

I33 Motivations to Offend: Hands-On vs. Hands-Off Sex Offenders

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The goals of this presentation are to: (1) identify the motivations behind child molestation and child pornography offenses and to demonstrate that sexual gratification is not the sole motivator for these crimes; (2) compare the motivations of child molesters and child pornography offenders to establish that sex offenders are a heterogeneous group and thus require individualized treatment interventions; and, (3) provide greater insight into the motivations behind child molestation and child pornography offenses, in order to improve risk assessments and design effective treatment strategies for sex offenders.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating that sexual gratification is not always the sole, or even primary, motivation for committing sex offenses against children. In order to effectively treat sex offenders, treatment providers must correctly identify and address the factors that led to the sexual offense. Thus, understanding the subjective motivations behind sexual offenses is necessary, as it is difficult to determine effective individualized treatment strategies for different sex offenders if unaware of their reasons for committing the offense.

Due to the severe and lasting harm caused by sexual offenses against children, treatment programs for sex offenders must be as effective as possible. Consequently, cutting-edge research continues to be required in order to better inform treatment programs and increase treatment efficacy. Since sex offenders are a heterogeneous population, it is essential that treatment providers have a thorough understanding of the many possible reasons for committing sexual offenses. Research has found that the most effective method for reducing sexual recidivism is recognizing and understanding the motivations behind offending.¹ This is logical, since it is unlikely that treatment providers will be able to provide the most effective treatments for sex offenders if the root causes of their behaviors are unknown. For example, a sex offender motivated by pedophilic sexual interests will require different treatment interventions than a non-pedophilic sex offender. It is also important to be aware that child molesters and child pornography offenders can have significantly different motivations for offending and are, therefore, likely to have different risk factors and require different treatments.

To date, most attempts to understand the behaviors of sex offenders have been from an external perspective, where the objective “facts” are considered more meaningful than the offender’s subjectively experienced realities; however, attempting to understand the offender’s subjective motivations for committing the sexual offense(s) is crucial, as it has been pointed out that “behavior is the product of one’s own sense of reality regardless of the degree to which that reality matches the objective facts of that person’s life.”² Determining the subjective motivations of sex offenders requires the use of qualitative methods that permit investigation of factors that may fall outside quantitative frameworks. Thus, the current studies involved a radical shift away from simply describing the characteristics of sex offenders or quantifying what sex offenders do, toward research that will help to identify and explain the subjective experiences behind child molestation and child pornography offenses.

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Two studies were conducted using semi-structured interviews with males who were charged with a hands-on sexual offense against a child (study one) or with accessing, possessing, and/or distributing child pornography (study two). These studies employed a novel perspective, focusing on the “why,” as opposed to “what” or “how,” to explore the motivations that lead men to commit sexual offenses against children. Interviews were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as phenomenology facilitates an understanding of how individuals perceive the world around them and make sense of their lived experiences (a concept often ignored in sex offender research). Child molesters and child pornography offenders were found to share some motivations for offending, such as sexual gratification and difficulties forming or maintaining relationships. Motivations reported exclusively by child molesters included: (1) non-sexual forms of gratification (e.g., seeking intimacy); and, (2) childhood experiences (e.g., personal abuse). Motivations reported exclusively by child pornography offenders included: (1) different pathways to offending (e.g., development of pedophilic interests); and, (2) mitigating factors (e.g., failure to see harm). The results of this research have the potential to improve the efficacy of risk assessments and treatment strategies for both child molesters and child pornography offenders by understanding and addressing their subjective motivations for offending.

Reference(s):

1. Robertiello G., Terry K.J. Can we profile sex offenders? A review of sex offender typologies. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*. 2007;12:508-518.
2. Skrapec C. Phenomenology and serial murder: Asking different questions. *Homicide Studies*. 2001;5:46-63, p. 52.

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