
Profiles of criminal groups: Child molester and rapist groups compared

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Abstract

Increased research interest exploring the characteristics of men who sexually offend has indicated that certain patterns of experience may influence offending pathways. This study outlines the results of a questionnaire that was administered to men who have been imprisoned for child molestation and rape, to explore the links between adult offending and early childhood experience. This paper draws together the characteristics of the child molester and rapist groups in offender-specific profiles, and discusses this in relation to similar comparative research.

Introduction

In recent years, research that compares the characteristics of offender groups, and in particular the characteristics of men who have sexually offended against children with men who rape adult women, has increased. Research studies have indicated that patterns of experience can be identified, and offender-specific characteristics delineated (Overholser & Beck, 1990). These can then contribute to the development of profiles that can be useful in providing a broad snapshot of a particular group. While profiles take the analysis away from the uniqueness of individual experience, they can be useful in providing a degree of systematic coherence (Lofland & Lofland, 1984: 96). As such, they can provide a tool of systematic analysis that can draw attention to certain characteristics, and also alert the researcher to those characteristics that are generally absent (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Further, understanding the individual and group experience can have implications for treatment and contribute to a broader and more comprehensive theory of sexual violence.

This research reports on the second phase of a quantitative study that examined the early family and sexual socialisation of adult male offenders. In the first phase of the study the questionnaire was administered to three criminal groups: child molesters, rapists and non sexual offenders, and reported on the links between adult offending and exploitative sexual experiences during childhood across these three groups (Connolly & Woollons, in press). The second phase of the research uses the questionnaire data to develop offender-specific profiles of the men who sexually offend in the sample. It uses data not necessarily significant across offender types within the first analysis, but is nevertheless true for the specific offender category. Two profiles are provided. Firstly a profile of the child molester is developed, followed by an equivalent profile of the rapists within the study. Following a discussion of the profiles, the paper considers the findings within the context of other studies that have compared these two criminal groups.

Method

The research was undertaken at Rolleston Prison, a medium security prison within the Canterbury region of Aotearoa New Zealand. Attached to one of the prison units is the Kia Marama Sex Offender Treatment Programme for adult males who have been convicted of child molestation. Before being accepted into the treatment unit at Kia Marama, the men will have spent some of their sentence in the general prison and are, therefore, in the final stages of their imprisonment prior to parole or release.

The research participants in this phase of the study represented a total sample of 67 males. Twenty-three of the men from the general prison were serving sentences for rape, and the remaining 44 men were from the Kia Marama programme undergoing therapeutic treatment for child molestation crime. It is important to note that the smaller number of rapists within the study limits the rapist profile from being representative, but is offered here as an indicator of comparative difference. It is also important to note that the profiles have been developed from incarcerated offenders and may not relate to others who may have similarly offended but who have not been through the legal and penal systems.¹

The questionnaire was originally developed by Toni Cavanagh Johnson. It begins with general questions about the respondent himself (eg, age, race, education) and then asks other questions relating to family information (eg, parent's occupation, family religion). Proceeding in five sections, the questionnaire explores the men's views about children's sexual behaviours, and then enquires about their own preadolescent sexual experiences, both with respect to sexual activity with other children and adults. The questionnaire also enquires into the offender's experience of other abuse types, such as physical abuse and neglect.

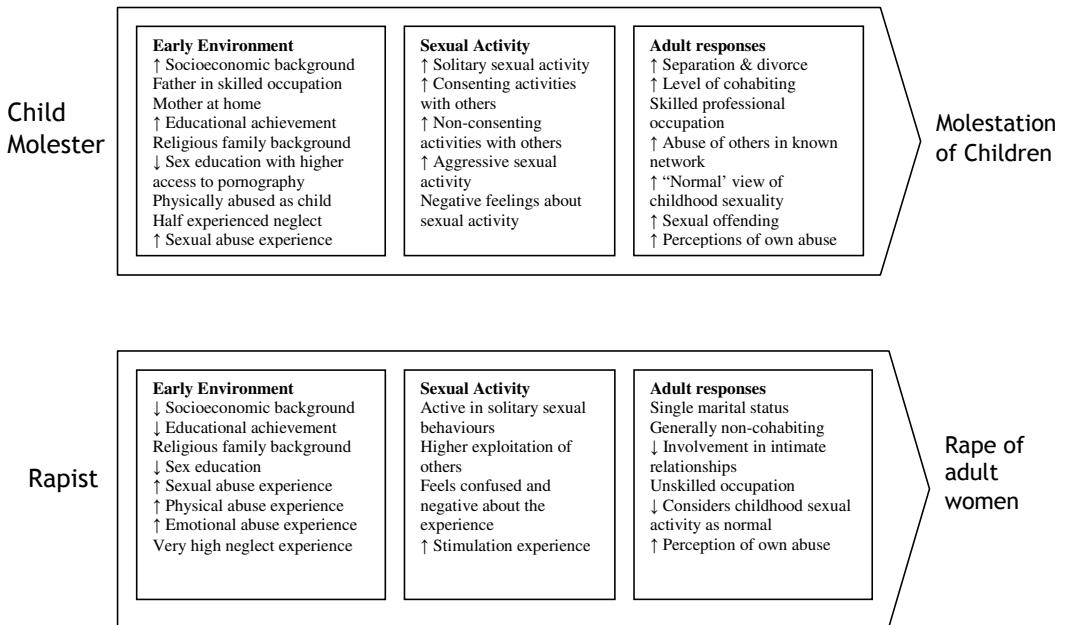
Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and the men were able to decline or withdraw. The questions were anonymous and anonymity was assured. Ethical approval was provided by the University of Canterbury Ethics Committee.

The administration of the questionnaire occurred in two phases: firstly with the treatment group within the sex offender unit, and then to the men in the general prison.

PROC FREQ from the SAS suite of statistical sub-routines was used to analyse the questionnaire data (Stokes, Davis & Koch, 1995). Data was tested by Fisher's exact method for a null hypothesis of no association. Once the findings of significance were identified, a profile of the child molester group and the rapist group was developed. The findings were then ordered around a three set analysis that included the offender's early family context, early childhood sexual behaviour, and the offender's subsequent adult responses. This then provided a comparative example that we suggest may illustrate developmental pathways toward an abusive lifestyle (Figure 1).

¹ It is important to reiterate that the data in the study comes from an incarcerated rapist sample. It may be that rape charges that involve stranger rape are more likely to be successfully prosecuted. Rape allegations that involve a victim that is known to the alleged abuser may be more difficult to prosecute as the question of consent becomes a significant issue.

Figure 1. Pathways toward an abusive pattern of offending.



Child molester profile

From this study, the child molester is most likely to be of European descent (68%), heterosexual (69%), and be separated or divorced from his partner (around 46%). He will have worked in a professional or skilled occupation. Professional work is identified as those occupations that include teaching, medicine, and engineering, while skilled work includes occupations such as teacher's aide, technician, plumber, builder etc. For the molester, this is consistent with his father's occupational background, while most frequently his mother was a home person. When his mother *did* work outside the home, occupation was divided equally across skilled and unskilled work, house cleaning and shop work being examples of unskilled work. His mother would not have worked in any of the professional occupations.

Scholastically, the child molester would have completed secondary schooling, and a few (11%) would have attended university. He is likely to come from a religious family background, almost 80% reporting an identified family religion.

In terms of his attitudes to childhood sexuality, he is most likely to consider it normal for children under 12 years of age to engage in some sexual behaviours. In this his views are generally consistent with the rapists in the sample. Like them, he would consider passive sexual activity to be normal, for example, teasing at school, looking at 'dirty' pictures, peeping at people in the bathroom. He is a little more certain about what he considers other 'normal' sex play activities, such as playing doctor, masturbation, touching and exploring another child. A few of the child molesters (almost 10%) consider activities such as cunnilingus, vaginal

and anal intercourse to be normal sexual activities for a child under 12. If he discovered his own child engaging in sexual behaviour with another child he would take action to stop the behaviour by talking to the children and to the parent of the other child. Some of the child molesters (19%) would consider that the behaviour was wrong and punishable.

He is unlikely to have been told the 'facts of life' by his parents and is even less likely to have received any formal sex education. Like the rapists in the sample he is more likely to have picked up information from family and friends (42%) and some will have picked up through the media (24%). He is, however, more likely to have developed his understandings about sex from pornography (22% versus 15% for the rapist group). During his own preadolescence, he would have participated actively and regularly in solitary sexual experimentation, for example, genital exploration and masturbation (89%). He is more likely than the rapists to have had consensual sexual experiences with other children during his preadolescence. While most of this sexual activity would be within the areas identified above, he is also reporting (22%) more aggressive activities such as putting his penis into another child's mouth and vaginal and anal intercourse. He is most likely to have a familial relationship with the other child. Generally, he is more inclined to express positive feelings about his consensual preadolescent sexual activities (63% versus 40% for the rapists), and describes them as positively stimulating.

As a preadolescent he is significantly more likely to have been sexually exploitative to other children (27%). He is also likely to sexually exploit other children much more actively across the range of activities, from more general exploratory activities (touching and exploring another child's genitals) to more aggressive activities (such as pretending intercourse, fellatio, or vaginal and anal intercourse). He uses trickery as the main method of engaging other children into sexual activity, but also uses verbal or physical threats. While having a preference for girls, the child molester is likely to have abused both boys and girls during his preadolescence and he is slightly more likely to have had exploitative experiences with his siblings.

Thinking back about all of his preadolescent sexual experiences, including abusive experiences with adults, he is likely to have felt confused and negative (59%). He rates the effect of his early sexual experience as being 'bad', only 5% would rate it as having had a 'good' effect. He is likely to report having been sexually abused (46%) and would seem to have experienced a higher degree of abuse frequency (13% > 50 times). He is not always certain whether or not his experiences were abusive however, 18% being quite unsure. When he looks back on his experiences as an adult, though, he recognises them as having been sexually abusive. With respect to other types of abuse, he is likely to have been physically abused (48%), to report emotional abuse (55%), and to have experienced childhood neglect (43%).

During his adolescence and adulthood, perhaps not surprisingly, he is more likely to have offended sexually toward others. He abuses mostly female children, (70%), but also abuses boys (27%). Clearly he is very much more child focused and abuses children across the age range (9% abuse of victims under six years of age, 36% of victims aged 7-12, and 44% of the victims being in the 13-18 age group). He is much less likely to sexually exploit adults (victimising 8% in the 18-30 age group, and 3% > 31 years). He is much more likely to abuse within his closer family group (36% incestuous) and he is also significantly abusive to step-children (16%).

Generally then, the group characteristics of the child molesters within this sample suggest early backgrounds that are more abusive than neglectful, family occupations described as professional, higher educational background, with religious influences. Their early childhood is more likely to be characterised by greater sexual activity and experimentation, both in terms of solitary experience, and consensual and non-consensual activities with other children. However, these activities are more likely to be remembered as confusing and perceived negatively. By definition, the child molester is more focused on the abuse of children rather than adults, and is more likely to abuse children within his known network. Most will have been married at some stage in their lives and some remain so (nearly 30%). Only a quarter of the molesters have remained single, suggesting a greater opportunity for the majority of them to experience family life in a cohabiting situation.

The rapist profile

In contrast, the rapists in the sample are less likely to have ever been married and are half as likely than the child molesters to be in cohabiting situations (the total non-cohabiting being 86%). Most will remain single, and less than 15% are currently married. The remaining 43% of the rapists report being divorced or separated. The rapist, therefore, is more likely to be outside a familial arrangement.

Like the child molester generally he will be European in origin, and is likely to have completed secondary education. Unlike the child molester he would not go on to tertiary education, but would be more likely to enter unskilled employment, for example labouring. This is generally consistent with his father's occupational experience, although there is a greater change across the generation, the rapist's father being more likely to be in skilled employment than the rapists themselves, a suggestion of downward drift.

Within this study, the rapist's family background is also likely to be influenced by religious beliefs and values. Like the child molesters, the rapist will come from a religious family background, both groups reporting around 75%.

The rapist will generally consider childhood sexual activity for children under 12 years to be normal, but he is not so likely as the child molester to think so (57% versus 70%). He is likely to agree with the child molester group in regard to what type of activities are normal, for example, the passive activities outlined earlier and more active sex play activities (e.g. playing doctor, masturbation, touching and exploring another child). Few (12%) of the rapists will view activities such as cunnilingus, and vaginal and anal intercourse as normal for a child under 12. Like the child molester, if he discovered his own child engaging in sexual behaviour with another child he would also take action to stop the behaviour by talking to the children and to the parent of the other child, but only 16% of them would consider that such behaviour was wrong and punishable.

He is unlikely to have had formal sex education and his parents are unlikely to have told him about sex. He is more likely to have picked up information from family and friends and slightly more would have been influenced by media (30% versus 24% of the child molesters). Although less active than the child molester, the rapist also participates actively in solitary sexual experimentation during his preadolescence (71%), and is also likely to have consensual sexual experiences with another child during his preadolescence (around 65%). His

activities are a little more likely to involve other members of his family group (54% versus 41% for the child molester), and while he reports the highest levels of stimulation from this activity, he feels less positive about it than the child molester (40% versus 63%).

He is less likely than the child molester to be sexually exploitative toward other children during his childhood (14% versus 27% of the child molesters), and he is likely to feel confused and negative about his experiences.

The rapist is most likely to have been sexually abused during childhood, reporting significantly higher levels than the child molesters (71% versus 46%). While he was less likely to consider his experiences abusive at the time, looking back as an adult, he is more inclined to consider it abuse now. He has even chances of being physically abused during his childhood (50%), but is more likely to report emotional abuse (64%), and is considerably more likely to experience neglect (79% versus 43% for the child molester). He is most likely to rate the effects of his childhood abuse as negative.

The rapist reports high levels of abuse of others during his adolescence and adulthood, although not as high as the child molester (57% versus 84%). He abuses females only and his focus is mainly on the adult woman population. Unlike the child molester the incarcerated rapist is most likely to abuse people outside his known network (i.e. strangers). Although he will have sexually abused others during his own childhood and adolescence, 83% of his offending has been during his adult years (versus 69% for the child molester).

Generally then, the group characteristics of the rapists within this sample indicate early backgrounds that are significantly more affected by neglect, suggesting deficits in terms of the satisfaction of their basic childhood needs. Their early family background is also abusive in other ways, and they regard their experience as negatively affecting their adult lives. Coming generally from working class backgrounds, they are also from families that are influenced by religious beliefs. They are less likely to complete their education, and more likely to move into unskilled occupations. Most remain single or in non-cohabiting situations, and much of their offending takes place during their adult years.

Discussion

The analysis of the data and the findings emerging from this analysis have a number of limitations, both practical and statistical. The small sample size, particularly with the rapist sample, reduces comparative power, and the findings therefore cannot be seen as representative. Further, the quality of the data is dependent on the veracity and candor of the replies, an ability to understand what was being asked, the reliability of recall, and the possibility of 'treatment effect' with respect to the child molester group. The findings need to be considered in the light of this. However, notwithstanding the limitations, the comparison of the child molesters and the rapists in the sample contributes to a growing research interest in comparing these two groups of offenders. While rapists and child molesters have been found to have characteristics in common, for example, the likelihood of them coming from disturbed family backgrounds (Bard, Carter, Cerce, Knight, Rosenberg & Schneider, 1987), high reporting of childhood abuse (a finding supported by this study, and also Tingle et al., 1986), and the tendency for child molesters and rapists to consider their own sexual abuse a normal part of childhood development (Overholser & Beck, 1990), they also differ in cer-

tain ways. According to Barbaree, Hudson and Seto's (1993) appraisal of the research, the criminal histories of the two groups differ. Rapists have usually been found to be diverse in their criminal activities, while child molesters have been found to be less varied. In addition, child molesters generally begin their criminal career later than rapists, and there are differences with respect to their intelligence (Marshall, Barbaree & Christophe, 1988) and their scholastic achievement (Bard et al., 1987). A lower intelligence subgroup within the child molester samples creates a greater variance within the distribution of scores, a point that reinforces the need for specialists within-group treatment services.

A study by Tingle et al. (1986) explores some of the developmental differences and similarities between rapist and child molester groups. A higher percentage of the rapists in their sample came from disrupted family backgrounds or 'broken homes'. The rapists also reported higher levels of aggressive behaviour during childhood, were more likely to have difficulty getting along with adults (e.g. parents, teachers), and were more frequently expelled from school. In addition, the rapists were more likely to have been involved in contact sports, to hurt the people to whom they are aggressive, and to destroy property (including fire starting activity). While the child molesters also experienced conflictual family relationships, these were more likely to be centred around dependency issues with respect to the mother. A finding by Tingle et al. that differs significantly from the findings within this study is the reporting of having felt neglected by the parent or caregiver. While this study distinguishes the rapist as feeling most neglected during childhood the Tingle et al study found equal reportings by the child molesters and the rapists of around 25%. In the Tingle study however, the neglect was specifically related to the mother figure and did not relate to the father or other caregivers. In terms of parental rejection, Bass and Levant (1992) found that child molesters adjudged their parents as more rejecting and controlling than the control sample, and while the rapist sample concurred with respect to the perception of mothers, the rapists' fathers were not judged by them as being more rejecting.

Psychosocial studies have also delineated child molesters and rapists into distinctly different clinical groups. Hillbrand, Foster and Hirt (1990) found that across the range of psychological and psychosocial variables, rapists exhibited more severe psychopathology than child molesters. This included the rapists' sense of self worth, and self-esteem, vulnerability and helplessness. It also considered the offenders' social relationships, dysphoric mood state (lack of sense of wellbeing), mismanagement of aggression, and tenuous masculine identity. Interestingly, they conclude that the severity of the psychopathology, together with the rapists' violent history, and childhood psychiatric symptomology and substance abuse, indicates that with long-term institutional treatment the rapist is likely to respond to treatment. Conversely, they argue that the more ego-syntonic psychopathology (a more characterological condition with lower distress scores) of the child molester indicates a less optimistic prognosis.

The issue of response styles, moral reasoning and cognition has also been considered by researchers in terms of rapists and child molesters. Nugent and Kroner (1996) found significant differences between the measures of denial and response styles of the two offender groups, and differences between the likelihood of them admitting their offences. Their findings suggest that child molesters are more likely to be concerned about what others think about them, while rapists indicated less concern in this regard. This, together

with the greater number of victims and repetitive offending, may reinforce a greater need for denial in the child molester that becomes more strongly integrated into their lifestyle as an enduring cognitive characteristic.

Conclusions

Using profiles can assist a worker to better understand the patterning of experience and behaviour with respect to men who offend in different ways. When undertaking groupwork with offenders, profiles can highlight commonality with respect to the significance of early experience, sexual activity and adult responses, and can suggest possible treatment strategies or lines of therapeutic inquiry. For example, if the child molester profile indicates that the men are likely to consider preadolescent sexual activity as normal, then exploring this within the context of group treatment could be beneficial. However, while profiles can offer much in terms of alerting the worker to common characteristics, recent research also points to a growing recognition that sexual offenders are heterogeneous in their profiles, criminal diversity and treatment requirements (Porter, Fairweather, Drugge, Herve, Bert & Boer, 2000). For example, while child molesters may share common characteristics, not all exhibit the same characteristics, nor do they have the same family and personal experiences and applied responses. This raises difficulties, not only with the conceptualisation and classification of the problems, but also influences decisions about the nature of treatment strategies and service responses. Work that has been done to delineate the particular characteristics and treatment needs of rapists (Polaschek, Ward & Hudson, 1997) and child molesters (Ward, Hudson, Marshall & Siegert, 1995) is important to the better understanding of the aetiology and treatment responses to sex offending. According to Miner and Dwyer (1997: 36), "(A)s our knowledge about sex offender treatment increases, we become more aware that the effects of interventions differ with respect to the characteristics of the offenders being treated." This points to the need for knowledge about offender aetiology and treatment possibilities to be both general and specific. Increasing knowledge about individual experience and a person's unique responses is clearly important. How a person makes sense of their own experience, and how this contributes to their offending patterns is important when working with issues of sexual offending. However, increasing our knowledge of offender-specific groups is also important. Developing general profiles can provide a basis from which more specific within-group classifications can be identified, and could contribute to treatment strategies that have a better fit with offender profiles.

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