

OFFENDERS

CHILD MOLESTERS AND THE SEX OF THEIR VICTIMS

—by Robert A. Prentky and Raymond A. Knight

The division of child molesters into subgroups on the basis of the sex of their victims was one of the earliest taxonomic distinctions to be examined empirically. The trichotomization of these offenders into same-sex ("homosexual"), opposite-sex ("heterosexual"), and mixed-sex ("bisexual") groups has become somewhat of a taxonomic "standard" against which other proposed subdivisions should be compared.

Child molesters' sexual preference appears to be stable over time, and covaries systematically with the measurement of sexual arousal to stimuli depicting specific ages and sexes. Such preferences have also proven useful in predicting the course of subsequent offending and are apparently related to a constellation of offender characteristics. Same-sex child molesters have been found to be less aggressive, younger, better educated, more often single, and more frequently diagnosed as sociopathic than opposite-sex child molesters. Same-sex molesters choose older victims, more frequently abuse children who are not related to them, less frequently consume alcohol during their offenses, and report different sexual histories from opposite sex offenders.

Unfortunately, not all of these purported differences have been replicated across samples. Two major problems have clouded the distinction and may have contributed to the discrepant results. The first difficulty involves the definition of sexual preference itself. Although it has been defined in a variety of ways, the most common definition has focused on the sex of victims in reported crimes. Several factors have contributed to the unreliability of assignment of offenders to sexual preference categories on the basis of such reports, including: the large number of unreported sexual assaults on children, possible biases against reporting homosexual encounters, situational variables that might encourage assaults on the less preferred sex, and the incarceration of an offender after a single assault masking a tendency among some offenders to change sexual preference and thus appear as "bisexual" rather than homo- or heterosexual.

The second problem involves confounding variables that may artifactually contribute to sexual preference group differences. For instance, some studies have not distinguished between incest and nonincest offenders. Incest offenders are disproportionately heterosexual in their choice of victims and would therefore be included in opposite-sex groups in any analyses of sexual preference. But "true" (i.e., exclusive) incest offenders have been found to differ from extrafamilial child molesters on important characteristics such as social and interpersonal competence. Consequently, the proportion of such incest cases in any particular

sample might falsely produce differences between same- and opposite-sex groups because of the disproportionate assignment of incest cases to opposite-sex groups. Studies that fail to take this potentially confounding factor into account may attribute to sexual preference differences that are partially or totally due to the offender's relationship to his victims.

Despite these potential problems, the group differences that have emerged between sexual preference groups suggest that the distinction warrants further scrutiny. Consequently, in a sample of 174 child molesters (50 same-sex, 66 opposite-sex, and 58 mixed-sex offenders), we examined the differences among sexual preference groups in their developmental histories and adult adaptations. The approximately equal distribution of offenders into this trichotomy reflects the relative frequencies of these groups in an incarcerated, nonincestuous population, and differs radically from both the distribution of sexual preferences among incestuous offenders and, of course, the distribution among individuals with age-appropriate preferences.

The sample comprised child molesters who had been found "sexually dangerous" and who had been committed to the Massachusetts Treatment Center. The determination of sexual preference was based on extensive clinical and criminal file data that contained information gathered from multiple sources and that documented both charged and uncharged sexual offenses (the latter occasionally revealed in-treatment progress reports), thereby reducing the report bias problem discussed above. To avoid any possible confounds with incest, we excluded all incest cases from the study. We also omitted both cases where victim age selection appeared indiscriminate (i.e., men whose victims were both under and over the age of 16), and where only nuisance sexual offenses (i.e., in which there was no physical contact with the victim) were committed.

Despite the three sexual preference groups' comparable IQs, the mixed group was somewhat lower in education and achieved skill level than the two pure sexual preference groups. The mixed group also had more adult penal offenses and more known victims. Whereas the mixed group selected younger victims, the victims of the same-sex group tended to be older.

Although few noteworthy differences were found between the same-sex and mixed-sex offenders, a variety of interesting differences emerged between the opposite-sex and the mixed-sex offenders. In their childhoods the mixed-sex group experienced more family pathology and evidenced more academic and behavioral management problems than child molesters who had only female victims. In adulthood, the mixed-sex offenders were lower than opposite-sex offenders in interpersonal and professional competence, and higher in alcohol abuse, aggression, impulsivity, and psychiatric disturbance.

Same-sex and opposite-sex offenders also manifested notable differences, the former showing more emotional and behavioral instability in their childhoods, and less interpersonal competence and more evidence

of psychiatric disturbance in adulthood. These results are consistent with the findings of Ronald Langevin, et al., that same-sex child molesters presented as more emotionally disturbed on the MMPI than a group of opposite-sex child molesters (Langevin et al., 1985).

Although no significant group differences in family pathology were noted, the mixed-sex offenders were somewhat higher than the other two groups on the three aspects of family pathology we examined. Moreover, mixed-sex offenders evidenced significantly higher childhood and juvenile acting out and behavioral management problems, which in turn correlated with aspects of family disturbance. The most important group differences, however, arose during adulthood, when both the same- and mixed-sex groups were characterized by less interpersonal competence, less academic and vocational competence, and more psychiatric disturbance than their opposite-sex counterparts.

Same-sex preferences among child molesters have frequently been associated with higher offense rates and a greater potential for recidivism. Preliminary criminal follow-up of our incarcerated sample suggests that such differential recidivism may not apply to select samples, like the one we examined (i.e., exclusively nonincestuous, and committed as "sexually dangerous").

Results on the early sexual victimization of our sample of child molesters were noteworthy. When compared to the incidence of sexual victimization in opposite-sex offenders, the rate for the same-sex offenders was over 2.5 times greater and for the mixed-sex offenders twice as great (24.5%, 68%, and 49%, respectively, for opposite-, same-, and mixed-sex groups). Although there do not appear to be any reports in the literature addressing this specific issue, David Finkelhor has reported that boys who were sexually abused by older men were more than four times more likely to engage in homosexual activity than were non-victims.

How all these differences interrelate to form a cohesive picture of these groups and which of these group discriminators might have causal implications are questions that await further study. Certainly, our preliminary examination of the validity of the victim sex distinction supports its viability as a potential taxonomic construct and encourages continued study. If we are to make progress, however, it is critical that the methodological problems we have mentioned be addressed and cross-sample comparability be established.

References

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