

Nunes, K. L. (2017, October). Research perspective: (Un)certainty about the causes of sexual offending. In K. L. Nunes (Chair), *Different perspectives on (un)certainty: Challenges, standards, and strategies*. Symposium conducted at the 36th Annual Research and Treatment Conference of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Kansas City, Missouri.



**Research Perspective: (Un)Certainty  
About the Causes of Sexual Offending**

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**Scientific Research and Uncertainty**

- Continuum from complete uncertainty to complete certainty
- Goal is to reduce uncertainty, but even in the best studies some uncertainty remains



**4 Main Types of Validity (Shadish et al., 2002)**

- Internal validity
  - Causal relationship between the variables
- Construct validity
  - Representation of the presumed constructs
- External validity
  - Generalizability of the results
- Statistical conclusion validity
  - Accuracy of the results



**Cannot Rule Out Every Threat to Validity**

- Typically a trade-off between different types of validity in any one study



**Some Strategies for Reducing Uncertainty**

- Methodologically rigorous studies minimize the number and plausibility of threats to validity, thereby permitting stronger inferences



- More rigorous research designs
- Measurement and statistical control of confounding variables
- Better measures
- More representative sampling of population
- Larger samples
- Synthesize evidence from studies with complementary strengths and weaknesses

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**Acknowledging Uncertainty**

- Research is the best way to reduce the degree of uncertainty about the causes of sexual offending, but cannot completely eliminate uncertainty
- Acknowledgement of uncertainty is **not** a proscription against taking action in practice or policy

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**Action in the Face of Uncertainty**

- Speculate as needed about the causes of sexual offending
- But acknowledge the degree of uncertainty, and the distinction between evidence versus hypothesis/speculation

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**Some Relevant Readings**

- Harris, G. T., & Rice, M. E. (2015). Progress in violence risk assessment and communication: Hypothesis versus evidence. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 33, 128-145. doi: 10.1002/bsl.2157
- Nunes, K. L., Pedneault, C., Filleter, W. E., Maimone, S., Blank, C., & Atlas, M. (2017). "I know correlation doesn't prove causation, but...": Are we jumping to unfounded conclusions about the causes of sexual offending? *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1177/1079063217729156
- Shadish, W. R., Cook, T. D., & Campbell, D. T. (2002). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for generalized causal inference*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

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