



Personality functioning and psychopathic traits in child molesters and violent offenders

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Personality dysfunctions and psychopathy are central in most theories of crime. However, different offense types are likely driven by different motivational factors. Therefore, it is plausible that distinct offender groups differ in terms of personality features. In the present study, child molesters, (non-sex) violent offenders and community participants were compared on self-report measures of personality functioning in the self- and interpersonal domains (i.e., self-control, identity integration, responsibility, relational capacity, and social concordance), and psychopathic traits.

Methods: Multivariate analyses of variance were conducted to examine differences between child molesters ($N = 74$), violent offenders ($N = 64$), and community participants ($N = 238$) on psychopathic traits and personality functioning.

Results: Bivariate associations among personality features were largely consistent across groups. Violent offenders showed higher levels of personality dysfunctions and psychopathy, compared to both child molesters and community participants. Child molesters reported more selective impairments. Compared to community participants, child molesters reported significantly greater impairments in self-control, identity integration, responsibility, and relational capacities.

Conclusions: The different personality profiles of the two offender groups corroborate the importance of applying different theoretical models and treatment approaches to child molesters and non-sex violent offenders.

1. Introduction

In research among forensic psychiatric patients, knowledge about specific differences between offender groups can be used to gain a better insight into underlying pathogenic psychological processes. Specifically, increasing interest has been devoted to the identification of similarities and differences between sex offenders and non-sex violent offenders (Harris, Mazerolle, & Knight, 2009; Helfgott, 2008; Ward et al., 2010; Ward & Beech, 2006). In this context, two categories of offenders appear to be particularly different from each other, namely child molesters and non-sex violent offenders.¹ These two groups often differ in the target and in the motivation of their offenses. Whereas child molesters tend to target minors, non-sex violent offenders tend to target adult victims. Regarding the motivation of the offense, child molesters are often directed at satisfying sexual desires or impulses, or are driven by a need for intimacy and seek satisfaction for needs other than sexual, whereas non-sex violent offenders can have a variety of

instrumental or reactive goals (Helfgott, 2008). Understanding differences between groups of offenders can be useful to inform psychological theories of offending and to inform longitudinal research on the etiological pathways leading to different forms of offending (Seto, 2008). Moreover, such knowledge can help practitioners identify treatment targets that can be useful for certain offender groups but not others. Such a specificity is called for by important theoretical models, such as the Risk-Need-Responsivity model (see Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006).

An important clinical factor that increases the risk of offending behavior and may therefore serve as crucial treatment target is the presence of personality pathology (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Garofalo & Bogaerts, 2017). In the broader domain of personality, two constructs that have been predominant in explanatory theories of crimes in the last few decades are self-control and psychopathy (DeLisi & Vaughn, 2014, 2015). Research on these domains is needed to examine whether specific personality features may relate to distinct offense types or

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¹ Because also child molestation is typically violent in nature, for the purpose of this study we use the term non-sex violent offenders to refer to offenders who have exclusively committed non-sexual violent crimes, and the term child molesters to refer to offenders who have exclusively committed sex offenses toward minors.

characterize offenders in general (Bogaerts, Vanheule, & Declercq, 2005; Marshall, 1996), considering that a distinction between offender groups is often used to allocate offenders to different treatment programs (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). In an effort to contribute new evidence to the increasing literature on personality in offenders, the present study compared child molesters and non-sex violent offenders with a community sample to examine impairments in personality functioning in the self and interpersonal domains, and on psychopathic traits.

1.1. Impairments in personality functioning in child molesters and non-sex violent offenders

Self-control has been posited as one of the main predictors of antisocial behavior and criminal justice involvement, with an abundance of empirical evidence in support (for a review, see DeLisi & Vaughn, 2014). However, the concept of self-control used in early criminological theories (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) was not limited to the top-down inhibition of impulsive behavior, as the term would suggest in psychological science and practice. Rather, self-control was conceptualized as the individual "tendency to consider the long-term consequences of one's potential acts" (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2008, p. 220). This conceptualization defined low self-control in terms of an array of trait-like dispositions including impulsivity, callousness/self-centeredness, and a temper/emotion dysregulation component (Gibbs, Giever, & Martin, 1998; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993). Thus, it is possible that poor behavioral control reflects broader personality dysfunctions, including basic personality traits like negative emotionality, disinhibition, and antagonism (DeLisi, 2009; DeLisi & Vaughn, 2015). From this perspective, rather than positing a narrow-band construct of self-control as the primary risk factor for criminal behavior, the general theory of crime is consistent with other theoretical models of sexual and violent offending that emphasize broader deficits in self-regulation and relational functioning as key to understand sexual and violent behavior (DeLisi & Vaughn, 2014, 2015; Marshall & Marshall, 2000; Ward, Hudson, & Keenan, 1998; Ward, Hudson, Marshall, & Siegert, 1995).

This broader perspective of self-control theory bears some resemblance with the aspects of personality functioning highlighted by Verheul et al.'s (2008) SIPP model (operationalized in the Severity Index of Personality Problems, SIPP; Verheul et al., 2008), which is now represented in the new model of personality pathology in the appendix of the current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013).² In the SIPP model, five domains were described as core aspects of personality functioning: self-control (i.e., emotion regulation and effortful control), identity integration (i.e., stable self-image and self-directedness), relational capacities (i.e., ease with intimacy and enduring relationships based on reciprocity), social concordance (i.e., aggression regulation, cooperation and respect, frustration tolerance), and responsibility (i.e., trustworthiness, conscientiousness). It can be noted that some of the personality features included in Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) definition of self-control actually span across several of

these domains (e.g., self-directness, frustration tolerance, conscientiousness, reciprocity in relationships; see also DeLisi & Vaughn, 2008; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2008). Of note, the five SIPP domains are strongly intercorrelated, and the self-control scale of the SIPP typically explains the largest part of the covariation among SIPP scales (Rossi, Debast, & van Alphen, 2017; Verheul et al., 2008), in line with the view of self-control as intertwined with several aspects of personality dysfunctions.

In light of the above considerations, earlier findings linking problems in self-control (as operationalized by Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) with sexual offenses (Grasmick et al., 1993; Ha & Beauregard, 2016; Hudson & Ward, 2000; Ward & Beech, 2006), child molestation (Bogaerts, Vervaeke, & Goethals, 2004; Clevenger, Navarro, & Jasinski, 2016), and violent offenses (DeLisi, 2001; DeLisi & Vaughn, 2015; Garofalo & Velotti, 2017; Robertson, Daffern, & Bucks, 2015; Watts & McNulty, 2016) can be extended to assume that both sex offenders and non-sex violent offenders might be characterized by impairments in personality functioning in the earlier defined self and interpersonal domains included in the SIPP model, and by extension in the DSM-5 Section III alternative model of personality pathology (Criterion A, see Footnote 1). Yet, no studies have formally tested whether child molesters and non-sex violent offenders show different impairments (either in severity or kind) in a broader range of domains of self- and interpersonal functioning (as opposed to the umbrella-concept of self-control). However, there is some indirect evidence that child molesters – compared to non-sex violent offenders – tend to score lower on several criminogenic factors, including personality disorders and maladaptive personality traits (Becerra-García, García-León, Muela-Martínez, & Egan, 2013; Craig, Browne, Beech, & Stringer, 2006; Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 2000; Marshall, Hamilton, & Fernandez, 2001; Mills & Kroner, 2003; Seto, 2008).

1.2. Psychopathic traits in child molesters and non-sex violent offenders

In the domain of personality pathology, psychopathy is one of the most important clinical constructs in the criminal justice system (DeLisi, 2009; Hare, 1996). Psychopathy is defined as a personality syndrome encompassing a cluster of behavioral features and personality dispositions, along with a pervasive tendency to breach social norms and expectations (Hare & Neumann, 2008; Leistico, Salekin, DeCoster, & Rogers, 2008; Neumann, Hare, & Newman, 2007). Although different multidimensional models of psychopathy have been proposed (Cooke & Michie, 2001; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996; Neumann, Hare, & Pardini, 2015; Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009), there is general consensus to divide its components into affective (e.g., callousness, lack of remorse), interpersonal (e.g., manipulation, grandiosity), and behavioral (e.g., impulsivity, irresponsibility, poor behavioral control) domains, whereas the different conceptualizations diverge on the emphasis they place on antisocial tendencies as part of the psychopathic construct (Cooke & Michie, 2001; Neumann et al., 2015).

Although the relevance of psychopathy has been initially acknowledged in the context of violent offending, psychopathic traits plausibly underlie different offense typologies, including sexual offending (DeLisi, 2009). However, some scholars have posited that child molesters tend to show lower levels of psychopathic traits compared to other offender groups (for a review, see Seto, 2008). This perspective is consistent with theory and research on psychopathy – which links psychopathic traits with a tendency to engage in versatile and diverse antisocial behavior, as opposed to specialize in one type of offense like child molestation (Hare, 2003; Neumann et al., 2015). Indeed, non-sex violent offenders have been found to be more involved in criminal activities than child molesters across a wide range of domain (Brown, Dargis, Mattern, Tsonis, & Newman, 2015; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Hare, 2003; Mitchell & Beech, 2011; Seto & Lalumière, 2010). In contrast, child molesters may function relatively well when they do not engage in their offenses (Marshall et al., 2001). Accordingly, child

² The DSM-5 alternative model of personality disorders emphasizes impairments in the domains of self and interpersonal functioning as the first criterion for a diagnosis of personality disorders (DSM-5 Section III, Criterion A; APA, 2013; Bender, Morey, & Skodol, 2011; Morey et al., 2011). The domain of self-functioning includes: identity and self-direction, thus paralleling the identity integration and self-control domains of the SIPP, respectively. The domain of interpersonal functioning entails empathy and intimacy, which are akin to the social concordance and relational capacities scales of the SIPP, respectively. Finally, the responsibility scale of the SIPP is not considered in the DSM-5 as an indicator of personality functioning (Criterion A), but it is one of the traits that comprise the disinhibition domain of maladaptive personality traits (Criterion B; for further information on the parallelism between the SIPP model and the DSM-5 alternative model of personality disorders, see: Bastiaansen, De Fruyt, Rossi, Schotte, & Hofmans, 2013; Rossi et al., 2017).

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