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Emotional Processing of Child and Adult Faces in Pedophilic Men

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In order to understand the mechanisms and dynamics of child abuse, previous research has targeted offenders' sexual interest and sexual arousal by child-stimuli. Less attention has been paid, however, to the emotional processing of child-stimuli. A relevant facet of emotion recognition is reading emotional states from facial expressions.

Deficits in facial expression processing are not exclusively relevant to pedophilia but also to general criminal behavior and interpersonal deficits since they likely impede empathic reactions toward others. Amygdala dysfunction and volume reduction as well as deficits in limbic neural networks have been suggested as possible causes of deficits in emotional recognition in child molesters (Schiltz et al. 2007; doi:10.1001/archpsyc.64.6.737; Cantor et al. 2008; doi:10.1016/j.jpsychores.2007.10.013). Empirical findings regarding emotional processing in child molesters are rare and inconsistent. According to one study child molesters were more impaired than controls and other offenders (Hudson et al., 1993; doi:10.1007/BF00849561), whereas Suchy et al. (2009; doi:/10.1177/1079063208326930) reported that non-pedophilic child molesters performed worse in an emotion recognition task than pedophilic child molesters. The studies mentioned only used adult stimuli to measure the performance in emotion recognition, not child stimuli.

Empirical findings also suggest that pedophiles do not only feel sexually attracted to children but also experience an emotional congruence or an affinity toward children (Finkelhor 1984). Child sexual abusers often hold offense-supporting attitudes and beliefs about sex with children (Hall & Hirschmann, 1992 doi:10.1177/0093854892019001003). Such findings could be confounded by a systematic misattribution of positive and negative emotional expressions of children. Pedophiles could be more sensitive towards positive expressions and approach behavior expressed by children and less sensitive towards negative expressions and avoiding behavior. To summarize, pedophiles may feel emotionally connected to children more easily than to adults due to the above-mentioned cognitive and emotional deficits in the processing of facial cues. Therefore, it seems promising to investigate, whether the performance in emotion recognition in pedophilic individuals depends on the age of the person expressing emotions.

To address the differences in emotional responsiveness of pedophiles to child- and adult-stimuli, the present study uses a computerized testing battery containing two tests of face recognition and three tests of emotion recognition. The emotion recognition tasks measure cognitive empathy, whereas latencies for different emotions would indicate affective empathy. Similar to the viewing-time-effect (Imhoff et al., 2010; doi: 10.1007/s10508-009-9595-2), we expect differences in latent reaction and viewing time depending on the stimuli

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age and expression after controlling for general cognitive ability (IQ).

The data collection is currently underway. First results will be presented. The sample comprises four groups of participants: Offenders with offenses against children with pedophilia (O_CA_P), offenders with offenses against children without pedophilia (O_CA_NP), offenders without offenses against children (O_NCA) and non-offenders without any recorded offenses (NO). The diagnosis of pedophilia will be corroborated from the criminal records using the SSPI-2 (Seto, Stephens, Lalumière, & Cantor, 2017; doi: 10.1177/1079063215612444).

Hypotheses:

1. Differences in global face- and emotion-recognition as well as for response latencies are expected between all four groups after controlling for the IQ.
2. In comparison with all other groups, offenders with offenses against children *with pedophilia* (O_CA_P) perform better on a) face-recognition tasks and b) emotion-recognition tasks in trials that show child-stimuli but worse in trials that show adult-stimuli after controlling for the IQ.
3. In trials that show child-stimuli, offenders with offenses against children *with pedophilia* (O_CA_P) a) make more mistakes in identifying the emotions fear, anger, and sadness and b) make fewer mistakes in identifying the emotion happiness but c) misattribute other emotions more often as happiness than all other groups after controlling for the IQ.

Julien Wessels obtained his Master's Degree in Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience (M.Sc.) at the Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany in September 2017. He worked as a research assistant in the forensic unit at the University Clinic in Bochum, as a tutor in the unit for Biological Psychology, and as a research assistant in the unit for Social Psychology at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum. He is currently working as a researcher at the Department of Psychology at the FernUniversität in Hagen (University of Hagen) with Professor Andreas Mokros, Ph.D.. His doctoral research will focus on sexual deviance (pedophilia; sexual sadism) and emotion processing. Furthermore, Julien holds a research interest in alternative relationship-concepts.