Sensitivity and Specificity of the Phallometric Test for Pedophilia: Admitters vs. Deniers

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Accurate identification of pedophilia is important for clinical practice and research. In clinical practice, identifying sexual offenders against children who deny pedophilic interests is essential for risk assessment, as pedophilic interests are a strong predictor of sexual recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; McPhail, Fernane, Hermann, Fernandez, & Nunes, 2013) and an important target for interventions with sexual offenders. In research, having accurate tests for pedophilia improves researchers’ ability to examine the role this sexual interest plays in the initiation and maintenance of sexual offending.

The phallometric test for pedophilia is an established psychophysiological method for identifying individuals with pedophilic interests. Blanchard and colleagues (2001) measured the sensitivity and specificity of the volumetric phallometric test for pedophilia in a sample of sexual offenders who denied having a sexual preference for children (i.e., non-admitting sexual offenders) despite having committed sexual offenses against multiple children. This research established the sensitivity and specificity of the test in denying pedophiles, which are similar to those seen in typical forensic clinical settings. Other research on the sensitivity and specificity of the phallometric test has typically examined the sensitivity of the test in admitting sexual offenders or has not specified the amount of admitting offenders or deniers in the sample (e.g., Barsetti, Earls, Lalumière, & Bélanger, 1998; Freund & Blanchard, 1989; Freund & Watson, 1991; Malcolm, Andrews, & Quinsey, 1993).

The use of admitting sexual offenders in research is problematic, since clinical settings require a measure of pedophilia in individuals who deny sexual interest in children and are motivated to manipulate test results. Currently, it is problematic to generalize the sensitivity and specificity of the phallometric test from samples of admitting pedophiles to real world samples who deny pedophilic interests (despite substantial histories of sex offenses against children). Although less accuracy would be expected for a sample of deniers, we do not currently know what the expectable “deflation” would be. This lack of knowledge is due to the sensitivity and specificity of the test not being examined in admitting and denying sexual offenders that come from the same sample.

The current study will examine the sensitivity and specificity of the phallometric test in a sample of 1329 sexual offenders who have undergone a volumetric phallometric test for pedophilia as part of a clinical assessment. The current study will replicate and extend Blanchard and colleagues’ (2001) findings in two ways. First, we will be able to validate the previous findings on a second, larger independent sample of sexual offenders. Second, given the size of the sample, we will be able to examine a narrower operationalization of pedophilia as assessment by the phallometric test. Specifically, the current sample will
allow for child victim offenders to be identified as having prepubescent victims only, whereas Blanchard et al. (2001) defined offenders with pubescent victims (12-14 years) as child victim offenders due to a smaller sample size. The current study will examine the sensitivity of the phallometric test in admitting and denying pedophiles, compare the sensitivity of the test in these two groups of sexual offenders, and estimate the amount of deflation in accuracy of the test when comparing deniers with admitters. This research will provide a clearer picture of how the accuracy of the test performs in typical clinical settings (e.g., use with denying pedophiles) and will provide an estimate of how the accuracies found in past research may be anticipated to deflate when applied to clients typically seen in forensic settings.

Goals of the Poster Presentation:

1. Audience members will understand the sensitivity and specificity of the phallometric test in non-admitting sexual offenders.
2. Audience members will understand the sensitivity and specificity of the phallometric test in admitting sexual offenders.
3. Audience members will understand whether there is a significant difference between the sensitivity and specificity of the phallometric test found in non-admitting and admitting sexual offenders.