

Pedophiles Are Not Always Child-Molesters: A Literature Review on the Virtuous Pedophiles Community

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ABSTRACT: Pedophiles, individuals who are sexually attracted to children, are regarded as child-molesters. This stigma incites hate and discrimination towards them, even those who have not and committed themselves to not harm children. Thus, understanding and challenging this stigma is important to help them. In this study, we explored the experience of members of Virtuous Pedophiles, an online support group and the preferred identity for pedophiles who are against sexual activity between adults and children. Narrative literature review and thematic analyses were conducted on Gary Gibson's book titled Virtuous Pedophiles. Virtuous Pedophiles, unfortunately, encounter problems in their daily life, yet they choose to acknowledge and share their sexual orientation with loved ones. They also develop various strategies to protect themselves and children from any form of molestation. They build boundaries in interacting with children, avoid situations involving children, and use fantasy in the form of pornography and masturbation to satisfy their sexual needs without harming children. They hope the stigma on pedophiles is reduced and one day, they can live comfortably by receiving help and support from others and mental health practitioners. Despite acknowledging their sexual orientation, they are still experiencing difficulties in fully accepting themselves due to the stigmatization experienced from others and concerns about their own future. This also hinders them in reaching out for help from professional services to manage their overall wellbeing. As mental health practitioners, we are encouraged to focus more on their psychological distress and then devise strategies that might help improve their daily functioning.

INTRODUCTION

Pedophilia is clinically defined as a persistent and intense sexual attraction to children who have not yet reached puberty (Seto, 2018). The attraction can manifest itself in a variety of ways including thoughts, urges, fantasies, stimulation or behaviour. Seto (2018) explained that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (fifth edition [DSM-5]) mentions pedophilia as a lifelong condition and has different diagnostic criteria from pedophilic disorder because pedophilia does not involve clinically significant impairment. The term pedophile is also often used in news stories about child sexual abuse, leading to a stigma in society that all pedophiles are child abusers and vice versa (Nielsen et al., 2022). Pedophiles are portrayed as 'uncontrollable monsters'

or 'sexual radicals', even though they can live normal lives without acting out their sexual interests and urges on children (Goode, 2011).

This stigma inhibits their self-acceptance and thus disrupts the lives of pedophiles. They experience stress due to sexual attraction that is unwanted by themselves and those around them. They feel anxious about hiding their condition from those closest to them and are also constantly and consciously controlling themselves to avoid acting on their sexual urges. They may also get into social or legal trouble for accessing child pornography or eventually having sexual relationships with children (Seto, 2018). Limited role models also make them feel hopeless thus interfere with their ability to control their attraction (Buckman et al. in Nielson et al., 2022). Furthermore, this stigma also prevents them from seeking professional help for fear of being judged or reported to the police (SBS The Feed, 2018).

The internet provides opportunities for pedophiles to de-stigmatise and gain peer support so that they can understand how to behave and understand themselves from the stories they share (Nielsen et al., 2022). They also create and popularise new terms for their identity, such as underage attracted, child lover, non-offending pedophile and virtuous pedophile (Jahnke et al., 2022). Virtuous Pedophiles is the name of an online community, and a term used to identify individuals who are aware of their sexual attraction to children but are strongly opposed to sexual relationships between adults and children. Even if they can abstain from contact with children, they are still judged and hated for this ineradicable attraction. This hatred affects not only the children who may be targeted, but also non-offending pedophiles. They are afraid to seek professional help for fear of being judged and are ashamed to admit their condition, resulting in depression and suicidal thoughts. Therefore, this community aims to reduce the stigma of pedophilia in society and provide information and support to fellow pedophiles so that they can lead happy and productive lives.

The stigma attached by society needs to be overcome so that we can help virtuous pedophiles to accept and regulate themselves. In this case, the researchers would like to conduct a narrative literature review to explore and examine the experiences that virtuous pedophiles have and share on the Virtuous Pedophiles support group forum. This research will explain how virtuous pedophiles recognize and accept themselves as pedophiles, how they tell others about their pedophilia, and how those around them respond. In addition, this study will discuss the impact of the stigma associated with pedophilia on them. Finally, this study will examine how virtuous pedophiles deal with the challenges and problems that arise from their pedophilia.

METHODS

Design

This study used a research method in the form of a narrative literature review, which is an objective and careful summary and critical analysis of a topic (Cronin et al., 2008). The main purpose of a narrative literature review is to provide a comprehensive basis for understanding certain ongoing phenomena. According to Cronin et al. (2008), the narrative literature review process includes five steps: (1) determining the topic; (2) searching for literature sources relevant to the topic in a structured manner; (3) collecting, reading, and analyzing literature sources; (4) writing a structured report in the form of an abstract, introduction, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion; and (5) listing the references used.

Data Analysis

The primary source for this research is the book *Virtuous Pedophiles*, written by a member named Gary Gibson, which summarizes the experiences and esteem of virtuous pedophiles on the forum. In addition, data was collected from the public Virtuous Pedophiles website (<https://www.virped.org/>) and previous research on virtuous pedophiles. The collected data was then processed using thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting

patterns or themes in data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), making it an appropriate method for gaining understanding related to patterns of experience, thoughts, or behaviors of research participants (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Thematic analysis is a flexible method involving a long and iterative process of analysis: rereading the data obtained from the beginning, the codes drawn, and the analysis obtained (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Thematic analysis of the data collected from various sources resulted in six themes: virtuous pedophiles, self-awareness, coming out, the impact of existing stigma, coping strategies, and hopes for society and mental health practitioners.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis Summary

Theme	Main Findings
Virtuous Pedophiles	An online peer support community who strongly opposed sexual activity between adults and children
Self-Awareness	They mostly realized their sexual attraction during puberty and gradually accepted themselves
Coming Out	They carefully inform others about their sexual attraction which can bring both positive and negative impacts to their lives
Impact of Existing Stigma	The stigma and discrimination caused them to struggle socially and psychologically
Coping Strategies	They commit to not harm children by accepting themselves, establishing boundaries during interactions with children, and watching pornography.
Hopes for Society and Mental Health Practitioners	If the stigma is reduced, then they can receive help professionally and appropriately.

Virtuous Pedophiles

Virtuous Pedophiles is an online community founded in 2012 by two pedophiles under the pseudonyms Nick Devin and Ethan Edwards. The term was chosen because although the word "pedophile" may seem negative, it has a scientific definition that fully describes their condition, which is individuals who have a sexual attraction to children, while the word "virtuous" was chosen to illustrate that they are good people who do not want to harm children like the 'monster' image attached by society. They just want to be seen and treated as any other person.

Virtuous Pedophiles aims to improve the quality of life of pedophiles without compromising the well-being of children, as they are strongly opposed to any form of sexual activity between adults and children. Virtuous Pedophiles has over 6000 members as of April 2021 who are individuals with pedophilia, their family members, researchers, and journalists. To qualify for membership, you must be over the age of 18 and commit to not sexually abuse children in any manner. Pedophiles who have sexually abused children are allowed to join if they agree not to repeat the act. Virtuous Pedophiles members are also prohibited from sharing opinions that support contact or sexual relations between children and adults.

Virtuous Pedophiles provides support in a peer group setting for virtuous pedophiles and helps at-risk virtuous pedophiles to stay out of trouble with the law and not harm children. They also want to fight for better mental health facilities for virtuous pedophiles. In addition, they want to educate the public about pedophilia, especially the fact that not all pedophiles are sexual predators, to reduce stigma. They are also willing to assist researchers in their studies to develop a deeper understanding of pedophilia.

As a support group, Virtuous Pedophiles has helped many people come to terms with themselves and their lives. The Virtuous Pedophiles support group is often the first place and medium where virtuous pedophiles accept and acknowledge themselves as pedophiles. Members who join the Virtuous Pedophiles forum also feel comfortable sharing their experiences and seeking support from fellow pedophiles so that they do not feel alone in a hateful environment.

Self-Awareness

Virtuous pedophiles became aware of their abnormal sexual attraction during puberty and in situations as diverse as playing "doctor" with younger female cousins, playing on the beach with naked girls, and a tendency to search for pictures of children in their underwear or naked. However, there are also virtuous pedophiles who are initially confused about what is wrong with them and take a long time to realize their sexual attraction because they consider pedophilia a crime due to the stigma. They have difficulty accepting themselves at first and experience shame, guilt, and disgust because they feel they are breaking the norm. They also feel hopeless that they will never live a happy and "normal" life like other people. However, some virtuous pedophiles gradually accept themselves because they know that they did not choose to become a pedophile and are determined to control themselves so that they will not harm children.

Coming Out

Virtuous pedophiles use the term 'coming out of the toy box,' adapted from the LGBTQ+ community term 'coming out of the closet,' to describe the act of informing others about their sexual attractions. However, coming out needs to be done carefully, with the following considerations: (1) identifying the reason for coming out; (2) evaluating how trustworthy the person is; (3) considering the impact of coming out on the person; (4) considering the repercussions of spreading this information; and (5) being prepared to accept whatever the person's response is.

Coming out brings some negative impacts to the lives of virtuous pedophiles. Gibson recounted that after admitting his pedophilia to family members and the community through media interviews, he was banned from going to the only hospital in his area for two years, expelled from his master's program in mental health counseling, received death threats, and was expelled from the church. Other virtuous pedophiles also received less favorable treatment, especially when they were seeking help from mental health professionals, such as being reported to the authorities even though they had not committed sexual abuse and being treated as sociopaths.

Nevertheless, coming out can provide virtuous pedophiles with a calmer sense of self, which helps them accept their condition and open themselves up to positive life experiences, such as building healthy relationships with children, growing closer to God, and having hope that they can live happily with a partner who accepts them. In addition, not all virtuous pedophiles received negative reactions from others, especially family members. Although family members were shocked when they first learned about virtuous pedophiles, they gradually accepted them and hoped that virtuous pedophiles could live happily. They acknowledge that coming out takes a lot of courage and see it as an opportunity for a deeper relationship. Some family members also joined the Virtuous Pedophile forum to find out how they could accept and help virtuous pedophiles.

Impact of Existing Stigma

Society still associates pedophiles with sexual predators, so virtuous pedophiles are hated and discriminated against, even though they have not and are determined not to abuse children. These stigma and discrimination are internalized by virtuous pedophiles, causing them to initially struggle with accepting their sexual attraction and resulting in self-punishment, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts. They are ostracized from society, are unable to get psychological help and have no hope of a fulfilling romantic relationship. Some must live with this secret for the rest of their lives thus

are terrified that their secret will be discovered by others. They also fear that one day they will commit crimes against children as they are stigmatized in society. As a result, they often experience stress, anxiety, depression – some even decide to end their lives because they are unable to overcome these problems.

Many virtuous pedophiles would like to receive professional help to help them cope, but they are reluctant because they are afraid of not being accepted, of being reported, and because they think they will not be helped. One virtuous pedophile shared that he had many bad experiences with mental health practitioners where they did not believe his story and concluded that he was just confused because he was too intelligent, good looking, and socially competent to be diagnosed as a pedophile. There were also virtuous pedophiles who shared that the first time he visited the hospital, the practitioners were kind and willing to help, but after listening to his complaints, they immediately contacted the police without giving him any help.

Coping Strategies

Contrary to the stigma, not all pedophiles have a strong urge to have sexual relations with children. However, virtuous pedophiles develop strategies to manage themselves to maintain their commitment not to harm children. They also develop these strategies to overcome the hatred and discrimination they receive from society. Although it takes a long time, accepting oneself as a pedophile is a fundamental step in self-management. One of the virtuous pedophiles explained that the more he accepted himself, the less he considered people's judgments important to him. Another virtuous pedophile chose not to read the hateful comments on the internet so that he would feel calmer. Another explained that hating a sexual attraction he did not choose was akin to hating his God-given gift.

Virtuous pedophiles sometimes have difficulty managing themselves in certain situations, so they make certain rules to establish boundaries when interacting with children in difficult situations. These rules include pretending that the child's parents are present even when virtuous pedophiles are alone with the child, having only child-initiated interactions, and limiting interactions with children on social media. Some virtuous pedophiles even imagine specific situations that will be difficult for them to handle, such as being asked to babysit a child or being asked for sex by a child, and then devise ways to overcome these difficulties so that they will be ready when faced with similar real-life situations.

In addition, many virtuous pedophiles choose to use avoidance as a way to reduce the likelihood of unwanted behavior. This strategy is commonly used by virtuous pedophiles who are less confident in their abilities to control their thoughts and behavior, especially when alone with a child. They decide not to go out during school hours, not to go to places where children congregate, to pursue careers not closely related to children, and not to marry and have children. Some virtuous pedophiles also limit their use of the internet and social media to avoid exposure to child-related content such as video games, photos, videos, and communication access.

However, virtuous pedophiles have sexual urges and needs that they want to fulfill. They are aware of their responsibilities, so they seek to satisfy these desires in other ways that do not harm children. One way of doing this is through pornography. Non-exclusive pedophiles, pedophiles who are also attracted to adults, fulfill this need by having relationships with adults or watching adult pornography, while exclusive pedophiles, pedophiles who are only attracted to children, watch twink pornography, which is performed by adults who are physically younger and resemble children or teenagers. Another method of release that is also debated among virtuous pedophiles is masturbation. Some virtuous pedophiles consider masturbation by imagining children to be helpful, as long as they can distinguish between fantasy and reality and do not do it before interacting with children. Other virtuous pedophiles argue that masturbation can increase the likelihood of them having sexual intercourse with children in real life. One virtuous pedophile took the extreme

measure of castration to control his sexual urges and shared that he no longer feels anxious about doing inappropriate things, even though he has been actively teaching elementary school students for more than 3 years.

Hopes For Society and Mental Health Practitioners

In general, virtuous pedophiles want to see the stigma reduced in society so that they can help their fellow virtuous pedophiles lead happy, productive, and law-abiding lives. As the stigma associated with pedophilia is reduced, pedophiles, whether they hold the pro-contact view or the anti-contact view like virtuous pedophiles, can receive professional help from mental health practitioners without being treated as criminals. If society understands the difference between pedophiles and child sexual abusers, virtuous pedophiles believe that society will change its attitude and no longer treat them unfairly, so that gradually the community environment will become healthier, and the number of child sexual abuse cases will decrease. This is because pedophiles will receive help before their sexual urges become uncontrollable and endanger children. The founder of Virtuous Pedophiles also advises mental health practitioners to remember that their clients who are pedophiles are coming for help, so they need to be treated as individuals with complex life problems, not as potential child sexual abusers. In addition, Gibson argues that mental health practitioners need to understand how to help pedophiles by encouraging nonviolent behavior without trying to change the pedophile's sexual orientation.

Discussion

Although virtuous pedophiles generally perceive their sexual attraction as something they did not choose and cannot control, they still have difficulty accepting themselves as pedophiles because of the stigma in society and concerns about their future. Virtuous pedophiles internalize these unhealthy views into their self-identity (Levenson et al., 2020), making them feel even more uncomfortable and self-loathing. As part of a minority group, they are also more vulnerable to negative experiences and mental health problems due to discrimination (Levenson et al., 2020).

In addition, stigma is a major barrier to virtuous pedophiles seeking professional help. This stigma can increase distress in the lives of virtuous pedophiles due to unwanted attraction, discrimination based on their sexual attraction, pressure to hide their sexual attraction, and getting into social or legal trouble for actions related to their sexual attraction, such as accessing child pornography and having sex with children (Seto, 2018). However, they are reluctant to seek help from mental health practitioners because they suspect that such professionals will treat them with disrespect, violate the established ethical standards by disclosing their information, report them to authorities or their family members, and lack the pedophilia knowledge and experience to help them (Seto, 2018; Levenson et al., 2020). If virtuous pedophiles do not receive professional help, they may become depressed, have low self-esteem, have suicidal thoughts or attempts, and experience loneliness or social withdrawal – it is even possible for at-risk individuals to engage in unwanted sexual relationships to fulfil their attraction to children (Seto, 2018).

Virtuous pedophiles recognize that they must first recognize and accept their condition before attempting to cope and tell others. Goode (2009) emphasized the important role of family and friends in the process of self-acceptance as virtuous pedophiles, where the support they receive makes them more likely to live a law-abiding lifestyle, especially regarding their sexual attraction to children. Self-acceptance is also a basic tenet of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which has been shown to be an effective therapeutic approach for a variety of problems (Jones et al., 2021).

The strategies used by virtuous pedophiles are generally adaptive and consistent with the advice given by practitioners to individuals who have sexually abused (Jones et al., 2021). Marlatt and Gordon (1985 in Seto, 2018) developed an approach to preventing sexual abuse based on cognitive behavioral principles: (1) identify triggering situations; (2) identify triggering actions; (3)

develop strategies to avoid triggers; and (4) develop strategies to use when it is impossible to avoid triggers. This has been used by virtuous pedophiles so that they are able to maintain their commitment to not harming children, even though this strategy is not entirely easy to do.

However, fantasizing in the form of pornography and masturbation is a controversial coping strategy because it may increase the risk of virtuous pedophiles committing sexual abuse. Ward et al. (1998) explained that these fantasies can lead to a loss of behavioral control in two ways. First, sexual fantasies can increase positive mood and lead individuals to seek other forms of gratification, namely real sexual relationships with children. Second, sexual fantasies carried out in a negative mood can represent an individual's cognitive control to increase his or her sexual drive and have real sexual intercourse with children.

The experience of virtuous pedophiles proves that not all pedophiles are sexual abusers of children, and that in fact they are able to manage themselves and their sexual urges so as not to harm children and to live "normal" lives like other people in general. Their commitment can be explained by the relapse prevention model developed by Laws et al. (2000 in Seto, 2018), where individuals are encouraged to refrain from sexual thoughts, urges, and actions involving children so that they are willing to manage their sexual fantasies about children and avoid risky situations such as being alone with a child.

As a community, Virtuous Pedophiles have values that are close to societal norms in that they oppose sexual relationships between adults and children, although they try to fight the stigma associated with pedophilia. The Virtuous Pedophiles forum is also helpful because virtuous pedophiles feel that they understand each other, are nonjudgmental, and serve as role models for other virtuous pedophiles in self-management (Seto, 2018). Virtuous Pedophiles has also been shown to help pedophiles accept and manage themselves through interactions between members in their forum. In addition, Virtuous Pedophiles provides hope and a social support system with minimal stigma, so the Virtuous Pedophiles forum can be a means of support for virtuous pedophiles who do not trust or dare to visit mental health professionals yet (Nielsen et al., 2022).

Mental health practitioners have an important role to play in preventing sexual violence by helping pedophiles. Therefore, it is recommended that mental health practitioners focus on the psychological problems of their pedophile clients and formulate strategies that their pedophile clients can utilise to function in their daily lives. According to Levenson et al. (2020), some of the treatment goals that can be given to pedophiles include: (1) self-acceptance by addressing stigma, shame, and identity confusion; (2) cognitive schema restructuring by changing the self-narrative and meaning they associate with their pedophilia; (3) treatment for symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation; (4) relationship and intimacy issues; (5) hope and future goals such as a sense of belonging and self-actualization; (6) living an authentic life such as how to build genuine and supportive relationships.

CONCLUSION

Virtuous pedophiles do not choose their sexual attractions to be different from other people, but they are hated and treated unfairly by society. Nevertheless, they accept pedophilia as part of who they are and are determined to control themselves so as not to harm the children around them. Society, including mental health practitioners, is expected to understand and appreciate their beliefs and efforts to indirectly and unconsciously help them live in peace with their differences.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

TT and EKP agreed to the final version of this article.

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