



'I believed I could, so I did'—A theoretical approach on self-efficacy beliefs to positively influence men with a risk to sexually abuse children



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ABSTRACT

Today's competing positions regarding the flexibility of pedophilic sexual interest are of increasing relevance. Besides empirical research on this specific topic, theoretical work grounded on scientifically sound research is equally needed. From a theoretical perspective, this paper aims to deduce if self-efficacy to change sexual interest in children may influence men with a risk to sexually abuse children in a positive way. We focus on research literature on (1) self-efficacy and (2) sexual interest in children in order to (3) link both. By this, we provide a framework within which sexual interest in children may also be seen as flexible and changeable due to specific therapeutic interventions. By addressing the individuals' conviction of being able to alter their sexual interest in children, the required motivation for change might be enhanced and help the individuals in changing and developing. Finally, both research and clinical implications are given.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

A current discussion in the field of forensic-psychiatric and sex research concerns several issues in pedophilic individuals, i.e., individuals having a sexual interest in children. Research questions reflecting the diversity of predominant approaches are for instance: Is pedophilia a life-long condition? Are pedophiles treatable? Is there a scientific basis allowing a hopeless prognosis for changes in every pedophilic individual? Can we classify pedophilia as a sort of sexual orientation similar to homosexuality? There are important and influential researchers expecting pedophilia as a life-long condition unlikely to change (e.g., Cantor, 2012; Seto, 2012). Other researchers, like Marshall (2008), assume that there is evidence indicating pedophilic preferences can change throughout treatment. So far, we have not managed to create a commonly accepted theory grounded on scientifically sound research about the characteristics of sexual interest in children, its developmental courses, and especially its immutability. Most likely, the fact that the recently published DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for pedophilic disorder have been strongly criticized by several researchers and clinicians (e.g., Blanchard, 2013; Briken, Fedoroff, & Bradford, 2014; Fedoroff, Di Gioacchino, & Murphy, 2013; First, 2010; Green, 2010; O'Donohue, 2010) may be seen as one consequence of the current disagreement.

1.2. Aim of this article

Given the discussion about the characteristics and the proposed immutability of pedophilic sexual interest, we consider both empirical and theoretical research in this specific research field to be absolutely essential. For this, the current article presents the attempt to develop a theoretical framework within which sexual interest in children might be seen as fluid and flexible, able to change over time, and maybe also due to therapeutic interventions. From a perspective based on positive psychology, and with a focus on the human agency theory including the importance of people's faith in their own ability to develop and change themselves and to exercise control, we linked sexual interest in children with the concept of specific self-efficacy. This concept is considered as the conviction of being able to reach specific goals or to change specific behavior or personal attributes due to one's own competences. Our main research question thus was: Could specific self-efficacy beliefs about the own competence to change sexual interest in children affect men with a risk to sexually abuse children in a positive way? In order to develop such theoretical approach, this article is divided into three broad sections: First, we focus on the concept of self-efficacy; second, we concentrate on sexual interest in children; third, we transfer the self-efficacy concept to sexual interest in children.

1.3. Method

This article is no systematic review since - to our knowledge - there are no empirical studies investigating a primary outcome criterion comparable to specific self-efficacy for modifying sexual interest in children. Thus, we did not choose a highly systematic but instead a comprehensive

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literature search leading to a variety of selected studies. Taking into account the research tradition on self-efficacy, we first refer to some of the initial research work of Albert Bandura since the 1970s. In order to emphasize the generalizability of the self-efficacy concept and its relevance for people's daily lives, several studies conducted since the late 1970s until present times are selected. Regarding its changeability, we selected various controlled randomized studies referring to different fields. In the selection of all studies on self-efficacy, we aimed to demonstrate the presence and the relevance of self-efficacy for individuals' perception and behavior. Therefore, we focused on both a variety of life spheres and a variety of samples regarding health condition, age, and nationality. Finally, to point out the potential impact of self-efficacy for personal development, we give a short overview about the existing literature focusing on the relation between self-efficacy and essential parts of personality. Referring the second broad section on sexual interest in children, we initially evince the current role of sexual interest in children in professional fields including diagnostic criteria and treatment strategies. Afterwards, we demonstrate the current range of opinions and research approaches regarding the characteristics of sexual interest in children and its proposed immutability or flexibility. Within the third broad section, we theoretically link self-efficacy with sexual interest in children in order to provide a theoretical framework suggesting both clinical and research implications. All literature searches were performed in suitable databases devoted to peer-reviewed literature in the behavioral sciences and mental health (PsychInfo, PubMed). Additional references were used where it seemed useful or necessary.

2. Self-efficacy

2.1. Self-efficacy as key concept of social cognitive theory

In the 1970s, Albert Bandura published a learning theory based on the idea that people learn by observing others, postulated as social cognitive theory. The concept of self-efficacy is a core aspect of the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) and addresses people's faith in their own ability to manage their behavior and to control events that affect their lives (Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 2001). Factors able to force motivation underlie the core belief that an individual has the capability to show a certain behavior leading to certain effects. Without this core belief an individual has hardly motivation to act or to persist if problems arise. Such self-efficacy beliefs affect human agency by cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes. They determine whether individuals think in self-enhancing or self-debilitating ways; how well they motivate themselves and persist whenever problems arise. As a result, the belief in the power to exercise control in the face of challenging issues supports resilience (Benight & Bandura, 2004). Four major sources were postulated as having a direct affect to the extent of one's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977): (1) Performance accomplishments refer to personal mastery experiences (e.g., LoPiccolo, 1970; Sherman, 1972; Strahley, 1966) and are considered to be most influential in affecting self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). (2) Vicarious experience includes seeing others perform threatening activities without negative consequences which may lead to expectations in observers that they also will succeed if they make a greater effort (Bandura & Barab, 1973). (3) Verbal persuasion refers to the fact that people can be led into believing they can cope with their issues by suggestion. (4) Emotional arousal or physiological states that occur from stressful and taxing situations may have informative value regarding personal competency (Bandura, 1977).

Since Bandura's postulation about the concept of self-efficacy, it has been further developed by several researchers (Fuchs & Schwarzer, 1994; Maddux & Gosselin, 2003; O'Leary, 1992; Schindler & Körkel, 1994; Schwarzer, 2002; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1989; Shelton, 1990; Sherer & Maddux, 1982; Stuart, Borland, & McMurray, 1994). Luszczynska, Scholz, and Schwarzer (2005) distinguish between general and specific self-efficacy by defining general self-efficacy as the belief in one's competence to cope with a broad range of stressful or

challenging demands and specific self-efficacy as constraining to a particular task at hand. After reviewing the relevant literature, one might describe general self-efficacy as a basis coping capacity, whereas a certain specific self-efficacy only concerns a certain task, for instance, certain sport activities, smoking, alcohol consumption, or mathematical competences.

2.2. Main effects of self-efficacy beliefs

Beliefs of one's efficacy affect motivational and behavioral processes by self-regulatory mechanisms. The extent of self-efficacy determines the degree of effort on an activity and staying power in the face of obstacles. Thereby the extent of self-efficacy indirectly determines the degree of success as well. Findings of many studies provided evidence for this mechanism. For instance, with the same abilities, children with higher educational self-efficacy comparing to those with lower educational self-efficacy were characterized by more effort and persistence, a higher aspiration level, a more effective working time management, a greater strategic flexibility when searching for problem solutions, and better achievement (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 1995).

Bandura (1986, 1997) supposes that people with a strong sense of accomplishment in a certain field perceive difficult exercises in that field rather as challenges to be coped than as threat to be avoided. Therefore, people with high self-efficacy have greater intrinsic interest in tasks, set challenging goals and maintain a strong commitment to them. As a result, they heighten their efforts when failing, i.e., show a higher frustration tolerance. In contrast, people with low self-efficacy tend to overestimate the difficulty of challenging tasks. Due to this, they rather become scared, stressed, and sometimes even depressed. Schwarzer and Jerusalem (2002) finally stated that self-efficacy is a key to competent and successful self-fulfillment, self-regulation, and self-control.

Since the first publication by Bandura, numerous meta-analyses of self-efficacy effect sizes have been carried out on results from studies using different experimental designs and analytic methodologies across varied modes of self-efficacy enhancement and domains of functioning that will not be discussed in more detail here (Boyer et al., 2000; Gully, Incalcaterra, Joshi, & Beaubien, 2002; Holden, 1991; Holden, Moncher, Schinke, & Barker, 1990; Moritz, Feltz, Fahrback, & Mack, 2000; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Sadri & Robertson, 1993; Stajkovic & Lee, 2001; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Because of these relevant findings, Bandura (1986, 1997) strongly claims that self-beliefs in one's efficacy constitute the key factor of human agency.

2.3. Self-efficacy and health

Many studies demonstrated high self-efficacy as often accompanied with better mental and physical health (e.g., Fuchs & Schwarzer, 1994). Psychological disorders correlating with fear and depression are strongly negative related to self-efficacy, meaning that lower self-belief in one's efficacy is associated with depressive symptoms (Brody, Roch-Levecq, Kaplan, Moutier, & Brown, 2006; Francis, Weiss, Senf, Heist, & Hargraves, 2007; Sacco et al., 2005; Tucker, Brust, Pierce, Fristedt, & Pankratz, 2004) and fear (Öst, Thulin, & Ramnerö, 2004; Takaki et al., 2003). Furthermore, a large number of studies presented evidence for a positive relation between self-efficacy and abstinence from alcohol after treatment in patients with alcohol dependence (e.g., Burling, Reilly, Moltzen, & Ziff, 1989; Solomon & Annis, 1990). Therefore, the most reliable way to predict a specific behavior such as abstinence from alcohol is the correspondent specific self-efficacy. Hence, the concept of specific self-efficacy is particularly suitable for behavioral prediction and offers approaches towards therapeutic intervention (Hofstetter, Sallis, & Hovell, 1990). By purposeful increasing the specific self-efficacy through treatment, progress and recovery process can be influenced positively (e.g., Ollendick, 1995; Petermann & Noeker, 1991). Several studies also showed the crucial role of self-

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