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2018 ATSA Conference | Thursday October 18 | 1:30 PM – 3:00 PM

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An Examination of Psychologically Meaningful Factors Associated with Online and Contact Sexual Offending Against Children

Symposium Chair: Sarah Paquette, MSc, PhD Candidate
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Psychologically meaningful risk factors have been defined as factors either empirically or theoretically associated with sexual offending (Mann, Hanson, & Thornton, 2010). Among these risk factors, atypical sexuality and offense-supportive cognitions have been empirically established as predictive of contact sexual recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005), while anonymity has been discussed to be related to sexual offending over the Internet (Seto, 2013). Several manifestations of atypical sexuality describe sexual offenders against minors, like a sexual preference for children or adolescents, but also comorbidity with other paraphilias; abnormally high occurrence of sexual thoughts, masturbation, use of pornography and sexual intercourse; as well as the use of sex as a self-regulation strategy in difficult and stressful situations. This symposium seeks to extend our understanding of these risk factors associated with online and contact sexual offending. In the first presentation, Sarah Paquette examines the association between indicators of atypical sexuality, offense-supportive cognitions and anonymity in a sample of online and contact sexual offenders against children. The second and third presentations specifically focus on atypical sexuality. In his presentation, Ian McPhail examines the convergent and predictive validity of multiple measures of pedohebephilic interests. Finally, Sebastien Brouillette-Alarie explores several questions regarding the use of legal, atypical and illegal pornography by sexual offenders against children.

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The Association Between Offense-Supportive Cognitions, Atypical Sexuality, and Anonymity in Sexual Offending Against Children

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Research among contact sexual offenders has found that offense-related cognitions contribute to sexual offending (e.g., Helmus, Hanson, Babchishin & Mann, 2012), and likely contribute to online sexual offending. Furthermore, sexual deviance, another well-established factor associated with contact offending, is also presumed to contribute to online sexual offending. It is yet unclear, however, how offense-supportive cognitions interact with sexual offending factors among offenders. Preliminary research hypothesized that these factors may be linked together among contact offenders (Gannon & Wood, 2007). It is unclear, however, how these factors may interact for online sexual offenders. In addition, the anonymity afforded by the internet, a presumed risk factor unique to online sexual offending, has also never been investigated (Cooper, 2002; Seto, 2013). Quayle and Taylor (2003) hypothesized that the interaction between known factors related to sexual offending such as a sexual interest in children and the perceived anonymity afforded by the Internet would be related to the presence of cognitions that specifically support online sexual offending. Finally, some researchers (e.g., Mann & Beech, 2003) have suggested offense-supportive cognitions may have a moderation effect on the relationship between other risk factors and sexual offending behaviors. This association has, however, never been investigated.

This study examined the associations among offense-supportive cognitions, atypical sexuality, and anonymity with online and contact sexual offending against children. A total of 241 sexual and non-sexual offenders were included in the study. Offense-supportive cognitions were measured by the Cognitions on Internet Sexual Offending (Paquette & Cortoni, 2018) and the Molest scales (Bumby, 1996). Atypical sexuality was measured by the Sexual Interest Cardsort Questionnaire (Abel & Becker, 1979), the Sexual Preoccupation scale (Snell & Papini, 1989), and the Coping Using Sex Inventory (Cortoni & Marshall, 2001). Anonymity was measured by the Perceived Anonymity scale (Yun, 2006). Results revealed that a combined effect of offense-supportive cognitions and elements of atypical sexuality, but not anonymity, are associated with online and contact sexual offending behaviors. Implications for future research will be discussed.

Learning Goals :

- Investigate the association of offense-supportive cognitions, atypical sexuality, and anonymity with online and contact sexual offending against children.

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- Verify the hypothesis that offense-supportive cognitions act as a moderator factor among the relationship between risk factors and sexual offending.
- Contrast associated risk factors of online sexual offending to factors associated to contact sexual offending against children.

Convergent Validity, Predictive Validity, and a Test of Measurement Models of Pedophilic Interests

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Sexual interest in children is a main risk factor for the initiation and maintenance of sexual offending against children. Understanding how measures of this risk factor inter-relate with each other and predict sexual recidivism will improve assessment and management of sexual offenders. This study will examine the convergent, predictive, and incremental validity of three measures of pedophilic interest: phallometric testing, the Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests (SSPI), and the Deviant Sexual Preference item of the Violence Risk Scale-Sex Offender version (VRS-SO; Olver et al., 2007). The analytic approach will examine the correlations between these three measures of pedophilic interest. Predictive validity will be examined using Cox regression and the incremental contribution of these measures of pedophilic interest will also be examined.

Recently, three taxometric studies have examined the latent structure of pedophilic interest and have produced differing results (McPhail, Olver, Brouillette-Alarie, & Looman, 2018; Stephens, Leroux, Skilling, Cantor, & Seto, 2017; Schmidt, Mokros, & Banse, 2013). At present it is unknown which of the different measurement models implied by these divergent structural findings is the most accurate. The present study will also examine whether modelling pedophilic interest continuously (Stephens et al., 2017), dichotomously (Schmidt et al., 2013), or trichotomously (McPhail et al., 2018) results in differing estimates of the predictive accuracy of pedophilic interest. Providing a direct test of these measurement models may inform which latent structure performs the best. The present study will examine the accuracy of the predictive estimates produced when pedophilic interest is modelled as a continuum, a dichotomy, or a trichotomy.

Learning Goals:

- Understand the convergent validity for three measures of pedophilic interest.
- Understand the predictive and incremental predictive validity for three measures of pedophilic interest.

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- Understand which latent structural approach to pedophilic interests is most accurate.

Porn 101: Answering Questions about the Link between Porn Use and Sexual Offending

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The study of porn use among sexual offenders has mainly focused on the variety of contents found in illegal materials (e.g., Endrass et al., 2009; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2011), or the effects of pornography consumption on sexually coercive behaviors (e.g., Kingston, Fedoroff, Firestone, Curry, & Bradford, 2008). However, very few studies linked the type of content with specific behaviors, leaving many questions unanswered. Among these:

- 1) Does legal pornography have a different effect on sexually coercive behaviors than illegal pornography?
- 2) Does the type of pornographic content watched by sexual offenders reflect their sexual interests?
- 3) Does pornography consumption have incremental validity beyond deviant sexual interests in predicting sexually coercive behaviors?

Our presentation will answer the above questions drawing on a sample of 221 offenders: 36 online sexual, 44 contact sexual, 67 mixed sexual, and 74 non sexual offenders. Participants completed the Sexual Interest Cardsort Questionnaire (Abel & Becker, 1979) and a custom checklist assessing their frequency of use of various types of legal, atypical and illegal pornography. Preliminary results indicate that legal pornography had no relationship with committing contact sexual offenses, but illegal pornography did, suggesting that content influences predictive validity. Also, the type of pornography consumed typically reflect the sexual interests and real-world victim choices, although there was a “bleeding” effect: highly deviant offenders tended to consume various types of illegal pornography without having all of the according victim types. Finally, even though use of illegal pornography was individually related to committing contact sexual offenses, it failed to have an incremental effect beyond that of deviant sexual interests. This suggests that pornography consumption may not be a useful assessment target if deviant sexual interests are thoroughly known. However, the reported analyses were cross-sectional, meaning that the temporality of measures was not explicitly considered. Longitudinal studies could be more adapted to the detection of the role that pornography consumption plays in the offense chain.

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Learning Goals:

- Present an overview of the current research on pornography use among sexual offenders.
- Provide preliminary evidence on some of the unanswered questions, namely the link between types of pornographic material and sexually coercive behaviors.
- Discuss the implications of our results for research and clinical practice.

Sarah Paquette, MSc Criminology, is a doctoral student in psychology at the Université de Montréal. She also works within the Internet Sexual Child Exploitation (ICE) unit of the provincial police of Quebec (Sûreté du Québec) in Canada. Her research focuses on sexual crimes, more specifically, the study and measurement of offense-supportive cognitions as well as the atypical sexuality among online and contact sexual offenders against children.

Franca Cortoni, PhD, CPsych, a clinical forensic psychologist, is Professor at the School of Criminology of the Université de Montréal and Research Fellow at the International Centre of Comparative Criminology. She has published extensively and made numerous presentations on male and female sexual offender issues at national and international conferences. She is currently the President of ATSA.

Ian McPhail is a PhD Candidate in clinical psychology at the University of Saskatchewan. Ian has experience working with adult and adolescent sexual offenders and has worked with these clients in the community, in prisons, and in forensic psychiatric settings. He has also worked in the research unit of a provincial corrections ministry and has published on issues related to sexual offending and pedohebephilic interests.

Sébastien Brouillette-Alarie, PhD, is a sessional lecturer at Université de Montréal and a postdoctoral candidate at Université Laval, under the supervision of Patrick Lussier, Ph.D. He has published peer-reviewed articles on the latent structure of risk scales for sexual offenders, sexual sadism, the offending process of hebephiles, and psychopathy among women. His current research interests are about the etiology of risk in sexual offenders and criminal desistance.