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Sexual and relationship dysfunction in sexual offenders

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ABSTRACT *The prevalence of marital/relationship dysfunction and of sexual dysfunction among 74 newly sentenced sexual offenders serving custodial sentences in Northern Ireland prisons was assessed using the Golombok–Rust Inventory of Marital Satisfaction (GRIMS) and the Golombok–Rust Inventory of Sexual Satisfaction (GRISS). Relationships between scores on these measures and criminological variables were examined. The study identified a prevalence of 62% for marital/relationship dysfunction among offenders who had a current relationship with an adult female partner and a prevalence of 57% for sexual dysfunction among offenders who had experienced heterosexual intercourse with an adult. The study did not support the view that sexual and relationship problems are more likely to be encountered among offenders against children than among rapists, nor that incest offenders are more likely to have problems in these areas than other offenders against children.*

Introduction

The nature and quality of adult heterosexual relationships among sexual offenders has been commented on by many investigators working in this field. It has been noted that rapists are more likely to have been married or to have cohabited than non-incest offenders against children and are more likely to report having had satisfactory adult heterosexual experiences (Christie *et al.*, 1979; Henn *et al.*, 1976; Barclay & Fjordbak, 1979; Bard *et al.*, 1987). However, sexual dysfunction occurring during rape attacks has been reported by studies based both on interviews with rapists (Gebhard *et al.*, 1967; Groth & Burgess, 1977; Prentky *et al.*, 1985) and interviews with rape victims (Burgess & Holstrom 1974; Bownes & O’Gorman, 1991). Research evidence supports the view that a significant proportion of offenders against children are likely to admit to difficulties with their sexual functioning. Fitch (1962) reported that 40% of a sample of 139 child molesters felt ‘frustrated’ in their sexual relationships and similar findings have been reported by Cohen *et al.* (1969), Groth (1979), Peters (1976), Bard *et al.* (1987) and Bradford *et al.* (1988). Complaints of disturbed marital and sexual relationships are common among incest offenders (Maisch, 1972; Justice & Justice, 1979) and they frequently

report that their incest offences occurred during periods of marital discord (Gebhard *et al.*, 1967).

The purpose of the present study was to assess the prevalence of sexual and marital/relationship dysfunction among sentenced sexual offenders in Northern Ireland prisons and to examine the relationship between sexual and marital/relationship dysfunction and variables relating to their offending behaviour, including previous history of convictions for sexual offences.

Method

The study was prospective: all 92 men who consecutively received custodial sentences for sexual offences in Northern Ireland during the 18-month study period were invited to take part. Eighteen offenders refused, giving an uptake rate of 81%, and the study sample subsequently comprised 74 men serving custodial sentences for sexual offences.

On agreeing to participate in the study, subjects were interviewed and data on personal and criminal history were recorded. Offenders were only asked about offences for which they had received convictions. Details of the current sexual offence were noted including age, sex and relationship to victim(s), presence of accomplices, degree of planning involved and the level of force used. Offence planning was rated as 0 if there was no evidence of premeditation, 1 if the offender had formed the intention to offend prior to the offence, 2 if the offender had sought out a specific victim and 3 if the offender had made detailed preparations for the offence. The force variable was rated as 0 if no force was used (e.g. coaxing or persuasion), 1 if verbal threats were used, 2 if mild physical force was used, 3 if physical force was used which resulted in obvious physical injuries to the victim, 4 if a weapon was displayed and 5 if a weapon was used to inflict injuries.

Sexual functioning was assessed using the Golombok–Rust Inventory of Sexual Satisfaction (GRISS) (Rust & Golombok, 1986). This self-report schedule is intended to provide an objective assessment of an individual's functioning within a sexual relationship. It provides a total score together with six subscale scores covering motivational, behavioural, attitudinal and communicative aspects of a sexual relationship, as well as specific sexual problems. There are 28 questions each with a choice of five responses according to how often the subject reports experiencing the situation presented (i.e. never, hardly ever, occasionally, sometimes, always). The manual for this questionnaire recommends a score > 4 for subscales and total score as representing significant sexual dysfunction. Offenders who reported that they had never or rarely experienced consenting heterosexual sex were not required to complete this inventory.

The Golombok–Rust Inventory of Marital Satisfaction (GRIMS) (Golombok & Rust, 1988) was used to assess relationship dysfunction. This self-report inventory is designed to be complementary to the GRISS and to avoid conceptual overlap. It provides a measure of an individual's affective sensitivity, mutual communication, satisfaction with and degree of long-term commitment to a heterosexual relationship. There are 28 questions presenting four response options: strongly

TABLE I. Number of men with marital/relationship problems (GRIMS score > 3) in a current heterosexual relationship by offender group

	Number of GRIMS scores > 3
Rapists (<i>n</i> = 19)	11 (58%)
Offenders against female children (<i>n</i> = 4)	16 (57%)
Offenders against male children (<i>n</i> = 4)	4 (100%)
Incest offenders (<i>n</i> = 9)	6 (66%)
All sexual offenders (<i>n</i> = 60)	37 (62%)

agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. The manual for this questionnaire recommends a score of > 3 as indicating relationship dysfunction. Offenders who reported that they did not have a current female partner were not required to complete this inventory.

Results

All the 74 offenders studied were white males who had been born in Northern Ireland. Mean age at interview was 33.5 yrs (s.d. 11.7, range 17-71 yrs). With respect to levels of attainment, 25 (34%) were unskilled, 29 (34%) were semi-skilled and 20 (27%) were skilled. Forty-five men (60%) had been in employment at the time of their offence. Fifty-one offenders (69%) were assessed within six months of beginning their sentence.

Twenty-one men had been convicted of offences against females aged 16 years or over, nine men of incest offences against female children, 35 men of (non-incest) offences against female children and nine men of (non-incest) offences against male children.

Sixty offenders (81%) described themselves either as married or as having a current relationship with a female partner. This group comprised 19 rapists (90%), 28 (80%) of the (non-incest) offenders against female children, four (44%) of the (non-incest) male children group, and all of the incest offenders. The proportion of men who described themselves either as married or as having a current relationship with a female partner was significantly lower among the offenders against male children than among the rapists (Fisher's exact probability, $p = 0.02$). The 14 (19%) offenders who did not have a current female partner did not complete the GRIMS questionnaire.

A total of 13 (18%) sexual offenders stated that they had rarely or had never experienced consenting heterosexual intercourse with an adult. This group comprised two rapists (9%), seven (20%) non-incest offenders against female and four (44%) non-incest offenders against male children. The proportion of men in the group of offenders against male children who stated that they had rarely or had never experienced consenting heterosexual intercourse with an adult was significantly higher than among the rapists (Fisher's exact probability, $p = 0.03$).

TABLE II. Number of men with sexual dysfunction (GRISS total score > 4) by sexual offender group

	GRISS total score > 4
Rapists (<i>n</i> = 19)	10 (52%)
Offenders against female children (<i>n</i> = 28)	17 (61%)
Offenders against male children (<i>n</i> = 5)	2 (40%)
Incest offenders (<i>n</i> = 9)	6 (66%)
All sexual offenders (<i>n</i> = 61)	35 (57%)

Twelve offenders had also reported that they had no current female partner and thus did not complete either the GRISS or the GRIMS questionnaire.

The number of men in each offender group who obtained scores > 3 on the GRIMS questionnaire indicating that they were likely to have significant marital or relationship problems are shown in Table I. Statistical analysis showed that there were no significant differences between offender groups with respect to the proportion of men with problems in a current heterosexual relationship.

In order to identify relationships which might exist between scores for relationship dysfunction and other variables, Kendall's rank correlation coefficients were calculated. Because of the very small number (4) of non-incest offenders against male children who had completed the GRIMS, this group was not included in this part of the analysis.

Age did not correlate significantly with GRIMS scores in any of the sexual offender groups. Correlation of GRIMS scores with variables relating to past and present criminal convictions showed that among the rapists GRIMS scores correlated significantly with highest level of force used (Kendall's Tau = 0.51, $p < 0.01$) in the index offence. There were strong correlations between GRIMS scores and highest level of injuries inflicted (Kendall's Tau = 0.42, $p < 0.05$) in the index offence and between GRIMS scores and number of previous convictions for non-sexual offences (Kendall's Tau = 0.37, $p < 0.05$). There was also a negative association between GRIMS scores in this group and degree of acquaintance with the victim (Kendall's Tau = -0.39, $p < 0.05$). Among the incest offenders there was a significant correlation between GRIMS scores and number of previous convictions for sexual offences (Kendall's Tau = 0.64, $p < 0.01$); however, there were no other statistically significant associations between GRIMS scores and criminological variables among the group of offenders against female children.

A total of 60 sexual offenders (81%) completed the Golombok-Rust Inventory of Sexual Satisfaction (GRISS). The number of men in each offender group identified by their total GRISS score as being sexually dysfunctional, i.e. as having significant sexual problems, is shown in Table II.

Statistical analysis showed that there was no significant difference between any of the sexual offender groups with respect to the proportions of men with specific sexual difficulties identified by the subscale scores or with respect to the proportion of men identified by their total GRISS score as having significant sexual problems.

In order to identify relationships which might exist between scores for relationship dysfunction and scores on other variables, Kendall's rank correlation coefficients were calculated. Age was not significantly correlated with total GRISS score or with any subscale score in any of the offender groups.

There was a statistically significant association among the rapists between GRISS scores and the highest level of injuries inflicted in the index offence (Kendall's Tau = 0.48, $p < 0.01$). There were also significant correlations in this group between GRISS scores and highest level of force used in the index offence (Kendall's Tau = 0.38, $p < 0.05$) and between GRISS scores and number of previous convictions for sexual offences (Kendall's Tau = 0.36, $p < 0.05$), although these were not significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. Among the group of (non-incest) offenders against children the strongest correlation with GRISS scores was with age at interview (Kendall's Tau = 0.33, $p < 0.05$). There were no statistically significant correlations between GRISS scores and criminological variables among the groups of offenders against children.

The criminological characteristics of the 12 offenders (two rapists, six non-incest offenders against female and four non-incest offenders against male children) who had not completed either the GRISS or the GRIMS were compared with those of the other men in their offence group. No statistically significant differences were identified with respect to age, previous criminal history or characteristics of the index offence.

Discussion

The majority (81%) of the sexual offenders studied described themselves as having a current relationship with an adult female partner. A minority of 13 men (18%) reported having had little or no experience of consenting heterosexual intercourse with an adult. The proportions of men who had no current female partner and of men who had rarely or never experienced consenting heterosexual intercourse with an adult were both significantly higher among the (non-incest) offenders against male children than among the rapists. However, there were no other significant differences between offender groups in this respect. This suggests (non-incest) offenders against female children to be just as likely as rapists and incest offenders to report having a current adult female partner and having experienced heterosexual sex with an adult.

The proportion of men among the sexual offenders identified in the present study as having relationship problems was considerably higher than that reported by studies among the general population in which the GRIMS has been used as a measure of marital/relationship dysfunction. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of the sexual offenders who currently had a heterosexual relationship were identified as likely to have significant problems in that relationship on the basis of their scores on the GRIMS, and there were no statistically significant differences between the offender groups in this respect. Golombok & Rust (1988) reported a prevalence for marital/relationship dysfunction of 23% among attendees at a general practice clinic and O'Gorman *et al.* (1990) a prevalence of 32% among male attenders at a

Belfast hospital out-patient clinic. It is likely, however, that negative reactions of spouses/partners to the disclosure of the offenders' behaviour and conviction had some influence on the higher prevalence of marital/relationship problems among the sexual offenders studied, and GRIMS scores of sentenced sexual offenders may not necessarily reflect the nature of their relationships at the time the offences were committed.

Some statistically significant relationships were identified between GRIMS scores and criminological variables. Among the rapists, GRIMS scores were significantly correlated with highest level of force used and with highest level of injuries inflicted in the index offence. There was also a negative relationship in this group between GRIMS scores and degree of acquaintance with the victim. This suggests that, for a sentenced rapist, the more violent his offence and the more distant his previous relationship with his victim, the higher his GRIMS score is likely to be and hence the more severe his current marital/relationship problems. This finding could in part reflect a negative reaction on the part of the offender's partner to disclosure of his offending behaviour—the more violent the offence, the more negative the reaction and the more detrimental the effects on the relationship. However, there was no evidence from the study to suggest a similar relationship between severity of marital/relationship problems among non-incest offenders against male or female children and the level of violence they used and of injuries they inflicted during their sexual offences.

The findings also identified a relationship between previous convictions for sexual offences and marital/relationship difficulties. Among the rapists and among the incest offenders, GRIMS scores were significantly correlated with number of previous convictions for sexual offences, indicating that the greater the number of previous convictions for sexual offences a sentenced sexual offender has, the more severe the problems with his current relationship are likely to be.

Thirty-five (57%) of the sexual offenders who had experienced consenting heterosexual sex with an adult were identified as likely to have significant sexual dysfunction on the basis of their total scores on a measure of sexual satisfaction (GRISS). This prevalence is considerably higher than that of 32% for sexual dysfunction among male out-patient clinic attenders at a Belfast hospital reported by a study which also used the GRISS (Bownes *et al.*, 1990), and is also higher than prevalences ranging from 25%-28% for sexual dysfunction among males which have been reported by other researchers (Catalan & Bradley, 1981; Pedder & Goldberg, 1970; Frost, 1985). The proportion of men with significant sexual difficulties was highest among the incest offenders (66%). However, differences between the groups of sexual offenders in this respect were not significant. Subscale scores on the GRISS indicated that significant proportions of sexual offenders were likely to have problems in specific areas of their sexual functioning, for example difficulties with communication on sexual matters (25%) and lack of satisfaction with sexual activity (22%). The group with the highest proportion of men identified by GRISS subscale scores as having erectile problems was the offenders against male children (40%); offenders against female children had the highest proportion of men with problems of premature ejaculation (46%). However, statistical analysis showed that the groups

of sexual offenders were not significantly different with respect to the proportions of men identified by any of the GRISS subscales as having specific sexual problems. Hence the findings of the present study did not support the view that rapists are less likely to have sexual problems than are offenders against children who have experienced heterosexual sex with an adult. In addition there was no evidence to suggest that the nature of the sexual difficulties experienced by rapists are likely to differ significantly from those experienced by offenders against children.

Sexual difficulties during rape attacks have been noted by several researchers and, although a history of sexual dysfunction during the index offence was not specifically sought, 52% of rapists in the present study were identified by their total GRISS scores as likely to have significant sexual dysfunction. A recent Northern Ireland study based on interviews with rape victims reported that in 32% of a series of 50 rapes the rapist experienced sexual dysfunction at some point during the attack, and it was further noted that sexual dysfunction experienced by the rapist resulted in increased aggression towards the victim (Bownes & O'Gorman, 1991). The results of the present study showed total GRISS scores among the sentenced rapists to be significantly associated with the level of injuries inflicted during the index offence. There was also a strong correlation between total GRISS scores and number of previous convictions for sexual offences among rapists. There were no significant associations between GRISS scores and these criminological variables among the groups of offenders against children. Although a causal relationship between sexual dysfunction and sexual offending cannot be inferred, the results of the study suggest that the more severe the sexual problems a sentenced rapist has, the more serious the injuries he inflicted on his victim are likely to have been the greater the number of previous convictions for sexual offences he is likely to have had.

Conclusions

The results of the present study show that a substantial majority of the sexual offenders studied had a current female partner and had experienced consenting heterosexual sex with an adult. Rapists were more likely to report having a current female partner and to have experienced consenting heterosexual intercourse with an adult than were non-incest offenders against male children and this is in keeping with the findings of previous researchers (Christie *et al.*, 1979; Henn *et al.*, 1976; Barclay & Fjordbak, 1979; Bard *et al.*, 1987). However, there was no evidence that rapists and non-incest offenders against female children differed significantly in this respect. In addition, the results did not support the view that problems with relationships and with sexual functioning are more likely to be encountered among offenders against children than among rapists, nor that incest offenders are more likely to have problems in these areas than are other offenders against children. The findings provided evidence of prevalences of marital/relationship difficulties and of sexual problems among all offence categories of sentenced sexual offenders which are substantially higher than those among the general population.

The roles played by sexual and relationship dysfunction in the aetiology, form

and maintenance of sexual offending have yet to be established. However, the relatively high prevalences of such problems identified by the present study would strongly suggest that treatment programmes for sexual offenders should include elements which address relationship skills and sexual functioning. The results would further suggest that specialized therapeutic intervention in these areas is likely to be equally appropriate among groups of rapists as among offenders against children.

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