

DEVELOPMENTAL ANTECEDENTS AND ETIOLOGICAL FACTORS

The Role of Developmental Antecedents and Interpersonal Characteristics in Adolescent Sexual Offending

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Despite the significance of the etiology of sexual offending among adolescents, empirical studies addressing this issue are rare. Particularly lacking are studies of sexual aggression against younger children (Daversa & Knight, 2007). Developmental antecedents, such as a history of childhood maltreatment, and a constellation of specific personality and behavioral characteristics have been identified in the early histories of juveniles who sexually offend (JSOs; Awad & Saunders, 1991; Knight & Sims-Knight, 2003, 2004). Lacking, however, are both theoretical models and empirical investigations of the specific ways in which family experiences contribute both to shaping individual dispositions and to increasing vulnerability to sexual offending. Daversa and Knight (2007) found that among JSOs, experiences of childhood abuse are indirectly linked to sexual aggression through their association with feelings of sexual inadequacy and with psychopathic traits. Results from this study suggest that maladaptive experiences within the family are associated with problematic individual and relational dispositions that can increase susceptibility to sexual aggression. Little is known empirically, however, about how specific individual and family-related factors interact to heighten JSOs' vulnerability to sexually abusive behavior.

The objective of the present study was to analyze the family environment characteristics of JSOs, and to determine how the various antecedent abuse experiences interface with adolescents' individual and interpersonal dispositions, including psychopathy related traits, such as lack of empathy, grandiosity, conning and superficial charm, as well as with aspects of adolescents' sexual offences. Participants were 248 adolescent sexual abuse perpetrators (156 had perpetrated a sexual offence against a younger child, and 92 had perpetrated a sexual offence against a peer victim). Adolescent perpetrators were aged between 13 and 18 years old, and they were recruited from outpatient and residential treatment programs, juvenile detention centers, and probation departments in Minnesota. All participants completed a short form of the Multidimensional Inventory of Development, Sex, and Aggression (MIDSA), a computerized inventory that assesses critical areas of adaptation for sex offenders. Data for the present study were derived from the developmental antecedents, intimacy, negative

masculinity, and psychopathy modules of the MIDSA. Additional information pertaining to the quality of the relationship with parents/caregivers during childhood, attachment, and offence characteristics was also collected through interviews and client file data.

Childhood maltreatment, social isolation, and peer attachment were found to covary with self-esteem, sexual performance anxiety, and psychopathic traits. Moreover, biological mother's criminal history significantly predicted JSOs' sense of grandiosity and lack of empathy. Both biological mother and father's criminal histories and biological father's history of drug abuse covaried with adolescents' sense of masculine adequacy. Multiple regression analyses and structural equation modeling investigate further the interplay and interactions among these variables. The implications for the prevention, treatment, and the theory of sexual offending will be discussed.

Examining the Etiological Significance of Precocious Sexualization in Juvenile Offenders

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Contemporary research regarding juveniles adjudicated for sexual offenses (JSOs) has demonstrated the complexity and heterogeneity of the population (Chaffin, 2008). The developmental histories of JSOs may resemble those of nonsexual delinquents in more ways than not (e.g., Ronis & Borduin, 2007). Sexually delinquent youth, however, are unique in that they typically evidence a higher prevalence of childhood victimization (Seto & Lalumière, 2010) and precocious sexualization than other juvenile offenders (Burton, Leibowitz, & Howard, 2010; van Wijk, Mali, Bullens, & Vermeiren, 2007). One such early sexualization experience is frequent exposure to pornography in childhood, a factor commonly noted in the developmental histories of JSOs (Burton, Duty, & Leibowitz, 2011).

While the effects of pornography consumption on adult males with a predilection for sexual aggression are well documented, these effects are less studied in sexually delinquent youth (Alexy, Burgess, & Prentky, 2009; Burton et al., 2010). Research has established a link between early maltreatment and greater criminality in JSOs (Alexy et al., 2009), and it appears that early sexualization may foster the development of sexual aggression in this population (Flood, 2009; Hunter, Figueredo, & Malamuth, 2010). The mechanisms through which this occurs, however, are unclear. More research is needed to determine whether precocious sexualization is related to the specific offense characteristics of sexual delinquents, such as age at first offense and severity of offense (Burton et al., 2010). The authors hypothesize that the presence of precocious sexualization will predict sexual offending, violent offending, and higher general delinquency risk. Additionally, the presence of childhood victimization is expected to moderate the effect of precocious sexualization, such that the presence of both precocious sexualization and childhood sexual abuse will be associated with more negative outcomes.

Methods

The sample consists of 227 male juvenile offenders ages 12 to 19 years ($M = 15.73$, $SD = 1.27$) housed across four detention sites in the Southeastern region of the United States. All participants were adjudicated for a sexual ($n = 103$) or non-sexual offense ($n = 124$).

Information regarding age at first sexual intercourse, age at first pornography exposure, and history of sexual offending were coded from institutional files of the participants. Sexual abuse history was assessed using the *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire* (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1997). Data regarding violent offending will be drawn from the *Self-Reported Delinquency Scale* (SRD; Elliot & Ageton, 1980). Finally, overall risk to reoffend was measured by the *Positive Achievement Change Tool* (PACT; Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2005).

Descriptive statistics have been examined for all variables of interest. The main analyses are currently in progress. Participants will be categorized as having early exposure to sexuality or not based on the presence of either or both of the following: age at first intercourse more than two SDs below the mean and age at first exposure to pornography more than two SDs below the mean. The early exposure group will be compared to the other youth in a series of analyses focused on offense type and risk. Logistic regression will be used to predict sex offender status, whereas linear regression will be utilized to predict violent delinquency and PACT scores. For each regression analysis, the main effects of and interaction between precocious sexualization and childhood sexual abuse will be examined. A significant interaction will indicate that childhood victimization moderates the relationship between early sexualization and risk.

Implications for treatment and future research will be discussed.

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