



# Adolescent self-image as a mediator between childhood maltreatment and adult sexual offending



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The link between maltreatment and offending has been well established in the literature, with research examining the etiology of criminal behavior consistently documenting the negative effects of experiencing trauma early in life. Theoretically, ideas behind the cycle of violence hypothesis have greatly contributed to our understanding of this connection; however, there is a lack of understanding of the mechanisms underlying this relationship. We address this research gap by examining the mediating role that adolescent mental health, particularly self-image, plays in the relationship between child maltreatment and subsequent adult sex offending.

**Methods:** We utilize retrospective data from a sample of incarcerated sex offenders at a maximum security penitentiary located in Canada (N = 565).

**Results:** Results indicate that poor self-image in adolescence partially mediates the relationship between child maltreatment and the extent of sex offending in adulthood.

**Conclusions:** Implications for research, theory, and policy are discussed.

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## Introduction

Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to examining the detrimental effects of maltreatment (Brezina, 1998; Fagan, 2005; Kakar, 1996; Kaufman & Charney, 2001; Lansford et al., 2002; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Stith et al., 2000; Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001; Widom, 1989a, 1989b; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). This body of research indicates that experiencing abuse early in life places an individual at an increased risk for involvement in a variety of negative behaviors, such as delinquency and adult criminal offending (Fagan, 2005; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Stith et al., 2000; Widom, 1989a, 1989b; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). The connection between maltreatment and subsequent delinquent and criminal behavior has been designated by scholars as the “cycle of violence” and is exemplified in Cathy Spatz Widom’s seminal work (see for e.g., Widom, 1989a, 1989b; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). According to Widom’s research, the impact of maltreatment on the victim is substantial, with findings indicating an increased risk of being arrested as a juvenile and as an adult, as well as being arrested for a violent crime later in life. In addition, research indicates the harmful effects (e.g., aggressive behavior, depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies) that simply being exposed to or witnessing abuse can have on an individual (Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Madan, Mrug, & Windle, 2011; Stiles, 2002).

Support for the cycle of violence is evident in studies examining numerous negative consequences, such as antisocial behavior in general (Thornberry, Freeman-Gallant, Lizotte, Krohn, & Smith, 2003), substance use (Ireland & Widom, 1994; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Thornberry et al., 2001; Widom & Maxfield, 2001), re-victimization (Noll, 2005), depression (Kaufman & Charney, 2001; Toth, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1992), and even teenage pregnancy (Boyer & Fine, 1992). Other research has also been supportive of the link between experiencing maltreatment and a range of criminal behaviors, such as the perpetration of intimate partner violence (e.g., Stith et al.’s, 2000 meta-analysis) and child abuse (e.g., Pears & Capaldi, 2001), as well as the intergenerational transmission of child sexual abuse (McCloskey & Bailey, 2000).

Expanding on this, support for the cycle of violence is shown in the sex offending literature (Jespersen, Lalumière, & Seto’s, 2009 meta-analysis; Salter et al., 2003; Seto & Lalumière’s, 2010 meta-analysis; Widom & Ames, 1994). According to this scholarship, being a victim of child abuse is among one of the most consistent documented risk factors for sexual offending (Seto & Lalumière, 2010). This body of research indicates that sex offenders report a wide range of childhood abuse histories, including neglect and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (i.e., various abuses often co-occur; for reviews see Boyd, Hagan, & Cho, 2000; Craissati, McClurg, & Browne, 2002; Davis & Leitenberg, 1987; Finkelhor et al., 2007a, 2007b; Hanson & Slater, 1988; Jespersen et al., 2009; Seto & Lalumière, 2010; Starzyk & Marshall, 2003; van Wijk et al., 2006; Veneziano & Veneziano, 2002; Whitaker et al., 2008).

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Furthermore, research indicates a relationship between experiencing various forms of abuse and sexual offending, though the risk of involvement in sexual offending is greatest when one experiences sexual abuse (Widom & Ames, 1994). Specifically, Widom and Ames (1994) found that the likelihood of being arrested for a sex crime was 4.7 times higher for sexually abused victims, 4.1 times higher for physically abused victims, and 2.2 times higher for neglect victims, compared to the controls. Additionally, in their prospective study of 224 former sexually abused males, Salter et al. (2003) identified child sexual abuse as a risk factor for sexual offending. Other research suggests that sexual abuse experienced early in the life course places the victim at an increased risk for involvement in subsequent sex offending (Finkelhor & Browne, 1986; Jespersen et al., 2009; Kempe & Kempe, 1984; Lanyon, 1986) and even sexual homicide offending (Chan & Heide, 2009; Chan, Heide, & Beauregard, 2011).

Though the connection between maltreatment and sex offending is evidenced in the literature, the processes through which abuse leads to sex offending remains unclear. Scholars question whether certain factors play a role in predicting future offending and trauma merely exacerbates the likelihood of being involved in future offending. To address this research gap the current study draws on data from a sample of incarcerated sex offenders to examine the mediating role that adolescent mental health, particularly self-image,<sup>1</sup> plays in the relationship between childhood maltreatment and subsequent sex offending in adulthood. A systematic evaluation of this topic will advance understanding of the impact of maltreatment on offending patterns of sex offenders and inform theory and prevention efforts. Below, we summarize scholarship investigating indirect effects on this relationship. Using this research as a springboard, we then move toward discussing one potential, but largely overlooked mediator—self-image—of the abuse-crime link.

### Mediators of the maltreatment-offending relationship

Although there exists a large literature examining the direct effect of experiencing maltreatment on subsequent offending, a relatively smaller body of work has tested for intervening factors that may mediate the abuse-offending relationship (Teague, Mazerolle, Legosz, & Sanderson, 2008). Despite a comparatively smaller literature, this prior work has identified several mediators theorized to indirectly impact childhood and adolescent maltreatment effects on the propensity to offend later in life.

Using empirical evidence, Bender (2010) proposes a diagram of possible intervening risk factors (e.g., substance abuse problems, school disengagement, association with negative peers, etc.) in an effort to advance the understanding of how maltreatment results in subsequent delinquency. For instance, substance abuse has been recognized in the literature as an influential mediator of the abuse-offending association (Bergen, Martin, Richardson, Allison, & Roeger, 2004; Kilpatrick et al., 2003), as well as indicators of academic disengagement (e.g., truancy, difficulties concentrating) (Acoca, 1998; Garnefski & Arends, 1998; Kaplan, Pelcovitz, & Labruna, 1999). In one of the more systematic and recent studies centered on identifying mediators of the maltreatment-offending relationship using longitudinal data ( $n = 1,539$ ), Topitzes, Mersky, and Reynolds (2011) found that low school commitment in elementary school and impaired social and emotional skills in middle school increased the propensity to offend (a general outcome measure of offending) in adulthood among males.

In a similar direction negative peer influence may also impact the abuse-offending relationship. To illustrate, abuse has been linked with negative peer influences (Kaplan et al., 1999) and, in turn, negative peer networks have been connected to offending (Herrenkohl et al., 2001; Piquero, Gover, MacDonald, & Piquero, 2005). In her recent review, Bender (2010, p. 469) explicated this intervening process: “Youth who experience violence often have difficulties regulating their emotions . . . [making] socializing with conventional peers difficult . . . these youth

are often excluded from conventional peer groups due to their coercive or aggressive behaviors and consequently become ‘loners’ or join deviant peer groups” (see e.g., Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; Schwartz & Protor, 2000).

One of the more prominent factors believed to intervene between the maltreatment and offending relationship is family dysfunction. Some early work suggests that family support (e.g., by measuring the closeness of family relationships, see Kruttschnitt, Ward, & Scheble, 1987)—may serve as a protective factor—reducing the propensity to offend among abused youth (McCord, 1983). Thus, the converse is also true—less family support could potentially amplify offending among maltreated youth. For example, in Teague et al.’s (2008) examination of the relationship between physical abuse and subsequent offending (official and self-reported violent, sexual, property, and substance-related) results indicated that each one unit increase in maternal support resulted in an 8% decrease in the odds of total offending while controlling for various other important factors, suggesting that positive maternal support can protect individuals from the negative impact of abuse.

Mental health functioning has also been implicated as a pathway from abuse to offending. Specifically, maltreatment is theorized to exacerbate negative mental health symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety), and these symptoms in turn, are theorized to predict involvement in delinquent behavior (Bender, 2010). It appears that type of abuse (e.g., physical, neglect, or sexual) influences the specific mental health problem. For example, maltreated youth who have experienced physical abuse or neglect are at significantly greater risk of developing depression later in life (Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006). In contrast, experiencing prior sexual abuse is more strongly associated with anxiety, low self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; see e.g., Turner et al., 2006).

In short, prior research has established that a broad range of potential mediators exist. Despite this focus, extant scholarship is limited in that it a) has not systematically explored the potential mediating effect of self-image, and b) by extension has not focused on this factor in explaining sexual offending. Below we outline the importance of this potential mediator in the abuse-sex offending relationship.

### Self-image, sex offending, and maltreatment

Self-image (interchangeably referred to as self-esteem, self-concept, self-structure, etc.) is defined by Rogers (1951, p. 136) as “an organized configuration of perceptions of the self which are admissible to awareness. It is composed of such elements as the perceptions of one’s characteristics and abilities; the precepts and concepts of the self in relation to others and to the environment; the value qualities which are perceived as associated with experiences and objects; and goals and ideals which are perceived as having a positive or negative valence.” Research indicates the importance of self-evaluation in healthy psychological functioning (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma, & de Vries, 2004) making it an important factor in theoretical models of sexual aggression. At the same time, it is theorized to be shaped by the child-caregiver relationship; thus, children reared in a loving home will on average have a more positive self-image than those raised in dysfunctional or abusive families.

Even so, the effect of self-image on sexual offending appears in a limited literature (see Marshall, Marshall, Serran, & Fernandez, 2006 for a review; Marshall, Anderson, & Champagne, 1997; Marshall, Marshall, Serran, & O’Brien, 2009; Shine, McCloskey, & Newton, 2008; Thornton, Beech, & Marshall, 2004). For instance, research conducted by Marshall and colleagues suggest that sexual offenders typically suffer from low self-esteem<sup>2</sup> (Marshall, 1997; Marshall, Barbaree, & Fernandez, 1995; Marshall, Champagne, Brown, & Miller, 1997; Marshall, Champagne, Sturgeon, & Bryce, 1997; Marshall, Cripps, Anderson, & Cortoni, 1999; Marshall & Mazzucco, 1995). In a separate study, Thornton et al. (2004) showed that low self-esteem predicts sexual recidivism in

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