

Section 4: Subtypes and Typologies

Use Slide 1: Section 4 - Subtypes and Typologies

Introduction

By this point, you've heard many times the key message that sex offenders are a heterogeneous population and that there is no profile of a sex offender, which makes sex offender management efforts complex. As I mentioned, however, there are some ways in which researchers and practitioners have tried to identify more similar groups or subtypes of sex offenders. So at this point we are going to talk about some of these subtypes or typologies, and how some of the characteristics of offenders discussed in the last section of this training – in addition to the nature of their offenses and their targeted victims – play out within and across these groups.

Keep in mind that we work with offenders who do not necessarily “fit” within any one of these subtypes, especially given the data that exists about crossover behavior. Nonetheless, these subtypes can provide us with some ways in which we can think about different types of sex offenders, and may help us tailor our intervention efforts according to what might work best with those particular types of offenders.

Classifying Sex Offenders by Subtypes

As you can imagine, attempting to identify subtypes or typologies can be a very challenging endeavor. To be most reliable and accurate, developing typologies requires sound theories about how and why offenders could be classified into subtypes – usually based on specific explanatory ideas, and sets of features or characteristics that define these potential subgroups – and then conduct research on large samples of sex offenders to see if the proposed subtypes actually pan out. In other words, follow-up research needs to be conducted to see if sex offenders reliably fall into these categories or subtypes based on the criteria used to develop them.

At this point in the field, there have been only a few attempts at developing subtypes using both a sound theory and then having significant and consistent research support for those subtypes. There have, however, been some attempts to develop subtypes that are in fact based on a well-developed theory, but the follow-up research hasn't yet been conducted or is still in the process of being conducted.

Perhaps more common are the attempts to classify sex offenders because of what “seem” to be logical clusters, often based on clinical experiences working with this population. But this approach to classification isn't always based on a fully-developed theory to explain the rationale for these subtypes. And

sometimes, either no research has been conducted to determine whether these typologies are “good,” or there may be some limited research, but the research doesn’t necessarily support these subtypes in a consistent way.

To give you a sense for some of these attempts at creating subtypes or typologies of sex offenders, I’ll highlight a couple of the more common ones.

Groth’s Typologies

*Child Sexual Abusers*¹

One of the earliest and very influential classification models about individuals who sexually abuse children suggested that these offenders can be grouped into two subtypes: fixated or regressed. In simple terms, this categorization was designed to cluster sex offenders based on their primary sexual interests and motivations. I’ll briefly describe each of them. However, offenders may not necessarily fall “neatly” into one or the other category. Rather, they may fall somewhere along a continuum, with these categories representing the anchors of the continuum.

Use Slide 2: Groth’s Typologies

- **Fixated.** Those in the fixated group represent individuals whose sexual desires and preferences center around children, and for whom such interests likely began during adolescence. They are unlikely to have healthy sexual contacts with age-appropriate partners, tend to be emotionally immature, and are preoccupied with children. Generally, these individuals go to great lengths to establish “relationships” with more vulnerable children, often through extensive grooming and pre-meditation. And they tend to target young male children who are not related to them. When thinking about the fixated typology, pedophiles often come to mind. Oftentimes, sex offenders in the fixated subtype are considered to be at higher risk for continuing to commit additional sex offenses because of their primary deviant sexual interests in children and because they target male victims. And as I mentioned earlier, deviant sexual interests and preferences are associated with increased risk for re-offending.
- **Regressed.** The individuals who are categorized as regressed primarily have “normal” sexual interests toward and encounters with appropriate partners. Although they do not tend to be interested sexually in children, they may turn to sexual contact with children as a means of coping or as a substitute for an appropriate partner during times of considerable stress in their lives. Thus, their behaviors may be more situational, opportunistic, and impulsive. This differs from the typically planned and entrenched offending behaviors of the fixated molesters. In addition, their victims – often girls – are more likely to be

children who are either within their families or known well to them and who are easily accessible during those times of stress.

Rapists²

Similar to the classification of individuals who sexually abuse children, Groth and his colleagues also identified subtypes of men who rape women, based on the characteristics and patterns of the acts and the different motivations believed to underlie them. Again, not all individuals will fall “neatly” into a single category, as they may display characteristics or motivations that exist within other subtypes.

Use Slide 3: Groth’s Typologies (Cont.)

- **Anger Rapist.** Persons in this category are believed to commit rape in part as a means of expressing anger and hostility that has built up over time – not for sexual gratification, per se. In general, anger rapists have intimate relationships that are marked by conflict, and they displace their hostility and resentment on the victims whom they target. They tend to use considerable force and are both physically and verbally aggressive toward their victims, often causing considerable physical injury. In addition, anger rapists tend to subject victims to particularly degrading and humiliating sexual acts. It is believed that these rapes are more spontaneous and impulsive, rather than carefully planned, and they are often preceded by some type of precipitating life stressor, such as an argument with a girlfriend or wife, or a significant conflict in the workplace.
- **Power Rapist.** As the name clearly suggests, these individuals are primarily motivated by power. Men in this subtype are interested more in having control over their victims and “possessing” them, so to speak, than they are interested in causing physical harm. Oftentimes, power rapists have problems with feeling inadequate, controlled by others, or are insecure about their masculinity, so they use rape as a means of feeling more powerful, strong, or in control. The acts are about “conquering” women to demonstrate their “manhood.” Men in this subtype may engage in more planning and premeditation, as they typically look for someone who appears vulnerable and may be an easy target. In some instances, rapes may be triggered by recently perceived threats to the offender’s competency or masculinity.
- **Sadistic Rapist.** Groth and his colleagues suggest that this subtype of rapists is perhaps the most dangerous. These men experience a great deal of pleasure and excitement – including sexual arousal – from inflicting harm on their victims, and enjoy watching the victim’s fear and suffering. During the rapes, these men are extremely abusive. They may restrain and torture their victims in idiosyncratic and sometimes bizarre ways. And at the most extreme end, sadistic rapists may even mutilate or kill their victims. These crimes tend to be the product of considerable planning and premeditation;

victims are often targeted and then stalked because of specific physical or other attributes.

As you can probably sense, based on the common characteristics of the men within any one subtype, and the significant differences across these subtypes, the ways in which we would intervene would vary, wouldn't they?

For example, in terms of community supervision strategies, what is one thing that you might do differently when you consider the fixated versus the regressed molester?

(ALLOW FOR AUDIENCE RESPONSES).

And what is one thing that you might do differently from a treatment perspective when considering the sadistic versus the anger rapist?

(ALLOW FOR AUDIENCE RESPONSES).

That's right. We certainly wouldn't intervene in the exact same ways with each of these five subtypes of sex offenders. Now let's take a look at a couple of other examples that illustrate attempts to identify or classify subtypes of sex offenders.

Massachusetts Treatment Center (MTC) Typologies

The research-based work of Knight and Prentky that went into developing these typologies is sophisticated and complex. Over the past several years, they have used statistical procedures to explore and refine these typologies, both for child sexual abusers and men who commit acts of rape. Because of the complexity of these typology models, and because we don't have the time to go through each of them in a manner that would do them justice, I'll simply highlight for you the characteristics or factors that determine these subtypes.

Child molesters (MTC: CM3)³

Let's start with the typologies for those who sexually abuse children.

Use Slides 4-5: MTC - Child Molester 3 Typology

- **Degree of Fixation.** First, offenders are differentiated based on the extent to which they are either fixated or regressed, much like the Groth typologies we just discussed. So, for those whose sexual interests primarily involve children, they are categorized as high fixation, and those who have "normal" or age-appropriate sexual preferences are placed into the low fixation group. Then, individuals are further subdivided based upon their level of social competence – either high or low. These differentiations result in four subtypes:

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- High fixation/high social competence
 - High fixation/low social competence
 - Low fixation/high social competence
 - Low fixation/low social competence
- **Amount of Contact.** Another level of consideration involves the amount of contact the offenders have had with children – either high or low. For those with high levels of contact, they are then further divided into subtypes based on what the goals or meaning of that contact primarily seemed to be. For the first subtype, the high amount of contact is perceived to be meeting social, emotional, and sexual needs as if they were attempting to have a “relationship.” In contrast, for the other subtype, this contact is considered to be for purely selfish reasons, in that they are attempting to meet their own needs for sexual gratification without regard for the victim. So, based on this differentiation, two additional typologies are created:
 - High contact/interpersonal
 - High contact/narcissistic

For those with low amounts of contact with children, they are divided into subtypes based on the extent to which they caused physical injury to their victims – low or high – and then they are subdivided again based on whether or not they are considered to be sadistic or non-sadistic. This results in four more typologies:

- Low contact/low physical injury/non-sadistic
- Low contact/low physical injury/sadistic
- Low contact/high physical injury/non-sadistic
- Low contact/high physical injury/sadistic

Rapists (MTC: R)⁴

Use Slide 6: MTC - Rapist Typology

For men who commit rapes, the typologies are largely based on what they believed to be four primary motivations to commit acts of rape – opportunity, pervasive anger, sexual gratification, and vindictiveness. Within each category of motivation, rapists were further subcategorized based on several interacting characteristics and developmental, biological, and environmental factors that result in varying degrees of antisocial behavior, sexualized aggression, impulsivity, cognitive distortions, and deviant sexual arousal. Nine different subtypes of rapists were subsequently identified.

- **Opportunistic.** These are individuals who have poor impulse control and whose offenses are typically impulsive, unplanned, and driven by opportunity

as a means of seeking immediate gratification. While they do not exhibit gratuitous violence or aggression during the offense, they may use whatever force is necessary to complete the offense, with little to no regard for the victim. Rapists within this category are further subtyped depending upon their degree of social competence – low or high.

- **Pervasively Angry.** Rapists in this category represent a group of their own, with men who are characterized by impulsive behaviors, low social competence, and longstanding problems with generalized anger and hostility. And they often have significant histories of antisocial and aggressive behavior. Their offenses are driven by that anger, and they are likely to use excessive force and gratuitous violence during the course of their crimes, often causing significant bodily harm to the victims.
- **Sexual Gratification.** This category is comprised of men who have extensive sexual fantasies or preoccupations, many of which are incorporated into the actual acts of rape. If individuals in this category have sadistic tendencies, they are further categorized into one of two groups based on the extent to which they actually *display* those tendencies – either through patterns of highly antisocial and outright harmful and sadistic behaviors, or through more covert and symbolic ways. For the non-sadistic individuals in this category, they are further differentiated according to their level of social competency – low or high.
- **Vindictive.** For rapists in this category, unlike the pervasively angry rapists, their anger is not generalized to people in general. Rather, the vindictive rapists direct their anger primarily toward women. Their offenses are characterized by humiliating, degrading, and physically harmful behavior toward the victim. Men in this group can be further subdivided based on either high or low levels of social competency.

Self-Regulation⁵

Use Slide 7: Self-Regulation Model Subtypes

A final – and fairly recent – model that I would like to highlight is known as the Self-Regulation model. Although it is not technically considered to be a typology approach, it is helpful to review because it does classify sex offending individuals into subgroups based on whether or not their primary intent or desire is to commit a sex offense or to avoid committing a sex offense, and according to their-self-management strategies. In other words, it may be helpful to expand our thinking beyond simply classifying or categorizing offenders by also considering the processes that lead individuals toward committing sex offenses. Four distinct categories or offense pathways are outlined.

- **Avoidant-Passive.** The first group of individuals – the avoidant-passive category – wants to avoid engaging in sex offending behaviors, but because they generally lack effective coping strategies or self-management skills, are more impulsive, and may lack confidence in their ability to refrain, they simply don't take definitive steps to manage their behaviors. And although they initially experience negative feelings as they near an offense situation, the positive feelings ultimately outweigh the negative at that moment in time.
- **Avoidant-Active.** The avoidant-active group wants to “stay clean,” so to speak, and may even employ specific strategies in order to avoid it. Unfortunately, the self-management strategies that they use are not simply ineffective; rather, they actually *increase* their likelihood of offending. For example, instead of acting out sexually with a potential victim when a person experience deviant fantasies, he masturbates to those fantasies instead or drinks alcohol to try and eliminate the guilt that he feels for having the fantasy. These offenders, too, experience negative feelings before and after the offense, but the positives that they feel when they are actually about to offend are too powerful to stop them.
- **Approach-Automatic.** Sex offenders in the approach-automatic category have a desire for deviant sexual activity, but they aren't necessarily making active plans to offend. However, if and when a situation presents itself, it may be exactly what they have been waiting for – even if subconsciously. Because they have poor coping strategies and poor self-regulation skills, it makes it increasingly likely that when those risky situations arise, it is only a matter of time before they act. And they probably use a number of cognitive distortions that allow them to continue, once they are in that situation.
- **Approach-Explicit.** As you can probably guess, the approach-explicit group of sex offenders wants to engage in this kind of behavior and actively plans to do so. They identify and target specific persons, groom them, and take careful steps to avoid getting caught. It isn't that they lack the ability to regulate their behaviors; in fact, they are fairly good at it, in that they are able to premeditate, think about the best ways in which to engage in the behavior, and wait for the right time – or even work hard to create the opportunities so that they can increase their chances of offending while escaping detection. These individuals, as well as their approach-automatic counterparts, likely do not experience much negative affect prior to or after committing an offense, since ultimately, that was the desired outcome to begin with. In fact, it is suggested that they experience positive emotions throughout the process in anticipation of what they are going to do.

Just as the case was with the earlier typologies, you can probably start to identify some different intervention implications for the different subtypes proposed in the Self-Regulation model.

And that's really the bottom line. By identifying various subtypes or typologies of sex offenders – especially if they are well-grounded in theory and supported by research – we will have an informed rationale for tailoring our management approaches in a way that makes better use of our resources and that enhances public safety.

Summary

For this reason, sex offender typologies can be tremendously helpful. Typologies illustrate the diversity in sex offenders – the victims they select, their varying motivations to sexually offend, their patterns of offending, and the specific kinds of issues that seem to underlie or drive their offending – which allows us to individualize our approaches accordingly.

But don't forget the potential for crossover – the data we saw earlier suggests that not all sex offenders fit as neatly into a typology as we might like to believe. Some sex offenders who are identified in official records as being child molesters may have also offended against adults. Some offenders who are considered to be incest offenders may have also abused children outside of their family. These particular offenders do not fit snugly into one subtype of offender or another, and they may require interventions that are very unique or different from those of any one type of offender. And if we rely solely on subtypes to guide our intervention efforts, these individual risks and needs could be neglected.

Additionally, it is possible that motivations and risk factors vary for an individual offender, too. In other words, the reasons that any individual person engages in sexually abusive behavior may not always be the same, or that they change over time.

Finally, we know that the research and theory in this field are always evolving. And as more research is conducted, and additional theories are proposed and tested, we may find additional ways of classifying sex offenders into useful clusters or typologies that can assist us with developing more individualized and effective management strategies.

¹ Groth & Birnbaum, 1978

² Groth, 1979

³ Knight & Prentky, 1990

⁴ Knight & Prentky, 1990

⁵ See, e.g., Ward & Hudson, 1998; 2000; Ward, Hudson, & Keenan, 1998