

**Studies of Sex Offenders' (Phallometrically Measured) Sexual Interests:  
Implications for Theory Development**

Martin L. Lalumière, Ph.D., Symposium Chair

In this symposium we discuss new theoretical developments in the study of sex offenders' sexual interests as observed in phallometric assessments. Sex offenders' phallometric response profiles are still their most distinguishing features, and are very good predictors of future behavior. A better understanding of the etiology of sex offenders' sexual interests is likely to lead to improved theories of sexual offending and to better methods of assessment and treatment.

The first talk will examine the association between low IQ (including mental retardation) and phallometric responses, and will provide a test of the "counterfeit deviance" hypothesis. The counterfeit deviance hypothesis states that sex offenders with very low IQ appear sexually deviant but their behavior is better accounted for by differential opportunities, lack of restraints, or sexual immaturity, among other things. The alternative hypothesis is that low IQ is a risk factor—in the absence of unique situational factors—for atypical sexual interests. Marnie Rice and her colleagues will present the results of a study speaking to these hypotheses.

The second talk will examine the association between psychopathy and phallometric responses, and will provide a test of the hypothesis that psychopaths show more deviant phallometric profiles (i.e., are more sexually aroused by violence) because of inherent and pathological failures of inhibition and lack of empathy. The alternative hypothesis is that psychopaths have a unique pattern of sexual interests that was positively associated with reproductive success in ancestral environments. Grant Harris and his colleagues will present the results of a study speaking to these hypotheses.

The third talk will examine the phenomenon of "penile indifference" among sex offenders. Penile indifference refers here to a common outcome of phallometric assessments of sex offenders, that is, a lack of discrimination among various categories (as opposed to a clear preference, as often shown by non-sexually offending men). Is penile indifference simply caused by faking attempts, or is the observed undifferentiated pattern of arousal a true reflection of offenders' preferences (i.e., indifference)? Martin Lalumière and his colleagues will present results from several studies that distinguish between these two alternatives.

Together these three talks will cover some of the latest research on atypical sexual interests, addressing three questions that are of great interest to both researchers and practitioners.

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**Sex Offenders with Mental Retardation:  
Testing Counterfeit Deviance and Neurodevelopmental Explanations of  
Pedophilia**

Marnie E. Rice, Ph.D.

Grant Harris, Ph.D.

Carol Lang

Terry Chaplin

Some investigators have concluded that true sexual deviance is rare among sex offenders with mental retardation, suggesting that circumstance and opportunity are the factors that principally determine the victim choice and offense behavior of this population. The idea that any sexually deviant behavior by persons with mental retardation stems from a lack of sexual knowledge or from general social and intellectual immaturity rather than true sexual deviance, has been termed the “counterfeit deviance” hypothesis. A separate line of research has suggested that pedophilia (a true sexual interest in pre-pubescent children) is inversely associated with IQ (and with several other indicators of neurodevelopmental perturbation). This latter line of evidence supports the idea that men with mental retardation would exhibit increased risk of pedophilia, that offenders with mental retardation would exhibit increased risk of sex offending, and that sex offenders with mental retardation would exhibit increased risk of pedophilia.

In the present study, 69 sex offenders with mental retardation were compared with a matched sample of 69 sex offenders without intellectual impairment on a battery of phallometric tests and several historical variables. The results generally supported the idea that, as among sex offenders in general, sex offenders with mental retardation commit sexual offenses because of their sexual interests; results were not consistent with the counterfeit deviance hypothesis. The phallometric responses of the sex offenders with mental retardation matched their victims’ age and gender just as much as did the responses of the comparison sample of sex offenders without mental retardation. The present sample of sex offenders with mental retardation were more likely to exhibit phallometric and behavioral evidence of the most extreme forms of pedophilia – sexual interest in very young children and in boys. Moreover, the present results indicated that the sex offenders with mental retardation had victims in more different age and gender categories than the comparison sex offenders. The two groups did not differ in their sexual interest in violence and coercion, though both groups exhibited average phallometric profiles that would be considered extremely deviant in comparison to men without sex offense histories. The present finding suggests that these (rape-prone) preferences might not share all the same etiological bases as pedophilic interests.

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The results were consistent with research by Cantor and colleagues suggesting that pedophilia might be considered a neurodevelopmental disorder. The present results suggest that these men may be of high risk for sexual recidivism, especially to very young children, and point to the importance of complete assessments of paraphilic sexual interests and risk of recidivism. The fact that child molesters with mental retardation exhibit, on average, pedophilic sexual preferences, especially preferences for boys and for very young children, suggests that treatments that target these deviant preferences may be indicated. Finally, these results suggest the importance of monitoring child molesters with mental retardation who exhibit deviant age preferences whenever they are in the presence of children.

### **Psychopathy and Sexual Responses to Phallometric Stimuli Emphasizing Serious Injury to Victims: Testing Psychopathy as a Product of Natural Selection**

Grant T. Harris, Ph.D.

Marnie E. Rice, Ph.D.

Catherine Cormier

Terry Chaplin

Previous studies have reported an association between psychopathy and sexual deviance assessed phallometrically. This finding has generally been regarded as consistent with a basis for psychopathy implicating cortical and subcortical deficits in executive functioning and emotional responding. Thus, the association between deviant sexual responses and psychopathy scores might be regarded as a manifestation of psychopaths' relative inability to restrain basic impulses, recognize the consequences of behavior, and learn from experience. As well, the association might well be seen as the highly expected result of an emotional dysfunction characteristic of psychopathy such that psychopaths are comparatively unempathic and callous, including, in the case of psychopathic sex offenders, lack of awareness of the suffering of victims.

Somewhat in contrast with a proximal explanation of psychopathy as neurophysiological dysfunction, a distal or ultimate selectionist account posits that psychopaths possess a distinct neurophysiology by virtue of its association with a viable life history strategy in past generations. As such, the sexuality of psychopaths is expected to reflect interests, preferences and behaviors that led to successful reproduction during human evolution. Consistent with this account, previous research has indicated that the victims of psychopathic sex offenders are more likely to be female and of reproductively viable ages (compared to the victims of nonpsychopathic sex

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offenders). In addition, psychopathic sex offenders are relatively less likely (compared to nonpsychopathic sex offenders) to exhibit pedophilia in phallometric assessment. It does appear that psychopathic sex offenders are more likely to exhibit sexually deviant preferences for violence, coercion, and sadism. From a theoretical perspective, these latter associations have been difficult to interpret, because both the distal selectionist account and the proximal pathological view anticipate that psychopaths would be relatively indifferent to the suffering of others.

The two perspectives do, however, make different predictions with respect to depictions of extreme violence and serious injury to victims – such a preference is unlikely to have been associated with successful reproduction. For many years our phallometric laboratory has incorporated very extreme depictions of violence and brutality in phallometric evaluation of rapists and child molesters. In addition, we have scored the PCL-R on sex offenders who have participated in this testing. These data permit a strong disconfirmation of the psychopathy-as-adaptation hypothesis. That is, a monotonically positive association between PCL-R scores and the brutality and physical injury of victims described in the phallometric stimuli (though quite consistent with the psychopathy-as-pathology view) would be quite inconsistent with the idea that psychopathy has been a viable life history strategy during human evolution. This paper will present the results of this strong test employing a sample of approximately 600 sex offenders.

### **What Accounts for “Penile Indifference” among Sex Offenders?**

Martin L. Lalumière, Ph.D.  
Grant T. Harris, Ph.D.  
Michael C. Seto, Ph.D.  
Meredith L. Chivers

Many authors and practitioners have noted that many sex offenders produce “undifferentiated” response profiles in phallometric assessments, that is, they respond somewhat evenly to a variety of sexual stimuli. This undifferentiated response profile is quite unlike what is observed among non-offending men, who typically show a strong preference (a much greater response) to stimuli depicting adults (versus stimuli depicting children), or to stimuli describing sexual interactions with mutual consent (versus stimuli describing violence and non-consent).

One common interpretation for this finding is that sex offenders, who typically are motivated to avoid revealing their “true” sexual interests, attempt to suppress their

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penile responses to inappropriate stimuli (e.g., those depicting children) and to augment their penile responses to appropriate stimuli (e.g., those depicting adults), thereby producing a flat or undifferentiated response profile. An alternative interpretation is that the observed response profiles are a true manifestation, at least for some offenders, of their sexual interests.

In this presentation we will discuss recent findings in the area of human sexology and recent theories about the development of sexual interests that are consistent (and in fact predict) penile indifference among sex offenders of all kinds. We will present data documenting penile indifference among rapists and child molesters, and briefly review research by other scientists who have documented this phenomenon (e.g., Marshall & Barbaree).