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Explaining Sex Offenders: The Concept of Imprinting

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ABSTRACT

The concept of "imprinting" is used to explain, in part, the origin of someone becoming a sex offender. Many sex offenders were sexually abused during their childhood or youth. Two case histories of male sex offenders, a 16-year old and an 18-year old in a prison treatment program, provide insights and have implications for treatment. The imprinting comes from the sex offender's own sexual abuse, typically in childhood and often at the hands of a parent or relative. If this imprinting/modeling concept is correct, they learn sex offending in a way that is emotional, at an early age, and is difficult to overcome.

INTRODUCTION

From working with sex offenders in a prison treatment program, I have concluded that much sex offending is due, in part, to something that occurred when they were young, i.e. their being sexually abused. I think this experience and its effects are similar to the automatic way that some animals instinctively follow the parent animal (or whoever is around) and is known as "imprinting." It is an automatic, nonrational response. Also, modeling—where you copy what someone else does—can be fairly unemotional (Bandura, 1989), but what I call "imprinting" is an emotional, traumatic experience of being sexually abused in childhood or youth. From the prisoners I worked with (in a prison treatment program for youthful male offenders in California), it appears that this imprinting happened early in life, usually during childhood, although occasionally in early adolescence. The sexual abuse of the child often but not always leads to that child becoming a sex offender.

Since so little thought has been given to the idea of explaining imprinting as part of the sex victimization experience, the ideas advanced here must be considered speculative. Hopefully, they will aid in our understanding both the sex offender and the victim.

Most of the offenders I worked with had, themselves, been sexually abused. Although some may have been lying to gain sympathy, from case histories, sometimes verified by interviews with parents or via police files, it seemed that the vast majority of our sex offenders were sexually abused. This sexual abuse, usually in childhood, taught them that sexual abuse was the thing to do. It seems to imprint on them all kinds of emotional and informational messages about how one should behave. Since their father was often the abuser, the child had someone he looked up to, and who was, in effect, showing him how to behave. Plus, the experience of suffering sexual abuse seemed to say to the child that this is all right, and you should accept such conduct. Later, the child repeated on others what was done to him, both because (a) it seemed like appropriate behavior and, in some cases, (b) to have the upper hand by hurting others, thus trying to forget the pain and humiliation he had suffered.

From the above, it is apparent that imprinting is something that occurs when the child is sexually abused and involves emotional as well as intellectual processing of the experience. While the concept of "modeling" could explain some of what occurs with sex offenders, "modeling" does not go far enough. Modeling explains that the child copies the abuser. But, it does not imply the internal thinking and emoting of the child, which is probably crucial to the child going on and becoming—at some point in life—a sex offender. In fact, this could explain why some sexually abused children become sex offenders and some do not. It may be that some process the experience in such a way that they are inoculated from wanting to do it to others. Also, if one has peers or adults to talk to about what happened, this, too, may result in a different outcome, especially if the other person can help one deal with the experience by minimizing guilt and confusion.

IMPRINTING

With some animals, the babies will follow the mother wherever she goes. This is called imprinting. If the mother is not present but a researcher is, the babies will follow the researcher. Thus,

imprinting is a biological given, which helps keep the organism safe and alive (Hess, 1959; Lorenz, 1937). Although imprinting allows the animal to keep in contact with the mother, the imprinting can be "corrupted" so that the animal follows, instead, the first thing it sees.

Using the concept of "imprinting" with sex offenders is similar but also different from that employed above. With animals, imprinting has the denotation of an innate, biological behavior. With sex offenders, imprinting seems less powerful, making some focus on what was done to them and become sex offenders (Prendergast, 1991), but also having little such effect on others. Thus, imprinting, as used here for sex offenders, seems more of a learned behavior and not an innate response. However, it may be that little children who are sexually abused will have some things in common occur to them. In a combination of emotional, rational, and quasi-rational ways, they may have the following concerns, dealt with via the limited cognitions of a child: (a) this is horrible; (b) this must be all right since my daddy (or uncle or whoever) did it to me; (c) this was somewhat enjoyable; (d) I am confused by what happened; (e) I will think about this constantly; and (f) if I did this to others, I would be appropriate and more in control than if I remain the passive victim. I have stated them in adult terms, but the child would deal with them in their own level of understanding.

Becoming a sex offender does not seem to be a rational, well thought out decision. Instead, it appears to be a pathological outcome due, in part, to suffering early sexual abuse (Groth, 1979; Prendergast, 1991). Criminals in general often seem to have little good understanding of different options in life, other than being a criminal (Eisenman, 1994). Thus, the anti-social behavior seems to be the only option, based, at least in part, on early experiences, whether for sex offenders or other types of criminals (Eisenman, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c; 1994; Hunter, 1990; Koss, 1983; Marshall, Laws, & Barbarie, 1990; Prendergast, 1991; Quay & Wherry, 1979; Sgori, 1982).

TWO CASE HISTORIES

Two case histories of young sex offenders are presented. These case histories show what sex offenders can be like, and illustrate some of the problems as well as potential therapeutic benefits in working with sex offenders. In both cases, I worked with the offender in individual and group psychotherapy for about one

year, and they received group therapy treatment from other therapists as well, within the prison treatment setting.

Jack. The prisoner I shall call Jack was a 16-year old, white youth who was extremely effeminate. As if this was not bad enough for his welfare in a prison, where toughness and macho standards prevail among the inmates (and guards, too), the fact that he was a sex offender added to his travail. Sex offenders are typically hated by other prisoners, who use them as scapegoats, saying "As bad as I am, I would never do something like that." Further, instead of trying to conceal his crimes, when Jack first entered our prison he often boasted "I sodomized a nine-year old, and I am proud of it." This earned him great hatred from the other prisoners.

Why would Jack boast of the offense which sent him to prison? In therapy it became apparent that it went back to the time when he was nine-years old and his father, a homosexual or bisexual, made him wear a dress and anally raped him on several occasions. I never knew the father, as he committed suicide several years earlier, but I suspect that Jack modeled himself after the father.

Jack was placed in a boy's home when his mother went to jail for credit card fraud. Thus, he had a dead father and a criminal mother. Jack also revealed things in therapy which suggest that his mother is a prostitute, although he never came out and said it directly. He did say "She worked at an X-rated motel and had sex with 86 men in one year." I spoke with his mother on the phone about future release plans for Jack, and she seemed like a normal, charming person, which of course would be helpful if one is a prostitute or doing credit card forgery. Jack was serving a 4-year sentence, and the Youthful Offender Parole Board made it clear that they would have him serve all 4 years, with no early parole, which is unusual. Typically, prisoners are considered for parole before their full sentence expires.

As is typical with sex offenders, Jack had many more victims than the one he was convicted for (Eisenman, 1991a, 1991b). He is a physically weak, obese youth with pimples all over his face and the top of his head. His hygiene habits are poor, too. He seems to not have brushed his teeth or combed his hair on any regular basis. Besides the modeling after a homosexual rapist father, Jack seemed motivated to commit the sex offenses as a way of establishing power. He is a bully to boys weaker than him, although most of the time he is bullied by stronger kids. While most bullies choose physical combat and intimidation, Jack's background led him to utilize sex.

I met with Jack in individual therapy sessions at least twice a week and we established a good therapeutic relationship. I also went beyond the usual call of duty and tried to insure his physical safety from other prisoners, by talking to guards who took him to recreation and other group activities, and asking them to watch out for attacks against Jack. Jack refused to go to the prison swimming pool, fearing the rough play which the prisoners engaged in, such as dunking each other. Also, this would have been a opportune time for someone to really hurt him, such as attempted drowning, so he probably displayed good judgment in refusing to go to the pool. As with many of the prisoners, I, as a therapist, was one of the few people who had ever shown interest in them or treated them with dignity. Most of the prisoners came from tragic backgrounds of poverty and neglect.

Will Jack reoffend when he gets out? The therapy sessions (including others set up in our prison treatment program such as sex offenders group therapy) seemed to have helped him learn that molesting kids is wrong. At one point in therapy, after many sessions, he said "I should die for what I did to Benny" (his victim). This is an improvement over being proud of the offense. On the other hand, he is returning to a criminal mother who no doubt neglected him in the past. It would not make sense to send him back to the state boy's home where his offenses occurred, and the mother may be the best that can be done. From studying the records of our prisoners and talking with them, foster homes are often terrible places, where more neglect occurs.

Roy. I have briefly discussed some things about Roy previously (Eisenman, 1990). An 18-year old black youth, Roy was in prison for two robberies, one in which he and fellow Crips gang members (a notorious black youth gang, famous for much anti-social behavior including cocaine sales and automobile drive-by killings) took jewelry from a jewelry store by grabbing it and trying to run out. They assaulted a security guard who tried to stop them. Roy admits this crime, but denies his other conviction, a robbery of two elderly women who were allegedly hit and robbed by Roy as they started to enter their car. Like Jack, he was on my individual therapy caseload, and was seen by me in various therapy groups. Unlike Jack, Roy was not identified as a sex offender, and was not required to attend the sex offenders therapy group. This was unfortunate, since he showed many characteristics of a sex offender, although he had not been convicted for any sex crime nor was his former male prostitution widely known to staff. He spoke to me in individual therapy of

how he had, several years ago, worn a miniskirt and been a homosexual prostitute.

In addition, Roy was an incredibly angry person, and threatened at least two of the female staff members with rape. This did not seem to be an idle threat, as one of his favorite ploys was to wait until female staff passed by the window of his room and to masturbate in a way that they could see him. Thus, he used sex in a passive-aggressive fashion, with the potential of being a rapist to express his anger, which was especially strong against women. Roy saw his mother die when he was four years old, and perhaps this has contributed to a perception of women as being people who abandon you. He has been abandoned and rejected much of his life, although most of it seems to have been by men. His birth father abandoned the family before Roy was born, and as a child he was raped by an uncle. Thus, like Jack, the genesis of his sexual offending seems to stem, in part, from being sexually abused, himself. All or almost all of our sex offenders had, themselves, been sexually abused in their early years. Thus, they had been victims, and were now victimizing others.

On another occasion, Roy was missing from the classroom. The teacher searched the staff restroom and she found Roy in there, masturbating. Possibly he was planning to rape her. As he would often do, he denied he was doing anything wrong, and said he only went in there to use the bathroom. He denied masturbating, even though he was seen doing it. At times, he would be amazingly honest with me in therapy, and tell me things which could be damaging to him, such as misdeeds he had either not been caught doing, or had been accused of but with insufficient evidence to prove his misconduct. At other times, he would blatantly lie to me, too. At first, I thought that since he was so honest with me about things, that when he denied something he must be telling the truth, but later I learned that this was not the case.

In both individual and group psychotherapy, Roy revealed to me some frightening fantasies. In his mind these are not fantasies, but plans. He said that he has a list of 56 people he intends to kill when he gets out. He is scheduled for release in a few years. Also, he wants to go to a shopping mall with an Uzi submachine gun and randomly kill people. If he is successful at the first mall, then he wants to go to a second and repeat the behavior. He assumes he would be killed at the second mall, if not at the first. This second fantasy or plan is consistent with the suicidal qualities he shows at times. On occasion, he burns his skin with matches.

There are many white patches on his arms where he has burned himself.

Roy feels he has been victimized his entire life, and in some ways this is an accurate assessment. The one stable home he had was a group home run by a black woman, which included white as well as black youths. A social worker concluded that Roy "was not getting the black experience" there, and had him removed after about four years in this stable setting. Then began a succession of placements, including with the uncle who raped him, always ending in rejection and new, unsuccessful placements. This is an example of how one's political views may interfere with the best interest of the client. What that social worker did was, in my opinion, inexcusable, and I feel that the social worker has some moral responsibility for Roy's future victims.

CONCLUSIONS

Both Jack and Roy seemed influence to become sex offenders by the sexual abuse they experienced. Both were preoccupied with sexual offending. Jack was a bully who molested smaller children. In bragging about sodomizing a nine-year old, he was, in some ways, reliving his own experience of being sodomized by his father when he was nine-years old. Roy often used sex in a passive-aggressive fashion, such as masturbating in view of female staff. However, I feel it is quite possible that he will go on to become a rapist. He has great hatred for women and threatened rape to at least two female staff. Neither Jack nor Roy seemed willing nor able to stop what they were doing. Without psychotherapy they had little or no remorse. Remorse expressed in treatment may be (a) real; (b) temporary; or (c) designed to fool the therapist so that the offender can get out of prison. In the case of offenders who are not in prison, they may show fake remorse to get something, such as termination of probation, not going to prison, or other relaxation of controls.

While both Jack and Roy were sex offenders, they offended in different ways. They may be fundamentally different in certain ways, as well as having certain fundamental similarities. Different classifications may be needed to understand different types of sex offenders, especially if the classifications can show real differences for different types of sex offenders (Eisenman, 1993; Erikson, Luxenberg, Walbek, & Seeley, 1987; Murphy, Haynes, Stalgaitis, & Flanagan, 1986). However, it is tentatively suggested

that most, if not all, sex offenders have in common a pattern of having imprinted on early sexual abuse, often at the hands of their father. This imprinting leads them to do similar things to others, thus going from victim to offender. Counseling or psychotherapy with these offenders should not forget both that (a) they were once victims and (b) they are now offenders, capable of hurting others with little or no remorse. Neglect of either (a) or (b) misses a major part of what sex offenders are all about. The average person in the street usually focuses on (b) and sees them as evil people in need of punishment. Many in the field of corrections also feel this way. The empathic therapist or the softhearted person may focus on (a), but if (b) is not also perceived, a major point is being missed.

Finally, it is interesting that not all people who are sexually abused go on to become offenders. In imprinting terms, either the imprinting was not fully successful, or, if it was, it did not have the same effect as it does on others who go on to become sex offenders. Why these different outcomes occur would be areas worthy of further study, as well as attempts to better understand exactly what occurs during imprinting. Perhaps recent victims of sexual abuse, especially children, could be interviewed to capture what the experience is like for them. We could then go beyond saying that what happened to them was horrible, and try to understand specifics of what the sexual abuse experience is like. This would require very sensitive questioning, both to avoid further traumatizing the victim, and to bring out things which most victims do not talk about.

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