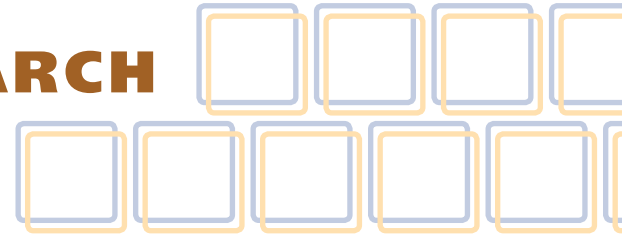




SOMAPI RESEARCH BRIEF

SEX OFFENDER MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING INITIATIVE

Luis C.deBaca, Director • July 2015



Etiology of Adult Sexual Offending

by Susan Faupel, M.S.W.

Introduction

The etiology of adult sexual offending refers to the origins or causes of sexually abusive behavior, including the pathways that are associated with the behavior's development, onset, and maintenance. Knowledge about the etiology of sexual offending is important for several reasons. First, the development of effective prevention and treatment strategies is contingent on having credible knowledge about the underlying causes of sexual offending and victimization. Second, knowledge about causes can help sex offender management professionals manage and mitigate risk more effectively. Third, etiological information can inform decisionmaking at the policy level, whether the focus is on sentencing, oversight in the community, civil commitment, or any other response to sexual offending.

This Research Brief reviews the scientific literature concerning the etiology of adult sexual offenders. It presents the basic tenets of both single-factor and multiple-factor theories of sexual offending and summarizes the empirical evidence concerning the validity of each theory.

Single-Factor Theories

Single-factor theories attempt to explain the development of sex offending behaviors by using a narrow set of factors or a single underlying cause.

Biological Theories

Biological theories of sexual offending have centered on abnormalities in the structure of the brain, hormone levels, genetic and chromosomal makeup, and deficits in intellectual functioning. The empirical evidence produced to

About SOMAPI

In 2011, the SMART Office began work on the Sex Offender Management Assessment and Planning Initiative (SOMAPI), a project designed to assess the state of research and practice in sex offender management. As part of the effort, the SMART Office contracted with the National Criminal Justice Association (NCJA) and a team of subject-matter experts to review the literature on sexual offending and sex offender management and develop summaries of the research for dissemination to the field. These summaries are available online at <http://smart.gov/SOMAPI/index.html>.

A national inventory of sex offender management professionals also was conducted in 2011 to gain insight about promising practices and pressing needs in the field. Finally, a Discussion Forum involving national experts was held in 2012 for the purpose of reviewing the research summaries and inventory results and refining what is currently known about sex offender management.

Based on the work carried out under SOMAPI, the SMART Office has published a series of Research Briefs, each focusing on a topic covered in the sexual offending and sex offender management literature review. Each brief is designed to get key findings from the literature review into the hands of policymakers and practitioners. Overall, the briefs are intended to advance the ongoing dialogue related to effective interventions for sexual offenders and provide policymakers and practitioners with trustworthy, up-to-date information they can use to identify what works to combat sexual offending and prevent sexual victimization.



date does not indicate that the presence of a particular biological phenomenon has a causal relationship with sexual offending.

Evolutionary Theories

Several theories rely on evolutionary postulates to explain sexual coercion and aggression, including the notion that sexual coercion is merely a type of reproductive strategy, and that rape is an outcome of a competitive disadvantage for some men that causes them to lack the resources or ability to obtain a mate by more appropriate means. It is very difficult to empirically test the validity of evolutionary theories, and etiological researchers have largely disregarded them as the cause of sexual offending because of their limitations (Travis, 2003).

Personality Theories

Early personality theories were based on the work of Freud and the premise that sexual deviance is an expression of unresolved problems experienced during childhood. Later personality theories focused more specifically on the role that childhood trauma or mistreatment plays in the development of sexual offending behavior. Research suggests that there is a relationship between poor-quality attachments and sexual offending, but personality theories fail to explain why these disturbances occur, and they alone do not provide a complete explanation of the cause of sexual offending (Stinson, Sales, & Becker, 2008).

Cognitive Theories

Cognitive theories address the way in which offenders' thoughts affect their behavior. Cognitive distortions or thinking errors on the part of sex offenders—such as denial, minimization of harm done, claiming the right or entitlement to the behavior, and blaming the victim—have been documented in research (Marshall, Anderson, & Fernandez, 1999; Ward & Keenan, 1999). Problems in recognizing and interpreting social cues and the emotional state of others have also been documented among sex offenders (Keenan & Ward, 2000; Ward, 2000). There is empirical evidence that distorted thinking patterns can drive deviant sexual behavior, and cognitive theories serve as a core component of many sex offender treatment programs in existence today. However, cognitive theories do not explain where cognitive distortions originate, nor do they explain

why some individuals commit sexually offensive acts specifically (Stinson, Sales, & Becker, 2008).

Behavioral Theories

Behavioral theories argue that sexual offending is a learned behavior. They suggest that sexually deviant arousal plays a pivotal role in the commission of sex crimes and that people who have sexual feelings toward inappropriate stimuli are more likely to commit sex crimes than those with appropriate sexual desires (Becker, 1998; Hunter & Becker, 1994; Lalumiere & Quinsey, 1994). Sexual gratification and the perceived lack of negative consequences for sexual offending, coupled with a lack of support for not engaging in sexual offending behavior, increases the likelihood for sex offenses to continue. Research supports the notion that sexual abuse is a learned behavior, but behavioral theories do not offer a complete explanation of sexual offending because many male sex offenders lack deviant sexual arousal patterns. In addition, no research has predicted which reinforcements or consequences are likely to increase or inhibit sexual offending behavior.

Social Learning Theories

Two primary social learning hypotheses have been suggested as possible explanations for sexual offending behaviors. The first is that children who are sexually abused grow into sexually abusive adults, and the second is that sexually explicit material contributes to sexual offending behavior. Although sex offenders have higher rates of sexual abuse in their histories than would be expected in the general population, and negative or adverse conditions in early development have been linked to sexual offending later in life, the majority of perpetrators were not abused as children (Berliner & Elliot, 2002; Putnam, 2003). Even so, a large percentage of sex offenders do report being sexually abused as children (Becker, 1998; Craissati, McClurg, & Browne, 2002; Graham, 1996; Jonson-Reid & Way, 2001; Seghorn, Prentky, & Boucher, 1987; Veneziano, Veneziano, & LeGrand, 2000; Worling, 1995; Zgourides, Monto, & Harris, 1997). Several factors have been identified that may lead more easily to the development of sexually abusive behaviors in former victims, including the victim's age, the intensity and duration of abuse, and internalizing the victimization experience as normal or pleasurable (Burton, 2000; Burton, Miller, & Schill, 2002; Hummel et al., 2000; Seghorn, Prentky, & Boucher, 1987. Also, Briggs & Hawkins, 1996; Burton, Miller,

& Schill, 2002; Eisenman, 2000; Freeman-Longo, 1986; and Hummel et al., 2000). Research also suggests that repeated exposure to sexually aggressive pornography contributes to increased hostility toward women, acceptance of rape myths, and decreased empathy and compassion for victims (Check & Guloiien, 1989; Knudsen, 1988; Lahey, 1991; Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1988; Malamuth & Check, 1980, 1981, 1985). However, the likelihood that these views will lead to abusive behavior depends on the degree of reinforcement in the learning process. For example, if the participants in the pornographic material seem to be enjoying it and watching it appears to be socially acceptable based on the reaction of others, the viewer is more apt to see the sexually aggressive content as positive and desirable to imitate (Norris, 1991; Sinclair, Lee, & Johnson, 1995).

Feminist Theories

Although there are many forms of feminist theory, the more prominent theories focus on the structure of gender relations and the imbalance of power between men and women. Currently, there is insufficient evidence to scientifically support gender power imbalances as the sole cause of sexual violence. It is important to keep in mind, however, that many feminist theories go beyond the binary of gender and discuss the intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity, culture, and other factors, and research exploring the impact of these interactions is lacking and clearly needed.

Multifactor Theories of Sexual Offending Behavior

Believing that single-factor theories are inadequate, a number of scholars have developed theories that combine multiple factors to explain sexual offending behavior. The most prominent of these theories are discussed below.

Finklehor's Precondition Theory

The first integrated theory of sexual offending behavior was put forth by Finkelhor in 1984. Finklehor's theory, which applies only to child sexual abuse, outlines four preconditions that must exist for a sex offense to occur: the motivation to abuse (e.g., sexual satisfaction, lack of other sexual outlets); the overcoming of internal

inhibitions (e.g., personal sense of morals, fear of being caught); the overcoming of external inhibitors (e.g., lack of privacy, negative social consequences); and the overcoming of victim resistance (e.g., taking advantage of a trusting relationship with the child or caregiver). Although the overcoming of internal and external inhibitors as well as victim resistance has been supported by research, Finklehor's theory does not explain how sex offending motivation originates. In addition, conditions such as poor social skills or lack of available sources of sexual gratification (among other factors) are not direct causes of sexual offending.

Marshall and Barbaree's Integrated Theory

Marshall and Barbaree proposed that the prominent causal factors for sexual offending are developmental experiences, biological processes, cultural norms, and the psychological vulnerability that can result from a combination of these factors. They argued that early negative experiences in childhood (e.g., sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect) cause children to view their caregivers as emotionally absent and themselves as unworthy of love or protection, resulting in low self-esteem and poor interpersonal skills. They also suggested that a key developmental task for adolescent boys is to learn to distinguish between sexual impulses and aggression, arguing that this task is difficult because both types of impulses are generated by the same brain structure. Hence, adolescent boys may find it difficult to know when they are angry, sexually aroused, or both, and learning how to inhibit aggression in sexual situations may also be difficult.

Many of Marshall and Barbaree's hypotheses—such as the presence of poor impulse control and a lack of sufficient social skills in sexual offenders—have been supported through research (Smallbone & Dadds, 2000). Additionally, research has shown that insecure childhood attachment can be linked to coercive sexual behavior. Thus, the theory has many compelling features, including its ability to unite multiple influences. However, the empirical evidence indicates that although some sex offenders have trouble with sexual impulse control, this is not the case for all sexual offenders. In addition, the assumption that basic human drives and capacities share neurological structures has been cast into doubt (Kolb & Whishaw, 1995; Symons, 1979; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992).



Hall and Hirschman's Quadripartite Model

Hall and Hirschman (1991) grouped sex offender personality traits and characteristics derived from other studies into four factors they believed to be most significant in the etiology of sex offending: (1) sexual arousal, (2) thought processes, (3) emotional control, and (4) personality problems. They proposed that even though all four factors are important, one is generally prominent in the individual sexual offender. The theory is based on sound empirical research about the traits of sex offenders, and the notion that individual offenders display contrasting problems has empirical support. Nevertheless, the theory does not adequately explain the relationships that exist and interactions that take place among etiological factors, nor does it identify causal mechanisms behind each factor (Ward, 2000; Ward, Polachek, & Beech, 2006; Stinson, Sales, & Becker, 2008).

Ward and Siegert's Pathways Model

Ward and Siegert's pathways model suggests that a number of different pathways may lead to sexually abusive behavior. Based on different symptom clusters, Ward and Siegert identified five different causal pathways for the development of sexual offending behavior: intimacy deficits, deviant thought processes, emotional deregulation, antisocial cognition involving a sense of entitlement and little regard for the emotional and psychological needs of others, and multiple dysfunctional mechanisms involving all symptom clusters associated with these previous pathways. In the model, situational stressors serve as triggers for sexual offending, and the specific triggers will vary according to the particular profile of causes underlying each individual's pathway.

Data from other areas of psychology support the basic tenets of the pathways model, but there is little direct support for the theory from sex offender research, and there is evidence suggesting that individuals in all five pathways share many of the same traits (Simon, 1997a, 1997b, 2002). Nonetheless, the pathways model has a number of strengths, including an in-depth description of the factors involved in sexual offending and its ability to unify promising aspects of other theories.

Malamuth's Confluence Model

The confluence model suggests two factors—sexual promiscuity and hostile masculinity—merge to result in sexually aggressive behavior. The theory suggests that evolution has created fundamentally different psychological mechanisms in the brains of women and men with regard to sex and intimacy, resulting in the male's preference for short-term over long-term mating patterns. According to the theory, it is in women's reproductive interest to withhold sex from insufficiently invested partners. Moreover, if a woman repeatedly withholds sex from a man, the male may resort to coercion. Although research offers support for several tenets of the theory—for example, men with self-interested motives are far more likely to act on aggressive thoughts than those with more compassion or empathy (Malamuth, 1998)—the confluence model has the same limitations associated with single-factor evolutionary theories of sexual offending (Stinson, Sales, & Becker, 2008). The model also fails to consider the roles situational factors or cognitive rationalizations play in sexual offending.

Stinson, Sales, and Becker's Multimodal Self-Regulation Theory

Multimodal self-regulation theory integrates various psychological perspectives and implicates self-regulatory deficits as a key variable in the development of sexually inappropriate interests and behaviors. Stinson, Sales, and Becker (2008) argue that significant self-regulatory deficits resulting from negative childhood experiences combine for the development of deviant sexual interest and arousal. When certain biological and temperamental vulnerabilities are also present, the individual is unable to manage his or her behavior, and sexual offending can result. Over time, behavioral conditioning occurs through sexual gratification and a lack of corrective action. Because multimodal self-regulation theory is relatively new, there is a paucity of research regarding its validity. Although some of the linkages hypothesized in the theory have been criticized for being implausible, there is empirical support for some tenets of the theory, including the roles that negative developmental experiences, cognitive distortions, and a lack of emotional control play in sexual offending.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Although no single cause for sexual offending has been found, research suggests that a combination of factors likely contribute to sexual offending behavior. Adverse conditions in an individual's early development can lead to poor attachment to others, and these conditions can contribute to the development of sexual offending. Like other behaviors, sexual abuse appears to be learned and influenced by reinforcement and punishment. The specific punishments needed to mitigate sexual offending, however, remain unclear, particularly in light of the cognitive distortions maintained by many sex offenders. Self-regulation and impulse control problems both appear to be related to sexual offending. Repeated exposure to sexually violent pornography may contribute to hostility toward women, decreased compassion and empathy for victims, and an increased acceptance of physical violence toward women. Men who use sexual coercion are more likely to maintain negative attitudes toward women, and men with self-interested motives are more likely to act on aggressive thoughts than those with more compassion or empathy.

Etiological research currently suffers from two major shortcomings: sampling problems and a lack of intersection among different theoretical perspectives. Much of the extant research is based on samples of sex offenders who are in treatment, in prison, or both; and these studies represent only a subset of sex offenders overall. Also, many studies rely on self-report data, which is of questionable validity because many sex offenders engage in cognitive distortions. Current theories also tend to focus on explanations for sexual offending that reside within the individual. Relatively few studies explore how social structures or cultural phenomena contribute to sexual offending behavior.

Several dynamics warrant further research, including maltreatment in early childhood development; how thinking errors originate, and why some individuals act on these thoughts and others do not; how specific punishments and rewards affect sexual offending behavior; and the impact of sexually violent and exploitive images in the culture, not only in pornography. There also is a need for prospective, longitudinal research that explores antecedents to sex offending and changes in sexually aggressive behavior over time. Efforts to employ samples that are more representative of the range of individuals who commit

sex crimes also are needed. Finally, there is a need for further study regarding the integration of theories and the ways that different factors involved in sexual offending relate to one another.

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ABOUT SMART

The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 authorized the establishment of the Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART) Office within OJP. SMART is responsible for assisting with implementation of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), and also for providing assistance to criminal justice professionals across the entire spectrum of sex offender management activities needed to ensure public safety.