Brief Communication

Psychopathy among pedophilic and nonpedophilic child molesters ☆

Donald S. Strassberg [a,*], Angela Eastvold [b], J. Wilson Kenney [c], Yana Suchy [a]

[a] Department of Psychology, University of Utah, 380 S. 1530 E., Room 502, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA
[b] James A. Haley VA, Tampa, FL, USA
[c] Salem Keizer School District, Salem, OR, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Objective: Among men who commit sexual offenses against children, at least 2 distinct groups can be identified on the basis of the age of the primary targets of their sexual interest; pedophiles and nonpedophiles.
Method: In the present report, across 2 independent samples of both types of child molesters as well as controls, a total of 104 men (53 pedophilic and 51 nonpedophilic) who had sexually offended against a child age 13 or younger were compared to each other (and to 49 non-sex offender controls) on psychopathy as assessed by the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI).
Results: In both samples of child molesters, the nonpedophiles scored as significantly more psychopathic than the pedophiles.
Conclusions: These results provide further evidence of the importance of distinguishing between these groups of offenders.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

In the public mind, child molester is synonymous with pedophile. Certainly many of these offenses come at the hands of men with a primary sexual interest in children (pedophiles), yet many others are committed by men for whom adults are the primary targets of their sexual interest (nonpedophiles) (Seto, 2008). Increasingly, there is empirical evidence that these two groups of sexual offenders against children differ in a number of important ways. For example, compared to non-pedophiles, pedophiles tend to have more victims, respond more poorly to treatment, and are more likely to reoffend (e.g., Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Seto, 2008).

Among the other relatively good predictors of reoffense among sex offenders, including child molesters, is psychopathy (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). In fact those convicted child molesters evidencing the combination of deviant sexual interest (i.e., pedophilia) and psychopathy are among the most likely to reoffend, both sexually and non-sexually (Seto, 2008).

In his model of sexual offending against children, Seto (2008) theorized two distinct developmental paths. One path is associated with psychopathy/antisociality hypothesized to result from "adverse early environments" and/or certain types of "neurodevelopmental deficits," while the other path is associated with pedophilia, hypothesized to result from "sexual abuse" and/or other types of "neurodevelopmental deficits" (p. 95). This model predicts, therefore, that, as a group, nonpedophilic child molesters should evidence greater levels of psychopathy than pedophilic child molesters.

Several researchers have explored the relationship between pedophilia and psychopathy among men convicted of having sexually offended against a minor. Serin, Malcolm, Khanna, and Barbaree (1994) reported the correlation between scores on

---

the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003) and a plethysmographically-assessed (PPG) measure of pedophilic sexual interest. Among incest (n = 14) and extra-familial (n = 15) offenders, the correlations ranged from −.27 to +47, none of which (owing to the small ns) was significant. Utilizing a similar design, Firestone, Bradford, Greenberg, and Serran (2000) correlated PCL-R scores and a PPG derived *Pedophilia Index*. Of the 6 correlations computed, only one was significant (r = .157) and 2 were in the negative direction. Most recently, Kingston, Firestone, Moulden, and Bradford (2007) used 4 different methods of identifying the pedophiles from among group of child molesters (e.g., offense history, PPG, DSM-IV criteria) and compared their PCL-R scores to those of the nonpedophilic offenders. On the only significant of the 4 comparisons, the pedophiles scores slightly more psychopathic (i.e., 2.5 points on the 40 point scale) than the nonpedophiles. Two related studies compared PCL-R scores of incest and extrafamilial child molesters, the latter group likely to have more pedophiles (Seto, 2008). Beggs and Grace (2008) found incest perpetrators to be less psychopathic while Porter et al. (2000) found no significant differences between these groups. Taken together, these studies leave quite unclear how (or even if) these 2, often quite different groups of men who offend against children, differ with respect to the important personality construct of psychopathy.

Our ability to understand the etiology, nature, and most effective treatment for child molesters will depend, in no small part, on our ability to recognize the differences between the pedophilic and nonpedophilic among them. This paper reports on a study (part of a larger project) consisting of two independent samples of both pedophilic and nonpedophilic child molesters, comparing these groups on the level of psychopathy evidenced.

Methods

Sample 1

Participants. Participants were 74 males, including 24 male controls (CNTs) recruited from the community, and 50 men convicted of having sexually offended against a child less than 14 years of age, recruited from 3 sex offender residential treatment sites. Sex offenders were divided into 2 groups: (1) pedophilic child molesters (PEDs, n = 25), those characterized by a primary sexual interest in prepubescent children, and (2) nonpedophilic child molesters (N-PEDs, n = 25), those exhibiting a primary sexual interest in adults. The 3 groups (PEDs, N-PEDs, CNTs) did not differ on age (M = 32.1, SD = 7.4, range, 21–45), estimated IQ (M = 104.6, SD = 8.1, range, 84–121), years of education (M = 12.5, SD = 1.6, range, 10–17), or average yearly income (M = $17,704, SD = $16,922, range, $0–100,000).

Offenders' pedophilic status was established in 3 steps. First, those few child molesters who acknowledged to either their therapist or the study interviewer that they were primarily sexually interested in children were included in the PEDs group. Second, for offenders who did not admit to being pedophilic, penile plethysmography, via routine PPG assessment of the offenders as a part of their treatment, was used for classification. Specifically, those demonstrating greater arousal to any child scenario than to all adult scenarios were considered pedophilic. Finally, for offenders not classifiable by steps 1 and 2, the Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests (SSPI) (Seto & Lalumiére, 2001) was used. Those scoring 4 or 5 on this 5-point scale were considered to be PEDs, and those scoring 0 or 1 were considered to be N-PEDs; those scoring in the intermediate range were not included in the study. Unfortunately, data on how many offenders were classified by each of these methods was unavailable.

Measures. The Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996) is a 187 item, self-report measure, yielding a total score (i.e., a global index of psychopathy) and 8 subscales. It (in particular the total score) has demonstrated good internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and validity (e.g., Malterer, Lilienfeld, Neumann, & Newman, 2010). IQ estimates were made based on performance on the Shipley Institute of Living Scale-Revised (Zachary, 1986).

Procedures. All data were collected in compliance with IRB-dictated guidelines. All participants were recruited primarily through flyers placed either at residential treatment centers (PEDs and N-PEDs) or around the community (CNTs). Participants from all groups completed a brief initial interview and IQ testing. Exclusion criteria for all groups included; (a) a history of significant neurological illness/injury, (b) a significant mental health history (including substance abuse), and (c) an estimated IQ < 80. Post-screening, participants were administered the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI). All participants were financially compensated.

Sample 2

Recruitment and other procedures for sample 2 were identical to sample 1 with one exception; instead of community volunteers, control participants were 25 men convicted of a non-sexual felony, serving time at a half-way house. There were 28 pedophilic (PEDs) and 26 nonpedophilic (N-PEDS) child molesters in this study. The 3 groups did not differ on age (M = 32.30, SD = 7.43, range, 19–49), years of education (M = 12.57, SD = 1.66, range, 8–17), or pre-incarceration SES [using the 4-factor Hollingshead (1975) scale]. There was a significant difference among the groups on estimated IQ; the criminal controls scored significantly lower in IQ (M = 96.92, SD = 9.94) than either the pedophilic child molesters (M = 105.89,