

Attention-Based Assessment: An International Perspective

D. Richard Laws, Ph.D., Symposium Chair

More than any other psychological characteristic, the nature of their sexual interests is what distinguishes repetitive sexual offenders from both non-offenders and lower risk offenders. Valid and efficient technologies for assessing the sexual interests of sexual offenders are of critical value in the identification of treatment needs and the assessment of risk.

A promising approach to developing new measures of sexual interest has been to adapt well-established paradigms from experimental social and cognitive psychology. This approach has the advantage of being more soundly based in academic psychology but has only recently been applied to the assessment of sexual offenders.

We should seek to develop cognitive assessment procedures that could be used with sexual deviants but are not limited to that clientele. Ideally, these procedures should be:

- entirely portable and useable in any setting,
- relatively inexpensive,
- easy to implement,
- not labor intensive,
- easy to score and interpret,
- not physically intrusive,
- not requiring a motivated subject,
- useable with males and females of any age, and importantly,
- completely open to psychometric evaluation.

The cognitive psychology literature, exclusive of the sexual deviance literature, has for decades reported the testing of procedures that meet those criteria.

The chair and discussant in this symposium have assisted in the formation of an international research consortium to research and clinically implement such cognitive-based assessments. The group presently has members in the US, Canada, the UK, Germany, and Finland. The presenters in this symposium will showcase some of the recently completed work of this group. All three presentations will describe what we call attention-based assessments. Measured shifts in attentional focus when sexual stimuli are presented can provide accurate information on the testee's sexual interests.

The presentations describe work currently underway in Europe. The first presenter will provide information on an important modification of the Emotional Stroop procedure and comparison of those data with two versions of the Implicit

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Association Test. The second presenter will describe research on the well established choice reaction time task. The third presentation will describe a comparison between the Implicit Association Test and the simpler measure of viewing time. All three presentations are representative of the mainstream of research on attention-based assessments at the present time.

The Use of a Pictorial Modified Stroop Task and Two Implicit Association Tests in the Assessment of Sexual Interest Among Sexual Offenders Against Children

Caoilte Ó Ciardha
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Viewing time tasks remain the most common attention-based assessment techniques used with sexual offenders against children. However, research is ongoing with a growing number of other attention-based tasks which may provide an alternative or an adjunct to established methods of assessment including viewing time and plethysmography. These methods included the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and the modified Stroop task. A pictorial modified Stroop task has previously shown potential in capturing non-deviant sexual interest. The present study explored the utility of this measure in determining the presence or absence of deviant and non-deviant sexual interest among a sample of men who were in community-based treatment for sexual offences relating to children. Pictorial stimuli included images of adults and children, all of whom were dressed in bathing suits. Participants included men with intra-familial offences, extra-familial offences, offences relating to child pornography as well as offences relating to exhibitionism. Participants also completed two versions of the IAT, one where child-sex versus adult-sex associations were investigated and a second investigated male-sex versus female-sex associations. Both IATs used word stimuli. Any relationship that existed between the IATs and the pictorial Stroop task was explored and results of both task types were compared to variables such as assessed risk, offence type and length of time in therapy. Results were also related to non-offending control participants. Implications for future directions in research as well as potential for clinical application will be discussed.

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The Choice-Reaction Time (CRT) Method of Assessing Pedophile Sexual Interest

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Choice-reaction time (CRT) methods capitalize upon shifts of attention to measure sexual preference. More specifically, CRT techniques rely upon a cognitive interference effect: How does the content of a visual stimulus (e.g., the picture of a nude boy) interact with an ostensible task (i.e., recording the position of a dot superimposed on the picture)? The CRT effect thus implies an increase in reaction time towards stimuli that possess sexual valence for the participant. To assess the diagnostic potential of the CRT method with respect to pedophilia, we tested $N = 21$ child molesters and $N = 21$ non-sex offender controls. All participants were inpatients from four different high-security psychiatric hospitals. The CRT method was implemented on a laptop computer using the NRP ("Not Real People") picture sets as stimuli.

According to expectation participants looked longer at nude pictures than at more neutral stimuli. There was also a weak, albeit non-significant interaction effect between the sex of the person depicted and the sexual orientation of the participants. Finally, and most importantly, we found a significant interaction effect between the age category of the stimulus (from infant to adult) and group status: Non-sex offenders took increasingly longer for the task the older the stimulus persons were. Child molesters, in contrast, had the briefest average reaction times in response to depictions of adults. The discriminant validity of the CRT method for diagnosing pedophilia will be discussed.

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Indirect Assessment of Sexual Preference in Child Molesters: Viewing Time Outperforms IAT

Alexander F. Schmidt
Rainer Banse
Jane Clarbour

The assessment of sexual preference in child molesters is fraught with difficulties. The results of direct self-report methods may be heavily distorted by the offender's denial or a strong tendency for positive self-presentation. The most established indirect assessment method, penile plethysmography, has been shown to be moderately valid. However, this approach is plagued by multiple problems including issues of low reliability, fakeability, practicability, training requirements, high costs, and ethical concerns.

While recent applications of the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and viewing time measures may overcome many of these concerns, neither of them is problem free. This paper presents findings from a sample of convicted child molesters, convicted non sex offenders, and non-offenders who completed a combination of three IATs and a set of four viewing time measures.

Overall, the set of IATs was only moderately successful in discriminating child sex offenders from controls. The data indicated that the structural problem of the IAT to provide only a comparative measure is particularly problematic in the case of sexual preference of child molesters. Viewing time measures provide an absolute measure of sexual interest and are hence conceptually and empirically the more adequate indirect measure of sexual preference in child molesters. Advantages and limitations of this approach will be discussed.

Discussant

Carmen L.Z. Gress

Dr Gress has five years of direct experience with attention-based methods, specifically choice-reaction time and simple viewing time. She is thoroughly familiar with other methods of this type and is an ideal discussant for this symposium.