

How Can We Explain Incest Offending?

Symposium Chair: Michael C. Seto, Ph.D.

Contemporary models of sexual offending against child victims emphasize the importance of antisociality and sexual deviance as psychologically meaningful risk dimensions (Mann et al., 2010; Seto, 2008). Individuals who have pedophilia or hebephilia, for example, are more motivated to engage in sexual behavior involving children, and individuals who are high in antisociality are more likely to act on these motivations because they are less inhibited by concerns about victim harm or their own negative consequences (such as incarceration). Offenders who are high on both risk dimensions are the most likely to reoffend (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005).

In this context, incest offenders are puzzling. Despite cross-cultural and historical evidence of a strong incest taboo, intrafamilial offenders account for a large proportion of sexual offenses against children, yet they are less likely to reoffend than extrafamilial offenders and tend to score lower than extrafamilial offenders on measures of antisociality and sexual deviance. This symposium will address this puzzle by reporting the results of a meta-analysis of approximately 70 unique studies comparing intrafamilial and extrafamilial offenders with child victims on measures of antisociality, sexual deviance, and other factors. The results will help us address the questions of how intrafamilial and extrafamilial offenders differ, and identify the factors that help explain why some individuals commit offenses against related rather than unrelated children.

The first presentation will summarize the comparisons of intrafamilial and extrafamilial offenders on measures of sexual deviance, including phallometric responses, self-reported sexual fantasies, and paraphilic interests. Similarly, the second presentation will summarize the group comparisons on measures of antisociality – including antisocial personality traits, criminal history, and substance use – to confirm the direction and assess the magnitude of this anticipated difference. The third presentation will examine other factors that may provide directions for future research and assessment and treatment practices, including general psychopathology, interpersonal functioning, and attitudes tolerant of sex offending. Possible explanations for the variability in findings (e.g., group composition, type of measurement) will also be presented.

Comparing Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Offenders on Sexual Deviance: A Meta-Analysis

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Sexual deviance is considered a key etiological and maintenance factor for sexual offending against children in multiple theories of child sexual abuse. However, research has produced equivocal findings regarding the level of sexual deviance in intrafamilial sex offenders. This presentation will summarize the empirical evidence comparing intrafamilial offenders to extrafamilial offenders on sexual deviance. Specifically, we will report the findings from a meta-analysis, based on approximately 70 unique samples, which examined differences between intrafamilial and extrafamilial offenders on variety of indicators of sexual deviance. Possible explanations for variability across studies (e.g., group composition) will be examined. Clarifying the empirical research on sexual deviance will shed light on competing explanations of why certain individuals sexually molest children who are related to them.

Comparing Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Offenders on Antisociality: A Meta-Analysis

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Antisociality is one of the strongest predictors of sexual recidivism in sexual offenders and is an important factor in understanding the etiology of sexual offending. However, studies with intrafamilial child molesters have presented inconsistent results, most likely due to the variability between studies in how they defined an antisocial orientation (e.g., antisocial attitudes and beliefs, impulsivity, general aggression). This presentation will report on the results of a meta-analysis that assessed the differences between intrafamilial and extrafamilial child molesters on a number of indicators of antisociality, including antisocial personality traits, psychopathy, substance abuse, and criminal history. Particular focus will be placed on factors that may moderate the findings, such as which specific indicator of antisociality is being measured and group composition. Understanding which of these indicators, if any, distinguish between intrafamilial and extrafamilial child molesters is important to help guide the assessment and treatment of these populations.

What Else Distinguishes Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Offenders Against Children?

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In this presentation, we summarize the results of meta-analytic comparisons of intrafamilial and extrafamilial offenders against children on theoretically-relevant domains other than antisociality and sexual deviance. In particular, theories about incest have focused on general psychopathology (e.g., psychiatric diagnosis, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem), interpersonal functioning (loneliness, social skills), and “cognitive distortions” (attitudes and beliefs about children and sexuality). If there are a sufficient number of studies, we will also examine family variables, which are also prominently featured in theories about incest; these variables could include relationship quality, family conflict, and evidence of other maltreatment within the family (e.g., domestic assault, physical abuse, or neglect). Implications of these findings, in conjunction with the findings reported in the previous two presentations, for theory, assessment, and treatment of incest offenders will be discussed.