Implications of Therapists’ Attitudes towards Sexual Offenders in Clinical Practice

Symposium Chair: Derek Perkins, Ph.D., Royal Holloway University of London

Perpetrators of sexual offenses are one of the few social groups about whom it is still socially acceptable, or even desirable, to be openly hostile and disparaging. They are disproportionately, and often incorrectly, represented in the media, and community fear of sexual recidivism has been a key driver in the implementation of a range of increasingly punitive and risk-averse responses to sexual offending in a number of legal jurisdictions. While community-based groups have been studied quite extensively in relation to their attitudes towards sexual offenders, less work has been conducted into the factors that underpin such attitudes, and why these constructs may be important within clinical settings. Individual differences in attitudes towards the perpetrators of sexual offenses are likely to have a significant impact on professional decision-making, specifically in relation to risk assessment and the construction of effective therapeutic climates within treatment centers.

The symposium will be chaired by Prof. Derek Perkins, who is a Professor of Forensic Psychology (Royal Holloway University of London, UK) and a Consultant Clinical and Forensic Psychologist (Broadmoor Hospital, UK). Three 25 minute talks will be presented, with these providing an overview of recent empirical work into the foundations of attitudes towards sexual offenders, their impact on the therapeutic climate in prisons, and their influence of professional judgments of risk within a clinical setting. As such, the session provides a systematic overview of the factors underpinning attitudes, and why these constructs are important within clinical settings.

Symposium Learning Goals and Objectives:

- Examine recent advances in research into the factors that underpin attitudes towards sexual offenders. Participants will gain an understanding of potential factors underpinning attitudes towards sexual offenders.
- Identify how attitudes towards sexual offenders can impact upon the therapeutic environment, and understand what this means for treatment efficacy. Participants will gain an appreciation as to how attitudes towards sexual offenders can impact upon the therapeutic climate of treatment facilities.
- Provide an overview of how therapists’ attitudes can impact upon individual clinical practices. Participants will gain insights into how attitudes towards sexual offenders can impact of professional judgements.
What Can Implicit Theories Tell Us about Attitudes towards Sexual Offenders?

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There is a substantial body of literature in relation to demographic differences in attitudes towards sexual offenders. However, there has been little work conducted into the psychological factors and constructs that serve to underpin these attitudes. In this study, we identify the potential role of implicit theories (ITs) in mediating responses to sexual offending. ITs structure the way people understand and respond to various human actions. Typically, people believe that human attributes are either fixed (entitists) or malleable (incrementalists). The present study aimed to examine: (a) whether attitudes towards sexual offenders differ depending upon one’s implicit theory about human nature and sexual offenders, and (b) whether implicit theories are associated with judgments made about different 'types' of child abuser.

A sample of 252 community participants was recruited. Their attitudes and implicit theories about sexual offenders were assessed via self-report, as was their political orientation. Results confirmed our hypotheses, in that ITs about sexual offenders were expressed independent of ITs about human nature more broadly. This is consistent with the view that specific views about sexual offenders may serve to increase the endorsement of entity-based ITs about this group. Further, entity ITs about sexual offenders were associated with significantly more negative attitudes towards them. However, the importance of ITs about sexual offenders was variable when we examined responses to different sexual offender groups, with stereotypical cases being judged more punitively than counter-stereotypical cases. Thus, we argue that ITs about sexual offenders may be based on representative images about who sexual offenders are. Implications for clinical practice will be discussed using these data as a foundational framework.

Learning Goals and Objectives:

- Understand the importance of examining the foundations of attitudes towards sexual offenders
- Propose that implicit theories about sexual offenders guide attitudes towards this client group
- Identify directions for further research to examine the role of implicit theories in clinical contexts
Exploring the Relationship between Attitudes towards Sexual Offenders and Therapeutic Climates

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Rebecca Lievesley, MSc., Nottingham Trent University

Research has demonstrated that sex offender treatment programs can reduce the number of sex offenders that are reconvicted. However, while there is now a body of knowledge regarding sex offender treatment effectiveness, there remains a lack of attention on the context in which treatment takes place. The prison environment, attitudes towards sex offenders, prisoners’ attitudes towards each other, and beliefs that prisoners can change are all potentially important for the rehabilitative process. Indeed, attitudes towards sex offenders (ATS) are associated with greater therapeutic effectiveness and therapeutic alliance, which is linked to positive treatment outcomes. ATS have been found to predict views of punishment and prison staff views of offender rehabilitation.

This presentation presents data from a mixed-methods study which evaluated the rehabilitative climates of two sex offender prisons; one a specialist treatment site, and the other a non-treatment focused site. The study focused, both qualitatively and quantitatively, on the relationships between therapeutic climate, ATS and beliefs that sex offenders can change from both prisoner and staff perspectives. Across the prison sites higher ATS scores were associated with positive views of the therapeutic climate, in particular the ‘experienced safety’ of prisoners. This research also found that beliefs about change were associated with higher ATS scores. There were also significant differences between ATS in prison staff at the different sites. The qualitative analysis from both prison sites bolstered the quantitative findings and found that sex offenders experience of staff who held positive attitudes of sex offenders enabled them to feel relaxed in the prison environment and contributed to prisoners having the ‘headspace’ to contemplate change. These are important findings as previous research has found that the attitudes held by professionals towards sexual offenders can have a profound effect on their practice. The key differences between the prison sites on prisoner and staff perceptions of rehabilitative climate and ATS, as well as implications for policy and practice, are discussed.

Learning Goals and Objectives:

- To explore the relationships between therapeutic prison climate, attitudes towards sex offenders and sex offenders beliefs that they can change
- To understand the role of attitudes towards sex offenders in constructive prisoner and staff relationships in prison
- To consider how attitudes towards sex offenders can effect rehabilitative practice and outcome
The Impact of Attitudes towards Sexual Offenders on Clinical Judgments

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During the past few years there has been an increasing awareness that community attitudes towards sexual offenders can have a significant impact on effective treatment and community reintegration. Such attitudes are likely to impact on perceptions of public safety and as such impact on social policies related to sexual crime. At the same time, research has shown that different professional groups differ in their attitudes to those who commit sexual offences, and that this impacts on judgments about risk and safety. To date, most research has focused on describing the differences between varying community and professional samples rather than concentrating on the impact that these differences may have on forensic practice.

Data are presented from thirty-five forensic assessors, mostly registered psychologists, who completed the ATS-21 – a validated measure of attitudes towards sexual offenders. Participants were presented with two different vignettes of individuals who had committed sexual and violent offenses, and then made judgments about risk and treatment need in relation to these vignettes. ATS-21 subscales of ‘Intent’ and ‘Social Distance’ were significantly related to judgments of risk for sexual the sexual offender, but not for the violent offender. Contrastingly, the ATS-21 subscale of ‘Trust’ was related to the perceived risk of the violent offender, but not the sexual offender. Throughout, more positive attitudes to sexual offenders were related to lower perceived risk. All ATS 21 scores were related to treatment need for the sexual offender, but not the violent offender. Given that the attitude of a forensic assessor should not be related to objective assessments of risk, this paper raises a number of important points for professional practice. Suggestions are made about how personal attitudes need to be considered in future research and clinical practice.

Learning Goals and Objectives:
- An improved understanding of the current research on attitudes towards sexual offenders.
- An understanding of how attitudes can impact on clinical / professional judgments made by professionals.
- An understanding of how future research and clinical practice with sexual offenders could be enhanced by the inclusion of attitudinal measures.