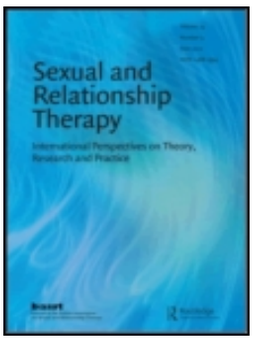

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The role of attachments, intimacy, and loneliness in the etiology and maintenance of sexual offending

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ABSTRACT *Within our general theory of sex offending, the vulnerability of the offender is a critical element. This vulnerability arises primarily from poor quality attachment bonds between the child, who is to become a sex offender, and his parents. Poor attachments lead to low self-confidence, poor social skills and lack of empathy for others. Such deficits make the transition at puberty to peer relationships more difficult and make attractive those social messages that objectify others, portray people as instruments of sexual pleasure, emphasize power and control over others, and deny the need for social skills and compassion for others. Poor quality attachments also provide the basis for loneliness as an adult and poor intimacy in relationships. Emotional loneliness breeds aggression and a self-serving life style. The present paper attempts to integrate all these processes and to demonstrate a connection between poor quality attachments, loneliness and intimacy, and the propensity to sexually offend.*

Introduction

As part of the development of a more general theory of the etiology and maintenance of sexual offending in males (Marshall, 1992) it is suggested that childhood attachments (Marshall, Hudson & Hodkinson, in press) and the adult capacity for intimacy (Marshall, 1989a) are essential links in the chain of development underlying the emergence of an inappropriate sexual disposition. It is the view of researchers in the field of intimacy and attachment that secure child–parent relations form the basis for effective love relationships in adulthood, and that disruptive attachments result in adult loneliness (Bowlby, 1973; Grossman & Grossman, 1990; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1989; Parkes & Stevenson-Hinde, 1982; Patterson & Moran, 1988). Within the context of our general theory, poor quality childhood attachments are understood to lead to a sense of alienation as an adolescent and adult, and this loneliness is a critical factor in the initiation and continuation of sexual offending. This paper represents an attempt to integrate these ideas.

The nature of attachments

According to Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1980) attachment reflects the bond between child and parent (or prime caregiver) and provides the child with a sense of security necessary to the confident exploration of his/her world. Within positive attachment relationships, the child acquires a sense of self-worth, learns that he/she is lovable, develops effective interpersonal skills, becomes confident enough to display affection for and empathy toward others, and feels emotionally secure. It has been shown that children who have strong attachment bonds with their parents are warm toward others, have few if any emotional problems, rarely engage in antisocial behaviours, (Grossman & Grossman, 1990) are resistant to stress (Egeland & Sroufe, 1981) and are the recipients of more positive responses from others (Jacobson & Wille, 1986). Most importantly, these features endure into adolescence and adulthood (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Jacobson & Wille, 1986; Weiss, 1982).

Not surprisingly, given these obvious benefits of secure attachments, disruptive or poor quality relationships between child and parent have markedly negative and abiding effects. Disruptive or poor quality attachments can result from simple prolonged separation (Bowlby, 1973), death of a parent (Bowlby, 1980), adoption or multiple fosterparenting (Marshall, *et al.*, in press), physical or sexual abuse (Lamb, Gaensbauer, Malkin & Schultz, 1985), or emotional rejection (Bell & Ainsworth, 1972). Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Walls (1978) found that children whose parents were unresponsive to them developed an avoidant style toward others, and Lamb *et al.* (1985) noted that physical maltreatment by parents resulted in children being either avoidant or anxious/ambivalent in relationships with others. Such children were observed to have poor relationship skills and low intimacy in their adult life (Feeney & Noller, 1990) and these inadequacies in relationships among poorly attached children are also evident during late childhood and adolescence (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985).

It is important to note that poor attachments do not necessarily doom the growing male to a life of loneliness, alienated from, and uncaring about, others. Positive experiences with people other than their parents, who are also in a caregiving role (e.g. teachers) can offset the negative effects of disruptive attachments (Grossman, Fremmer-Bombik, Rudolf & Grossman, 1988; Myers, 1984; Rutter, 1988). Presumably these positive experiences can help the otherwise vulnerable child to develop self-confidence and sufficient trust in others to take the risk of being affectionate.

Obviously the quality of attachment significantly influences the developing child in many ways and apparently provides the basis for the development of appropriate or inappropriate relationship behaviours during adolescence and adulthood. For our purpose, the most important concerns relate to the effects of poor quality attachments; in particular the development of delinquent or criminal behaviour in general and of sexual offending more specifically.

A general framework

In our general theory, vulnerability is a key feature. We propose that various factors or events produce a vulnerability in males that increases the chance they will respond to or seek out opportunities to offend sexually. These factors include biological underpinnings (Marshall, 1984a), socio-cultural influences (Marshall, 1984b), exposure to antisocial sexual beliefs, particularly certain forms of pornography (Marshall, 1989b), certain kinds of conditioning experiences (Laws & Marshall, 1990; Marshall & Eccles, in press) and transitory states such as depression, alcohol intoxication, anger or stress (Marshall & Barbaree, 1984a; 1990). Males do not sexually offend, of course, unless they either pursue, or are inadvertently exposed to, an opportunity to offend. The inadvertent circumstances may only be seen as opportunities by a person who is primed to view them as such by his previously developed vulnerability. For instance, a female child innocently seated in a manner that exposes her underwear, would not be seen as sexually provocative by anyone other than a person primed by his past to be attracted to sex with a child. One of the main priming (or what we prefer to call vulnerability) factors is the alienation from others resulting from poor attachments. This alienation, in conjunction with the various other influences noted above, may produce such a degree of vulnerability that an opportunity to offend is all but irresistible.

Attachment relationships are the critical influence in the developmental experience and they and their consequences are the focus of this paper. However, while we see poor attachments, and their resultant adult loneliness and inadequate intimacy, as perhaps the most important of the various influences that shape the vulnerability underlying the inappropriate response to opportunities to offend, these factors clearly interact with various other influences.

The specific influence of disrupted attachments

The transition at adolescence is complex and probably quite critical for all manner of later behaviours and attitudes. This is the time when children begin to sever the close bonds and dependency upon their parents (Weiss, 1982), and when the young male undergoes radical changes in the hormonal underpinnings of behaviour, particularly of aggressive and sexual needs and their expressions (Sizonenko, 1978). If the young boy has had poor quality attachments then he will be poorly equipped to develop relationships with peers. Remember that poor quality attachments do not provide the opportunity for the child to develop the self-confidence and skills necessary to relate easily to others. In addition, Steinberg & Silverberg (1986) have observed that the attachment between parents and children predicts the degree of the child's autonomy in peer relationships. When attachment bonds are sound, children display greater self-reliance and greater ease in establishing good quality peer relations; when parents are rejecting, the child will have difficulties in peer relations and this will obviously interfere with the shift from parental to peer relationships at puberty. These difficulties in developing relationships with peers, along with the boy's new found sexual and aggressive drives, will no doubt cause

frustration and anger. In this angry state the boy will turn to whatever sources he can to achieve some degree of satisfaction.

Let us consider a specific case. A young male patient aged 14 years, whom we will call Bob, illustrates quite clearly these problems and the likely outcome. Bob's parents had never paid him much attention, being too occupied with their own problems to be bothered with him. From the time Bob was four, his parents had repeatedly separated under acrimonious circumstances only to reunite and continue to argue. They physically fought, both abused alcohol and drugs when angry, and were negligent of the boy's physical and emotional welfare. Both parents repeatedly told Bob it was his fault they were having troubles. He was constantly being shipped off to one or another relative to be looked after while his parents were battling with one another. Finally, Bob was taken in permanently by his grandparents who clearly resented the burden of having to look after him.

In early adolescence Bob tried to strike up relationships with girls but was always rejected, or at least that is how he perceived their responses. These repeated rejections made him angry and he began to think that all girls were like his mother towards whom he felt strongly ambivalent; he desired her attention and yet he hated her. Bob began to feel the same way towards all females. When he was 13 years old, an acquaintance invited Bob to come to the friend's house to watch the pornographic videotape collection of the boy's father. The two boys repeated this experience at every chance they could, whenever the parents were away. Bob's favourite among the videotapes was one that depicted an adult male raping a young woman. In the sequence leading to the rape, the man dressed in dark clothes, equipped himself with a large knife and a length of rope, and went to a wooded park to await a victim. When the young woman came by he leapt from the bushes, threatened her with his knife, tied her hands and feet, forced her to her knees, lifted her dress and removed her underwear, then proceeded to have vaginal and anal intercourse with the distraught woman.

Bob found this sequence to be particularly exciting. It displayed a man in complete control of a woman such that he could do anything he wanted, as demonstrated by him having anal intercourse despite the woman's obvious expression of pain. The man not only enjoyed the power he had over the woman, he expressed a lot of anger towards her and he obtained sexual gratification. The rapist did not have to be attractive, or self-confident, or socially skilled, to get what he wanted; he simply had to arm himself with a weapon and seek out a victim at an isolated place. Bob found this sequence so exciting and satisfying that he repeatedly masturbated while either watching the videotape or imagining the events. When he was 14 years of age, Bob took a kitchen knife and a piece of rope, went to a wooded park, seized a 17 year old female, and enacted exactly what he had viewed in the videotape.

The role of loneliness and intimacy deficits

Not all first-time sex offences occur in adolescence, although a disproportionate number do (Abel & Rouleau, 1990) as would be expected from our claim that this

is a particularly vulnerable period. Poor attachments not only lead to difficulties during adolescence, they also result in loneliness and a lack of intimacy in adulthood. This loneliness and lack of intimacy in an adult male, interacting with many other factors, sets the stage for sex offending to occur.

Loneliness has at least two faces: social and emotional (Weiss, 1973). Social loneliness is experienced, for example, when a married adult and his partner shift location to take a new job and leave their friends behind. This is somewhat distressing, but is readily overcome by finding new friends. Emotional loneliness might occur in similar circumstances if, say, the man had to leave his wife behind for several months. His most intimate relationship would be severed at least temporarily and, depending on the degree of intimacy they had, he could be exceedingly emotionally lonely. However, under these circumstances this experience should be short-lived. With a divorce or the death of a loved one, emotional loneliness is more profound and usually more prolonged. Typically under these conditions, the person often loses self-confidence and may have difficulty establishing another intimate relationship; however, sufficient time and support from friends usually overcomes these temporary obstacles. Nevertheless, a previously poor history of relationships, most particularly poor childhood attachments, can make a man whose partner departs for good quite vulnerable during the period after his loss.

For our purposes, the most relevant state of emotional loneliness arises as a lifelong disposition stemming from poor quality childhood attachments. In this case the man feels permanently alienated from others and is unable to form effective relationships which satisfy his need for intimacy. The need for intimacy is evident in some other mammalian species and is understood to have arisen during evolution (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1990). Early attachment bonds serve to protect vulnerable young, and similar bonds between adults provide the circumstances to maximize this protection of the young and thereby increase the inclusive fitness of the species. It is assumed, by researchers in this field that intimacy is a basic human need (Dahms, 1972) although the preferred level of intimacy appears to differ across people (Argyle & Dean, 1965). On this issue it should be noted that while the desire for intimacy may be universal, and that an individual's disposition towards seeking intimacy with others may be reasonably persistent, the actual achievement of intimacy is as much a function of a particular relationship as it is of the disposition of one of the particular partners (Acitelli & Duck, 1987). When intimacy deficits persist in a person's life, and he/she experiences chronic loneliness, this is quite different from situational or acute loneliness (Beck & Young, 1978). Chronic loneliness appears to be a function, not of particular partners, but rather of more fixed cognitive, emotional and behavioural deficits in the individual (Young, 1982).

The desire to seek intimacy and the degree or level of intimacy sought, is understood to be, to a significant degree, a function of childhood attachment experiences. Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978; Bell & Ainsworth, 1972) have found that in response to poor quality parent–child relationships, the child will develop either an avoidance of intimacy with others or an anxious/ambivalent style in relationships. Thus, styles are understood to result from a fear that all relationships will end in rejection or abuse. The avoidant person

apparently decides relationships are not worth the risk, whereas the anxious/ambivalent person still desires intimacy, but is afraid of full commitment. In either case the child will grow up to experience emotional loneliness, although in the case of the anxious/ambivalent individual they may superficially appear to have good intimate relations. While the person who avoids intimate contacts will appear as evidently alienated from others, the anxious/ambivalent person will attempt to form intimate relationships, then draw back when things become too intimate and then make approach efforts again when the partner reacts to his/her withdrawal by distancing themselves. Also, such anxious/ambivalent individuals often develop elaborate strategies for securing relationships while maintaining a distance that does not permit good quality intimacy. Excessive devotion to work or to various social causes are common strategies adopted to avoid intimate involvement with families while at the same time making it difficult for spouses to complain. Avoidant or anxious/ambivalent people will fail to achieve satisfactory levels of intimacy in their lives and will, as a consequence, experience emotional loneliness.

Emotional loneliness has been defined as the discrepancy between desired and achieved levels of intimacy (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Perlman & Peplau, 1984). One of the consistently observed consequences of prolonged emotional loneliness is an increase in aggression. In an early paper, Zilboorg (1938) noted that lonely adults were hostile and aggressive. Lonely people score higher on measures of anger and hostility than do those who have good quality intimate relationships (Diamant & Windholz, 1981; Loucks, 1980), and Check, Perlman & Malamuth (1985) found that lonely males displayed significant aggression towards females in a laboratory and were also more accepting of violence towards women. Even among children, loneliness and aggression go hand-in-hand (George & Main, 1979).

In the present view, then, unsatisfactory attachments between parent and child poorly equip the child to develop the skills, self-confidence and confidence in others necessary for them to develop effective relationships. They either avoid relationships or enter into superficial relationships characterized by alternating approach and withdrawal. Such relationship styles preclude the achievement of intimacy and these individuals, therefore, suffer emotional loneliness. Emotional loneliness sets the stage for aggression and self-serving behaviours to emerge, and make more attractive those social messages (contained, for example, in pornography, but also in various other communications) that see other people as objects serving to meet the needs of whoever is willing to abuse them. Sexual offending is one obvious, but not the only, consequence of such a history.

In addition to the typical route by which people develop inadequacies in, or fears of, intimacy, and the corresponding loneliness, adult experiences can also result in a withdrawal from attempts at appropriate intimacy. While self-confidence may provide a degree of resilience against unpleasant relationship experiences, repeated failures to develop and sustain intimate relationships may, even in an otherwise well-functioning individual, produce avoidance of adult intimacy. In such circumstances the attributions individuals make are importantly related to their subsequent behaviour. If several attempts to establish intimate relations have ended in disappointment, individuals may attribute these difficulties to the inadequacy of

the partner. In this case the individual may not give up but may rather resolve to exercise greater care in partner selection in the future. Alternatively, people experiencing such failures may see themselves as at fault. They may conclude that they are unlovable or incompetent. These types of attributions for failure are likely to lead to fears of intimacy or an avoidance of any attempts at intimacy. This, of course, would lead to the experience of loneliness and all of the associated behavioural problems. More often, unfortunate adult experiences are set against a background of poor quality attachments in childhood.

A case history will illustrate this. Wendell had been so seriously neglected by his parents that it was at the insistence of the Child Protection Agency that he was placed in foster care at the age of five years. A succession of foster home placements followed over the next seven years until Wendell was finally permanently accepted into a family. Despite the kindness and warmth this family showed to Wendell, he never allowed himself to become deeply attached to them and he constantly had nightmares about being taken away again. His insecurity was manifest in all his relationships and he drove friends away by either being too demanding or by trying too hard to please them. Over time Wendell came to the conclusion that no one was trustworthy and, not surprisingly, he had few friends. Wendell had a series of disastrous relationships with peer-aged females during late adolescence and early adulthood, and it was not until he was 26 years old that he met his wife-to-be. They courted for two years before marrying and within a year they had a daughter. After the child was born, Wendell's wife began to find the responsibilities burdensome and she started leaving the child with Wendell while she went out with her female friends. Her main complaint, which she voiced often during their courtship and throughout their marriage, was that Wendell had no friends and would not socialize. Furthermore, she felt that he avoided her and, indeed, this seemed to be true. Wendell would always think of reasons to be away from home: he would work extra hours, go fishing alone, go to hockey matches alone, or simply go for long drives in his car. Wendell admitted that he felt uncomfortable spending long hours together with his wife. After their daughter was born, however, Wendell became an instantly devoted father. He came home directly from work and gave up all his leisure activities to be with his daughter.

As time went on and the child grew up, Wendell was her constant companion. His wife spent more and more time away from home and eventually when their daughter was nine, she left Wendell and the child and moved in with another man in a distant city. At this time Wendell began courting his daughter. He would arrange candlelight dinners for the two of them; he would take her out to various shows and to hockey matches; and he would constantly buy her surprise gifts. Finally, 14 months after his wife left, Wendell initiated sexual relations with his daughter.

When he first attended group therapy, Wendell said that he loved his daughter in more than a fatherly fashion, and wished that when she grew up he could live with her as her husband. He realized this was absurd and could not happen, but he declared that she was the only person he had ever trusted and that he had felt emotionally intimate with her in a way he had never been with anyone else.

The present account, then, suggests that poor quality parent–child attachments and distressing adult experiences result in failures in intimacy and the experience of loneliness. Such failures in intimacy and the experience of loneliness are said to be one set of the various factors that lead to sexual offending. The question remains, however, of whether this is just plausible theory or whether there is evidence to support such conjectures.

Evidence for the theory

Poor parent–child attachments in sex offenders

Loeber (1990), after a thorough review of the literature on juvenile delinquency, concluded that secure attachment bonds help children learn prosocial skills that prevent behavioural problems from emerging, while poor quality attachments appear to be a critical feature of the history of delinquents. So it is with adult criminals (Marshall & Barbaree, 1984b) and the same is true for sex offenders.

Social isolation is a consistently observed feature of juvenile sex offenders (Fagan & Wexler, 1988; Fehrenback, Smith, Monastersky & Deisher, 1986) and it has already been noted that alienation among children and adolescents results from poor quality attachments. Consistent with these observations, Awad and his colleagues (Awad, Saunders & Levene, 1984; Saunders, Awad & White, 1986) found that a substantial proportion of juvenile sex offenders came from disturbed families where they were abused or neglected, and that these youths were loners who had few and superficial friendships. Similarly, Tingle, Barnard, Robbins, Newman & Hutchinson (1986) reported that 86% of their adult rapists and 74% of their child molesters had few or no friends when they were young, and almost one third of both of these types of sex offenders were found to have had problems relating to classmates during their schooldays (Davidson, 1983). Davidson also found that those sex offenders who had difficulties with their peers when they were young also felt their parents had neglected them.

The family homes of adult sex offenders are characterized by violence and repeated disruptions (Rada, 1978) and as children these offenders did not identify with their parents (Langevin, Paitich & Russon, 1984). The fathers of rapists are commonly drunkards and physically abuse their children (Langevin *et al.*, 1984). Exhibitionists report high rates of abuse and neglect by their parents (Cox & Daitzman, 1980) and so do non-familial child molesters (Finkelhor, 1979, 1984). Chaotic and disruptive parent–child relationships have been reported by the majority of rapists and child molesters (Tingle *et al.*, 1986). In Tingle *et al.*'s study it was found that child molesters typically lacked a close relationship with their fathers, that they were frequently abandoned by their parents, that they were often neglected and that they were subjected to frequent physical and sexual abuse. The parents of these offenders were more likely to have separated or divorced than were the parents of other subjects, and there were frequent arguments between the parents; parental drinking was often a problem. These child molesters rarely indicated acceptable degrees of nurturance by their parents and displays of physical

affection, in particular, were notably absent. In their review, Williams & Finkelhor (1990) identified five studies reporting a high frequency of physical abuse in the family background of incestuous fathers. Research has also suggested that a significant number of various types of sex offenders were themselves sexually abused as children, all too often by their parents (Freeman-Longo, 1986; Groth, 1979; Quinsey, 1986; Seghorn, Boucher & Cohen, 1983).

We have recently begun to investigate this issue by examining exhibitionists (Marshall, Payne, Barbaree & Eccles, 1991). These subjects reported a greater degree of emotional rejection by their parents (42% considered their parents to be rejecting) than did matched non-offenders (only 14% felt rejected). However, the differences between the two groups was minimal in terms of physical abuse (19% of the exhibitionists and 11% of the non-offenders) and in the strictness of the parental discipline (29% of exhibitionists thought their parents were too strict as did 20% of the non-offenders).

More research is required that specifically focuses on these issues, but the evidence to date is persuasive that a disproportionate number of sex offenders experienced poor quality attachment relationships with their parents.

Intimacy deficits and loneliness in sex offenders

At present there is a dearth of observations relevant to the levels of intimacy and loneliness experienced by sex offenders. It is certainly true that sex offenders are often described as 'loners' (Marshall, 1989a) and there is some evidence to suggest that loneliness is a common experience for sex offenders (Awad *et al.*, 1984; Fagan & Wexler, 1988; Saunders, *et al.*, 1986; Tingle *et al.*, 1986). Recent, as yet unpublished, research, however, has revealed clear deficits in adult sex offenders.

Garlick (1991) asked sex offenders incarcerated in an English prison to respond to a variety of questions related to the issues of intimacy and loneliness. Subjects completed the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980), Tesch's (1985) Intimacy Questionnaire and a measure of the attribution of blame concerning the ending of intimate relationships. While non-sex offenders reported appropriate levels of intimacy and moderate loneliness, child molesters described the poorest levels of intimacy and they were the loneliest of the three groups. Rapists' scores fell between the child molesters and the non-sex offenders on both loneliness and intimacy measures. Both child molesters and rapists blamed women for the loss of intimate relationships, and saw factors outside themselves as causing their loneliness.

Seidman, *et al.* (1992) have conducted two studies of similar features of sex offenders. The first study compared rapists, child molesters, violent non-sex offenders and non-violent non-sex offenders confined in New Zealand prisons. On Waring's (Waring & Reddon, 1983) Intimacy Scale it was found that sex offenders did not differ from the violent offenders, but had significantly less intimacy than did the non-violent offenders. However, the UCLA Loneliness Scale did differentiate the sex offenders. Both child molesters and rapists were significantly more lonely than either of the two non-sex offender groups.

The second study examined the responses of non-incarcerated subjects. Sex offenders as a group reported far less intimacy in their lives than did either wife batterers or non-offenders, and within the sex offenders, the rapists and non-familial child molesters were the most deficient. Incest offenders had intimacy levels that did not differ from controls, and exhibitionists fell approximately between controls and the rapists and nonfamilial child molesters. All sex offenders described themselves as significantly more lonely than either the wife batterers and non-offenders, but there were no differences among the different sex offender groups. Finally, a history of family violence was more marked among rapists than in any other group.

Conclusions

Clearly there is something to this issue. The evidence supports the idea that attachment problems, intimacy deficits and loneliness, are significant features of sex offenders. Just as obviously, more research is needed to clarify which type of sex offender is most deficient and whether or not their deviance precedes or follows the experience of loneliness and its associated features. Most importantly, if intimacy deficits are factors in sex offending, how can this be? There are few suggestions for the amelioration of these problems although Evans & Dingus (1989) have outlined what seems to be an effective programme. Procedures need to be developed to treat these problems and they need to be specifically tailored to the particular needs of sex offenders, but first we must establish more clearly whether or not these deficits really exist in sex offenders and whether they precede or follow the initial sex offence.

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