

The Influence of Personality on the Experiences of Child Molesters: A Phenomenological Study

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Department of Community Care and Counseling, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe different personality traits and pathologies that are common to each of the two identified types of child molester, report how personality played a part in the offense committed, and describe the results from the offender's point of view. The history of personality traits and disorders is discussed; this information can be useful in the identification of sexual preferences involving those who abuse children. The study involved eight convicted child molesters in the state of Alabama. The participants were grouped into subtype based on self-report measures and public records. Costa and McCrae's (1995) five-factor model of personality is a globally accepted description of personality traits and was used to guide this study. A scale of the subjects' perceived personality traits and interview questions were administered to obtain the participants' opinions about how their personality traits influenced their act of sexually offending against a child. The results found that the participants perceived the positive aspects of their personality traits more readily than the negative. The participants also showed a lack of congruence between the perception of their personality traits and expressed thoughts and behaviors. The participants as a group felt that their personality traits had little influence on their actions of sexually abusing a child. The participants expressed some common attitudes towards their victims and common justifications for their actions. Implications for further research include further personality testing for the different types of child molesters, prevention efforts and treatment efforts are discussed as well.

Keywords: child molester, pedophile, childhood sexual abuse, personality traits, personality disorders, prevention, screening, justifications, cognitive distortions

Dedication

This study is dedicated to every person who has had to endure the trauma of sexual abuse in childhood and the aftermath that is often indescribable. Do not let them call you a victim; you are a survivor. We are all survivors.

This study is also dedicated to the superheroes of the world: they don't have capes or masks and they don't crave fame and glory. They sit behind desks and computers, in courtrooms, and in offices and they do good things. They are the good.

To my children: I hope one day when you are old enough to read this that you understand that this was truly for you. I hope you never have to understand the things I have understood. I hope one day you are proud of your mom. I love you three!

Acknowledgments

To my chair and reader, thank you for your unwavering support and guidance. Your patience and leadership throughout this process has been unmeasurable.

To my parents, thank you for supporting my efforts in this very long journey and helping me in multiple ways. I absolutely could not have done this without your support. The kids and I are so grateful for you both.

To my best friend, thank you for being my person. Always.

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List of Abbreviations

American Psychiatric Association (APA)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA)

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed., DSM-5)

Labial photoplethysmograph (LPG)

Five-factor model (FFM)

NEO-Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO-PI-R)

Penile plethysmography (PPG)

Personality Inventory for the DSM-5 (PID-5)

Personality Trait Perception Scale (PTPS)

Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) research has gained much-needed traction in the fields of psychology, counseling, and criminal justice in the last several decades due to the overwhelming evidence that sexual abuse in childhood is traumatic and developmentally damaging (Matthews & Collins-Vezina, 2017). The acute and long-term effects of CSA on the victims have been often studied, revealing that injury to the psychosexual and emotional development of a child has lasting negative repercussions. Ample research has concluded that adults who are attracted to or engage in sexual activity with children are abnormal in neurological functioning, attachment styles, cognitive processing, and other areas of mental health such as mental illnesses and personality disorders when compared to their normal (non-offending) cohorts (Becerra-García et al., 2013a; Cohen & Galynker, 2012). However, little research has been done regarding how child molesters view their own personality and its role in their offenses, specifically in the areas of personality traits and personality disorders. This study offers insight into the different personality traits of sexual offenders against children using previously validated research of personality and pathology.

Background

Historical Context

The classification of personality types and traits in clinical psychology started less than a century ago; however, the study of human behavior and the attempt to describe different types of people was of interest long before, dating back to early Greek and Chinese societies (Crocq, 2013). Early scholars believed that people exhibited fixed ways of thinking that determined how they responded to situations. Much later, French philosophers developed similar explanations of

human behavior even though the fields of psychiatry and psychology were still emerging (Crocq, 2013). In the late 19th century as the field of psychology began to develop and merge with early psychiatry, German scholars began to notate personality types. In the 20th century, the founders of the field of psychology began to study human behavior from a cause-and-effect standpoint, believing that people behaved inappropriately due to unprocessed childhood issues, representing the earliest research on mental illness and personality disorders. As the fields of psychiatry and psychology became more intertwined and more experimental in the 21st century, distinct and empirically validated personality types and disorders were identified (Crocq, 2013).

The latest decades of research have focused on the validity of the instruments used to assess personality traits and disorders and the criteria included in psychiatric literature to diagnose personality disorders. With the publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed., *DSM-5*), personality disorders were restructured into clusters, and the diagnostic criteria were updated to include the qualifier that the presence of a personality disorder causes some level of functional impairment in the person's life. This impairment is the most important factor to consider when determining if a personality trait is considered normal or pathologic (Huprich, 2011). To consistently measure personality traits and disorders, an array of empirically validated measurements have been developed, such as the tools used to influence this study. Inventories such as the NEO- Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO-PI-R) based on the five- factor model (FFM) of personality, used to measure the categorical aspects of personality, and the Personality Inventory for the *DSM-5* (PID-5), used to detect possible disorders and pathology in personalities, have been repeatedly validated in testing in modern psychology and psychiatry (Torres-Soto et al., 2020; Vize et al., 2018).

There is ample information available on the general personality of people who abuse children sexually. Studies have shown that child molesters overall have significantly higher levels of pathological personality traits such as neuroticism and significantly lower levels of extraversion and conscientiousness (Becerra-García, et al., 2013). However, further research into the personalities of subtypes of child molesters is limited.

Social Context

The application of personality traits and disorders in the criminal justice system is relatively new yet highly glamorized in societal contexts. Anyone with internet access can turn on a weeknight drama and hear terms linked to the study of personality thrown around like colloquialisms. Terms like *profiler*, *perp*, *psychopath*, *sociopath*, *sadist*, and *behavioral analysis* all allude to the application of personality traits and disorders in identifying, predicting, and catching the “bad guy.” This Hollywood-esque portrayal of personality analysis leaves out the meticulous, standardized, and often arduous process of what it takes to develop an actual personality profile of an individual. Researchers have found many moderators that would make it nearly impossible for this almost instantaneous identification of the “perp” to be realistic, such as the fact that a person’s mood at the time of assessment is found to play a role whether the criteria for a personality disorder are met (Huprich, 2011). However, the idea that these traits and pathologies are useful in predicting behavioral responses to certain types of situations is not implausible (Higgs et al., 2018). Law enforcement is all too familiar with the antisocial personality type: violent, manipulative, and unremorseful. Antisocial personality disorder has been identified in many infamous criminals (Boccio & Beaver, 2018). Researchers have found that offenders who meet criteria for antisocial personality disorder are more likely to leave the scene, deny guilt, and receive a lesser sentence for the same crime of homicide than their non-

antisocial criminal cohorts (Boccio & Beaver, 2018). They are also more likely to commit other types of crimes, repeat offenses, and have continued interaction with the legal system (Boccio & Beaver, 2018).

This type of application of personality traits and disorders in law enforcement and the criminal justice system leaves room for this knowledge to be used in relation in other types of crimes that involve harm to others, such as sex crimes. In fact, much research has been conducted on personality types and disorders in those who have abused others physically and sexually (Eher & Rettenberger, 2018; Jahnke et al., 2019). Research has shown that personality testing can be used in the prediction of criminal behavior, raising the possibility that these assessments can perhaps be used preventatively. Dunlop et al. (2011) found that a high psychoticism score on measurements of personality disorders was a predictive factor of adult criminal behavior when it paired with other personality traits.

Situation to Self

This study focuses on the role of personality traits in participants who have been convicted of sex crimes against minors. This research was inspired by my journey of being sexually abused as a child and adolescent, healing, becoming a mental health professional, going through the legal process of telling my story of my relationship with one abuser which resulted in conviction, and learning how to use my personal story to help others. My story does not stop there, however. I was also sexually abused by another adult around the same time, a story that I never told publicly. The differences in the way the abuses occurred are also an inspiration for this research. I would like to make it known that I did not seek out any interaction with any person of whom I have personal knowledge or with whom I have a relationship of any sort.

This study is also important to me because, as a result of my ability to look back on the years of the abuse and the years following and my work with survivors of CSA in my professional career, I truly believe there is often a predictable pattern of behavior before, during, and after the point that an adult sexually abuses a minor. I believe that these personality traits that are often so obvious in hindsight can be heeded as warning signs somehow going forward.

In regard to my personal bias about the different types of offenders, I admit I approach this study with a heavy bias from personal experience as well as my clinical expertise.

Theoretically, I assume that opportunistic child molesters exhibit more extraversion and neuroticism in personality and are more likely to develop antisocial and narcissistic personality traits. I assume that opportunistic offenders “get off” on the idea of the taboo and thrill of the act and have no concern for the outcome of the person they abuse. I assume that they will go to great lengths to hide any sort of illegal or unethical activity and that sexual activity is not the only thing they engage in that is socially unacceptable or illegal. Further, I have a preconceived idea that pedophilic child molesters are often introverted and socially awkward, have endured some sort of major trauma in childhood, and often genuinely believe that they love the children they engage with sexually and that the sexual activity is not meant to hurt the child. I assume that they are genuinely sexually attracted to young children. I assume that they are more likely to be lower income, less socially accepted, and less educated. I understand that part of phenomenological research is setting aside these ideas not only to explain what happened to me, but also to understand CSA in the context of how it affects others, victims and perpetrators included. The idea of setting aside preconceived ideas is a relief, as it will allow me to find answers that I have sought for more than two decades while allowing my feelings to rest. My biggest concern with the research is my fear that people who will willingly abuse others, regardless of motivation, will

also willingly lie in an interview. By interviewing people I do not know, explaining the anonymity and purpose of the process and providing nonjudgmental conversation, the external motivation to be dishonest will be reduced as much as is within my control.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed by this study is the lack of clearly defined information about personality traits and disorders that influence behavior in the two types of child molesters. Many studies have been conducted concerning the fact that there are two types of child molesters: those who prefer children to adults and those who do not have a consistent preference but will engage in sexual activity with people who are too young to consent when given the chance (Becerra-García et al., 2012b, 2013a; Cohen & Galynker, 2012). Research has shown that each typology of child abuser benefits differently from the completion of a sexual encounter with a child but also goes about offending in a different way (Strassberg et al., 2012). For example, true pedophiles are likely to lack social skills and offend out of true sexual desire/attraction, whereas an opportunistic pedophile is often a socially accepted member of the community whose abuse of children is centered around ego-syntonic justification and cognitive distortions (Becerra-García et al., 2013b; Cohen & Galynker, 2012). Research shows that true pedophiles may be less impulsive but more likely to have schizoid personality markers, whereas opportunistic child molesters often lack impulse control and show less concern for others (Becerra-García et al., 2013b; Cohen & Galynker, 2012).

An article by Cohen and Galynker (2012) recommended further research on the personality traits of the subtypes of child molesters. Research that identifies markers in personality traits in ways that are noninvasive, not ethically compromising, and that can be used before a pedophile has offended is needed (Bogaerts et al., 2008). Also, discovering the

personality characteristics and pathology (such as personality disorders) of child molesters may lead to more successful treatment of pedophilic disorder and other paraphilias and perhaps reduce the rate of recidivism/victimization. The research is lacking in that no comprehensive and empirically validated personality profile of each type of child molester has been developed. This study provides a foundation of information on the self-perceived personality types of child molesters.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe personality traits and pathologies common to convicted sex offenders (pedophilic child molesters and opportunistic child molesters) and describe life experiences leading up to and including engaging in sexual activity with a minor from the vantage point of the offender. For this research, a pedophilic child molester was defined as a person whose sexual preference is a child. A situational child molester was defined as someone whose sexual preference is an adult but has engaged in a sexual act with a child. The personality aspects of child molesters are described using the FFM of personality and the theory that personality profiles can correlate with risk of criminal behavior. This information was obtained via experience-based Likert-scale questions as well as the offenders' descriptions of their experiences and how their personalities influenced these experiences and their decision-making process (Dunlop et al., 2011; Eher & Rettenberger, 2018; Jahnke et al., 2019;).

The author hopes that future research can apply the knowledge obtained through this research in ways that contribute to the prevention of CSA and indicate best treatment practices for each type of offender. The participants in this study were adults who have been convicted of sex crimes against children in the state of Alabama. Any person convicted of a sexual offense

against a minor under the age of consent in Alabama (the age of consent is 16 when the offender is at least two years older than the victim) was considered for inclusion in the study. The purpose of this study is to identify separate personality traits, disorders, and behavioral characteristics of the two types of child molesters and how those traits influenced the behavior of each type of child molester.

Significance of Study

The significance of this study is that it differs from other research by delving more deeply into the minds of offenders, separating the types of offenders, studying the personality traits separately and in combination with the subjects' lived experiences, and offering insight into each type of offender rather than the nonoffending population. This information can be used in many different capacities. Employers of adults who have access to children can be educated on what to look for when hiring. When any questionable circumstances arise, law enforcement officers, child protective services officers, and mental health professionals may be able to adjust interview and interrogation techniques based on the personality profiles provided. Additionally, treatment professionals and researchers will be able to offer more specific treatments based on the type of offender. Finally, this study may offer an ethical way to identify offender typology. Currently, research currently can only identify pedophilic types definitively from post-crime-related testing such as penile plethysmography (PPG; Blumberg, 2018; McAnulty et al., 1994). However, researchers have moral concerns and biological obstacles to consider since PPG only tests subjects with penises and the showing of sexually suggestive child images is controversial and considered unethical in the United States (Blumberg, 2018). Further research is needed to develop a method to identify which type of child molester an offender is regardless of the offender's sex and in a way that does not involve any potentially unethical practices or biological

limitations, which is especially critical because research states that sexual abuse by women is significantly underreported (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022).

CSA has become a national health problem, and researchers have been charged with finding ways to identify risk factors preemptively so that organizations that are responsible for the care of children can put increased protective measures in place (Abel et al., 2019). One drawback to research that is aimed to help in the development of preventative measures is that even if a person shows markers that would be considered risks for offending, no amount of personality testing or risk assessment can say whether or not a person will offend against a child, opening the door to the possibility of making unfair or inaccurate assumptions about a person (Taufik et al., 2019).

To date, no research has identified a way to separate offenders into their respective categories and assess the risk of offending based on empirically validated personality assessments that are ethical, noninvasive, unaffected by the sex of the offender, and applicable before a person sexually abuses a child. There are excellent sexual interest surveys available, but the person taking the survey must self-identify as having sexual interest in children, which is highly unlikely to happen before that person abuses a child. This study is significant in that it begins to fill this gap in the research.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do child molesters perceive their own personality?

Research Question 2: In what way does the offender feel that his or her personality influenced the way in which he or she selected and abused his or her victim?

Research Question 3: How do personality traits contribute to the number of victims abused?

Definitions

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA): Contact between a child and an adult or other person significantly older than or in a position of power or control over the child, where the child is being used for sexual stimulation of the adult or other person (Hayashino et al., 2016).

Child molester: An adult who has been convicted of sexually abusing a child (Abel et al., 2019).

Conscientious: A personality trait that involves paying attention to details, wanting things to be done in order and being aware of consequences, and wanting things to be done right.

Extravert: A person who enjoys the company and attention of others; someone who likes social activities.

Pedophilia: A paraphilia involving intense and recurrent sexual urges toward and fantasies about prepubescent children that either have been acted upon or cause the person with the attraction distress or interpersonal difficulty (American Psychiatric Association, 2015). The psychiatric community defines pedophilia as a an ongoing sexual attraction to young children that can include thoughts and/or behaviors (Parr & Pearson, 2019).

Penile plethysmography (PPG): A test that measures phallometric response to stimuli. PPG has been used in past studies to measure the sexual arousal of men to different images or scenarios (Tong, 2007).

Personality: The combination of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are characteristic of how a person interacts with the world around them (American Psychological Association, 2022).

Preferential or true child molester: A person convicted of a sex crime involving a child who meets the criteria for the diagnosis of pedophilia. True child molesters are only or more

sexually attracted to prepubescent or pubescent children than to older adolescents or adults (Eastvold et al., 2011).

Situational or opportunistic child molester: A person convicted of a sex crime involving a child who does not meet the criteria for the diagnosis of pedophilia. Situational child molesters are sexually attracted to age-appropriate persons or exhibit a wide range of sexual attraction, including no sexual attraction (Eastvold et al., 2011).

Summary

In conclusion, this study aims to fill in the gaps that previous research left regarding the personalities of child molesters and how the person perceives his or her personality to have affected their decision-making. Ample research is available on the topic of child molestation in general, but studies have stopped short of dividing the types and studying personality only, largely because the instruments used in previous research on the separate types of child molesters have been limited to neurological tests such as PPG and EEG. These studies have identified marked differences in things like executive functioning, decision-making, and impulse control. Some studies have even studied specific aspects of personality in the two types of child molesters, but no study has developed a comprehensive report of different areas of personality. Also, there is no body of research that definitively describes how this information can be useful to mental health professionals, law enforcement, and other stakeholders due to most testing and treatments occurring postconviction. This study provides information that can be used in preventative efforts.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

CSA is a type of trauma that is unfortunately common yet incredibly devastating to survivors. According to current research, one in four women and one in 13 men in the United States experienced sexual abuse before the age of eighteen (Letourneau et al., 2018). The scenarios in which a child experiences sexual abuse are vast and can range from being exposed to pornography at an inappropriate age to being forcibly raped multiple times. This study focuses on any sexual activity between an adult and a minor and the personality traits and disorders of the abusers. As previously stated, there are differences in the clinical definition of a pedophile and the legal definition of criminal behavior involving sexual activity with children, meaning that all offending pedophiles are child molesters, but not all child molesters are pedophiles.

Research has shown that there are two distinct types of child molesters: pedophilic child molesters (also called fixated or preferential pedophiles) and situational child molesters (also called opportunistic child molesters; Robertiello & Terry, 2007). These two different types of offenders act differently and experience different rewards upon offense, according to neurological imaging (Massau et al., 2017). A pedophilic child molester offends out of sexual attraction, whereas an opportunistic child molester acts out of convenience for personal gratification that is not always sexual (Blagden et al., 2017). Studies show that opportunistic child molesters often show less impulse control, less remorse, less concern for the victims, and have more distorted cognitions surrounding the abuse than pedophilic child molesters (Abel et al., 2019; Eastvold et al., 2011). Other studies have shown that pedophilic child molesters have lower executive functioning scores than do opportunistic child molesters but spend more time planning their offense (Eastvold et al., 2011). Neurocognitive studies have shown differences in

brain abnormalities in the two types of child molesters and indicate the need for further research into the two types of offenders.

Research indicates that these differences between the types of child molesters can be useful in treatment and in reducing recidivism. Therefore, it would be significant to be able to identify a sexual offender's type in other ways than self-report, or sexual interest survey to reduce recidivism and revictimization, develop of treatment strategies, and possibly create prevention methods (Abel et al., 2019; Seto & Lalumière, 2001). Research has already begun on predictive factors of behavior, differential motivations, and possible causes of the development of disorders like pedophilic disorder and antisocial personality disorder which correlate with the different types of offenders (Babchishin et al., 2019); however, research thus far has been limited to postconviction neurological imaging as well as some research into attachment styles, IQ scores, and trauma histories (Drury et al., 2019). Ideally, similar testing could be used preemptively in the future to identify risk factors in adults before the first offense is committed. For example, research shows that in preemptive screening, a small percentage of adults display substantial risk factors for committing sexual abuse against children regarding sexual attraction and defense mechanisms (cognitive distortions) (Abel et al., 2019). Furthermore, research in the general population has found that up to 10% of adults expressed that they would engage in sexual activity with a child if they were certain they would not get caught (Wurtele et al., 2014). These findings indicate a dire need for the identification of preemptive risk factors and classification of types of child molester if CSA rates are ever to decline (Levin, 2019).

Currently, the only definitive way to determine primary sexual interest is by electronically recording penile responses and brain waves as a person is shown different sexually suggestive images. PPG was one of the most commonly used techniques for the assessment of

sexual interests, especially among those who commit sexual offenses against children or display other deviances (Renaud et al., 2014). This method is lacking for several reasons, including the fact that it cannot accurately detect arousal in female offenders, though it also poses other ethical and moral issues (Balmer & Sandland, 2012). Currently, in some states it is considered unethical to use sexually explicit images of children for research purposes, therefore limiting the material used in testing and therefore the accuracy of PPG (Balmer & Sandland, 2012). The other way to determine primary sexuality is by self-report measure, but many studies show that many people who meet the criteria for the diagnosis of pedophilia will not be forthcoming with this information due to negative emotions, stigma, and fear (Blagden et al., 2017).

Conceptual Framework

The framework for this study comprises two major concepts: that adult sexual activity with a minor is not only abnormal for the adult as a social construct but also that it is detrimental to the child and considered a form of abuse; and that personality traits and pathology influence behavior and cognition and can be used predictively in the fight against CSA as has already been seen in other areas of forensic psychology.

Sexual Attraction to Minors

There is no doubt that sexual activity between a child/adolescent and an adult can be incredibly harmful to the child both physically and mentally. However, the idea that sexual attraction to a child/adolescent is on the spectrum of normal adult sexuality is a new concept. This idea is now up for debate in the individualistic and psychological communities, although support for the assertion that it is merely another aspect of sexuality has marginal support, even with the caveat that one can be attracted to children without acting on it (Chenier, 2012; Parr & Pearson, 2019). However, this concept needs to be addressed in this study since the different

types of child molesters differ in their attraction to their victims. For example, much research on nonoffending pedophiles (also called nonoffending minor-attracted persons) has shown that sexual attraction to children is present for the entirety of an individual's sexual development (Blagden et al., 2017). The attraction to children is developed early, like other forms of sexual attraction, and only becomes problematic when the person is unable to stop from acting on it once they have surpassed the people to whom they are attracted to in age, or when it bothers the person internally. For example, research shows that many nonoffending pedophiles want to get treatment but are afraid of the stigma and that over half of the nonoffending pedophilic population will attempt suicide at some point in their adult life (Blagden et al., 2017; Stevens & Wood, 2019). This view of sexuality is important for this study because multiple studies have shown that being attracted to children and meeting the criteria for a diagnosis of pedophilia is the most prevalent risk factor for offending and reoffending against children (Blagden et al., 2017; Beier et al., 2015).

It is also important to note that when distinguishing the types of child molesters, nonpedophilic child molesters are much more likely to engage in other types of criminal behavior than are pedophilic child molesters, implying that there are indeed completely different intrinsic motivations in the two types of child molesters (Cardona et al., 2020; Cohen & Galynker, 2012). For the offending population of adults who are engage in sexual activity with minors, the conceptual framework for this study lies in the development of personality as influenced by both biological and environmental/social factors (Specht et al., 2014).

The Role of Personality Traits/Disorders

Personality traits and behavior are very intertwined, so much so that early researchers began looking for ways to explain common behaviors long before personality assessments, types,

and disorders had been established. The earliest research on personality in the modern scientific era comes from psychiatry in the late eighteenth century (Crocq, 2013). It was not until the 20th century that statistical methods became available to measure specific traits that had become universally accepted as elements of all personalities, but even those vary most often between three and five dimensions, with the FFM being the most commonly used (Crocq, 2013; Trull & Widiger, 2013). These commonly accepted traits can be summarized using the FFM, one of the most widely accepted and universally applicable models of personality. The FFM comprises the traits of agreeableness, openness, neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness (Costa et al., 2019). These traits can be measured using the NEO-PI-R, which has been used in many studies on personality, psychopathy, criminality, and treatment (van Gelder & de Vries, 2012). The personalities of adults who sexually abuse minors has long been a popular topic for research. Similarly, pedophilia and the characteristics of those who have abused children have been the subject of much research, including studies on topics similar to this study's such as personality traits and other psychological markers like personality disorders and psychosocial histories (Becerra-García et al., 2012a, 2013b; Boillat et al., 2017; Cohen & Galynker, 2012; Daskevicius, 2013; Garofalo & Bogarts, 2019). The previous research makes it clear that adults who abuse children sexually have more pronounced personality traits such as neuroticism, have lower executive functioning, and are more likely to meet *DSM-5* criteria for personality disorders, specifically antisocial personality disorder and schizoid/schizotypal personality disorders, than the general population (Garofalo et al., 2018; Garofalo & Bogarts, 2019; Jahnke et al., 2019; Kärgel et al., 2017; Kruger & Schiffer, 2011; Magaletta et al., 2014; Marshall, 2016). However, studies have most often compared child molesters as a whole to other groups including nonoffending cohorts, adults with substance use disorders, and other control groups

void of sexual activity with minors. Research comparing the personality traits and disorders of the two types of child molesters is relatively new, as is statistical data on the rates of CSA by type of offender. For example, some research shows that CSA is perpetrated about equally by pedophilic and nonpedophilic child molesters, while other research shows that most convicted child molesters do not meet the criteria for pedophilia, though pedophilic child molesters have more victims on average (Strassberg et al., 2012). The lack of research on the personality profiles of the two types of child molesters means studies such as this one are needed to look for common traits in order to identify risk, not only of offense but of victim typology as well. Comparisons of the personality traits of the two types of offenders are scarce, and research on the personality types of female sexual offenders is thin, especially research comparing pedophilic and nonpedophilic female child molesters. It is imperative to include females in the research because some research shows that while female sex offenders make up only 2% of the convicted population, the rate for report of sexual abuse by a female is approximately 12%, which means there is a large gap in the amount of abuse and the amount of conviction for female offenders (ten Bensele et al., 2019). Also, a recent study found that female perpetrators of CSA were more likely to have a diagnosis of a personality or mood disorder, but there was no consistent profile of diagnoses (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022).

Practical Application of Information

Although research on CSA is abundant, there are three main gaps in the research that have led to the development of this study. First, there is very little information on the differences in personality profiles of the two types of child molesters. The majority of studies compare child molesters (of all types) to the general population (assumed to be void of any pedophilic behavior). This study compared one type of offender to the other. Second, there is almost no

research on the personality of the female child molester. This is due in large part to the fact that most convicted child molesters are male, although it is believed that child molestations by female offenders are significantly underreported to law enforcement (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022). Therefore, because studies are often conducted postconviction, women are typically excluded. Most studies measuring the sexual arousal of child molesters use penile response to stimuli, particularly PPG, something that is not physically possible to administer to female offenders (Balmer & Sandland, 2012). Also, even though the majority of sexual offenses against minors are perpetrated by men, women are less likely to be arrested and/or convicted of a sex crime against a child and upon conviction often receive lighter sentences (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022). Finally, as the previous problems foreshadow, most evaluations of child molesters occur after they have offended. A call to action to reduce CSA has been repeated in the fields of psychology and public health many times over.

This study sought to find distinct patterns in the personality traits and/or disorders of child molesters that can be used for further research with the specific purpose of aiding in the development of prevention methods. This study aimed to identify any traits with high correlations to child molestation to advance screening and testing efforts in many different areas in order to identify those who may be a risk of offending, rather than relying on the commonly used hindsight perspective of obvious behavioral patterns (Winters & Jeglic, 2016). Uses for this information could include enhanced preemployment screenings in workplaces that allow access to children, better community and school-based programs on prevention/protection, and a better understanding of the nature of child molestation in general.

Major Theories/Diagnostic Criteria

Several diagnoses are relevant to this study. Pedophilic disorder is included in the *DSM-5* as a diagnosis that is given upon the disclosure of or evidence that an adult person (age 16 or older) is sexually attracted to prepubescent or early pubescent/adolescent children (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a). The diagnosis is applied to those who have only fantasies, desires, and urges and those who have acted upon these urges. A statement in 2013 clarified that the position of the American Psychological Association is that any sexual contact between an adult and a child is always harmful (American Psychological Association, 2013). Other diagnoses relevant to this study include personality disorders, which are diagnosed based on the symptoms as well as the requirement that the symptoms be enduring, pervasive, and impairing (Kapfhammer, 2017).

Personality Disorders

Personality disorders are classified into three clusters in the *DSM-5*: Cluster A includes paranoid, schizoid, and schizotypal personality disorders, which are classified together based on the common thread of odd or eccentric thoughts and behavior (Kapfhammer, 2017). Cluster B includes antisocial, histrionic, borderline, and narcissistic personality disorders, which are grouped together based on their symptoms of overly dramatic thoughts and behaviors (Massaal-van der Ree et al., 2022). Cluster C includes avoidant, dependent, and obsessive-compulsive personality disorders, which are rooted in anxious and fearful thoughts and behaviors (Massaal-van der Ree et al., 2022). It should be noted that while personality disorders often have a strong correlation with personality type, there is no diagnosis affiliated with personality typology. Personality types, specifically those based on the FFM, are used as a framework for

understanding a person but are not considered any type of diagnosis, and none of the types is considered to be maladaptive or impairing.

Pedophilic Disorder

One cannot begin researching different types of child molesters without first understanding how the sexual disorder of pedophilia came to be included in the *DSM-5* and how pedophilia affects CSA. There are still ongoing debates about the nature of adult/child sexual contact as it relates to cultural and religious practices across the world; however, this study relies upon the social constructs most widely accepted in the United States and other modernized countries, which view adult/child sexual activity as harmful to the child due to their lack of ability to give consent, developmental processes not being fully formed, social norms, and the sheer magnitude of evidence on the detrimental effects of CSA on the survivor (APA, 2013; Skaine, 2015). Research shows that consequences of CSA are often complicated for survivors when the abuse is revealed and the survivor is either disbelieved or not supported in recovery, with those having validation and support from family having a lessened negative outcome (Elliott et al., 2022). For clarification purposes, it should be noted that pedophilia was originally included in the *DSM-3* as its own diagnosis after being listed previously as a “sexual dysfunction” but with no clearly defined criteria (APA, 2013). Since then, numerous studies have allowed the scientific community to understand the detrimental effects that CSA has on the survivors, leading to a change in the APA’s wording and stance on the diagnosis of pedophilic disorder with an updated and more concise definition in versions five and beyond (APA, 2013).

One of the most influential studies regarding the effects of CSA was the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)-Kaiser Permanente study on adverse childhood experiences, which included sexual abuse and elaborated on the correlations between immediate

and long-term problems in the lives of survivors (About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study, 2018). It should also be noted that CSA is now one of the criteria for a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder, and much research is currently being conducted on CSA and the development of complex posttraumatic stress disorder and other trauma/stress related disorders because survivors of sexual abuse in childhood often endure multiple incidences over periods of month or years along with other forms of maltreatment (APA, 2013; Dye, 2020; Hoeboer et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2018; Negriff, 2020). With that information in mind, one can see how the research efforts have developed over the years to identify CSA as harmful, identify what types of people abuse children sexually, why they abuse, the likelihood of multiple victims or recidivism, and now the brain-mapping and personality-mapping efforts of the offenders themselves.

In recent years, the distinction between a true pedophile and a situational child molester has been made, as researchers were able to see that many children are abused by adults with seemingly normal lives, contrary to the image of the creepy old man luring children into the back of a van with candy and balloons that first visualized in the minds of the general public, thanks in large part to uninformed media influences (Blanchard, 2010). The most applicable takeaway from this information for this study is the conclusion that while all offending pedophiles are child molesters, not all child molesters are pedophiles.

While the research on the distinction between pedophilic and nonpedophilic child molesters has begun, the results have been limited and even conflicting. For example, one study found that pedophilic child molesters were more likely to have some sort of psychopathy and offend outside of the family (Beggs & Grace, 2008). Other studies found no differences in the two types when it came to psychopathy but confirmed that victim counts were higher for pedophilic child molesters (Seto, 2008; Strassberg et al., 2012). Furthermore, there is

disagreement in the psychiatric community regarding the inclusion of adults who abuse minors who are pubescent and early adolescent in the diagnosis of pedophilic disorder (Sea & Beauregard, 2018). Some argue that once a child has reached puberty, the biological and evolutionary desire for mating with females of peak child-bearing age can be seen as a reason for attraction to females who are minors but not prepubescent and therefore not considered to look or behave in a child-like manner (Sea & Beauregard, 2018). This argument is one that will continue in the philosophical arena, but research is clear that whether a child is eight or 15, sexual activity with an adult is not something that child can process in the same manner as the adult and is therefore harmful (APA, 2013).

Overlap with the Legal System

There is some discrepancy between the criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis of pedophilic disorder and the legal definition of child molestation. Most states prosecute adults who are at least two years older than the victim and engage in sexual acts with children or adolescents under 16 years of age. As previously mentioned, the average age of onset of puberty in the United States is well below the age of consent, which leaves a gap between the time the offense meets psychiatric criteria for pedophilia and the time the act is considered criminal. This study uses the term *child molestation* rather than *pedophilia* to encompass both the psychiatric and criminal definitions but includes pedophiles as a type of child molester in the study. Although age 15 is most likely past the onset of puberty, for this study, any person convicted of a sexual offense with a minor under the age of 16 (the age of consent in Alabama, where this study was performed) was considered for participation. For further clarification, a true pedophile is an adult who is sexually aroused by children, whereas a situational child molester is an adult who is sexually attracted to adults and can have pleasurable sexual activities with adults but who

engages in sexual activity with a minor given an opportunity (Allen, 2019; Blanchard, 2010).

The latter type is believed to be much more common and responsible for the largest percentage of CSA prosecuted in the state of Alabama based on court records and information regarding the age of the victim at the time of conviction (Alabama Department of Corrections, 2022).

Although situational child molesters are more common and more often convicted, studies show that pedophilic child molesters have more victims, have younger victims, are more likely to abuse a male child, and are more likely to abuse a child outside of his or her family (Seto & Lalumière, 2001; Seto et al., 2004; Strassberg et al., 2012). This information further highlights the need for noninvasive ways with which to identify risk factors for child molestation.

Personality Types and Disorders

Personality type is not a diagnosis, but rather information that allows for insight into the foundation of a person's cognitions and behaviors. People with certain personality types are often considered to be predisposed to certain types of disorders, including mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression and personality disorders (Crego et al., 2018). The identification of a certain personality type does not mean the person has any sort of diagnosis, but rather, the trends in which these disorders occur appear to be consistent with the presence of certain personality types. For example, using the FFM, someone high in neuroticism would be considered at risk or predisposed for symptoms of an anxiety disorder or Cluster B or C personality disorder and other psychiatric illnesses (Boillat et al., 2017; Crego et al., 2018). The development of scales and assessments to identify the maladaptive aspects of personality types based on the FFM of personality has been crucial in the study of personality disorders. For example, using a personality test and then an empirically validated assessment for personality disorders that are

both rooted in the FFM allows for the continuity and consistency of information and diagnosis (Van den Broeck et al., 2013).

The application of personality traits and disorders in the criminal justice system is relatively new yet highly glamorized. Anyone with internet access can turn on a weeknight drama and hear terms linked to the study of personality thrown around like colloquialisms. Terms like *profiler*, *perp*, *psychopath*, *sociopath*, *sadist*, and *behavioral analysis* allude to the application of personality traits and disorders in identifying, predicting, and catching the “bad guy.” This Hollywood-esque portrayal of personality analysis leaves out the meticulous, standardized, and often arduous process of what it takes to develop an actual personality profile of an individual. Researchers have found many barriers that would make it nearly impossible for this almost instantaneous identification of the “perp” to be realistic, such as the fact that a person’s mood at the time of assessment is found to play a role whether the criteria for a personality disorder are met (Carvalho & Nobre, 2019; Huprich, 2011). However, the idea that these traits and pathologies are useful in predicting the risk for certain types of behaviors and behavioral responses to certain types of situations is not implausible (Higgs et al., 2018). Studies have shown that personality traits and disorders are highly correlated with crime (Vize et al., 2018). Law enforcement is all too familiar with the antisocial personality type: violent, manipulative, and unremorseful. Antisocial personality disorder, or psychopathy, has been identified in many infamous criminals (Boccio & Beaver, 2018). Researchers have found that offenders who meet the criteria for antisocial personality disorder are more likely to leave the scene, deny guilt, and receive a lesser sentence for the same crime of homicide than their nonantisocial criminal cohorts (Boccio & Beaver, 2018). Recent research in the field of personality and criminal justice suggests that almost two thirds of violent crimes are committed

by a very small number of offenders who meet the criteria for diagnoses such as mood disorders and personality disorders (Falk et al., 2014).

This type of application of personality traits and disorders in law enforcement and the criminal justice system leaves room for this knowledge to be used in relation in other types of crimes that involve harm to others, such as sex crimes. In fact, much research has been conducted on personality types and disorders in those who have abused others physically and sexually (Eher & Rettenberger, 2018; Jahnke et al., 2019). For example, a recent study found that child molesters presented with significantly less openness than those who had committed sexual violence against adults (Carvalho & Nobre, 2019). Also, if personality traits and disorders can be identified after an assault occurs, the results of these assessments can perhaps be applied preventatively in the future. This study focuses on the perceptions of personality traits and how those traits played a role in the lives of participants who have been convicted of sex crimes against minors.

Past Research Findings

Personality

Since this study researches the differences in the personality traits of the two subtypes of offenders, most literature reviewed focuses on the use of empirically valid and scientifically accepted instruments that measure different aspects of personality. The most common instruments used in past research efforts include the NEO-PI-R, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2, and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Becerra-García et al., 2012a, 2013a; Boillat et al., 2017; Cohen & Galynker, 2012). These instruments have been verified and validated for their accuracy and reliability for many years. Most personality testing instruments have undergone multiple revisions, improvements, studies, critiques, etc.

Specifically, the tests that were used in this research study (NEO-PI-R and the PID-5) are revised versions of original tests; they have been improved over time to increase reliability and validity. Studies have shown that the NEO-PI-R and its use of the FFM of personality is an accurate and globally accepted instrument to describe personality (Van den Broeck et al., 2013). The FFM of personality is based on the premise that people have different levels of the same five major dimensions of personality: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Using an instrument like the NEO-PI-R, the traits are assessed, and the scores are then calculated and analyzed to form a snapshot of sorts for someone's behavioral responses to situations. For example, someone who scored high in the extraversion category would most likely feel comfortable in settings where there are many people and where socializing is expected.

Some studies have shown that personality is rooted in biology. The idea that people are born the way they are to some degree has merit, as evidenced by studies comparing identical twins' personality similarities to those of fraternal twins (Loehlin & Martin, 2018). However, research has proven that the development of personality is heavily influenced by social and environmental factors, especially during the formative years. These external influences may also affect someone to varying degrees based on the biological aspects of personality. Therefore, it is important to note that personality is developed not in a vacuum, but rather in a biopsychosocial process. However, once a person has reached adult development, personality traits are considered to be enduring and lifelong with allowances for the fluctuation of certain traits throughout the lifespan (Barbaree et al., 2009). Some studies point out that while personality types may have roots in genetics, the development of personality disorders is related only to environmental factors (Shiner, 2009).

Personality is therefore influenced by what happens to someone, which in turn influences how they interact with others, including sexually (Allen, 2019). The cycle of personality and behavior is infinite and creates a web of thoughts, behaviors, actions, reactions, and justifications. This relationship between personality and behavior applies to this study when one begins to look at how personality was developed and how that influences the risk that someone may commit a crime against another person (Aydin, 2016; Becerra-García, et al., 2013b). For example, when comparing sexual offenders against adults to adults addicted to opiates and child sexual offenders, Carvalho and Nobre (2013) found that there were distinct differences in the general FFM personality profiles of those three types of offenders, meaning that people who commit certain types of crimes may share similar personality types.

Sexuality

Sexuality is best understood as a spectrum. Historically speaking, sexuality has often been viewed as a social construct, with pressure from societal forces to maintain a heteronormative view of sexuality, one that specifically relates to heterosexual activity with the goal of reproduction (Stelzl et al., 2018). This view, however, leaves little room for those who are sexually attracted to people in a way that does not fall within this standard. Recent efforts to explain human sexuality have therefore resulted in the development of the idea that sexual attraction is present outside the evolutionary need for reproduction. This spectrum view of sexuality allows for that flexibility, while still maintaining that there are parameters of norms, meaning that some forms of sexuality are inside the norms and others are outside the norms. Sexuality that falls outside the parameters of normal is often described by the term *sexual deviance* (APA, 2013). Sexual attraction or activity with minors is included in the concept of abnormal or deviant sexuality.

Some argue that adults who are sexually attracted to children (referred to as minor-attracted persons) are not “wrong” in any sense, but rather are sexually attracted to children in the same inexplicable ways that other adults experience their sexuality. The spectrum of sexuality ranges from heterosexual to homosexual in most common languages, with variance and movement along the spectrum. However, attraction to children has only recently been explored as a sexual orientation that is not chosen but rather innate. Advocates for this view of sexuality report that a minor-attracted person almost always knows that his or her sexuality is forbidden and that those people often struggle with tremendous amounts of negative emotions (Blagden et al., 2017; Houtepen et al., 2016). The advocates for this view of sexuality report that there are minor-attracted persons who act on their desires, thus becoming what society and academia call a child molester, and there are minor-attracted persons who refuse to act on their sexual attractions (Parr & Pearson, 2019). Personality is one of the moderating factors found to differentiate those who act and those who do not (Cohen & Galynker, 2012).

Only individuals who have acted on sexual desires, impulses, urges, etc., and have been convicted of a crime were included as participants in this study. This narrowed the sample population from anyone who has an attraction to children to those who have acted in a manner that has been deemed inappropriate by both psychological and legal communities. Those who have engaged in sexual activity with a minor are referred to in this study as child molesters.

Child Molesters

Many studies have been conducted with participants who have been convicted of sexual crimes against children. Most studies compare offenders to nonoffenders and focus on one of three areas: personality traits, mental illness, and neurocognitive functioning. Research has shown that compared to nonoffenders, child molesters show significant differences in personality

traits and disorders, mental illnesses such as anxiety and impulse control disorders, and neurocognitive function (Becerra-García et al., 2013b). Research also shows that developmental history, substance use, childhood abuse history, and sex are all important factors that influence how someone comes to engage in sexual activity with a child (Sullivan & Sheehan, 2016; Thomas et al., 2013). While these formative factors help explain why someone engages in sexual activity with a child, this information falls short of distinguishing the difference in the dynamics of sexual abuse when sexual attraction is present and when it is not. For example, Sullivan and Sheehan (2016) reported that some of the offenders in their study reported sexual attraction as the most important motivator, while others reported the need for affirmation and the need for power and control. The difference in self-reported motive leads to the categorization of child molesters into different types because the research clearly shows that not all CSA is about sexual pleasure.

Two Types of Child Molesters

A few studies have sought to find differences in the two different types of child molesters in areas other than personality. A recent study showed differences in the brains and attachment styles of the two types of offenders (). Also, there is ample research available to support the differences between the pedophilic and nonpedophilic child molesters when it comes to full scale intelligence quotient (FSIQ) scores, executive functioning, socioeconomic status, and cognitive distortions (Mohnke et al., 2014; Schiffer & Vonlaufen, 2011). Some research shows that pedophilic child molesters are less likely to respond to treatment than opportunistic child molesters, but studies have been unable to pinpoint why (Simkins, 2016). Another important reason to consider the differences in the typology of the offender is the prevention of CSA and the protection of children. This is relevant to this study because some research shows that there

are differences in the likelihood of opportunistic offenders being detected and experiencing legal consequences, with the rate of detection and prosecution being higher than pedophilic child molesters (Stephens et al., 2021). This is an alarming finding because research shows that undetected sexual offenders (those who have not been reported or charged with any crime) are more likely to have a sexual interest in children, have a greater degree of sexual interest in children, and commit sexual offenses against children (Stephens et al., 2021). The study by Stephens et al. (2021) found that the undetected offenders also had a greater number of victims than did the detected group of offenders. The researchers note a consistent theme with other studies: that those who are detected and charged criminally are more likely to exhibit antisocial personality traits and are more likely to have committed other types of crimes as well (Boccio & Beaver, 2018). This information is alarming considering that it is estimated that over 80% of sexual abuse against children is undetected and/or unreported (Stephens et al., 2021). What is more frightening is that the majority of these studies leave out an entire group of child sex offenders: female child molesters.

The Female Child Molester

The term *child molester* invokes imagery exclusive of female perpetrators in most people's minds due to the historical concept that it is outside feminine capability to sexually abuse a child. As evidenced by prior research, most studies on child molestation focus on males who have been convicted, although recent research coupled with advancements in technology such as the development of the labial plethysmograph, has come a long way in including other study participants. Recent studies have shown that while female child molesters are not the majority, they are an ever-present and underreported threat to the well-being of children (Gannon & Alleyne, 2013). Some studies report that up to 20% of CSA in the United States is perpetrated

by women, while only about 1% of incarcerated child molesters are female (McLeod, 2015). Attention on female child molesters has increased in recent years as overall CSA has declined with increased education and reporting measures, as well as the acceptance of the concept of female predators (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022). Furthermore, while research has shown mixed results when it comes to personal CSA histories of male child sex offenders and the susceptibility to future abuse perpetration, research is clear that female child sex offenders show significantly higher childhood abuse rates (Strickland, 2008). Another important consideration for this study is that there is very little research on the types of offenders for female offenders. One recent study showed that female child molesters are distinctly different from their male counterparts in regard to their victims' sex and age, as female child molesters abuse boys and girls at a much more equal rate than men and female offenders' victims are generally about two years younger on average (McLeod, 2015; West et al., 2011). Also, a female child molester is much more likely to sexually abuse a child in her own family, including biological children. The rates of abuse increase exponentially when the adult female is using drugs, when the child is using drugs, and when the child is noted as having some sort of physical or mental disability (McLeod, 2015). The findings from this and other studies show that the female perpetrator is much more likely to emerge later in life after multiple life experiences of trauma and other difficulties. Little research points to the existence and description of a female pedophilic child molester, when sexual desire is the determining factor (not just age and type of offense). However, a recent study of adult, noncriminal, nonclinical women found that over 4% of women endorsed at least one type of sexual interest in young children (most often fantasy), and 0.08% reported a sexual attraction to children (Gee et al., 2012; Wurtele et al., 2014). Another theme among most studies regarding female child molesters is that females are much more likely to

abuse children sexually in response to and in partnership with a coercive or abusive male counterpart (Brown & Kloess, 2020). Although a distinct personality and pathology profile of the female child molester has yet to be identified, research indicates that similar to males, female child molesters are more likely to exhibit antisocial personality traits, have some sort of clinical psychopathology, and have suffered from sexual and other traumas in childhood (Brown & Kloess, 2020; Walters et al., 2016).

Findings from Postconviction Testing

The previous information explains many aspects of child molesters as a group. However, the timing of the collection of that information in most cases is of concern, as well as some of the methods of collecting that information. The previous section highlighted the fact that women as child molesters are significantly underreported and unprosecuted. Since most studies on child molestation occur in some sort of punitive setting, as did this one, the population of female child molesters is also understudied. However, one of the main reasons for the exclusion of even women who are convicted of sex crimes against children is the nature of examinations of sexual interests. While there are plenty of surveys and assessments that can identify risk factors and aid in the diagnosis of pedophilia and other disorders such as paraphilias, personality disorders, and mental illnesses, the only way to truly measure deviant sexual interests has long been considered to be phallometric testing (McPhail et al., 2019). As the name suggests, phallometric testing measures blood flow and neurological response to sexual stimuli in men. The most common and most validated testing apparatus is called the penile plethysmograph. This instrument has been used in repeated studies with participants convicted of sexual crimes against children and is often considered the gold standard of validity despite some ethical concerns (Konrad et al., 2018). Other postconviction studies have found differences in brain development between the two types

of offenders, differences in developmental and abuse histories, and differences in executive functioning and full-scale intelligence quotient scores (Mohnke et al., 2014; Tenbergen, et al., 2015). What has not been found is a distinct personality profile including pathology for the different types of offenders, although some research indicates that situational child molesters often meet the criteria for antisocial personality disorder.

Other postconviction research has elaborated on the theme that people who sexually abuse children, whether for sexual gratification or other internal motivations (such as the need for power and control), purposefully place themselves in situations in which there is access to children and exhibit the personality traits and/or sexual interest in children long before they offend. The only difference appears to be in female child molesters of their biological children, in whom researchers found the desire and/or previous offenses (undetected included) were seldom present before the time of the offense, indicating it is often trauma or stress-related issues coupled with access to and vulnerability of the child (Gölge et al., 2021). An interesting technology that could enable postconviction testing in female offenders is the LPG, or labial photoplethysmograph. The LPG is a device that measures physiological sexual arousal in women using size changes in the labia when the woman is shown sexually arousing images. This device has undergone recent validity testing but has yet to be used in postconviction testing (Staunton & Hammond, 2016). However, as with PPG, LPG presents its own similar and unique ethical considerations.

The Detrimental Effects of CSA

The prevalence of CSA and its detrimental effects on the victims are of disastrous proportions. It is estimated that one in five people will endure sexual abuse before adulthood. The consequences of CSA have been investigated in depth by numerous people, organizations,

and government agencies due to devastating consequences that are often seen throughout the lifetime of the victim (Abel et al., 2019). One of the most groundbreaking studies into the long-term effects of childhood trauma was the CDC-Kaiser study on adverse childhood experiences (CDC, 2013; Petruccelli et al., 2019). Following this study, the research on the effects of CSA increased exponentially with clear evidence showing that CSA affects victims in both the short-term and long-term phases of life mentally, emotionally, and physically. Some of the most common long-term consequences of CSA manifest in adulthood as anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use disorders, risky behaviors, myriad physical maladies both explained and unexplained, unhealthy attachment styles, poor self-esteem, and an overall inability to trust others (Gallo et al., 2018). Research shows that consequences of CSA are often complicated for survivors when the abuse is revealed and the survivor is either disbelieved or not supported in recovery, with those having validation and support from family having a lessened negative outcome (Elliott et al., 2022). Meta-analysis has shown that CSA is more common in females than in males but that the risk of developing long-term mental health issues after the abuse was similar for both sexes (Gallo et al., 2018; Petruccelli et al., 2019). The gender of the victim and the perpetrator can also play a role in the long-term effects of CSA. For example, one study found that feelings of guilt, shame, and confusion over sexuality were more common in boys who were abused by men, but that boys who were abused by women had similar outcomes to girls who were abused by men (Dube et al., 2005).

Most researchers believe that the presence of sexual abuse in childhood disturbs the developmental process and decreases the child's ability to form healthy attachments, boundaries, self-esteem, self-awareness, etc. Couple this with the overwhelming evidence that many children are not believed or are even blamed for the abuse and are not subsequently protected from further

contact with the abuser, and the foundations of trust that develop from early family of origin bonds are also disturbed (Brits et al., 2021).

The idea that a person who sexually abuses a child was also a victim of sexual abuse has inconsistent support in research. For example, there is substantial stigma surrounding CSA in that many laypeople believe it is a risk factor for future offending in adulthood (Baril et al., 2016). However, research shows that a history of CSA is only a minor risk factor for offending against children in adulthood, more specifically only in pedophilic child molesters. For example, a meta-analysis involving over one thousand sex offenders showed that while convicted sex offenders do have a significantly higher prevalence of CSA, it was much more prevalent in men who abuse younger males or other adults than men or women who abuse younger females (Jespersen et al., 2009). Furthermore, research has shown that sex offenders of all types have higher rates of personality pathology and CSA than the general population, but this finding was not specific to sex offenders who abuse children (Becerra-García et al., 2012a). A recent study found that CSA is significantly correlated with the commission of sexual offenses in adulthood including but not specific to child molestation (Drury et al., 2019). One study differentiated the types of child molesters when analyzing sexual abuse histories in childhood and found that while the presence of sexual abuse in childhood was correlated with a higher risk for abusing children sexually in adulthood, that risk was confounded by the fact that those offenders also had higher rates of other adverse childhood experiences and therefore their offenses could not be correlated specifically with CSA (Thomas et al., 2013). However, one study did find that when compared to nonpedophilic child molesters, pedophilic child molesters have higher rates of sexual and emotional abuse in childhood (Marx et al., 2020). Although the presence of CSA in childhood is not a cause of sexual offending against children later in life, the conclusion is

logical that the presence of CSA is not only detrimental to the victim but also, in multiple ways, a risk factor for the maltreatment of others in the future.

Prevalence of CSA in Different Settings

While the overall rates of CSA continue to be reported at about one in four children overall, there are significant risk factors as well as protective factors that influence the likelihood that a child will be sexually abused before adulthood (Dye, 2020). Studies show that around 90 percent of CSA is perpetrated by someone the child and family know and trust (Finklehor, 2012). This could mean a family member, such as a live-in partner of the child's biological parent, family friend, neighbor, or family member who is well known but does not live in the home; in some cases, the perpetrator is a biological parent (Ferragut et al., 2021). The roughly 10% of CSA that is perpetrated by strangers has markedly different characteristics, which could also be related to the sexual preferences and personality traits of the abusers (Ferragut et al., 2021). It is imperative to know where and under what circumstances CSA tends to occur to be able to pinpoint warning signs and increase effective prevention methods. The following research describes the most common situations in which children are sexually abused.

CSA by Family

While sexual abuse in childhood by a biological family member in the home is not the most common situation, it is of utmost importance to understand due to the overwhelming evidence that even though uncommon, family member/child sexual abuse often begins at a younger age, lasts longer, is more severe in regard to violence and physical maltreatment, and often incurs more significant and long-term impairment for the victim (Ferragut et al., 2021). One study found that personality traits such as low extraversion can play a role in the risk of a parent offending (Lu & Lung, 2012). Research shows that the younger the victim, the more

likely the abuser is to be an in-home family member or someone who frequents the home under familial circumstances. For example, the average age of a victim of CSA by an immediate family member is under 7 years of age, with the most common age range being 6 years to 11 years old (Finkelhor, 2012). Research also found that when a child is sexually abused by a biological parent, it is four times as likely to be the mother (Gölge et al., 2021).

Institutional/Acquaintance CSA

The overwhelmingly most common relationship between victim and perpetrator of CSA is a family friend/acquaintance (Turner et al., 2013). How the perpetrators gain access to their victims vary to include things like spending time with the family, usually through friendship with the victim's mother, being in some sort of authoritative/supervisory role over the child, or being responsible for some sort of care for the child such as in school, extracurricular, or religious activities (Turner et al., 2013). Recent decades have brought to light numerous large-scale sexual abuse scandals involving prominent organizations such as the Roman Catholic Church, Boy Scouts of America, and school systems in which one or more individuals in some sort of caregiving or supervisory role have been found to have sexually abused multiple children during their career (Kline, 2009). This type of sexual abuse is referred to as institutional CSA, but when looking at cases individually, the person who abused the child was known to that child with some level of familiarity in which the time with and access to the child would otherwise appear appropriate.

Recent research estimates that approximately 4% of Roman Catholic clergy have sexually abused a child (John Jay College, 2011). Considering the overwhelming influence the Catholic Church has held across the world in the last century, that percentage equates to thousands of abusers and hundreds of thousands of victims in the last 70 years; in the United

States alone, it is estimated that over ten thousand children were sexually abused by Catholic clergy (Bohm et al., 2013).

Another prominent scandal recently uncovered involved the Boy Scouts of America. This high-profile exposure of CSA brought forth an often dismissed or overlooked population of victims, much like the scandal with the Roman Catholic Church. Until large-scale scandals like these were exposed, the idea of male children as victims of sexual abuse was largely underreported and/or discussed (Easton et al., 2014; Shon & Tewksbury, 2020). While previous research had touched on the topic of adult male to child male sexual abuse, much was learned regarding the grooming patterns and behavioral patterns of both the abusers and victims from research on this scandal, an approach that had rarely been taken in past studies (Shon & Tewksbury, 2020). What researchers have taken away from this scandal is that access to children in places and situations that would allow for sexual abuse of children is situational in nature of offense, but that the grooming process and lack of reporting shows what an immense sense of control the abusers have over their victims (Laufersweiler-Dwyer & Mackinem, 2015). The grooming process for many of these children was years long and involved the juxtaposition of what researchers call the “nice guy” approach coupled with gradual and sometimes seemingly harmless sexual abuse that often graduates into much more serious types of sexual abuse. This scandal, and the current lack of prosecution of these offenders, supports evidence that child molesters, whether pedophilic or situational, will continue to offend when the offenses go undetected or at least unpunished and that male-on-male sexual abuse is a widespread public health concern (Easton et al., 2014).

Perhaps the most common but certainly most reported type of institutional CSA comes from the involvement of adults within the school or daycare setting. This is a logical pattern,

given the fact that almost all children will be involved with a school-based educational program throughout the majority of childhood and adolescence. In school settings including kindergarten through 12th grade, it is estimated that approximately 10% of students experience some sort of educator sexual misconduct (Gushwa et al., 2018). This misconduct ranges from verbal sexual advances to physical contact but is most commonly reported as an inappropriate online or social media relationship that is sexual in nature (Gushwa, et al., 2018). Often, the experience is different for male and female victims and perpetrators, as studies have shown that female educators who engage in sexual activity with a male student are less likely to receive legal prosecution and that often the male victim is considered “lucky” or to be acting out consensual fantasies, when in fact it is the act of CSA, nothing less. Male educators who engage in sexual activity with female students are much more likely to receive punitive consequences (Zack et al., 2018).

CSA by a Stranger/Extrafamilial

While the vast majority of CSA is perpetrated by an adult who knows and has access to the child, approximately 10% of CSA is perpetrated by a stranger to the child. While this type of offense is uncommon, it is often accompanied by complications such as greater severity of abuse, lack of support for the child in disclosure, and the inability of the child to receive legal justice due to reporting and investigative difficulties (Finkelhor, 2012; Finkelhor et al., 2013). While abuse by a stranger accounts for a small percentage of CSA, some researchers point out that pedophilic sexual interest is at the root of stranger CSA. This is logical when considering that the very nature of opportunistic offenses is to offend from a place of access to and comfort around the child.

Prevention Efforts

As previously stated, the results of this research study may help to enhance prevention efforts to combat CSA before it occurs. There are no established ways to spot a child molester before they offend other than educating children, parents, and caregivers on the warning signs of behavior in both the abused and of the abusers. Programs such as school-based prevention efforts based on Erin's Law have been adopted in most states, but even the best curriculum focuses primarily on how to spot the signs of abuse and how to report when sexual abuse is suspected.

Several recent clinical studies have aimed to identify behavioral patterns of child molesters (Knight et al., 2016). There have also been efforts to develop more ways to identify adults who are sexually attracted to children without the ethical concerns related to most current types of testing, leading to some promising research in the field of personality disorders and the risk of child molestation. For example, many child molesters in previous studies have been found to meet *DSM* criteria for the diagnosis of three distinct personality disorders at much higher rates than the general public: antisocial, schizoid, and schizotypal personality disorders (Kapfhammer, 2017). This information is both helpful and able to be used ethically in identifying potential perpetrators.

Other studies have shown that there is no correlation between where a person identifies on the spectrum of sexual identity (hetero-homo) and the propensity to abuse children. Also, there is a correlation between CSA against the offender and future perpetration, but it is not the norm: most children who are abused sexually do not grow up to offend sexually against others in adulthood (Kruger & Schiffer, 2011). Further research indicates that while child molesters have a higher rate of personal CSA than the general public, the number of people who are abused

sexually as children and do not offend against others is far more significant (Dillien et al., 2019; Drury et al., 2019).

In addition to a history of CSA and personality disorders, child molesters often share several other traits. For example, studies have shown that convicted child sex offenders often exhibit cognitive distortions, mental illnesses, neurocognitive deficits, and high rates of neuroticism and anxiety (Ciardha & Ward, 2013). Another interesting finding in studies of child molesters relates to the cultural/religious norms in which a person developed. For example, Harper and Harris (2017) found that some cultures are far more accepting of adult/child sexual contact than others, but what is unknown is whether or not this social perception reduces the psychological trauma to the child.

Other prevention efforts include the call to action for advanced pre-employment screenings, educational programs in schools to increase reporting by both students and other educators who see or suspect harmful activity, and general community education on the nature of CSA, its effects, warning signs, and education regarding positive support for those who disclose.

Summary

This literature review focused on literature that is currently available regarding CSA and the personality traits and disorders of child molesters. There is abundant literature stating that child molesters have different personality traits, are more often personality disordered, and exhibit lower levels of decision-making processing. However, there are gaps in the literature when it comes to differentiating the traits of the two different types of child molesters that offend against children: those who are only attracted to children and those who offend when the opportunity arises. There is also missing information related to the female child molester, as research shows these crimes and therefore the research surrounding them is severely

underreported. Also, there is little to no evidence indicating which people can be considered at high risk for child molestation since almost all research occurs postoffense. Finally, there is a gap when it comes to the testing of child molesters due to ethical concerns.

Current research shows that prevention efforts are limited and narrow, focusing the most on educating children to speak up. This method often proves incredibly insufficient given the means that offenders will use to gain access to their victims, lack of family support, and lack of understanding of what can happen in the brain of a young child or adolescent. Furthermore, the literature shows that there is an unfortunate discrepancy between what is considered pedophilia or a mental disorder by the psychological community and what is considered CSA in the legal system as well as the majority of the scientific community when it comes to the detrimental effects that abuse can have on a child, even if they are postpubescent. This discrepancy could contribute to the fact that the general public view all child molesters as pedophiles, while the majority of offenders are considered more opportunistic in their motivations, leading to a lack of understanding and prevention/reporting. This discrepancy also leads to misunderstanding about the detrimental effects of sexual abuse in the lives of older children.

Finally, this literature review seeks to point out the need for further research into the brain of the child molester, both true and situational types. The research conducted for this study aims to provide at least a small start in closing that gap.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe commonalities and differences in personality traits in two groups of convicted sex offenders (pedophilic child molesters and opportunistic child molesters) and how those traits contributed to the experience of molesting a child. The study was designed to describe the results of interviews of participants from the two different groups. The participants were persons convicted of sexual crimes against children in the state of Alabama. The researcher summarized the data from the interview of each person and noted similarities and differences in the personality traits and the meaning those traits gave to the offender regarding the offense(s). The goal of this study is to identify and describe any significant personality and psychological markers in true and situational child molesters. This chapter will explain the research process with the goal of allowing replication in further research.

Although some questionnaires and scale-type questions were used with individual participants, the objective of the research was to describe each type of child molester as a whole in regard to personality, using any commonalities noted in the interviews. A qualitative design is appropriate because the common traits among each type of offender are explained based on interviews that were transcribed for the study.

Design

This study was designed to produce descriptive research results through which commonalities and differences could be identified. Furthermore, this research was intended to reveal common themes of the lived experience or phenomenon among both groups, which can be generalized but also allows for interpretation and insight from the individual participant. This study is qualitative and descriptive in nature due to the sample size being small and the results

being based on the experiences of the convicted persons in the sample. This method of research was chosen to allow in-depth dialogue and explanation of lived experiences of each participant, including dialogue about personal information, personality types, and how those things played a role in the sexual crime against a child.

A phenomenological study is defined as an attempt “to produce an exhaustive description” of an experience (Heppner et al., 2016, p. 367). Phenomenological research design has its roots in philosophy, particularly in the discovery of new information and the questioning of previously held beliefs. Edmund Husserl founded phenomenological research in attempt to develop a research methodology that excluded bias and preconceived knowledge and that focused on observing not only the event but the observer’s relationship to the event (Zieske, 2020). An important term in this type of research is *epoché*, meaning that researchers constantly work to set aside their previous knowledge in the attempt to discover new truth intentionally void of previous thoughts (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). This technique is particularly useful in this study on personality and its influence on behavior. Combining experience with measurable traits gives descriptive yet repeatable results. In this research, the specific technique of phenomenological research is used to produce both philosophical and experiential explanations regarding the relationship between personality and child sex offending. This usage is consistent with the purpose of phenomenological data analysis to describe the psychological processes that generate experiences, which in turn have meaning to all parties involved. In short, this research design allows the subject (offender) to explain and describe how they perceive the events to have unfolded in light of their personal history, sexuality, and personality. It allows for an in-depth discovery of a common human experience, but from a unique perspective. This design was chosen due to the complex nature of the development of personality and personality disorders,

the complexities of CSA, its consequences, and the lack of descriptive analysis in the existing literature regarding the personality profiles of both types of child sex offenders and their different inherent motivations and rewards for offending.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do child molesters perceive their own personality?

Research Question 2: In what way does the offender feel that his or her personality influenced the way in which he or she selected and abused his or her victim?

Research Question 3: How do personality traits contribute to the number of victims abused?

Setting

Several settings were used this study to allow participation from a varied sample population, but all interviews were conducted in person and in community-based locations. The setting for each interview was determined based on location of the participant, agreement between the researcher and participant, and office availability. For safety reasons, the interviews took place in private office spaces, such as an empty office in several different public libraries and business offices where the researcher could reserve a private office. Several additional safety measures were put in place: All interviews were conducted using an office with a window. All interviews took place during the day in public buildings but in a private office space. No security personnel were present in the interview room/office but were asked to remain close enough to intervene in case of an emergency. Additionally, a temporary phone number was provided during the interview process given that the researcher lives in the areas in which research is being conducted. The researcher feels that to obtain the most honest and natural responses to the questionnaires and interview questions, the participant must feel comfortable. Anonymity was

ensured through the assignment of pseudonyms and redaction of any identifying information in publication.

Participants

Participants for this study were adults who have been convicted of sex crimes against minors through the legal system in the state of Alabama. The most current information available indicates that in the state of Alabama, there are currently more than 16,000 people on the sex offender registry (Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, 2022). Information was obtained from public records such as the Alabama Sex Offender Registry. The participants were recruited via flyers in the offices they are required to visit on a regular basis called Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act offices. The researcher selected volunteers to participate with the goal of representing the group as fairly as possible. The researcher was able to find a diverse group of participants who volunteered including one female and seven males. Due to the intense and intricate methodology and the nature of phenomenological research, the participants consisted of seven male and one female participants. Based on initial impression, only two participants appeared to fall into the category of pedophilic, but the information provided during the interviews proved that assumption to be false. The researcher used public criminal history information to learn the age and sex of the victim, the name of the conviction, and the potential participant's age, sex, race, etc. The selection of both pedophilic and nonpedophilic participants is made possible by the ability to view the public record that differentiates the crime based on the age of the victim at the time of the offense (younger than 12, older than 12; Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, 2022). This is relevant in to the definition of pedophilia which is specific to younger victims (pubescent or prepubescent) (APA, 2013). The researcher attempted to select participants that represented different ethnicities and cultures as well as participants that

represented a diverse criminal history and socioeconomic status based on information available through public records. The researcher used a convenience sample based on public information and willingness to participate, although the selection process used basic demographic information as a selection tool to allow the best representation of the groups being studied. The use of a recruitment flyer ensured that participation was voluntary.

Procedures

Upon successful proposal defense, the researcher applied for Institutional Review Board approval through Liberty University. The researcher provided an overview of the study procedures, a list of all questions to be asked, copies of consent forms and recruitment flyers, and a list of offices that would be contacted to assist with recruiting participants. The researcher obtained permission to recruit future participants and provide informed consent to all agencies that were involved in the solicitation and selection of participants, including the Alabama Department of Corrections (Parole and Probation Offices) and the Alabama Sex Offender Registry Offices. After Institutional Review Board approval, the researcher recruited participants, obtain informed consent releases, and selected eight participants for the study. The selection process operated on somewhat of a first-come, first-serve basis. I looked for four males, one of whom shows probability of meeting criteria for pedophilia, and four females, one of whom shows probability of meeting criteria for pedophilia. I was able to find eight participants who met the criteria, however the group consisted of seven males and one female. This is due mostly to the very limited amount of convicted female sex offenders. When the potential participants made contact with the researcher to ask about participation, the researcher viewed their public information on the sex offender registry website to confirm that he or she is a convicted sex offender against a child and view the name of the crime of which he or she was

convicted. In Alabama, sex crimes against children are differentiated by things like age of the victim and what type of sexual contact took place (rape, sodomy, other sexual contact with a child under 12, pornography, etc.), which is enough information for the researcher to confirm if the individual met the criteria for participation. It could be argued that by nature of the crimes committed and because of the sensitive nature of the subject, the self-reported stories of a convicted child abuser could be unreliable, but measures were taken to combat any reason for participants to provide false information: informed consent was obtained before the study began, anonymity was ensured, and participants had the ability to participate in the study without fearing disclosure of any personal information to anyone other than the researcher. For these reasons, after a list of voluntary potential participants who fit the criteria for this study was compiled, potential candidates were selected, candidates were contacted, and informed consent was obtained, the screening and interview process began.

After the participant completed the initial screening and agreement for voluntary participation, the researcher and participant set a date and time to meet for the interview. The in-person interview consisted of a brief introduction, an explanation of the process with participant's confirmation of understanding, informed consent signatures, and time to answer any questions the participant may have. First, each participant completed a written questionnaire that asked for self-identification of the sexual preference that best describes them using multiple choice. The questionnaire was completed on paper so that he or she could fact check their answers and so that the researcher could point back to answers for clarification if needed during the interview process. Next, the participant filled out the Personality Trait Perception Scale (PTPS) on paper. Then the recorded oral interviews began. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for validity and authenticity purposes and relative statements were included in the

final research. The researcher audio recorded each interview while using an audio recording device and then an automated intelligence service call Sonix.ai for transcription (no human transcription). The software transcribed each interview to a Word document, while the audio recording allowed the researcher to make appropriate changes in the text.

The Researcher's Role

My role as the human instrument in this study is to report the truth and meaning of the experiences of others. I have no personal relationship with any of the participants, but as a person who has endured CSA and lack of support upon reporting as a minor and then followed through with criminal prosecution of one of my abusers in adulthood, it is not lost on me that I have schemas framed in my mind about how I predicted each type of offender will answer. My role as the researcher is to set aside those experiences and beliefs (*epoché*) and to discover what a similar experience is like for others, from the mindset of the perpetrator rather than the victim. In order to protect myself from retraumatization and to ensure fairness to participants, I met with my personal therapist on a regular basis throughout the research process to discuss any feelings or emotions that came up. I journaled my preconceived ideas before each interview and then used reflective journaling after each interview before trying to process any of the actual information obtained for the study. While this subject is very important to me personally and the information and details can be heavy and disturbing, I felt prepared to engage with the information due to this being the nature of my work in general and the steps that I took to heal from my own trauma many years ago. I also understand that trying to understand other people's experiences and understand their "why" of events may not ever be fully possible due to the complexity of human nature. I do not have unrealistic expectations that this study will somehow "find a cure" for all CSA in the future, but I do hope that it can help at least one person.

I feel that using some structured questions and scales and including an open conversation with each participant in the interview allows the participants to provide their interpretation of the phenomenon while focusing the interview on the research questions, which are based on the influence of personality and sexuality on behavior. The following sections on Data Collection and Results will also include a summary of my constant effort to set aside bias and see things as they are to the participants, rather than as they are to me.

Data Collection

Data were collected for this study via interviews that were expected to take around two and a half hours each. The length of the interview was adjusted for each participant as needed to include more time, and I was prepared to conduct a second interview in order to ensure that I captured each person's true experience. The interviews lasted between an hour and a half to four hours. No second interviews were requested or needed. Each interview was audio recorded and consisted of an introduction, completion of the demographic questionnaire, completion of the PTPS to capture the participants' perceptions of their basic personality traits, and finally an open interview consisting of 16 questions with time left to discuss anything else relevant to the study that was important to the subject. I stayed engaged and present in the interview and offered a comfortable and conversational presence while taking field notes as needed in each interview. The field notes allowed me to write down any words, phrases, themes, or actions that take place in the presence of the participant, something that would have been lost when listening to the audio afterward. Field notes also allowed me to take notice of any questions or concerns participants have about the questions in real time. As I have learned from experience interviewing people about sensitive topics, taking notes on certain phrases or questions that cause a visible change in demeanor, body language, or verbal response is important and can help me

focus on an area that may be important in the participant's experience. Each interview was assigned a code for record-keeping purposes, and a pseudonym was assigned for each participant.

Demographic Questionnaire

The first questionnaire is a brief demographic and self-report measure developed by the researcher. It consists of six multiple choice questions and one question that requires only a numerical answer. The questions are direct and straightforward. This questionnaire was completed on paper by the participant using his or her pseudonym, which was assigned before the in-person interview. All interviews were audio recorded, and any questions the participants had were answered directly in a way that guided the participant back to completion of the questionnaire.

Date of Birth: _____ **Current Age:** _____

Sex: Male Female

For the following demographic questions please select ONLY one answer. Select the answer that is most true for you.

1. What is your ethnicity?

White/Caucasian

Black/African American

Hispanic/Latino

Asian

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

More than one ethnicity reported

2. What is the highest level of education you completed?

Did not finish high school

Graduated high school or obtained GED

Some college

Bachelor's degree or higher

3. How do you describe your sexuality?

Straight

Gay

Lesbian

Bisexual

Unsure

Not sexually attracted to anyone

4. Are you or have you ever been sexually attracted in adulthood (18 years or older) to young children (at or about under the age of 12)? This does not mean you sexually engaged with the person, but rather asks about attraction only.

Yes

No

5. Which type of person are you MOST sexually attracted to (please choose only the group you are MOST attracted to, even if there are several)?

Adult Males

Adult Females

Adolescent Males (12-17 years)

Adolescent Females (12-17 years)

Young Males (under 12 years)

Young Females (under 12 years)

Not sexually attracted to anyone

6. Have you ever been convicted of any other type of crime other than the sexual offense against a minor referenced in this study?

Yes

No

7. Please write the total number of people under the age of 16 that you have engaged in sexual activity with since you have been 18 years old and older.

The first section of the questionnaire is designed merely to gather participants' basic demographic information. Questions 3 through 5 allow the participant to self-disclose sexual interest/preference. This is imperative to the study for the identification of pedophilic child molesters. Question 6 allows for self-disclosure of any other nonsexual criminal activity, which could be relevant to personality disorders, particularly antisocial personality disorder, which has been found to be common in situational child molesters (Jahnke et al., 2019). Finally, Question 7 allows for the self-disclosure of the participant's victim count, which is relevant to the type of child molester as well as the third research question of this study.

Personality Trait Perception Scale

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am an extravert.					
I am open to new experiences.					
I am agreeable with others.					
I am conscientious.					
I worry about things a lot.					
I prefer to be alone.					
I prefer to do things the same way.					
I prefer to do what I want, even if it bothers other people.					
I tend to do things based on how I feel in that moment, without thinking about the consequences.					
I usually see the positives in situations.					

I developed the 10-question Personality Trait Perception Scale in order to gauge each participant's perception of their own personality. This instrument is the meant to gather demographic information rather than qualitative data because it asks for the person's opinion or perception of their own personality. The instrument is not intended to be used as any sort of personality test. The participants' responses to these questions helped the researcher later in the interviews uncover how the person perceives their personality contributed to their experiences. For the first five statements, the person simply rates how they perceive themselves in regard to Costa and McCrae's (1992) Big Five personality traits of extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. The statements are worded as directly as possible, although Statement 5 states, "I worry about things a lot" rather than, "I am neurotic" to help the participants understand the statement, since *neurotic* is not a commonly used word. I feel this substitution is appropriate given the definition of neuroticism and its correlation with worry, fear, and anxiety (Boillat et al., 2017). The last five statements are inverted statements of the five

factors of personality written in layman's terms. For example, someone who strongly agrees or agrees that he or she is extraverted would be expected to strongly disagree or disagree with the statement "I prefer to be alone." These Likert-scale statements are inspired by assessments like the NEO-PI-R, but the statements use different wording in the Personality Trait Perception Scale.

Interviews

After the participants completed the demographic questionnaire and the perception scale, they were provided a printed list of terms and definitions that may be used in the interview. I then began the interview, while having the written paperwork in front of us to allow me to look back at their answers while we were conversing. This allowed them to describe their perceptions of their personality and their experience committing a sex crime against a minor. The interviews took place in as comfortable a setting as possible, and the participants were reminded that they were free to ask questions and ask to stop or take a break at any time. They were also reminded that while they volunteered to participate in the study, there would be absolutely no consequence if they felt they could not complete the interview. The following questions were asked in each interview, but were adjusted slightly if needed to help the participant understand and be able to answer openly and honestly. The included prompts were used if a participant seemed to need further guidance to respond.

1. Introduce yourself to me as if we just met, giving me your name, age, gender, and ethnicity.
2. How do you describe your personality? (prompt: Would you say you're funny, quiet, etc.)
3. How do you describe your sexuality or the sexual preference that you most identify with? (prompt: Would you say you are gay, straight, bisexual, etc.?)

4. Describe the first experience you can remember regarding your sexual attraction.
(prompt: Tell me about the first time you realized you were sexually attracted to someone.)
5. Do you consider yourself a pedophile? Why or why not? (prompt: What does the word *pedophile* mean to you?)
6. Tell me about any other convictions not involving sexual activity with a minor.
(prompt: Have you ever been arrested and convicted for other things like drug-related crimes, theft, etc.?)
7. Tell me what crime or crimes you have been convicted of involving sexual activity with a minor. (prompt: What were you originally charged with, and did that change at all during this process? Was there more than one minor involved?)
8. Have you been sexually active with anyone else in any way that would be considered illegal? (prompt: That could mean things like sexual activity with a minor, forcible rape, voyeurism, exposure, child pornography, etc.?)
9. Describe in detail the situation/relationship/sexual activity that led to your conviction and registration as a sex offender. (prompt: Tell me your story of how you became sexually involved with a minor or minors.)
10. Describe any events or situations that you feel contributed to your sexual activity with a minor. (prompt: Were you ever sexually abused as a child? Did you feel like the minor you were involved with wanted it? What things were going on in your life at the time?)
11. Why do you think you became sexually involved with a minor? (prompt: Was it out of curiosity, convenience, or did you feel like you could not stop yourself, etc.?)

12. Do you believe that your sexual activity with the minor was harmful to that person in any way? If yes, why did you continue? If no, explain your thoughts. (prompt: For example, if there was no physical harm to the minor, do you think there were any other negative consequences for that person such as emotional or mental harm?)
13. Describe your feelings or attitude toward the person or persons identified as the victims in your conviction(s). (prompt: Do you feel angry, sad, bitter, remorseful, etc. toward the person?)
14. Describe how you think your personality had anything to do with your sexual activity with a minor? (prompt: For example, did you find it easier to engage in sexual activity with a minor due to being nervous or shy around people your own age? Or did you feel excited about the taboo and the thrill of doing something you knew could get you in trouble?)
15. If you were guaranteed not to get caught or punished in any way, would you engage in sexual activity with a minor again? Explain your answer. (prompt: For example, if you could have sexual activity with a minor of your choosing with no consequences whatsoever, would that interest you?)
16. Explain why you became sexually involved with a minor in a few short words. (prompt: Would you say it was because you were curious, you did not think you would get caught, you thought you loved the person, it was an impulsive decision, etc.?)

Question 1 is an introductory question that allowed the participant to verbalize demographic information from the questionnaire and allow for audio recording and transcription for accuracy. Question 2 allowed the participant to describe their understanding of their

personality and is related to all three research questions. Question 3 prompted the subject to describe their view of their sexuality, as related to whom they are most attracted to. Research shows that sexual attraction to children is a strong predictor of sexual activity with a minor, as well as criterion for the diagnosis of pedophilia (APA, 2013a; Gerwinn et al., 2018). Question 4 asked the subject to describe an early formative experience in which they recognized their sexuality. Some research on pedophilia shows that sexual attraction to children develops at the appropriate age (cohort) but then never progresses developmentally, often due to cognitive dysfunction or maltreatment (Drury et al., 2019). Question 5 allowed the participant to self-disclose beliefs surrounding sexual attraction to children and their relationship with the word *pedophile*. Question 6 was designed to discover whether or not the person has been convicted of other crimes, which often occurs in individuals with antisocial personality disorders and believed to be more common in opportunistic child molesters (Falk et al., 2014). Question 7 was meant to elicit details regarding the criminality of a sexual offense against a child, in particular the crime that led to the person becoming a convicted child molester. Question 8 allowed the person to elaborate on the other areas (apart from convictions) in which he or she has displayed sexual deviancy. Sexual attraction to children is believed to be associated with pedophilia and higher victim counts, while other sexual crimes such as forcible sexual activity with an adult is believed to be more common in antisocial personalities and opportunistic offenders (Cohen et al., 2018; Healey & Beauregard, 2015). Questions 9 through 11 prompted the participant to explain and describe in detail their experience as an adult engaging in sexual activity with a minor. Question 9 was about the event itself, whereas Questions 10 and 11 were about the reasons, justifications, and motivations around the experience. These questions were designed to allow the person to describe in detail their experience, including the meanings, thought processes, and beliefs about

the events that led them to become a convicted sex offender. Questions 12–15 allowed the participant to relate their experiences back to their perception of their personality and how their personality influenced their thoughts and behavior before, during, and after the event. Research has shown that personality traits play a role in how a person perceives, acts, and thinks about others, the environment, and the self (Carvalho & Nobre, 2019). Question 12 prompted the person to describe their feelings about their morality regarding the experience. Question 13 was designed to elicit a description of how the person feels about the minor he or she abused. This response could identify personality traits such as agreeableness or the show the opposite such as a lack of empathy or other cognitive distortions common to sex offenders (Becerra-García et al., 2012a). Question 14 was designed to give the person an opportunity to express how their personality traits contributed to their behavior. Question 15 was meant to identify risks for recidivism, sexual attraction to children, sexual deviance, lack of remorse, etc. Question 16 was designed to give the participant a chance to explain in a brief, direct statement why they committed such a crime as a final statement reflecting their perception of the experience.

Data Analysis

Data were bracketed, clustered, and organized to form common themes. Each interview was transcribed, and the participant was offered the opportunity to review their transcription for accuracy via mailed written document. The participants were offered verbal reflection from the researcher to confirm understanding. For the bracketing and theme formation, each participant's responses were categorized as situational or pedophilic. The results were then split into two groups and summarized. The common themes from interviews were documented individually but summarized as a whole for each group. Common statements, personality traits, justifications, and meanings were clustered and formulated into themes in order to give an overall description of

each group's experience. A final summary of the groups' similarities and differences is provided as well. Any common themes from the female participants are discussed separately, as research shows that female child molesters are seriously underreported and understudied.

Trustworthiness

Credibility

This study aims to be considered credible by following all of the major requirements set forth by the latest guidelines from the American Psychological Association and the scientific community in general for a qualitative study to produce descriptive results. The researcher improved credibility by using globally accepted traits of personality drawn from the FFM of personality. All participants were asked the same questions and administered the same surveys in the same order. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and mailed to the participant to be checked for accuracy. Upon meeting with each participant, the researcher asked the participant to fill out a self-addressed envelope so that a copy of the interview could be mailed to them. The researcher allowed a two-week period for any participants to write with concerns about the accuracy of the interview. Self-addressed envelopes and the U.S. Postal Service were used for communication because many people convicted of sex crimes against children in Alabama have limited rights when it comes to internet and smart phones, which makes using electronic communication a potential roadblock. Also, the conviction of sex crimes against children is often correlated with low socioeconomic status, and in rural Alabama, that means many people do not have internet in their homes. When a person is required to register as a sex offender, they may lose internet and electronic communication privileges, but they are required to maintain a physical address to receive mail. For these reasons, the researcher opted to use traditional mail

service for correspondence. For my own safety, I used a PO Box in a different city than where I reside for all mail correspondence with participants.

Dependability and Confirmability

The questions elicited responses that paint a rich and detailed picture of personality and personality experience. The purpose of phenomenological research is to derive the meaning of the experience from the subject, so allowing the person to answer with as much detail as he or she wishes is imperative. Research has shown that the FFM is an excellent choice for personality trait description, especially when further testing into the realm of personality disorders is warranted due to the cohesion of the FFM with possible disorders (Vize et al., 2018). Although no standardized tests were used in this research, the questions allowed the person to describe how they felt their personality affected their behavior. This lived experience approach is the foundation of phenomenological research.

Transferability

Each interview consisted of audio-recorded conversation as well as on-paper responses. Each interview was transcribed, and each participant was given the opportunity to offer clarification at the end of the interview as well as respond to reflective questions to ensure the researcher's comprehension.

Ethical Considerations

All studies that involve human participants have ethical concerns. This researcher took every effort to protect the rights and dignity of each participant. First and foremost, participation was on a voluntary basis. All information has been kept confidential and anonymized. The researcher kept all information in a locked office or in a locked, fireproof bag while traveling. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym; names, which are public record, were only used in

the beginning during participant recruitment and on the stamped informed consent forms. Also, should the researcher have found herself unable to continue the study with the utmost mental clarity due to personal history, she was prepared to immediately reach out to her chair and/or Institutional Review Board for assistance. There were no unexpected interruptions and the researcher was able to complete the study.

Summary

A phenomenological study was conducted to describe the lived experiences of child molesters and their perceptions of their personality and the role of personality in sexual activity with a minor. The researcher sought to understand personality traits that may be common to each type of child molester in order to understand how each group perceives that their personality profiles, how their perceptions influenced their behavior leading up to and after the offense, and what personality traits correlate with the highest number of victims, as described by the perpetrators. The researcher recruited and interviewed/assessed eight participants. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and all paper documents were sealed and protected. Data were bracketed in order to find common themes and experiences. The data were validated by the participants to ensure credibility. The results, along with relevant statements from the transcribed interviews, are reported in Chapters Four and Five.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

CSA has been declared a major public health concern due to its rampant and pervasive occurrence and the many negative consequences for victims both immediately and long term. CSA is often studied after the fact in both the victims and the adults who engage in sexual activity with minors, but there is much need for more preventative efforts. Adults who abuse children sexually do so for different motivations and rewards depending on factors like personality traits, sexual attraction, and lack of regard for others. Personality traits and disorders have been shown in previous research to play a role in many different aspects of the experience of an adult engaging in sexual activity with a minor. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the relationship between personality, sexuality, and the act of engaging in sexual activity with a minor from the abuser's perspective. One of the goals of the study was to understand the difference in personality traits between pedophilic child molesters and opportunistic child molesters in order to distinguish events that may have contributed to the development of pedophilic disorder and to identify and describe what type of preventative and protective measures need to be taken. Volunteer participants were interviewed, interviews were audio recorded, and data were collected. The data were examined, and themes, common phrases, and ideologies were created to describe the experiences of the participants.

This chapter begins with a demographic overview of the participants in the study. It also includes a summary of the data collection process, provides quotes from the interviews, and then describes common themes and ideas. It concludes with a summary of these findings.

Each interview transcript was reviewed multiple times to develop common themes. Five main themes emerged: perceived personality traits, early formative experiences, attitudes

towards victims, justifications, and victim counts (total). Each theme was broken down further into several subthemes, including breaking down the personality perceptions of the participants in accordance with the FFM (Table 5). Overall, there were five themes and 18 subthemes.

Table 1

Themes and Sub-Themes

Personality	Early experiences	Attitudes	Justifications	Victim counts
Extraversion	Physical abuse	Remorse	Sexual attraction	Same
Openness	Sexual abuse	Anger	Denial	Different
Agreeableness		Lack of response	Blame-shifting	Hypothetical recidivism
Conscientiousness			Persecution	
Neuroticism			Alcohol/drugs	

The themes arose out of the participants' interview answers and best describe the experiences and perceptions of the participants from the vantage point of the offenders. The subthemes are related to how the participants described their personality as well as their expressions of thoughts, feelings, and emotions during the interviews. Statements from interviews that pertain to each theme and subtheme were marked and used to explain the development of these themes and subthemes. Common answers, including words and phrases, that were expressed by multiple participants were also marked and used to form the themes and subthemes.

Participants

The study sought to represent the population of sex offenders in Alabama as closely as possible with the small sample size regarding race/ethnicity, sexual attraction, and sex. Flyers were hung in several different Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act offices in the state, and the researcher was contacted by nine potential volunteers. Of the nine potential

participants, eight volunteers met the screening criteria, including seven men and one woman. One of the potential candidates did not meet the criterion of the victim being under the age of 16.

Eight participants completed the full interview process, including seven men and one woman. The group of participants included six Caucasian, one African American, and one person who identified as having multiple ethnicities. The ages of participants varied, ranging from 38 to 67. Two male participants self-identified as pedophilic at the time of offense, and six participants (five males and one female) identified as nonpedophilic at the time of the offense. None of the participants believed they should be considered pedophiles at the time of the interview.

A brief screening was conducted with each potential participant on the phone when he or she called to express interest in the study. If criteria were met, we arranged to meet at an agreeable time and place. At this meeting, the informed consent form was explained in detail to the participant, and a signature was obtained before any research was begun. Each participant was provided with a copy of the informed consent form, an explanation of the purpose of the research, and an overview of what the interview would entail. Each participant was reminded that he or she would be audio recorded and that he or she could ask for clarification or a break at any time. Each participant then filled out the demographic questionnaire and the PTPS on paper before the verbal interviews began.

Active listening, note taking, prompting, and clarification were skills used by the researcher in each interview. Some participants were asked to explain some answers in more detail, relating back to the answers they had given on the demographic survey and PTPS in order to capture their most detailed interpretations of their own experiences and perceptions of their own personality development and its role in their criminal convictions. Some follow-up

questions were asked for clarification to make sure each participant's experience was captured accurately.

Individual Participants

This section provides a rich description of the participants individually, which is the most important aspect of phenomenological research. Each person was assigned a pseudonym that follows alphabetical order for simplicity and confidentiality purposes. All participants were in agreement with this process.

Adam

Adam is a 38-year-old Caucasian male who was convicted of second-degree rape. Adam was arrested when he was 23 years old for having sex with a minor who was 14 at the time. Adam indicated on the demographic questionnaire that he had one victim total and that he did not consider himself a pedophile. Adam's victim was not related to him. Adam selected that he was most sexually attracted to adult females. On the PTPS, Adam rated his personality as extraverted, open, and agreeable. Both of his answers regarding conscientiousness indicated that he was low in conscientiousness.

Adam expressed a deep dissatisfaction with being required to register as a sex offender. After he served 2 years in prison, Adam was released on parole and began having to register as a sex offender. He explained that he felt what he did was not wrong, and that the only wrongdoing fell on the teenage girl for not being clear about her age. However, it seemed that this information would be hard to misunderstand considering he stated they were in a relationship for several months. At the time of the interview, Adam had been paroled and required to register as a sex offender for about 11 years. Adam also explained that he had been in legal trouble for a few other minor issues as well.

Adam continued to reiterate that he did not feel that his actions were detrimental to the child in this case, that his actions were somewhat normal, and that he was not sexually attracted to children. Adam concluded his interview by stating the main reason for his sexual activity with a minor: "I guess it just happened."

Bill

Bill is a 64-year-old Caucasian male who was convicted of two counts of sexual abuse of a child under 12. Bill was arrested and convicted for sexually abusing both of his daughters, starting when the oldest was about 9 years old. Bill indicated on the demographic questionnaire that he had two victims total and that he did not consider himself a pedophile now because he was rehabilitated, but that at the time of his convictions he would have considered himself a pedophile. Bill selected that he was most sexually attracted to young girls and adolescent girls. On the PTPS, Bill rated his personality as extraverted but low in the other four traits. Bill described himself as extraverted and funny. He later acknowledged other traits that were consistent with low neuroticism and low conscientiousness, such as by describing how he manipulated and took advantage of his daughters, how he was arrogant in thinking they would never tell on their dad, and how he took steps to continue that manipulation. Bill explained he was only able to realize those aspects of his personality after many years and many efforts to understand himself and come to terms with what he did.

Bill spent 8 years in prison and has since completed a sexual offender's rehabilitation course. Bill now volunteers to help other people get back on their feet after getting out of prison. Bill explained that the reason he wanted to participate in this interview was that he felt like it might do "some good" in helping prevent what he did from happening to other people. Bill expressed remorse and seemed to be sincere in acknowledging how negatively his actions

affected others, calling it a “domino effect.” Bill was able to describe many things he felt contributed to his development of sexual attraction to his daughters, including his own sexual abuse at the hands of his sister for the majority of his developmental years along with severe physical abuse from a stepfather. He also stated that marital dissatisfaction, drugs, and alcohol were contributing factors in the sexual abuse of his daughters. He denied any other criminal convictions.

Charles

Charles is a 61-year-old African American male who was convicted of three counts of sexual abuse with a child under 12. Charles was convicted of one count of rape, one count of sodomy, and one count of enticing a child for immoral purposes. Charles indicated on the demographic questionnaire that he was attracted to adult females and denied having ever been sexually attracted to a minor or ever engaging sexually with a minor. Charles stated he did not commit the crimes he was convicted of. Charles rated his personality on the PTPS as extraverted, open, agreeable, and conscientious and low in neuroticism. Charles stated he did not consider himself a pedophile.

In the interview, Charles verbally explained his perception of his personality traits by stating, “I love to talk, and I love to talk to people. . . . I do get along with most people.” Charles exhibited an extremely disorganized and almost delusional way of thinking regarding his conviction and status as a registered sex offender. Charles described in very vivid detail many of the things that “allegedly” happened and that he pled guilty to involving his 11-year-old niece but then continued to express that he was innocent and that his conviction was a punishment from God for other wrongdoings in life.

Charles explained that he had a college education and served in both the military and as a firefighter before his convictions. He said he was also the pastor of a church when he was arrested and convicted of sexually abusing his niece. Charles denied any other criminal convictions and explained that he felt he was just the opposite of a criminal. Charles often referred to his morality as being rooted in the Bible. He spoke a lot about what is right and what is wrong according to “God’s Word.” Charles spent 3 years in prison and had been out and required to register as a sex offender for 15 years at the time of the interview. Many of his statements expressed a strong denial of the “allegations,” and it seemed that he was convinced that his conviction status was somehow going to change. His reasoning for participating in the interview was unclear. The researcher believes, based on observations from the interview, that Charles enjoyed getting to tell his story again.

Charles expressed that he felt that this situation arose out of many complicated factors. He explained that he was having affairs with multiple women while he was married. One of the women with whom he attempted to have an affair he thought was this child’s mother, but that that affair consisted of him sending naked pictures and suggestive wording to the email address that his niece also had access to.

When asked if he would engage in sexual activity with a minor again if he were guaranteed not to be caught or punished in any way, Charles answered that “It could be legal. Still, my answer is no.” Charles concluded his interview by explaining why he thinks he was convicted of being sexually involved with a minor. He maintained that he never touched his niece, but when asked if she saw the naked pictures of his genitals, he stated, “I think she did.” When redirected to answer the question of why he became sexually involved with a minor, he stated, “Ignorance of the law.” When asked if he wanted to clarify or explain anything further,

Charles stated, “Not really. I don’t. I don’t know what I can even add to this. I mean, I hate it happened to me, but I always say to that, I hate that it happened.” Charles maintains that he pled guilty to three crimes but that he never touched the victim.

David

David is a 67-year-old Caucasian male who was convicted of one count of sexual abuse in the first degree, with the victim being his 6-year-old daughter. David rated his personality on the PTPS as low in extraversion and high in neuroticism. David stated his daughter was his only victim, and he had no other arrests/convictions. David said he did not believe he was a pedophile but verbally described feeling sexual arousal toward his young daughter long before he sexually abused her.

In the interview, David confirmed his personality trait perception verbally by stating, “I’m pretty quiet most of the time. Never have . . . never have really been good around people. Always kind of stayed to myself. Even, even when I was a kid. I was the quiet one, the shy one at school.”

When asked about other convictions, David confirmed he had never been arrested for anything else, stating, “No. No, I ain’t never been in no trouble.” In regard to his conviction of a sex crime involving a minor, he explained he was “convicted of sexual abuse in the first degree, which means sexual activity with a young girl. It was my daughter.” David explained that he spent 6 years in prison and has had no contact with his family since his arrest over 20 years ago.

He went on to explain that he was very lonely and sexually frustrated with his wife after the birth of their daughter and found himself fantasizing about her from a young age. He described his relationship with his wife as tumultuous and said that they were never good for

each other. He also detailed many other broken relationships throughout his life and expressed that to this day he was still very much a loner.

I asked David to refer to the PTPS, where he described himself as introverted and anxious. I asked him if he felt those personality traits played a role in abusing his daughter sexually. He answered this question by expressing the possibility that it was easier for him to become sexually involved with his young daughter because she was there than to have an affair with another woman. This statement was contradicted by his obvious sexual attraction to his daughter and his explanation of struggling to avoid touching her but eventually being overcome by the urges.

When asked about the hypothetical scenario of being able to have sexual activity with a minor again if he was guaranteed not to get caught, he said, “No, no, I don’t think so. Plus, I’m, I’m an old man now. You know? I don’t, I don’t, I don’t think that way anymore.”

Evan

Evan is a 53-year-old male who identified as having multiple ethnic backgrounds. Evan rated his personality as extraverted and agreeable on both statements, with openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism being rated in the neutral area. Evan was convicted of possession of obscene material, otherwise known as child pornography. Evan’s experience was different in that while he is indeed a registered sex offender due to an offense involving a child under the age of 16, his conviction and his self-described experience did not indicate that he has had any sexual activity with a minor. Evan did not feel that he had any “victims.” Evan did not identify as a pedophile. His interview was very brief compared to the others.

Evan denied any drug use or alcohol abuse at the time of his offense. He also denied any sexual abuse in his developmental history. Evan did detail a long criminal history involving

many other types of crimes, even other felony convictions. During the interview, Evan's persona swapped back and forth between cold, short, and almost angry to extremely happy and talkative. When asked about his personality and how he felt it could have contributed to his actions, Evan expressed that he felt like he was too trusting and that people took advantage of him. He acknowledged no correlations between his personality traits and his own actions.

Evan was then asked if there was any part of that experience that was exciting to him, including the thrill or taboo of the experience. Evan's engagement and verbal expression changed during his reply to this question. He seemed to relax and go back to being open and talkative, almost happy. He answered,

I guess. I mean, it was, you know, I didn't want that. That's not what I was looking for. It's not what I expected, but, yeah, I guess it was a little exciting. That excitement went away as soon as I got caught, of course. I wasn't excited about it anymore. But yeah, I guess at the time it was kind of like that feeling of like looking at your Christmas presents early when you're a little kid and not telling your parents, but then the next day when you open your present, you act all surprised, even though you've known. But it's like, them not knowing that you knew . . . that kind of excitement.

He then elaborated on the feelings of excitement, stating,

And I guess the newness of it, I mean, I did, I always kind of had a fetish or a thing for teenage I mean, the younger the better. But not in a, not in a way of like little kids. But I think every man wants a young, new, fresh, beautiful young woman to have sex with. I mean, that's just normal. That's just biology. That's what we want, always have.

Francis

Francis was a 47-year-old Caucasian female who was convicted of one count of sexual abuse of a child under 12. Francis perceived her personality as very low in extraversion and openness, but high in agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. Francis gave a detailed description of her experience of becoming a convicted child molester. Francis did not identify as a pedophile and asked for clarification of what the word meant. I provided her a definition to assist her in understanding the question.

I asked Francis to describe her personality in her own words. She stated, “I’ve always been really quiet. I don’t say a whole lot. I don’t think I’m funny, but I try to be nice to people.” Francis then went on to describe her sexuality as lesbian. She circled this answer on the demographic questionnaire and then explained that answer later in the interview by describing what she referred to as a lifelong history of abuse at the hands of male partners, which led to her choice to only be sexually involved with women at this time. Francis seemed to be very saddened by things that had happened to her and things that she had done to others throughout her life. She was tearful throughout her interview, and much of the conversation centered around her own victimization by others. Francis stated that she spent a little over a year in prison and that it was very hard for her, and she felt ashamed of her status as a registered sex offender.

I redirected Francis to her PTPS, where she described herself as introverted, agreeable, and neurotic—meaning she worried about a lot of things. I asked her if she felt these personality traits contributed to her experience of sexual activity with a minor, and she answered, “I definitely was always the one that just did what other people told me to do. I would have done anything for him. I was always worried if I didn’t, he would leave me.”

Francis denied feeling excited about the taboo of the relationship and denied any sexual gratification from the activity with the minor, but she explained she tried to block out the thoughts of getting in trouble and assumed the child would never tell on them because they “loved her and she loved us.” She also denied any desire to engage with a minor again even if she was guaranteed not to get caught.

When I asked Francis to sum up why she became involved sexually with a minor in a few short words, she replied, “The things you do for love or what you think is love at the time.” Her story of being both a victim of intimate partner violence and a perpetrator of sexual abuse at the same time is consistent with the bulk of research on female sex offenders (West et al., 2011).

George

George is a 63-year-old Caucasian male who was convicted of sexual abuse in the first degree for a situation involving two young males. George described his personality by saying,

I’m pretty easygoing, depending on who I’m around. But most of the time I just stay to myself. Um, I try to just make it through the day. I can go to the store and talk to people, but most of the time I’m pretty quiet.

However, on the PTPS, he indicated that perceived his own personality as extraverted and checked that he disagreed that he wanted to be alone. He was provided with a definition of extraversion, but chose to keep these answers the same.

George spent 4 years in prison and since his parole had been required to register as a sex offender, which was 22 years at the time of the interview. George explained that he had a somewhat lengthy criminal history not involving sexual activity with minors that predated his sexual conviction. He explained that he had been arrested and convicted of assault, possession of marijuana, and driving under the influence. All of those convictions occurred before the sexual

activity with the minors. He explained that he spent a lot of time in and out of jails but never went to prison until the sexual abuse conviction.

George was asked if the victims in this case were the only people he had ever been sexually involved with in which the situation would be considered illegal in any way. He answered that question by explaining that when he was younger, it was “normal” for older guys to date younger girls and that he had probably had sex with girl who would now be considered “too young, but back then it wasn’t a big deal.”

George explained that he was convicted for sexual activity ranging from masturbation to oral sex with his two young nephews. He explained that he was originally charged with several counts of sexual abuse and sodomy but pled guilty to two counts of sexual abuse in the first degree. George denied being a pedophile, even though the age and sex of his victims the and grooming techniques he used are indicative of sexual attraction, arousal, and gratification.

George continued to describe the sexual activity that occurred between him and his nephews, who he estimated were around 7 and 11 at the time. When asked about contributing factors and why he became sexually involved, George expressed that all the men in his life were physically abusive when he was growing up and that he was used to other males knowing he was masturbating due to his many stays in jail.

When asked if he felt his sexual activity with these victims was harmful to them, George was adamant that it was not. George was asked if he felt his personality traits contributed to his sexual activity with these minors. He did not feel there was any connection. He also denied feeling any excitement or thrill regarding the idea of sexual activity with young males; however, he did express excitement regarding having someone other than himself to bring him to orgasm but denied that it had to do with the victims specifically.

Henry

Henry is a 43-year-old Caucasian male who was convicted of one count of rape in the second degree. He described his sexuality as straight. He rated his personality on the PTPS as extraverted, open, and agreeable. He described his personality by saying, "I'm real outgoing, real talkative, funny people person. Always been kind of the life of the party, no matter where we went or what we were doing growing up, I was pretty popular." Henry did not consider himself a pedophile.

Henry denied having been arrested for anything other than the sexual offense that led to his registration as a convicted child molester. Henry explained that he was convicted of second-degree rape because when he was out of high school, his 15-year-old girlfriend became pregnant. He expressed anger and blame toward her parents and their religious views for his conviction.

Henry first stated this girl was the only person he had ever been involved sexually with that would be considered illegal in any way. However, he then went on to say,

I guess if you get down to it, yes, there's probably other people that I had sex with in high school after I was 18 that would be considered illegal, but shouldn't be illegal and was consensual. Just normal high school sex. So, I mean, I guess that's a yes and no question.

I asked Henry about any contributing factors to his sexual involvement with a minor, and he denied any sexual or physical abuse in childhood. He continued to state that the only real contributing factors were that he and his victim were in a relationship and that her parents were embarrassed and upset by the pregnancy. Henry was able to draw the conclusion that his personality affected his sex life due to his friendliness and openness to new experiences, including sexual experiences.

Henry expressed that the last two decades of his life have been extremely hard for him due to his status as a registered sex offender for something that he feels was “normal” behavior. He also expressed many emotions such as anger, regret, and sadness at never having a chance to be involved with his son.

Results

Theme Development

This section describes the results from the data analysis processes explained in this study. The results are organized into themes and subthemes. The themes are related to the research questions and were developed from pertinent and outstanding statements that arose throughout the interviews. The subthemes provide a more detailed expression of the participants’ experiences.

Theme 1: Personality Perception

The participants rated their perception of their own personality. Definitions were provided to those who had questions about the meanings of words. Most participants expressed that they felt their personality traits played very little role in their experience of committing sex crimes involving children. A few participants felt their personality influenced their sexual involvement with a minor in different ways. For example, Adam expressed that his extraversion allowed him to befriend and be sexually involved with plenty of people, with no other people being underage to his knowledge. When asked about the thrill of the taboo aspect of the relationship with the minor in his case, Adam stated, “I mean, I guess everybody kind of gets a thrill out of, like, sneaking in a girl’s window or something. I mean, everybody does that shit, you know?” Upon discussion through the interviews, however, it was evident that most participants lack insight into their own personality traits that are linked to things like

manipulation, conscientiousness (or lack thereof), lack of concern for others, lack of empathy, impulse control, etc. It should be noted that the nature of this phenomenological study involving participants who had to contact the researcher in order to take part in the study makes it more likely that the participants' personalities are more extraverted, agreeable, and open; however, some of the participants described personality traits, attitudes, and experiences that were quite contradictory to this. For example, one participant stated his personality allowed him to be tricked into becoming a registered sex offender. Referring to his affairs with adult women, Charles said,

But it was exciting, you know, when you meet in a park or we meet here and we'll meet there, we might meet at their house, you know, and they're just, the thrill of it you know, their husband not being there. You know, these are several different women around the same time.

However, he denied feeling that way toward his minor victim and denied being guilty of the crimes to which he pled guilty to.

Subtheme 1.1: Extraversion. Extraversion is the personality trait associated with enjoying being around other people and being the center of attention. Six out of eight participants rated themselves as extraverted to some degree. Two rated themselves as more introverted. Both of the participants who self-identified as pedophilic at the time of offense perceived themselves as extraverted. The only female participant viewed herself as introverted. None of the participants were neutral regarding this trait perception; therefore, this was the most easily discussed personality trait. One example of the participants' verbal explanations of extraversion is Adam's statement that "I'm pretty chill, I guess, like pretty friendly. I mean, some of my friends think I'm funny. I like to be around people." Another participant, Charles, stated, "I'm

most time I am quiet, but I do like conversing with other people a lot. I love people and I just think God didn't put us here to be alone and not speak to others." Other participants related their extraversion to including others in their daily lives. For example, Bill identified himself as an "equal opportunity jokester."

Subtheme 1.2: Openness. Openness to new experiences refers to one's willingness to try new things, think outside the box, and be open to other's perceptions. The participants' perception of their openness to new experiences varied. Four participants perceived themselves as open to new experiences to some degree, one was neutral, and three perceived themselves as not open to new experiences. Some examples of the participants' descriptions of their openness include Francis's statement about her "kinky sex life" and Henry's account that he had always been open to trying anything once:

I would definitely say that my personality had something to do with it. I mean, like I've told you, I was always and still am a very sexual person. So I definitely feel like my personality being the outgoing kind of party guy, you know, like I said, I was popular. Um, those kind of things definitely were part of my sex life too.

Subtheme 1.3: Agreeableness. Agreeableness is associated with a warm and easygoing personality and the ability to get along well with others. This personality trait was perceived by four of the participants, with one being neutral and three feeling they did not get along well with others as shown by answers on the PTPS. However, when questioned verbally, all participants expressed that they enjoyed getting along well with others and made some sort of positive statement regarding this personality trait, which could indicate a lack of insight or merely a narrow view of agreeableness as a personality trait. Only two participants agreed with the statement "I tend to do what I want, even if it bothers other people." This was surprising to the

researcher given the nature of the discussion. There was one participant in particular who marked and expressed that he felt he was agreeable but was very confrontational and angry during the interview that he volunteered for. Evan described his personality by saying,

I'm pretty outgoing. I've always gotten along with everybody really well. Always kind of the guy that cut up and joked around with everybody. I think I'm funny sometimes.

Maybe other people don't think I'm as funny, but I do.

He then went on to describe living with his mother and only having social interaction online. He became angry and agitated when asked questions about his past, specifically regarding any accountability for his actions. The tone of his verbal and nonverbal expressions changed frequently throughout the interview, which was somewhat confusing.

Subtheme 1.4: Conscientiousness. Conscientiousness is often explained as paying attention to details, a desire to things in an orderly manner, and rule-following. Two of the participants felt they were high in this personality trait while one was neutral and the other five were low in their perception of conscientiousness. While two participants rated themselves as conscientious, the responses to the inverted question revealed that only one participant had matching answers to the corresponding statements on the PTPS that would be consistent with having a higher level of conscientiousness. This personality trait creates perhaps the most interesting discussion regarding its meaning and the topic of the study. While only one or two participants marked answers consistent with conscientiousness on the PTPS, only one participant who purposefully expressed his blatant disregard for other people, rules, laws, social norms, etc. All of the other participants seemed to deflect from questions or prompts that would require an answer that corresponds with very low levels of conscientiousness. For example, most participants had varied and unusual reasons for why they became a convicted sex offender, with

only one person even coming close to stating that he or she chose his or her own gratification at the expense of other human beings repeatedly. It should also be noted that none of the participants expressed a desire to stop their illegal behavior before getting caught and suffering legal repercussions.

Subtheme 1.5: Neuroticism. Neuroticism is explained as a predisposition toward anxiety, worrying, or a pessimistic expectation of outcome. Three participants rated themselves as high in neuroticism. The overall results for neuroticism were spread out fairly evenly over the PTPS. The only participant who marked *strongly agree* in response to the direct statement and *strongly disagree* in response to the inverted statement on the PTPS was the female participant, showing a more consistent perception of neuroticism than the other participants. This participant stated that she worried a lot and had suffered from anxiety disorders throughout her life.

Theme 2: Early Experiences

Regarding early formative experiences, the two most common themes among all participants were physical abuse and sexual abuse. Four of the participants reported physical abuse in childhood, and four participants reported sexual abuse in childhood. This finding is relevant to this study due to the overwhelming evidence that early childhood trauma influences the development of personality traits, disorders, and attachment styles (Garofalo & Bogaerts, 2019; Thomas et al., 2013). It should be noted that both of the male participants who expressed pedophilic interest at the time of their offense experienced abuse from a young age. All three participants who the researcher felt made statements that are consistent with a diagnosis of pedophilic disorder reported childhood abuse, with two of these participants reporting both early physical and sexual abuse and one participant reporting physical abuse only.

The only female participant, Francis, reported severe sexual and physical abuse from an early age up until the time of her offense, which is consistent with previous research on female offenders (Aydin, 2019; ten Bensele et al., 2019). Francis explained her experiences as a victim of abuse:

I've been raped many times. I've been involved with things that were very illegal and very bad many times. But now are you asking if I did those things? No, I haven't. But I feel like I have been many times and nothing ever happened to them.

I asked her to clarify that statement and she said, "Well, none of the people that ever hurt me ever went to jail, and nobody ever worried about me. Nobody ever helped me."

Subtheme 2.1: Physical abuse in childhood. Many adverse childhood experiences are correlated with poor mental, social, and physical outcomes later in life. Specifically, physical abuse in childhood is correlated with a higher risk for developing mental health and personality disorders, as well as the commission of crimes against another person, especially in males (Petruccelli et al., 2019). The development of cluster B personality disorders is correlated with previous childhood trauma and lack of concern for or the violation of others' well-being later in life (Shiner, 2009; van Gelder & de Vries, 2012). Several of the participants described extremely physically abusive childhoods, and several of them exhibited markers of cluster B personality disorders through their self-described adult behavior and during the interview process as observed by the researcher.

Bill described his childhood physical abuse at the hands of his stepfather by saying, He'd beat the hell out of me. He was 6'4", 380 pounds, wore 14 triple E cowboy boots. You know how I know? Because you used to kick me out of the house. Literally through the kitchen door, through the back, mudroom.

Bill did not exhibit evidence of a personality disorder but did explain he had struggled with other mental health and substance use disorders throughout his life. Other participants such as David, Francis, and George all recounted experiences of physical abuse in childhood at the hands of one or more family members.

Subtheme 2.2: Sexual abuse in childhood. Sexual abuse in childhood is affiliated with poor long-term health outcomes, specifically mental health disorders and substance use disorders (Petrucci et al., 2019). In pedophilic offenders, the rate of sexual abuse in childhood is much higher than the rate of sexual abuse in nonpedophilic child molesters (Drury et al., 2019). It should be noted that several of the participants described early sexual abuse in their interview, but some stated they did not view it as sexual abuse until much later in life. One participant expressed that he did not realize he experienced sexual abuse in childhood because that was something that was not discussed when he was growing up.

Regarding his own CSA, Bill, who self-disclosed sexual attraction to young children, explained he felt his sexual activity with his sister contributed to that attraction:

She had small breasts, so I think that probably played a part in what the adolescence was, the attraction of, you know, to the smaller breasts, petite, you know. I mean, I have dated women that were petite and, you know, small, and it was great. But I just you know, I think that's probably kind of sums it up right there.

For some of the participants, the experience of being a victim of sexual abuse was not recognized until even after they had offended against others. For example, David said,

I guess if you're asking about the first sexual experience I had, it, it would have been with with my mother when I was little. But I didn't know that until—until I was older.

. . . “She would touch me and and do things to me that she wasn't supposed to as far back

as, as I can remember. And I, I just grew up thinking that was normal. And I didn't, I didn't understand what that meant.”

He elaborated,

We did everything. Everything you could do together, we did growing up. And it lasted until I was 14 or 15 when I was able to . . . I just moved out and lived with some other people and started working, dropped out of school.

One participant explained he never considered his sexual encounter with a much older neighbor when he was 6 years old as sexual abuse until the interview. Charles described being sexually abused at the age of 6 by a neighbor in exchange for cookies that he never received. He stated,

You know, I mean, I can remember a time just as we talk now, when I was a little kid, there was a lady next door. . . . But anyway, we went upstairs, and, and she said, “Hey, get on top of me.” And I'm like, “Where my cookies?” You know, that's the whole thing I was focused on. Let's just say I did lay on top of her and she the one. Yeah she did. She started moving anyway so she never did give me the cookie.

The female participant, Francis, was tearful when she contemplated if her own CSA was a reason for her perpetration of sexual abuse in adulthood; she stated, “Was I sexually abused as a child? Absolutely. By many people, including my own family.”

Theme 3: Attitudes

The participants were asked to describe their attitudes or their feelings regarding the victims in their cases. There were three common themes that arose from the responses: remorse, anger, and a lack of response.

Subtheme 3.1: Remorse. Two out of the eight participants reported feeling extremely remorseful, sad, sorry, or guilty toward the victims in their cases. They were able to express empathy and concern for the well-being of their victims after the abuse. Both of these participants seemed to have insight into their own personalities as well. Their perceptions were consistent with statements they made and observations made by the researcher. Both participants who expressed remorse rated their personalities consistently among the direct and inverted statements on the PTPS, thus following the typical order of understanding oneself first before being able to understand others. For example, Bill illustrated remorse by explaining,

I love my kids. I would love to be with my kids, but I can't. But I'm not angry at them because they didn't do anything wrong. I was at fault. And see, that's what helped me deal with a lot of this is me admitting.

The other participant who expressed remorse was Francis, who also had a consistent personality perception on the direct and indirect statements on the PTPS. She described her feelings toward the victim in her case by saying, "If anything I feel sorry for her. I don't feel anything but sad for her."

Subtheme 3.2: Anger. Four out of eight participants expressed anger at someone else regarding their conviction and registration as a sex offender. Some of the participants expressed anger or blame at the child, the child's parents, or, in one case, the person who sold him child pornography. These participants shared a common response to the question of harm toward the victim. All four participants who expressed anger were adamant that their actions were not harmful to the victim. For example, Adam expressed most of the anger regarding his conviction at the victim (for not telling him her true age) and at her parents, explaining that he did not cause any harm to the child, but rather her parents caused them both distress. He stated,

I mean, no, I didn't hurt her. If anything, her parents hurt her and then, like, man, we had to break up. I went to jail. We could never see each other again. And after she talked to the police and her parents, like, I don't know what happened to her, but I mean, I'm sure she's probably mad at her parents for that and stuff because, I mean, she knew what she was doing.

Another participant, Evan, said that he was angry at the man who sold him the child pornography. He said,

I mean, if anything, I feel mad at the guy that sold me the package because he didn't tell me that there was, there was little kids in there. I had no idea I was going to get busted for it, you know?

Subtheme 3.3: Lack of response/empathy. There were three participants who had little to no emotional response when asked how they felt toward the victims in their cases. These participants appeared to have no insight into or ability to understand the consequences of their actions in any way that did not relate directly to their personal consequences. All three of these participants seemed to express no emotional response toward their victims because they all argued that the children in their cases were not victimized, thus eliminating the need for an emotional response. One participant explained that he blocked that part of his life out and tried not to think about it. Henry stated that if his daughter had never been in trouble at school and if people would not have asked questions, then she would have never known what happened, thus eliminating any harm. When asked about his attitude or feelings toward his daughter now, he appeared to not have an immediate answer, so I prompted him by asking him if he felt sad, bitter, angry, or remorseful. He replied,

No, I mean, none of that at all. I mean, I don't. I mean, honestly, I try, I try to block it out. I try not to think about it because I don't you know, I don't have anything to do with any of them. You know, they moved off eventually and I don't I don't know anything about them. It's like, you know, from the day I was arrested until now. They're not a part of my life anymore.

He appeared to be emotionally detached from the situation. While Henry attempted to forget what he did, George deflected and blamed the victim for the sexual activity. When asked how he felt about his victims, George stated,

I think it was just their curiosity. And I think I felt like I was just kind of teaching them how things go. Now, it did end up going farther than that. But I mean, that was their idea. I just kind of thought he, I thought he was gay and just wanted to practice or whatever. And I just let him.

He went on to explain that he felt that because the young boys pursued him, they were not victimized, but rather that one of his nephews "wasn't right in the head or something." Ironically, George continued his denial of responsibility by saying this about his 11-year-old nephew:

So he kind of spun it that he wanted me to teach him things and he was curious and things like that. So I guess I feel kind of like he kind of tricked me or he kind of, you know, made it out to be something that it wasn't. But I feel bad for the little one, I guess. I don't—I don't know. Ain't no telling what's happened to him after. I mean, I can't imagine what it'd be like to be raped by your brother.

He then continued to explain, in very colorful language, that he would not turn down the opportunity to receive oral sex from anyone. Finally, although Evan demonstrated feeling angry and "set up" in his criminal offenses, when asked how he felt about the victims in his case he

stated, “I don’t feel anything. But as far as the kids...No, I don’t. I don’t feel anything. I don’t know how I would. Like I said, I don’t even know who they are.”

Theme 4: Justifications

Subtheme 4.1: Sexual Attraction (Pedophilic Interest). Many readers may find it easy to assume that any adult who engages in sexual activity with a minor is sexually attracted to them. However, this is far from the majority (Thomas et al., 2013). There were two participants who stated they were sexually aroused by their young victims at the time of their offense: Bill, who stated the sexual activity with his sister “basically just started my attraction to adolescents” and that he found having his young daughters laying in his lap arousing; and David, who stated, “I found myself attracted to her and thinking about her before I ever touched her in a way that was inappropriate. You understand? I mean, I, I guess I just lost control of it.” There was one participant who did not state his sexual arousal directly, but his descriptions of his actions and responses to other questions left little room for doubt that he was sexually attracted to young males. Overall, three participants provided enough information to have met criteria for pedophilic disorder in adulthood.

Subtheme 4.2: Denial. Four participants expressed that they felt they should not be convicted sex offenders. Two of these participants felt the sexual activity with a minor was a consensual relationship, and two participants made statements asserting their innocence or lack of intent to engage in sexual activity involving children. For example, both Adam and Henry felt their convictions were unfair due to the child in the case being “willing” or “knowing what she was doing.”

Both participants who described themselves as innocent (or not having engaged sexually) used words or phrases that indicated they accidentally or mistakenly engaged in illegal sexually

motivated activity involving young children. One participant, Charles, seemed to be almost stuck in a preconviction mindset, as evidenced by his plans to obtain a lawyer, see the evidence, file an appeal, etc. He also went as far as to say he hoped the victim in his case felt guilty one day and cleared his name. He stated, "I'm just confused, I guess you could say. And what I've been doing is praying and hoping that one day, someday, that she would feel guilty and come out and tell the truth." When I asked Charles if he considered himself a pedophile, he stated, "No, ma'am, I don't." When asked why and what that word meant to him, Charles answered, "Well, because as we spoke earlier, but I never did do what I was charged with."

The other participant who denied having any victims and that he should have been convicted was Evan. When asked if he thought his involvement with these sexual images of children was harmful to the victims in any way, Evan became frustrated, almost angry, and stated,

No. How could that be harmful? I'm just some old guy in Alabama that accidentally bought these pictures. How could that be harmful to anyone? I don't even know who, I don't even know who the kids were in those pictures. So, no. I don't know who took them and I don't know who was in them, but it wasn't me. So no, it wasn't harmful at all.

Both of these participants expressed denial by repeatedly saying things like they did not know or touch the victims and could therefore not be responsible. Denial, both categorical and minimization, is a common response in convicted sex offenders. Research shows that denial serves multiple purposes even postconviction such as to minimize internal and external negative consequences such as shame and stigma (Ware et al., 2020).

Subtheme 4.3: Blame-shifting. All eight participants directed some, if not all, of the blame at other people. For example, even the two participants who stated they were sexually

attracted to the children they abused in part blamed their adult female partner due to a lack of sex or lack of fulfillment in their adult relationships and stated that alcohol and/or drugs were partly responsible. For example, David expressed that after he and his wife had their baby, she “no longer had time for him.” Bill stated he and his wife were “on the rocks” and were not having enough sex. George blamed his sexual activity with his nephews on lack of sex due to his house being crowded, saying,

I mean, it wasn't a lot of sex going on between me and my lady friend at this time because there was somebody always in the house. I mean, we only had one bathroom. You know, we only had only had one real bedroom and there was always somebody in there.

Charles expressed frustration that his wife at the time would not perform the sexual acts that he wanted. This low frustration tolerance as a justification for the sexual abuse of children has been found in prior research with convicted child molesters (Ciardha & Ward, 2013). The two participants who expressed remorse and seemed to accept their actions and consequences and felt their status as a sex offender was appropriate still placed some of the blame on other people for their sexual activity with minors. For example, Francis blamed her boyfriend for starting it and pressuring her to participate. All eight participants made at least one statement that indicated someone else, whether the victim or a third party, was in some way to blame. The two participants with the oldest victims (14 and 15) both blamed the victims' parents for pressing charges and expressed their perception of their relationship with the victim as normal, healthy, and consensual, although both relationships had an age gap of 4 or more years between victim and perpetrator.

Three participants made statements that directly blamed the victims in their cases for the sexual activity. George stated,

Hell, I think there was something going on with that oldest boy the whole time. I mean, he was the one that was curious. He was the one that kind of approached me and I thought I was just, you know, being a male influence and teaching them kind of how things work. And hell, he turned around and raped his little brother. I think there was something going on with him, but I don't think I mean, I didn't ever do anything to them. I didn't touch them. I didn't rape them. I didn't have anal sex or anything like that with them. You know, I'm not gay, but I think he was. And I think that oldest one, I think there was something, like I said, something going on with him the whole time because he turned around and hurt his little brother.

David responded similarly when asked if he felt the sexual abuse was harmful to his daughter in any way:

No, I mean, I mean, it was harmful in the fact that, you know, she, she was hyper and acting out at school and that's how that's how this all came out. But I don't think that that had anything to do with...I don't think that had anything to do with me. I think that's just how it all came out, you know?

Henry also expressed blame toward the victim in his case, as well as her parents. He stated,

No, I don't have any negative feelings towards her. I certainly don't feel like she was a victim. I mean, she wasn't a victim. Um, I'm much more angry, mad, whatever now, because I didn't get to see my son. I didn't get that. I don't have a relationship with my son. She had all the rights to him. I mean, he's an adult now, and I've never been allowed to know him.

This type of cognitive distortion (blame-shifting) is consistent with previous research regarding the perpetration of CSA (Ciardha & Ward, 2013).

Subtheme 4.4: Persecution. Two of the participants expressed feeling persecuted regarding their convictions. One participant, Charles, explained he felt his conviction was a punishment from God for other wrongdoing while simultaneously using the word “entrapment” regarding the victim in his case. He stated that he felt he was punished by God for having affairs in his marriage and that the punishment came in the form of being wrongfully accused and pleading guilty to sexual activity with a child. He said,

And at that same time and I hate to say that God did this, but there was several different women at that time, married, you know, that I was seeing. And, you know, and it just that is what got me in trouble right there, I think.

Another participant stated he felt like he trusted people too much and that he was “set up” by other people. Evan stated,

You know, but they kind of, I feel like maybe they kind of set me up, maybe they knew that I was going to get caught or something. Because, I mean, it wasn't long at all after I downloaded that package, after I paid for it or whatever, that they showed up to my mom's house and took all my stuff and arrested me and charged me with these crimes. So, I mean, if anything, I feel like my personality made me too nice to people, too trusting and too kind of naive, I guess.

He further expressed feeling victimized and not responsible for being in possession of these obscene images. Both of the participants who expressed feeling persecuted also denied having any direct victims in their cases, even after being convicted of sexual offenses involving minors.

Subtheme 4.5: Alcohol/Drugs. The use of psychoactive substances was the second most common justification that arose for the participants' sexual abuse of children. Four out of the eight participants stated at the time of their offense that they were using alcohol, drugs, or both. Two of the participants felt they would have not acted on the thoughts of sexually abusing their victims if it were not for the use of alcohol and/or drugs. Two other participants felt their use of alcohol and other recreational drugs was normal and part of life, as was the sexual relationship with the minors with whom they engaged. Regarding the sexual activity with his young daughter, David said, "I was drinking a lot and I think I probably wouldn't have ever touched her if I if I hadn't have been drinking, but I didn't try to stop drinking or anything either." Bill also explained that he had been injured and was taking a lot of pain medication and drinking a lot of whiskey at that time in his life. He also felt that the drugs and alcohol were a factor in his offense.

Theme 5: Victim Counts

Subtheme 5.1: Same as Number of Victims in Convictions. Four participants stated that the only minors with whom they had ever engaged sexually were the victims in their convictions. All of these participants described the experience that led to their conviction as one long and ongoing relationship. Three of these four participants stated the relationship was with a family member. One participant who stated he had no other victims considered the victim in his case his girlfriend. The three participants who perceived their personalities as introverted and higher in neuroticism were part of this group.

Subtheme 5.2: Different Than Number of Victims in Convictions. Four participants reported that the number of victims was different than the victims listed in their convictions. Two participants stated they felt they had no victims because they denied any sexual activity with a

minor. Two participants stated they had engaged with other minors in multiple ways and were unsure of the total number. One participant stated that while he had had sex with other underage people, those acts should not be considered illegal since they were consensual. All four of these participants perceived their personalities as extraverted. Three of these four participants expressed that they were completely unconcerned with the well-being of their victims following their abuse and took little to no personal accountability for their actions.

Subtheme 5.3: Response to Hypothetical Opportunity. While this subtheme relates to a question that was clearly hypothetical, it was important to me as the researcher to understand if the desire to engage in sexual activity was still present in convicted child molesters when the potential for consequences was eliminated. I had trouble getting participants to answer this question in a hypothetical manner. Those who did mostly expressed that the desire for sex with young (underage) people was present. For example, Adam who was 38 at the time of the interview, stated,

I mean, guaranteed not to get caught, not to get in trouble? No negative consequences whatsoever. . . . I mean, yeah. I mean, I don't know. I mean, not like a little kid, but like 15-, 16-year-old, I mean. Yeah, I think. I think everybody would.

Bill's answer was mixed and was based on his perception of his rehabilitation. He answered that 20 years ago he would have said yes, but that now his answer is no. He explained, "Before that 2000. No repercussions. I probably would have done it. But now, I don't think so. Because like I said, from there to here, I would have been thinking about what happens to them."

Those who said no overwhelmingly said no due to fear of consequences, which is a deflection from a direct answer. For example, several participants answered the question by saying something to the effect of not wanting to go back to prison. One participant, Evan, who

stated very coldly, “A 15’s below the age of consent. So no, but a 16, yeah, like I said, it’s kind of every man’s dream.” Another participant, George, stated,

No, I would not engage sexually in any way with a minor again, in any way. Because I do not want to go back to prison. If I, if I went back to prison, if I did something like that again I would go to prison for the rest of my life. So, no, I would not.

George was reminded that the question was hypothetical and included the guarantee of not getting caught. He stated, “There ain’t no such thing. I mean, somebody’s going to tell or something’s going to come out at some point.” He never answered the question directly. This deflections is consistent with prior research regarding sexual interest and inhibitory factors (fear of getting caught) regarding the perpetration of CSA (Gerwinn et al., 2018; Wurtele et al., 2014).

Responses to Research Questions

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked, “How do child molesters perceive their own personality?” The participants in this study generally perceive their own personalities as extraverted, agreeable and open, but lower in conscientiousness and neuroticism. There were only two participants who felt they were introverted (or low in extraversion).

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked, “In what way does the offender feel that his or her personality influenced the way in which he or she selected and abused his or her victim?” The general consensus from the perspective of the participants was that their personality traits did not influence their experience of sexually abusing a child. One participant was able to draw logical conclusions about aspects of his personality that allowed him to “take advantage” or his

daughters, but most of the other participants felt that their personality did not influence their direct actions but rather allowed them to be taken advantage of.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked, “How do personality traits contribute to the number of victims abused?” There appears to be a correlation from the participants in this study with extraverted, friendly, agreeable, and talkative personalities and a higher number of minor victims. Some of the participants were able to express how their personality traits contributed to their ability to offend against one or more minors, while some participants were unable to draw any correlations. The detailed answers to the research questions are presented with supporting research in Chapter Five.

Summary

This chapter included an explanation of this study’s data collection and analysis results, with a focus on the main reason for phenomenological qualitative research: the participants’ experiences. This chapter included a detailed description of each participant and then used statements from the interviews to explain the development of the themes and subthemes. The chapter presented the demographics of the participants as well as a detailed description of themes and subthemes that arose from the interviews. The themes included: the participants’ perceptions of their own personality; early formative experiences the participants’ felt were contributing factors to becoming a convicted child molester; attitudes toward the victims of their crimes; the justifications the participants used to explain why they committed these crimes; and total victim counts as compared to the number of victims in the convictions, including their responses to the opportunity for hypothetical recidivism. Finally, the chapter concluded with brief responses to the research questions set forth in the study.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Overview

This chapter provides a review of the purpose of this phenomenological study as well as the findings from the research process and a discussion of the implications of those findings. This chapter also discusses the delimitations and limitations of the study and research process. Finally, recommendations for future research will be presented in closing.

Summary of Findings

Over the course of the eight interviews, five major themes arose from the participants' descriptions of their experiences. Those themes were (1) their perception of their own personality traits, including insight and lack thereof; (2) their attitudes and feelings towards their victims; (3) the justifications used for the sexual abuse of a child or children; (4) the relationship between personality traits and the number of children abused; and (5) total victim counts and verbalized desire for future recidivism. Each theme was developed to target one or more of the research questions. The thematic findings and conclusions are discussed using current research as support and analysis and insight from the researcher as a clinical professional. This study sought to answer the following research questions.

Research Question 1

In regard to Research Question 1, "How do child molesters perceive their personality?" the researched noted that throughout the interviews, there appeared to be some degree of dissonance between how the participants perceived their personalities, how they answered the PTPS, and their attitudes and behaviors. In the interviews, the participants' verbal responses when asked about their personality were overwhelmingly positive. Most participants stated they were "nice," "friendly," "talkative," "easygoing," "funny," etc. While these perceptions are

seemingly accurate based on observations made by the researcher, they are also incomplete.

There was only one participant who was able to connect the negative aspects of his personality such as manipulateness, lack of concern for others, and disregard for rules or laws with his sexual activity with minors.

The researcher feels that these inconsistencies are due to several factors including lack of knowledge of personality traits in the interviewed population, a lack of insight and personal accountability, and the natural desire of people to make a good first impression. All personality traits have some a balance of positive and negative effects on behavior and interactions with others, but the negative was underwhelmingly identified and discussed. The participants marked their personality traits on the PTPS (see Appendix C) and then were asked to verbally describe their personalities. Most participants only described positive personality aspects. The most easily described personality trait was extraversion, as it was the only trait for which there were no neutral answers.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked, “In what way does the offender feel that his or her personality influenced the way in which he or she selected and abused his or her victim?” Most participants felt their personality traits had little to no influence on the commission of sex crimes against children or other crimes for those to whom that statement is applicable. This finding points to a lack of knowledge about the influence of personality on behavior. It is also interesting to note that when participants were prompted further, the most common answers to this question pointed to the offenders feeling that their personality allowed them to be taken advantage of. For example, the few participants in this study who were able to draw a connection between their personality traits and their behavior described themselves in ways such as “being too nice” or

“being friendly and popular” or “just wanting to be loved.” Only one participant was really able to describe the personality traits that are needed to willingly sexually abuse a child: utter neglect of the well-being of others in the attempt to gain personal satisfaction, manipulateness, and a complete disregard for the laws or social norms of expected behavior. None of the participants described their sexual encounters as impulsive, but rather all participants discussed a long-term or ongoing situation in which at some point he or she made a choice to engage sexually with a minor while knowing that the behavior was illegal, inappropriate, or wrong to some degree. This type of thinking points to the presence of one or more cognitive distortions, and even to the possibility of one or more personality disorders.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked, “How do personality traits contribute to the number of victims abused?” There were some similarities in the personality traits of the participants who reported having engaged with more than one minor in the past. The participants in this study who had the highest number of victims all perceived their personality as high in extraversion and agreeableness, while neutral or low in openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. The personality traits of extraversion and agreeableness seem to be consistent with the ability to bond with different types of people, including children with the intention of sexual activity. The personality trait of openness to new experiences was relayed by the participants in parts of the interviews in which they were asked about their experiences. Several people described an openness to new or exciting sexual activities, not including the three participants with the highest victim counts. While previous research shows that pedophilic offenders are mostly not open to new sexual experiences, the majority of participants in this study more easily fit into the category of opportunistic child molesters. Opportunistic child molesters often display personality traits

such as extraversion and openness and a tendency toward hedonistic behavior (Taufik, et al., 2019). The participants who described themselves as introverted stated they each had one victim total. The number of victims could also be correlated with conscientiousness. Low levels of conscientiousness play a role in the person's willingness to engage sexually with a minor. Conscientiousness is associated with wanting to do things the right way, follow rules, and behave in an orderly fashion. The participants who reported having the highest numbers of victims made many other statements that point to a lack of conscientiousness.

It should also be noted that the participants in this study who had more than one victim had more education as a group than did the group with one victim each. The group with multiple victims included participants who at least finished high school, with three having some college or a college degree, according to the demographic questionnaire. The group of participants with one victim each consisted of participants who did not finish high school and one person who did finish high school but had no college education. This finding is contradictory to research that shows that educational attainment/academic success has been linked to personality traits that are negatively correlated with criminal behavior (Jahnke et al., 2019). However, the participants with more educational attainment expressed a great deal of other cognitive and social skills including manipulation, trickery, advanced technology abilities, etc. These types of crimes often involve a certain level of cunning, manipulation, and planning that is the opposite of lack of intelligence but does not necessarily require any formal education.

Discussion

This study sought to present corroborative information as well as to discover any conflicting information from previous studies. This study also attempted to identify any hidden traits or warning signs that could be used as markers in the prediction and prevention of CSA.

This study's findings were mostly consistent with previous research on sex offenders with child victims on the topics of personality traits and their relationship to crime, the correlation of different types of childhood trauma with different outcomes in adulthood, pedophilia as a sexual identity that develops in childhood but ceases to evolve alongside physical and cognitive development, sexual attraction as a leading risk factor for the sexual abuse of children, and a distinct difference in the motivations and reactions to child sexual abuse behavior between pedophilic and nonpedophilic child molesters.

Discussion Related to Empirical Framework

This study did advance these areas of interest by describing these experiences from the abuser's point of view and being unable to identify a particular warning sign, other than the use of manipulation and unsupervised access to minors. While that may seem counterproductive, this finding can be used in the field to expand the research and develop prevention methods to include many different avenues of protection and prevention since there is no one pathway to becoming a child molester.

The researcher was able to observe participants' personality traits, identify potential markers of personality disorders in several of the participants, and observe thought processes and behaviors that are common to child molesters according to previous research. One of the most obvious trends was the use of cognitive distortions and dissonance in perceptions. Cognitive distortions such as denial, minimization, and blame are common among many convicted child molesters (Ciardha & Ward, 2013).

Another observation made by the researcher points to sexual attraction and arousal for pedophilic child molesters even through the form of fantasy or dialogue. For example, several participants seemed to enjoy discussing their convictions. Participants often provided an almost

jovial and very detailed description of the sexual abuse of minors and their actions, even if the person was exhibiting some form of denial (total or partial). Some participants expressed that they felt their information did not constitute a major contribution to the study yet continued to talk about their actions involving the sexual abuse of children for long periods of time, with one interview lasting almost three hours. For example, one participant appeared to completely shift in mood and affect when talking about the conviction versus the actual viewing of the pornographic images of children. This is indicative of mental stimulation regarding sexual activity with minors.

Discussion of Findings Related to Theoretical Framework

One major theoretical model that inspired this study was Costa and McCrae's FFM of personality, which includes the traits of extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (Costa et al., 2019). Further the theoretical framework included outlining the ways in which personality traits influence behavior. Personality traits are linked with personality disorders as well as early experiences of child abuse. Those things, the biological aspect of personality traits as well as early formative experiences combined influence the development of personality during development, which therefore influences the behavior and thought process of the person (Becerra-Garcia et al., 2012b).

The other major framework that influenced this study is that sexual activity between an adult and a minor is not only illegal but also socially unacceptable and harmful to the child. The abundance of research on this topic in the last several decades outlines the detrimental long-term effects of CSA on survivors. The presence or absence of pedophilic disorder among child molesters does not change the outcome of the abuse for the victim, but it does change the experience and motivation of the offender. It is also understood that pedophilic disorder develops

much like a personality disorder with the presence of trauma or some other detrimental formative experience in early childhood (Drury et al., 2019). All of these factors are intertwined in a tangled web of psychosocial development. By considering the reason someone engages in sexual activity with a child, their attitudes or justifications regarding the sexual activity with a child, and their risk or motivation for repeat offenses this study was able to draw several correlations founded in prior research regarding personality traits and the experience of sexually abusing a child.

One interesting insight regarding personality traits that can be drawn from the eight participants' interviews is that while there is a marked difference between the sexually motivation offenders and the rest of the participants, one can conclude that none of the sexual abuse would have occurred in these situations, whether it was motivated by pedophilic or nonpedophilic desires, had there not been an opportunity. Therefore, it is important to note that while much of the past research focuses on the differences between pedophilic and nonpedophilic child molesters from a diagnostic perspective, the experiences described by these participants seem to explain the motivation for sexual offending against children as much more comparable to a spectrum than a hard line between the two types of offenders. This can be summarized by saying that not all child molesters are opportunistic child molesters, but all child molesters are opportunistic.

Regarding personality traits, the three participants who the researcher felt met criteria for a diagnosis of pedophilic disorder did not meet the expectations influenced by previous research as a group. An illustration of this can be seen by comparing the common personality traits of pedophilic child molesters found by Jahnke et al. (2019) of low in extraversion and conscientiousness and high in neuroticism to the traits of the participants in this study. Two of

the three participants rated their personalities as extraverted, conscientious, and low in neuroticism. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that the participants in this study had to call the researcher and volunteer themselves to participate, which by nature would appeal to people who are more extraverted, as evidenced by their willingness to call a stranger and participate in a study. Perhaps this could also be explained by the participants' desire to talk about, relive, and tell the story of their sexual activity with the children to a new person with no consequences, which reinforces the idea of the presence of pedophilic desires (Taufik et al., 2019). These ideas are consistent with previous research on different types of sexual offenders (Sigre-Leirós et al., 2015). Whatever the motivation for each participant was, there were no clear personality differences between the pedophilic and nonpedophilic participants.

While there were no significant differences in the personality traits disclosed by the participants in regard to pedophilic or nonpedophilic motivation, there were marked differences in the personality traits in the offenders in regard to their feelings or attitudes toward the victim(s) in their cases. This is where the most evidence of personality differences presented. For example, the participants who showed remorse or guilt or expressed that they felt sorry for or saddened by the damage that they caused their victims were very consistent in their perception of their personality, marking the direct and inverted statements in their respective forms congruently. However, the participants who blamed their victims and or denied that there were victims in their cases were more inconsistent in their perception of their own personality. For example, a participant marked that he perceived himself to be conscientious but also agreed that he did things based on how he felt in the moment without considering other people and then further described actions that clearly eliminated the potential for concern for others' well-being. Another participant had congruent answers regarding conscientiousness on the PTPS but in the

interview described multiple situations in which he disregarded rules, regulations, norms, contracts, covenants, and quite simply—anyone else’s feelings. This incongruence in personality perception and observable behavior is explained by research that points to the presence of personality differences in child molesters when compared to the general public and other offenders. Some research indicates that those who offend against children are able to be empathetic and conscientious in behavior toward others except in specific situations in which they have a specific goal of sexual gratification (Garofalo et al., 2018). There is also some previous research on the role of personality in the acceptance or denial of one’s crimes even postconviction, as was seen in this study (Ware et al., 2020).

Another interesting observation is that there appears to be some relationship between the participant’s personality, the way they responded to the interview questions, and markers of a personality disorder. For example, the participants who justified their behavior by any means other than sexual attraction to the child showed little to no remorse or empathy for the victims. Two of the participants even expressed anger or blame directly toward the victims in their cases. Most of those participants had other convictions not involving sexual activity, including drug- or alcohol-related offenses, theft, and violent crimes. Continuing the theme of personality disorders influencing criminal behavior, the female participant denied any past criminal history but expressed things like a lack of self-identity, recurrent victimization, and intense fears of abandonment. Her affect was labile throughout the interview as well. These factors are consistent with the presence of cluster B personality disorders (Garofalo & Bogaerts, 2019). One participant showed several markers of a possible type A personality disorder by expressing some very odd, delusional, and almost paranoid thoughts regarding his experience of becoming a

convicted sex offender. This description is consistent with previous research on type A personality disorders and child molestation (Kapfhammer, 2017).

In direct response to RQ3, this study found that the three participants who verbalized pedophilic interest or made statements consistent with pedophilic disorder were, as a group, less personality disordered based on the information gathered and observations made throughout the interview process. One of the pedophilic participants had other convictions but little other evidence of a personality disorder, while the other two did not show any flagrant signs of personality disorders of any type. This interesting theme is furthered by the fact that based on self-report on the demographic questionnaire, the three participants who showed pedophilic tendencies had almost twice as many victims combined as the other five participants who did not indicate pedophilic interest. The pedophilic participants all shared the same response of agree to the statement “I prefer to do things the same way” and disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “I am open to new experiences,” which is incredibly consistent with the idea that pedophilic offenders are sometimes called fixated or regressed child molesters for that very reason. So while the overall personality profile of the pedophilic group did not match expectations on other traits, the trait of low openness to new experiences was consistent among this group. That finding is supported by ample previous research (Garofalo et al., 2018; Becerra-García et al., 2013b; Simkins, 2016).

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The findings presented in this study suggest that the theory that personality is formed partly by genetics and partly by early environmental influences and in turn influences behavior is obvious to observe, especially regarding criminal behavior. The participants’ answers

corroborate the ideas that personality is developed from both biological and early environmental factors; that personality traits, once established in the developmental years, are relatively stable; that sexual attraction to children is not normal and any sexual activity between an adult and a child is harmful and detrimental to the child; and that not all child molesters offend out of sexual attraction, but some out of other motivations such as lack of regard for others, convenience, thrill, etc. The other theory that seems to be confirmed by the participants' answers is that different personality traits affect behavior, and different levels of certain personality traits give people a predisposition for mental health and personality disorders, which in turn influence thoughts, behaviors, and cognitions.

Empirical Implications

The most obvious empirical implication gained through this study is the presence of the elements of denial and minimizations after a sexually offense against children, even decades later. The researcher observed some elements of denial or blame-shifting in all of the participants. There also appeared to be a substantial lack of insight and understanding in the participants' perceptions of their own personality traits. It was also observed that several of the participants who endured sexual abuse in their own childhood did not realize this until much later in life, pointing out a lack of knowledge about CSA and its injurious effects in general.

Another intriguing aspect of this study that is associated with the empirical foundations of criminal offending is that none of the participants expressed a desire or a willingness to stop their sexually abusive behavior against the minors in their cases until they experienced legal repercussions. While most of the participants reported knowing the activity was wrong either morally, criminally, or both, none of the participants attempted to stop the behavior on their own. This is consistent with the scientific evidence that long-term criminal behavior is often continued

by the perpetrators until he or she is caught and is justified by either cognitive distortions about the behavior, as expressed by many of the participants, or by a total disregard for the well-being of others with little to no thought of the future consequences. Both of those elements have a correlation with certain personality traits, as discussed in the results section.

Practical Implications

Upon first impression, the researcher felt this study had few practical implications. However, after much reevaluation, the researcher has determined there are some very useful insights to be gained from this research. The research on CSA continues to illuminate the long-term and far-reaching negative effects experienced by the victims and their families. In fact, one participant verbalized this as “a domino effect.” This understanding has recently led not only to a push for the detection and reporting of CSA by anyone interacting with children, but also to the call for more preventative efforts (Levin, 2019). Prevention efforts are focused mainly in two areas: education and screening efforts. Education efforts emphasize educating children to speak out upon the first warning signs, such as by teaching children that adults do not ask kids to keep secrets; Erin’s Law requires public schools to educate children on the topic of sexual abuse. Parents are also educated on ways to talk to their children about topics such as good touch and bad touch. While educational efforts towards children are noble and needed, this method places the responsibility too heavily in the hands of the potential victims. The other avenue of prevention efforts calls for enhanced screening methods for any sort of employment or volunteer work that gives adults access to children. The idea that prevention efforts would have better results and target the most appropriate population if there were enhanced screening measures in place such as personality and scenario-based pre-employment screenings geared toward

detecting maladaptive personality and behavioral patterns is supported by past research efforts on the prevention of CSA as well.

This type of screening is not unheard of, as many employers who hire people to interact with the public or control financial gains already perform these types of pre-employment screenings (Abel et al., 2019). In Alabama, law enforcement officers are required to undergo rigorous psychological testing, often including polygraph testing, to identify any potential warning signs of behavioral patterns that would be risk factors for the safety of the community. Perhaps this method should be adopted by agencies that hire candidates for the care of children. The argument against enhanced pre-employment screening will always be a financial one. However, when one considers the socioeconomic burden the current rates of CSA place on society, that argument could easily be countered (Letourneau et al., 2018).

This study also provided a detailed description of the perpetrators' attitudes long after conviction. This information can be used in the treatment of convicted sex offenders because the participants' perceptions of their experiences and status as a registered sex offender shed light on what types of therapeutic treatments would be most beneficial. For example, a person who expressed remorse might benefit more from radical acceptance than someone who expressed denial or other cognitive distortions, who might benefit more from therapeutic techniques such as dialectical behavior therapy and other cognitive behavioral therapy-derived techniques. Treating the feelings of shame and promoting forgiveness may also be appropriate for those offenders who continuously express denial. Another important extension of the research is that in several of the participants' experiences, had their own childhood trauma been addressed and treated appropriately, it is reasonable to question whether or not pedophilia and/or personality disorders would have been mitigated in the developmental years, as research has shown an increasingly

supported link between sexual victimization in childhood and future offending in adulthood (Becerra-García et al., 2012a; Drury et al., 2019). Like many other mental health challenges, the development of things like sexual deviance and personality disorders due to early traumatic experiences can be better mitigated with early and appropriate treatment programs.

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, is the way in which society breaks the cycles and stigmas of sexual abuse, particularly in families, the treatment that survivors of any sort of abuse are offered, and the way society approaches the mental health treatment of people sexually attracted to children. There is evidence for the improved outcome for survivors of CSA that starts with the way in which the caregiving adults respond to the initial disclosure. Research shows that survivors who disclose and receive familial and judicial support fare far better than those who do not (Elliott et al., 2022). The solution obviously starts in the home; however, CSA is a societal problem from a moral, health, and economic standpoint. Therefore, the efforts to reduce its effects must be large scale in nature. In this study, the majority of the participants reported one or more forms of childhood abuse—most often at the hands of a family member. Similarly, in their adult lives, the majority of the participants perpetrated abuse against a family member, often reaching the level of offense that would qualify as incest. All of the participants in this study reported knowing their abusers and knowing the children they abused, a phenomenon consistent with statistics on CSA (Winters & Jeglic, 2016). However, the question of why adults are willing to go to such great lengths to abuse their own family members, including their own children and others close to them, remains unanswerable, other than the concepts of opportunity and proximity.

Furthermore, previous research has shown that the strongest predictor of child sexual abuse perpetration is sexual attraction to children (Bier et al., 2015). While this element is not

present in the majority of convicted child molesters, it is a starting point. Other research found that up to 4% of the adult population indicated some level of sexual attraction to children in anonymous online surveys (Wurtele et al., 2014). These two facts combined make it imperative that people who recognize any sort of sexual attraction to children in themselves are able to reach out and receive treatment in confidential and unstigmatized ways. A good example of this somewhat radical idea was the German Dunkelfeld Project. This pilot study offered a confidential 1-year treatment program to participants who reported actively engaging in sexual activity with children. The program included mental and behavioral therapies and was found to have significantly reduced the rates of offending by increasing positive personality attributes such as self-regulation, impulse control, and empathy development while reducing distorted cognitions that supported the sexual abuse of children (Klaus et al., 2015). While this approach is radically different than the normal report-investigate-prosecute methodology that is in place (and absolutely justified), it is effective in a different way as evidenced by the fact that undetected offenses are far more common than recidivism in convicted offenders and this project saw a significant decrease in offenses over the 1-year period.

Delimitations and Limitations

The limitations of this study would include a very small sample size, meaning that the findings may not be applicable to the general population of convicted sex offenders. While eight interviews are considered enough for a phenomenological study in order to achieve saturation, it is not the goal of phenomenological research to make broad correlations for nonparticipants (Namey et al., 2016; Zieske, 2020). Other limitations include the distrusting nature of the population being studied and the willingness of people to participate. The recruitment flyer was seen by hundreds of convicted sex offenders in the months in which the study took place, and the

researcher was contacted by only nine participants, eight of whom met the screening criteria. The eight participants that were interviewed in the phenomenological study were very open and honest; the candid conversations did not necessarily capture the truth of the scenarios discussed (as would be important for any legal or other processes), but the detailed description and the honest perception of each person's experience, which is subjective and is the focus of a phenomenological study (Zieske, 2020).

It is understandable that these research findings cannot be applied to the larger population of sex offenders, which is not the goal of qualitative research. However, the detailed descriptions and insight gained from the qualitative approach give much more meaning and room for personal exploration and interpretation than quantitative data. Another limitation of this study is that this study used information from convicted sex offenders who had been released from prison after their conviction(s). While this may not seem like a limitation to those unfamiliar with the legal system and sentencing guidelines for child sexual abuse in Alabama, it is relevant, as one must consider the differences in sentencing guidelines for the severity of crimes involving sexual activity with minors. The participants in this study were paroled after an average length of stay in prison of 3.25 years; therefore, the severity of their crimes, which is determined partly based on the age of the victim at the time, would be less than other types of charges, as most multiple or repeat offenders with children under the age of 12 are sentenced differently. Therefore, the limitation lies in the fact that while this information is incredibly enlightening yet disturbing, this study most likely does not capture the most heinous experiences, as the sample did not include participants who are incarcerated with the most severe forms of punishments for sexual offenses against children.

The delimitations of this qualitative study are that the study sought to include only adults who had been convicted against sex crimes against minors, with their commission and conviction of the crime or crimes occurring after the age of 18 with a victim or victims younger than the age of 16. This was done to exclude other types of sexual offenders who may be required to register as a sex offender but have had no involvement with children, such as violent sexual offenders against other adults. This delimitation was also chosen in an effort to include participants with many life experiences and the ability to express said life experiences in their own words. The study also focused on including and distinguishing between pedophilic and nonpedophilic child molesters in order to corroborate existing research that explains while these two types of offenders may have the same victim population (children), their desires, motivations, and rewards are different.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, I would like to see a study performed as I originally planned for this study. My original plan was for this study to be a quantitative study involving the assessment of personality and personality disorders using instruments such as the NEO-PI-R and the PID-5 and a quantitative sample of convicted sex offenders in the prison system. However, I was unable to perform that study due to COVID-19 restrictions, other social problems in the prison system, and time limitations for the purpose of this dissertation. I do feel that quantitative data differentiating between pedophilic child molesters and nonpedophilic child molesters may offer more insight into the specific personality traits that develop alongside other things like pedophilic disorder and personality disorders.

In regard to research on prevention efforts, I would like to see this study inspire community leaders to educate not only administrators and employers but also families on the

dangers of CSA and the ways in which it could be prevented. Researchers have been attempting to identify behaviors consistent with the process that leads up to CSA, called grooming (Vartapetian & Gillam, 2014) Winters and Jeglic (2016) presented a great argument for community education on grooming behaviors as a prevention effort for CSA.

I would like for this study to inspire research regarding the economic benefits of drastic measures such as the German Dunkelfeld Project (Klaus et al., 2015) in communities as far as reducing the rates of CSA. Research regarding prevention efforts in the forms of treatment and mental health resources available to the survivors of CSA, as well as the families of the survivors of CSA, would also be beneficial. Future research into the treatment options for the offenders, both while incarcerated and after parole, would be useful. This implication for future research is inspired by one of the participants of this study. While his crimes were abhorrent, his vulnerability and his willingness to actively complete several years of treatment is admirable. He was able to identify traits within himself that are dangerous to others and was willing to acknowledge those and refuse to act on them, even though he stated that his desire for young girls will always be there, just like his desire to drink Jack Daniel's. He added the caveat that he has the ability to choose not to partake in either one of them.

Finally, for survivors of CSA, more research is needed on the best treatment practices for long-term healing and understanding. Part of this research effort was indeed inspired by my own journey to try to understand the reasons behind what happened to me in my own childhood. I would like to point out that this rigorous research process did not provide me with the black-and-white answer I was seeking. So for other survivors who choose to tackle topics that are personal to them, I advise them to do so cautiously and with few expectations. The healing journey is not found in research.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experience of becoming a convicted child molester and how things like personality, early formative experiences, and relationships with victims played a role in the offending process. Through an arduous and conscious effort to understand the experience through the eyes of the offenders, this study was able to identify common themes and personality traits that the offenders felt were relevant to their experiences. This study also investigated how those events and personality traits affected the total number of victims and the hypothetical opportunity for repeat offending.

The study was able to describe how certain personality traits such as extraversion and agreeableness make it easier to manipulate children into sexual activity with the false assurance that the offender has control over the situation. The study was also able to describe certain commonalities such as openness to new experiences as negatively correlated with pedophilic interest in these participants. Also, other traits like lack of conscientiousness and higher levels of neuroticism were indicators of observable markers of personality disorders in the participants. The study found that while some people have a realistic grasp on their personality traits, the majority of offenders in this study perceived and described their personality traits in generally positive terms while ignoring the negative aspects of their personalities.

The study also identified common attitudes toward the victims in the cases: remorse, anger, and lack of response. Then the study concentrated on identifying common justifications for becoming a child molester. The justifications that were identified were sexual attraction, denial, blame-shifting, persecution, and the use of alcohol/drugs. The study was able to differentiate personality traits that were more common in those with higher victims counts. Finally, the researcher identified possible prevention efforts based on insight gained from the

interviews as well as discussed implications for future research. The most important implication is the need to rethink the way society and practitioners address and try to prevent CSA. The most obvious observation drawn from this research is the fact that the people who sexually offend against children are so varied and different, so must be the efforts at prevention. Another implication is the recommendation for serious reconsideration of the way the public is educated on sexual offending, particularly regarding public education on what grooming behaviors look like and when to speak up. Also, practical implications included enhancing access to treatment for both victims and offenders and differentiation in treatment for the different types of offenders related to personality traits and disorders.

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Appendix A**Demographic Questionnaire****Date of Birth:** _____ **Current Age:** _____**Sex:** Male Female

For the following demographic questions please select ONLY one answer. Select the answer that is most true for you.

What is your ethnicity?

White/Caucasian

Black/African American

Hispanic/Latino

Asian

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

More than one ethnicity reported

What is the highest level of education you completed?

Did not finish high school

Graduated high school or obtained GED

Some college

Bachelor's degree or higher

How do you describe your sexuality?

Straight

Gay

Lesbian

Bisexual

Unsure

Not sexually attracted to anyone

Are you or have you ever been sexually attracted in adulthood (18 years or older) to young children (at or about under the age of 12)? This does not mean you are sexually engaged with the person, but rather asks about attraction only.

Yes

No

Which type of person are you MOST sexually attracted to (please choose only the group you are MOST attracted to, even if there are several)?

Adult Males

Adult Females

Adolescent Males (12-17 years)

Adolescent Females (12-17 years)

Young Males (under 12 years)

Young Females (under 12 years)

Not sexually attracted to anyone

Have you ever been convicted of any other type of crime other than the sexual offense against a minor referenced in this study?

Yes

No

Please write the total number of people under the age of 16 that you have engaged in sexual activity with since you have been 18 years old and older.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Introduce yourself to me as if we just met, giving me your name, age, gender, and ethnicity.
2. How do you describe your personality? (prompt: Would you say you're funny, quiet, etc.)
3. How do you describe your sexuality or the sexual preference that you most identify with?
(prompt: Would you say you are gay, straight, bisexual, etc.?)
4. Describe the first experience you can remember regarding your sexual attraction. (prompt: Tell me about the first time you realized you were sexually attracted to someone.)
5. Do you consider yourself a pedophile? Why or why not? (prompt: What does the word *pedophile* mean to you?)
6. Tell me about any other convictions not involving sexual activity with a minor. (prompt: Have you ever been arrested and convicted for other things like drug-related crimes, theft, etc.?)
7. Tell me what crime or crimes you have been convicted of involving sexual activity with a minor. (prompt: What were you originally charged with, and did that change at all during this process? Was there more than one minor involved?)
8. Have you been sexually active with anyone else in any way that would be considered illegal?
(prompt: That could mean things like sexual activity with a minor, forcible rape, voyeurism, exposure, child pornography, etc.?)
9. Describe in detail the situation/relationship/sexual activity that led to your conviction and registration as a sex offender. (prompt: Tell me your story of how you became sexually involved with a minor or minors.)

10. Describe any events or situations that you feel contributed to your sexual activity with a minor. (prompt: Were you ever sexually abused as a child? Did you feel like the minor you were involved with wanted it? What things were going on in your life at the time?)
11. Why do you think you became sexually involved with a minor? (prompt: Was it out of curiosity, convenience, or did you feel like you could not stop yourself, etc.?)
12. Do you believe that your sexual activity with the minor was harmful to that person in any way? If yes, why did you continue? If no, explain your thoughts. (prompt: For example, if there was no physical harm to the minor, do you think there were any other negative consequences for that person such as emotional or mental harm?)
13. Describe your feelings or attitude toward the person or persons identified as the victims in your conviction(s). (prompt: Do you feel angry, sad, bitter, remorseful, etc. toward the person?)
14. Describe how you think your personality had anything to do with your sexual activity with a minor? (prompt: For example, did you find it easier to engage in sexual activity with a minor due to being nervous or shy around people your own age? Or did you feel excited about the taboo and the thrill of doing something you knew could get you in trouble?)
15. If you were guaranteed not to get caught or punished in any way, would you engage in sexual activity with a minor again? Explain your answer. (prompt: For example, if you could have sexual activity with a minor of your choosing with no consequences whatsoever, would that interest you?)
16. Explain why you became sexually involved with a minor in a few short words. (prompt: Would you say it was because you were curious, you did not think you would get caught, you thought you loved the person, it was an impulsive decision, etc.?)

Appendix C

Group Answers to PTPS

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am an extravert.	4	2			2
I am open to new experiences.	2	2	1		3
I am agreeable with others.	3	1	1	2	1
I am conscientious.	1	1	2	3	1
I worry about things a lot.	1	2	1	4	
I prefer to be alone.		2		1	5
I prefer to do things the same way.		4	1	3	
I prefer to do what I want, even if it bothers other people.		2	1	3	2
I tend to do things based on how I feel in that moment, without thinking about the consequences.		1	3	2	2
I usually see the positives in situations.	2	1	1	4	