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# Explanations of Pedophilia: Review of Empirical Research

Sharon Araji, PhD, and David Finkelhor, PhD

This article reviews empirical research to discover what support exists for theories that attempt to explain why adults become sexually interested in and involved with immature children. These theories are first organized into four basic categories: (1) emotional congruence—why the adult has an emotional need to relate to a child; (2) sexual arousal—why the adult could become sexually aroused by a child; (3) blockage—why alternative sources of sexual and emotional gratification are not available; or (4) disinhibition—why the adult is not deterred from such an interest by normal prohibitions. The review shows (1) that the best experimental research has been directed toward establishing that pedophiles do show an unusual pattern of sexual arousal toward children, although no good evidence yet exists about why this is so; (2) a number of studies have concurred that pedophiles are blocked in their social and heterosexual relationships; (3) the use of alcohol is well established as a disinhibiting factor that plays a role in a great many pedophile offenses; (4) at least one study gives support to the “emotional congruence” idea that children, because of their lack of dominance, have some special meaning for pedophiles; and (5) there is evidence that many pedophiles were themselves victims of pedophile behavior when they were children. The article also demonstrates that pedophilia research is, in general, characterized by some serious theoretical and methodological flaws. As a result, caution should be exercised in generalizing findings until more careful research is undertaken.

This article reviews the empirical evidence concerning theories of pedophilia. Many theories have been proposed,<sup>1-4</sup> but there exist few comprehensive reviews of the problem that have looked at these theories in the light of empirical research, a gap that this article will try to remedy.

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## Definitions

The state of research in the field of pedophilia is primitive enough that even the term pedophilia itself is a matter of some controversy, with different theorists and investigators defining it in different ways. Some have used it in what might be called an "inclusive" fashion, considering pedophilia as any sexual contact with or interest in a child, however transitory this behavior.<sup>5,6</sup> Others<sup>7</sup> have reserved the term only for a condition of persons who have an enduring and exclusive sexual interest in children (called "fixated" offenders by Groth<sup>8</sup> or "sexual preference mediated" offenders by Howells.<sup>4</sup>

In the current review, we use the broader "inclusive" definition of pedophilia, taking account of any study of individuals who have had sexual contact with children, including incest offenders.

There are also controversies about what age victims and what sexual activities should be included within the term pedophilia. Here again for purposes of the review, we have included the broadest definition. In a later part of the article, we discuss definitions of pedophilia in greater detail and point out some of the difficulties that the lack of consensus creates for interpreting findings.

We also faced a difficulty in deciding what kinds of studies to include in a review of empirical findings. Few enough studies have been done that to limit such a review to strictly experimental studies would have resulted in a very short review indeed. The current review thus encompasses all studies we could find where some effort was made to quantify offender characteristics. Beyond that, we have included some additional research which was of a more clinical, interpretive nature, especially when trying to evaluate evidence for certain theories.

One could easily get confused among the welter of ideas that have been proposed as theories of pedophilic behavior. After reviewing these theories in a previous article,<sup>3</sup> we proposed that most of them could be classified in four categories (see Table 1). Most theories are trying to explain either (1) why a person would find relating sexually to a child to be emotionally gratifying and congruent; (2) why a person would be capable of being sexually aroused by a child; (3) why a person would be frustrated or blocked in efforts to obtain sexual and emotional gratification from more normatively approved sources; and (4) why a person would not be deterred by the conventional social restraints and inhibitions against having sexual relations with a child. In an earlier article, we labeled these emotional congruence, sexual arousal, blockage, and disinhibition, respectively.<sup>3</sup> How these categories interrelate to account for the diversity of pedophilic behavior is also explained in this earlier article. We have organized the present review according to this theoretical typology.

## Explanations of Pedophilia

Table 1. Summary of Empirical Evidence for Explanations of Pedophilia

Theory	Evidence
Emotional congruence	
Children attractive because of lack of dominance	One positive study
Arrested development/immaturity	Some support from psychological testing, but inferences are weak
Low self-esteem	Some support from psychological testing, but inferences are weak
Mastery of trauma through repetition	Several studies show frequent histories of sexual abuse in offenders' backgrounds
Identification with aggression	Several studies show frequent histories of sexual abuse in offenders' backgrounds
Narcissism	Untested
Male socialization to dominance	Untested
Sexual arousal	
Heightened arousal to children	Clear experimental evidence, except for incest offenders
Conditioning from early childhood experience	Several studies show frequent histories of sexual abuse in offenders' backgrounds
Modeling from earlier childhood experiences	Several studies show frequent histories of sexual abuse in offenders' backgrounds
Hormonal abnormalities	Mixed evidence
Misattribution of arousal	Untested
Socialization through child pornography or advertising	Untested
Blockage	
Difficulty relating to adult females	Generally positive evidence
Inadequate social skills	Some support from uncontrolled studies
Sexual anxiety	Some support from uncontrolled studies
Unresolved oedipal dynamics	Family problems evident, but not necessarily the ones oedipal theory would predict
Disturbances in adult sexual romantic relationships	Suggestive evidence from uncontrolled studies
Repressive norms about sexual behavior	Suggested by two studies
Disinhibition	
Impulse disorder	True for some small group of offenders, but not for all
Senility	Negative
Mental retardation	Negative
Alcohol	Present in great many instances, exact role unclear
Failure of incest avoidance mechanism	Two studies show higher rates of abuse in stepfather families
Situational stress	Only anecdotal evidence
Cultural toleration	Untested
Patriarchal norms	Untested

## Emotional Congruence

Some of the most widely cited theories about pedophilia indicate that pedophiles choose children for sexual partners because children have some especially compelling emotional meaning for them. We have called this "emotional congruence" because it conveys the idea of a "fit" between the adult's emotional needs and the characteristics of children, a fit which the theories are trying to account for.

One such theory holds that pedophiles have "arrested psychosexual development" and are emotionally immature. They choose to relate to children because they are at the pedophile's emotional level and they can respond to the pedophile's child-like preoccupations.<sup>9-11</sup>

A related idea is that pedophiles are not just immature, but have a generally low sense of self-esteem and little efficacy in their social relationships. Relating to children is congruent because it gives them a feeling of being powerful, omnipotent, respected, and in control.<sup>9,12</sup>

Other theorists have surmised that relating to children allows pedophiles to try to overcome the effects of some childhood trauma. By victimizing a child, they master the trauma by reversing roles in the victimization they suffered and through "identification with the aggressor," they combat their own powerlessness by becoming the powerful victimizer.<sup>4,13,14</sup>

Still another theory that can be classified under emotional congruence uses the notion of "narcissism" to explain pedophilia. In this theory, a pedophile, as a result of emotional deprivation or even overprotection, remains emotionally involved with himself as a child.

Finally, recent feminist ideas about pedophilia have a surprisingly similar underlying notion. According to these theories, pedophilia grows out of certain themes in normal male socialization that tends to make children "appropriate" objects of sexual interest. These themes include the value that male socialization puts on being dominant and the initiator in sexual relationships, as well as the value placed on partners who are youthful and subservient. Pedophilia occurs as a natural extension of some of these values.<sup>5,6</sup>

The idea that children have some special emotional congruence for pedophiles has proven to be useful in many clinical accounts of the problem. Unfortunately, not much formal evidence has been marshalled to confirm these theories or demonstrate that these special meanings of children occur more frequently among pedophiles than in other segments of the population. As far as we could find, for example, no empirical studies relating to the narcissism hypothesis have been completed. As for the issue of overcoming effects of childhood trauma, we will discuss this in the section on sexual arousal.

**Children Attractive Because of Lack of Dominance** Howells<sup>17</sup> has perhaps gone further than any others to try to substantiate the idea that children have a special emotional meaning for pedophiles. By using a technique called the Repertory Grid (a description of the test instruments used in the studies cited in this article can be found in either the article referenced, Buros,<sup>18</sup> or Woody<sup>19</sup>), he found some support for two propositions: (1) that issues of dominance and hierarchy were more important in the social relationships of pedophiles than for non-sex offenders and (2) that one of the salient characteristics that pedophiles point to in their victims is the victim's lack of dominance. This research gives support to the notion, common to most of the emotional congruence theories, that pedophiles like children because it allows them to feel powerful. Nonetheless, Howells<sup>17</sup> methodology is somewhat vaguely described and may allow for some degree of investigator subjectivity. In any case, extensions and replications of his very promising line of inquiry are needed.

Some other studies based on psychologic tests do provide findings that could be construed as consistent with those of Howells.<sup>17</sup> For example, Langevin<sup>1</sup> cites studies by Fisher<sup>20</sup> and Fisher and Howell<sup>21</sup> in which female object pedophiles (pedophiles who prefer female to male children) scored higher than normals on deference, succorance, and abasement and lower on achievement, autonomy, change, heterosexuality, and aggression. These findings were based on the Edward's Personal Preference Schedule. The high score on deference, in particular, might be viewed as similar to Howells' notion that pedophiles have difficulty with dominance. However, this is a precarious inference, and, most importantly, does not give any substantiation to the idea that children are preferred because of this difficulty.

**Immaturity and Self-esteem** Two other hypotheses that emotional congruence theories make about pedophiles are that they are immature and have low self-esteem. These ideas are well suited to substantiation through conventional psychologic tests, although surprisingly, few very thorough investigations of this sort have been done. (One study that used several standardized tests and also examined hypotheses related to "immaturity" and "arrested psychosexual development" theories as well as others is that by Ellis and Brancale.<sup>22</sup> However, because their conclusions are based on many types of sex offenders all lumped together, it seemed unwise to use their research findings to confirm or disconfirm theories about pedophilia. Hence, it was excluded from the present review.) Hammer and Glueck<sup>9</sup> gave the Rorschach, House-tree-person, Tat, and Blacky picture tests to 200 sex offenders and concluded that pedophiles feel psychosexually immature and lacking in self-esteem, but they say little of what findings from the tests warranted these conclusions.

Using the Blacky pictures, Stricker<sup>23</sup> was more specific and reported that

pedophiles tended, in comparison to a college sample, to significantly "overuse descriptive positives (e.g., beautiful, fair, kind) on the evaluative dimension of the scale." Based on the fact that females also use more positive responses on this dimension, Stricker concluded that "pedophiles share this immature, feminine approach." This seems a weak inference and one that reflects a great deal of sex role stereotyping, so should be treated with caution.

Peters<sup>24</sup> drew similar inferences, that pedophiles differed from normal men in that they were more immature, regressed, and had strong dependency needs and feelings of phallic inadequacy. These inferences were based on the results of the Bender Gestalt test with a sample of 224 probational male sex offenders. He also found that pedophiles scored higher than other sex offenders on the somatic scale of the Cornell Medical Index, meaning that they had a particularly large number of physical symptoms. He takes this to mean that there is "a strong tendency (for pedophiles) to somatize affective problems and thus view themselves as inferior. They seem to feel unable to compete with other men in efforts to attract adult women because of this felt inferiority." Some of these conclusions involve large conceptual leaps and should be viewed cautiously until more objective research becomes available.

Besides the above mentioned research, it has not been uncommon for investigators to give pedophiles MMPI tests and make inferences from these. Among the earliest studies was one by Toobert *et al.*,<sup>25</sup> who compared pedophiles with other prisoners in general and found pedophiles scored higher on the femininity and paranoia scales. They then concluded that pedophiles were "weak and inadequate and had low self-esteem." They saw this as supporting the theoretically predicted personality of a pedophile. In this case, as before, the investigators may be making unwarranted inferences from their findings, inferences that also seem to be affected by sex role stereotyping.

Panton<sup>26</sup> compared MMPI test results of 30 rapists, 20 child rapists, and 28 nonviolent child molesters. They report that the profiles of the child molesters "implied self-alienation, low self-esteem, self doubt, anxiety, inhibition of aggression, aversion to violence, need for reinforcement, feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and fear of heterosexual failure." From this they concluded that "the motivation of the molester group appeared to be the satisfaction of sexual needs at an immature level of sexual development."

Cavallin<sup>27</sup> also used the MMPI in his study of 12 incestuous offenders. While he does not report the actual MMPI findings, he indicated that, among other factors, results from the MMPI point to pedophiles having "weak psychosexual identity."

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There are, of course, many clinical studies that are in agreement with the above findings including Groth *et al.*,<sup>13</sup> Cohen *et al.*,<sup>28</sup> and Fitch.<sup>29</sup>

In sum, there seems to be a number of investigators who are in agreement that pedophiles are immature or inadequate. Some of these have found support for such contentions in psychological tests such as the MMPI. However, these investigators have often made broad and unwarranted inferences from test data, and we believe that the hypothesis is not much advanced beyond the status of a clinical inference. Perhaps, more importantly, even well-established evidence of immaturity and inadequacy on the part of pedophiles does not necessarily explain their sexual interaction with children. Howells' study<sup>17</sup> does provide some initial confirmation that pedophiles may interact with children because children have special meaning for them in terms of representing weak and nonthreatening objects. However, more such studies on the meaning that children have for pedophiles are needed.

### Sexual Arousal

Another group of theories about pedophilia are essentially explanations of how a person comes to find children sexually arousing. Wenet *et al.*<sup>30</sup> have suggested that early sexual experiences during childhood may condition such arousal patterns. The conditioning might occur through a process proposed by McGuire *et al.*<sup>31</sup> in which early experiences of arousal become incorporated into a fantasy that is repeated and becomes increasingly arousing through masturbatory repetitions. Such a fantasy might be instigated either through traumatic childhood encounters or perhaps through pleasurable ones as well.

In another theory of sexual arousal, Howells<sup>4</sup> speculated about how a process of "attributional error" may play a role in creating arousal to children. Children elicit strong emotional reactions in many people, reactions usually labeled parental or affectionate, but some individuals may label these reactions as sexual and then come to act toward the children accordingly.

Still other accounts of the origin of sexual arousal to children have focused on biologic factors such as hormone levels or chromosomal makeup.<sup>32-34</sup>

A final theory about sexual arousal derives from speculations that some individuals might learn to become aroused to children through exposure to child pornography or other media which project children in an erotic light.

**Studies Demonstrating Heightened Arousal** In examining the theories described above, the first matter to be established is whether pedophiles are in fact persons who have unusual sexual arousal to children. Some theorists

have denied that pedophilic activities are sexual in nature, but consider them as growing out of needs for power and assertion.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, there is a fairly impressive body of experimental evidence suggesting that pedophiles are indeed unusually sexually responsive to children. Most of the research has been conducted by Freund and colleagues<sup>36-39</sup> and Quinsey and colleagues.<sup>40</sup> In fact, this particular body of research represents the most methodologically and statistically sophisticated research on pedophilia.

Freund<sup>36,37</sup> and Freund and colleagues,<sup>38,39</sup> in a series of studies, investigated penile responses to slides of female and male children and adults. They found significantly more arousal to children in a group of pedophiles, both female object and male object, than in either of two control groups (homosexual and heterosexual males).

Quinsey *et al.*<sup>40</sup> have conducted a number of similar studies and have found similar results. For example, using penile and skin conductance responses to slides of children, they compared child molesters ( $n = 20$ ) with nonmolesters ( $n = 20$ ). Although the child molesters claimed adult females as their preferred sex object, in tests they exhibited the largest penile responses to slides of female children. The penile tests also confirmed that female object child molesters had peak arousal to female children and male object pedophiles to male children. Bisexual pedophiles, interestingly, had peak arousal to female children, although the second highest peak was for adult females. (For more on bisexual pedophiles, see Freund and Langevin.<sup>39</sup>) Atwood and Howell<sup>41</sup> also found that the pupils of child molesters dilated to slides of children and constricted to adult females, an opposite pattern than was found for a control group.

As a whole, the studies described above seem to establish the fact that some pedophiles have an arousal preference for children, but whether all child molesters, including incest offenders, have such a preference is not clear. There is at least one study which indicates that incest offenders do have such an arousal to children. Abel *et al.*<sup>42</sup> played audiotapes of sexual encounters to six female object incest offenders as well as ten female object pedophiles and found that, similar to the other pedophiles, the incest offenders "developed significant erections to pedophilic cues that were not descriptions of sexual acts with their daughters or stepdaughters." However, when Quinsey *et al.*<sup>43</sup> examined the penile responses of a matched sample of 16 incestuous and 16 nonincestuous child offenders, they found "that incestuous child molesters have more appropriate sexual age preferences (adults) than those who are non-incestuous."

**Early Sexual Experiences** While the studies described above indicate that at least some groups of pedophiles are sexually aroused by children, evidence about the source of this arousal is scarce. The best researched of the arousal hypotheses is one that suggests that it may stem from early

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childhood sexual experiences. Many pedophiles appear to have been subjected to early sexual contact with adults themselves. Gebhard *et al.*<sup>44</sup> found that both their male object and female object prison pedophile groups had higher rates of childhood sexual contacts with adults than did a group of controls. It was found, for example, that of the 199 female object child molesters, 10 percent had childhood contact with adult females compared with only 1 percent for the control group. Eighteen percent had had a childhood contact with adult males compared with 8 percent for controls. The male object pedophiles in the Gebhard *et al.* study<sup>44</sup> also had many child sexual contacts with adults, in fact more childhood sexual approaches by adult males than any other sex offender or control group, 33 percent (N = 123). Only the incest offenders among all pedophile groups were distinct in having less sexual contact with adults during prepuberty. The Gebhard *et al.*<sup>44</sup> findings do suggest that child sexual contact with adults is an important characteristic in the background of many pedophiles.

Groth's<sup>8</sup> research on child sexual contact with adults reinforces that of Gebhard *et al.*<sup>44</sup> Groth<sup>8</sup> found that 32 percent of a group of 106 child molesters reported some form of sexual trauma in their early development compared with only 3 percent of a comparison group of 64 police officers. Approximately twice as many of the "fixated" type offenders (who are also more commonly male object) had been victimized compared with the "regressed" type offenders. Moreover, Groth<sup>8</sup> observed that these offenders tended to duplicate in age of victim and type of sex act the form of victimization which they themselves had suffered.

Prentky<sup>45</sup> compared a group of rapists and child molesters and found that significantly more child molesters (57 percent) than rapists (23 percent) had been sexual assault victims. This finding also holds true in Groth's<sup>8</sup> sample if one only counts the "sex force" offenses and excludes types of experiences labeled by Groth as "sex pressure," "sex stress," "witness," and "psychologic."

In sum, there is evidence to support the contention that many pedophiles were the subjects of pedophilic attentions themselves. However, studies on this subject suffer from problems, most particularly related to control groups. For example, it is hard to imagine that a group of police are appropriate as a control for a group of pedophiles. However, the fact that more pedophiles have had such experiences than rapists is important in this regard, since rapists are another incarcerated population who may have a similar stake in providing background "excuses" for their deviance.

If a history of sexual assault is connected to later pedophilia, this evidence is consistent with several possible theories. One may be that such experiences condition an arousal to children. Another may be that the pedophiles learn the behavior through the early modeling of their own victimization. Still

other more psychoanalytic theories are that pedophiles repeat their own victimization in an effort to "master" the trauma of these early experiences or as a result of identifying with the older aggressor and trying to take on his/her power. These data are consistent with all of these theories, too. To test the conditioning theories, it might be important to know whether pleasurable and peer-type experiences as well as traumatic sexual experiences also lead to later pedophilia, a matter on which we could find little data. It is also important for the generational transmission theory to give a better account of why it is primarily victimized men who become victimizers, whereas the greater number of victims, women, do not.

**Biologic Factors** With respect to other theories of pedophilic sexual arousal, there has been only minimal research. Studies about biologic factors are scarce. Berlin and Coyle<sup>46</sup> report elevated testosterone levels in a substantial number of pedophiles seen at Johns Hopkins Hospital, a finding in conflict with the report of Rada *et al.*<sup>47</sup> that pedophiles' testosterone levels were within normal limits. But even Berlin and Coyle<sup>46</sup> concede that hormonal findings do not give much explanation of why children become arousing to pedophiles.

**Pornography** The hypothesis that pedophiles may learn arousal from exposure to pornography or advertising is also one that has not been extensively investigated. Goldstein *et al.*<sup>48</sup> found that pedophiles (20 male object and 20 female object) had had somewhat less exposure to pornography than had control groups. However, this study only asked about pornography portraying adult heterosexuality. Moreover, at the time of their research, the late 1960s, child pornography was much less available than it is at present.

In summary, empirical studies have shown that children are sexually arousing to at least some pedophiles and that sex object preference can be roughly determined from laboratory exposure. However, it is not clear whether this is true of all child molesters, especially incest offenders. Early childhood experiences with adults may play a role in this process, and these data are consistent with several theories, including the emotional congruence theory that the pedophile is trying to gain mastery over the trauma by repeating it, or the sexual arousal theory that the earlier experience conditioned the pedophile's erotic responses.

## Blockage

Some of the most popular theories about pedophilia focus on the proposition that individuals are blocked in their ability to get their sexual and emotional needs met in adult heterosexual relationships, and thus turn to children. The more psychoanalytically oriented see this blockage as stem-

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ming from oedipal dynamics or “castration anxiety.”<sup>9,49,50</sup> Others describe the blockage as stemming from timidity, unassertiveness, moralism, or lack of social skills.<sup>14,51</sup> Besides these types of blockages, which might be termed “developmental,” there are also more transitory or “situational” blockages which have been hypothesized as playing a role in pedophilia. In the family dynamics model of incest, for example, it is the break-down of the marital relationship that is usually described as impelling the father to seek sexual and emotional gratification from the daughter.<sup>52,53</sup>

As we pointed out in a previous article,<sup>3</sup> blockage theories present a problem because they apply to sexual deviance in general. They do not explain why, blocked from adult heterosexual outlets, a man becomes a pedophile rather than, for example, a rapist or exhibitionist, where the victim is an adult. Nonetheless, blockage theories are widely cited in the literature on pedophilia and may be one element of the process, along with others, that leads to sexual involvement with children.

**Difficulty Relating to Adult Females** There are a wide range of studies that do indicate that pedophiles may have many problems with adult females. In a study of 200 sex offenders, Hammer and Glueck<sup>9</sup> report “fear of heterosexual contact” as a common finding. In response to a Tat card showing a seminude mature woman, they report that 85 percent of the pedophiles and 87 percent of the incest offenders did not come up with the sexual theme normally offered, but instead came up with stories such as the female was sick, dying, or dead. These researchers also had a panel of psychologists compare the responses offered by the offenders to the House-tree-person, Blacky pictures, and Tat with those given by a group of normals. The clinicians rated 90 percent of the offender group as having “marked” or “moderate” castration feelings compared with only 55 percent of the control group.

Panton<sup>26</sup> compared several groups of rapists with a pedophile group. Based on responses to the pedophile scale (a special scale derived for the MMPI), he found, among other characteristics, that pedophiles tended to be anxious, inadequate individuals who felt insecure in their association with others and who expected rejection and failure in adult heterosexual advances. In a later study,<sup>54</sup> he compared incestuous versus nonincestuous child molesters and found the two groups to have profiles similar to those of the pedophiles, with the only significant difference occurring on the social introversion scale. He interprets this to mean that the incest sample had even greater inadequacies in social skills and difficulties in decision making.

Gebhard *et al.*<sup>44</sup> also noted that there were problems in the area of social relationships for the female object, male object, and incest offender group. Howells<sup>4</sup> reports additional confirmation in studies by Mohr *et al.*,<sup>5</sup> Fisher,<sup>20</sup>

Fisher and Howell,<sup>21</sup> Pacht and Cowden,<sup>55</sup> and a review by West.<sup>56</sup> A number of clinical type studies have reached similar conclusions.<sup>1, 11, 13, 28, 57-59</sup>

Pedophiles have also been shown to harbor unusual amounts of sexual anxiety, which may contribute to problems in relating to adult females. For example, Goldstein *et al.*<sup>48</sup> found that 80 percent of their pedophile group reported guilt or shame from looking at or reading erotica compared with 47 percent for a control group. These researchers also report that male object pedophiles expressed more opposition to talking about sex than any of the other study groups.

In sum, the evidence does seem to support the idea that many pedophiles do have problems relating to adult women and that possibly poor social skills and sexual anxiety contribute to this. Whether this has anything to do with family background and dynamics, as alleged in many of the theories, is, however, another matter. Gebhard *et al.*<sup>44</sup> found evidence of poor parental relationships for his heterosexual aggressor, incest, and male object (but not female object) offenders. But the types of poor relationships differed. Paitich and Langevin,<sup>60</sup> using the Clarke Parent-Child Relations Questionnaire, found problems with mothers to be characteristic of incest offenders, but not of other pedophiles. In general, the evidence on this matter is very spotty and inconclusive and cannot be said to support theories about castration anxiety or oedipal conflict.

**Disturbances in Adult Sexual or Romantic Relationships** The other component of the family dynamics blockage theme is related to the adult family life of the pedophile: that child molesters and incest offenders experience some disappointment or trauma in adult heterosexual relationships which triggers the pedophilic activity.

Fitch<sup>29</sup> classified 56 (11 male object and 45 female object) of his sample of 139 offenders and reoffenders against children as "frustrated" in sexual relationships. Gebhard *et al.*<sup>44</sup> also found their incestuous group's offenses always started during periods of marital stress, and, likewise, Cavallin<sup>27</sup> observed that in all of his 12 cases of incest offenders, the wife was seen as rejecting and threatening. (In the other sex offender groups marital problems were mentioned, but no specific association was drawn between marital disturbances and pedophilia.<sup>44</sup> In addition, the work by Groth,<sup>8</sup> Peters,<sup>24</sup> and Cohen *et al.*<sup>28</sup> all report similar findings. The evidence from all of those studies suggests that the "disturbance in a marital or love relationship" is better at explaining pedophilic behavior among the type of offenders who prefer adult females (regressed offenders in Groth's terms). However, few of the investigations making these assertions have presented good, quantified evidence for this theory.

**Repressive Norms About Sex** A final blockage-type theory is the idea that repressive norms or attitudes about such things as masturbation and

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extramarital sex may be related to pedophilia. Goldstein *et al.*<sup>48</sup> found that pedophiles reported more guilt or shame from looking at or reading erotica than either rapists or controls. They also listed "fear of sex" as the main barrier to seeking more mature sexual outlets, were opposed to premarital sex, and expressed more discomfort with respect to talking about sex than any other group. Gebhard *et al.*<sup>44</sup> also found strong moral inhibitions to premarital intercourse among the female object pedophiles but not among any of the other pedophile groups. In short, it seems that some pedophiles may hold repressive sexual attitudes that may predispose them toward sexual activities with children.

In summary, then, one blockage-type theory does receive support: that pedophiles have problems relating to adult females in particular and maybe even to adults in general. As noted, there is some evidence that they have unusual sexual anxiety and also that they may suffer from frustration in love relationships. But, many, many people in the general population have love-related or marital problems. Hence, future research needs to investigate how blockage combines with other factors to create individuals who are predisposed to sexual interaction with children.

## Disinhibition

A final set of theories about pedophilia are essentially accounts of why conventional inhibitions against having sex with children are overcome or absent. According to these theories, some mechanism, process, or condition works to disinhibit pedophiles so that they are able to sexually interact with children.

Sometimes this disinhibition is seen as the result of a personality disturbance. Pedophiles are described as having psychopathic tendencies, being senile, brain damaged, retarded, or psychotic. Pedophiles are also regularly described as persons with alcohol abuse problems.

Sometimes the disinhibition is seen as a result of situational factors. Unemployment, loss of love, death of a relative, and other stress conditions are often cited as lowering the barriers to allow sexual abuse. Theories of incestuous fathers regularly point to job stresses and marital difficulties (a blockage factor as well as a potential disinhibitor).

A disinhibition-type theory that applies exclusively to incestuous fathers is the idea that some men, because they were out of the household when the child was very young, do not develop the conventional inhibitions against sex with a close family member. A related idea is that being a stepfather as opposed to a biologic father weakens the incest taboo.

Still other disinhibition theories focus on social and cultural forces. Feminists<sup>61</sup> and others<sup>62</sup> point out that elements of the male subculture

have for centuries approved of sexual interaction with children. This approval and other elements of the patriarchal culture, such as the beliefs that children are property or should absolutely obey their fathers, make it easier for men to overcome the barriers to committing incest or sexually abusing children.

As will become apparent, there is empirical support for some of the elements of disinhibition theories and also evidence that some have little relevance. Most propositions, however, have not been tested.

**Lack of Impulse Control** One disinhibition-type theory for which there is some support is lack of impulse control. Based on 200 sex offenders' responses to the Bender Gestalt and Blacky pictures, Hammer and Glueck<sup>9</sup> identified inadequate control of impulses as the third factor of their four-factor theory. Gebhard *et al.*<sup>44</sup> found that 10 percent of their female object pedophiles were "amoral delinquents" characterized by being "unable to defer gratification and tolerate frustration until a socially suitable situation is available." However, impulse control is not a problem for all pedophiles. For the other 70 percent of the pedophiles in the Gebhard *et al.* sample,<sup>44</sup> impulsivity did not seem to be an outstanding characteristic. In fact, Gebhard *et al.*<sup>44</sup> point out that 80 percent or more of the acts engaged in by all of the pedophile groups were planned, not impulsive.

In summary, probably some small group of pedophiles actually suffer from impulse disorders. However, there is little evidence that it is a characteristic of pedophiles in general.

**Senility and Mental Retardation** A once popular disinhibition-type explanation of pedophilia was that pedophiles were senile. As a whole, current evidence contradicts this theory. Studies show most offenders to be between 35 and 40 years old<sup>23, 29, 44, 58, 59, 63-65</sup> or even younger—in their mid to late twenties.<sup>40, 43, 66, 67</sup> In a two-state sample of sex offenders, Groth *et al.*<sup>68</sup> identified two modal groups, one age 16 and the other 31. Mohr *et al.*<sup>5</sup> also found a youthful group between 15 and 24. As with impulse disorders, there may be a small group of senile pedophiles, but it does not appear to be common.

The evidence is also generally negative about the stereotype of the pedophile as mentally retarded. Peters,<sup>24</sup> for example, used the revised Army Beta intelligence examination and did find pedophiles to have the lowest IQ of four sex offender groups, but his findings are an exception. Mohr *et al.*<sup>5</sup> used the Wechsler Adult IQ scale and found their 57 pedophiles to have normal intelligence. Their results concur with a number of other studies.<sup>1, 69, 70</sup>

**Alcohol** Evidence for the alcohol-related disinhibition theory, however, is quite a different story. Many studies show that alcohol involvement accompanies pedophilic acts, meaning that the person was an alcoholic

and/or drinking at the time of the offense. Aarens *et al.*,<sup>71</sup> for example, reviewed eleven U.S. and two foreign empirical studies and found the use of alcohol involved in 30 to 40 percent of the cases in most studies (ranging from a low of 19 percent of the cases in a German study<sup>72</sup> to an overall high of 49 percent in an American study<sup>73</sup>). They also found that studies showed 45 to 50 percent of child molesters had histories of drinking problems (low of 8 percent to high of 70 percent).

Studies by Gebhard *et al.*,<sup>44</sup> Rada,<sup>73</sup> and Stokes<sup>69</sup> have shown female object pedophiles to be more alcohol involved than male object pedophiles. Gebhard *et al.*,<sup>44</sup> for example, reported that 37 percent of their female object pedophiles compared with 10 percent of the male group said alcohol was a significant factor in their lives. Rada<sup>73</sup> found 57 percent of the female object pedophiles were involved in use of alcohol as compared with 38 percent of the male object pedophiles. The comparative figures of Stokes<sup>69</sup> were 25 percent and 8 percent, respectively.

Aarens *et al.*<sup>71</sup> concluded from a review of five relevant studies that incest offenders appear to be the most alcohol involved of all pedophiles. In their comparison across studies, they found incestuous child molesters were characterized by larger proportions of both alcoholics and offenders who were drinking at the time of the offense than were nonincestuous child molesters. Morgan<sup>74</sup> reviewed many of the same studies as Aarens *et al.*<sup>71</sup> and reached similar conclusions.

It seems safe to say that alcohol plays a role in the commission of offenses by some groups of pedophiles. Alcohol may act as a direct physiologic disinhibitor or it may have some social meaning that allows a person to disregard the taboos against child molestation. This remains a somewhat unresolved question in the field of alcohol abuse.<sup>74</sup>

**Incest Avoidance Mechanism** There are only two studies that we are aware of that address the "failure of incest avoidance mechanism" idea. Based on responses from a survey of a college population, Finkelhor<sup>75</sup> reports that one of the strongest risk factors associated with a child's vulnerability to being sexually abused is having lived with a stepfather.

Based on responses from a probability sample of 930 women residents in San Francisco, Russell<sup>76</sup> reports that approximately 1 of every 40 women who had a biologic father as a principal figure in their childhood (birth to 14 years) was sexually abused by him, compared with about 1 of every 6 women who lived with a stepfather during these same years. There are various possible explanations for the apparently high risk of abuse at the hands of stepfathers. One of the most plausible falls within the disinhibition theory framework, that because of different norms or different exposure to the child at an early age, stepfathers are less inhibited from sexual feelings toward a child than are natural fathers.

The remaining disinhibition theories listed in Table 1 have not been subjected to any empirical examinations that we are aware of. There is no research aimed at confirming, for example, the situational stress notion offered by Groth<sup>8</sup> and others as an explanation of pedophilia. Likewise, there are no studies that have investigated a "cultural norm or attitudinal" theory of pedophilia; e.g., that pedophiles hold more patriarchal attitudes or have attitudes that give more legitimacy to having sex with children.

In conclusion, it is clear that of all disinhibition theories, the one with the most empirical support is that of alcohol involvement. The failure of the incest avoidance mechanism theory as it relates to stepfathers also receives some support.

### Problems in Pedophilia Research

As can be seen from the preceding review, it is hard to draw unambiguous conclusions about what factors lead to pedophilia on the basis of the available research. The field is plagued with problems that contribute to this difficulty and thus hamper the accretion of scientific knowledge.

**Definitional and Classification Problems** One group of problems with research on pedophilia concerns the issue of defining pedophilia and grouping pedophiles. First, different researchers have included different groups of offenders within their definitions of pedophilia. Some, such as Fitch<sup>29</sup> and Langevin,<sup>1</sup> have included offenders against both pre- and postpubertal children, while others such as Glueck,<sup>77</sup> Gebhard *et al.*,<sup>44</sup> McCaghy,<sup>65</sup> Mohr *et al.*,<sup>5</sup> and Cohen *et al.*<sup>28</sup> have limited pedophiles only to those who have sexual contact with prepubertal children. Even then, if mentioned, researchers differ on how they determine puberty. Gebhard *et al.*<sup>44</sup> defined prepubertal children as those "under age twelve," while McCaghy<sup>65</sup> included anyone "13 or younger."

Another definitional problem is that some researchers<sup>17,24</sup> include as pedophiles anyone who has had sexual contact with children (what we called earlier the "inclusive" definition), whereas others limit themselves to so-called "fixated types" (what are sometimes called "true pedophiles").

How researchers handle these matters has very important research implications. For example, it is possible that the theory about early sexual trauma better explains pedophilia where there is a more enduring interest in children than where the interest is temporary. If all groups of pedophiles are combined, one might come to the empirical conclusion that sexual trauma is not that common and thus not predictive, when in fact it may be very predictive, but only for a particular segment of the larger group. By the same token, if a particular theory is quite relevant to one group of pedophiles and that group is overrepresented in a sample, we might attribute greater weight to it as a general theory of pedophilia than is the case.

## Explanations of Pedophilia

Another way in which research studies are not always comparable concerns the handling of pedophilic sex object choice. Some studies noted in the review such as Gebhard *et al.*,<sup>44</sup> Mohr *et al.*,<sup>5</sup> Fitch,<sup>29</sup> Goldstein *et al.*,<sup>48</sup> and McCaghy<sup>65</sup> have differentiated pedophiles according to their victim preference—male object and female object pedophilia. Others such as Peters,<sup>24</sup> Stricker,<sup>23</sup> Cohen *et al.*,<sup>28</sup> and Hammer and Glueck<sup>9</sup> have made no such differentiation. It is possible that some theories, such as ones based on emotional congruence, may be better able to explain male object pedophilia while other theories, such as blockage-type explanations, may be better able to explain the female object type. Complicating things even more, studies by Freund and Langevin<sup>39</sup> suggest that there is a group of bisexual pedophiles who differ from either male object or female object types. This means that it may be important to have a three-way rather than two-way classification of victim preference-based pedophilia.

Another problem of grouping types of offenders centers around the issue of incest. Some researchers such as Gebhard *et al.*,<sup>44</sup> Langevin *et al.*,<sup>78</sup> Quinsey *et al.*,<sup>43</sup> and Panton<sup>54</sup> separate incestuous from nonincestuous offenders, while others such as Mohr *et al.*<sup>5</sup> lump incestuous offenders with other pedophiles. Still others, such as McCaghy,<sup>65</sup> Marsh *et al.*,<sup>58</sup> and Fitch<sup>29</sup> make it difficult to tell whether incest offenders are included or excluded from their samples. While this problem is understandable since there seems to be some debate as to whether incest offenders are in fact pedophiles,<sup>60,78</sup> it still adds to the problem of assessing research based on different types of pedophile groups.

In sum, the problems associated with defining pedophilia and grouping pedophiles create difficulties in evaluating research. First, it is hard to compare studies where one treats all child molesters alike,<sup>24</sup> another breaks them down by age of victim choice,<sup>65</sup> another by preferred sex object,<sup>44</sup> another according to incestuous or nonincestuous offenders,<sup>43</sup> and still another by enduringness of sexual interest in children.<sup>10,13</sup> Second, in accepting or rejecting theories, it is hard to know whether the decision should apply to only some types of pedophilia or all types.

**Sample-related Problems** A final and much discussed problem with pedophilia research has to do with the fact that almost all research is based on pedophiles being recruited from the criminal justice system. The subjects tend to be either prisoners or probationers in treatment. Among the problems of a group such as this are:

1. One might be seeing only characteristics of pedophiles who get caught. The stereotype of the pedophile as shy, ineffectual, and passive<sup>1,25</sup> may have emerged because it is this type who gets apprehended. Those who do not may have quite a different profile.
2. Other characteristics of pedophiles within the criminal justice system

may simply be the results of their contact with this process. Findings of low self-esteem, for example, may reflect only the experience of getting caught or being a prisoner.<sup>79</sup>

3. It is also possible that institutionalized offenders have special incentives to provide researchers with answers they think the researchers want to hear or that will help them (offenders) get released. McCaghy,<sup>65</sup> for example, found that pedophiles gave different reasons for committing sexual offenses after they had been in therapy (arrested development, oedipal complex, etc.).

4. Even when control groups are used, they are frequently other prisoners convicted of nonsexual or nonpedophilic crimes.<sup>9,24,80,81</sup> Thus, all we learn is how two prison populations vary. Other types of controls, however, present another problem. If nonprison samples such as college students are used<sup>58</sup> and careful methodological procedures are not used, any differences that arise may be differences between students and prisoners, not pedophiles and nonpedophiles. On the other hand, if nonpedophile prisoners are used as controls, some of the control group may actually be pedophiles who were charged with some other offense.

Given the various problems discussed above, it should not be surprising that we found mixed results regarding the theories we evaluated. At this stage of research on pedophilia, attempts to confirm or disconfirm theories are fraught with problems concerning how: (1) pedophilia is defined; (2) samples of pedophiles are subdivided and/or control groups are used; and (3) standardized measures and statistical procedures are used. Moreover, what we have reported in this article is perhaps only relevant to the segment of pedophiles who get caught and/or incarcerated. Nonetheless, even this research with all its inadequacy may be useful in dispelling certain stereotypical notions about the problem. Certainly, reviews such as this, and questions raised by them, can form a legitimate base from which scientists can begin to do more systematic research in confirming old theories as well as developing new ones. This should lead to a better understanding of why adults become attracted to and engage in sexual relations with children.

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