



Examining risk of escalation: A critical review of the exhibitionistic behavior literature



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ABSTRACT

While forensic mental health professionals frequently are asked to assess the risk that exhibitionistic offenders will increase the severity of their sexual offending, disparate perspectives exist reflecting the perceived dangerousness of those who engage in exhibitionistic behavior. The present paper critically reviews the literature regarding the reported link between male exhibitionistic behavior and contact sexual offending in 12 peer-reviewed, English-language studies published since 1981. A history of exhibitionistic behavior was prevalent in a minority of perpetrators of various contact sexual offenses. Over an average follow-up period of greater than five years, an estimated 5–10% of exhibitionistic perpetrators were found to escalate to contact sexual offending, while approximately 25% recidivated with a subsequent exhibitionistic offense. The most supported risk factor for escalation was a general clustering of antisocial behavior, including a history of sexual and nonsexual convictions. Common methodological limitations of the research and recommendations for improved validity are provided, along with suggestions for future research directions.

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1. Introduction

Sexual offenses are commonly divided into contact (hands-on) and noncontact (hands-off) types of offending (MacPherson, 2003). Contact sexual offenses include those in which a perpetrator makes physical contact with a victim, such as during a forcible rape or other forms of

sexual assault. Perpetrators typically do not physically touch their victims during noncontact sexual offenses. Noncontact offenses include exhibitionistic behavior, voyeuristic behavior, making obscene phone calls, communicating with a child online or in person for sexual purposes, and possession and/or distribution of child pornography. Exhibitionistic behavior—broadly defined as the exposing of the genitals to an unsuspecting stranger—is the most commonly reported of all sex offenses (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittelman, & Rouleau, 1988; Firestone, Kingston, Wexler, & Bradford, 2006; Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy, & Christenson, 1965). Exhibitionistic behavior is estimated to

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occur at rates as high as 2–4% in the general population (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Långström & Seto, 2006; Murphy & Page, 2008).

Psychologists and psychiatrists often are asked to assess the risk of future sexual offense in perpetrators of noncontact sexual offenses. As part of such risk assessments mental health professionals may be asked to assess not only the risk of continued noncontact sexual offending, but also the risk that an individual will advance to contact sexual offending (Rooth, 1973). Evaluating a noncontact offender's risk of future contact offense is not a simple task. While a portion of individuals who commit noncontact sexual offenses are also found to commit contact sexual offenses, historical perceptions of risk of future contact sexual offending for those charged with and convicted of noncontact sexual offenses have been mixed. Regarding a progression from noncontact to contact offending, West (1987) reported that noncontact offenders, perpetrators of exhibitionistic behavior, are “generally harmless” (p. 39). Alternatively, Lea, Auburn, and Kibblewhite (1999) surveyed professionals working with sex offenders and found that 87% of them viewed noncontact sex offenders as having the potential to escalate in their crimes. Psycholegal professionals have also been divided when assessing risk of escalation to contact sexual offending, specifically among individuals who expose. For example, the predominant view in the late 19th century and early 20th century was that individuals who exposed were “not sexually aggressive” (Rooth, 1973; p. 705). Conversely, various publications in the 1960s and 70s from Australia, Europe, and North America began to associate exhibitionistic behavior with prior, concurrent, or subsequent acts of sexual violence including attempted rape, forcible rape, pedophilia, and sexual murder (Cabanis, 1966; Gebhard et al., 1965; Rooth, 1973). Rooth (1973) and Snaith (1983) have suggested that sexual violence among persistent exhibitionists is rare. Rooth (1973) cited research indicating that approximately 10% of persistent exhibitionists progressed to more serious sexual offending (Cabanis, 1966; Grassberger, 1964). Longo and McFadin (1981) stated that exhibitionistic behavior has often been handled as a “nuisance offense” by the legal system, but that such behavior may “progress into other sexually deviant, potentially dangerous behaviors” if untreated (p. 21). West (1987) detailed that “in rare cases [exhibitionistic behavior] can be a prelude to more serious crime” (p. 39).

Psycholegal professionals have also debated the risk of future contact offending among exhibitionistic offenders. A Massachusetts appellate court recently considered whether a persistent exhibitionist and voyeur with no prior contact sexual offenses could legally be civilly detained as a sexually dangerous person (*Commonwealth v. Almeida*, 2013). Among the issues discussed was whether an individual with only noncontact sexual offenses was likely to commit future contact sexual offenses, thus warranting civil commitment as a sexually dangerous person. Ultimately, the court ruled that the perpetrator's noncontact sexual offense behavior was enough to warrant civil commitment on the grounds that such behavior “objectively put [a] victim in fear of bodily harm by reason of ... a contact sex crime” (*Commonwealth v. Almeida*, 2013). Such reports demonstrate that concerns that exhibitionistic offenders will escalate to contact sexual offending have been, and continue to be, a relevant topic of debate in the realms of psychology and law.

A literature review by Blair and Lanyon (1981) summarized methodological limitations of studies on the etiology and treatment of exhibitionistic behavior from 1960 to 1980, but did not address escalation to contact sexual offending. Furby, Weinrott, and Blackshaw (1989) reviewed the literature on sexual offender recidivism including six studies with exhibitionist samples (none of which met criteria for inclusion in the present review), finding sexual reoffense rates ranging from 0 to 71% for exhibitionists with regard to both contact and noncontact offense types. Since the Blair and Lanyon (1981) review, a number of studies have emerged that allow for the examination of the relation between exhibitionistic behavior and contact sex offending.

One such study found that greater than a quarter of 561 non-incarcerated males had committed both contact and noncontact sexual offenses (Abel et al., 1988). While some contact sexual offenders recidivate with noncontact offenses, the present review is primarily concerned with contact recidivism following a specific noncontact offense—exhibitionistic behavior. Of particular interest are the rates at which perpetrators of exhibitionistic behavior recidivate by escalating to a more serious sexual offense involving contact, and the identification of factors that may differentiate those exhibitionistic offenders who escalate in their sexual offending. With regard to such factors, researchers have hypothesized a multitude of mechanisms by which perpetrators of exhibitionistic behavior progress to contact sexual offending. After reviewing the literature regarding exhibitionism and indecent exposure, Rooth (1971) developed a two-pronged typology of perpetrators of exhibitionistic behavior. The first type is described as inhibited, displaying a flaccid penis during the exposure. The second type, labeled “sociopathic,” is frequently characterized by the exposure of an erect penis (Rooth, 1971; p. 213). While individuals who expose frequently have features of both types, Rooth (1971) states that the more an individual approximates the sadistic and sociopathic type II exhibitionist, the more likely he is to have other sexual disorders that may include contact sexual offending.

An alternate explanation for escalation to contact offending is the courtship disorder hypothesis, which purports that exhibitionism is part of a progression of sexual behaviors that are socially aberrant, but functionally-equivalent to a typical pattern of dating (Freund, 1990). For instance, the deviant progression of voyeurism, exhibitionism, frotteurism, and rape is analogous to characteristic stages of courtship: locating a partner, interacting with a partner prior to physical touch, establishing physical contact, and sexual intercourse. In courtship disordered individuals, the preference for rape over consensual sexual intercourse is referred to as a “preferential rape pattern” (p. 198, Freund, 1990). Courtship disorder has been proposed as an explanation for both high comorbidity among various paraphilic behaviors and the relation between the less severe noncontact sexual offenses and more severe contact sexual offending. Furthermore, Kafka (2003a,b) have suggested hypersexuality as an underlying mechanism that may explain a link between noncontact and contact sexual offenses (Morin & Levenson, 2008). Other researchers have attempted to identify variables that differentiate which perpetrators of exhibitionistic behavior progress to contact sexual offending. Some reported predictors of contact sexual offending include: preferential exposure toward children (Mohr, Turner, & Ball, 1962); convictions for previous nonsexual offenses (Rooth, 1971); masturbating while exposing, communicating with the victim while exposing, or touching a victim while exposing (Petri, 1969; Sugarman, Dumughn, Saad, Hinder, & Bluglass, 1994); and low intelligence, features of conduct disorder, or personality disorders (Bluglass, 1980). The present review examines the evidence for the purported mechanisms by which perpetrators of exhibitionistic behavior progress to contact sexual offending with respect to the methodological rigor of the examined studies.

1.1. Purpose and procedure

By synthesizing and evaluating the relevant literature relating to escalation from exhibitionistic behavior to contact sexual offending among males¹ from 1981 to 2013, the present review fills a gap in the literature. Rates of recidivism and escalation to contact offenses are examined among exhibitionistic offenders, and methodological strengths and weaknesses are evaluated with respect to internal, external, statistical conclusion, and construct validities (Kazdin, 2003).

¹ The study by Bader, Schoeneman-Morris, Scalora, and Casady (2008) includes 5 females (4.7%) in a sample of 106 exhibitionistic perpetrators. This is the only reviewed sample to include females.

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