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Pedophilic Sexual Interest in Convicted Child Sexual Offenders: The Predictive Role of Psychopathology and Personality Dimensions

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Abstract

Pedophilic sexual interest is a key target in the forensic assessment and rehabilitation process of child sexual offenders. Yet, there is limited evidence on the biopsychosocial factors underpinning pedophilic interest. Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to test the predictive role of psychopathology and personality dimensions in pedophilic sexual interest in a sample of convicted male child sexual offenders. Participants answered to a set of self-report measures assessing psychopathology, impulsiveness, personality factors, and trait-affect. Pedophilic sexual interest was measured based on the behavioral proxies of sexual arousal to children. Findings revealed that anxiety and interpersonal sensitivity, as well as lower extroversion and higher conscientiousness, predict higher levels of pedophilic sexual interest. These data support the assumption that marked social inadequacy and difficulties align with the sexual interest by prepubescent children.

Keywords: Pedophilia; Child Sexual Abuse; Psychopathology; Personality; Impulsiveness

Introduction

In the psychiatry and psychology field, pedophilia relates to the sexual interest in prepubescent children. The concept of pedophilia is formally recognized as a clinical entity in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition) [1] and ICD-10 (International Classification of Diseases, 10th edition) [2], encompassing nosology criteria such as recurrent and intense sexually arousing fantasies, urges, or behaviors involving sexual activity with children. The concepts of pedophilia and child sexual abuse must be however differentiated: while the former relates to a clinical diagnose, the last relates to a legal entity. Indeed, only a part of convicted child sexual offenders presents pedophilic sexual interest. This suggests that while some child sexual offenders have probably acted upon their pedophilic urges, others have acted upon other motivational/criminological factors. In the context of forensic sexology, the debate surrounding the concept of pedophilia expands well beyond the criteria of nosology; it includes the issues about the stability of pedophilic sexual interest, its etiology and maintenance factors, or the assessment (including the risk-assessment) of pedophilic sexual arousal for forensic purposes.

Within this respect, pedophilic sexual interest is both regarded as a stable/life-long condition [3,4,5] or as a persistent, yet flexible state, that can be intervened and changed with tailored intervention methods [6]. Is worth noting however, that despite the stability versus flexibility discussion, pedophilic sexual interest is considered a main recidivism factor in child sexual abuse [7], and hence requiring specific forensic evaluation [8]. Furthermore, is must be recognized that despite the vast majority of individuals presenting pedophilic sexual interest are men, pedophile women have also been described [9].

Another area of great forensic importance is that of the vulnerability factors for pedophilic sexual interest. Studies on the topic of the etiology and maintenance factors underpinning pedophilia have been conducted under the umbrella of the neurosciences, psychiatry, and psychological sciences. While some studies have pointed neurodevelopmental features and brain structure specificities as proxies of pedophilia [10,11], others have suggested that psychopathological markers [12], and developmental/familiar experiences [13,14], are milestones in the conceptualization of pedophilic sexual interest. Yet, there is only minimal evidence in the literature regarding the nature of

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pedophilic sexual interest. Even though paraphilic sexual preference is known as an important risk factor for sexual offence recidivism (more than denial of the sex crime or victim empathy [15]), we are still far from understanding the core features underlying pedophilic sexual interest.

Considering the limited knowledge on the nature of pedophilia, the aim of the present study was to test the effects of psychopathological and personality dimensions as predictors of pedophilic sexual interest, in a sample of convicted male child sexual offenders. Findings are expected to add to the literature on the dynamic factors characterizing sexual interest in children, in forensic samples.

Materials and Methods

Forty-three Portuguese men ($M_{age} = 37.79$; $SD = 9.65$, range 22-58; $M_{n^{\circ} \text{ years of school education}} = 5.95$; $SD = 2.12$, range 4-12) convicted for child sexual abuse were evaluated while in prison. Child sexual offenders completed a set of self-report questionnaires (assessing personality and psychopathology dimensions), in an interview-style, conducted by the author of this manuscript. The assessment protocol consisted on the Portuguese version of the Brief Symptom Inventory [16,17], which is a measure aimed at assessing psychopathological dimensions, such as depression, anxiety, psychoticism, somatization or hostility. Participants further reported on the Portuguese versions of the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale [18,19], a self-report measure assessing motor/planning and cognitive impulsiveness; the Five-Factor Inventory [20,21], assessing the Big-Five personality dimensions (neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness); and the Positive and Negative Trait-Affect Schedule [22,23], measuring trait positive (e.g., interested, excited, inspired) and negative emotions (e.g., distressed, ashamed, afraid). Furthermore, pedophilic sexual interest was evaluated through the Screen Scale for Pedophilic Interests [24]. This is a scale aimed at measuring behavioral proxies of pedophilic sexual arousal, and it is completed using the sex offenders' criminal records. These proxies are: 1) having male victims, 2) multiple child victims, 3) prepubescent victims, and 4) extra familiar victims. Higher scores have been related to pedophilic sexual arousal as measured by psychophysiological means, mainly through penile plethysmography [24]. Participants gave written informed consent and were not paid for participation. Ethical approval was given by Direção Gera dos Serviços Prisionais, in Portugal.

Results and Discussion

A series of multiple regression analyses (Enter method) were performed in order to test the predictive role of each set of predictors (i.e., psychopathology, impulsiveness, personality dimensions, and trait positive/negative affect) in pedophilic sexual interest. Findings on the predictive role of the psychopathological dimensions revealed a significant model [$F(9,33) = 3.639$, $p = .003$] accounting for 36% of the explained variance ($R^2_{adjusted} = .361$). Anxiety and interpersonal sensitivity were the best/significant predictors of pedophilic sexual interest ($\beta_{anxiety} = .650$, $p = .036$, $\beta_{interpersonal \ sensitivity} = .799$, $p = .033$) (Table 1). Findings on the effects of impulsiveness, revealed a non-significant model [$F(2,40) = 2.221$, $p = .122$] accounting for only 5.5% of the explained variance ($R^2_{adjusted} = .055$); none of the impulsiveness dimensions significantly predicted pedophilic sexual interest (Table 1). Also, findings on the predictive role of the personality dimensions showed a significant model [$F(5,37) = 4.973$, $p = .001$] accounting for 32% of the explained variance ($R^2_{adjusted} = .321$); the personality

Table 1: Psychopathology and personality predictors of pedophilic sexual interest in convicted child sexual offenders (n = 43).

	B	SE	β	t	p
Psychopathology					
Somatization	.083	.054	.342	1.547	.131
Depression	-.098	.091	-.352	-1.080	.288
Hostility	-.099	.076	-.242	-1.302	.202
Anxiety	.200	.092	.650	2.185	.036
Fobic anxiety	-.067	.094	-.191	-.719	.477
Psychoticism	-.092	.109	-.261	-.844	.405
Paranoid ideation	-.101	.082	-.324	-1.233	.226
Obsessive-compulsive	-.009	.098	-.030	-.094	.926
Interpersonal sensitivity	.309	.139	.799	2.229	.033
Impulsiveness					
Motor-planning impulsiveness	.052	.026	.332	1.983	.054
Cognitive impulsiveness	-.017	.069	-.041	-.245	.808
Personality					
Neuroticism	.065	.035	.316	1.873	.069
Extroversion	-.128	.042	-.458	-3.060	.004
Openness	.013	.038	.047	.356	.72
Agreeableness	.036	.048	.104	.736	.466
Conscientiousness	.088	.042	.284	2.084	.044
Trait-Affect					
Positive affect	-.022	.030	-.115	-.745	.461
Negative affect	.037	.025	.230	1.484	.146

traits of extroversion and conscientiousness significantly predicted pedophilic sexual interest in the sample of convicted child sexual offenders ($\beta_{extroversion} = -.458$, $p = .004$, $\beta_{conscientiousness} = .284$, $p = .044$) (Table 1). Finally, data on the predictive role of trait-affect showed a non-significant model [$F(2,40) = 1.654$, $p = .204$] accounting for only 3% of the explained variance ($R^2_{adjusted} = .030$); neither positive nor negative trait-affect predicted pedophilic sexual interest (Table 1).

Findings revealed that a set of psychopathological dimensions and personality factors may be involved in the dynamics surrounding pedophilia. More specifically, the psychopathological dimensions of anxiety and interpersonal sensitivity, relate not only to a series of somatic and cognitive markers characterizing peripheral activity (e.g., sudden fear, panic attacks), but also denote a sense of personal inadequacy and inferiority. Both of these markers point to a fragile psychopathological profile that includes the fear and the removal of the subject from social contexts and interactions. Additionally, while the personality trait of lower extroversion characterizes subjects with a poor propensity to be social, denoting solitary and socially alienated individuals, the personality trait of higher conscientiousness characterizes individuals with an obsessive-style, requiring great self-discipline, having sometimes an inflexible cognitive style. Accordingly, the current findings suggest that pedophilic sexual interest may emerge within the larger spectrum of interpersonal/social difficulties and anxiety, in which subjects present strong difficulties performing every-day social interactions. Indeed, it has been proposed that given the strong social difficulties presented by convicted pedophiles— with adult people, and particularly with women —, the relationship with a minor may be seen as a less

threatening way of developing interpersonal and intimate bonds[6]. This may be relevant as it has been acknowledged that pedophiles not only engage in sexual intercourse with children, but also wish to have a romantic/affection-oriented relationship with them [5]. So, the interpersonal deficits along with the inflexible cognitive style and the fear to perform socially, may be some of the core features underpinning pedophilic sexual interest, and hence, a key indicator in offender profiling, as well as an important clinical target in the rehabilitation of child sexual offenders.

Conclusion

The current study was aimed at testing the role of psychopathological and personality dimensions predicting pedophilic sexual interest in a forensic sample of child sexual offenders. Despite some study limitations (relatively small sample size, non-physiological assessment of paraphilic sexual arousal, social desirability bias), findings suggest that psychopathology related features (anxiety and interpersonal sensitivity) as well as some personality traits (lower extroversion and higher conscientiousness) may be involved in the dynamics behind sexual interest in prepubescent children.

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