



Moral judgment of young sex offenders with and without intellectual disabilities

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ABSTRACT

This study examined differences in moral judgment between juvenile sex offenders with and without intellectual disabilities. The Sociomoral Reflection Measure-Short Form (SRM-SF) was used to assess moral judgment, and was extended with questions referring to general sexual situations and to the offenders' abuse victim(s). Juvenile sex offenders with and without ID significantly differed in moral judgment stage regarding general life, sexual and own abuse victim situations. Juvenile sex offenders with ID generally showed stage 2 moral reasoning, which indicated that their justifications for moral decisions were dominated by instrumental and pragmatic reciprocity, whereas juvenile sex offenders without ID used reasons and justifications representing transitional moral stage 2/3 moral judgment, indicating that the maintenance of interpersonal relationships was considered to a certain extent in their justifications for moral decisions. Future research should examine to what extent moral judgment of offenders with ID should be targeted in treatment.

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1. Introduction

Moral judgment, which pertains to the “reasons or justifications for moral decisions or values” (Gibbs, 2010, p. 130), is considered to be related to delinquent behavior. Although it is widely acknowledged that moral emotions, such as empathy, are important for moral functioning (Gibbs, 2010; Hoffman, 2000), it is moral cognition, in particular immature moral judgment, that has been shown to be most strongly related to delinquent behavior (Stams et al., 2006; Van Vugt et al., 2011). Given the link between moral cognition and delinquent behavior, people with intellectual disabilities (ID) may be at increased risk for delinquency, as their cognitive impairments could set limits to the development of mature moral judgment. Although there is indeed empirical evidence showing that people with ID are overrepresented in the criminal justice system (Cullen, 1993; Holland, 2004; Holland, Clare, & Mukhopadhyay, 2002; Lindsay, Law, & Macleod, 2002), especially with respect to sexual offending (Cantor, Blanchard, Robichaud, & Christensen, 2005; Lund, 1990; Walker & McCabe, 1973), little research has focused on moral development of offenders with ID. It is important to examine moral development of offenders with ID, as it is questionable whether offenders who do not fully understand that certain behavior is against the rules and mores of society (Lindsay, 2002) can be held accountable for their delinquent behavior (LeSage,

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2005). Moreover, moral development of offenders with ID should be examined in order to establish whether efforts to enhance their level of moral judgment can be successful.

Langdon, Clare, and Murphy (2010) recently discussed the literature regarding moral development of individuals with ID. This review showed individuals with intellectual disabilities to have lower levels of moral judgment than their chronologically aged comparison group. When individuals with ID were compared with typically developing individuals of the same mental age, these differences disappeared (Blakey, 1973; Lind & Smith, 1984). However, there are indications that individuals with ID, compared to typically developing persons, have difficulties understanding the motive of the actor and more frequently focus on the consequences of an act in their judgments (Abel, 1941; Bender, 1980; Blakey, 1973). In addition, moral judgment of individuals with ID develops with age, but only progresses at a slower pace, and this progress is not as marked as in their peers (Mahaney & Stephens, 1974; Moore & Stephens, 1974; Stephens & McLaughlin, 1974).

It is still equivocal which level of moral judgment stage individuals with ID can obtain. For example, Sigman, Ungerer, and Russell (1983) found some stage three moral judgments in a small group of adolescents with borderline intellectual functioning, although the majority of this group showed pre-conventional (immature) levels of moral judgment. Recently, Langdon, Murphy, Clare, and Palmer (2010) showed a group of adult men with IQ's under 70 to show pre-conventional levels of moral judgment, indicating that their scores fell within stage one and two. It is questionable if individuals with ID, and in particular offenders with ID, are able to reach mature levels of moral judgment that have been shown to protect against criminal behavior (Stams et al., 2006; Van Vugt et al., 2011).

Moral judgment has been identified as an important risk factor for recidivism in both adolescent and adult offender samples (Van Vugt et al., 2011). Although, according to the "what works" principles of judicial interventions, treatment should address criminogenic risk factors, such as moral judgment, risk factors also need to be dynamic in the sense that they are changeable over time (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Even though there seems to be some progress in the level of moral judgment of individuals with ID, these progresses are small and inconsistent. This may mean that in specific groups of individuals, such as offenders with ID, moral judgment should not be a target for treatment because of its relatively static nature. Nevertheless, as the risk-need-responsivity model (RNR model) suggests, it is all about fitting general models to individualistic cases (Doyle & Dolan, 2002), signifying that moral judgment as a risk factor should not be addressed as a changeable criminogenic factor (needs principle) in treatment, but needs to be addressed to as a rather unchangeable factor (responsivity principle) that should be taken into account in treatment that targets desistance from crime.

Langdon, Clare, and Murphy (2011) recently suggested moral judgment in individuals with ID to be curvilinear, meaning that the lowest levels of moral judgment may protect against criminal behavior, as this stage reflects the obeying of authorities and law. Individuals who have borderline intellectual functioning and whose moral judgment falls into stage two, meaning their reasons for moral decisions are dominated by the fulfillment of own needs and instrumental exchange of favors, would be at risk for antisocial and delinquent behavior.

For the purpose of this study, we examined a group of young offenders with and without ID who have a history of sexual offending. To our knowledge, no research has yet focused on differences in moral judgment between young sex offenders with and without ID. For the purpose of this study the Sociomoral Reflection Measure–Short Form (SRM-SF) was used. As it is suggested that sex offenders with ID also have a poorer sexual knowledge than individuals without ID (Clare, 1993), possibly affecting their sexual mores, we added questions to the SRM-SF regarding moral judgment in sexual situations. Lastly, as all respondents committed a sexual offense, we also added questions about the offender's own abuse victim (see Van Vugt et al., 2008). The expectation was that juvenile sex offenders with ID would show lower-stage moral judgment in all three moral judgment situations; general-life (original items), sexual and own abuse victim situation than those without ID.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

All sex offenders were sampled from three juvenile correctional facilities (one special facility for offenders with ID) and six forensic outpatient treatment centers in the Netherlands. The sex offenders were subdivided into two groups according to the standard criteria that are used in the Netherlands for the classification of mental retardation. All individuals with a total IQ between 50 and 85, additional adaptive behavior problems or psychiatric problems, and who are in need of long-term support were designated as individuals with intellectual disability (Moonen & Versteegen, 2006). The group with an IQ over 85 was designated as the non ID group.

The first group consisted of $n = 32$ male sex offenders with (borderline) intellectual disability ($IQ < 85$): the total IQ scores ranged from 57 to 84, $M = 72.26$; $SD = 7.03$. The mean age of the offenders at the time of the index offense was $M = 14.27$, $SD = 1.59$, and at the time of the assessment $M = 17.94$, $SD = 2.12$. The majority of the participants attended special education schools (46.9%) or were enrolled in pre-vocational secondary education (43.8%), which prepares students for careers in (non-academic) manual labor jobs. One of the respondents was still enrolled in primary education and one respondent was enrolled in secondary vocational education. This information was not available for one of the participants. Most participants (81.3%) were native Dutch. We classified the sex offender group according to typologies that are used in clinical practice and scientific research. Most offenders were classified as solo sex offenders (90.6%), as they committed the sexual offense alone. Only one participant was a group sex offender (3.1%) and two respondents committed both solo and group sex offenses (6.3%). Approximately 56.3% of our sample was classified as child abusers, meaning that the victim was at least five years

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