

## Section 5: Etiological and Explanatory Theories

### Use Slide 1: Section 5 - Etiological and Explanatory Theories

#### Introduction

In the last section, we considered how some researchers and other experts in the field have attempted to identify subtypes or typologies of sex offenders based on similar characteristics or features, which may ultimately help us think about more tailored intervention strategies for certain types of offenders, rather than trying to treat them all in the same way. And as I mentioned, the research and professional literature on these characteristics can also help us think about why individuals engage in sexually abusive behavior in the first place.

It probably comes as no surprise to you that trying to answer the question about the cause or causes of sex offending behavior has been a lingering issue for researchers and other professionals involved in sex offender management for decades. And that is the focus on this section. Over the next several minutes, we're going to cover theories of etiology – or ideas about why sex offenders do what they do. It is beyond the scope of this training to address each of these theories in great detail as they are too numerous and typically very complex. But because some of these underlying theories drive some of our management efforts, it can be helpful to have an understanding of some of them, at least in a broad sense.

Based on what you've heard so far today, and given your experience with and knowledge about sex offenders, what do you think some of the causes of sex offending behavior might be? How would you explain why people commit sex offenses?

(ALLOW FOR AUDIENCE RESPONSES.)

These are all very good thoughts and ideas. And as I just mentioned, there are actually several explanatory or etiological theories about sex offending behavior that take into account a variety of factors. Some theories are based on single factors, and others – particularly the more contemporary theories – take into account the interaction of multiple factors. Let's start with the single factor theories.

#### Single Factor Theories

You'll remember from our discussion of typologies that the way in which some of them were described actually shed some light into why certain offenders may engage in sexually abusive behaviors from the beginning. For example, the fixated molester typology basically suggested that deviant sexual preferences were the driving force behind the offenses they committed. And for the anger

rapist subtype, it was suggested that a primary reason for their crimes was the misdirected expression of anger and hostility.

What these represent, to some extent, are ways in which researchers and practitioners have attempted to explain the development of sex offending behaviors, using single elements or a fairly narrow set of factors.

Here are some key examples of single factor explanations<sup>1</sup>:

### Use Slide 2: Examples of Single Factor Theories

- **Biological.** Some researchers have suggested that certain kinds of biological factors, such as hormones, contribute to why individuals engage in sex offending behaviors. Perhaps most common within this category is the role of high testosterone levels, which have been found to be associated with increased sex drive and aggression. And some biological theories suggest that certain individuals may be predisposed toward problematic sexual behaviors because of physiologically or biologically predetermined sexual appetites or sexual preferences.
- **Behavioral.** Other theorists believe that sex offending behaviors develop in part because of conditioning or learning. In other words, just as it is believed that individuals “learn” appropriate or socially acceptable means of sexual behavior or sexual expression, behavioral theorists indicate that deviant sexual interests or behaviors can also be learned. For example, a father who commits domestic violence in the home is modeling hostile and aggressive attitudes and behaviors toward women, and youth who are exposed to that kind of environment may learn to act in similar ways as part of their developmental experiences.

A different type of behavioral theory involves conditioning, whereby over time, an individual’s sexual interests or arousal patterns become strengthened through certain types of experiences or reinforcers. When someone masturbates to fantasies that are deviant, for example, it tends to strengthen their interest or arousal to those unhealthy or inappropriate fantasies, which ultimately may lead to offending.

- **Sociocultural.** Another way in which theorists have attempted to explain the etiology of sex offending emphasizes the role of societal and cultural structures, norms, and messages. For example, some theorists suggest that desensitizing messages of violence in television or video games may implicitly condone violence. Others argue that the ways in which women and children are sexualized or portrayed as submissive and passive – through advertisements, television programs, and films – may contribute to sexual violence. Yet others believe that men are socialized to be aggressive and to dominate, or “conquer” women and children, which some theorize encourages male violence.

- **Attachment/Intimacy.** One of the common characteristics and risk factors that we discussed earlier involved intimacy deficits. One theory of the etiology of sex offending centers around those very issues. More specifically, it has been suggested that different types of problematic attachments may lead individuals to have a variety of problems related to intimacy in adult relationships, and that ultimately these intimacy deficits may lead individuals to engage in sexually abusive behavior. For example, theorists have suggested that insecurely attached persons may want to be emotionally close to others but avoid it out of fear of being rejected or hurt. In turn, some of these individuals may attempt to establish “romantic” or close relationships with children (with whom they may feel more “safe”) and they may ultimately have inappropriate sexual contact with them. Those with dismissive attachment styles may have no desire whatsoever to become close or intimate with others and may even harbor negative, angry, and hostile feelings toward others, such as adult women. And subsequently they may act out their anger or hostility in sexually aggressive ways.

These are just a few examples of some of the single-factor or more narrowly focused theories that have been proposed over the years in an attempt to explain why people commit sex offenses. And as you will see in just a moment, many aspects of those theories continue to be influential today. However, none of these theories can – in isolation – fully explain why all individuals engage in sex offending behaviors. And it is questionable whether any one of those theories can adequately explain why any one individual commits a sex offense, for that matter.

As I mentioned earlier, many people would like to believe that there is a single, easily identifiable characteristic that allows us to “spot” a sex offender so we can take appropriate protective measures. Similarly it would make our jobs easier if there existed a single identifiable or “treatable” etiological or explanatory factor that ultimately determines whether or not someone will sexually offend, because then we could intervene and maybe even prevent sex offending from happening altogether.

But we know that this is not the case – the etiology of sex offending is more complex and multifaceted than that. The reality is that researchers have yet to identify any single factor that causes individuals to offend sexually, and they probably never will. This previous single-factor research and these more narrow theories have, however, provided us with much more information than we previously had about why individuals may sexually offend, and have paved the way for our continuing and expanded efforts in understanding this problem.

## Multifactor Theories

### Use Slide 3: Examples of Multiple Factor Theories

The prevailing evidence-based wisdom suggests that a number of factors interact in a manner that leads to offending. And as such, contemporary scholars in the field have proposed more integrated and comprehensive theories about what leads to the initiation – and, in some cases, the continuation – of sexually abusive behavior.<sup>2</sup> Let's take a quick look at a few key examples, keeping in mind that these represent only a fraction of the excellent work that has been done in this area.

### Use Slide 4: Integrated Theory

- **Integrated Theory.**<sup>3</sup> According to this influential theory, sexual offending behaviors are the result of a combination of biological, developmental, environmental and cultural influences, individual vulnerabilities, and situational factors. It suggests that that negative developmental influences that occur early in life, such as maltreatment or exposure to violence in the home, have a significant impact on one's ability to form close, meaningful, relationships. And problem solving, emotional management, self-esteem, self-control, and other important coping skills and qualities are negatively affected as well.

Not surprisingly, because of these vulnerabilities, additional difficulties with adjustment are likely going to be encountered during adolescence, such as peer rejection, esteem difficulties, and social isolation. And in turn, this exacerbates their existing problems and vulnerabilities, and makes it increasingly difficult for them to effectively deal with the significant physical and hormonal changes and emerging sexual feelings that occur during puberty. This is a very crucial issue, because if already vulnerable individuals do not learn healthy ways of meeting their sexual, social, intimacy and other psychological needs – particularly when they experience significant stressors and difficult situations in their lives – they are likely to resort to unhealthy means of meeting their needs and managing their emotions and behaviors. For example, to deal with unpleasant feelings like anger, rejection, or loneliness, they may masturbate to deviant fantasies which, as I mentioned a moment ago, reinforces the deviant fantasies even more. And, as the theory suggests, being exposed to certain cultural messages, such as those that condone aggression and objectification of women, only makes matters worse.

Obviously, this is an oversimplification of the theory, but I suspect that you get the point – that through a complex interaction of these and other factors, both internal and external, individuals may ultimately act out in sexually aggressive ways.

 **Use Slide 5: Confluence Model**

- **Confluence Model.**<sup>4</sup> Another influential multifactor theory suggests that a combination of three primary clusters of risk factors – motivators, disinhibitors, and opportunities – increases the likelihood that an individual will become sexually aggressive toward women. More specifically, the interaction of these risk factors results in two pathways to sex offending: the sexually promiscuous pathway and the hostile masculinity pathway.

Similar to the Integrated Theory, the Confluence Model is based in part on the premise that adverse developmental experiences such as physical or sexual abuse during childhood have a detrimental impact on the ways in which individuals view themselves (and others) and their ability to form meaningful and healthy relationships. The theorists further propose that an antisocial or delinquent orientation often results from these experiences, and depending upon other situational or environmental variables and influences, the individual either develops into a person who uses sexual conquest and sometimes coercive tactics as a means of elevating his peer status and self esteem, or someone who holds strong adversarial and mistrustful attitudes about women and uses sexual aggression as a means of domination, control, and humiliation.

 **Use Slide 6: Relapse Prevention**

- **Relapse Prevention.**<sup>5</sup> One of the most common multifactor conceptualizations is based on the model of Relapse Prevention. Many of you are probably familiar with this model, because for the past two decades it has been a primary theoretical framework upon which most sex offender treatment programs have been built. It describes not only the characteristics and factors that may predispose individuals to commit sex offenses, but also the process by which sex offending unfolds.

According to the Relapse Prevention model, sex offending is the end result of a common chain of events that ultimately leads to offending, beginning with the person experiencing some type of negative emotional state. This is followed by deviant fantasies and the use of cognitive distortions to justify or rationalize these fantasies. In turn, the fantasies lead to covert planning about an offense. And finally, after disinhibiting himself in some way, the individual commits a sex offense.

In addition, the theory underlying the Relapse Prevention model suggests that a number of identifiable precursors, both early and more immediate, are commonly associated with offending behaviors for most individuals. Included among the earlier precursors are family dysfunction and chaos, childhood

maltreatment such as neglect or physical or sexual abuse, sexual anxiety, and marital conflict. Anger problems, assertiveness and social skills deficits, impaired empathy, emotional management difficulties, personality disorders, and substance abuse are among the more immediate factors preceding an offense.

So, based on this theoretical framework, interventions are designed to teach offenders to identify and address the risk factors that are believed to be linked to their offending, and to help them learn how to interrupt that predictable chain of events that leads to offending. Although this theoretical model has remained very popular in the sex offender management field for quite some time, it has been challenged by some experts in recent years, largely because it assumes that the sequence of emotions, fantasies, thoughts, and behaviors is equally applicable to all individuals.

#### Use Slide 7: Self-Regulation Model

- **Self-Regulation Model.**<sup>6</sup> You'll remember from the previous section that I mentioned the Self-Regulation Model. This, too, has some elements of an explanatory theory, as it considers individuals' different motivations and self-management skills. Again, the models' developers use four categories to explain or characterize the sex offending process for different individuals:
  - Avoidant-Passive
  - Avoidant-Active
  - Approach-Automatic
  - Approach-Explicit

I mention it again now because it is one of the more promising theories put forth in recent years as a means of addressing some of the shortcomings of the Relapse Prevention model for explaining the offense process.

#### Use Slide 8: Pathways Model

- **Pathways Model.**<sup>7</sup> Similarly, one of the most current theories, specifically focusing on sex offending against children, recognizes that not all individuals follow the same "path" to offending. These multiple pathways are influenced by the complex interaction of interpersonal emotional, biological, physiological, cultural, and environmental variables. The Pathways Model suggests that the extent to which persons experience difficulties in four clusters of psychological problems – cognitive distortions, emotional management difficulties, intimacy and social skills deficits, and deviant or unhealthy sexual scripts – largely explains the primary reasons that they engage in sex offending behavior. So depending upon what their main deficits are, they fall into one of the following five pathways:

- Multiple dysfunctional mechanisms pathway
- Deviant sexual scripts pathway
- Intimacy deficits pathway
- Emotional dysregulation pathway
- Antisocial cognitions pathway

As you can see, this conceptualization offers a range of relatively distinct but also interacting “explanations” for why some sex offenders against children do what they do. Similar to – and building upon – other multifactor theories, the Pathways Model takes into account a number of characteristics or risk factors that appear to be common among sex offenders. What seems to set it apart from some of the other etiological theories is that it more fully considers the heterogeneity of offenders, rather than assuming that all offenders follow the same or very similar path to offending, and does so in a way that it makes more clear what some of the differing implications for interventions might be. And that further emphasizes one of the critical messages of this training – that one size does not fit all.

## Summary

One of the most common questions that we are asked in this line of work is, “What causes someone to commit a sex offense?” As you know, there is no simple answer to that question. But as I’ve highlighted in this part of the training, researchers and other experts in this field have done quite a bit of work around trying to find that answer, or perhaps more accurately stated, the possible range of answers.

At the present time, the most plausible explanations involve a synergistic interplay among number of variables across a number of domains, and they indicate that there is no single pathway that can be used to explain this behavior for all offenders. And again, this means that how we manage sex offenders must take into account their variability.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Becker & Murphy, 1998; Laws & Marshall, 2003; Marshall & Laws, 2003; Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006 for detailed reviews of various etiological and explanatory theories, including single factor theories

<sup>2</sup> See Ward et al., 2006 for comprehensive reviews and critiques of various influential multifactorial theories of sex offending

<sup>3</sup> Marshall & Barbaree, 1990

<sup>4</sup> Malamuth, 1996; Malamuth, Heavey, & Linz, 1993; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991

<sup>5</sup> Laws, 1989; Laws, Hudson, & Ward, 2000; Pithers, Marques, Gibat, & Marlatt, 1983

<sup>6</sup> Ward & Hudson, 1998; 2000; Ward, Hudson, & Keenan, 1998

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Ward & Siegert, 2002; Ward et al., 2006