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# Evidence-based prevention strategies derived from the narratives of young sex offenders

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2019-12-11



# Introduction

- Possible link between sex offending and empathy deficits?
- Marshall, Marshall, Serran and O'Brien (2009) are of the opinion that empathy should not be seen as a trait, but rather as **situation-specific** and **person-specific**.
- General empathy vs own victim empathy
- Situational reinforcers (e.g. use of alcohol)
- Estimated South African recidivism rate – 95% (Quan-Baffour & Zawada, 2012).

# Key concepts

For the purpose of this presentation:

- A **young sex offender** refers to a male between the ages of 17 and 25 years (in the emergent adulthood development phase) who raped another individual.
- **Emergent adulthood** refers to a development period encompassing the period between late teens and early twenties.

# Goal and objectives of the study

The overarching **goal of this study** was to measure, describe and compare the prevalence of victim empathy in young sex offenders.

**Two types of victim empathy** were measured in the current study, namely:

- General sexual abuse victim empathy, which refers to empathy for victims of sexual abuse in general, for example a rape victim AND
- Own victim empathy, which refers to specific empathy towards the victim against whom the offender committed the crime.

One of the **objectives** of the study which will be the focus of this presentation was:

- To provide recommendations with regard to the need for the inclusion or exclusion of victim empathy advancement components in intervention programmes aimed at rehabilitating young sex offenders.

# Methodological overview

- **Mixed methods approach**
- **Sample** consisted of 96 young male sex offenders detained in three Youth Correctional Centres (YCCs) in the Gauteng province of SA.
- Data collection – Quantitative: **Beckett and Fisher's Victim Empathy Distortion Scale (VEDS)**
- Qualitative: **Semi-structured interviews**

# Empirical results - Quantitative

## EMPATHY LEVELS OF YOUNG SEX OFFENDERS

Wilcoxon signed rank test: It was found that the young sex offenders in this study had **significantly less victim empathy for their own victim (M=89.17/120; s.d. = 20.01) than for a general sexual abuse victim (M=100.84/120; s.d. = 12.26)**. Thus, a significant difference exists between own victim empathy levels and general sexual abuse victim empathy levels in young sex offenders who participated in this study ( $z=-4.99$ ,  $p<.05$ ) with a large effect size as interpreted with Cohen's criteria ( $r=-0.52$ ).

# Empirical results: Qualitative

## Attendance of sex offender programmes (SOPs) in YCCs

- RP 29: *“There is a course for sex offenders. They teach us about sexual offences. They are showing us the importance of females. Most of the time we think they are not like us. I learnt that we all have something in common; we want to feel safe and loved. If the girl says no, I mustn’t force myself into her.”*
- RP 16: *“There should be more activities during the programmes in prison. We just sit in the class and listen to a story book. They have to preach less, it leads to resistance.”*
- RP 86: *“Only did New Beginning. I want to go to other programmes because it will help in parole board and they will see you changed and you won’t make another crime.”*

# Empirical results: Qualitative

Inclusion of victim empathy components in the programmes attended.

- RP 56: *“The Sex Offender programme included victims but I can’t remember what.”*
- RP 52: *“I went to Life skills, Anger Management, Sexual Offence programme where we did victim empathy. We debate topic of rape. Why it happens. Talk about our own story. We are 20 in a group. There is not a lot of time, not everyone gets a chance.”*
- RP 58: *“I attended many programmes. I never talked about my case in the Sex Offender programme. Only social worker knows. In the programme we talked about how victims in general feel, how they would feel if they saw you. We use newspaper and talk about how the victims feel and how we feel. Some talked about their own victims as well.”*
- RP 61: *“I made many programmes, nothing focusing on the victim.”*
- RP 75: *“The Sex Offence programme, our social worker talks about victims and we write a letter to victim. I also attended psychologist. I also wrote letter to victim and letter back from victim to me. I registered for VOD.”*



# Recommendations for victim empathy advancement

- Primary prevention
  - Awareness campaigns should focus on healthy sexual interactions and the forming of appropriate relationships.
- Secondary prevention
  - Life orientation curricula in schools (rape myths and cognitive distortions).
  - Victim empowerment strategies (high-risk situations).
- Tertiary prevention
  - Individual counselling
  - Group counselling

# SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This aspiration is best encapsulated in the words of Ayelet Waldman, an Israeli-American novelist and former lawyer:

“The thing about youthful offenders is that no one seems to care about them. Most people don’t like adolescents – even the good ones can be snarky and unpleasant. Combine the antipathy we feel toward the average teenager with the fear inspired by youth violence and you have a population that no one wants to deal with. Despite the fact that in America we incarcerate more juveniles for life terms than in any other country in the world, the truth is that the vast majority of youth offenders will one day be released. The question is simple and stark. Do we want to help them change, or do we want to help them become even more violent and dangerous?”

# Thank you

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