

Beliefs about Pedophilia and the Attribution of Punishment for Child Sexual Abusers

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ABSTRACT. Pedophilia is a mental illness which may or may not lead to sexual abuse against children. However, when thinking about people with pedophilic sexual interests, people often consider them abusers (even if they did not act against children and did not commit any offense). This is a pilot study aimed to explore the attitudes and perception of people with pedophilic sexual interests in Romania, based on a questionnaire that was distributed on social media (Facebook), having 1077 respondents. The questions concerned the perception of people who sexually abused children and people with pedophilia who did not abuse children. The majority of participants in the study believe that people with pedophilia do not have control over their actions, even if they are perceived as ill or criminals. The results of this study have shown that chemical castration is the most preferred punishment for persons who sexually abuse children. Regarding the danger of people with pedophilia, all the respondents believed that it did not matter whether they were just suffering from an illness or if they committed an offence, they were all very dangerous. Regarding the recidivism rate, the majority of the respondents believed that the percentage is between 80-100%. Roughly half of the respondents who have children perceived 100% chances for the people with pedophilia to relapse. Further consideration and implications were discussed.

Keywords: pedophilia, sexual abuse against children, stigmatization, sexual offense against children, society's perception of people with pedophilia

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INTRODUCTION

Pedophilia and sexual abusers

According to the DSM-5, a diagnosis of pedophilic disorder (previously known as pedophilia) requires a prolonged period of sexually arousing fantasies or sexual urges involving prepubescent children that may result in sexually abusive behaviors, significant distress, or sexually abusive acts toward a prepubescent child victim (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Stigmatization is a significant problem in society, mainly for people with mental illness or different sexual orientations. These labels diminish opportunities in life and consist of a continuing source of stress. Stigma prevents people with pedophilia to seek help, disclose their sexual interest and seek therapeutic support, but encourages them to be more isolative and to feel loneliness, which are risk factors for committing sexual crimes (Cantor & McPhail, 2016). The media shows (West, 2000) there is a high incidence of sexual abuse and the recidivism rate concerning this offense, but statistics and studies about recidivism fail to confirm the inevitability of recidivism (West, 2000). Moreover, vigilantism, stigmatization, and barriers to employment impair the rehabilitation of sex offenders (West, 2000). With this issue, the public needs education to prevent such labels as 'pedophile', 'predator' and 'incurable' being used indiscriminately, and for the minority of offenders who are dangerously deviant and uncontrolled, hospitalization remains a more constructive response than imprisonment for the protection of children in the future (West, 2000).

Social Perception of pedophilia

One study (Imhoff & Jahnke, 2018) explored society's perception about people labeled as "pedophiles", or people with sexual interest in prepubescent children, finding strong negative and punitive attitudes towards persons with a pedophilic disorder, seen as very dangerous and incapable of changing. People generally sustain and favor punishment and incarceration for people with pedophilia, even if they did not commit unacceptable activities or illegal acts (Imhoff & Jahnke, 2018).

Two surveys conducted in Germany (Jahnke et al., 2014) measured agreement with stereotypes, emotion and social distance concerning people who abused alcohol, sexual sadists, or people with antisocial tendencies, all regarding pedophilia. The results reveal that all reactions to people with pedophilia were more negative than those to other groups, including social distance. Fourteen percent (Study 1) and 28% (Study 2) of the participants admitted that

people with pedophilia should be dead, even if they did not commit any crime. These outcomes showed that persons with a pedophilic disorder are stigmatized and are a target of discrimination (Jahnke et al., 2014).

The prevalence of pedophilia in Romania is not known. A large sample from Germany, found that 4.1% of people had sexual fantasies involving a child, 3.2% sexually offended prepubescent children, and 0.1% had a pedophilic sexual preference (Dombert et al., 2016). Data from Canada ($N= 1040$) suggests that nearly half of the canadian sample (45.6%) expressed interest in at least one paraphilic category (voyeurism, fetishism, frotteurism, masochism), and 33.9% of the respondents have displayed paraphilic fantasies and behaviors in the past (Joyal & Carpentier, 2017). From this sample, 0.4% experienced at least one time sex with a child, and 0.4% wished to have a sexual experience with a child (Joyal & Carpentier, 2017). Moreover, on a sample of sexual offenders from Austria (Eher, Rettenberger, & Turner, 2019), the most frequently found disorders were alcohol misuse (40%), paraphilic disorder (43.3%) and personality disorder (53.6%). From those people who committed a sexual assault against a child, they were most probably diagnosed with pedophilia (67.1%), paraphilic disorder, sexual deviance, and an antisocial disorder (Eher et al., 2019). It can be rightly supposed that the stigma attached to this diagnosis may make some people not want to search for a treatment. Moreover, punitive attitudes against individuals based on their sexually deviant desire also exist.

Of note, it is possible that individuals with sex offenses could differ depending on their age. In a study (Clark & Mezey, 1997), a group of 13 people over the age of 65 ($M=72.5$), who abused children were described, to discover the differences and similarities with younger age groups. They differ in terms of being of higher socioeconomic status, having stable backgrounds, reporting low rates of personal sexual victimization, and yielding an overall picture of socially skilled and well-adjusted offenders. Individuals who committed sex offenses are similar in terms of low levels of psychiatric illness, and in particular of organic disorders, and they also reported sexual abuse in childhood (Clark & Mezey, 1997).

Regarding the punishment people with pedophilia should receive, a greater proportion of respondents agreed with the death penalty (51%), compared with the same punishment for crimes against adults (27%) (Mancini & Mears, 2010).

Perception about the recidivism of a pedophile

Recidivism is another problem that is stigmatized and controversial. On a sample of residents from Florida ($N=193$, 57% females) (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007), 75% of sexual offenders are thought to relapse because they form a homogenous risk group, and the treatment is not effective.

In addition, people consider that persons who commit the sexual offenses are unknown to, and have no connection with their victims. (Levenson et al., 2007). Another study (Katz-Schiavone, Levenson, & Ackerman, 2008) found that people believe that 98% of the people with pedophilia will relapse. In fact, 76% of people who sexually offended did not relapse after 15 years (Harris & Hanson, 2004) (only 5-14% relapse after 3-6 years), 96% of the offenders know their victims (34% are family members and 59% are acquaintances), and there are evidence that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) works for rehabilitating this patient (Levenson et al., 2007). Another researcher (Moulden, Firestone, Kingston, & Bradford, 2009) examined the relationship between pedophilia and recidivism on a sample of 206 extra-familial child molesters between 1982 and 1992. The results showed that the overall recidivism rates were 22.8%, 33.9%, and 45.6% for sexual offense, violence, and any re-offense, respectively, but there was no difference regarding recidivism between people with pedophilia and people who do not have pedophilia (Moulden et al., 2009). Five years after release in a sample from Austria (Rettenberger et al., 2015), the recidivism rate was 6% for the total sample, 4% for the rapist subgroup, and 8% for the child molesters' subgroup. In another study (Eher et al., 2019), 68.3% of the sample with pedophilic disorder had an intra-familial child victim, 68.7% had an affiliate victim (acquaintance), and 54.1% did not know their victim.

A qualitative online study, conducted in Australia (Richards, 2018) discovered that people consider pedophilia a sexual orientation which is stable and internal, thus giving a biological explanation for this disease. Participants from this research believed that people with pedophilia do not have control, and that they cannot be cured. Other respondents believed that they are mentally ill, that they need psychological or psychiatric treatment, and they also believe in the efficacy of these treatments (Richards, 2018). Regarding choice, people perceive that people with pedophilic sexual interests do have control over their actions, and they want to show their power and control over their victims. Respondents conceptualized persons with pedophilia as calculated and rational, making deliberate decisions, rather than being driven by a mental illness (Richards, 2018).

It is important for professionals involved in the treatment of sexual offenders to endorse fewer stereotypes and be able to offer the treatment they need, which should be based on review or risk. Sanghara and Wilson (2006) interviewed 60 professionals (psychologists, social assistance, rehabilitation staff etc.) and 71 teachers from schools (UK). The results reveal that professionals involved in the treatment of sexual offenders have fewer negative stereotypes, more positive attitudes, and sustain that the offenders are less guilty if they have a low intelligence level, if they are frustrated because they are alone, or if they have a mental illness (Sanghara & Wilson, 2006).

People with pedophilia appeared to be ambivalent about therapy (52% would seek professional help, even if it meant that they have to talk about their sexual interests to a stranger, but only 36% believed that a health care professional would understand their problems) (Jahnke, Schmidt, Geradt, & Hoyer, 2016). Moreover, perceived social distance and fear of discovery were not linked to self-efficacy, cognitive distortions or treatment motivation (Jahnke et al., 2016).

An analysis of the population's distorted perceptions could reveal the possible areas of intervention to change people's attitude towards pedophilia. A correct public view of pedophilia could help to have a more appropriate attitude that encourages the treatment of people suffering from pedophilia. The general social interest is the prevention of sexual abuse of children. If people suffering from pedophilia were more encouraged to seek treatment, the goal of preventing sexual abuse of children would be indirectly, partially fulfilled.

At present, there are no studies that have measured the public perception of pedophilia in Romania. The main purpose of this exploratory study is to measure Romanian people's belief about people with pedophilia. We want to investigate the inter-individual differences which are associated with certain beliefs. The specific aim is to investigate the attitudes regarding the punishment of the people who suffer from pedophilia, and who committed a sexual abuse, and the perception about the rate of relapse of child sexual abusers.

This study is an exploratory one, therefore no hypothesis was assumed. Variables that were already used in other studies were explored and performed on a sample from Romania.

METHOD

Instrumentation and procedure

Based on other research that measured the public perception of pedophilia (Levenson et al., 2007; Stevenson et al., 2015), we constructed an online questionnaire with 35 items. In the first part we measured different perceptions and beliefs about pedophilia (whether or not pedophilia is a disease, beliefs if pedophilic persons have control over their actions, whether child abuse is spontaneous or premeditated, whether non-offending people with pedophilia are dangerous, about the treatment persons with pedophilia need or deserve etc.), then we measured the punishment chosen by the participants for sexual abuse against children ("What punishment should a person with pedophilia

receive who committed a sexual crime?") and estimates of the recidivism rate of sexual abusers and the history of sexual abuse of persons with pedophilia. In the last part of the questionnaire we measured data on participants.

Similar to Levenson et al. (2007), in most items the answers had to be chosen from a list of choices (for example, " You consider that people who suffer from pedophilia: a) They are sick; b) They are criminals; c) They are sick criminals; d) Other: ", "Pedophiles: a) have control over their behavior; b) they have no control over their behavior; c) I do not know" or "Do all persons with pedophilia commit sexual crimes at any given time?: a) yes; b) no; c) I don't know"). For items that estimated the recidivism rate and the history of sexual abuse of pedophiles, we proceeded as Stevenson et al. (2015) formulating responses at intervals. We took over the questions formulated by Stevenson et al. (2015) to which we added some regarding the criminal policy that the participants would consider effective.

The questionnaire was distributed on social media, in different Facebook groups (e.g. groups of different students from Romania). This method was chosen because it gave access to a large number of people and keep them anonymous.

Participants

There were no exclusion criteria, and the total number of participants was 1131. After incomplete, duplicated and invalid responses were excluded, 1077 responses were taken into consideration. The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 77 years of age ($M=27.43$, $SD=10.020$), 71.9% of the respondents were female, and 28.1% were male. About half of the sample responded that they are students, and the rest had diverse careers. The majority of the sample, 93.6%, declared being heterosexual, 5.4% declared that they are bisexual, and 1% declared being homosexual. From the total sample, 83.4% of the respondents declared that they have never met an individual with pedophilia, and 10.8% of the sample declared that they have been a victim of sexual abuse. The majority of the sample is from the urban area (93.3%).

Analysis of the data and results

The data were analyzed in the program SPSS Statistics 24., using the Chi-square test or the Kruskal-Wallis test, depending on the variables (nominal or ordinal).

Results regarding punishment attribution

The punishment set by the respondents for the people who committed sexual abuse against a child was: 1% chose imprisonment for up to 1 year, 5% imprisonment between 1-5 years, 8% imprisonment between 5-10 years, 9% imprisonment between 10-15 years, 5% imprisonment between 15-20 years, 9% imprisonment between 20-25 years, 6% death penalty, 15% life imprisonment, 34% chemical castration, and 9% chose “other” (see Figure 1).

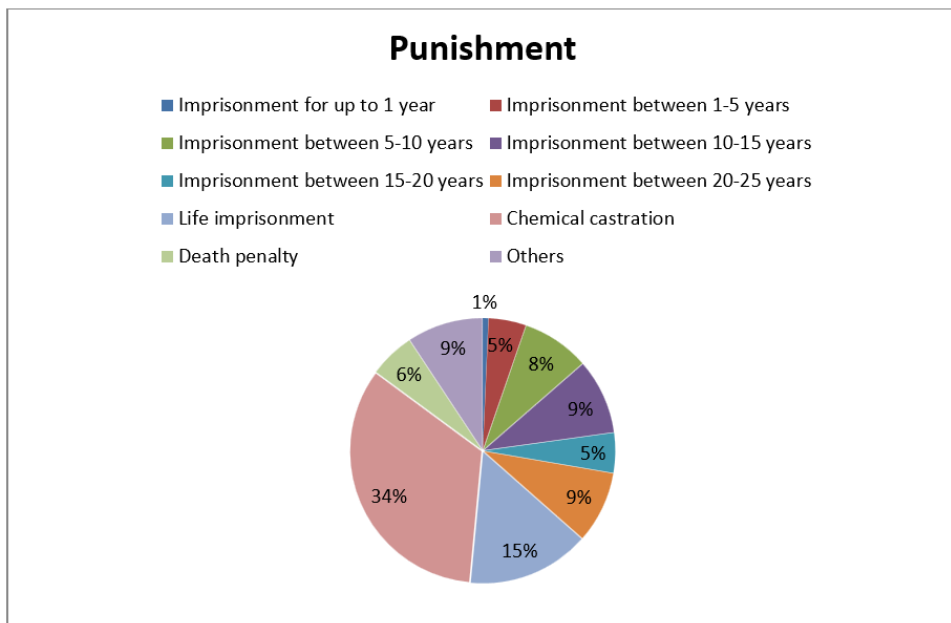


Figure 1. Punishment attribution

There was a significant association between people’s knowledge and the perceived punishment, $\chi^2(21) = 43.060, p < .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a small association of .21 ($p < .001$). Most of the respondents with no legal/psychological training, (23.3% from the total 65.8%), most of the respondents with legal training (2.3% from the total 8.2%), most of the respondents with psychological training (7.1% from the total 23.6%), and most of the respondents with both psychological and legal training (0.9% from the total of 2.4%) perceived chemical castration as the most appropriate punishment.

Table 1. Results regarding punishment attribution

	X ²	df	p
Perceived punishment			
Legal/psychological knowledge	43,060	21	.003
Individuals with pedophilia do /r have control of their actions	55,608	28	.001
Participants who don't/have children	25,881	7	.001
Individuals with pedophilia forced/convinced their victim	140,454	14	.001
Individuals with pedophilia do /not have a mental disorder	71,892	28	.001
Individuals with pedophilia have a mental illness / criminals	67,556	28	.001
Individuals with pedophilia abused in the past	152,759	63	.001
Individuals with pedophilia's environment	37,373	14	.001
Danger of individuals with pedophilia	121,178	14	.001

There was a significant association between the belief that persons with pedophilia do or do not have control over their actions, and the perceived punishment, $\chi^2(28) = 55.608, p = .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a small association of .25 ($p < .001$). The majority of the respondents who considered that persons with pedophilia do not have control over their sexual actions (16.4% from the total of 51%) considered that the appropriate punishment was chemical castration. The majority of the respondents who considered that individuals with pedophilia have control over their sexual actions, (12% from the total of 33.5%) considered that the appropriate punishment was chemical castration.

There was a significant association between people who have / do not have children and the perceived punishment, $\chi^2(7) = 25.881, p = .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a small association of .20 ($p < .001$). A big part of the respondents who do not have children (23.3% from the total of 75.3%), and most of the respondents who have children (10.2% from the total of 24.7%) considered that the most appropriate punishment was chemical castration.

There was a significant association between the belief that persons with pedophilia forced/convicted their victim, and the perceived punishment, $\chi^2(14) = 140.454, p < .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a moderate association of .41 ($p < .001$). The majority of the respondents who believed that the victim was convicted (0.6% from the total of 1%) considered that the most appropriate punishment was imprisonment to up to one year (0.3%), and chemical castration (0.3%). The majority of the respondents who believed that the victim was forced (4.4% from the total of 12%) of them considered that the most appropriate punishment was chemical castration.

There was a significant association between the belief that individuals with pedophilia do or do not have a mental disorder, and the perceived punishment, $\chi^2(28) = 71.892, p < .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a moderate association of .31 ($p < .001$). From the total number of respondents, 89.5% considered that people with pedophilia have a mental disorder, 4.9% considered that they do not have a mental disorder, and the rest (5.6%) answered that they do not know if people with pedophilia have or have not a mental disorder. From the respondents who believed that people with pedophilia have a disorder, a considerable percentage (32%) considered that the most appropriate punishment was chemical castration (16%) and imprisonment between 10-15 years (16%).

There was a significant association between the belief that people with pedophilia are criminals / ill, and the perceived punishment, $\chi^2(28) = 67.556, p < .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a small association of .25 ($p = .027$). The majority of the respondents who believed that people with pedophilia have an illness (23.3% from the total of 68.7%) and the majority of the respondents who considered that people with pedophilia are criminals (5.3% from the total of 15.2%) considered that the most appropriate punishment was chemical castration.

There was a significant association between the belief that individuals with pedophilia became sexual abusers because they have been abused in the past, and the perceived punishment, $\chi^2(49) = 86.285$, $p = .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a small association of .28 ($p < .001$). A significant part of the respondents who believed that individuals with pedophilia have not been abused in the past (3.2% from the total of 11.7%) and the majority of the respondents who considered that individuals with pedophilia have been sexually abused in the past (15.4% from the total of 49%) considered that the most appropriate punishment was chemical castration.

There was a significant association between the belief about the pedophile's environment, and the perceived punishment, $\chi^2(14) = 37.373$, $p = .001$. Phi indicated a small association of .20 ($p < .001$). 19.4% from respondents considered that individuals with pedophilia come from urban area. The majority of the respondents who considered that individuals with pedophilia come from the urban area (7.4% from the total of 19.4%) perceived that the most appropriate punishment was chemical castration. The majority of the respondents who considered that individuals with pedophilia come from the rural area (3.1% from the total of 11%) perceived that the most appropriate punishment was chemical castration.

There was a significant association between the perceived danger of individuals with pedophilia, and the perceived punishment, $\chi^2(14) = 121.178$, $p < .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a moderate association of .36 ($p < .001$). A part of the respondents who believed that individuals with pedophilia are not dangerous (0.7% from the total of 4%), the majority of the respondents who perceived individuals with pedophilia as a little dangerous (14.4% from the total of 41.9%), and a big proportion of the respondents who considered that individuals with pedophilia are very dangerous (18.5% from the total of 54.2%), perceived chemical castration as the most appropriate punishment.

Results regarding perceived recidivism rate

There was a significant association between people's training and the perceived recidivism rate, $\chi^2(3) = 11.689$, $p = .009$. Phi coefficient indicated a small association of .16 ($p < .017$). Most of the respondents with no legal or psychological training (25% from the total 65.8%), most of the respondents with legal training (3.9% from the total 8.2%), and most of the respondents with both legal and psychological training (0.8% from the total 2.4%) considered that there was a probability of 80-100% that individuals with pedophilia would commit a crime again. Most of the respondents with psychological training (8.6% from the total 23.6%) considered that there was a probability of 50-80% that individuals with pedophilia would relapse.

Table 2. Results regarding perceived recidivism rate

	X ²	df	p
Perceived recidivism rate			
Legal/psychological knowledge	11,689	3	.009
Individuals with pedophilia abused in the past	19,524	5	.002
Participants who don't/have children	44,900	1	.001
Individuals with pedophilia do /not have a mental disorder	8,738	1	.003

There was a significant association between people who have been abused and the perceived recidivism rate, $\chi^2(20) = 40.517, p = .004$. Phi coefficient indicated a small association of .11 ($p < .010$). A significant part of the respondents who have not been sexually abused (35.4% from the total 93%) and most of the respondents who have been sexually abused (2.4% from the total 6.9%) considered that there was a chance of 80-100% that an individual with pedophilia would reoffend again.

There was a significant association between people who have children or not and the recidivism rate, $\chi^2(5) = 55.980, p < .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a small association of .28 ($p < .001$). A significant proportion of the respondents who do not have children (27.2% of the total of 75.2%) consider that there is a chance of 80-100% that individuals with pedophilia would commit again. Most of the respondents who have children (10.8% from the total of 24.8%) consider that there is a chance of 100% that individuals with pedophilia would commit again a sexual offence.

There was a significant association between the belief that individuals with pedophilia do or do not have a mental disorder, and the perceived recidivism rate, $\chi^2(10) = 100.237, p < .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a small

association of .21 ($p=.001$). Most of the respondents who believed that individuals with pedophilia do not have a mental disorder (1.8% from the total of 4.9%) considered that the recidivism rate was between 50-80% chances that the individuals with pedophilia would commit again. Most of the respondents who considered that individuals with pedophilia have a mental disorder (34% from the total of 89.5%) considered that the recidivism rate was between 80-100% chances that people with pedophilia would commit again.

Results regarding perceived control

Table 3. Results regarding perceived control

	X^2	df	p
Perceived control			
Individuals with pedophilia have a mental illness/ criminals	82,914	16	.001

There was a significant association between the belief that individuals with pedophilia do or do not have control over their actions, and the perception that they are criminals / ill, $\chi^2(16) = 82.914$, $p < .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a large association of .52 ($p < .001$). Most of the respondents who considered that individuals with pedophilia are having an illness (19.6% from the total of 30.2%), and most of the respondents who considered that individuals with pedophilia are ill criminals (27.7% from the total of 53.8%) considered that they do not have control over their actions. Most of the respondents who considered that individuals with pedophilia are criminals (7.9% from the total of 11.7%) considered that they do have control over their actions.

Results regarding danger perception

There was a significant association between the belief about the danger a persons with pedophilia poses, and the belief about the help they need, $\chi^2(8) = 90.949$, $p < .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a moderate association of .36 ($p < .001$). Most of the respondents who considered that individuals with pedophilia were not dangerous (2% from the total of 4%), and most of the respondents who

considered that individuals with pedophilia were a little dangerous (23.4% from the total of 41.9%) considered that the most appropriate help for them was treatment. Most of the respondents who considered that individuals with pedophilia were very dangerous (36.8% from the total of 54.1%) considered that the most appropriate help for them was treatment and imprisonment.

Table 4. Results regarding danger perception

	X ²	df	p
Danger perception			
Help they need	90,949	8	.001
Participants who have children	15,369	2	.001

There was a significant association between people who have children or not and the perceived dangerousness of individuals with pedophilia, $\chi^2(2) = 15.369$, $p < .001$. Phi coefficient indicated a small association of .17 ($p < .001$). Both most of the respondents who do not have children (36.7 from the total of 75.2%), and most of the respondents who have children (17% from the total of 24.8) considered that an individual with pedophilia who never committed a crime is very dangerous.

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of the study was to explore the Romanian people's attitudes and beliefs concerning individuals with pedophilia. The specific aim was to investigate the attitudes regarding the punishment of people who suffer from pedophilia, and the perception about the rate of relapse of child sexual abusers.

Discussion regarding punishment attribution.

This hypothesis targeted the punishment assigned to individuals with pedophilia that committed sexual offense. Respondents considered that the most appropriate punishment for individuals with pedophilia is chemical castration. This answer was the majority, even if the following variables about

the answer were controlled: do or do not have legal/psychological training; consider that individuals with pedophilia do or do not have control over their actions; do or do not have children; consider that the victims were forced or convinced; consider or not that individuals with pedophilia have a mental disorder; consider that individuals with pedophilia are having an illness or not; consider that individuals with pedophilia were or were not sexually abused in the past; consider that individuals with pedophilia come from urban/rural area; consider that individuals with pedophilia are a little dangerous, dangerous or very dangerous.

This information may show that the first instinct people have when they think about an individual with pedophilia is the defense instinct (for their children). The criminal punishment has a punitive role but also to remove the immediate danger. In conformity with Imhoff (2015), there are situations when people prefer to think about a just punishment for what individuals with pedophilia have done, and to restore justice. Moreover, 54.2% of the respondents consider that individuals with pedophilia are very dangerous.

Discussions about perceived recidivism rate.

The probability of perceived recidivism rate for the majority of the respondents is between 80-100%. This could be a possible explanation why the majority of the respondents prefer chemical castration as a punishment for individuals with pedophilia. Individuals who have psychological training are more optimistic regarding the recidivism rate, or they may just be more aware of the current state of research. The majority of them estimated the probability of recidivism rate between 50-80%, however, estimating the rate to be much higher than the real one, 38% in 2017 (The National Administration of Penitentiaries, 2017). In Romania there are no official data specific for pedophilia related offenses, but only in general, for sex offenses. However, the judgments made by respondents regarding recidivism rate could be distorted, reflecting the stigmatization of people with pedophilia, considering the fact that studies showed that 76% of people convicted in the past for sexual offenses against children do not recidivate (Harris & Hanson, 2004). The results of this study are consonant with other studies regarding perception about people with pedophilia, where the relapse rate was also overestimated (Levenson et al., 2007; Moulden et al., 2009; Richards, 2018).

Whether individuals with pedophilia were sexually abused or not, the respondents perceived the recidivism rate as being very high. Considering the repulsion/negative emotions that society has for pedophiles (Richards, 2018), one of the explanation for this result could be attribution substitution. Research

(Kahneman & Frederick, 2005) has shown that when people should evaluate frequency, they are influenced by emotions (affective heuristic).

The respondents who have children yield another interesting result, regarding the perceived recidivism rate. Almost half of the respondents perceived the recidivism rate as being 100%. It is considered that this result is sustaining the hypothesis that emotional processes are also involved in the evaluative judgments regarding recidivism rate. However, this presumption needs to be further investigated in the future.

Discussions regarding the perceived control.

Regardless of whether the respondents believe that individuals with pedophilia are mentally ill or criminals, those who perceive the disease to be associated with the behavior, assigned external control. There is strong association between the perception of pedophilia as a disease, and the perception of the lack of control. On the flip side, respondents who perceived individuals with pedophilia as criminals, assigned internal control for the behavior, indicating they consider that these individuals have control over their actions. This is in accordance with other studies that investigated the perception of people with pedophilia (Richards, 2018).

Discussions regarding danger perception.

The high danger perception of individuals with pedophilia is associated with the perceived need to give them treatment but also with incarceration. As discovered before, cognitive behavioral treatment could have beneficial outcomes and reduce the rate of recidivism (Babchishin et al., 2013).

The majority of the respondents with or without children (53.7%) consider that individuals with pedophilia are very dangerous, regardless of whether they committed a sexual crime in the past or not. The results are explainable because people associate the mental illness with the lack of control. Thereby, respondents considered people with pedophilia very dangerous because they perceived them unable to control their desires regarding children. This is in accordance with other studies that found strong negative and punitive attitudes towards persons with a pedophilic disorder, seen as very dangerous and incapable of changing (Imhoff & Jahnke, 2018). In a study from 2014, Janke and colleagues, discovered that 28% of the respondents considered that people with pedophilia should be dead, even if they did not abuse any child. Also, 53.7% of the respondents of this study considered that individuals with pedophilia who never committed a sexual offense were very dangerous. Regarding punishment,

5% of the respondents considered the death penalty the most appropriate punishment for individuals with pedophilia who committed a sexual offense. This percentage (5%) found in this study it is smaller than in previous researches (28%- Jahnke et al., 2014). This difference could be due to the fact that the current sample has a high level of education (32% graduated university, 17% master degree).

The present paper confirms what has already been found by previous research (Levenson et al., 2007; Stevenson et al., 2015). In Table 5. the results from previous studies will be summarized and the findings from the present study completed.

Table 5. *Perception and reality about sex offenders*

People's perception	Reality	Present study
67% of the molesters were sexually abused in childhood (Stevenson et al., 2015).	28% of the molesters were sexually abused in childhood (Stevenson et al., 2015).	49% of the respondents consider that individuals with pedophilia were abused in childhood.
75% of sex offenders have high rates of recidivism (Hanson et al., 2004;	After a period of 15 years, 76% of the sex offenders did not relapse (Levensonet al., 2007).	Respondents consider that the recidivism rate is between 80-100%.
People consider that sex offenders did not know their victims (Levenson et al., 2007).	93% of the sex offenders know their victims (59% are acquaintances, 34% are members of the family) (Levenson et al., 2007).	-
People consider that treatment does not have beneficial outcomes and do not reduce the rate of recidivism (Babchishin et al., 2013).	Cognitive behavioral treatment could have beneficial outcomes and reduce the rate of recidivism (Babchishin et al., 2013).	53.8% of the respondents consider that individuals with pedophilia are ill criminals and they need both treatment and imprisonment.

The results of this study showed a high stigmatization of individuals with pedophilia who did not commit a sexual abuse. It is important to delimit the two terms "pedophile" and "child sexual abuser". Society should be more careful with the individuals with pedophilia who did not commit a sexual offense, because if they are not seen with empathy, and if there is no wish to help them through professional programs, the chances that they will commit a sexual offense against children could increase. People should fight against

stigmatization to reduce child sexual abuse in society. A first step could be to differentiate people with pedophilia who did not commit any offense against a child and people with pedophilia who sexually abused children.

Limitations and future directions

This study is, as we have assumed, an exploratory one. One of the main limitations is that in the measurement, we used only one item for each public perception/belief. Moreover, because it is an exploratory study, and because Romania does not have a validated questionnaire for this matter, a not validated questionnaire was used. The answers were only self-report, which could lead to a socially desirable answering style. However, anonymity could also offer freedom in expressing their thoughts regarding a taboo subject. The used sample is quite highly educated, thus the generalizability of the results is limited. In the same direction, our sample is heavily skewed towards females (71.9%), which may limit the generalizability of the results, particularly regarding gendered perceptions of pedophilia. There is a need to explore more the gender differences on the perception of pedophilia. In future research it is necessary to use more complex instruments, with more items for each perception / belief studied.

As I have shown above, from the total sample, 83.4% of the respondents declared that they have never met an individual with pedophilia. So, a majority of respondents formed their beliefs about people suffering from pedophilia indirectly. It would be interesting for the future to investigate more the way in which respondents form their perceptions of people who suffer from pedophilia and if direct contact with these people changes their beliefs about them.

Lasher and Stinson (2017) suggested that to "challenge myths and misunderstandings about child sexual abuse" is one of the important recommendations in the process of preventing sexual abuse behaviors of individuals with pedophilia. Stigma prevents people with pedophilia to seek help, disclose their sexual interest and seek therapeutic support, but stimulate them to be more isolated and to feel loneliness, which are risk factors for committing sexual crimes (Cantor & McPhail, 2016). The present research is only a first step in measuring the beliefs about pedophilia and child sexual abuse in Romanian population. In the future, information campaigns and challenge myths and misunderstandings about child sexual abusers can be promoted, so that people with pedophile interests who do not act will be encouraged to consult with mental health specialists.

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