



High-risk sexual offenders: An examination of sexual fantasy, sexual paraphilia, psychopathy, and offence characteristics

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ABSTRACT

High-risk sexual offenders are a complex and heterogeneous group of offenders about whom researchers, clinicians, and law enforcement agencies still know relatively little. In response to the paucity of information that is specifically applicable to high-risk offenders, the present study investigated the potential influence of sexual fantasy, sexual paraphilia, and psychopathy on the offending behaviour of 139 of the highest risk sexual offenders in one province of Canada. The sample included 41 child molesters, 42 rapists, 18 rapist/molesters, 30 mixed offenders, and 6 “other” sexual offenders. Two offenders could not be categorized by type due to insufficient file information. Data analyses revealed significant differences between offender types for a number of criminal history variables including past sexual and nonsexual convictions, number of victims, weapon use, and age of offending onset. Further, there were significant differences between offender types for sexual fantasy themes, paraphilia diagnoses, and levels of psychopathy. For example, results revealed that offenders’ sexual fantasies were significantly more likely to correspond with the specific type of index sexual offence that they had committed. Further, offenders scoring high in psychopathy were significantly more likely to have a sadistic paraphilia than offenders with either low or moderate psychopathy scores. Results from the current study provide a refined and informed understanding of sexual offending behaviour with important implications for future research, assessment, and treatment, as well as law enforcement practices when working with high-risk sexual offenders.

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1. Introduction

Over a decade ago, the Government of Canada established a task force to understand more clearly what needed to be done regarding high-risk sexual offenders. A “high-risk” offender is typically defined in a clinical setting as an individual who, based on an evaluation of a number of actuarial and clinical risk factors, has a high probability of re-offending (Hanson, 1998). However, the clinical conceptualization of high-risk has also had major implications within a legal setting. In fact, based on the report of the Government of Canada’s task force, a comprehensive package of aggressive reforms was introduced to the *Criminal Code of Canada* which were intended to better manage and control what is referred to in Canada as “dangerous offenders” (Canada Solicitor General, 2001). These dangerous offender provisions stipulate that the most dangerous and violent sexual predators are to remain incarcerated until it is believed that there is no longer

a risk to the general public.¹ It has very aptly been suggested that a more refined understanding of high-risk sexual offenders would be particularly beneficial as this subset of offenders is typically more violent, have a greater number of victims, and are at a greater risk for sexual recidivism (Levenson, 2004).

High-risk sexual offenders are a complex and heterogeneous group of individuals who are likely motivated by a combination of biological, environmental, and psychological factors. Unfortunately, minimal research has investigated the motivational and offence characteristics of sexual offenders, and this is particularly true among samples deemed to be high-risk. In fact, the majority of existing studies have focused specifically on issues of risk, and the utility and predictive ability of risk assessment measures. An additional shortcoming of the existing literature is its predominant focus on child molesters exclusively, or on sexual offenders as a single unit with very little distinction of offender type.

¹ A dangerous offender designation can subject the offender to an indeterminate prison sentence, whether or not the crime he/she was convicted of carries a life sentence. The purpose of the legislation is to detain offenders who are deemed too dangerous to be released into society because of their violent tendencies, but whose sentences would not necessarily keep them incarcerated under other legislation, such as the Correctional and Conditional Release Act (Statutes of Canada, 1992).

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Given the diverse nature of sexual offenders, we sought to examine motivational and offence characteristics across all types of sexual offenders among a group of offenders considered to be some of the highest risk sexual offenders. Although the current article does not claim to provide a snapshot of the characteristics of sex offenders in general, it does afford a unique opportunity to gain a more informed understanding of some of the characteristics and factors that contribute to high-risk sexual offenders.

1.1. Sexual fantasy and sexual offending

Sexual fantasy has been defined as almost any mental imagery that is sexually arousing or erotic to the individual (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). The content of sexual fantasies varies greatly between individuals and is thought to be highly dependent on internal and external stimuli, such as what individuals see, hear, and directly experience (e.g., Jones & Barlow, 1990). Depending on an individual's sexual interests, fantasies may include such things as confirmation of sexual power, irresistibility, imagery with past, present, and future lovers, aggressiveness, or submissive/masochistic tendencies (Arndt, Foehl, & Good, 1985; Crepault & Couture, 1980).

Despite some past theoretical and empirical interest, there has been relatively little recent investigation into understanding the role that sexual fantasy plays in sexually aberrant behaviour (Deu & Edelmann, 1997; Howitt, 2004; Langevin, Lang, & Curnoe, 1998; Prentky et al., 1989; Williams, Cooper, Howell, Yuille, & Paulhus, 2009). In the past, many professionals have proposed that deviant sexual fantasies are elemental in facilitating sexual offending and are important contributors to both the aetiology and dynamics of sexual offending (Deu & Edelmann, 1997; Laws & Marshall, 1990; MacCulloch, Snowden, Wood, & Mills, 1983; Prentky et al., 1989). In fact, it has been demonstrated that deviant sexual fantasies appear to directly impact the offending process (Deu & Edelmann, 1997; Gee, Devilly, & Ward, 2004; MacCulloch et al., 1983; Prentky et al., 1989). For example, MacCulloch et al. (1983) found that repetitive sadistic masturbatory fantasies spilled over into overt sexual behaviour among 13 psychopathic hospital patients as a result of the offenders' compulsions to seek and enact increasingly dangerous tryouts of their sexual fantasies. More recently, Maniglio (2010) conducted a review of seven previous studies that examined the relationship between deviant sexual fantasies and sexual homicide. Results suggested that it was the distinct combination of early traumatic experiences (in particular, child abuse), deviant fantasy, and social/sexual dysfunction that may lead to an increased chance of committing a sexual homicide. There are also a variety of case studies that demonstrate a very strong link between deviant sexual fantasies and sexual (often serial) offending (e.g., Carabellese, Maniglio, Greco, & Catanesi, 2011).

As a result of these findings, coercive sexual fantasies that lead to deviant sexual arousal are considered by some to be a primary motivating factor for aggression and rape offences (Drieschner & Lange, 1999; Laws & Marshall, 1990; Ryan, 2004). Hence, it is not surprising that the presence of deviant sexual fantasy is one of the major factors in contemporary diagnosis and treatment of sex offenders (c.f. Abel & Blanchard, 1974; Branaman, 1996; Conte, 1991; Langevin et al., 1998). Nonetheless, not all researchers are in agreement regarding the exact effect deviant sexual fantasy has on sexual offenders' behaviours. In fact, there is a considerable amount of research to suggest that a substantial number of individuals who have not committed any type of criminal sexual behaviour engage in sexually deviant fantasy (e.g., Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). Among child molesters and child pornographers, Sheldon and Howitt (2008) demonstrated that the most common sexual fantasies reported were typical adult-male heterosexual fantasies. Langevin et al. (1998) have proposed that the engagement in sexual fantasy may serve a number of other more positive purposes including wish fulfilment, curiosity, alleviating sexual frustration in the absence of a suitable partner, and/or prevention of additional offending. Moreover, research

has established that deviant sexual fantasy is not exclusive to sexual offenders, and that non-offenders also engage in deviant sexual fantasy (Crepault & Couture, 1980; Gray, Watt, Hassan, & MacCulloch, 2003). For example, Gray et al. (2003) found that close to half of their non-offending participants reported sadistic sexual fantasies and interests. This suggests that deviant sexual fantasy may not be as elemental in the aetiology of sexual offending as is currently believed, or alternatively, that what distinguishes non-offenders from offenders may be their degree of sadistic interest and fantasy or their willingness to act on their sadistic fantasies.

In the last decade and a half, there has been a slight increase in the number of studies devoted to understanding the different types of sexual fantasies reported by sexual offenders. However, perhaps because of the public's extreme concern regarding child predators, the preponderance of fantasy information available focuses on the fantasies reported by child molesters exclusively, or instead, on sexual offenders as a single unit with very little distinction of offender type (Dutton & Newlon, 1988; Marshall, Barbaree, & Eccles, 1991; Proulx, Pereaault, & Ouimet, 1999). Not surprisingly, research has demonstrated that child molesters disclose deviant sexual fantasies specifically involving children to a much greater extent than rapists and non-offenders (Looman, 1995). However, with regard to reports of non-deviant sexual fantasies, Looman (1995) found no significant difference between child molesters and rapists. In an earlier study by Quinsey, Chaplin, and Carrigan (1979), child molesters were grouped into intra-familial (IF) and extra-familial (EF) categories. These researchers found that in comparison to EF child molesters, IF child molesters had more age-appropriate sexual attractions which made them more prone to having non-deviant, age-appropriate sexual fantasies. Phallometric studies have revealed that rapists may not have a preference for depictions of aggressive sex over consensual sexual intercourse (Looman & Marshall, 2005) which suggests that some rapists may entertain non-deviant sexual interests and fantasies. Finally, Looman (2001) found that high-risk rapists readily admitted their deviant sexual fantasies to a greater extent than lower-risk rapists and child molesters suggesting that reports of sexual fantasy may differ not only between different types of offenders but also by levels of risk.

In spite of these findings, the available evidence fails to support any exclusive association between different types of sexual fantasies (e.g., violent, child, consensual, and combination of violent and child) and the offences perpetrated by high-risk sexual offenders. Despite limited findings and the belief that sexual fantasy does play a role in the sexual offences committed by sexual offenders, there is little clarity or insight into the nature of that relationship (Daleiden, Kaufman, Hilliker, & O'Neil, 1998; Howells, Day, & Wright, 2004; MacCulloch et al., 1983; Meloy, 2000).

1.2. Sexual paraphilia and sexual offending

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR), defines paraphilia as a mental disorder characterized by recurrent intense sexual urges and sexually arousing fantasies, or behaviours involving (a) nonhuman objects (e.g., animals and inanimate objects) (b) the suffering or humiliation of oneself or one's partner (e.g., whipping, biting and verbally abusing), or (c) children or other non-consenting people (e.g., mentally challenged; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Like all voluntary behaviours, paraphilias run the gamut from the seemingly harmless, such as fetichisms, to the more serious and violent, such as paedophilia and sexual sadism (Healey, 2006). Among a random sample ($n = 2450$) of the general population, 2.8% of men and 0.4% of women reported at least one episode of transvestic fetishism that met DSM-IV-TR criteria (Långström & Zucker, 2005). Using the same nonclinical, nonforensic sample, Långström and Seto (2006) suggested that acts of voyeurism are probably the most common with 11.5% of men, and 3.9% of women reporting

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