

Implicit Cognitions: Indirectly Measuring Sex Offenders' Attitudes and Interests

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Although understanding of the factors associated with the initiation and maintenance of sexual offending has been increasing through theory and research, little empirical work has addressed the potential role of implicit cognitions. Implicit cognition refers to automatic associations that are not accessible through introspection (i.e., outside of conscious awareness). A promising and rather simple procedure for measuring implicit cognitions is the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). The IAT is a relative measure of association strengths, which are inferred from response latencies (or reaction times) on various categorization tasks. IAT measures may complement more commonly used measures, such as self-report and phallometric measures, to provide a more complete understanding of the cognitions associated with sexual offending. Recently, IAT measures have been used with forensic and correctional samples in research on implicit cognitions associated with violence (Gray, MacCulloch, Smith, Morris, & Snowden, 2003; Snowden, Gray, Smith, Morris, & MacCulloch, 2004) and child molestation (Brown, Gray, & Snowden, 2008; Gray, Brown, MacCulloch, Smith, & Snowden, 2005; Milhailides, Devilly, & Ward, 2004; Nunes, Firestone, & Baldwin, 2007). Building on the encouraging results of these previous studies, research presented in this symposium examines three IAT measures designed to assess attitudes towards rape, attitudes towards child molestation, and sexual attraction to children.

Implicit and Explicit Evaluation of Rape

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It seems quite reasonable to assume that the likelihood of committing sexual assault is influenced by one's evaluation of that behavior. It is easy to imagine a number of reasons why a man would evaluate rape negatively; for example, he may be disturbed by causing another person physical and psychological pain, he may fear being arrested,

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or he may not wish to violate a personal moral code. Another man, however, may see some value in sexual assault; for example, sexual assault may be associated with feeling powerful or experiencing sexual excitement and gratification. The overall evaluation should reflect the balance between the perceived negative and positive aspects of committing a sexual assault versus not doing so, which in turn should influence behavior. This line of speculation is consistent with numerous theories and models. Although some researchers have examined sex offenders' cognitions, surprisingly little empirical attention focused specifically on offenders' relative evaluation of rape. For the current study, an Implicit Association Test measure (Rape Evaluation IAT; RE-IAT) and self-report measure (Rape Evaluation Scale; RES) were created to assess, respectively, implicit and explicit evaluation of rape. Thirty male undergraduate students completed these measures. They also reported on their past sexually coercive behavior (Sexual Experiences Survey-Male Version) and likelihood of raping a woman in the future. The degree to which the RE-IAT, RES, sexual coercion, and likelihood to rape are related to one another is examined. Potential implications for future research and assessment will be discussed.

Indirectly Assessing Sexual Interest in Children: The Implicit Association Test

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Many theorists have identified sexual interest in children as an important factor in the etiology of child sexual abuse (e.g., Hall & Hirschman, 1992). Deviant sexual arousal is currently an integral part of the assessment of child sexual abusers as well as an important target in many sexual offender treatment programs. Sexual attraction to children is most commonly measured using phallometric and self-report measures. The Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) is a relatively recent and innovative procedure that assesses the strength of automatic associations between categories (e.g., the association between 'child' and 'sexy'). Complementing self-report and physiological measures with the IAT may allow for a more complete understanding of the sexual interests of child molesters. In four recent studies, the IAT has been adapted to assess sexual interest in children with favorable results. Specifically, these studies suggest that IAT measures of sexual interest in children are able to differentiate child molester from nonmolesters. However, it remains unclear exactly what these IAT measures are assessing. Although they seem to be tapping sexual interest in children, researchers have not yet examined whether they are related

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to other measures of sexual interest (e.g., phallometry). This is an essential step in determining the extent to which the IAT actually measures sexual interest.

In the current study, 40 child molesters are compared to 40 nonmolesters on our IAT measure (Sexual Attraction to Children-IAT; SAC-IAT) as well as self-report and viewing time measures of sexual interest in children. The degree of association between the SAC-IAT and phallometric scores in child molesters is also examined. Analyses are conducted to examine if child molesters' scores on the SAC-IAT and other measures of sexual interest (e.g., viewing time and self-report) independently account for individual differences in phallometric scores. The degree to which the SAC-IAT and the other measures of sexual interest independently account for risk of sexual recidivism (e.g., Static-99, Stable-2007) in the child molesters is also examined. The present study is an important step in evaluating the usefulness of an IAT measure of sexual attraction to children.

References

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Under the Radar: Assessing Attitudes toward Child Sexual Abuse Using the Implicit Association Test

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) is both legally and ethically proscribed, and engenders serious mental and physical problems for its victims. In order to protect children and prevent would-be or seasoned offenders from striking, it is imperative that we come to understand why CSA takes place in the first place and why it recurs. Many theorists have identified attitudes supportive of CSA as probable causes. Attitudes toward CSA are commonly identified using self-report measures. Such measures, however, are susceptible to self-presentation biases. That is, child molesters may seek to portray themselves positively by reporting their attitudes inaccurately. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) assesses attitudes by measuring cognitive associations between categories. Because the IAT measures automatic reactions to how certain categories are paired (e.g., "sex with a child" and "good"), it is relatively unaffected by such self-enhancing

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motives. One's performance on the IAT may therefore reveal attitudes that self-report measures may not. Indeed, the IAT and self-report measures may together provide a more complete picture of attitudes toward CSA. As part of an ongoing study, 40 incarcerated child molesters and 40 incarcerated nonsexual offenders are completing an IAT measure designed to assess implicit attitudes toward CSA, in addition to self-report questionnaires assessing the same variable. Child molesters' risk of sexual recidivism is also being measured using the Static-99 and Stable-2007. Data analysis will involve comparing child molesters and nonsexual offenders' performance on the *Attitudes toward CSA* IAT and self-report measures. It is hypothesized that extrafamilial child molesters will display more positive attitudes toward CSA than intrafamilial child molesters. Collectively, both child molester groups are expected to display more positive attitudes toward CSA than nonsexual offenders. Data analyses will additionally evaluate the *Attitudes toward CSA* IAT and the self-report measures' joint contribution to the assessment of risk of sexual recidivism in child molesters. Research and practical implications include the creation of a psychometrically sound IAT measure of attitudes towards CSA with potential clinical applications.