



What we do and don't know about sex offenders' intimacy dispositions [☆]



Geneviève M. Martin ^{a,*}, Monique Tardif ^b

^a Department of Psychology, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montreal, Canada

^b Department of Sexology, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montreal, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 February 2014

Accepted 10 June 2014

Available online 18 June 2014

Keywords:

Intimacy

Attachment

Deficits

Sexual offending

Recidivism

ABSTRACT

Despite the significant role attributed to intimacy deficits in the etiology of sexual offending, current understanding of sex offenders' intimacy dispositions remains limited. The present article reviews the theoretical and empirical literature in order to better define the intimacy dispositions of sex offenders, and understand the role of intimacy in sexual offending. Research on sex offenders evidences a marked fear of intimacy and a low involvement in practices that can lead to intimacy, which suggests a poor inclination for the experience of intimacy. Moreover, scarce available data show that aspects of intimacy increase sex offenders' susceptibility to adopt sexually abusive behaviors. Although research has suggested that intimacy deficits contribute to sexual offending behaviors, no common operationalizable definition of intimacy has yet been put forth. Consequently, our understanding of the components of intimacy and their specific etiological role in interpersonal functioning and in sexual offending lacks theorization and evidence-based research. The present article proposes to answer the following question: what are the intimacy deficits in sex offenders identified in the scientific literature, and what is the role of these deficits in sexually offending behaviors?

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Contents

1. Introduction	373
2. Why is intimacy important?	373
3. Defining intimacy	373
3.1. What is intimacy?	373
3.2. What are intimacy deficits?	373
4. Theoretical explanations of the role of intimacy in the etiology of sexual offending	373
4.1. Attachment-based theories of sexual offending	373
5. Integrative theoretical models of sexual offending	375
6. Evidence for the presence of intimacy deficits and their role in sexual offending: attachment and intimacy studies	375
6.1. Representations of childhood attachment	375
6.2. Adult attachment: dimensions and patterns	376
6.3. Intimacy dispositions	376
7. Evidence for the presence of intimacy deficits and their role in sexual offending: related constructs	377
7.1. Sexual victimization	377
7.2. Social skills	377
7.3. Feelings of loneliness	378
8. Differences in intimacy dispositions across types of sex offenders	378
9. Drawing together empirical evidence and theory	378
9.1. Attachment	378
9.2. Intimacy	378
10. Limitations of studies on intimacy in sex offenders	379
11. Some challenges to the future study of intimacy in Sex offenders	379

[☆] This study is based on a doctoral dissertation completed by Geneviève Martin in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in psychology at Université du Québec à Montréal.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Université du Québec à Montréal, C. P. 8888, Succursale Centre-ville, Montreal, Quebec, H3C 3P8, Canada. Tel.: +1 514 987 3000; fax: +1 514 987 7953.

E-mail address: genevieve.m.martin@gmail.com (G.M. Martin).

12. Conclusion	380
References	380

1. Introduction

Sex offenders are hypothesized to display problematic intimacy dispositions that purportedly increase their vulnerability to seek out sexual contacts with non-consenting partners in an attempt to satisfy unmet intimacy needs (Marshall, 1989, 1993; McGrath, Cumming, Burchard, Zeoli, & Ellerby, 2010). Although relational problems are commonly noted among sex offenders in clinical settings (Mulloy & Marshall, 1999), and intimacy deficits are included in the assessment of dynamic risk factors (Hanson & Harris, 2000), little is known empirically about sex offenders' dispositions toward intimacy. Drawing on empirical evidence and theory, the present article aims to better define the intimacy dispositions of sex offenders, and the role of intimacy in sexually abusive behaviors. This effort will hopefully lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the nature, extent, diversity, and specificity of intimacy abilities and deficits among sex offenders, and their potential implication in sexual offending.

2. Why is intimacy important?

Intimacy is so important to general functioning that some consider it a fundamental need for human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Popovic, 2005; Sullivan, 1953). Its marked contribution to general well-being is emphasized in numerous studies conducted with men and women from different cultures and social circumstances (Levitt, 1991; Popovic, 2005). Results from these studies indicate that intimacy is notably linked to psychological adjustment, good health, happiness, and a sense of well-being (Greeff & Malherbe, 2001; Heller & Wood, 1998; Khaleque, 2004; Popovic, 2005; Waring, Tillman, Frelick, Russell, & Weisz, 1980). Conversely, a lack of intimacy and intimacy-related problems have been found to be associated with poor adaptation to stress, loneliness, psychoactive substance abuse, increased risk of depression, and higher mortality rates, among individuals from the general population (Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, & Gridley, 2003; Popovic, 2005; Prager, 1989). Evidence of a relationship between intimacy and healthy functioning is especially pertinent to the domain of sexual abuse, given the purported role of intimacy deficits in sexual offending. The theoretical literature outlining the contribution of intimacy in sexually abusive behaviors is considered in the next section, following a review of the definitions of intimacy and intimacy deficits.

3. Defining intimacy

3.1. What is intimacy?

Given that it can take on various meanings according to age, gender, education, and culture (Popovic, 2005; Ridley, 1993), and that there is a lack of consensus regarding its conceptual roots, intimacy is difficult to define. Existing definitions conceptualize intimacy as either: 1) the individual abilities that are necessary for the experience of proximity in relationships, or 2) the quality of the rapport that is formed between partners. As of yet, no attempt has been made to integrate the two conceptual currents into a single definition of intimacy. Abilities that are thought to promote the experience of proximity notably include: empathy, trust, individuation and differentiation, and self-disclosure (Chelune, Robison, & Kommor, 1984; Hinde, 1979; Malone & Malone, 1987; Schnarch, 1991; Weingarten, 1991; Wynne & Wynne, 1986). Alternatively, rapports (emotional, physical, sexual, etc.) that foster better knowledge of the self and/or the partner are described as being

high in intimate relatedness (Kieffer, 1977; Perlman & Fehr, 1987; Weingarten, 1991).

Intimacy is defined in the present article as a relational experience that is characterized by mutual exchange and an ambiance of proximity and engagement between two persons (Thériault, 2001; Wynne & Wynne, 1986). It will be discussed with reference to both individual abilities for intimacy and the quality of intimate rapports.¹

3.2. What are intimacy deficits?

Due to the absence of a common operationalizable definition of intimacy, the specific dispositions that contribute to the experience of intimacy (i.e. those dispositions whose absence indicates an intimacy deficit) cannot be circumscribed. For the purpose of the present article, 'intimacy deficits' refers to relational dispositions that negatively affect the capacity to experience healthy and satisfying intimate relationships and/or the quality of intimacy in relationships.

4. Theoretical explanations of the role of intimacy in the etiology of sexual offending

Existing theories of the role of intimacy in sexual offending are articulated around notions of attachment. Authors in the domain of sexual aggression draw on attachment theory to explain sex offenders' general modes of relation with parents (based on childhood memories) or peers/romantic partners, and to define the presumed evolution into adulthood of their intimacy dispositions and deficits with partners. Existing theories have as a starting point the formation of an insecure attachment relationship with the parent/caregiver in early childhood. This relationship would fail to provide sex offenders with enough support for the elaboration of positive internal working models of the self and/or others. These models are presumed to orient the development of various aspects of individual and interpersonal functioning (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1977, 1988), which would, in return, hinder sex offenders' capacity to experience satisfying intimate relationships. Sex offenders' intimacy deficits are thus posited to originate from shortcomings in the attachment relationship with parent/caregivers. Attachment-based theories that describe the role of intimacy in sexual offending are presented in the next paragraphs.

4.1. Attachment-based theories of sexual offending

Marshall (1989, 1993) was the first to propose that relational experiences are linked to the emergence of sexually abusive behaviors. According to his theory, insecure childhood attachment impedes the development of the trust and skills necessary for the experience of intimacy with others. The incapacity to satisfy interpersonal needs with partners of a similar age may motivate some individuals to gradually turn to sexuality as a preferred mode of gratifying intimacy needs and reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation (sexual coping). These individuals' tendency to sexualize intimacy needs and/or their inability to resolve conflicts would suggest certain deficiencies pertaining to intimacy dispositions and poorer quality of relationships. Over time, unsuccessful attempts at attaining intimacy through sexuality may

¹ The use of the expression 'intimacy dispositions' in this article refers to the capacity for intimacy and the quality of intimate relationships established by an individual. In the context of close relationships, partners presenting better intimacy dispositions are more inclined to experience intimacy.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10252361>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10252361>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)