sexual self) and adult woman in this grid may reflect developing feelings of confidence and contentment in future heterosexual relationships, while not over idealizing them (Houston, 1998). Self as an offender is construed very differently to other “self” elements and “sexual self” elements. “Self as an offender” was construed as being unhappy in relationships, oblivious to others’ feelings and as having inappropriate sexual thoughts (egocentric constructs). There is a clear move away from these constructs (and associated elements) toward more content and caring constructs in the current and future selves. This may relate to the finding in the qualitative analysis regarding acceptance in that a sexual interest in children may still be present, but that they did not have to act on and could achieve a positive possible sexual self. Past sexual self is not well defined in this grid and may represent Participant 2 not wanting to think about his past sexual self or that he is still ambiguous about it (see Mason, 2003, 2008).

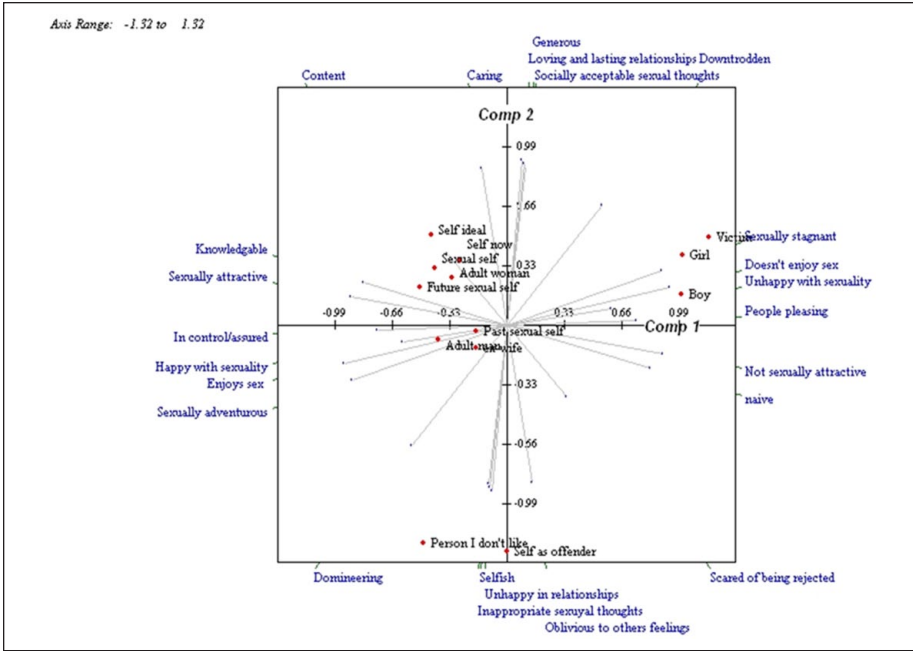


Figure 2. Participant 2.

Repertory Grid 3. In figure 3, “self now” is construed differently from “past self” (self as an offender) who was seen as controlling and paranoid.

It can be noted that past sexual self was construed more in terms of being someone who panicked and who did not enjoy sex. Self as an offender is defined as someone who is not able to trust, who is sexually unattractive and paranoid about others. Self now is construed as something who enjoys sex and is sexually adventurous but ideally he would like to be able to talk about his feelings more and be more content with his sexuality. These themes are also evident in this participant’s interview data where he discusses his struggles with his sexuality. It is also noticeable that adult man and boy are not well defined by the grid and this could represent ambiguity and ambivalence in construing of those elements. There are tensions in his sexual interests, as he stated in his interview that he was homosexual, that he offended against boys and had a sexual interest in them, but was living a heterosexual life. However, the placement of sexual self and self now suggests that he construes his future sexual self and ideal self as achievable. As he stated in his interview “I will always have these feelings [for children],” it does appear that he construes his future sexual self as possible.

Repertory grids also allow an elicitation of implicative dilemmas (IDs). IDs can be construed as cognitive conflicts based on correlations between congruent and discrepant constructs (Feixas & Saul, 2004). IDs involve an “awareness in discrepancies between a person’s actual and ideal selves, as well as an implicit cost associated with

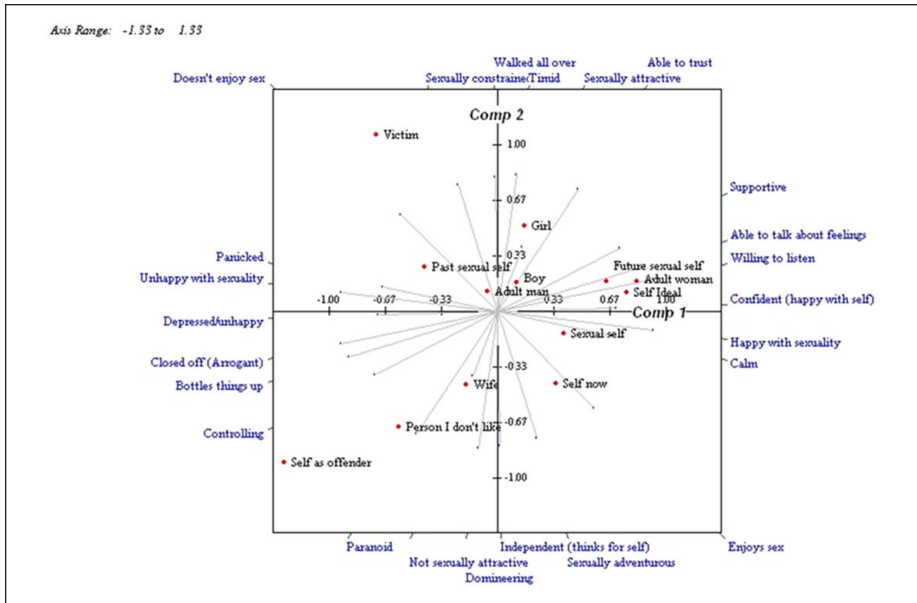


Figure 3. Participant 3.

becoming more like the ideal self” (Dorough, Grice, & Parker, 2007, p. 83). For example, some men may construe themselves as pessimistic and their ideal as optimistic; however, they may construe optimistic people as foolish (Dorough et al., 2007). In this grid, there were four IDs identified. The IDs are reported in Idiogram (Grice, 2002) and are detailed below for this participant.

Self now is construed as “Not sexually attractive,” whereas Self Ideal is construed as “Sexually attractive.” The dilemma is that a “Sexually attractive” person tends to be a “Sexually constrained” person ($r = .27$).

Self now is construed as “Not sexually attractive,” whereas Self Ideal is construed as “Sexually attractive.” The dilemma is that a “Sexually attractive” person tends to be a “Walked all over” person ($r = .21$).

Self now is construed as “Paranoid,” whereas Self Ideal is construed as “Able to trust.”

The dilemma is that an “Able to trust” person tends to be a “Sexually constrained” person ($r = .48$).

Self now is construed as “Paranoid” whereas Self Ideal is construed as “Able to trust.”

The dilemma is an “Able to trust” person tends to be a “Walked all over” person ($r = .44$).

The first ID highlights how for this participant, a sexually attractive person is a sexually constrained person. This may follow from his construal of self in that he construes himself as sexually unattractive but sexually adventurous. Furthermore, sexually attractive people are people to be taken advantage of and so are “walked all over.” Interestingly people who are “able to trust” are also seen as sexually constrained and the type of people to be worked all over. This perhaps points to more general problems that Participant 3 has with trust especially in intimate relationships, as currently people who are able to trust (or in trusting relationships) are seen as sexually constrained, which is potentially problematic. This links with the qualitative theme of the “feared sexual self,” in that while the future sexual self is possible and achievable it is not a guarantee and there is the possibility that the lack of trust in his relationships may lead him down previous paths. These dilemmas may also reflect a history of sexual relationships based solely on sex and not on trust and intimacy or may highlight sexual preoccupation and perhaps oversexualization of partners/people in general. Any revision of his current sexual self would need to examine these conflicts and in particular his construing of trust.

Repertory Grid 4. There are several interesting features to Figure 4. First, the grid is not as well elaborated as others and appears to reveal polarized thinking, typically characterized by extreme ratings on the raw data.

The PCA has been used as a measure of cognitive complexity in repertory grids by considering the amount of variance accounted for by the first component in the PCA. In this case, the amount of variance accounted for by the first component was very high (86.23%). It appears then that Participant 4 has a thinking style that is characterized by tight construing or “all or nothing thinking” (Houston, 1998). Mason (2008) has found that loose construing (i.e., construing that is more elaborated) is a signifier of readiness to change, whereas constricted thinking is not. The position of victim, boy, and girl as close to the origin indicates that they are relatively undefined and may point to an unwillingness to give them thought in relation to the constructs elicited. This can, in grid analysis, signify depersonalization or self-distance related to those constructs (Blagden et al., 2012). This interpretation is supported by Participant 4’s interview where he discussed themes about being depressed, having no meaningful social relationships, being lonely, depressed about his sexual performance, and lacking personal confidence. While he admitted to a sexual interest in children in his interview, he discussed a want for meaningful and secure relationships with adults. This interpretation also fits with his construal of “past sexual self” and “self as offender” who are construed in the nexus of negative traits and states. What appeared important and meaningful to him were the constructs of “hides things versus being emotional open,” “insecure versus confident,” and “unhappy with sexuality versus happy with sexuality.” All “self” elements are positively positioned and are associated with the constructs “secure relationships,” “confident,” and “happy with sexuality.” While this is positive and demonstrates how he construes his sexual self as possible and achievable, the feared sexual self (manifested in the “self as an offender”) would need to be continually monitored.

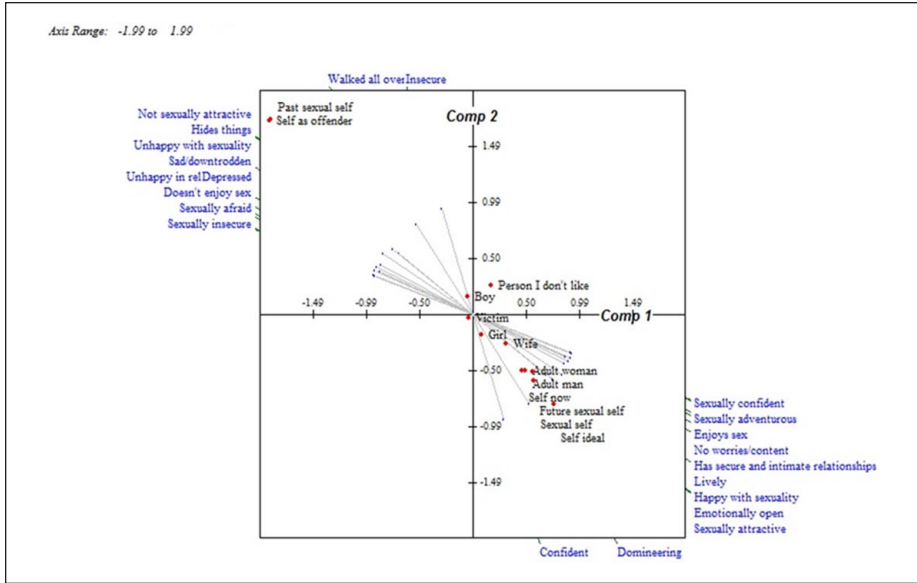


Figure 4. Participant 4.

Feelings of sadness, depression, feeling unattractive, and sexually afraid could lead to the feared sexual self.

Overall, the grids presented in this section are well elaborated indicating a personal meaningfulness of the grid for the participant. The grids, in the main, appeared to highlight a shift between past and future sexual selves, as well as shifts between current self-elements and “self as an offender.” As each participant had been through treatment, these shifts are fairly typical of posttreatment grids (Shorts, 1985, found a similar pattern pre- and posttreatment). Past self-elements in the grids had a tendency to be described by egocentric/“me-istic” constructs. There were some similarities between participants in their construing of past elements (self as offender, past sexual self) as being people who were emotionally closed, afraid, unhappy with various aspects of their lives (including sexuality, relationships, and self). For example, Participant 3 was very conflicted over his sexuality as a homosexual man at the time of his offense; he had also been abused when he was younger and was living a chaotic life. The repertory grid analysis also highlighted how, for some participants, the sexual self and future sexual self were still going through a process of revision and transition and there was some ambivalence in the construing of sexual self. This links with the qualitative analysis of the feared sexual selves where it was apparent that some participants were still struggling with the identity of someone who has a deviant sexual interest in children and that some of the negative poles of the constructs could be experienced again particularly if they face rejecting relationships.

Summary

The main aim of this research was to qualitatively explore and understand what it is like living with a sexual interest in children, the impact this has on psychosexual identity, and to explore a pedophile's view on whether the interest is amenable to change. The interviews revealed themes of anxiety and conflict within participants' identities and the identity struggles that result from having a sexual interest in children. However, some participants were clear that while their sexual interest would always be a part of them, it was something they could control so that acting on it was a choice even if experiencing it was not.

The analysis also revealed the relational barriers that come with a sexual interest in children and how the common experience of social isolation due to feeling different. There was uncertainty in the narratives of participants about whether they could achieve healthy, positive, and satisfying intimate relationships. It was also clear that having a sexual interest in children had affected all participants relationally and that while some participants wanted help and support for their interest, there was no recourse for such support. The repertory grid analysis bolstered the interview data and further highlighted some of the ambiguities and ambivalences in participants' construing of various selves, particularly the "sexual self." This analysis also revealed qualitative shifts between past and current selves and suggested that, for some, possible sexual selves were beginning to be construed as positive. Overall, the research reveals how living with a sexual interest in children is a contradictory and incongruent experience, which affects how the person construes various aspects of himself.

Implications for Treatment

Given that participants' deviant sexual interest was construed as a stable part of them, at least in this sample, it appears important to provide a treatment environment that allows for open and honest discussion about the nature of pedophilic sexual interest and does not focus on attempting to change the sexual interest (see Seto, 2012). Given that some participants articulated that "I will never get rid of my sexual interests. I have realized that I will never get cured," there perhaps needs to be an acceptance from both client and therapist that their sexual interest in children may never go away. Through this acceptance, clients could work on enhancing sexual self-regulation, recognizing their triggers and so managing their sexual thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Hanson, 2010). The results here support previous assertions that the creation of an open environment in treatment that allows the client to discuss the role of sexuality in their offending behavior also seems beneficial (Tidefors & Drougge, 2006). The repertory grid analysis highlighted how "possible" future sexual selves were construed as emotionally open, content, and able to talk about their feelings. Their future sexual selves were wanting close and fulfilling relationships. However, the findings from the repertory grid analysis are limited given the small sample size and it is recommended that more research is conducted with such samples using the approach. However, we would tentatively argue from our findings that treatment with such populations may

benefit from adopting strengths-based approaches using principles from the good lives model (Ward, Mann, & Gannon, 2007) and focusing on what is important to the individual, for example, meaningful adult relationships and friendships, stable and satisfying employment, or something constructive to occupy their time. Finally, given the impact living with a deviant sexual interest had on participants' identities, treatment may want to consider the latitude it gives to clients in creating/shaping constructive self and sexual identities. Indeed, a coherent narrative identity is crucially important for rehabilitation (Ward & Marshall, 2007).

Limitations

This study utilized a very specific sampling criteria, aiming to access a group who are likely to fit the definition of "pedophile." The participants were chosen because their behavior or self-report implied that they had an exclusive or very dominant sexual interest in children. They do not therefore necessarily reflect the majority of men convicted of sexual offenses against children and our conclusions and recommendations should not be applied more broadly.

The sample specification also favored men who were likely to admit to a sexual interest in children. We excluded deniers and men who claimed to be interested only in adults. Again, therefore, we must emphasize that our conclusions and recommendations may not fully reflect the challenges faced by those who have but cannot acknowledge a deviant sexual interest.

The men in our study were all convicted of sexual offenses against children, were all in prison, and all engaged in treatment. We must also therefore recognize that it is possible that their construing of current, future, and sexual self had been influenced by their experiences of treatment. To try and minimize a bias here, we chose to interview only men who had completed a core treatment program, and not men who had also completed treatment focused on the nature and management of their sexual interests (e.g., a "healthy sex program"). We also interviewed men from across a number of prisons, who would have had some variation in the process of their treatment experience even though the program content would have been consistent.

Conclusion

One of our underlying aims for this study was to increase general understanding of the challenges faced by men who live with a sexual interest in children. Popular belief has it that pedophilia is a "sick" or "evil" condition; and many people tend not to have considered empathically the conflict that would be experienced if you were born with a sexual interest that you would not choose to have. The article wished to articulate the different ways in which people experienced and worked through the struggle of having a sexual interest that others despise and how this affected on their psychosexual identity. Not only do our data provide a rich understanding of the enormity of this struggle, but they also reveal the dangers of societal hostility to pedophilia as a condition as opposed to sexual offending as a behavior. That is, in several of our themes, there is a

connection between the identity conflict that participants experienced and risk factors for acting on their interest through the sexual abuse of children, such as social isolation, impaired intimacy with other adults, and the recognition of being a member of a highly stigmatized group. While participants recognized that they needed to accept and to come to terms with a largely unwanted sexual interest in children, there also needs to be greater acceptance from the public that people who have such an interest deserve help and support rather than isolation and vilification. Community acceptance is a much needed step in helping those with a sexual interest in children and, potentially, helping to stop some sexual abuse before even starting.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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