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Forensic assessment of sexual interest: A review

E. Kalmus, A.R. Beech*

School of Psychology, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK

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Abstract

The paper reviews the published literature relating to the assessment of sexual preference in child-sex offenders. Evaluated physiological techniques include penile plethysmography and pupillometry. Self-report measures include interviews, questionnaires, and card sorts. Procedures utilizing attentional phenomena and information processing are also reviewed. Findings are presented with a discussion of the problems inherent to each procedure. The paper notes that while plethysmography is generally considered the sexual preference measure of choice, similarly to most other assessments of sexual preference, it is vulnerable to faking. The paper suggests that a combination of a card sort and the Multiphasic Sex Inventory (MSI) may provide the most cost-effective assessment of sexual interest and the measurement of the likelihood of faked responses. Consideration is also given to the future development of assessment techniques, in particular the potential for attentional methodologies to effectively assess sexual interest while remaining resilient to faking.

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* Corresponding author. Tel: +44-121-414-7215.

E-mail address: a.r.beech@bham.ac.uk (A.R. Beech).

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1. Introduction

1.1. *The meaning of sexual preference*

McGuire, Carlisle, and Young (1965) proposed that any deviant sexual behavior was the direct product of a deviant sexual preference. This proposal evolved to become the “sexual preference hypothesis” (Lalumiere & Quinsey, 1994); that is, men who engage in sexually deviant behaviors do so because they prefer them to socially acceptable sexual behaviors. Operating from a radical behaviorist perspective, McGuire et al. suggested that a deviant sexual preference resulted from conditioning. Classical conditioning would assert that this type of sexual interest is acquired through a concurrent experience of deviant stimuli and a sexually aroused physiological state, leading to a psychological association. This association would then be reinforced through masturbation to deviant fantasies (operant conditioning), while arousal experienced with nondeviant stimuli would gradually extinguish due to a lack of reinforcement. Due to its implicit treatment and evaluative component, centered on the assessment and reduction of a deviant preference, conditioning theory quickly became prominent, and remains a highly influential approach explaining the development of deviant sexual preference (Laws & Marshall, 1990).

As deviant sexual preference was not empirically observed in large groups of child-sex offenders, Groth and Birnbaum (1978) later presented a dichotomy that distinguished offenders by their sexual preference, to either adults or children. The “fixated” offender was said to display a greater sexual interest in children, whereas the “regressed” offender sexually preferred adults to children. Furthermore, fixated offenders were considered to mostly offend against strangers and acquaintances outside of the family, while the regressed offender was typically incestuous. Groth and Birnbaum’s model proposed that sexual preference was a primary consequence of specific psychosocial factors. Thus, the fixated

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