

Pedophiles' Ratings of Adult and Child Photographs Using a Semantic Differential

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ABSTRACT: Recent knowledge of the widespread extent of child sexual abuse and its consequences has led to an increasing interest in the understanding and treatment of perpetrators. This study examined a group of pedophiles in an English Special Hospital to determine possible characteristics that make children attractive and adults unattractive to them, using Repertory Grid technique and Semantic Differential. A small number of significant findings suggest that pedophiles may perceive some children and women in an unusual way. The large number of insignificant findings are discussed with reference to the sensitivity of the instrument; the pedophiles' desire to give socially acceptable answers; and subject characteristics of low IQ and "psychopathic disorder." Future directions for research are suggested.

KEYWORDS: psychiatry, pedophiles, child sexual abuse

With our increasing knowledge of the extent of child sexual abuse [1,2], and its short- and long-term effects on the victims [3], it has become apparent that child sexual abuse is a major problem. Psychological interventions with perpetrators may be helpful in reducing the risk of further offending in those who are caught.

This paper will focus on "pedophiles"—those men who appear to have an enduring sexual interest in children in the absence of an ongoing adult heterosexual relationship and who act on that interest. Pedophiles are singled out because they appear to commit many offenses against a large number of victims [4] and often present a high risk of re-offending when they are released [5,6], making them a priority for treatment interventions.

There is a paucity of information regarding the characteristics that make children attractive and adults unattractive to pedophiles. In a thorough review of the literature, Finkelhor [7] concludes that "... taken as a whole, the evidence does suggest that pedophiles do have a problem relating to adult women" and that possible poor social skills and sexual anxiety contribute to this. Although pedophiles may have such difficulties, few investigators have attempted to examine how the cognitions of pedophiles may be related to their particular choice of victim and maintenance of interest in that victim. Clinical work with pedophiles suggests that these cognitions and potential cognitive distortions can form a legitimate focus for treatment [8].

A series of interviews by Ingram [9] provides tentative evidence that pedophiles do

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see children in unusual ways. He comments that many pedophiles report that children are "seductive" in a variety of ways. This view is also supported by the writings of pedophiles [10,11] in which children are attributed with qualities and knowledge that other adults are unlikely to share. One study [12] used Repertory Grids to examine the social relationships of a group of incarcerated pedophiles. It found that issues of dominance and hierarchy were more important in the social relationships of pedophiles than in those convicted of property offenses and that one of the most salient characteristics that pedophiles point to in their victims is their lack of dominance.

The Study

Aims

In view of the paucity of information on the possible characteristics which make children attractive and adults unattractive to pedophiles the aims of the study are:

1. to elicit some of the constructs which pedophiles use in response to photographs of adults and children and compare these with the constructs used by other non-pedophilic groups;
2. to use these constructs (and some others which studies have suggested discriminate between pedophiles and non-pedophiles) to devise a semantic differential to measure the meaning of photographs of adults and children to pedophiles and non-pedophiles; and
3. to attempt to replicate Howells' [12] finding of the importance of dominance and submission using photographs rather than role titles.

The following specific hypotheses are tested:

1. the pedophile group will rate women in photographs as more dominant than comparison groups;
2. the pedophile group will rate women in photographs with more negative attributes than the comparison groups;
3. the pedophile group will rate children in photographs as more submissive than the comparison groups; and
4. the pedophile group will rate children in photographs with more positively valued attributes than the comparison groups.

Subjects

The experimental group consisted of eight pedophiles who were incarcerated in an English Special Hospital (a maximum security hospital for mentally disordered offenders). They had been convicted for offenses against children outside of the family. Overt violence was not a feature of their offenses. It was the opinion of their treating psychiatrist that they had a primary sexual interest in children. Six of the subjects appeared to be exclusively homosexual offenders, the other two had offended against both sexes. They were held in the Special Hospital due to the repeated nature of their offenses for which they had been repeatedly caught. Their mean age was 36.7 years (range 23 to 50 years) and the mean length of their current hospitalization was nine years (range 3 to 17 years). Where IQ was not already known it was estimated using the Schonell Graded Word Reading Test. Their mean estimated IQ was 76 (range 70 to 94).

The first control group consisted of eight nonpedophiles who were also in the Special Hospital. These men had been convicted of offenses other than sexual ones (index offenses were arson and assault). Their mean age was 32.6 years (range 24 to 49 years)

and the mean length of their current hospitalization was 7.3 years (range 2 to 26 years). Their mean estimated IQ was 83 with a range of 72 to 102.

The second control group consisted of eight nursing assistants drawn from a large psychiatric hospital. Their mean age was 27.9 years (range 20 to 47 years). Their mean estimated IQ was 102 with range of 91 to 117.

All groups were matched as closely as possible in terms of age, IQ, and where appropriate length of hospitalization. They were all of Anglo-Saxon ethnic backgrounds.

Materials

Twenty color photographs derived from a variety of fashion catalogues were used in the study. The photographs were of frontal, full body shots of fully clothed Anglo-Saxon individuals that had been trimmed to remove any background details. Body posture was similar in all photographs and facial expressions ranged from neutral to smiling. An attempt was made to standardize the size of the photographs and they were all mounted on standard sizes pieces of cardboard. There were five photographs in each of the following categories: adult, male adult, female pre-pubescent child, male and pre-pubescent child, female.

Pilot Study

The first part of the study involved a small scale exploratory investigation of the interpersonal perception of all three groups using a grid technique [14] with the photographs as elements. The aim of this pilot study was to generate descriptors to be used in the main study.

Pilot Study Method

Three subjects were randomly selected from each of the groups. They were informed that this was a study to look at the way different people both in and out of hospital look at photographs. They were informed that all answers were confidential and that there would be no record of their name on any documentation. The method used was a Repertory Grid [13], with the elements consisting of the 20 photographs and the constructs being elicited by the triadic method. This involved asking subjects to tell the experimenter one important way in which two of the photographs were alike and therefore different from the third. The opposite pole of the construct was elicited by asking the subject "What is the opposite of . . .".

Subjects were shown random triads until they had produced 15 different constructs, or were clearly unable to produce any more. Administration time for a grid ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours. Subjects were also given five supplied constructs, to see whether they could use them to make discriminations between the pictures. The supplied constructs related to the experimental hypotheses, that pedophiles would construe children in an idealized way and that they would construe adult women as domineering and less positively valued.

Pilot Study Results

Both incarcerated control groups found this a difficult task and few constructs were elicited. All elicited constructs were used in the main study.

Main Study

In the main study subjects were presented with the photographs used in the pilot study. They were asked to endorse ratings on a Semantic Differential [14] with scale items derived from the pilot study.

Method

Subjects were given the same information as in the pilot study regarding the purpose of the study and confidentiality, etc. A semantic differential booklet was prepared from the constructs that had been supplied and elicited in the pilot study. This booklet consisted of a page of instructions with examples and then 20 further pages with each page containing one photograph and 24 Likert scales. The ordering of the Likert scales was randomly varied from page to page, and the polarity of the scales was systematically varied. Subjects rated which of each pair of words most accurately described the person in the photograph, using the following Likert scale (illustrated below with the pair cold-warm).

	EXTREMELY	QUITE	SLIGHTLY	NEITHER	SLIGHTLY	QUITE	EXTREMELY	
COLD								WARM

The scales were scored for each subject on each photograph using a seven point scale, where one and seven represented extremity judgments. Each subject received the photographs one at a time in random order, with the experimenter present. Administration time ranged from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours.

Results

Analyses were carried out using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS), with a one-way analysis of variance procedure used to obtain overall *F* ratios and planned contrasts between pairs of groups calculated using Scheffe's procedure. In view of the large number of statistical tests carried out, corrections were made using Bonferroni's method. One-way ANOVAS were carried out on each of the 24 semantic differential scales, on each of the individual photographs, with group as the independent variable. Three of the results were statistically significant ($P < .05$) on three scales for three different individual photographs. One photograph (woman aged 30 years) was judged by the pedophile group to be "trusting" compared with the other groups who saw her as "cautious." Another photograph (boy aged 8 years) was perceived as "talkative" by the pedophile group, compared with the other groups who saw him as "quiet." A third photograph (girl aged 6 years) was rated by the pedophile group to be "critical" compared with the other groups who rated her as "accepting."

Discussion

Clearly, with such a small sample of subjects it is difficult to draw reliable conclusions. The pilot study failed to produce a large number of constructs to use in the main study. This is possibly a reflection of the fact that some of the incarcerated subjects were within the borderline range of intellectual abilities, and therefore found the task very difficult. However, some constructs were produced enabling the development of a semantic differential on more than an a priori basis. There was little evidence to support any of the

hypotheses. The small number of significant findings and the large number of insignificant results are discussed below.

The significant result with the photograph of a woman may represent a misreading on the part of the pedophiles of the cues in the photograph. If "trusting" invokes some idea of submission (in the sense that control is relinquished) then this lends no support to the hypothesis that women would be seen as dominant. It could be hypothesized that pedophiles were responding on the basis of their own experiences of victims' mothers having trusted them with children.

The significant result with the photograph of a young boy may be a reflection of pedophiles' abilities to converse and establish relationships with some children, and lends some support to the hypothesis that children are perceived with positively valued attributes.

The significant result with the photograph of a young girl lends no support to the hypothesis that pedophiles see children as submissive, if "critical" is taken to suggest the notion of power. It could be argued that if a pedophile has been apprehended as a result of evidence from a victim of this age, then he would be more likely to see a child of this age as "critical."

There are a variety of possible explanations for the large number of insignificant results obtained in this study. It is possible that this may provide confirmation of the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between pedophiles, incarcerated nonpedophiles and normals when asked to make judgements of photographs using a semantic differential. However, previous studies which suggest that pedophiles perceive children in unusual ways [8] make this an unlikely hypothesis.

One explanation for the lack of significant results could be the failure to differentiate between the pedophile group in terms of sexual preference. It is possible that male homosexual pedophiles will react differently from heterosexual pedophiles to photographs of both children and adults. The small sample size precluded such fine distinctions but future work with larger samples should ensure that such distinctions are made.

It may have been that the instrument used was not sensitive enough to detect differences, possibly through the groups misunderstanding the terms; having difficulties with the rating task; or being asked to use terms that they usually would not apply to people. These factors could have led to random responses. That some subjects took up to 1.5 hours to complete the questionnaire may indicate significant difficulties with the task.

Another possible explanation may be that the pedophile group were consciously or unconsciously giving responses that they thought would reflect well on them. Despite the reassurances of confidentiality and the separation of the study from any treatment many subjects appeared to believe that their involvement in the study was in some way linked with their potential for discharge. On the other hand this may mean that any significant results in the obtained in the expected direction are stronger by virtue of the fact that the pedophile group were unable to conceal them.

There are other methodological problems with this study:

1. There was no attempt to control for any ongoing treatment of the offender groups. However, informal discussions with staff indicated that there was no therapy directed towards index offenses.
2. The study relied on other's classifications of the offenses and judgements of a primary sexual interest in children.
3. Due to time constraints no attempt was made to assess the reliability of the semantic differential.
4. Many subjects' intellectual abilities were in the borderline ability range. In addition many of them were diagnosed as suffering from "psychopathic disorder." These factors, or an interaction of them, may have meant that they were less able to make attributions about the stimulus materials.

Future Directions

The prediction of future behavior is often of central concern when decisions are made about the release of a sex offender. A refinement of the semantic differential and the development of different stimulus materials could be used on a trial basis with a greater number of subjects and if successful this could perhaps form another component of an assessment package used in a treatment programme.

An issue remains of whether the semantic differential accurately predicts behavior in a test situation. Rather than pursue this issue it may be more useful to construct a test which appears to have more "ecological validity." This could perhaps be similar to the work of Lipton et al., [15] with rapists, using videotaped vignettes. For pedophiles, videotapes of interactions involving children and adults could be presented. Pedophiles could be asked to make judgements about the actors and their interactions on a number of dimensions. Response latency might also provide some indication of the production of answers considered to be socially acceptable.

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