Childhood Adversity and Sexual Offending: Researchers' Identification and Interpretation of Empirical Evidence

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Introduction

Marshall and Barbaree (1990) suggest in their integrated theory of the etiology of sexual offending, that a wide variety of childhood adversity related issues can lead to sexual offending. It is important to note, however, that much of the research in the field of sexual offending is correlational in nature.

As Shadish, Cook, and Campbell (2002) discuss, a causal relationship can be inferred when (a) The cause preceded the effect; (b) the cause was related to the effect; and (c) there is no other explanation for the effect other than the cause. Given these criteria, correlational evidence then does not allow for causal inferences to be drawn.

Objective

Research is the foundation of effective assessment, intervention, and policy aimed at reducing sexual offending. Research differs in its methodological rigour, as well as the inferences that can be drawn from its findings. The main objective of this study is to see what factors researchers believe may lead to sexual offending, to see what evidence they consider, and to see whether their inferences are consistent with the methodological rigour employed in the study.

Participants

A survey was emailed out to 240 researchers in the field of sexual offending who had been published in the Journal of Sexual Aggression, the Journal of Sexual Offender Treatment, or Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment from 2003 to present. Of the 240 participants that were emailed, 107 completed the survey. The majority of the participants indicated atypical sexual interests and childhood adversity. The nine participants who provided childhood adversity factors were included in this study.

Method

Participants completed an on-line survey that asked them to provide a factor that may lead to sexual offending, and provide a study as evidence. The participants were then asked to indicate the inferences that they had drawn from the study they provided. We then coded the various research designs and possible inferences that can be drawn from the studies to see whether or not researchers' interpretations of research were consistent with our coding.

Results

All participants indicated non-experimental studies: longitudinal ($n = 1$), cross-sectional ($n = 6$), and descriptive ($n = 2$) designs. Descriptive designs provide one data point, without examining a relationship between relevant variables or difference between relevant groups. In general, the studies provided demonstrated that some forms of childhood adversity are both associated with and predictive of sexual offending. As noted previously, however, these non-experimental designs do not permit causal inferences.

The results of the study are displayed in Tables 1, 2, and 3 below. The responses are divided by research design, and total scores are listed. The various questions they replied to are listed as the names of the various tables.

Table 1
Which of the following is demonstrated by the results of the study? (Select all that apply)

Research Design	Inference			
	Causal	Predictive	Associated	None of the above
Longitudinal ($n = 1$)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Cross-Sectional ($n = 6$)	0 (0%)	2 (33.3%)	6 (100%)	0 (0%)
Descriptive ($n = 2$)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)
Total ($N = 9$)	0 (0%)	3 (33.3%)	8 (88.8%)	0 (0%)

Table 2
Which of the following is the most plausible interpretations of the results? (Select all that apply)

Research Design	Interpretation				
	Factor influenced sexual offending	Sexual offending influenced factor	Something else influenced both	Factor had no influence	None of the above
Longitudinal ($n = 1$)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Cross-Sectional ($n = 6$)	6 (100%)	0 (0%)	1 (16.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Descriptive ($n = 2$)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total ($N = 9$)	9 (100%)	0 (0%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Table 3
What are the implications of the results of the study? (Select all that apply)

Research Design	Implication						
	Change on factor would change likelihood of offending	Targeting this factor would reduce likelihood of offending	More rigorous research should be done	Important factor to consider when assessing risk of re-offending	Important to target in treatment aimed at reducing re-offending	Important to consider in offender management	None of the above
Longitudinal ($n = 1$)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Cross-Sectional ($n = 6$)	2 (33.3%)	2 (33.3%)	3 (50%)	2 (33.3%)	3 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Descriptive ($n = 2$)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)
Total ($N = 9$)	4 (44.4%)	3 (33.3%)	3 (33.3%)	2 (22.2%)	4 (44%)	0 (0%)	1 (11.1%)

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Conclusion

The results of the current study suggest that researchers in the field of sexual offending may be drawing causal inferences that are not clearly supported by the by the evidence. Researchers appeared to be sensitive to the fact that they can not draw causal inferences from the research they provided when asked directly. Nevertheless, the majority of participants seemed to implicitly infer causality, with 89% indicating that the only plausible interpretation of the findings was that childhood adversity influenced sexual offending, 44% indicating that changing childhood adversity would change the likelihood of sexual offending, and 33% indicating that interventions addressing childhood adversity would reduce the likelihood of sexual offending. That is, despite the fact that all of the researchers indicated that their study did not provide evidence for a causal relationship, many still endorsed causal interpretations as the most plausible. Future research should replicate our study with a larger, more representative sample. If this misinterpretation of evidence is present in a larger sample, then future research should also attempt to further understand and remedy the issue.

References

Marshall, W., & Barbaree, H. (1990). An integrated theory of the etiology of sexual offending. In *Handbook of sexual assault: Issues, theories, and treatment of the offender* (pp.257-275). New York: Plenum Press.

Shadish, W., Cook, T., & Campbell, D. (2002). Experiments and Generalized Causal Inference. *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Generalized Causal Inference.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

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