Sex Offender Research: How do we Interpret the Evidence?
Chloe Pedneault & Kevin L. Nunes
Carleton University

Introduction

We asked people who had published an article in a journal on sexual offending to identify an important factor in sexual offending, supporting evidence, and the inferences they draw from this evidence.

Research questions:

- What factors do researchers believe lead to sexual offending and what type of evidence do they provide for this relationship?

- Are researchers appropriately sensitive to methodological rigor when drawing conclusions from research?

Method

Individuals who had published an article in a journal on sexual offending were recruited via e-mail.

Participants completed an online survey which asked them to
- Provide a factor they thought was important in leading to sexual offending
- Provide a research study that demonstrates a relationship between this factor and sexual offending
- Draw inferences from the results of the study they provided

The most commonly identified factor was deviant sexual interests (*n* = 15); we focused on these participants.

We coded the rigor of the research design used in each study (Kazdin, 2003).

Results

All participants provided a reference for non-experimental designs. Most were single-wave longitudinal designs (*n* = 13), whereas the remainder were cross-sectional designs (*n* = 2).

Based on our coding and review, these studies demonstrate that deviant sexual interests predict sexual offending. However, these studies do not support causal inferences because they do not eliminate the possibility that a third variable causes both deviant sexual interests and sexual offending. These studies also do not address the relationship between change in deviant sexual interests and sexual offending because they measured sexual interests only once.

Inferences drawn from non-experimental studies

Figure 1. Inferences about the observed relationship between deviant sexual interests and sexual offending

Note: Causal inferences are indicated in red

Figure 2. Inferences about the direction of influence between variables

Note: Circled values indicate low endorsement of plausible inferences

Figure 3. Inferences about the implications of the results of the study they provided

Note: Causal inferences are indicated in red

1. Change on this factor can be expected to lead to change in the likelihood of sexual offending
2. Targeting this factor (e.g., in treatment) can be expected to reduce the likelihood of sexual offending
3. More rigorous research should be done to determine if this factor has any effect on sexual offending
4. This is an important factor to consider when estimating risk for sexual re-offending
5. This is an important factor to target in treatment programs aimed at reducing the likelihood of sexual re-offending
6. This is an important factor to consider when making decisions about sexual offender management aimed at reducing the likelihood of sexual re-offending, such as prison sentences, parole/probation, supervision intensity, etc.
7. None of the above

Conclusions

- The majority of participants provided single-wave longitudinal non-experimental studies as evidence for a relationship between deviant sexual interests and sexual offending.

- Although the majority of participants correctly concluded that deviant sexual interests were predictive of sexual offending, 20% inferred from the non-experimental evidence that deviant sexual interests were a cause of sexual offending.

- Most of the participants also correctly identified one plausible interpretation of the evidence, but failed to acknowledge that the observed results could also reflect the influence of a third variable.

- Appropriate implications received the highest endorsement, but unsupported implications reflecting assumptions about causal influence and change were also endorsed by one third to half of the participants.

- In the future, similar studies should examine a more representative sample and use a more controlled research design.

References

Kazdin, A. E. (2003). *Research design in clinical psychology* (Vol. 3). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Contact Information

Chloe Pedneault: chloepedneault@cmail.Carleton.ca