

## ***SHAPING THE FUTURE***

2019 ATSA Conference | Friday November 8 | 10:30 AM – 12:00 PM

**F-11**

### **Stigma in Minor Attracted Persons**

#### **Using Narrative Humanization to Reduce the Social Stigmatization of Pedophilia**

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Stigmatization and societal punitiveness about pedophilia have a range of potential consequences, such as the social isolation of people with sexual interest in children, and the formation of policies that are not consistent with empirical research findings. Previous research has shown that people with pedophilic sexual interests use societal thinking to self-stigmatize, which in turn may actually serve to increase their risk of committing a sexual offense.

In this research, we have compared two attitudinal interventions (first-person narratives vs. expert-driven information) using both student ( $N = 100$ ) and general public ( $N = 950$ ) samples. It was hypothesized that both interventions would lead to reductions in stigmatization and punitive attitudes about paedophiles on an explicit (self-report) level but that only the narrative intervention would lead to reductions of these constructs at the implicit level. Our findings supported both hypotheses within the student sample. However, in the general public sample, expert-delivered information had a negative impact on perceptions of pedophiles' deviance, and there was no effect of information transmission on attitudes at the implicit level.

We further discuss the potentially important role of narrative humanization (vs. pure evidence) in this area, and highlight opportunities for embedding personal narratives into mainstream popular culture in an effort to reduce the societal stigmatization of this vulnerable population.

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### **Learning Goals:**

- To define narrative humanization and how it applies to stigma reduction.
- To explore the effects of first person narratives and expert-delivered information about pedophilia of attitude change.
- To discuss ways of improving social responses towards people with pedophilic sexual interests, in a bid to facilitate more effective sexual abuse prevention efforts.

**Craig Harper** is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. His research interests lie in the psychological processes that underpin decision-making in relation to controversial social and political topics. Most of his research has been focused on how people form and express attitudes towards people with sexual convictions, with the aim being to promote progressive and evidence-based policies to prevent and reduce sexual victimisation. Away from forensically-based research, he is a member of the Heterodox Academy, which is an organization seeking to promote viewpoint diversity and reduce political polarization in higher education.

**Rebecca Lievesley** is a Senior Lecturer in Forensic Psychology and member of the Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University. She has worked and researched within the Criminal Justice System for around 10 years, currently engaged in various research projects including an investigation of reoffending and desistance in those serving short sentences, an evaluation of anti-libidinal medication for individuals convicted of a sexual offence and help seeking prior to committing a sexual offence. Rebecca is also a co-founder and trustee of the Safer Living Foundation, a charity established to reduce sexual (re)offending through rehabilitative initiatives and prevent further victims of sexual crime.

**Nicholas Blagden** is a co-founder and trustee of the Safer Living Foundation, Associate Professor in Forensic Psychology, Chartered Psychologist and Associate Head of the Sexual Offences Crime and Misconduct Research Unit. He has worked and researched within criminal justice and prison settings for over 10 years. He has taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses in psychology, forensic psychology and criminology. He has also trained police officers. His work has been funded by the HMPPS and he is currently engaged in numerous collaborative forensic projects with NTU, HMPPS, Institute for Mental Health, Ontario, Canada and Correctional Services Australia. He sits on NOTA's policy and practice committee. He has led programme evaluations, has a track record of high quality research and disseminated his work widely in international journals conferences.

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### **Suppression as an Indicator of Internalized Stigma in People with Sexual Interests in Children**

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Working proactively with people who have a sexual interest in children is an emerging topic in the study of sexual abuse. A substantial amount of this work has focused on the experiences of stigmatization faced by this population (Jahnke, 2018; Jahnke & Hoyer, 2013). Stigmatization of this group can be driven by external factors, such as the conflation with such sexual interests with acts of sexual abuse (Feelgood & Hoyer, 2013), or internal factors, such as feelings of shame and guilt. Recent theorizing by Hocken and Taylor (2017) suggests that working to help people with sexual interests in children to accept their sexual identities and commit to a life of non-offending may be a fruitful way to prevent sexual offending by reducing the negative psychological effects of self-stigmatization (e.g., loneliness and low self-worth; Jahnke, Schmidt, Geradt, & Hoyer, 2015). In this research, we sought to build on existing research by examining the extent to which internalized stigma among people with sexual interests in children might be measurable by examining thought suppression, and the subsequent effects on their help-seeking behaviors, and perceptions of their own risk of becoming sexual abusers.

We adopted a cross-sectional anonymous survey design to recruit a sample of individuals from prominent online forums for people with sexual interests in children. We found that increased levels of suppression were associated with lower levels of hope about the future, but higher levels of both shame and guilt about participants' sexual interests. We found no differences in levels of conscious thought suppression among those who had vs. had not sought support for their sexual interests. However, those who felt that they needed more support than they were currently receiving did suppress more than those who felt they were receiving adequate levels of support. Finally, suppression was associated with higher levels of active avoidance of children, which we used as a proxy measure for self-perceptions of potential child abuse risk.

We discuss the results in the context of stigmatisation research and broader attempts to implement primary and secondary prevention schemes aimed at reducing the incidence of sexual offending, and increasing the mental wellbeing of people who are sexually attracted to children.

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### **Learning Goals:**

- To define externalized and internalized stigmatization among people with a sexual interest in children.
- To understand the thinking styles of people who have a sexual interest in children, and to explore their behavioral correlates.
- To set out how acceptance and commitment therapeutic principles could be used as an effective approach to support non-offending among people with a sexual interest in children.

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