

Evaluating the Alleged Sexual Offender

Susan J. Sachsenmaier, Ph.D.

Professionals involved in evaluations of alleged sexual offenders who have no history of detected sexual offenses are confronted by the complex issue of conducting a psychosexual evaluation or risk assessment without addressing the issue of guilt or innocence. There is scant research and theoretical literature to guide the professional in these evaluations or to offer the attorney or judge reviewing such an evaluation. This paper describes the guiding principles of such an evaluation, structuring the evaluation, choosing methods for data collection, data integration, hypothesis formation, and the reasoning process that leads to an opinion that is both scientifically and ethically sound. This chapter addresses viewing time and penile plethysmography as ways of determining sexual interests and sexual arousal patterns. Polygraphy in the context of sexual history verification is discussed. These psychophysiological assessment methods are widely used in sexual offender evaluations; therefore, an examination of their role in the assessment of an alleged sexual offender is relevant. Foremost court rulings involving each major assessment method are presented, along with an analysis of how they may inform our practice in different psycho-legal contexts, such as child custody with alleged incest, the fact-finding phase of a criminal trial, sentencing, and post-disposition treatment. Ethical and practice standards developed by the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers are referred to throughout the presentation.