

Article

The Pedophile as a Human Being: An Autoethnography for the Recognition of a Marginalized Sexual Orientation

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Abstract: By the general public and in the media, pedophilia as a sexual orientation is systematically confused with sexual abuse of minors. Neurological research supports the idea that pedophilia is an innate sexual orientation, and that is how pedophiles, in the sense of ‘minor-attracted persons,’ experience it themselves. The stigma attached to pedophilia as a sexual orientation ensures that pedophiles live in emotional isolation and that young people with pedophilic feelings have nowhere to turn with their doubts and fears. However, pedophiles are not destined to abuse children, and more openness about living with pedophilia can actually prevent child sexual abuse. In this article, based on an autoethnography, I want to provide more insight into what it means to grow up and live with a pedophilic orientation, and I want to make a case for turning the pedophile into a human being again.

Keywords: pedophilia; paedophilia; minor-attracted person; sexual identity; sexual orientation; autoethnography

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1. Introduction and Rationale

DSM-5¹ makes a distinction between pedophilia as a paraphilia and pedosexual behavior as a paraphilic disorder, both oriented towards prepubescent children. A paraphilia is defined as ‘the experience of intense sexual arousal to atypical objects, situations, fantasies, behaviors, or individuals.’ In the discussions within the American Psychiatric Association (APA) prior to the publication of DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed.), calling pedophilia a sexual orientation² rather than a paraphilia has been considered, but this was ultimately not implemented because APA

¹ APA. (2013). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. *American Psychiatric Association*, 21.

² Seto, M. C. (2012). Is pedophilia a sexual orientation? *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 41 (1), 231–36.

wanted to avoid normalizing pedophilia, as that could be interpreted as not prioritizing the protection of children over the interests of pedophiles.³ In clinical practice, an exclusive sexual interest in young adolescents (hebephilia) is also considered a paraphilia. Having pedophilic or hebephilic feelings⁴ is not a criminal offense, although it is widely regarded as outright reprehensible.⁵ Putting these sexual preferences into practice is punishable, in most circumstances and worldwide, and is considered by DSM-5 a symptom of pedophilic disorder.⁶

The above clinical and legal descriptions conceal the inconvenient truth that many men, as well as some women, are attracted almost exclusively to minors, and that many of them for this single reason feel abandoned by society. Even though the proportion of them who put their preferences into practice is unknown, it seems clear that many do not engage in it,^{7, 8} but still suffer from the burden and stigma associated with pedophilia.⁹ Those who suffer from—and I use these words deliberately—pedophilic feelings rarely, if ever, communicate about it with family members, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, or even therapists, for fear of an imminent social vacuum.¹⁰

As a result, there is relatively little scientific research on people with pedophilic preferences (also called ‘minor-attracted persons’ or MAPs), especially on those who have never been involved in sex offenses.¹¹ It also appears as if there are hardly any organizations that defend their interests. Curiously, this was very different in the period 1975–1995. Every country in Western Europe and North America had its own pedophile associations, which often acted as part of the gay movement to promote the emancipation of pedophiles (and, in many cases, also to promote tolerance with regard to sexual contacts between members of different age groups).¹²

Currently, many pedophiles live an emotionally isolated life, find it difficult to find a position in society, and suffer from depression or contend with suicidal tendencies.¹³ In this article, I therefore reintroduce a controversial idea, namely that pedophilia should be considered a sexual orientation, which is part of the spectrum of sexual orientations such

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- ³ Berlin, F. S. (2014). Pedophilia and DSM-5: The importance of clearly defining the nature of a pedophilic disorder. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 42 (4), 404–7.
- ⁴ Having pedophilic or hebephilic feelings is called ‘pedohebephilia’ by some authors, although in what follows I will bring it under the common denominator of ‘pedophilia.’
- ⁵ McCartan, K. F. (2010). Student/trainee-professional implicit theories of paedophilia. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 16 (4), 265–88.
- ⁶ Hekma, G. (2008). The drive for sexual equality. *Sexualities*, 11 (1–2), 46–50.
- ⁷ Goode, S. D. (2009). *Understanding and Addressing Adult Sexual Attraction to Children: A Study of Paedophiles in Contemporary Society*. New York: Routledge.
- ⁸ Kärgel, C., Massau, C., Weiß, S., Walter, M., Borchardt, V., Krueger, T. H., Tenbergen, G., Kneer, J., Wittfoth, M., Pohl, A., Gerwinn, H., Ponseti, J., Amelung, t., Beier, K. M., Mohnke, S., Walter, H. & Schiffer, B. (2017). Evidence for superior neurobiological and behavioral inhibitory control abilities in non-offending as compared to offending pedophiles. *Human Brain Mapping*, 38 (2), 1092–104.
- ⁹ Jahnke, S., & Hoyer, J. (2013). Stigmatization of people with pedophilia: A blind spot in stigma research. *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 25 (3), 169–84.
- ¹⁰ Cacciatori, H. (2017). The lived experiences of men attracted to minors and their therapy-seeking behaviors. Dissertation. Walden University ScholarWorks.
- ¹¹ Castellanos-Cruz, L., Bao, A. M., & Swaab, D. F. (2017). Sexual identity and sexual orientation. In *Hormones, Brain, and Behavior* (3rd ed., Vol. 5, pp. 279–90). Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- ¹² Paternotte, D. (2014). The International (Lesbian and) Gay Association and the question of pedophilia: Tracking the demise of gay liberation ideals. *Sexualities*, 17 (1–2), 121–38.
- ¹³ Stevens, E., & Wood, J. (2019). “I despise myself for thinking about them.” A thematic analysis of the mental health implications and employed coping mechanisms of self-reported non-offending minor attracted persons. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 28 (8), 968–89.

as those recognized by the LGBT movement, and that those who suffer from pedophilic feelings should therefore be accepted and respected in society. To substantiate my argument, I offer an autoethnography,¹⁴ with which I hope to demonstrate that growing up with a pedophilic orientation is not very different from developing any sexual identity that deviates from the heterosexual norm.

In the period when pedophile organizations started to disappear, pedophiles seem to have stopped writing about their experiences. In 1991, a special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* was dedicated to relationships between boys and men,¹⁵ in which some of the authors (namely Edward Brongersma and David Thorstad) were openly pedophiles. However, more recent accounts of how pedophiles stand in current society are rare in the academic literature. An exception is the work of Goode,¹⁶ who conducted an ethnographic study of several dozen, almost all non-offending, pedophiles. In one of her accounts, she describes how a certain David wanted to take his own life around the age of sixteen, after he had realized on the basis of information obtained from a few newspaper articles only, that he was destined to abuse young boys because of his pedophilic feelings. More recently, also a master's thesis¹⁷ and a doctorate¹⁸ were dedicated to the problems that pedophiles face in daily life.

As for myself, around the age of seventeen I noticed that I, a male adolescent, was emotionally and sexually attracted to boys roughly aged thirteen to fourteen. While such feelings were not new to me at the time (I had been attracted to boys of about my own age since I was twelve), it was a shock to find myself getting older, while the kids I found cute and attractive remained in the same age bracket. In addition, over time it turned out that these feelings for young teenage boys were exclusive enough as to make it unrealistic for me to enter into a lasting relationship with an adult. At the time, this observation plunged me into a deep personal crisis, which I partly overcame through my academic career. As is common in an academic research environment, I work long hours, I give priority to my job, and in return, no one questions the fact that I am not in a relationship and that apparently I am not looking for one either. I continue to find it distressing and problematic that in the kind of environment I work in, which is populated with open-minded, highly educated people, I cannot be open about my own sexuality.

I have thought long and hard about my situation, and have even written about it (anonymously, in a regional newspaper). While I am opposed to sex between adults and minors (and have never engaged in it), I think that the deafening silence about the fact that people can suffer from pedophilic feelings is a major ethical issue. As far as I can understand, pedophilic feelings are innate, just like homosexual feelings, which means that the person concerned cannot do much about it.¹⁹ While some neurological research indeed supports this view, hard evidence is lacking. But that does not alter the fact that pedophilic feelings are experienced by those involved as a fundamental and

¹⁴ Rambo, C., & Ellis, C. (2020). Autoethnography. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. John Wiley and Sons. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosa082.pub2>.

¹⁵ Sandfort, T., Brongersma, E., & Van Naerssen, A. (1991). Man-boy relationships: Different concepts for a diversity of phenomena. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 20 (1–2), 5–12.

¹⁶ Goode, S. D. (2009), op. cit. David's story is on pp. 5–9.

¹⁷ Freimond, C. M. (2013). Navigating the stigma of pedophilia: The experiences of nine minor-attracted men in Canada. Dissertation. Simon Fraser University.

¹⁸ Walker, A. (2017). Understanding resilience strategies among minor-attracted individuals. Dissertation. City University of New York.

¹⁹ Castellanos-Cruz et al. (2017), op. cit.

unchangeable part of their identity,²⁰ in the same manner as for most heterosexual or homosexual individuals it is beyond imagination to voluntarily change their own sexual and romantic desires, for example towards the same or, respectively, the opposite gender.

In the next sections of this paper, I will substantiate my argument through an autoethnographic account. I consider this autoethnography a unique contribution to the debate, in which pedophiles rarely participate themselves, as doing so would involve great personal risk, at least as long as their anonymity is not guaranteed. To my knowledge, since 1991, there have been no academic papers published on this topic by any authors who have been open about their own pedophilic orientation. The *Journal of Controversial Ideas* offers a unique forum for this, being the only peer-reviewed academic journal that allows publishing under a pseudonym. The core contribution of the autoethnography is a primary (as opposed to secondary) understanding of how pedophilic feelings work.

Although autobiographical elements are central to my argument, they can only receive an autoethnographic status by embedding them in a cultural and social context.²¹ I do this by providing, prior to the autoethnographic part, a concise review of the sources that I have consulted in order to answer the questions that I have asked myself during the search for my sexual identity and my possible position in society. It means that the selection of sources which I cite or discuss (including those referred to in this introduction) is structured by these questions, and should be viewed as a tailor-made reflection framework rather than as a full-fledged literature review.

The questions I asked myself had to do with (1) the origin of pedophilic feelings, (2) whether other pedophiles had experiences similar to mine, and (3) why I did not seem to be welcome in the LGBT movement, despite being attracted to boys (and not pursuing sex with minors). As a result, I will cite from three bodies of literature, namely (1) recent insights into the biological nature of pedophilia, (2) recent ethnographic research into pedophiles, and (3) insights into how the social acceptance of pedophile organizations has vanished, along with the support of the LGBT movement. The first of these bodies of literature is rather technical and still in progress, which means that my review of it needs to be considered as non-exhaustive. The second and third strands of literature comprise a rather modest number of publications, which means that my review of it is intended to be representative at least to some extent.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. First I will provide a brief overview of the gap between the image of the pedophile that emerges from scientific research in clinical, sociological and criminological fields on the one hand, and the pedophile as a person on the other hand. Neurological research into sex offenders is a growing field, but contemporary research that assesses how pedophiles feel, what their social relationships look like, or how happy or unhappy they are, is scarce. Next, I will highlight the reasons for the quasi-absence of organizations representing pedophiles, despite the fact that pedophilia is less rare than many think. Then, the autoethnography follows. This is a condensed compilation of a full autobiography (of more than 120,000 words, unpublished), based on the diary notes that I have made over the years about how I have experienced growing up and living with a pedophilic orientation. In the conclusions, I will first provide a brief reflection on what I learned from the process I went through. Finally, I will explore a

²⁰ Blagden, N. J., Mann, R., Webster, S., Lee, R., & Williams, F. (2018). "It's not something I chose you know": Making sense of pedophiles' sexual interest in children and the impact on their psychosexual identity. *Sexual Abuse*, 30 (6), 728–54.

²¹ Rambo, C., & Ellis, C. (2020), op. cit.

pathway to turn the pedophile back into a person, or a human being. I will argue that such a societal turnaround would preferably be supported by a change in the attitude of the LGBT movement, which since 1993 has actively distanced itself from the idea that pedophilia is a sexual orientation that people can suffer from, and that can be disconnected from child sexual abuse. Also the media and education should play a role in such a shift in thinking.

2. The Gap between the Clinical and the Human Pedophile

As Brongersma noted in 1991,²² research into pedophilia is almost entirely sterile. Methods applied consist of behavioral experiments and standardized questionnaires, while respondents are predominantly convicted sex crime offenders. Neuropsychological research into pedophilia has existed for several decades, and today it is increasingly supplemented by neurological research. Sociological and ethnographic research, in particular on non-offending pedophiles, is scarce and often outdated.²³ One of the problems lies in the recruitment of respondents. Organizations representing pedophiles have mostly disappeared over the years. Some preventive projects have replaced these, such as B4U-ACT, Virtuous Pedophiles, and Dunkelfeld. B4U-ACT has existed since 2003 and is a US-based partnership between therapists and pedophiles. Virtuous Pedophiles is a purely online and strictly anonymous, personal initiative of two American pedophiles who want to assist their peers in dealing with their sexual orientation and controlling their lusts. Dunkelfeld is a prevention project of the German government that focuses on pedophiles, and also serves as a research platform.

Although the distinction between pedophilia as a sexual orientation and child sexual abuse is explicitly recognized by researchers in the field,²⁴ finding representative samples of non-offending pedophiles remains a challenge. Even to the simple question of how many pedophiles there actually are, science has not yet found a satisfactory answer. Tenbergen et al.²⁵ speak of 'true pedophilic preference' in about 1% of the population, but if we consider only men and also include those who have pedophilic sexual fantasies, then figures rise up to around 5%. In comparison, according to Goode,²⁶ 0.0025% of the population has been convicted of sexual abuse of a minor. Although there is sufficient data available to indicate that most pedophiles never engage in sexual activity with minors, there is less clarity about the use of child pornography, as the threshold, both ethically and practically, for the use of such material is much lower than for hands-on abuse. Statistics about the use of pornography among (non-pedophile) male adolescents indicate that many of them regularly consume it while masturbating,²⁷ suggesting that similar inclinations may be present in pedophilic adolescents, who may be less aware than adults of the harm that child pornography can cause to minors, or of the risks to themselves involved in such behavior.

²² Brongersma, E. (1991). Boy-lovers and their influence on boys: Distorted research and anecdotal observations. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 20 (1–2), 145–73.

²³ Cantor, J. M. (2014). "Gold-star" pedophiles in general sex therapy practice. *Principles and Practice of Sex Therapy*, 19, 219–34.

²⁴ Tenbergen, G., Wittfoth, M., Frieling, H., Ponseti, J., Walter, M., Walter, H., ... & Kruger, T. H. (2015). The neurobiology and psychology of pedophilia: Recent advances and challenges. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 9, 344.

²⁵ Tenbergen et al. (2015), op. cit.

²⁶ Goode. (2009), op. cit., p. 16.

²⁷ Ševčíková, A., & Daneback, K. (2014). Online pornography use in adolescence: Age and gender differences. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 11 (6), 674–86.

Only some of the convicts of child sexual abuse have a pedophilic orientation, which means that convicted pedophiles can never be representative of the—rather large—group of non-offending pedophiles.²⁸ Besides, the figures mentioned do not say anything about exclusivity: there is evidence that sexual orientations occur in combination, and that being attracted to, for example, young adolescent boys does not necessarily stand in the way of a lasting relationship with an adult, female or male.

In neuropsychological research on pedophilia, the problem of the representative sample is usually prominent. Samples are small, subjects are often sex offenders, and it is usually difficult to find a control group of non-offending pedophiles, presumably because non-offending pedophiles are reluctant to identify themselves to anyone as pedophiles and have not much to gain from participating in research.²⁹ Comorbidities are frequently present in sex offenders, but causal relationships are difficult to demonstrate. For example, sex offenders who have abused children show a lower IQ than average, but this difference was not observed in non-offending pedophiles.³⁰ Although advances in neurological research do not rule out all possible links between upbringing and sexually aggressive behavior, they do not support the belief that a sexual orientation towards minors is determined by one's own childhood experiences.

Tenbergen et al.³¹ report various neurological theories that can help explain pedophilic orientations. Currently, the medical sciences see pedophilia as a result of interactions between neurodevelopmental factors: a combination of a genetic basis and environmental factors, especially those in the womb. But while the evidence that pedophilic orientations are associated with specific characteristics of parts of the brain is becoming more convincing, the problem of small sample sizes persists.

The neurological view does correspond to how pedophiles experience their feelings, namely as innate. As Moen³² interprets the empirical literature, pedophiles 'discover' their sexuality during their teenage years. So in their experience they do not develop these feelings, neither can they decide about them. In fact, the feelings can be present very early on, namely at the time when the child itself is in the age category to which it is attracted.³³ Very young teenagers (around the age of twelve) do not attach profound significance to such feelings, which at that age are often not yet explicitly sexual, while young adolescents (around the age of fourteen) will start wondering about themselves. Boys of that age who like young boys will consider the possibility that they are homosexual. Only around the age of sixteen or seventeen will pedophile youth realize that their feelings are mainly or exclusively oriented towards children who are younger than themselves, realizing that they deviate from the norm in this regard.

However, such personal experiences are not well documented. Internet forums where pedophiles talk about their own experiences provide a fragmented source of information, but systematic research is rare. The studies by Goode,³⁴ Freimond,³⁵

²⁸ Castellanos-Cruz et al. (2017), op. cit.

²⁹ Gibbels, C., Sinke, C., Kneer, J., Amelung, T., Mohnke, S., Beier, K. M., ... & Kruger, T. H. (2019). Two sides of one coin: A comparison of clinical and neurobiological characteristics of convicted and non-convicted pedophilic child sexual offenders. *Journal of Clinical Medicine*, 8 (7), 947.

³⁰ Tenbergen et al. (2015), op. cit.

³¹ Tenbergen et al. (2015), op. cit.

³² Moen. (2015). The ethics of pedophilia. *Etikk i Praksis*, 9 (1), 111–24.

³³ Freimond. (2013), op. cit.

³⁴ Goode. (2009), op. cit.

³⁵ Freimond. (2013), op. cit.

and Walker³⁶ are exceptions. Based on surveys and interviews with predominantly non-offending pedophiles, these researchers paint a picture of how their respondents discovered and experience their sexual orientation, and how they cope with it in daily life.

Goode's study is based on an analysis of pedophile online chat groups, an online survey, interviews and focus groups in which a number of pedophiles testify about how they live their lives, and how this is influenced by their sexual orientation. Goode deliberately focuses on 'non-clinical' and 'non-criminalized' self-defined pedophiles, recruiting her respondents from the online community. She focuses on how the respondents deal with their feelings, how they think about themselves, and on the basis of which sources they do so. She describes how and by whom they are or are not supported, what problems they face, how they behave in the online communities, and what their attitude is towards child pornography.

Freimond's master thesis is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine minor-attracted men. The research is guided by the concept of 'stigma' and the challenges that the minor-attracted men face as a result of this. Respondents were recruited through the B4U-ACT network, and interviews were conducted live or online. The study finds that respondents became aware of their sexuality at an early age, that they feel rejected by society and experience stress because of that, and that being open about their sexuality has elicited both positive and negative reactions.

Walker's doctoral thesis, which was followed by the publication of a book,³⁷ is based on 41 semi-structured interviews with minor-attracted persons, focusing on identity formation, coming out, coping with stigma, dealing with attractions, and strategies to avoid offensive behavior. The thesis exposes life's complexity as a minor-attracted person, partly caused by stress that is associated with seeking support from others.

A more recent study³⁸ additionally illustrates that pedophiles can fall genuinely in love with a child or a young teenager, something many non-pedophiles find hardly imaginable. However, such studies seem to find little resonance in the media, in government policy, or in campaigns targeting teenagers and adults who struggle with the orientation of their sexuality and affections.

3. A Marginalized Sexual Orientation

In public opinion, the notion of pedophilia is first and foremost associated with child sexual abuse, not with a sexual orientation.³⁹ Also on public forums, including the media, rarely is any distinction made between these two quite different phenomena, and little effort is made to challenge the crude image of the pedophile as an intrinsically immoral and predatory person. Pedophiles who openly acknowledge their sexuality are extremely scarce, as are organizations that defend the interests of pedophiles. The LGBT movement generally implicitly but also, when asked, explicitly distances itself from pedophilia, in every sense of the word, and makes no effort to emphasize the difference between sexual orientation and sexual contact with minors. Many members of the LGBT community feel

³⁶ Walker. (2017), op. cit.

³⁷ Walker, A. (2021). *A Long, Dark Shadow: Minor-Attracted People and Their Pursuit of Dignity*. University of California Press. The controversy that arose upon publication of the book forced the author to step down at least temporarily as an assistant professor at Old Dominion University.

³⁸ Martijn, F. M., Babchishin, K. M., Pullman, L. E., & Seto, M. C. (2020). Sexual attraction and falling in love in persons with pedohebephilia. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 49, 1305–18.

³⁹ McCartan. (2010), op. cit.

that homosexuality and pedophilia have nothing to do with each other, and seem to care little about the trials pedophiles face.⁴⁰

If it is true that about one percent of the male population is predominantly romantically and erotically oriented towards prepubescent children,⁴¹ a figure that would obviously increase if we were to include female pedophiles, those attracted to young adolescents, and pedophilia as a secondary sexual orientation,⁴² then the lack of an organized representation of this group in society is at least remarkable. And if it is true that from a clinical perspective pedophilia is a sexual orientation that falls within the spectrum of sexual orientations such as those recognized by the LGBT movement, then it is equally curious that this movement distances itself from it.

That problematizing the current stance of the LGBT movement towards pedophilia is legitimate, is demonstrated by the fact that the situation was very different in the period 1975–1995, a time when in various countries more and less activist pedophile organizations existed, some of which had associated themselves with the LGBT movement. The most important one was the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA), which together with the Dutch Vereniging Martijn and the American Project Truth/Free Will represented the pedophile movement in the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA). Paternotte⁴³ describes in detail the discussions within ILGA about its position with regard to pedophilia. The positions of the various members differed, partly because the three aforementioned pedophile associations campaigned for more sexual freedom and for lowering or even abolishing age of consent. In 1993, an initiative of an American conservative politician forced ILGA to vote on the membership of the three pedophile organizations mentioned. The perception of ILGA supporting ‘pedophile groups’ made it lose its initial ECOSOC⁴⁴ member status in 1994, which was only granted in 1993. In the course of these events, in 1994 more than 80% of ILGA’s members voted for removing the three ‘pedophile groups’ from the association. In addition, ILGA repeatedly launched statements in which it distanced itself from pedophilia and child sexual abuse, without making any attempts to clarify the distinction between both notions, thus diverting attention from the idea that pedophilia could be considered a sexual orientation rather than a disorder or an offense.⁴⁵ Of course, this does not mean that all members of LGBT organizations, let alone of the wider LGBT community, support this stance. Research into this is beyond the scope of the current paper, but an anonymous questionnaire-based inquiry among members and supporters of LGBT organizations could elucidate this.

While, to my knowledge, there is no systematic research on how pedophile organizations have developed since then, it is obvious but striking that most of them seem to have withered, if not disappeared or been banned. Once, NAMBLA was a highly visible group, while today it is little more than a dated, quasi-static website and a PO box address in San Francisco. Vereniging Martijn, which once published a printed magazine with an edition of hundreds of copies, was banned by a Dutch court in 2014 following

⁴⁰ Thorstad, D. (1991). Man/boy love and the American gay movement. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 20 (1–2), 251–74.

⁴¹ Goode et al. (2009), op. cit., p. 16

⁴² Castellanos-Cruz et al. (2017), op. cit.

⁴³ Paternotte. (2014), op. cit.

⁴⁴ ECOSOC is the UN Economic and Social Council.

⁴⁵ ILGA. (2011). ILGA and the ECOSOC Status controversy. Retrieved from <https://ilga.org/ilga-ecosoc-status-controversy>.

appeal procedures. Similar associations in various countries in Europe became smaller and gradually disappeared. Remnants of some of these are still there in a few discussion forums on the internet (including: Boychat, Jongensforum, La Garçonnière).

Most of the older pedophile associations have advocated greater tolerance for sexual contact between members of different age groups at least at some points in their history, and some of them have been compromised as regular members or board members had disseminated child pornography or had engaged in sexual activities with minors. That explains why the rare more recent initiatives are in fact no more than prevention organizations or online self-help groups (including B4U-ACT, Virtuous Pedophiles, as well as some government or charity funded prevention initiatives such as Dunkelfeld and Stop it Now!), who present themselves to non-pedophiles as activists against child sexual abuse and do not take any political position on the rights of pedophiles. With respect to the presence of the debate on pedophilia on the internet, it is worthwhile mentioning that Twitter has officially tolerated accounts in which 'attraction to minors' was discussed, before it changed its user policy (in October 2020) and henceforth prohibits 'promoting or normalizing sexual attraction to minors as a form of identity or sexual orientation.' The pre-existing rule that 'you may not promote violence against, threaten, or harass other people on the basis of ... sexual orientation, ... , gender identity, ... ' remained in force. In practice, Twitter seems to randomly remove accounts of pedophiles without further explanation.⁴⁶

4. Autoethnography as Complementary Literary Evidence

Edward Brongersma is one of the few overt pedophiles to have published academic work on the topic. More numerous, however, are the pedophile authors who have turned their experiences into fiction. In 1943, Roger Peyrefitte, who himself had a preference for young boys, wrote about the 'special friendship' between a young and a somewhat older boy in a pre-war French boarding school.⁴⁷ Despite the sensitive theme, the book has long been on the reading lists of French high school students and has played an important role in the social acceptance of homosexuality in France. In the 1960s and 1970s, books with either an autobiographical or a very well-informed pedophilic nature were regularly published in various language areas. Brongersma⁴⁸ was convinced that more can be learned about pedophilia from a selection of relevant works of fiction than from scientific studies. It is true that those who want to gain insight into the emotional life of a pedophile cannot limit themselves to clinical studies. Stories that provide insight into real situations, or fictional works inspired by real events, are key to deeper insight. It is therefore very unfortunate, but understandable, that in recent history, pedophile authors have no longer published fiction with autobiographical elements. I would like to make a modest attempt to remedy this with the autoethnographic section of this article. The contribution to knowledge of

⁴⁶ In August 2020, Dutch activist Ben Kirssen's Twitter account was deleted, even though no offensive or illegal material had been posted there. A new account of Ben Kirssen was deleted again a few weeks later. Ben Kirssen appealed to Twitter, but did not receive a satisfactory response. In December 2020, Ben Kirssen again created another new account, which has not been deleted to the date of submission of the current article. These events were documented at <https://pedofieltweets.wordpress.com/2020/08/16/suspended-by-twitter>.

⁴⁷ Peyrefitte, R. (1943). *Les Amitiés particulières*. Marseille: Jean Vigneau. Translated as: Peyrefitte, R. (1958). *Special Friendships: A Novel*. London: Secker & Warburg.

⁴⁸ Brongersma (1991), op. cit.

this section is in providing primary evidence for the argument that being emotionally and sexually attracted to children or young teenagers is not fundamentally different from being attracted to adults of the opposite or same gender, and more specifically, that falling in love with a child or young teenager is not fundamentally different from falling in love with an adult.

In what follows, I will substantiate the above considerations by telling my personal story, which is a condensed compilation of a full, unpublished, autobiographic account. Why did I write this story? First and foremost because I wanted to reconstruct the process I went through, in order to understand it myself from a more distant position. But secondly, I want to make this story public, to make clear to young people who discover their own pedophilic feelings that it is nevertheless possible to live a meaningful and virtuous life. I dream of publishing the full story as a book, but the brief version in this article is a good start. The events took place at the end of the nineties, in Belgium, where I grew up. It contains names, including those of underage boys with whom I sometimes have fallen genuinely in love. Their names as well as any details that could be recognized by those involved have been changed. I would also like to mention that this story in no way claims to be representative. For example, I can hardly imagine what it means to fall in love with a young girl, or with a very young child.

5. Summer Camp with the Boys: My Personal Story

When I recall my early memories, it is clear that since I was ten, some of the boys around me have carried away my special sympathy. In primary school I thought of some of my friends as being really cute, nothing more, nothing less. One of them was Mathieu. He had a beautiful, clear face, and he had an angelic feel about him. I admired him for that, but because he was much more sporty than I was, I did not hang out with him that often. When we had turned twelve, one day I was standing next to him in the swimming pool locker room when I was shocked to discover that in all his frontal nudity, he suddenly turned out to be a lot more developed than the rest of our group. As I remember it, a lush bush of dark pubic hair surrounded his almost fully grown penis. Of course, I knew that this was waiting for us, but that it was just this little boy who looked so perfect when he was wearing his pants, who had lost his angelic smoothness first, was difficult for me to deal with. For fourteen days I told myself that I had not really seen it, that it had been a bad dream. But at the next swimming class I had to face the harsh truth.

Another incident too, at a schoolmate's home, is one of my clearest memories. My schoolmate had a seventeen-year-old brother who not only drove a moped, but also had porn magazines and condoms in his room. Although I found the magazines interesting in themselves, they did not really excite me. That I was supposed to get aroused only dawned on me when one day one of our group of friends noticed that he was getting an erection upon looking at pictures of naked women. Everyone found this natural, except I was not so sure.

After a clumsy and unsatisfying masturbation session, at fourteen I knew that I had become sexually mature. Therefore it seemed necessary to me to get to know the opposite sex more closely. I quite liked one girl in my class, Wendy. Wendy looked rather young for her age, which made her in fact not very girlish, but perhaps a little boyish, both in appearance and behavior. As had been the case with some of the boys I had found so beautiful, at first I did not associate Wendy with sex in any way. I thought it possible to go to bed with her one day, in the distant future. But first and foremost I was interested in her friendship and attention. I wanted to hang out with her and make her my regular

company. After some effort, I had become friends with all the girls in the group that she was part of, but my rapprochement to Wendy herself was not that simple. She seemed to like me, but she did not really encourage me. And even though I clearly felt some attraction to her, I had little more than a vague idea of what it exactly was that I wanted from her. Eventually, I would orbit her for two years, without much progress. At times, however, I had the feeling that I was madly in love with her. But at every opportunity to turn my infatuation into action, uncertainty took over again.

At fifteen, in summer I went on a week-long bicycle trip with Korneel, a classmate. We slept together in a tent, and I thought of how exciting it would be if we could once masturbate together. But of course I did not dare to suggest such a thing. Actually, I expected Korneel himself to come up with the proposal. He was much more extrovert than I was, and I was convinced that he had exactly the same needs as I did. I thought of it as something really normal to fifteen-year-old boys, and I did not even associate it with homosexuality. But he showed no signs at all that pointed in such a direction, and I was slightly disappointed. At times I wondered if I should not have been a bit more assertive, especially when not much later I accidentally learned that some other boys in my class had actually messed around with each other, after having smoked cannabis.

When I turned sixteen, I was still wondering if and how I could start a romance with Wendy. But in addition to that, I also developed a kind of aesthetic awe for some of the boys around me. This became mainly manifest during gym class. There, I realized how I hated the appearance of dark leg hair in the boys of my group. But those who were somewhat behind in their physical development attracted my full appreciation. Sometimes we had a session in parallel with the boys from the second year. Those were the moments when I realized that the guys in my own group were getting uglier every day, while many of those middle-schoolers were still beautiful, smooth faunlets.

It was not until my fifth year of secondary school—when I turned seventeen—that I began to realize that I had a special fondness for boys around the age of fourteen. In the queue for the school canteen, my eyes drifted to the young kids who gathered in groups. During gym classes I enjoyed the smooth calves of the second-year boys. And it happened more and more often that I started talking to one of them. On one occasion I addressed a younger brother of one of my own classmates, another time I spontaneously came to the aid of a kid in the bicycle shed who was struggling to tie his bag onto his bike. When the school organized a retreat for the first- and second-year pupils and recruited supervisors for it, I applied. During that retreat I befriended two boys in particular: Sander and Ivo. Both were of a rather short stature and of a very lively nature. Sander had a narrow face, dark brown straight hair, and a quite high voice. Ivo was a little rascal with a dark blond bushy crown, gray eyes, and a face strewn with freckles. Several times a week we exchanged a few words, in the school hallway, in the canteen, by the bicycle shed, on the playground, or even when we were peeing in the urinals next to each other. Often all this happened at my initiative, but both seemed to like having someone so much older pay attention to them, and over time the impetus came from them too. We asked each other about exam results, poked each other in the hallway, or went to sit together during lunch. Ivo teased me by pulling my school bag off my shoulder with his carrier strap whenever he saw the opportunity. I patted him on the chest or ruffled his hair for a moment and our mutual laughter completed this little pleasure time and again. Sporadically, I explained to him a chapter of mathematics that he was unable to master. Once, before school, I found Sander in the bicycle shed, panicking about his homework, that he had forgotten to do. I asked if I could help him and then filled out the entire form myself, imitating his somewhat

unstable handwriting. He was delighted with my service, but afterwards came to tell me indignantly that I had made several mistakes.

It took a while before I started to question my fascination with these kids. The doubts only came when I realized they were appearing in my sexual fantasies. More and more often while masturbating I imagined someone sitting on top of me, usually a boy the age of Ivo or Sander, or I even thought of Ivo or Sander themselves. I imagined that we were enjoying each other's bodies, and in my fantasy for the boy it was a novel sensation over and over again, for which he then would be very grateful to me afterwards. Sometimes I tried to imagine a girl, but the idea of breasts towering over me could not excite me; nor did the thought of vaginal (or anal) sex. No, it was clear that manually initiating a young, hormone-overflowing pubescent boy into the world of orgasm would certainly give me much greater satisfaction.

After I had realized all this, it took another couple of weeks to see that my fantasies might not be completely normal. Even this kind of, in my eyes innocent, adventure would be considered sex, and sex with young boys was not only inappropriate but also illegal. They called it pedophilia. I had a hard time accepting this knowledge. I did not dare to talk to anyone about it, but I started to observe my peers in my own age group a little more closely. I quickly concluded that none of my classmates had any special interest in the kids I liked so much. I was clearly the outsider.

One day, this awareness was reinforced by a conversation between two of my classmates, during gym class. We sat on the grass outside the sports hall, waiting for our teacher, while the boys of the second year held a sprint race. Ivo and Sander were also lining up for the sprint, dressed in shorts and a school T-shirt. My one classmate, whose field of vision was filled with bare boy legs, jokingly commented that this must be a paradise for pedophile homosexuals. Or should you say 'homosexual pedophiles,' perhaps? In any case, he did not belong to that group, so he made clear. I remained silent and thought that maybe I was one of the kind of people he had called 'homosexual pedophiles.' Because yes, I liked bare boy legs, there was no doubt about that. I decided it would be best to stop talking about young boys altogether, no matter how much I wanted to do so.

I was eighteen when I enrolled in the university. After just a few weeks, I started missing high school with the hordes of joyful second- and third-year kids whose presence I had enjoyed so much. I started to realize more and more that the presence of those young boys had been central to the quality of my life, a quality that was now largely lacking. I was not feeling particularly well, and I did not manage to really integrate into student life. For these reasons, in my spare time I began to fully engage in the youth club that I had been a member of for a couple of years, first in my hometown, and later in the city where I was studying. What was different, however, was that I now mainly focused on the group of twelve-to-fifteen-year-olds, implicitly hoping for a little more fun in my life.

I was nineteen when I met twelve-year-old Cédric in this youth club. He was a very active, funny, waggish, and yes, handsome boy. He still looked quite young: he had a rounded child's face with some baby down on his cheeks, he had not started his adolescent growth spurt yet, and he had very blond hair, sparkling steel blue eyes, and cute dimples in his cheeks. I was enchanted by him. I did not miss a chance to meet him, chat with him, and be in his company. That summer Cédric, now thirteen years old, also went to camp. The first night I tried my best to find a place to sleep next to him, on a mattress on the floor. When it came to bedtime, I was terribly nervous and had no way of falling asleep. Every ten minutes I raised my eyes to take in his silhouette and the glow of his hair in the moonlight. I listened to the adorable boy's regular breathing. In

several steps I tried to get closer to him, in a way that I imagined I could have done in my sleep accidentally. At one point I felt the warmth of his body through both of our sleeping bags, I smelled the fresh scent of washing powder from his clothes, and I thought for a moment that I felt his breath, even though he was still facing away from me. I carefully lowered the zipper of my sleeping bag, enough to let my right arm out. His sleeping left hand was close to me, uncovered. I reached for it cautiously. My hand was shaking, I was extremely nervous, and it was a terrible experience. For what had started out as the promise of a heavenly adventure had become a bit more of a perverse act with each of the steps I had taken. I enjoyed the closeness of this divine being who was sleeping here next to me, but at the same time nagging doubts about my own morality arose. I lightly touched his fingers one by one. They were fine, soft, and warm, and together they still formed a child's hand. Cédric did not seem to notice. I carefully crept a little closer. We were practically in a spooning position. The gnawing did not stop, however, and this discomfort was amplified by the feeling of a prolonged, in the end even painful erection, which I experienced as highly unwelcome and inappropriate, and which seemed to have little to do with the platonic admiration I felt for this boy. This realization made me deeply doubt myself that night and the days that followed, and even made me disgusted with myself. The next morning Cédric casually remarked that I had been sleeping very close to him, had I not? I could not believe my ears. Had he noticed something after all, perhaps? This was enough material to reflect on, I thought. I had no need for a follow-up to this adventure and the next evening I moved my sleeping supplies to another room.

For the next few days and the rest of the summer I could not possibly put Cédric out of my mind. I enjoyed every moment he was near me. His temperament, his behavior, his appearance: I found everything about him equally attractive. I had to think about what that exactly meant. I thought he was super cute, I thought he was beautiful, I thoroughly enjoyed his presence, I wanted to smell and touch him, and eventually—inappropriate as it seemed—he excited me sexually. In short, there was no doubt: I was in love!

But Cédric was a boy, a boyish boy. Would I be gay after all, or possibly bisexual—because of my past, albeit confusing, experiences with Wendy? I committed myself to further investigate this hypothesis. That was a tough endeavor. First, I did not know anyone who was openly gay. So, there were hardly any examples, let alone role models, available. Second, I realized that a gay guy is basically a man who likes men. I was a man, so far as I fitted the concept, but did I like men? During the entire fall, I screened as discreetly as possible the men who walked the streets of the city, especially those of approximately my own age. But I could not find any to whom I could imagine being attracted to, let alone go to bed with. Apparently I did not like men at all, because they were too sturdy, too hairy and angular and, above all, too mature.

In the end, two books from the public library and a magazine article on pedophilia on the internet took me a lot further. In one book⁴⁹ the author explained that men could fall in love with boys and that it was not even that exceptional. The other book⁵⁰ analyzed a number of sexual relationships between boys and men. I was reluctant to borrow the books, but read them in small pieces, just before the library's closing time, so as to reduce the chance that I would be caught reading such suspicious works by someone I knew.

⁴⁹ Brongersma, E. (1986). *Loving Boys: A Multidisciplinary Study of Sexual Relations Between Adult and Minor Males*. New York: Global Academic.

⁵⁰ Sandfort, T. (1987). *Boys on Their Contacts with Men: A Study of Sexually Expressed Friendships*. New York: Global Academic.

The magazine brought me to some websites and chat boxes where so-called 'boylovers' communicated with each other. After having read in the article that boylovers do not see themselves as child molesters, but as people who are attracted to young boys, I experienced a light-bulb moment.

Visiting the aforementioned websites posed the next challenge, because in the late 1990s the internet was not just available everywhere. Equipped with a stack of floppy disks, I made my way to an internet room at the university, preferably just before closing time, when most of the other students were spending time in the pubs. I deliberately chose a computer with a monitor slightly out of sight, and I downloaded the websites onto the floppy disks, to avoid getting caught reading. I did not look for child pornography, but a number of written erotic stories in which young boys played the leading role came with the downloads.

All these discoveries did not exactly have a comforting effect. I knew where—and what—I was now, and I could more or less frame my feelings, but what exactly was I supposed to do with this knowledge? My hopes for a normal life melted like snow in the sun. Visions of an existence in miserable loneliness and boredom loomed. For the time being, as a student, I still more or less fitted into the picture, and being single did not really bother me. But what after student life? I still had a few years to think this over, but I had the firm impression that the problem would not resolve itself. Going to live alone? No longer getting in touch with young boys? Watching soccer on TV, gardening and completing crossword puzzles to get through the weekends? Maintaining social contacts with more or less marginalized peer singles, just to dispel loneliness? Imaginings like these did not make me particularly happy. But the alternatives were not very promising either. Enter into a lasting relationship with a woman, or with a man? Both seemed unrealistic to me. I could not possibly be honest with an adult partner, and I was not even sure if I would ever really fall in love with a woman again. Furthermore, even when really doing my best, I could not imagine an intimate relationship with a man. Start a lasting relationship with a boy, then? It was clear that this was only possible in my dreams. And then again, I knew that advancing puberty would eventually end the attraction that any boy could elicit in me.

My memories of the wonderful child named Cédric counterbalanced my dark thoughts a little. Every night when I wanted to fall asleep, I would roll over on my left side, just as I had at that night at summer camp, and I would curl half around the imaginary sleeping figure of a warm, sweet, blond thirteen-year-old boy, put my arms around him, sniff his fresh scent and listen to his regular breathing until I would land in sweet dreams. But after that summer, Cédric no longer regularly showed up in our youth club activities. At the next summer camp it was another boy, Wannes, just fourteen, who won my attention. In the dorm room, I got involved in a romp with him every day, and he thoroughly enjoyed being dragged through the attic in his sleeping bag in the morning and being tickled out of bed by me. He also sought my attention and protection. After a few days most of the times we seemed to be close to each other. In the kitchen we helped each other with the dishes, during the picnic I gave him a few more toppings, and we always sat next to each other around the campfire. One evening a game was being played, so that Wannes and I suddenly found ourselves together in the dark, a few meters away from the flickering campfire. I half-jokingly remarked that I would carry him upstairs and put him in bed if he would not behave. "But we will not go to bed, you know, do not think so!" he remarked, in his thin voice. I was baffled, and the only thing I could say was a muttered "Why not?" I felt he did not really mean it as a joke. He seemed to have realized that our bond might have become a little too intense, and he wanted to make it clear to himself that it was not meant to derail. And what I had not understood at the time was that he had developed

a crush on a pretty girl of his own age who, however, had hardly given him a glance yet. From then on, I kept a little more distance again. But the spark had already been passed, and I really felt the fact of being in love again. It was a terrible experience, and I no longer managed to maintain my regular posture. Meanwhile, Wannès did his best to get into the girl's favor. That was a tough one for me.

It became painfully clear to me that my relationship with Wannès—if you could call it that—was also leading to a dead end. A few months later, however, Cédric reappeared in the youth club. He was fourteen now, he had grown a lot, but his appeal to me had even become stronger. He very much welcomed my attention, and for a few months I had the time of my life with him. In spring we went camping in small tents. He casually proposed to sleep in the tent with me, much to my happy astonishment. As I had hoped, it was not just about sleeping, since he was not averse to some wrestling and mutual tickling from time to time. In the summer months that followed, we regularly went cycling together, often without anyone else around. I started spending time at his home where we talked in his room about music, sports, and books, and where I taught him how to email me. The fact that I was seven years older than him apparently did not raise any concerns in his parents. His mother offered me cake and secretly asked for help to organize a birthday party for her son. I was madly in love again, and on some days my mind was occupied by all kinds of fantasies about him. I had to force myself not to show any signs of my feelings, and I was waiting desperately for him to make some allusion to sex himself. But irresistible as I found him, Cédric always behaved like an exemplary innocent, even seeming to take care never to talk about sex in my presence. But he, too, grew older, and from his fifteenth birthday his awe of youth leaders like myself began to give way to an interest in girls. Moreover, he also started the metamorphosis that I had dreaded so much, with leg and armpit hair, sweat smells, pimples, and his voice breaking. The Cédric I had been so fond of slowly but surely disappeared from sight.

I was twenty-three when Jeroen, fourteen years old, entered the picture. By that time, I had known this boy for a while, and he had caught my attention from day one. But it was only after a year and a half that he became somehow aware of my interest in him. On a movie night at the youth club, I ended up next to him in the dark, and after our bodies had touched we spontaneously snuggled together, invisible to the others. When I was about to leave for home by bike a few hours later, he came after me. He jumped on the carrier of my bike, and it was not until the next intersection that he seemed to realize that it might not be the best idea to come home with me. A little aghast, I murmured that he could spend the night in my student room if he really wanted to, but he vaguely dismissed the proposal. It was midnight, and we stood indecisively under a lamp post. Then he leaned over quickly, and kissed me on the neck—he could not reach higher—before he turned around and walked away without looking back, almost sullenly.

I did not know what to make of that, but from then onwards I could not stop thinking about him. For the next few weeks, I saw him just a few times, never alone, and we did not talk about what had happened. But in July, just after his fifteenth birthday, we went to camp together. There was tension in the air from day one. When we went for a swim, Jeroen asked me if I wanted to rub his back with sun cream, after which he lay half naked against me. Someone took an unsolicited picture of us, we almost looked like a couple in love. At the campfire I put my arm along his back, making sure that the shadows of the fire kept it from being noticed by others. And when we took a break during a day trip, he spontaneously put his head in my lap. I tousled his hair and stroked his face. At another break, he took off his T-shirt and stretched out on his stomach in the grass. When the other youth leaders looked the other way for a moment, I stroked the side of his half-naked

body, and got a cheerful grin in return. All these events seemed to happen in a completely natural way, and with each contact we got a little closer together, apparently in the same manner as if we would have been a teenage boy and girl of similar age. That evening, in the tent, he asked me if there was any room next to me, because he would like to come and sleep there. I could hardly believe what I was hearing, but the tent was tight and there was actually no space left between a huge pile of luggage and my own mattress. So he lay down opposite me with his head turned towards me. I moved up a bit so that my own face was close to his hair. After the last flashlights went out, I ruffled his hair in the dark. He grabbed my hand and pressed it onto his face. Overcome with emotion I started stroking his face, and then he opened his mouth a bit and sucked my finger for a while. I was totally overwhelmed.

The next day a conversation seemed to be called for. I had fallen madly in love with Jeroen, but at the same time I had become terribly worried. I was twenty-four, and he had just turned fifteen. I did not believe that he would realize how problematic this could be. It took until after noon before we eventually talked about it, on his initiative. He told me he thought that I had a crush on him. And that he had recently realized that he liked boys, not girls. I tried my best to explain to him that all this was really not easy for me. That I only liked young boys, not men, that most people would think of it as pedophilia, and that therefore he was in the position to make things really bad for me if he were to spread the word about what had happened last night. He paused for a moment, then assured me not to worry, that he did not think I was a pedophile, but that I might need to talk to someone about it. And one more thing: he liked me, but he did not really believe he was in love with me. Although I felt kind of desperate after the latter confession, the next day we still met one more time, in the storage shed next to the tents. We hugged, I looked deep into his doe eyes, ran my fingers through his hair and along his ears, and then I kissed his face. He grinned and started whispering to me until we heard someone come in and quickly let go of each other.

What followed was a new personal crisis. I could no longer handle the stress of secrecy, and I briefed several people around me, including my parents, about what had happened. The responses were understanding but concerned, and no real solutions emerged. In the following months I called Jeroen regularly and met him from time to time, but of course he could not really help me either. On an evening in the winter after the camp, we went together to a pub once, after which he spent the night in my student room. His parents thought he was staying with a friend. But he kept his distance, and was clearly not going to start flirting again.

My parents thought I should talk to a psychotherapist about my problem. So I did, but after a bit more than a year of regular sessions it did not seem to make sense anymore. My therapist had helped me put my situation in perspective, but of course he was unable to address the substance of the problem. In the meantime I had started renting a house myself, which was near the university campus where Cédric apparently wanted to enroll. He asked me if I wanted to sublet one of the rooms in my house. Pleasantly surprised by his question, I agreed. And finally, a few years later, I explained to Cédric exactly what was wrong with me, and what part he himself had played in my story. Cédric was surprised but understanding, and has since become an even better friend than he was before.

Being able to talk to someone about it from time to time, especially to Cédric, helped. I sought and found a way to live my life. I decided to keep more distance from young teenage boys, and to give new crushes no chance, with reasonable success. I concentrated on my academic work, I often spent time abroad and I was offered a position in a renowned research institute. I never talk about relationships and my feelings about

them, and my friends respect that. It is a bearable but emotionally lonely life, a life full of inhibitions. Sometimes I read books, watch movies, or enjoy (legal) pictures or stories on the internet that I prefer to shield from others, so that they will not ask any awkward questions. The threshold for getting in touch with emotional peers is rather high, and so far such contacts have been limited to sporadic, anonymous emails. Young teenage boys are mostly absent from my life, and the feeling of emptiness that comes with it never goes away completely. About a dozen people are aware of my problem, but currently I only talk about it with two of them. I even lost connection with some of the people who know, and I suspect that some of them would rather not have known. In 2017 and 2020 I anonymously shared part of my story in a regional newspaper. My goal was to point out to people in a similar situation that they are not alone. But anonymity is not very appealing, and consequently these articles have had relatively little influence.

6. Reflections and Conclusions: Make the Pedophile Human Again

Based on the questions I have asked myself, on some answers I have found in the literature, and on my own experiences, I would like to make the following reflections. First, I feel that pedophilia should explicitly be recognized as a sexual orientation by anyone who deals with issues of sexual identity in any way. In other words, people with pedophilic feelings deserve recognition and attention to their emotional problems, especially as long as they do not harm others, particularly minors. Rejecting pedophilia as a sexual orientation is unethical and intellectually unfair. Although the most recent scientific insights strongly support this hypothesis, the argument for it is not so much in what can be found in the literature, but rather, first and foremost, in the fact that it is experienced as such by pedophiles.

Second, it is important to recognize that there is such a thing as pedophilic love, that fits in the spectrum of feelings that are generally denoted as romantic, even though falling in love with a minor is peculiar in some aspects. Such romantic feelings are unlikely to be requited, and even if they would appear so, the child's feelings towards the adult cannot perfectly mirror the adult's feelings towards the child. The same goes for lust, which is associated with pedophilic feelings of love in a similar way as feelings of love directed at an adult. Even though children, and young teenagers in particular, are not asexual beings, they do not experience feelings of lust in the same way an adult does. Furthermore, the adult will always need to face the knowledge that such feelings of love cannot possibly lead to a balanced relationship of mutual equality. In addition, pedophilic love may be more related to how adolescents experience love and romantic attraction, than to long-lasting feelings of love for someone who has been a partner or a soul mate for an important part of one's life. What is more difficult to demonstrate, but must nevertheless be considered, is that pedophilic love may show some characteristics of the affection that is felt by parents for their young children; a concerned and protective reflex that is associated with strong emotional involvement, which is only partly reciprocal. Apart from being less reciprocal, pedophilic love clearly is also more ephemeral than love between adults, since the advent or progress of puberty inevitably has a profound, even destructive, impact on such feelings. But the fact that it is so short-lived is not bizarre or unethical by necessity: it could easily be viewed as an accelerated version of the common case of a couple separating because one or both of them feel that at the time when they started their relationship, their partner was very much a different person. In practice, however, the strong feelings an adult may experience when falling in love with a child are not necessarily hampered by any rational considerations such as those outlined above.

Third, society should be more tolerant of those who suffer from pedophilic feelings. In pursuing this, I see a role for the LGBT movement, which is increasingly referred to as LGBTQIA+. Pedophiles are a particular sexual minority,⁵¹ and face the same problems of stigma, discrimination and social isolation as other members of the LGBT community, albeit to a greater degree. If the community is to be inclusive, then it must live up to the meaning of the '+' in its acronym. Despite its historically difficult relationship with pedophilia, in those countries where currently homosexuality is generally accepted, the LGBT community is large, stable, and powerful enough to be able to recognize and even represent other sexual minorities, albeit within strict legal constraints. Clearly, I am not calling for representing or defending those members of the pedophile community who engage in illegal activities or activities that could harm minors, which include child sexual abuse and the use of child pornography.

I also appeal to the wider society, including the sectors of psychological assistance, and education. Every year there are many tens of thousands of young people worldwide who realize that they have pedophilic feelings, and may become desperate, developing depressions and suicidal tendencies. Explaining to them that they are not alone, that they are not destined to abuse children, and that they can find someone to talk with, can avoid the worst of harm, and can also prevent child sexual abuse.^{52, 53} Education is already succeeding in explaining to children how to defend themselves against possible molesters and teaching them what homosexuality is. Then it is a small effort to also include pedophilia in the curriculum. It is an excellent opportunity for the LGBT movement: by working towards this, the movement can come to terms again with its old ideals of inclusiveness.

⁵¹ Walker, A. (2019). "I'm not like that, so am I gay?" The use of queer-spectrum identity labels among minor-attracted people. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 67 (12), 1736–59.

⁵² Cantor. (2014), op. cit.

⁵³ Houtepen, J. A., Sijtsema, J. J., & Bogaerts, S. (2016). Being sexually attracted to minors: Sexual development, coping with forbidden feelings, and relieving sexual arousal in self-identified pedophiles. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 42 (1), 48–69.