



Understanding the Cause, Building a Foundation for Effect

A Review of

Sex Offending: Causal Theories to Inform Research, Prevention, and Treatment

by Jill D. Stinson, Bruce D. Sales, and Judith V. Becker

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Upon entering a sex offender treatment group for the first time during my internship, I could not help but be struck by how unassuming the participants looked. Those eight men could have been any eight men—waiting for the bus, discussing sports, whatever. In keeping with the standard practice of the training program, I did not review the participants' histories before the group, adding to my sense of confusion. Sessions passed without a clue being shared as to what each man had done.

Several weeks' into the group, curiosity got the better of me, and I did review case histories, again prompting bewilderment as I could not have predicted who had done what. I repeat this experience of culture shock each time I teach an undergraduate forensic psychology class when the topics of sex offenders and their treatment are raised. Semester after semester, I encounter the same misconceptions, mischaracterizations, and misanthropic attitudes.

Even while working in a civil commitment program for sex offenders, I perceived a general sense that no one was quite sure whether our interventions were efficacious. Certainly there was an excitement in believing one was literally on the cutting edge of a treatment modality. Simultaneously, there was a sense of anxiety borne of not really knowing whether it mattered. Surely there was some intervention that could help this population—but were we doing that?

Sex Offending: Causal Theories to Inform Research, Prevention, and Treatment was certainly a welcome arrival. Promising to address precisely the questions that trouble many on the clinical front lines, this book should help us all hone that cutting edge. Doing justice to the political, moral, and social hot potato that sex offenders represent, this book pulls no punches in addressing the good and the bad in research, prevention, and treatment.

Actually, the book does not begin by addressing research but rather etiology, correctly pointing out that “we must know what causes the behavior in order to prevent it” (p. 7). Sadly, in my limited experience, I have encountered more than a few clinicians who seem to share the general public's aversion to members of this population. Understanding how and why one human being could come to do this to another was apparently abandoned in favor of a superficial “that's sick” blanket condemnation.

It is that inclination toward shorthand diagnosis that affects the ability to conduct good research, according to the authors. Many of the commonly accepted facets of behavior research, for example, random sampling, voluntary participation, and exclusionary criteria, do not lend themselves to the unique aspects of sexual offending behavior. The results of being unable to adapt to the specifics of this population leave investigative outcomes with questionable generalizability. In addition, reliance on self-report takes on a whole new dimension when asking sex offenders to admit honestly to crimes that invoke a visceral response in so many, not to mention exposing the offender to enhanced

penalties. Avoiding the post hoc nature of the research, according to the authors, requires a more diligent undertaking of longitudinal research where those with sexually deviant fantasies might be monitored and potentially followed through the turn to sex offending.

Of course, the ambiguities inherent to understanding how and why one turns to sexual offending gives rise to several competing hypotheses. Discussing these consumes the majority of the book, starting with the biological, through the cognitive and behavioral, and ending with integrative constructs. The prevailing message is simultaneously as engaging as it is depressing—the complexity of this particular behavior has plausible genesis in almost every facet of human development. For example, in the biological theories chapter, the authors comprehensively review theories that suggest that this behavior has underpinnings in structural abnormalities, hormones and neurotransmitters, genetics and sex chromosome abnormalities, and/or mental retardation. Despite the daunting breadth of these possible explanations, the authors further frame the discussion by acknowledging the limitations of the various theories.

When moving to the psychological constructs, the authors are direct in highlighting how much of the current understanding of sex offending behavior is based upon limited perspective, generally due to the same problems that constrain research. For example, when discussing cognitive theories, they point out that much is assumed about the differences between sexual offenders and nonoffenders when, in fact, it cannot be confirmed that sex offenders have offense-supporting beliefs and cognitive schemata that nonoffenders lack. Can it be simply a matter of social learning? Does one come to deviant behavior simply due to conditioning or modeling? The authors state, “The fact is that we do not know why so many people are able to observe a given behavior and refrain from participating in it” (p. 88). However, it is after discussing social learning that the authors present the challenge of incorporating what is known about conditioning in general terms and using it to integrate environmental factors into theories based on other domains.

Civil commitment laws hang their hat on the premise that personality disorders qualify as “mental abnormalities” and therefore are treatable as mental illnesses. The authors offer the reminder that personality has been a suggested explanation for behavior since the days of Freud and Krafft-Ebing, with those underpinnings still echoing in today's conceptualizations but suffering from a history of questionable formulations. However, have the theories of personality that acknowledge the existence of an idiosyncratic self provided a greater depth to our understandings of humanity? The authors suggest that the answer is yes, adding yet more depth and breadth to the complexity of the concept.

The chapter exploring evolutionary theories will probably strike many readers as the most controversial. Can rape actually be evolutionarily adaptive? There is no shying away from unvarnished theories illustrating the innate disparity between male and female sexuality. As with every other chapter, after these theories are presented directly and without editorializing, the authors give the limitations the same treatment. Ultimately, the theme of the book is consistent with the good and the bad of each theory being presented, with the hope being that the bad will be left behind and a mixture of the best aspects of the various theories will be combined and elevated through future research.

After giving the same thorough treatment to the theories based upon distinct modalities, the authors give five integrated theories similar coverage, with the added bonus of demonstrating an integrated approach that introduces their own multimodal self-regulation theory. Taking their own advice, they present their multimodality as accepting the best of previous theories and acknowledging the integrated nature of all behavior, not just offending. Starting with a person's initial temperamental and biological vulnerabilities, his or her attitudes are then filtered through family and peer socialization. Behavior patterns are learned from within that framework, shaped by self-regulating behaviors involved in immediate gratification and guided by opportunity.

The authors' formulations are then illustrated in the form of three case examples, presenting the etiology of a pedophile, exhibitionist/voyeur, and sadistic rapist through their theoretical lens. It is indeed helpful to follow the developmental process outlined in the book, from the discrete theories to integrated approaches and then to a formative exploration of examples of sexual deviance.

The derivation of the multimodal theory may not be exactly groundbreaking—it is, after all, the synthesis of all those that preceded it. However, it is precisely that thoughtful melding of what is known and what is empirically supported that can best inform future research and practice. This is more than just an aspirational goal. The book's exploration of

current treatment is uncharacteristically brief, essentially boiled down to a mention of dialectical behavioral therapy, multisystemic therapy, and a self-regulation model of relapse prevention.

The discussion of treatment methods might be frustratingly short, but that is indicative of the fluidity of current thinking. The book's value is not so much in establishing a manual for treatment but rather as a blueprint for creating the foundation and the framework. It is from that perspective that this book should be required reading for anyone interested in moving past the visceral and toward the empirical understanding of sexual offending.