

THE ROLE OF SHAME AND GUILT IN SEXUAL OFFENDING

Sexual Preoccupation and Shame and Guilt in Incarcerated Sexual Offenders

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This paper examines the relationship between sexual preoccupation and shame and guilt. Subjects included forty-seven community respondents and fifty incarcerated sexual offenders (25 rapists & 25 child molesters). Scores on the measure of sexual preoccupation were found to be significantly higher for incarcerated sexual offenders than community respondents. Sexual offenders were also more likely to report shame and less likely to report guilt than community subjects. There were significant relationships between sexual preoccupation and shame and guilt, and this relationship was also dependent on the type of subject (sexual offender versus community): Sexually preoccupied sexual offenders were more likely to report shame than other respondents. The implication of these findings for the treatment and assessment of sexual offenders is discussed.

Shame and Guilt in Child Sexual Assault

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This paper reports early results from a PhD thesis investigating the role of shame and guilt in a first sexual offence, and its effect upon their subsequent behaviour, by a group of convicted child molesters.

A number of theories have been developed to explain sexual offending against children. These theories address the range of motivations that might motivate an offence against a child. However, none of these theories adequately address the offender's decision making in the period immediately preceding the offence, particularly the process by

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which many offenders will act against their own values and beliefs. The aim of this paper is to address part of that shortfall by investigating the role of shame and guilt in the lead up to, and aftermath of, an offence.

Shame and guilt are powerful moral emotions that function to inhibit certain behaviours. The differences between shame and guilt are subtle and often misunderstood, even by researchers. As they are both similar emotions, evoked by similar situations, they often occur together to some degree, adding to this confusion. Most situations that involve guilt will also invoke some degree of shame and vice versa. However, ultimately, one of these will be dominant and motivate a particular response from the person.

This study involves approximately 150 convicted child molesters who have completed a detailed questionnaire about their first sexual assault on a child, and subsequent offences.