



## Emotion regulation, mindfulness, and alexithymia: Specific or general impairments in sexual, violent, and homicide offenders?

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Problems in emotional functioning have been identified as a risk factor for both sexual and violent offending, yet the precise pattern of impairment in emotional functioning that is experienced by sexual and violent offenders remains unclear.

**Methods:** In this study, we examined self-reported difficulties in emotion regulation, the use of different strategies for regulating emotions, levels of trait alexithymia, and dispositional mindfulness in men with a history of sexual offending, non-sexual violent offending, homicide, and community controls.

**Results:** A comparison between these groups showed that while sexual offenders had some circumscribed difficulties in emotional nonacceptance, violent offenders showed more generalized problems in emotional nonacceptance, alexithymia, and mindfulness. In contrast, homicide offenders reported few difficulties compared with other offender groups.

**Conclusions:** Our results have implications for the allocation of individuals to treatment modules aimed at improving emotion regulation to reduce negative affect and offending behavior.

Sexual offenders are often characterized by negative affective states and emotion dysregulation (Gillespie, Mitchell, Fisher, & Beech, 2012). As a result, strategies for improving emotion regulation have been recommended for inclusion in intervention programs aimed at improving social and affective functioning and reducing sexual offense recidivism (see Carter & Mann, 2016; Gillespie et al., 2012; Gillespie & Beech, 2016). However, negative affective states are not specific to men with a history of sexual offending, and emotion dysregulation is a precipitator of violent and antisocial behaviour more generally (Davidson, Putnam, & Larson, 2000). In particular, negative affect was central in Agnew's (1992) general strain theory, one of the most influential theories at the intersection of psychology and criminology. Another mainstream criminological framework – the general theory of crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) – posited that low self-control (which arguably subsumes emotion regulation) was the main cause of antisocial behaviour. Advancing these traditional perspectives, DeLisi and Vaughn (2014) have recently proffered a sophisticated integration of conceptual and empirical knowledge on antisocial behaviour in their temperament-based theory. In this framework, the interaction of negative affect and poor effortful control, that is, a developmental antecedent of emotion regulation, are considered to represent the main ingredients of antisocial

behaviour and criminal justice involvement at the individual level.

Existing research on aggression has focussed on the experience of predominantly negative emotions, including anger and shame (Davey, Day, & Howells, 2005; Novaco, 2011; Velotti, Elison, & Garofalo, 2014), and the capacity to regulate these emotions and control behaviour when distressed (Elison, Garofalo, & Velotti, 2014; Garofalo, Holden, Zeigler-Hill, & Velotti, 2016). However, the extent to which sexual offenders and non-sexual violent offenders experience similar negative emotions, use different strategies for regulating these emotions, or are more or less successful in these regulatory efforts, remains unclear. It is also unclear how these groups compare on traits including mindfulness and alexithymia that can affect one's capacity for emotion regulation. Understanding these differences has implications for the design of offender behaviour programs and the allocation of service users.

### 1. Emotion regulation as a treatment target for sexual offenders

Risk factors for sexual offense recidivism include deviant sexual interests, distorted attitudes (e.g., around children and sex, or males' entitlement to sex with women), self-management and socio-affective functioning (Hanson & Harris, 2000, 2001; Thornton, 2002). While

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some of these risk factors may be specific to sexual offenders, other risk factors, including self-management and socio-affective functioning, may be shared with violent/general offenders. In many countries, the assumption that sexual and violent offenders can be distinguished in terms of criminogenic needs provides a logic for allocating individuals with different index offense types to different treatment programs. That is, it has been considered that sexual and violent offenders have relatively distinct sets of needs that, when treated, will be associated with a reduced risk of sexual and violent reoffending, respectively (see Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Carter & Mann, 2016; Mann, Hanson, & Thornton, 2010). The potential benefits of such an approach are that clinical and forensic professionals can tailor treatment modules to the needs of specific types of offender. However, research on emotion regulation in forensic samples has often collapsed across sexual and violent offenders, clouding any judgments about actual differences. If such differences do not exist, at least in some domains, then placing individuals on the same program may have financial and logistic benefits (e.g., in reducing difficulties associated with monitoring various interventions delivered to relatively small groups of individuals). In a recent redesign of treatment programs available to high risk and moderate risk offenders, the prison and probation service for England and Wales has taken a more streamlined approach to program delivery. As part of this redesign, core modules are provided for needs that are transversal across groups, while more specialized modules (e.g., healthy sexual functioning programs) are offered to those with needs that are more specific (Walton, Ramsay, Cunningham, & Henfrey, 2017).

Researchers and clinicians alike are consistent in the opinion that men who have sexually abused are characterized by negative affective states (Gillespie et al., 2012; Gillespie & Beech, 2016; Langton & Marshall, 2000; Marshall, Cripps, Anderson, & Cortoni, 1999; Smallbone & Dadds, 2000; Ward & Beech, 2016; Ward & Hudson, 2000; Ward, Hudson, Johnston, & Marshall, 1997). Specific negative affective states experienced by sexual offenders have been reviewed in detail by Gillespie et al. (2012), and include anger and social anxiety. Negative affect also appears to be associated with aggression and violence more generally, with particular attention paid to the emotions of anger and shame (Davey et al., 2005; Novaco, 2011). For example, the results of a meta-analysis confirmed that anger and hostility are both moderately elevated among intimate partner violent (IPV) men, particularly those who fall within more severe IPV subtypes (Norlander & Eckhardt, 2005). However, the experience of positive affect, and efforts to upregulate or maintain positive emotions, may also contribute to both sexual and violent offending (Day, 2009; Ward, Hudson, & Keenan, 1998). This point is highlighted by Hudson, Ward, and McCormack (1999), who found that almost as many sexual offenders reported positive affect (37%) as reported negative affect (44%) in the offense process for their most recent or typical offense. Examples of positive affect in the offense process have been highlighted for impulsive or serial rapists who experience a post-offense increase in positive emotions, and for offenders who plan their offenses carefully with the explicit aim of increasing or maintaining a level of generally positive affect (Ward et al., 1998). Finally, negative emotional states do not necessarily precede, and do not trigger, those offenses that are more instrumental in nature (i.e., premeditated and driven by an external goal) (Woodworth & Porter, 2002).

### 1.1. A framework for understanding emotion regulation

Drawing on research in the fields of emotion and emotion-regulation, forensic psychology, and cognitive neuroscience, Gillespie and colleagues propose a model for understanding difficulties in emotion regulation in relation to sexual offending, aggression, and antisocial behavior (Gillespie et al., 2012; Gillespie, Brzozowski, & Mitchell, 2017; Gillespie & Beech, 2016, 2018). These authors highlight that, according to a simplified neurobiological framework, the process of emotion regulation is largely dependent on cognitive control over lower

level brain circuits involved in emotion response and emotion generation. As such, disturbances in this circuitry can lead to difficulties in emotion regulation, and increases in negative affective states. However, there are functional overlaps between emotion regulation and other related constructs, with individual differences in mindfulness processing and alexithymia consistently linked with emotion regulation abilities. Mindfulness refers to an attitude of non-judgemental moment-to-moment awareness and acceptance of current experience (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), and is associated with a greater capacity for emotion regulation. Alexithymia refers to an impaired ability to identify, describe, and distinguish between different emotions (Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994; Nemiah, Freyberger, & Sifneos, 1976). In contrast to mindfulness, alexithymia is associated with difficulties in emotion regulation. Drawing on this framework, in the current paper we focussed on negative affective states, difficulties in emotion regulation, and levels of trait mindfulness and alexithymia as possible needs that may differentiate offenders from non-offenders, and that may differentiate between groups of offenders based on offense type.

Broadly defined, emotion regulation refers to the process by which individuals use a range of strategies to exert control over which emotions they experience, and when they experience them (Gross & John, 2003). Emotion regulation also includes the ability to engage in goal-directed behaviour and refrain from impulsive actions when distressed (Grazt & Roemer, 2004). Importantly, emotions can be either up-regulated (i.e., experienced more strongly or intensely), or down-regulated (i.e., experienced less strongly or intensely) (Gross, 1998a), and different strategies for regulating emotions have been identified (Gross, 1998b). Dependent on the particular strategy being used, these will typically have greatest impact either before an emotional response has been generated (antecedent focussed), or following emotional response generation (response focussed). The most commonly cited strategies for emotion regulation refer to *cognitive reappraisal*, and *expressive suppression* (Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). Reappraisal refers to an antecedent focussed strategy whereby cognitive resources are required to construct an emotion eliciting situation in such a way that the emotional impact of the situation is altered. Expressive suppression on the other hand refers to a response focussed strategy whereby an individual inhibits ongoing emotionally-expressive behaviour (Gross, 1998b). When used in the correct context, both of these strategies can be used to successfully regulate emotions (Webb et al., 2012). However, a chronic and inflexible use of expressive suppression has been linked with a host of negative outcomes, including violent behaviour (Norström & Pape, 2010; Robertson, Daffern, & Bucks, 2012). The extent to which there are links between expressive suppression and sexual offending remains unknown.

### 1.2. Emotion regulation in sexual and violent offenders

It has been numerously suggested that difficulties in emotion regulation represent causal factors in pathways to sexual offending (Hudson et al., 1999; Polaschek, Hudson, Ward, & Siegert, 2001; Polaschek & Ward, 2002). However, emotion dysregulation could be a characteristic shared among violent offenders more generally. For example, a greater number of offenders in the community tend to be characterized by maladaptive (showing reduced awareness of emotional responses, or difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviours and controlling impulsive behaviours when distressed) rather than adaptive (good awareness of emotional responses and/or few difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviours and controlling impulsive behaviours when distressed) emotion regulation styles (Robertson, Daffern, & Bucks, 2014). In addition, more maladaptive styles also tend to be linked with more extensive histories of aggression (Robertson et al., 2014). A link between aggression and emotion dysregulation is further supported by the finding that, when modelled simultaneously, state anger, trait anger, and chronic anger expression were each found to be associated with emotion dysregulation, both among incarcerated

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