

Paedophilia Stigma

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I'm a pedophile, but not a monster

I'm attracted to children but unwilling to act on it. Before judging me harshly, would you willing to listen?
TODD NICKERSON

- Paedophilia refers to a sexual interest towards pre-pubescent children (Cantor & McPhail, 2016). Thus, paedophilia is **not** the act of having sexual contact with a child.
- In the general population, there are many people with paedophilia who have never acted upon their interests and have no intention to do so. They are referred to as non-offending paedophiles (NOPs).
- However, people tend to equate paedophilia with 'child sexual abuse' (McCartan, 2010). This leads to people holding very harsh and stigmatising views about NOPs (Jahnke, Imhoff, & Hoyer, 2015), and even discriminating behaviour (see below)
- Unfortunately, this stigma discourages NOPs to seek help for their sexual interests and increases their risk to offend (Jahnke, Schmidt, Geradt, & Hoyer, 2015).



- Despite this extreme stigmatisation and its negative consequences, little is known about:
 - the degree of stigmatisation relative to other 'extreme' stigmatised groups
 - the psychological processes that underpin negative judgments about paedophiles (Brown et al., 2009).

Terror Management Theory (TMT)

- TMT (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) may provide some insight into why paedophilia is so highly stigmatised.
- TMT argues that a basic psychological conflict results from the desire to live and the realisation that death is inevitable. This conflict results in a state of terror.
- This terror is managed by embracing cultural values, or symbolic systems, that provide life with meaning and value. This can involve adopting more extreme cultural, religious, or personal views (Greenberg et al., 1990).
- The 'death thought accessibility' hypothesis states that, if one is motivated to avoid cognitions about death, they will show more death-related cognitions (typically assessed via Word Completion Task) when cultural values are threatened.
- Children buffer one's fear of death because they represent both literal and symbolic immortality, as well as a means of transmitting cultural values (Zhou, Chen, & Yu, 2008).
- Thus, exposure to the topic of paedophiles may increase the accessibility of death-related cognitions (because it harms the buffering effect that children have on terror management).



Aims of Present Study

- Degree of Stigmatisation**
 - People view paedophilia as a mental illness and/or an extreme criminal offence (Imhoff, 2015). Thus, we compared the level of stigmatisation towards paedophiles against the level of stigmatisation towards schizophrenic individuals (mental illness) and individuals with homicidal ideation (extreme criminal offence). This helped determine whether people stigmatise paedophiles to a greater, lesser, or equal degree to these two other targets.
- Post-vignette Judgments**
 - Using a vignette-based methodology, the second aim examined whether people make negative and punitive judgments about NOPs to the same extent as offending paedophiles. Vignettes of offending and non-offending schizophrenics and homicidal individuals were also included for further comparisons.
- Accessibility of death (and child-related) thoughts**
 - The third aim was to investigate whether the vignettes about paedophilia increased the accessibility of death-related cognitions (using a Word Completion Task). We also included a single word completion task related to children (CHIL_ _ _ _).

Method

Design:

A between-subjects design was used (6 conditions)

Participants:

Sixty-three adult participants (47 females, 15 males, 1 unknown) were recruited online via Qualtrics, advertised via social media platforms and snowball sampling (Mean age = 27.37, SD = 9.98)

Materials:

Paedophilia Stigma & Punitiveness Scale (PSPS; Imhoff, 2015)

Schizophrenia Stigma & Punitiveness Scale (SSPS; adapted)

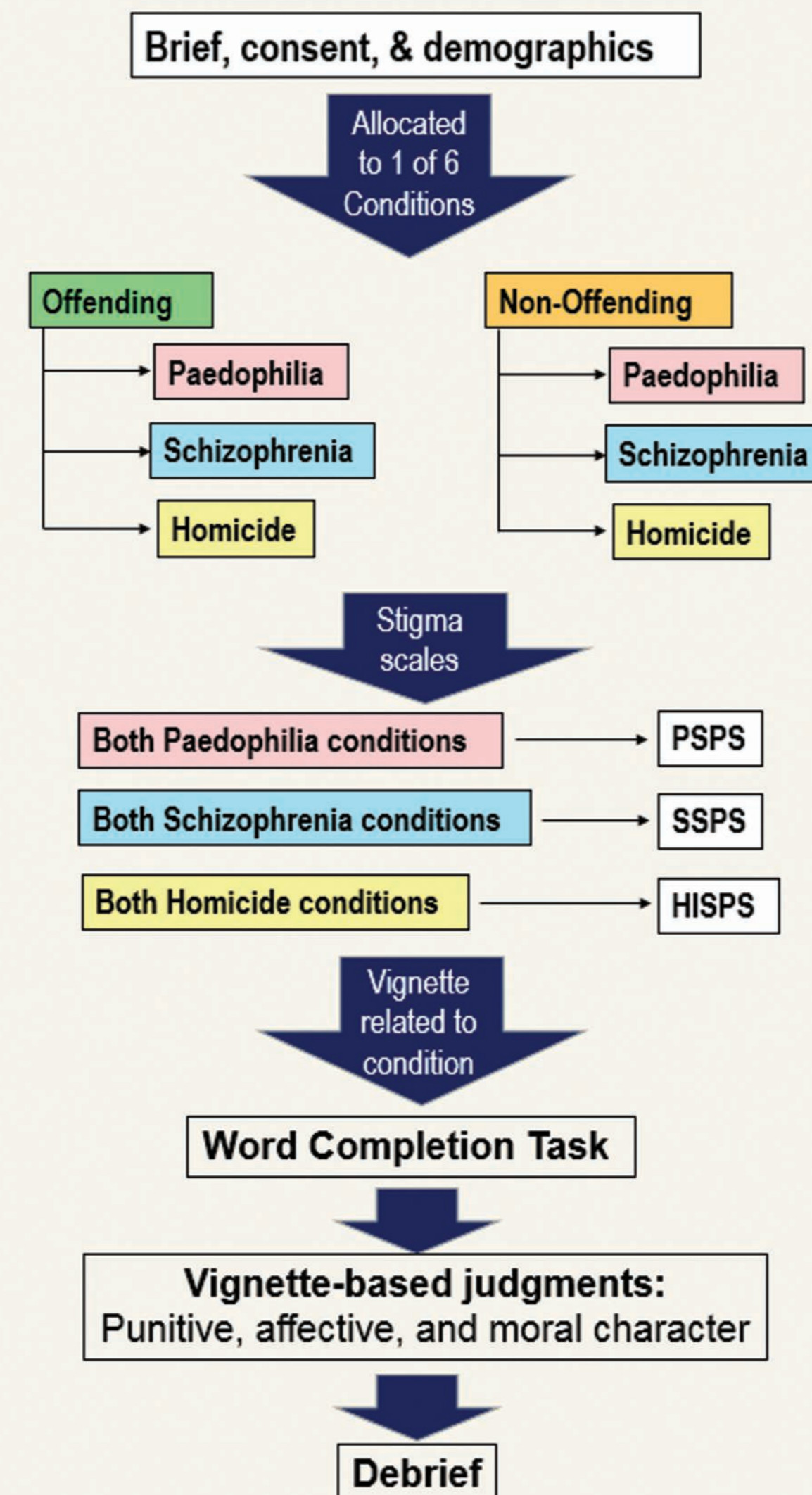
Homicide Ideation Stigma & Punitiveness Scale (HISPS; adapted)

Word Completion Task (6 death & 1 children-related words)

B_R_ED = BORDED (non-death) or BURIED (death-related)

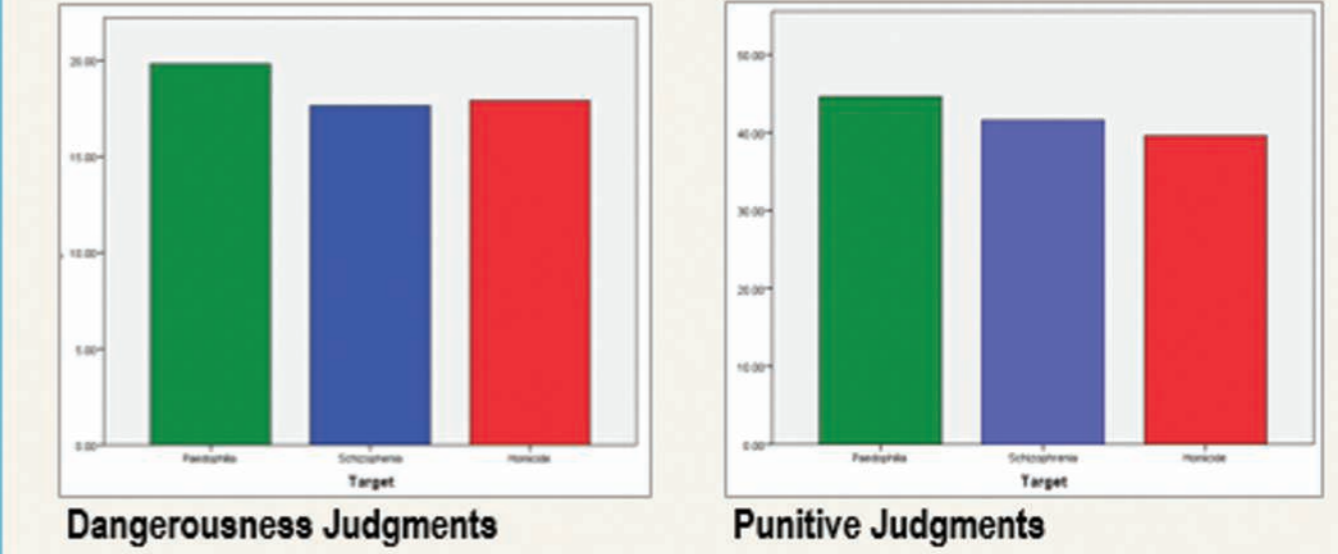
Six vignettes (one per target) & subsequent judgment questions

Procedure:



Results

1) Degree of Stigmatisation (pre-vignettes)



Trend for viewing paedophiles as more dangerous and deserving of punishment. However, results from a one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences between the three conditions ($p < .05$).

2) Post-vignette Judgments

Judgment data were analysed using a 3 (Target: paedophilia vs. schizophrenia vs. homicide) x 2 (Status: offender vs. non-offender) independent ANOVA.

Sentence judgments

A main effect of Status found; $F(1, 54) = 5.69, p = .02$. Offenders (regardless of target) were judged as more deserving of punishment ($M = 5.1, SE = .86$) than non-offenders ($M = 7.1, SE = .62$).

Moral character judgments

A main effect of Status found; $F(1, 49) = 13.38, p = .001$. Offenders (regardless of target) were judged as more immoral ($M = 19.44, SE = .81$) than non-offenders ($M = 15.26, SE = .80$).

Affect-based judgments

Marginally significant Status x Target interaction found; $F(2, 53) = 2.95, p = .06$. Simple main effects revealed greater negative affect towards offenders than non-offenders for schizophrenics ($M = 15.60, SE = 1.10$ vs. $M = 10.20, SE = 1.10$) and homicidal persons ($M = 16.44, SE = 1.16$ vs. $M = 12.20, SE = .10$). No differences between offending and non-offending paedophiles.

3) Accessibility of death (and child-related) thoughts

Number of death-related words were subjected to a 3 (Target) x 2 (Status) independent ANOVA. A main effect of Target was found; $F(2, 54) = 12.84, p < .001$. Participants in the Paedophilia conditions formed more death words ($M = 3.90, SE = .36$) than those in the Homicide conditions ($M = 1.34, SE = .37$), as did those in the Schizophrenia conditions ($M = 2.98, SE = .37$). No sig. difference between the Paedophilia and Schizophrenia conditions.

Chi-square analyses showed that those in the Paedophilia conditions made the word 'children' more often (95.2%) than those in the Schizophrenia conditions (47.4%) [$\chi^2 = 11.47, p = .001$] and Homicide conditions (25%) [$\chi^2 = 21.24, p < .001$]. Interestingly, the Homicide conditions made the word 'chilling' (75%) more often the Paedophilia (4.8%) and Schizophrenia conditions (52.6%).

Discussion

- Existing stigmatising attitudes about paedophilia did not differ to those related to schizophrenia or homicidal ideation.
- Similarly, stigmatising judgments towards paedophilic individuals did not differ from those made towards schizophrenic or homicidal individuals. Instead, offending individuals (regardless of the target) were judged more negatively than non-offenders.
- This does indicate that NOPs are judged less negatively than offending paedophiles. However, the stigma towards paedophiles may be no more severe than the stigma directed towards other groups that are seen as 'very different'.
- Exposure to paedophiles primed more death (and child-related) cognitions than the other vignettes (particularly homicide). Thus, the stigmatisation of paedophiles may be mediated by terror management processes. Further research/analysis is required to test this hypothesis.

References

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