

POSTER

Social Competence and Aggression in Men Who Sexually Offend Against Children

Heather M. Moulden
William L. Marshall
Philip Firestone

Social functioning deficits have long been implicated in explanations for sexual abuse. Historically, this understanding has been rooted in research findings, which differentiate child molesters from nonsexual offenders on constructs such as social skills, empathy, and cognitive distortions. The goal of the current study was to examine how these various indicators of social functioning are combined to explain sexual aggression in child molesters. To this end, a model of general aggression in non-offenders was adapted and tested to explain sexual and general aggression in child molesters. Specifically, it was proposed that poor social intelligence contributes to negative attitudes and beliefs about sexual contact with children (i.e. cognitive distortions). These cognitive structures inhibit capacity for victim specific empathy responses, which in turn leads to sexually aggressive behaviour. Participants were incarcerated men who had been convicted of a sexual offence against a child ($n = 121$) and men who may or may not be incarcerated, but have never admitted to, been charged with, or convicted of a sexual offence ($n = 61$). As predicted, child molesters (relative to non child molesters) reported poorer social intelligence, victim specific empathy deficits, and greater cognitive distortions about sexual contact with children. Although these factors were not predictive of sexual aggression, general empathy accounted for significant variance in the prediction of general aggression in child molesters. Interestingly, cognitive distortions made virtually no direct contribution to aggression of any kind. However, support was found for an indirect relationship, such that cognitive distortions had a negative influence on general empathy, which was then negatively related to general aggression. The results of this study were found after controlling for a number of confounding variables, which suggests that social competency factors are relevant over and above demographic and crime history factors in understanding aggression in child molesters. This study demonstrates the importance of integrating independent factors into a testable model, has implications for etiological theories, and contributes to understanding the complex role of social functioning factors in aggression.

(continued on next page)

(continued from previous page)

References

- Björkvist, K., Österman, K., & Kaukiainen, A. (2000). Social intelligence – empathy = aggression? *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 5*, 191-200.
- Hudson, S. M., & Ward, T. (2000). Interpersonal competency in sex offenders. *Behavior Modification, 24*, 494-527.
- Moulden, H. M., & Marshall, W. L. (2002). Empathy, social intelligence, and aggression. In Y. M. Fernandez (Ed.), *In their shoes: Examining the issue of empathy and its place in the treatment of offenders* (pp.53-72). Oklahoma City, OK: Wood and Barnes Publishing.