

## ***BETTER TOGETHER***

2018 ATSA Conference | Thursday October 18 | 10:30 AM – 12:00 PM

### **T-02**

#### **Emotion Processing and Emotion Regulation in Adult Male Sexual Offenders**

Symposium Chair: Steven M. Gillespie, PhD  
University of Liverpool

Socio-affective functioning and emotion-regulation represent psychologically meaningful risk factors for sexual offense recidivism. Yet, a rather limited body of research has focussed on the precise nature of the emotional difficulties experienced by adult male sexual offenders, and knowledge of ‘what works’ in targeting these risk-factors is lacking. A considerable focus on other identified risk factors, including sexual interests, and attitudes supportive of sexual offending, has yielded many interesting findings with important implications for prevention and intervention. Thus, the aim of this symposium is to highlight the importance of focussing on emotional functioning in the assessment, treatment, and management of sexual offenders, and to report new findings on emotion processing and emotion regulation.

The first presentation in this symposium will give an overview of the current literature on emotion deficits in sexual offenders. More specifically, the precise nature of the emotion deficits in sex offenders will be critically analysed as well as its implications for theory and practice. In so doing, the first presentation will set the ground for the empirical studies described in the two following presentations. The second presentation will expand on a small literature showing that sexual offenders have difficulties in recognizing others facial expressions of emotion. In this paper the results of an eye-tracking study highlighting the effects of victim age and antisocial personality pathology on accuracy of emotion recognition, as well as the pattern of eye-movements toward emotionally salient aspects of the face, that is, the eyes and the mouth, will be reported. The third presentation will expand on the literature suggesting that sexual offenders show self-regulatory difficulties and may benefit from interventions with a focus on reducing negative affect and improving emotion regulation. In this paper the results of a study that compared men with a history of sexual offending, violent non-sexual offending, homicide and community controls will be presented, with a focus on the use of different emotion regulatory strategies, difficulties experienced during emotion regulation, and levels of trait alexithymia and dispositional mindfulness. Taken together, these papers will take stock of extant knowledge and reveal new findings on the broad role of emotional functioning in sexual offending, including the processing of socio-affective stimuli, emotion regulatory abilities, and the potential benefits of new interventions.

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### **Parsing Emotion: A Critical Review of Emotion Deficits in Sex Offenders**

Kasia Uzieblo, Ph.D.  
Thomas More University College

Research and theory over the past two decades indicate that emotion deficits play a crucial role in the development and maintenance of sexual violent behaviour. Emotion deficiencies are also considered as an important risk factor for sexual recidivism. Accounts from practice tend to underline the importance of emotion deficits: Clinicians often attest to instances where a deviant emotional processing has driven the sexual violent behaviour, and numerous treatment programs for sex offenders target emotion deficits. Nevertheless, it remains unclear which specific emotion deficits are related to sexual violence. One of the main problems of the studies and clinical accounts is the use of different operationalizations of the emotion deficits. In addition, different methods of measuring emotion deficits have been used which hampers proper comparison across studies. Hence, the question arises which specific emotions deficits are associated with sexual offending.

The purpose of this presentation is to critically examine current empirical evidence for emotion deficits in sex offenders. We will first discuss the specificity of the emotion deficits and on which level these deficits tend to occur (i.e., conscious versus automatic processing). Then we will critically evaluate whether prominent theories on sexual offending are in line with this empirical evidence. Finally, we will discuss the implications of this review for future research and therapeutic interventions with sex offenders.

#### **Learning Goals:**

This presentation aims to:

- Provide a critical analysis of the literature on emotion deficits in sex offenders;
- Examine the link between theories on and empirical evidence for emotion deficits in sex offenders;
- Discuss the possible implications of current knowledge on emotion deficits for practice and future research.

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### **Socio-Affective Functioning in Sexual Offenders: An Eye Tracking Investigation**

Steven M. Gillespie, Ph.D.  
University of Liverpool  
*Pia Rotshtein*  
*Anthony R. Beech*  
*Ian J. Mitchell*

Problems in socio-affective functioning have been identified among sexual offenders, and a limited body of research has examined difficulties among sexual offenders and non-sexual violent offenders in recognizing others facial expressions of emotion. Facial expressions of emotion provide information about the emotions and intentions of the expresser, they evoke responses in the perceiver, and they provide incentives for desired social behaviour. Thus, difficulties in facial emotion recognition can often result in severely disturbed socio-affective functioning. Despite this, the cognitive mechanisms underlying difficulties in emotion recognition among sexual offenders, and the effects of affective valence, victim age and antisocial personality pathology, remain unknown.

To address this gap in the literature, we examined accuracy of emotion recognition among sexual offenders with adult victims, sexual offenders with child victims, and adult male community participants. Further, we used eye-tracking techniques to examine the allocation of attention to the more emotionally salient regions of the face, the eyes and the mouth, while participants judged images showing anger, disgust, fearful, happy, sad, and surprised expressions. A comparison between these groups showed that compared with offenders with adult victims, and non-offenders, sex offenders with child victims showed increased difficulty identifying expressions at lower intensity relative to higher intensity. An examination of eye movement data revealed that sex offenders with child victims showed a reduced pattern of preferential looking at the eyes compared with adult victims, and this effect was moderated by the sex and intensity of the expression for both angry and fearful expressions. These effects may be explained by heightened levels of antisocial personality pathology among offenders with adult victims, with heightened levels of disinhibition associated with a greater focus on the eye region. Our results have implications for understanding differences in socio-affective functioning in sexual offenders with adult and child victims, and add to a growing evidence base suggesting that facial emotion recognition may represent a viable treatment target among adult males who sexually offend.

#### **Learning Goals:**

- To provide an overview of emotion recognition abilities, the cognitive mechanisms that serve these abilities, and the ways in which these have been found to break down in forensic samples.

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- To examine the effects of victim age and antisocial personality pathology on accuracy of emotion recognition, and the allocation of visual attention to emotionally salient regions of the face.
- To give an account of the potential implications of the study findings for understanding and treating socio-affective dysfunction in sexual offenders.

### **Emotional Functioning in Sexual Offenders: Comparison with other Offender Groups**

Carlo Garofalo, PhD  
Steven M. Gillespie, PhD  
University of Liverpool  
Patrizia Velotti

Negative affect and problems in emotion regulation has long been central in theories of sexual offending, and treatment modules aimed at improving emotion regulation skills are often recommended and implemented in interventions for sexual offenders. Yet, negative affect and emotion regulation problems have also been theoretically linked with (non-sexual) violent offending, with emerging empirical evidence in support. Therefore, it remains unclear whether different offender groups share similar emotional difficulties or present distinct profiles. In addition, some conceptual confusion can arise due to the overlap between emotion regulation and related constructs that share conceptual and empirical commonalities, as well as interconnected neurobiological substrates (e.g., mindfulness, emotional awareness).

To address this gap in the literature, the present study examined negative affective states, difficulties in emotion regulation, the use of different strategies for regulating emotions, levels of trait alexithymia and dispositional mindfulness in men with a history of sexual offending ( $N = 68$ ), non-sexual violent offending ( $N = 159$ ), homicide offenders ( $N = 86$ ; total offenders  $N = 313$ , all men), and man adult community participants as controls ( $N = 324$ ). A comparison between these groups showed that while sexual offenders have some circumscribed difficulties in emotional nonacceptance, violent offenders showed more generalized problems in emotional nonacceptance, alexithymia, and mindfulness. In contrast, homicide offenders appear to be relatively in charge of their emotions, and reported fewer difficulties compared with other offender groups. Our results have implications for the allocation of offenders to treatment modules aimed at improving emotion regulation, and reducing negative affect and offending behavior.

#### **Learning Goals:**

- To provide an overview of the conceptual overlap among the domains examined (emotion regulation, mindfulness, alexithymia), and their functional links with sexual and violent offending.

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- To pit the theoretical prediction against empirical evidence obtained in the present study.
- To give an account of the potential implications of the study findings for treatment planning with different offender groups

**Steven Gillespie** obtained his Ph.D. in Psychology in 2014 from the University of Birmingham, UK, and now works as a Lecturer in Clinical Psychology in the Department of Psychological Sciences at the University of Liverpool, UK. His main research focus revolves around the study of socio-affective functioning and socio-cognitive abilities in violent and generally antisocial populations, and how these abilities are affected by levels of psychopathic personality traits. Steven is also interested in the improvement of treatment given to sexual offenders, with a particular focus on emotion regulation. Besides his research, he acts as a Research Tutor for trainees enrolled on the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology.

**Kasia Uzieblo** is the coordinator of the Applied Forensic Psychology research unit at Thomas More University College and is visiting professor in forensic psychology at Ghent University. She is also the founder and coordinator of the 2-year postgraduate course Forensic Psychological Assessment and Counseling. Her main research interests are psychopathy, sexual and partner violence, and psychological assessment in forensic populations. She has published several national and international papers and has given numerous presentations on psychopathy, (sexual) violence, and stalking. Kasia Uzieblo is currently the president of the Dutch chapter of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers.

**Carlo Garofalo** obtained his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology in 2015 from Sapienza University of Rome (Italy), and has since then worked as an Assistant Professor in Forensic Psychology in the Department of Developmental Psychology of Tilburg University (Netherlands). His main research focus revolves around the study of emotional functioning and antagonistic personality traits (e.g., psychopathy) in relation to antisocial and violent behavior. Besides his research, he teaches a MSc course of Forensic Treatment and Care Programs, and two BSc courses of Risk Assessment, and Criminality, Cognition, and Personality.