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Identifying the Coping Strategies of Nonoffending Pedophilic and Hebephilic Individuals From Their Online Forum Posts

Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

Individuals who identify as pedophilic or hebephilic, and who do not offend, are increasingly visible in online discourse and as a focus of research. Developing knowledge about this population will offer insights into their psychological needs and, potentially, into the mechanisms and strategies individuals use to live offense-free lives. This study examined coping strategies among members of an online forum supporting pedohebephilic individuals who do not wish to offend. Forum users' posts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Eleven themes emerged, which were classifiable into three superordinate themes around (a) the acceptance of pedophilia, (b) strategies to stay safe, and (c) dealing with sexual arousal. These themes offer insight into the varying strategies used by these individuals to cope with stress and/or to remain offense-free. Understanding whether these strategies are adaptive or maladaptive may help develop better support services for those who have not offended and may inform prevention efforts.

Keywords

pedophilia, hebephilia, internet, thematic analysis, coping

Pedohebephilia is an umbrella term used to describe a predominant sexual interest in either prepubescent (pedophilia) or early pubescent children (hebephilia), or both

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(Cantor, 2012). The labels used to describe these individuals are often used interchangeably in public discourse with pedohebephilic individuals being described as “child molesters” and vice versa (Theaker, 2015). However, these labels are not synonymous as child sexual abuse can occur without the presence of pedohebephilic sexual interest (Feelgood & Hoyer, 2008; Seto, 2008). The term *child molestation* reflects the act of sexual abuse against a child, whereas *pedohebephilia* refers to a sexual interest in children and is independent of whether or not a person has acted upon this preference (Feelgood & Hoyer, 2008). Therefore, it is possible to have pedohebephilic interests and not sexually abuse children.

Until relatively recently, individuals with a sexual interest in children who do not act on these attractions were an underrepresented group in research (Cantor & McPhail, 2016). However, an emerging literature is beginning to offer a deeper understanding of the characteristics of this group (e.g., Freimond, 2013; Houtepen et al., 2016; Mitchell, 2014; Mitchell & Galupo, 2016; Raven et al., 2014). In the research literature, these individuals are referred to as nonoffending pedophiles or nonoffending hebephiles, and often self-identify as *virtuous pedophiles* or *minor-attracted persons*¹ (Walker & Panfil, 2017). The current study examined forum user posts on virped.org (Virtuous Pedophiles), which, despite its name, also includes individuals whose stated interests would be more accurately classed as hebephilic.

In the absence of a rich literature on individuals with pedohebephilic interests who do not offend, the field has relied on studies sampling pedohebephilic individuals who have also committed (and typically been apprehended for) contact or noncontact sexual offenses. As a result, primary prevention efforts are being informed by research on the criminogenic needs of individuals who have offended, but are less informed by the effective strategies of people who live offense-free lives. To date, several studies have offered evidence on the characteristics of purportedly nonoffending individuals with pedohebephilic interests that may inform prevention efforts (for a review, see Cantor & McPhail, 2016). Despite this, empirical research examining coping strategies among individuals with pedohebephilic attractions who do not commit sexual offenses has been extremely limited (Cantor & McPhail, 2016).

In a general sense, coping strategies refer to the ways in which an individual responds and regulates their behavior in response to an aversive or challenging event (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). Coping strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive, and the adaptiveness of a given strategy can vary across context and time (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). They may also be moderated by the controllability of the stressful event (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Two qualitative studies, looking at how individuals who identify as pedophilic cope with their sexual interest, have found a number of themes relating to the maintenance of offense-free lives. In an unpublished study, Mitchell (2014) reported that a small number of individuals with a sexual interest in children—but who stated they had not acted on those interests—reported using masturbation to fantasies as a way of reducing the level of sexual desire and, therefore, the possibility of offending. Houtepen et al. (2016) conducted semi-structured interviews with a small sample of self-identified, community-based pedophilic males to better understand the onset of pedophilia and the coping strategies they employed,

which they stated helped them to live offense-free. For this sample, in addition to masturbatory fantasies, engagement with adult relationships was also endorsed as an effective way to cope with and reduce sexual arousal. Although participants in the Houtepen et al.'s (2016) study were currently motivated not to offend, the majority had watched pornographic material containing children or had committed child sexual abuse. Therefore, their articulated coping strategies may not be fully effective. Houtepen et al. (2016) also identified avoidant coping strategies—such as drug abuse—among individuals experiencing shame and who were trying to suppress their sexual feelings.

Both Houtepen et al. (2016) and Mitchell (2014) identified social support as a mechanism facilitating coping with pedophilic attraction and reducing the possibility of offending. Increased social support may act as a buffer to lessen or eliminate the negative affect of stressful events (Cohen et al., 2000). In terms of the impact of social support on criminality, there is evidence that the protective function of social support may depend on the availability of prosocial sources of social support (Brezina & Azimi, 2018). Houtepen et al. (2016) found evidence of two sources of social support: support from other pedophilic individuals and support from nonpedophilic individuals. Having support from other pedophilic individuals was found to offer reassurance that participants were not alone and gave them the freedom to speak openly about their attractions. Support from nonpedophilic individuals gave participants a sense of acceptance. In addition, supportive individuals could potentially act as a safeguard when they were around children, helping them to regulate their own behavior and maintain legal boundaries. Conversely, social support in Mitchell's (2014) study was found to have only a minor influence on decisions in the nonoffending sample. This may be because many participants in their sample linked support with disclosure and, as a result, may not have felt it possible for their friends and family to be supportive where they had not disclosed their sexual interests.

Understanding how individuals with pedohebephilic interests remain offense-free is vital to support prevention efforts. Unfortunately, due to the stigma associated with sexual interest in children and fear of exposure (see Jahnke & Hoyer, 2013), acquiring an adequate sample can be challenging. However, projects offering support and treatment for nonoffending pedophiles have demonstrated that this group can be reached and can be motivated to seek help (Beier et al., 2015; Levenson & Grady, 2019; Van Horn et al., 2015). Many help-seeking individuals indicated they had already disclosed their sexual interest and sought treatment (Beier et al., 2009), although many also faced considerable barriers when doing so (Levenson & Grady, 2019). Despite the ability of researchers to reach these populations, studies of nonoffending pedohebephilic individuals carry considerable limitations.

A key potential limitation of anonymous studies of sexual interest and sexual behavior is their reliance on self-report. Participants may underreport problematic behavior due to lack of trust, social desirability, and fear of losing anonymity. One approach to potentially overcome some of the limitations of traditional self-report approaches is to carry out research on naturally occurring discourse. The current study observed discourse among an online community sample of purportedly nonoffending

pedohebephilic individuals to identify the coping strategies they use and the advice they offered in support of their peers. Forum users were not directly engaged or asked questions to observe a more natural discourse, thus potentially reducing socially desirable responding and removing any demand characteristics.

Posts on the internet forum virped.org underwent thematic analysis. Virped.org is an online forum created to offer advice and support to those who have a sexual interest in children and do not wish to act on it. The forum, created by nonoffending pedophiles, also aims to raise public awareness in the hope it will reduce the stigma associated with pedophilia. Fear of stigma and concerns over confidentiality are key barriers to help-seeking among people with a sexual interest in children (Levenson & Grady, 2019). Virped.org therefore may provide the main or only resource for peer support and guidance for many pedohebephilic individuals. The aim of the current study was to identify the coping strategies of virped.org users both for managing stress related to their sexual interests and for managing their sexual interests, including minimizing the possibility of offending.

Method

Sample

The data set in this study consisted of posts written by members of the virped.org community. Due to the anonymous nature of the forum, demographics such as gender and age could not be reliably obtained. With more than 4,700 members, virped.org offers support to those with a sexual interest in children and who contribute to the forum in the context of an ethos that “sexual activity between adults and children is wrong” (virped.org FAQs, 2020). To access the site, users must be committed to living offense-free lives and there are strict rules about what can be discussed/shared. Although the site is dedicated to supporting these individuals and keeping children safe, some users may have histories that include sexual offenses against children and the use of indecent images of children. It is also possible that some users who report to be nonoffending were not, in fact, living offense-free lives. Users are aware that the forum is very likely to be monitored by police. Users therefore may be selective about the information they post and may promote a more positive picture about how they manage and cope in their everyday lives, painting an idealized version of themselves rather than a true reflection.

Data and Data Collection

The study was approved by the University of Kent School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 20153624) and by forum moderators on virped.org. Data were collected systematically by selecting threads from two of 22 discussion areas from the virped.org website. Threads are single topics of conversation started by one member to initiate discussion, while discussion areas sort threads into their relevant topics.

Threads were selected from a 12-month period between May 2015 and April 2016, from two discussion areas (“Requests for support” and “keeping kids and ourselves safe”). These discussion areas were selected as the most likely to contain relevant discussions. Discussion areas we did not examine included areas dedicated to forum rules, research studies, and member introductions and areas focused on topics like humor, sports, and music. Although we chose two discussions that we expected to include a large amount of relevant content, other areas of the forum may potentially include useful data (e.g., a dedicated area for women attracted to children and a discussion area about recent life experiences). These were not examined in the current study.

Threads within chosen discussion areas were selected based on their relevance and included any posts that discussed strategies to manage sexual attractions. As it was not possible to isolate posts by individuals who may have previously offended from those who had not, all posts within selected threads were included. In total, 30 threads were identified that contained discourse relevant to the research topic. This included any advice given by forum users to help manage the risk of sexual offending as well as ways of managing stress related to their sexual interest. The number of posts per thread ranged from four to 36, and in total, 326 posts were analyzed and coded to form the data set. Examination of the usernames of forum users suggested that posts by up to 87 unique individuals contributed to the data set. Although several users contributed more regularly than others, none of the final themes we identified were dominated by frequent contributors.

Data were organized using the software package NVivo, which is a qualitative data-managing program that allows large quantities of raw data to be sorted, analyzed, and explored more efficiently (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). This software supports qualitative analysis as it enables researchers to link memos to the data, use coding strips to show the relationships between themes, and create visual hierarchy charts and mind maps.

Analytic Method

Data were analyzed by the first author using thematic analysis, a method used to identify themes and patterns across a data set, which is particularly suitable for investigating underresearched areas (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). In approaching the sampled forum posts, the primary coder (first author) applied a critical realist approach to seek to make sense both of the forum users’ perspectives on their experiences and of the wider social influences that affected those perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was used to develop codes and themes from the data without relying on prior theoretical knowledge and to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which forum users manage their own sexual interests as well as the advice and support they offer to other users. Data were read multiple times to become familiar with the data set and then coded using a five-step process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Step 1 involved familiarization with the data, including reading, rereading, and making notes of any initial patterns that emerged. In Step 2, initial codes were

Table 1. Summary of the Three Superordinate Themes and Their 11 Subthemes.

Superordinate themes	Subthemes
Accepting and living with pedohebephilia	Accepting their sexual interest (14)
	Not beating themselves up (15)
	Being positive about pedohebephilia (8)
Staying safe	Having contact rules (12)
	Mentally preparing (11)
	Using distraction (9)
	Using avoidance (39)
	Removing temptation (14)
	Considering consequences (5)
“When I get that feeling”	Using legal outlets (39)
	Masturbating to child fantasies (39)

Note. The number in parentheses denotes the number of extracts contributing to each subtheme.

generated. Codes are meaningful groups or interesting concepts within the data that have not yet been brought together into a broader theme. The first author identified relevant codes by focusing on features of the data related to (a) coping strategies used and/or (b) advice given to others, to minimize the possibility of offending or reduce stress caused by forum users' sexual interests. Once all the data had been coded, the third step involved looking for any patterns between codes—and how they may fit together—thus generating candidate themes. At the end of this step, all extracts that appeared to relate to a code had been identified, and no themes had been discarded. The fourth step involved pruning themes that did not appear sufficiently supported, collapsing candidate themes that seemed to reflect overlapping themes and examining the coherence of the coded extracts within the themes. The fifth step involved further refinement, looking at the relationship between themes, and produced three superordinate themes and 11 subthemes. In this phase, we defined and named the final themes. While all steps were initially completed by the first author, Steps 4 and 5 were revisited and refined by all authors during the process of preparing the manuscript for publication, leading to fine-tuning of themes and labels.

From the complete data set of 326 posts, 196 unique extracts contributed to the final themes. Several of these were multifaceted and contributed to multiple themes. As a result, the total number of extracts per theme shown on Table 1 exceeds 196. Interrater reliability was examined by selecting 10% of the data (20 randomly selected extracts) to ensure that a second rater (the second author) could reliably interpret each extract as representing the themes identified by the first author. The second rater was blind as to how many of the themes were represented within the selection of extracts and not all to-be-rated extracts corresponded to a theme. Percentage agreement between the first and second raters was 85% ($\kappa = .83$, bias-corrected and accelerated 95% confidence interval [BCa 95% CI] = [.69, .94]), representing strong agreement (McHugh, 2012).

Results

In total, 11 subthemes were identified and sorted into three overarching themes. In keeping with the forum rules and the British Psychological Society's (2013) Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research, no identifying information, including direct quotes from posts, were used in the write-up of this analysis for publication. While direct quotes would have enriched the presentation of our results, this extra layer of anonymity was important in this study, as consent to access the posts was agreed with forum moderators but not with the individual posters.²

Theme 1: Accepting and Living With Pedohebephilia

This theme reflected content related to coming to terms with pedophilia and recognizing that forum users are not responsible for their attractions.

Accepting their sexual interests. This subtheme was based on 14 extracts from 11 unique users. The extracts contributing to this theme suggested that, for forum users, coming to terms with their attractions was difficult. The majority of forum users who made relevant comments articulated that not coming to terms with their pedohebephilia had major consequences, which placed them at risk. Individuals who had accepted their sexual interests, identified a level of pride, not necessarily in being pedophilic or hebephilic, but being proud of the ways in which they have managed their attractions. One user articulated the view that although pedophilia may be a part of who they are, it did not define them.

Not beating themselves up. Guilt and self-loathing were identified by users as factors to avoid or overcome in order to come to terms with their pedohebephilia. Fifteen extracts from 12 unique users contributed to this subtheme. One user suggested that such difficulties were partly due to negative media and societal messages—that pedophiles will inevitably give in to their urges and offend. Users who appeared to present as more confident with their sexual interests maintained that there is nothing to be ashamed of, as long as they remained offense-free. The concepts of guilt and shame appeared in a number of extracts. It was not, however, clear that users were distinguishing between these constructs. Instead, forum users appeared to be using the terms to communicate to others that they should not engage in negative self-judgment due to having pedohebephilic interests or engaging in fantasy involving children.

Being positive about pedohebephilia. This subtheme reflects the way in which having a positive outlook on pedohebephilia can shape people in positive ways and was based on eight extracts from eight users. For several of these users, being positive about their sexual interest was something learnt through experience. Two users argued their pedohebephilia created energy and passion. Passion in this context appeared to reflect experiencing an active emotional life rather than feeling emotionally deadened, which could be an issue for those with exclusive pedophilia if they feel unable to express

themselves emotionally or sexually. One user stated that they harnessed these feelings and used them in positive ways. The emotional connection that they have with children was something that some users said they would not part with. For these individuals, this appeared more important than the sexual component, with one member stating they would happily remove the sexual attraction if they could retain the emotional connection.

Theme 2: Staying Safe

Staying safe contained six subthemes and referred to the ways in which forum users dealt with their sexual interest to protect both themselves and children.

Having contact rules. Forum users set themselves guidelines, or contact rules, to safely interact with children. This subtheme was based on 12 extracts from 11 unique users. A large proportion of these users referred to rules such as the *present parent test* (when alone with a child, behave as you would if their parents were present), *child-initiated only contact* (child initiates sitting on lap/holding hands), as well as rules about contact on social media. These rules appear to act as a safety net to maintain control in difficult situations, which users stated caused them great anxiety and stress. One forum user discussed these rules as strategies to define boundaries and maintain contact with children without appearing suspicious or creepy. One user stated that children needed to ask before any interaction took place so that it would be clear to any onlookers exactly who initiated the contact. Another forum user stated that they discourage all physical contact with their girlfriend's children, as the children's behavior toward them feels sexual and makes the forum user uncomfortable.

Mentally preparing. This subtheme related to the way in which forum users prepared to manage potentially risky situations. Eleven extracts exemplified this subtheme based on posts by nine users. Users advised imagining specific scenarios that they would find particularly difficult, and thinking of ways in which they could respond to manage their behavior appropriately. Discussions suggested that users used this method to prevent being caught unaware as well as to develop confidence that they would be able to handle risky situations should they arise. Examples of rehearsed scenarios included being asked to babysit or a child suggesting sexual activity. Preparation techniques also included ways in which forum users organized their lives to reduce the possibility of encountering children. For example, an individual described how they plan shopping trips so that they can arrive early when there are fewer people, park close to the entrance, and have an exit strategy if they encounter too many children. This level of organization reflects the lengths that individual forum users went to to make their day-to-day experiences less stressful. One user stressed that it was important that this type of mental preparation should remain constructive and not develop into a fantasy.

Using distraction. Diverting energies into areas other than their sexual interests was a coping mechanism that forum users found helpful and recommended. Nine extracts from seven users provided the core evidence for this subtheme. Distraction was discussed in terms of hobbies and other interests such as physical (sports) activities. This method was suggested by users to help occupy the mind and distract from unwanted thoughts. Some forum users considered distraction merely as a tool to control temptation, while a few regarded their choice of method as having been a huge positive in their lives.

Using avoidance. To stay safe, users highlighted the importance of minimizing opportunities where risky behavior could occur. There was a large amount of content relevant to this subtheme in the data set, with 39 relevant extracts from 26 users. For many, avoidance was endorsed as a good strategy that they felt helped them reduce risk and stay safe. Avoidance was spoken about in situations where users expressed a lack of confidence that they would be able to control their thoughts and behaviors. Examples of avoidance included going out during school hours or avoiding specific locations where there are many children. Others used avoidance strategies to avoid becoming too attached, with one user stating he can become attached almost immediately after meeting a child, following which his emotions can become difficult to deal with. Users who felt less confident about interacting with children suggested avoiding them completely. However, a substantial number (12) of the extracts in this section related to the avoidance of situations where users were alone with children. Seven extracts related specifically to the avoidance of alcohol because of its disinhibiting effects. The subtheme of avoidance differed from other subthemes such as *mentally preparing*, as the extracts typically did not include much concrete detail on how to avoid these situations.

Removing temptation. The concept of temptation featured in 14 extracts from 12 users spanning a range of threads, with some individuals stating they have never struggled with it and others stating that they find self-control difficult. Discourse around temptation mainly occurred when users spoke about social media and using the internet in general. Users highlighted how easy it was to talk to children online or to access online images of children. As a result, forum users developed ways of managing their online behavior. For some, this meant complete removal of any internet access at home, including smartphone devices, forcing themselves to use public computers with no anonymity. For others, temptation was less frequent, with some forum users describing infrequent periods of vulnerability where they felt at risk of losing control. In these instances, users described using methods such as locking their devices away in a timed safe or handing them over to a partner until they felt more in control of their urges.

Considering consequences. Another method used by a small number of forum users (five individuals) to help them maintain legal boundaries was to think through their actions and the possible consequences. Individuals spoke about this in terms of taking the child's perspective, considering their feelings and the possibility that they may

experience mental and physical harm. One user described how thinking ahead, about the actions they would like to take, and the feeling this gave them (that their actions would be wrong) prevented them from crossing any boundaries. The same user stated that they only find themselves in risky situations when they are not thinking about the morality of their actions.

Theme 3: “When I Get That Feeling”

This theme highlights the ways in which forum users manage their sexual desires to “stay legal,” as well as focusing on the different views they have with regard to the effectiveness of these methods.

Using legal outlets. Being unable to satisfy their sexual needs was a topic discussed quite frequently among users, who described a variety of methods that helped them with sexual release. Thirty-nine extracts in the final data set were relevant to this sub-theme, with 30 unique contributors. Users with nonexclusive pedohebephilia (also attracted to adults) described how having an adult relationship or viewing adult pornography helped them to manage their pedohebephilic desires. This method was referred to frequently among users as a way to manage their attractions. For users exclusively attracted to children, many argued that finding methods for sexual release was more challenging. Some users stated that using pornography where adults look younger was not ideal but an acceptable outlet. The use of *twink* pornography—depicting men in their late teens or early 20s who are typically of slim build—was mentioned by some users, as well as pornography containing women with less pronounced development of secondary sexual characteristics and no pubic hair. However, for several users, the level of physical maturity of actors in legal pornography limited its appeal. Several of these individuals stated that they watched nonpornographic videos or images featuring children in their age of interest instead of pornography.

Forum users discussed seeking out pornography from cultures who are typically youthful looking, with one member stating that they find Asian men more appealing and another preferring pornography depicting Japanese women dressed as schoolgirls. *Lolicon* manga or anime material—a genre of Japanese cartoon depicting female children in an erotic or pornographic manner—was also mentioned to be useful by a number of users (the equivalent depicting male children is called *shotacon*) as were pornographic stories that some had written themselves. However, many users with exclusive pedophilia indicated that they were unable to satisfy their sexual urges using these techniques, with some opting for more inventive ways of coping. One user described a doll they had made from children’s clothing that gave them a sense of companionship and belonging. This example highlighted the need for individuals, in particular those with an exclusive sexual interest, to ease the loneliness they feel, and the difficulties they face in finding safe outlets.

Masturbating to child fantasies. Masturbation to fantasies of children was a hotly debated area among forum users. We coded 39 extracts relevant to this subtheme, including posts by 29 unique individuals. Some users suggested that masturbation to fantasy

helped with sexual urges, whereas others argued it intensified their attractions. Forum users exclusively interested in children were likely to endorse masturbation to fantasies involving children as an effective strategy to manage their interests in the absence of other outlets. Some users advised using masturbation prior to interaction with children to relieve sexual tension. Others, however, stated they avoided it completely.

A number of users were concerned that masturbating to fantasies of children would reinforce that behavior, making their attractions more intense. This appeared to be a minority view (seven extracts), although others had mixed feelings or acknowledged the possibility that masturbation to child fantasies would reinforce their interests. One user described using this mechanism of reinforcement to try to develop greater sexual interest in adults. The majority of users appeared to be of the opinion that masturbation to child fantasy was either harmless or decreased tension or arousal that, unchecked, might lead to problematic situations. Approximately two thirds of extracts contributing to this theme reflected this view, although some differentiated between fantasies involving known versus unknown children.

Discussion

By observing the discourse between users of a forum dedicated to supporting individuals with a sexual interest in children who do not wish to act on their desires, we were able to gain further insight into the management of their sexual attractions and sharing of advice with other forum users. Developing an acceptance of pedohebephilic interests and a broader self-acceptance appeared to be an important step for many forum users. Coping strategies such as contact rules and having set boundaries in place when interacting with children appeared popular, as well as distraction techniques for unwanted thoughts. Being able to recognize and deal with triggers, knowing limits, and staying vigilant were strategies that users described as helping stay focused and in control. Many adopted or recommended physical avoidant coping strategies by avoiding children altogether or specific situations. Some forum users discussed preparing for occasions where they had contact with children by rehearsing imagined scenarios. A few forum users mentioned using perspective taking.

Fantasy and masturbation created much debate within the forum with some individuals endorsing it as a successful method for them and others arguing that it intensified their attractions. Outlets for sexual release, such as masturbation to fantasies of children, were found to divide opinions, especially for those with exclusive pedophilia. The idea that children can be sexually persuasive was observed in the way in which forum users discussed some of their imagined scenarios and real-life events.

Acceptance and Avoidance

Coming to terms with their attractions appeared to be a common struggle for users, with many describing feelings of guilt and self-loathing. Not accepting their pedophilic interest was argued to have devastating consequences, leading to low self-esteem. Low self-esteem may increase risk of sexual offending (for a discussion of equivocal findings on self-esteem, see Mann et al., 2010). The importance of self-acceptance has been

highlighted by Goode (2010) and is a key principle of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Forman et al., 2007). ACT encourages acceptance of negative experiences and has been demonstrated as an effective approach to treatment (A-tjak et al., 2015), across a wide range of disorders. The acceptance of their sexual attraction held different meanings for different users in the current study. Those who struggled with it viewed acceptance as appearing proud of their pedohebephilia. However, for individuals who had come to terms with their sexual interest, acceptance meant feeling proud of their management of their attractions and embracing the positives that it has brought to their lives.

In research on coping, avoidance and distraction are often grouped together (Gonzales et al., 2001), representing ways of disengaging from negative life events. Within the current data, however, these strategies emerged as distinct, with avoidance relating to physical restrictions users imposed on themselves, and distraction representing the suppression of unwanted thoughts. Distraction and avoidance strategies were commonly referred to among users in the forum, complementing findings by Houtepen et al. (2016). Users described using distraction as a way to reduce sexual thoughts they found distressing. Although not a long-term solution (Forman et al., 2007; Hayes et al., 2006), focused distraction has been suggested to alleviate the distress of intrusive thoughts (Najmi et al., 2009) and prevent rumination (Shiota, 2006). The most discussed method of avoidance in our data was the avoidance of being alone with children. This strategy was observed in terms of protecting children and as a way of protecting themselves in case they behaved in a way that might be perceived as inappropriate.

Generally, avoidant coping alone is not considered an effective strategy for dealing with long-term negative affect and is consistently shown to be associated with poor mental health (Gonzales et al., 2001). However, evidence suggests that avoidant coping can produce better outcomes when stressors are deemed uncontrollable (Creasey et al., 1995; Valentiner et al., 1994) as well as being effective in managing short-term emotional expression (hiding signs of anxiety). Therefore, this type of avoidant coping could be considered as a self-protective measure to prevent negative consequence (Kashdan et al., 2006). Despite this, reliance on avoidant coping can have serious consequences, such as impaired functioning, especially if it becomes inflexible and demands too much time and effort (Kashdan et al., 2006). For example, a small number of the forum users organized their daily routines around school hours to avoid coming into contact with children. This not only imposes physical restrictions but also prevents them from dealing with challenging situations should they unexpectedly occur. This type of avoidance has been shown to correlate with increased anxiety, depression, and cognitive-affective distress (Feldner et al., 2003; Holahan et al., 2005). It remains an open question whether these negative consequences of avoidant coping are also present for the specific types of avoidance strategies articulated by the forum users.

Mental Preparation

Although avoidance of certain situations was considered useful to some users, others acknowledged the inevitability of coming into contact with children and expressed

concern regarding how they would cope. The value of imagining possible scenarios, such as being asked to babysit or a child instigating sexual contact, was discussed within the group. Those who used these scenarios said they did so to develop strategies should they ever be confronted with a similar situation. Mental preparation techniques such as this have been recognized as an effective strategy to improve performance ability in various domains of human activity (Driskell et al., 1994). For example, they are commonly used by athletes from a wide range of sporting backgrounds (Bertollo et al., 2009). These psychological strategies typically involve visualizing goals, mentally rehearsing strategies, and anticipating what could go wrong and how to respond (Bertollo et al., 2009).

Clearly, the use of strategies by forum users may not be directly comparable with mental preparations in sporting performance. However, for those with pedohebephilic attraction, mental preparation, in conjunction with other strategies, may potentially reduce anxiety and increase confidence in situations that would normally be deemed challenging. Poor problem-solving is empirically supported as a risk factor for recidivism in individuals convicted of sexual offenses (Hanson et al., 2007). It is suggested that poor problem-solving commonly relates to deficits in the ability to identify a problem, a lack of consequential thinking, and difficulties in constructing a range of viable options (Mann et al., 2010). Therefore, mental preparation could be a helpful tool to those struggling to cope with their attractions. In addition, it may reflect a distinction between individuals who offend and those who have been able to remain offense-free.

A small number of forum users discussed how they considered the perspective of the child (how the child would feel were they to act upon their feelings) and the potential effects of their actions, as a way to maintain legal boundaries. Perspective taking is an empathic response that involves both cognitive (expressing what someone else is feeling) and emotional processes (feeling what a person is feeling; Mann & Barnett, 2012) and is commonly targeted in treatment with individuals who have sexually offended (Yates, 2004). Research in other domains suggests that improvements in perspective taking positively affect intergroup attitudes and influence empathic arousal (Vescio et al., 2003). However, there has been considerable debate around the efficacy of targeting empathy deficits in the treatment of individuals who have sexually offended with concerns that it is unnecessary and potentially even harmful (e.g., Mann & Barnett, 2012). This ambivalence in the research literature may be mirrored in our finding that perspective taking did not appear to be a frequently used strategy by forum users in this study. A greater number instead appeared to articulate ways of directly managing their own behaviors and thoughts rather than focusing on the feelings of others.

Dealing With Sexual Arousal

Coping strategies to alleviate sexual arousal produced many different opinions among forum users. For individuals with nonexclusive pedophilia, focusing their attractions toward adults was frequently suggested. Those with an exclusive interest discussed

using legal pornography containing actors who appear younger, due to their secondary sexual characteristics, or animated pornography depicting underage characters. Many found that focusing their fantasies toward adults reduced their attractions to children, supporting previous qualitative research (Houtepen et al., 2016). In a sense, forum users appeared to be advocating a strategy similar to conditioning. While conditioning is used by some practitioners with individuals with a sexual interest in children (for a case study of masturbatory reconditioning, see Marshall, 2015), there is limited evidence that arousal to nonpreferred stimuli can be conditioned (Hoffmann, 2007; Seto & Ahmed, 2014). However, many of the individuals identifying their use of legal adult pornography as risk-reducing appeared not to be exclusively pedohebephilic. For those individuals, stimuli may be sufficiently appetitive to temper competing sexual interests.

Potentially Maladaptive Strategies

Many of the strategies discussed on the virped.org forum are adaptive, or may be situationally adaptive, and are consistent with the skills that practitioners may seek to build when working with individuals who have committed sexual offenses. For example, strategies around minimizing contact with children, managing substance use, or that reflect increased problem-solving or impulse control map onto treatment targets within guidelines for effective practice with individuals who have sexually offended (Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, 2014). Problem-solving and impulsivity, in particular, have been identified as *meaningful risk factors*, improvements in which are empirically linked to reductions of reoffending, and are strongly encouraged in biopsychosocial models of treatment (Carter & Mann, 2016; Mann et al., 2010). However, some of the themes highlighted potentially maladaptive strategies.

For individuals outlining their use of forms of pornography where actors/characters appear underage, or for individuals describing masturbation to fantasies involving children, it is unclear whether such coping strategies are likely to be effective at reducing possibility of offending. Indeed, this uncertainty was reflected in forum discussions, especially around masturbation to fantasies about children. At a basic level, the legality of materials like lolicon/shotacon varies across jurisdiction, and as a result, some forum users may be placing themselves at risk of prosecution. Masturbating prior to possible interactions with children or other circumstances where users feel at risk of committing offenses may take advantage of the postorgasmic refractory period of the human sexual response cycle (Masters & Johnson, 1966) where men, in particular, may experience a lack of sexual interest. However, this strategy may vary in effectiveness across individuals due to age-related variation in the duration of the refractory period (Meston, 1997).

A broader question is whether using pornographic material that appears to function as a proxy for indecent images of children and masturbating to pedohebephilic fantasies are strategies that influence the likelihood of offending. Meta-analysis suggests that approximately half of individuals identified as having used indecent images of

children have also committed contact sexual offenses (Seto et al., 2010). For the purposes of diagnosing paraphilias, neither Blanchard (2010) nor Seto (2010) distinguished between pornographic materials depicting real and fictitious children. If this real/fictitious distinction is trivial in terms of risk of contact offending, using some of the legal outlets discussed by forum users may be a risky strategy. However, given the lack of empirical research on this question, the opposite may be true, whereby seeking out legal forms of pornographic material, even where they are not quite a perfect fit to the individual's sexual interests, may reflect protective factors that function to reduce the possibility of offending.

Bartels and Gannon (2011) hypothesized two mechanisms through which fantasy may drive future offending. They drew on existing research to suggest that individuals may become "motivated to enact the imagery they have mentally simulated within their fantasies" (p. 551) and/or that fantasy may function as a disinhibiting factor that desensitizes the individual and as a result makes offending behavior more likely. As a result, few practitioners would recommend masturbating to fantasies involving children as an ongoing coping strategy. However, this does place individuals who are exclusively orientated to children but who choose not to use indecent images of children or commit contact offenses in a bind.

The use of fantasy and masturbation among users may not simply function as a strategy to cope with sexual interests and sexual tension. Research with individuals who have sexually offended suggests that those individuals use sexual activity as a way of coping with stressful or problematic situations (Maniglio, 2011). Studies with small numbers of offending individuals (McKibben et al., 1994; Proulx et al., 1996) suggest that negative mood states increase problematic fantasy as part of a chain that may lead to offending behavior. The paucity of literature on pedohebephilic individuals who do not offend makes us cautious about inferences drawn from research with offending individuals. However, the use of problematic sexual fantasy, and in particular an increased dependence on that sexual fantasy, may function as an indicator for nonoffending pedohebephilic individuals that they are relying on potentially problematic coping strategies to regulate their emotions.

Implicit Beliefs

A notable observation throughout, highlighted by their need to set rules and boundaries when interacting with children, was the lack of confidence many of the forum users had in their abilities to act appropriately, with many expressing a fear of losing control. This feeling of uncontrollability may mirror the belief, observed among individuals convicted of sexual offenses, that the world, including one's emotions and thoughts, is uncontrollable (Ward & Keenan, 1999). Where individuals convicted of sexual offenses make statements about the uncontrollability of their environment, practitioners may question whether they reflect genuine etiological/criminogenic beliefs or excuses/minimizations that may arise after an offense (see Maruna & Mann, 2006). However, for forum users in our study, feelings of uncontrollability appeared to be a motivating factor that encouraged them to develop methods to prevent loss of control.

Developing such methods may allow individuals to challenge their own cognitions and thus demonstrate that the world is, in fact, controllable and that their emotions and thoughts are manageable.

Rules that forum users set to maintain control were not only used to safeguard children but were also spoken about as a way of protecting themselves from the behaviors of children. On occasions, users referred to children's behavior as sexual. This was observed in the imagined scenarios they had as well as real-life experiences. It was common for users to discuss that children may involve adults in their sexual behavior, although most posters appeared to believe that this happens only in exceptional circumstances. This finding is consistent with Houtepen et al. (2016) who reported that, although participants denied having engaged in sexual contact with children, some reported having experienced situations where a child has attempted to initiate sexual activity. This finding may reflect a belief system similar to Ward and Keenan's (1999) "children as sexual beings" implicit theory, hypothesized to be characteristic of some individuals who commit sexual offenses against children. Holding this implicit theory is related to the overperception of children's behavior as sexual. Despite acknowledging that children are vulnerable and that pedohebephilic sexual attraction is something that can harm a child if acted on, some forum users did appear to observe children as capable of being sexually persuasive.

Our data prevent us from examining whether forum users differ from individuals who have committed sexual offenses against children in the extent to which they hold (or articulate) beliefs around the sexuality of children. However, Maruna and Mann (2006) argued that some forms of so-called cognitive distortions may buffer individuals from stigmatizing shame and thus offer protection from offending. Future research may examine whether the apparently distorted beliefs of individuals with pedohebephilic interests and who do not offend differ in quality and function from those of individuals who sexually offend (e.g., by being better able to separate the sexual motivations of children in their fantasies from children in reality).

Limitations

Overall, our study builds on the emerging literature on nonoffending pedohebephilic individuals by demonstrating the wide range of coping strategies used by individuals with a sexual interest in children, as well as the advice they offer one another to remain offense-free. Where other research in this area has found it difficult to recruit adequate sample sizes due to the stigma attached to pedophilia and fear of losing anonymity, the current study drew on the contributions of a subset of over 4,700 members of the virped.org website. Despite this, our findings should be considered with some limitations in mind.

First, although our findings reflect the contributions of many forum users, we were unable to examine how representative these contributions were of all forum users or of the nonoffending pedohebephilic community as a whole. Unlike previous research, this study did not explicitly ask participants for information. Data were instead obtained from conversations between forum users, free from researcher interference, where members have built up trusting relationships and are potentially being more honest and open with their thoughts and experiences. However, as with other studies

of this nature, despite the reduction in experimenter demand effects due to the use of existing discourse, there remains a reliance on self-report. As a result, the information obtained may not be a true reflection of these individuals' experiences due to social desirability. The probability that the site is monitored by police may create its own demands, preventing users from portraying a true reflection of themselves. It is further possible to argue that posts on the forum are performative, presenting an idealized version of the self or of the forum community. These factors should be considered when interpreting our findings. However, the closed nature of the forum may partially mitigate concerns about social desirability. In addition, it is worth considering whether even performative posts may provide useful guidance to peers and help establish positive group norms about self-acceptance and coping with pedohebephilic interest. In addition to the above, the site rules prevent users from sharing offending history. Therefore, the researchers cannot be entirely confident that all users are nonoffending but are instead being selective about what they write. It is, however, entirely possible that these individuals are, regardless of any previous offending, committed to living offense-free lives and supporting others to do the same.

Second, it should be acknowledged that, while the data set represented contributions from 87 unique individuals, there were a number of regular posters who appeared influential in discussions. This could be due to the fact that these individuals felt they had more experience dealing with their pedohebephilic attractions and therefore had more to contribute in terms of offering advice. Alternatively, it could simply be that they had more time to access the site than others. Despite this, none of the themes that emerged were dominated by a single user.

Third, it is possible that forum users are drawn to certain threads or discussion areas on virped.org *because* they are struggling to cope. Therefore, advice offered may not be representative of the broader nonoffending pedohebephilic community and could potentially be maladaptive. The evidence for the value of peer-to-peer support for coping with psychological challenges is currently mixed (e.g., Ali et al., 2015). It has been suggested that peer support groups may carry potential risks, such as the unreliability of advice being offered by users with unknown credentials (Entwistle et al., 2011). Advice offered by peers could lead those receiving the advice to develop unrealistic expectations and set unachievable goals. This in turn could increase symptoms such as anxiety and be detrimental to recovery (Ziebland & Wyke, 2012), an issue that warrants further investigation.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

We expect—and hope—that users of the virped.org forum will read this article. One feature of the specific set of threads that we selected for analysis was the prevalence of advice to avoid certain situations (e.g., being alone with children, or drinking alcohol). However, we observed that, in these interactions, the person providing this advice often did not explain in more concrete terms *how* they recommend avoiding the situation. It may be useful for forum users who share advice to consider providing more detailed examples of how they avoided a certain situation. After all, the person they are

advising might have the motivation to avoid a situation, but lack specific strategies to achieve that goal.

For professionals supporting nonoffending individuals with pedohebephilic interests or working with individuals who have offended but who are motivated to avoid future offending, our findings highlight the need for open discussion with clients around healthy use of pornography, fantasy, and masturbation. Overall, the conversations we sampled on the forum evidence a lack of consensus on whether engaging with child-related fantasy helps manage sexual urges or intensifies them. To an extent, practitioners may feel unsupported by the research literature when engaging with their clients on this issue. There is a lack of empirical research examining the role of fantasy in managing or failing to manage other sexual behaviors as well as the individual difference moderators of those relationships.

Professionals and policy makers may cite our research to argue that this particular online forum represents a resource in which users espoused prosocial behavior, constructively challenged risky behavior, and shared strategies that, in large part, map onto the types of strategies that professionals might recommend to clients. We recommend further research on the coping strategies of nonoffending individuals with pedohebephilic interests, to replicate or refine our findings. However, in advance of such research, practitioners may find it useful to discuss our emerging themes and strategies with their clients and explore the extent to which the experiences and practices discussed by forum users resonate with their own.

Our analysis arranged extracts into a meaningful thematic arrangement of superordinate themes and subthemes (Table 1). However, further research with different data from virped.org may help replicate or refine these themes and may help to identify further ways in which this population manage and cope with their sexual interests and their pedohebephilic identity. Should the data allow, it would be interesting to examine how forum users change and develop their articulated coping strategies over time.

Some themes reflected coping strategies that appeared to relate more strongly to certain modalities of sexual behavior (e.g., *legal outlets* for online behavior, and *having contact rules* for contact behavior). They may also capture distinct strategies for the long-term management of sexual interests (e.g., *mentally preparing*) and more short-term responses to particular situations (e.g., *using legal outlets*). Researchers should consider carrying out semi-structured interviews with forum users to examine whether apparent differences in our themes by modality of behavior reflect differences in the coping skills needed to deal with different challenges, or are different manifestations of the same underlying coping skills. In addition, semi-structured interviews could be used to examine how nonoffending individuals shift coping strategies between coping with existential long-term stressors and situations where they experience short-term vulnerability.

Conclusion

This study utilized the discourse of self-identified, purportedly nonoffending individuals with pedohebephilia to identify the coping strategies they use to reduce the

possibility of offending. The findings of this study build on previous research by observing natural discourse without researcher interference. The anonymity and social support provided by peer forums may encourage honesty in posting and prompt discussions that individuals may not otherwise be inclined to discuss. With the social exclusion that many of these individuals experience, being able to share these experiences with like-minded others in an appropriately moderated forum may provide a unique support system for the individuals in the virped.org community. The record contained within the forum provides rich data for professionals to gain insight into the lived experiences of this population and thus be better equipped to support them and others who are less able to manage their sexual interests.

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Notes

1. Some authors also prefer this term.
2. Researchers interested in reading the forum post extracts used to generate themes should contact the corresponding author, using their institutional/organizational email address.

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