

An Empirically-Informed Conceptual Model of Risk

Symposium Chair: David Thornton, Ph.D.

This symposium seeks to articulate an understanding of risk for sexual offense that is theoretically developed, consistent with existing empirical research, and helpful for forensic evaluators and treatment-providers. The first paper contends that the traditional distinction between static and dynamic risk factors is misleading and confuses more than it helps. Better conceptual distinctions are between problem-behaviors and predisposing factors, and between a focus on functioning over the life-time and a focus on recent functioning. A notable supposition is that predisposing psychological factors are better understood as enduring long-term vulnerabilities while levels of problem behavior can be quite dynamic. The second paper develops a theoretical framework that can explain both enduring and changeable aspects of risk. The third paper explores how this model addresses different forms of change in risk factors and looks specifically at what kinds of interventions are likely to impact different underlying risk processes.

Reconceptualizing Dynamic Risk Factors

Deirdre D’Orazio, Ph.D.

David Thornton, Ph.D.

This paper reasons that the commonly accepted static/dynamic dichotomy of risk factors for sexual re-offense is false and therefore unhelpful to those who want to communicate meaningfully about the risk properties of sexual offenders. A more conceptually accurate manner of discussing the primary distinguishing features of risk factors is that of predisposing psychological factors and problematic behaviors. These can be viewed through a lens that focuses more so on recent functioning or lifetime functioning thereby yielding different snapshots of risk properties. Data supporting this position will be reviewed and discussed.

Long-Term Vulnerabilities, Human Agency, and the Accumulation of Prosocial and Antisocial Capital

David Thornton, Ph.D.
Deirdre D’Orazio, Ph.D.

This paper proposes a model of the way different underlying psychological processes interact to produce both consistency and change in risk. One underlying process is depicted by the long-term vulnerability model in which acute risk is depicted as emerging from the ongoing interaction of situations with enduring traits. This leads to long-term consistency combined with temporary changes in risk according to the frequency with which different kinds of situations are encountered. This ongoing interaction also however gives rise to purposive striving that may serve to accumulate prosocial or antisocial forms of social and psychological capital. Shifts in the ratio of prosocial and antisocial capital can progressively bias subsequent decision-making.

Accounting for Change in Models of Risk

Deirdre D’Orazio, Ph.D.
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How can this emerging model account for change that isn’t mediated through conscious intentional processes? Potential examples include the effect of aging, of biological interventions (e.g. Lupron), or that of therapeutic intervention (e.g. schema therapies, trauma treatments like EMDR, psychoanalytic therapies). Several examples are examined. It is concluded that (1) the model isn’t restricted to fully conscious intentional processes (2) some of these unconscious effects likely involve genuine changes in aspects of the long-term vulnerabilities themselves. The kinds of interventions that might be relevant to producing change in the different underlying risk processes are identified and implications for SOT practice suggested.