

Introduction

Who Are Minor-Attracted People?

I met Cameron¹ at my first B4U-ACT workshop. He seemed nervous, but then so was I. Cameron introduced himself as a student, like I was. He had a handsome smile, and a soft-spoken, self-effacing demeanor that made me feel comfortable around him almost instantly. He explained to the group that he was there because of his studies in psychology. He was interested in learning more about minor-attracted people (MAPs)—maybe even in providing services for them in the future. He and I spent the day in a hotel conference room near Baltimore, Maryland, with 50 or so other individuals—about half of them MAPs, the other half therapists and researchers. B4U-ACT provides these annual workshops as part of the organization's efforts to remove barriers to mental health care for MAPs interested in therapy. Accordingly, workshop participants were there to learn from one another, although the researchers and therapists—often thought of as “experts”—learned far more than the MAPs, who generously shared their stories with us. Cameron and I spent most of our time listening rather than speaking.

I walked away from the workshop unsure why I had been so nervous to be there. Thinking back on it now, though, it seems obvious: this was my first time being in a room full of people who were open about being sexually attracted to children. B4U-ACT uses the term MAPs, rather than the term “pedophile,” to decrease stigma against this group, but the stigma follows them nonetheless. Although I hadn't been worried for my safety in attending the workshop, I had grown up as we all do: with stories of pedophiles being vilified, characterized as predatory and evil. I must have taken on some of that fear, somewhere down the line.

A year later, I attended the next B4U-ACT workshop, decidedly less nervous this time. By then, I had been engaging in interviews with

MAPs for my research for about a month, and after my experience at the workshop the previous year, I was more aware of what I would be walking into. I recognized Cameron, who seemed just as nervous this time around. Early into the day's discussion, I found out why, when he came out to the group as a MAP. He talked candidly about how his attractions to minors affected his life, about the stigma he felt, and the secrecy he needed to maintain in order to function. He told the room: "I felt like I cast a long, dark shadow."

Cameron's need for secrecy was so great that even in a room full of people who shared his attractions, as well as sympathetic others, he had not felt comfortable enough to come out the year prior. In fact, he had kept his attractions a secret not only from those in the room that year but also from most individuals in his private life. Cameron later told me that there were only three people in his personal life who knew he was attracted to minors—his partner and two friends. Although it pained and exhausted him to be "perpetually in the closet," the risk to his personal and professional life was too great.

Given the nature of his sexual attractions, Cameron's choice to keep his attractions a secret from conference attendees and his own family and friends is understandable. The word "pedophile" conjures several distinct images in the contemporary imagination. Perhaps a faceless man behind a computer, or a stranger lurking in a dimly lit corner. We imagine that they all are predators of small children, prowling in playgrounds or online, waiting to strike. This assumption causes us to decry pedophiles as dangerous, as monsters, as sex offenders and child molesters. This assumption kept Cameron from disclosing his attractions to others. This assumption, I argue throughout the book, propagates the danger to children that we all fear.

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Cameron, who was in his 30s when I met him, is one of many MAPs I spoke to as I collected data for this book. He experienced attractions to children as young as eight. Like my other research participants, Cameron struggled with these attractions for a number of reasons, never behaving inappropriately with a child but knowing that society vilifies those who share these attractions, whether or not they act upon them. My research participants were all minor-attracted people who refrained from any sexual contact with minors, all of whom were dedicated to living lives free of offending. This book is about them: how they form identities as

minor-attracted individuals, how they cope with the stigma they face from society, and how they strategize not to commit offenses.

A POPULATION SHADOWED

Cameron spoke about the shadow he cast, but his is not the only shadow of relevance to this book. As a society, understandings about this population have been shadowed by moral panic, leading to numerous misconceptions often accepted as fact. For decades, our mental image of minor-attracted people—or, as we have called them, “pedophiles”²—has been of individuals lurking in the shadows of back alleyways, playgrounds, and internet chat rooms, waiting to prey on children. Societal misconceptions about minor-attracted people create problems for individuals like Cameron and the other participants of my study. Furthermore, I argue that these misconceptions simultaneously place children at risk of harm. Accordingly, I explore several myths and realities about minor-attracted individuals below, in an attempt to shed some light on this obscured population.

Misconception 1: All Pedophiles Are Offenders

Misunderstandings about people who are attracted to minors begin with common usage of the term “pedophile.” In daily language this word is frequently used interchangeably with “child molester.” Even news outlets broadly considered to be credible sources typically use these terms as if they were synonymous. In fact, as I was writing my first draft of this introduction in April of 2019, I heard CNN reporter Anderson Cooper posing a question about voting rights to Pete Buttigieg, a candidate in the Democratic presidential primaries. He asked, “People like the Boston Marathon bomber; people convicted of sexual assault, rape and other things; pedophiles . . . what do you think . . . should they be able to vote?”³ This usage implies that pedophiles are necessarily criminals. Presumably, when Anderson Cooper used the word “pedophiles,” he used it as a shortened term for “people who have committed a sex offense against a child.”

The problem with Anderson Cooper equating pedophiles and sex offenders is that they are two entirely distinct groups. Although pedophilia indicates an *attraction* to children, it does not indicate anything about an individual’s *behavior*. But if you were unaware before you picked up this book that the term “pedophile” is not synonymous with “sex offender” or “child molester,” you are not alone. When I give talks to groups about the research I’ve conducted, I generally provide the defini-

tion of “pedophile,” pointing out that it does not indicate sex-offending behavior. At this point, I’ve come to expect phones to come out of people’s pockets. It’s not uncommon for me to see multiple incredulous attendees Googling whether the definition I’ve given is correct. (It is.) This includes scholars within the field of criminology. Indeed, news media is not the only source using the term “pedophile” as another term for “child molester”: even criminological research frequently uses language equating pedophilia with offending behavior,⁴ demonstrating how far misunderstanding and stigma about pedophiles extends. Hundreds of academic articles, many written since 2015, feature such phrases as “the crime of pedophilia” and “victims of pedophilia.” Nearly all articles about pedophiles are from a criminal justice– or psychology-related source, demonstrating that most academic writing about pedophiles focuses on this population as offenders or as mentally ill.

The absence of a behavioral implication in the definition of “pedophile” is backed up by research. Although there are currently no agreed-upon estimates of the percentage of pedophiles who have committed sexual offenses against a child, due at least in part to the hidden nature of the population of pedophiles,⁵ we do know that not all pedophiles commit sexual offenses.⁶ In fact, some research suggests that only a small proportion of people who are preferentially attracted to children have been convicted of sexual offenses against minors.⁷ In addition, evidence from multiple studies has shown that many to most of those who do commit sexual offenses against children are not pedophiles.⁸ These individuals are not preferentially attracted to minors.⁹

Misconception 2: All People Who Are Attracted to Minors Are Pedophiles

Just as it is common to assume that all pedophiles are sex offenders, so too is it a common assumption that all people attracted to minors are pedophiles. In 2017 a special election was called in Alabama for the U.S. Senate seat previously held by Jeff Sessions. The Republican nominee was Roy Moore, a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Alabama. Upon his nomination, multiple women accused Moore of sexual assault and other sexual misconduct, when he was an adult. Some of the women had been minors at the time of the alleged incidents, including a woman who had been 14 at the time and multiple women who had been 16 years old. In response to the allegations, the media collectively referred to Moore as a pedophile. Here the media again may have been looking for a shorthand way to indicate that he had committed a sex offense against

underage girls, for which “pedophile” would be the wrong term to use, but this term was also wrong for a second reason: “pedophilia” refers to a specific age range of attraction.

Although it may be true that a person attracted to minors is a pedophile, this is not always the case. Above, I referenced the definition of “pedophile.”¹⁰ The definition, according to the American Psychiatric Association,¹¹ specifically refers to individuals over age 16 who exhibit a preferential attraction to *prepubescent children*. In other words, pedophiles are attracted to children who have not yet begun to go through puberty; generally around age 11 and under. Clinicians frequently distinguish between pedophiles and hebephiles, the latter of whom are preferentially attracted to children in the beginning phases of puberty, typically from the ages of 12 to 14.¹² Ephebophiles are a third set of individuals attracted to minors; these are people with a preferential attraction to minors in the late stages of puberty (usually between the ages of 15 to 19).¹³ However, researchers and other sources disagree over use of the term “ephebophile,”¹⁴ as well as which age ranges best fit which definitions.¹⁵ In addition, people who are attracted to minors themselves use a range of terms to describe themselves in terms of their attractions, including (but not limited to) pedophile, hebephile, and ephebophile, although the age ranges they are attracted to may or may not fit the clinical definitions of these terms. These terms are all in contrast to “teleiophile,” which refers to an adult who is attracted to other adults.¹⁶

Why does it matter whether someone is a pedophile or a hebephile? Overgeneralizing and referring to individuals who are attracted to minors as pedophiles further promotes misunderstanding about this population, pulling us toward our colloquial understandings of “pedophiles” as child molesters. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 1 of this book, individuals who are attracted to minors frequently describe themselves using terms that denote the age of the individuals they are attracted to—in other words, some refer to themselves as pedophiles, and some hebephiles—so understanding the differences in the terms promotes an understanding of these individuals’ experiences.

To account for the disagreement over definitions, as well as to be inclusive of individuals attracted to all age ranges of minors, I use the terms “minor-attracted person” and “MAP” throughout the majority of this book. “Minor-attracted person” is an established umbrella term that can refer to all individuals preferentially attracted to children. In addition to its usefulness in describing individuals preferentially attracted to minors of any age, the term “minor-attracted person” has also been

identified by the MAP-led group B4U-ACT as a phrase that is preferable to the term “pedophile” due to its less-stigmatizing nature.¹⁷ The question that may naturally arise is, “Why should we want minor-attracted people to feel *less* stigma?” This brings me to my third key point.

Misconception 3: Stigmatizing MAPs Protects Children

While I was preparing to interview MAPs for the project that would become this book, I reached out to journalist Luke Malone. A story of his had run on the popular NPR show *This American Life*—it dealt with MAPs who were supporting each other in their efforts to cope with their attractions to minors,¹⁸ and I had been in the beginning stages of planning my research with MAPs when it aired. Luke agreed to meet me for coffee, and he gave me invaluable advice for getting in touch with MAPs for my research. Then he gave me advice of a different kind—about the reactions of the general public toward hearing narratives about MAPs. He told me about the hate mail he’s received. One exchange in particular sticks out in my mind. Someone had reached out to Luke to argue that because his *This American Life* story encouraged empathy toward MAPs, the story was dangerous to minors. This person told Luke: “You have to think about the children.”

I have since encountered similar responses to my research. It’s standard to treat empathy toward MAPs and the safety of children as if the two concepts oppose each other so profoundly that they cannot both exist. Common logic seems to dictate that if we treat MAPs with empathy and compassion, we are somehow condoning sexual abuse against children. Therefore, the argument that we should “think about the children” reveals a philosophy that to keep children safe, MAPs need to be shamed for their attractions.

There are two main problems with this assumption. The first is that shaming people for their attractions won’t make their attractions go away. Of course, an argument can be made that there is value in temporarily shaming people for negative *behaviors*—criminological theory emphasizes the benefit of shame in response to criminal acts, if the criminal actor is successfully reintegrated into society afterward.¹⁹ Hence, there could be social benefit to shaming people who commit crimes against minors, as this could change the behavior of these individuals in the future.²⁰ If the goal in shaming people is *behavioral* change, however, shaming people for their *attractions* to minors is ineffective. Again, we see here the misunderstanding of pedophiles as sexual offenders. If society shamed only MAPs who commit crimes, that could, according to

this theory, have an effect on offending. But society does not only shame MAPs who commit crimes—it shames *all* MAPs. Therefore, presumably the goal is to convince MAPs that they should not be attracted to minors, and in doing so, to change their attractions entirely. Attempting to change the attractions of MAPs is a futile enterprise, however. Researchers and theorists in multiple fields have begun to acknowledge that, among those who are preferentially attracted to minors, this attraction tends to endure across the lifespan. Whereas it used to categorize MAPs as mentally ill, the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*²¹ has categorized pedophilia as a “sexual interest.”²²

Other researchers have gone further than the American Psychiatric Association, conceptualizing attractions to minors as a sexual orientation. The definition of this phrase is contested: while media watchdog organization GLAAD²³ and other LGBT organizations define sexual orientation in terms of attraction to a specific (or multiple) sex(es) or gender(s), others see the distinction about attractions toward gender as arbitrary and argue for an expansion of our understandings of sexual orientation. For example, sexologist Charles Moser²⁴ has proposed that sexual orientation does not need to be defined by gender but can instead be categorized by multiple other characteristics that distinguish sexual orientation from other sexual interests. These characteristics include attraction, relative permanence, fluidity, early age of onset, and importance to the individual. While all of these are relevant to sexual orientations toward a given gender (or multiple genders), these characteristics also have relevance to orientations that are not characterized by gender.

Applying Moser’s definition, there is evidence showing that attractions to minors can be considered a sexual orientation. Psychologist Michael Seto²⁵ has identified pedophilia alternately as a “sexual age orientation,” and a “chronophilia,” pointing to numerous similarities between attractions to minors and attractions to either the same or another gender. His work shows that MAPs’ attractions and trajectories mirror those of other sexual minorities in terms of the age when individuals first become aware of their attractions, their sexual history, endurance of attractions over time, and experiences of romantic feelings in addition to sexual attraction. MAPs often report becoming aware of their attractions to children during adolescence, a trend that is typical of other sexual minorities.²⁶ MAPs also report feeling romantic attachments to those they are attracted to, in addition having sexual feelings for them, which is consistent with the discourse surrounding other sexual minorities,²⁷ providing further evidence for the existence of a sexual age orientation.

Two arguments are commonly applied against labeling attraction to minors as a sexual orientation. The first is that using the term “sexual orientation,” a term that generally gets invoked when discussing queer communities, cannot apply to MAPs because children cannot consent to sex, whereas relationships between consenting queer adults are morally permissible. Allow me to be clear: this book does *not* promote sexual contact between adults and minors. My point here is *not* that children can consent to sex, nor do I suggest that sexual contact between adults and minors could be beneficial to children in any way. Rather, my objection to this argument is that the fact of children’s inability to consent to sex is irrelevant in the application of the term “sexual orientation” toward attractions to minors. If our definition of “sexual orientation” is about attraction to a certain group that develops early, remains relatively consistent across the lifetime, and is important to the identity of the individual, evidence shows that this applies to MAPs. The fact that MAPs are attracted to a group with whom they cannot morally or legally engage in sexual activity does not mean that they lack a sexual orientation toward minors. Again, this comes back to attraction versus behavior. A person’s sexual orientation does not determine their behavior—it only determines their sexual interests.

The second common argument against using the term “sexual orientation” to describe attractions to minors is related to, but slightly different from, the first. This argument says that calling attractions to minors a sexual orientation sets MAPs up for comparisons to queer communities, which presents a danger to queer people. This argument is harder for me to oppose—in fact, I can’t say I disagree with it. If an enduring attraction to minors constitutes a sexual orientation, and if queer populations are individuals with non-normative sexual orientations, certainly MAPs apply under the large queer umbrella. What, then, does this mean for other queer communities, who have for ages been subjected to accusations of sexual violence and child predation²⁸ based on ignorance and hate?

As a queer person myself, this question haunts me. And yet it is perhaps the fact that I am queer that gives me meaningful understanding of others who are treated with suspicion and stigma based upon a sexual orientation that cannot be changed. I can’t begrudge other queer individuals who do not want to be associated with a population assumed to be child molesters; however, it is also important to realize that unfounded and reductive historical claims of queer individuals’ supposedly predatory behaviors mirror today’s assumptions about MAPs. It is a common

belief in today's society that minor-attracted individuals are all offenders, which is a flawed assumption that contributes to stigma felt by MAPs. The tendency of queer communities to distance themselves from MAPs indicates either agreement with that erroneous belief or a willingness to prioritize the wellbeing of *some* queer people at the expense of others.

Ultimately, shifting away from the conceptualization of attractions to minors as a mental illness and shifting toward their conceptualization as a sexual orientation indicates that attraction to minors is neither treatable nor curable—indeed, if it is not an illness, it cannot be cured. In fact, before the American Psychiatric Association²⁹ moved to call pedophilia a “sexual interest,” sexuality theorist Augustin Malón³⁰ critiqued its former categorization, calling it “a diagnosis in search of a disorder.” In addition, sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE), also known as conversion therapy or reparative therapy, have been condemned by many as ineffective.³¹ Although this type of “therapy” is specifically denounced (and in some jurisdictions prohibited by law)³² when applied to LGBT individuals, there is no evidence that it works to cure attractions to minors either—indeed, research has yet to substantiate any treatments that might supposedly change the attractions of MAPs.³³

If the first problem with the assumption that shaming MAPs makes children safe is that shaming MAPs can't change their attractions to minors, the second problem is that shaming MAPs for their attractions alone may actually put children in *more* danger. If we really want to “think about the children,” it is possible that treating MAPs with empathy is the *key*. This suggestion may seem counterintuitive: again, common wisdom says that if we don't place stigma and shame upon MAPs, we normalize their attractions and promote offending. However, because shame is not used to target only *offending* MAPs, and because MAPs cannot be “cured” of their attractions, shaming them is an ineffective method of keeping children safe.

Instead, shame may have the opposite effect. The stigma associated with experiencing sexual attractions toward minors is so severe that it may affect how MAPs cope with their attractions. Where can someone go for help if they realize they are preferentially attracted to minors? The taboo against sexual attraction to children is societally ubiquitous—who could trust their parents to be understanding? Their siblings or friends? An adult romantic partner? In the absence of support from friends and loved ones, where can MAPs turn for help if they feel tempted to commit a crime? Do mental health providers even know enough to provide help, given society's current misperceptions about MAPs?

The effect of shaming not only MAPs who commit offenses, but MAPs in general, means that MAPs are societally confused for sex offenders and therefore might have very few options for help-seeking, even in the event that help is necessary to prevent themselves from committing a crime. Taking into consideration the fact that our social environment provides so few resources for MAPs to access help, the resilience of my study sample, in terms of coping and in terms of non-offending, is remarkable. This resilience is a key topic in my research, and I share my participants' coping methods and strategies for non-offending throughout this book.

INTERVIEWING MAPS ONLINE

I was an adult with a full-time research job by the time I first learned about the existence of MAPs who do not commit offenses against minors. In that moment I was stunned. Why hadn't I considered before that people with these attractions may not be offenders? I began asking more questions: How do non-offending MAPs strategize to resist committing offenses? How do they cope with their attractions, and with the stigma they face? Finding few answers in available research at the time, I decided to ask non-offending MAPs themselves.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 42 MAPs across the globe. Most of these interviews took place over the phone or over text-based chat, although some were through video chat or in person. As I was interested in speaking only to non-offending minor-attracted people, requirements for participation in my study were that my participants had to be 18 years or older, preferentially or exclusively attracted to individuals under the age of 18, and that they had never committed a crime involving sexual contact with a minor.³⁴ The MAPs I interviewed, and whose narratives are presented throughout this book, range in age from 19 years old to their mid-sixties, with the majority in their twenties and thirties. Exactly half of the sample lived within the United States; the rest of the population lived internationally, spread across six continents. The majority were men, although three were women and one was agender. In terms of race, the sample was almost homogenous: the vast majority (90%) were white. Slightly less than half of my sample was exclusively attracted to minors; the rest were preferentially attracted to minors, with some attractions to adults as well. More information about my sample is available in Appendix A, and further information about my research methods is in Appendix B.

Although it is unlikely that participants' characteristics are represen-