



# Attitudes towards sexual offenders: What do we know, and why are they important?



Craig A. Harper <sup>a,\*</sup>, Todd E. Hogue <sup>b</sup>, Ross M. Bartels <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Nottingham Trent University, UK

<sup>b</sup> University of Lincoln, UK

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, a large body of research on attitudes towards sexual offenders has been conducted across a number of different contexts. However, there has been less discussion of their implications. Clinically, attitudes may be related to therapeutic climates, treatment outcomes, and risk judgments, while in the social context, the views of the public about sexual offenders may play a key role in the reintegration of these offenders, and the political responses associated with sexual offending. Sexual crime is advocated as a public health issue, with attitudes towards the perpetrators of such offenses being of critical importance when trying to create a social environment within which to successfully reduce rates of sexual offending. In this article, the research evidence currently available in this area is reviewed. An analysis of the conceptualization and measurement of attitudes towards sexual offenders is provided, before the existing literature on the factors underlying such attitudes is explored. Following this, the malleability of attitudes towards sexual offenders is examined. The review concludes with some suggestions for future theoretical, empirical, and practical advancements in this important area.

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\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham NG1 4BU, UK.  
 E-mail address: craigarper19@gmail.com (C.A. Harper).

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## 1. Introduction

The study of attitudes towards sexual offenders is a popular topic for empirical inquiry in the study of social views about the criminal justice system. Theoretical accounts from criminological and social studies indicate that attitudes towards sexual offenders could have profound implications for clinical and social decision-making (LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008; Willis, Levenson, & Ward, 2010). For example, societal negativity about sexual offenders has been linked to a range of disadvantages for this group upon their re-entering society after serving criminal sentences. These include difficulties in accessing stable housing arrangements (Clark, 2007), and organized attempts to drive them out of communities (e.g., Kitzinger, 2008). Despite these potential implications, Brown (2009) suggested that there is a dearth of knowledge about the psychological concepts and processes that underpin these attitudes. This lack of knowledge leads us to risk attempting to influence changes in attitudes towards sexual offenders using a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. This method of influencing attitude change may fail to reap the intended improvements in attitudes if some members of society hold particular beliefs or attitudinal stances about this group. As such, it is important to take stock of what we currently know about attitudes towards sexual offenders in order to develop new research streams. This exercise has the potential to re-focus this field of study, and assist scholars in meeting the longer-term goals of their research programs (i.e., theory development, attitude improvement, effective policymaking, and reduced offending rates).

Brown's (2009) chapter on public opinions about sexual offenders represents one related review of this area. However, this chapter's focus was on public opinion around sentencing policy, and as such did not examine different approaches to measuring attitudes, factors influencing attitudes, or the potential utility of considering attitudes in relation to clinical practice and reintegration processes. Similarly, Willis et al. (2010) presented a conceptual paper that sought to highlight the relevance of attitudes towards sexual offenders when considering desistance from sexual offending. However, covering the psychological factors underpinning such attitudes was not within the scope of their article. As such, the present article represents an overdue summary of what we currently know about attitudes towards sexual offenders. In light of this, we provide a comprehensive review of the international literature on attitudes towards sexual offenders, addressing five key domains. First, we set the scene by discussing the important conceptual distinction between *attitudes* and *perceptions*, before moving on to an examination of the methodological issues surrounding the measurement of attitudes in this area of research. Second, from surveying the literature, we consolidate what is currently known about the factors that underpin attitudes towards sexual offenders. Third, we address the malleability of these attitudes, with a critical discussion of the studies that have sought to change them. Fourth, we examine the importance of attitudes towards sexual offenders in terms of their implications within both clinical and social contexts. Finally, opportunities to progress this field of study are brought together, along with several suggestions for future avenues of research. These suggestions for future research are also incorporated within the appropriate sections of our review of the literature.

### 1.1. Discriminating 'attitudes' from 'perceptions'

An attitude is defined as a "psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particularly entity with some degree of favour or unfavour" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1). They are conceptualized as being comprised of three distinct components (Breckler, 1984): (1) *cognition* - which is related to the types of beliefs (i.e., stereotypes) that a person holds about a particular concept or entity; (2) *affect* - which refers to the visceral emotional response that people have towards a particular topic or entity; and (3) *behavior* - referring to the ways in which people act within the physical world with reference to the concept or entity under consideration. These three components of attitudes are all important, and it has been suggested that many researchers do not comprehensively consider all of these components when studying attitudes about sexual offenders (Hogue, 2015).

What many studies do examine, however, are 'perceptions' about sexual offenders. Conceptually, perceptions are more akin to stereotypical views and, thus, are primarily comprised of knowledge-based attributions about a topic or entity (Jussim, 2012). Unlike attitudes, they do not represent evaluations of a topic or entity. In this sense, only examining perceptions is a much narrower approach than examining attitudes. By examining attitudes (in a manner consistent with Breckler's (1984) conceptualization), it is possible to look deeper at the processes underpinning perceptions (through evaluations of affective responses), and further to investigate the potential implications of these perceptions (through evaluations of behavioral responses). Throughout this review, our primary focus is on research into attitudes towards sexual offenders.

## 2. Measuring attitudes and perceptions about sexual offenders

In order to accurately discuss the attitudes towards sexual offenders literature, it is first appropriate to outline the methods that are currently used by researchers in order to measure these constructs. Thus, in this section we identify, describe, and compare some of the key methods used by scholars in this area. We believe that an examination of these approaches to attitude measurement is both relevant and pertinent to the comprehensiveness of the review that we offer in this article. No review to date has systematically examined these measures together, and so this exercise offers a useful starting point for researchers seeking to design studies in this area of empirical inquiry.

### 2.1. The Attitudes to Sexual Offenders (ATS) scale

The Attitudes to Sexual Offenders scale (ATS; Hogue, 1993) was developed as a 36-item self-report measure, designed to capture respondents' affective and evaluative judgments about sexual offenders. The ATS was adapted from the Attitudes to Prisoners scale (ATP; Melvin, Gramling, & Gardner, 1985), with Hogue (1993) modifying the ATP by substituting the word 'prisoners' for the phrase 'sex offenders'.

ATS items are framed as attitudinal statements (e.g., "Sex offenders are no better or worse than other people"), with respondents rating their level of agreement with each statement. Each item is rated using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 0 'Strongly Disagree' to 4 'Strongly Agree'; 19 of which are reverse scored). This leaves a potential scoring range of 0–144, with higher scores indicating positive attitudes towards sexual offenders. The ATS has repeatedly been shown to have very good internal consistency ( $\alpha$ 's > 0.85) across a range of different samples

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