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Meeting the Pedophile: Attitudes toward Pedophilia among Psychology Students

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Abstract

Adverse consequences of stigma towards pedophilia can, among other things, increase dynamic risk factors for sexual offending. Decreasing stigma, therefore, is a plausible approach in the attempt to prevent child sexual abuse. Stigma research suggests that providing direct contact to a stigmatized individual is the most efficient way of reducing stigma. The present study involved an educational intervention, followed by direct contact to a pedophile, to maximize effectiveness. It aimed at finding out whether a dichotomous anti-stigma intervention can change psychology students' attitudes towards pedophiles regarding perceived dangerousness, intentionality, deviance, and punitive attitudes. In a one sample pre-post design, 162 students of the University of Groningen attended a lecture about pedophilia, which was held by a psychology master's student. Participants learned about child sex offending and pedophilia in addition to the importance of distinguishing between pedophiles and child sex offenders (CSOs). The guest lecturer Gabriel shared his experiences about growing up, coping, and living with pedophilia. Results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test revealed significantly diminished negative attitudes towards pedophiles after the intervention. Students perceived pedophiles as less dangerous, having less intent, and being less psychologically deviant. Additionally, students' punitive attitudes towards pedophiles diminished significantly. Also, a thematic analysis revealed that students were highly interested in the topic of pedophilia and greatly appreciative of Gabriel sharing his story. This study was the first to provide direct contact to a pedophile within an anti-stigma intervention.

Biography

Dr Heron completed her doctorate at the age of 25 years from the University of Nottingham in the UK. She is an assistant professor at the University of Houston and has worked as a forensic psychologist in the United Kingdom prior to also working at the University of Groningen. Her research interests are domestic violence and sexual offending.

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