

ASSESSING MEN WHO SEXUALLY ABUSE

A Practice Guide



David Briggs, Paddy Doyle,
Tess Gooch and Roger Kennington

Assessing Men Who Sexually Abuse

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Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that there has been something of a revolution in society's understanding of the true nature and extent of sexual abuse over the past fifteen years or so. Ignorance, disbelief, denial, minimisation and collusion have rapidly been replaced by bewilderment, shock, anger, outrage and a demand for vengeance and that something be done to protect the public in general and our children in particular. This has been mirrored by the media portrayal of sexual abusers as 'Beasts' or 'Monsters' and the fact that it has become the normative public response to call for castration, life imprisonment or even the death penalty for those few cases (generally estimated to be less than 10%) which are successfully identified and prosecuted by the Criminal Justice System. Whilst this is readily understandable as a response to society's attempt to come to terms with its new knowledge and the horror of it all, a more measured response is necessary if we are to have any hope of successfully reducing the serious harm inflicted by these acts of abuse or 'unspeakable crimes' as Willis (1993) put it:

'It is the cost to children of failing to treat their abusers that must be counted above any other cost when we consider the best way forward for child protection.'

and we would say that this is equally applicable to adult victims of abuse.

The revolution in the general understanding suggested above has fortunately seen a parallel revolution in our knowledge of effective methods of working with sexual abusers. That knowledge remains subject to rapid development from which we must continue to learn, but it also gives us confidence in our ability to make a real difference to the prevalence of future victimisation from sexual abuse. It has become increasingly acknowledged that all agencies concerned in working with sexual abuse, whether that be primarily with victims or abusers, share the common aim of reducing the risk of reoffending in order to protect the public. Crucially we would argue that to be effective this work must begin with assessment, be informed throughout by a process of continuous assessment, and end with assessment. To put it simply, if we don't understand the problem we will never find the solution.

This book is therefore intended to be of practical assistance to professionals from all disciplines involved in the assessment of adult male perpetrators of

sexual abuse. Whilst many of the methods and tools might be applicable to female perpetrators, we do not presume expertise in this area. The book is a practice guide drawing on the experience of the authors. It aims to provide an overview of the major considerations necessary for practitioners undertaking assessments. It is designed as a basic level text for those who are at the outset of their careers in work with sexual abusers. Specifically, it does not attempt to address the technologies of penile plethysmography, nor the developing assessment 'systems' of workers such as Richard Beckett or David Thornton in the UK. It is divided into three parts.

PART I

Chapter One outlines our values and the research base which form the foundation of the work. It outlines some of the essential elements of professional support necessary for practitioners undertaking assessment of sexual abusers and comments on the importance of the management function within agencies.

Chapter Two provides a critical summary of some of the theoretical models commonly underpinning assessment work with sexual abusers. These are divided into developmental theories and empirical theories, concentrating in particular upon Finklehor's 'four factor' model (1986) and the 'cycle of offending' (Wolf 1985, Ryan *et al.* 1987) as important tools for assessment work.

PART II

Chapter Three addresses, in a practical way, those general procedures and good practice guidelines underpinning the process of assessing sexual abusers. Beginning with guidance about interviewing, the chapter develops to review the use of questionnaires, penile plethysmography, projective testing, behavioural observation and other approaches to assessment. The chapter provides an overview of the approach to assessment and forms the basis upon which specific issues are considered in Part III.

Chapter Four deals with some key contexts within which assessments are undertaken. The areas covered are: civil proceedings, child protection conferences, mental health, hostels, pre-sentence reports, prisoner release considerations, and 'Schedule One' offences. Under each of these headings the basic framework within which assessment work may be called for is outlined, with references for these to be pursued in more detail where appropriate. The implications for work in relation to sexual abusers within these contexts are then explored.

PART III

In this final Part, chapters Five to Thirteen examine in turn each of the main areas of the abusers' functioning which might form the substance of the assessment task. Each of these chapters follows a common format examining

why to assess that area, the **targets** for assessment, **how** to assess (with MEASURES where available), and concluding with **tips** and **hints** which the authors have found to be of practical benefit.

Chapter Fourteen examines the vexed question of Risk Assessment but shows that by drawing upon the material within the previous chapters of the book this is a task which we can and should approach with confidence.

PART I

VALUES, RESEARCH
AND THEORETICAL BASES

Requirements for Effectiveness

Working with sexual abuse is no easy task. The particularly damaging effects of abuse upon its victims places a high burden of responsibility on those practitioners undertaking work with abusers aimed at reducing the risk of further abuse. In addition, the content of the work itself, because of its abusive and sexually explicit nature, can exact a high toll on workers. For these reasons, if we are to aspire to effectiveness in this work we must be clear about why we are doing it, we must ensure that we, and our colleagues, are adequately equipped and supported, and the work must be effectively managed. This chapter will examine each of these requirements in turn under the headings of:

- value and research base
- practitioner support
- management issues.

VALUE AND RESEARCH BASE

At the foundation of our value base is the belief that sexual abuse involves the abuse of power in all cases and the abuse of trust in most cases. Sexually abusive behaviour is not an illness and therefore cannot be 'cured'. It is however behaviour over which abusers can learn to exercise control, and we approach our work with a belief in the capacity for people to change.

Sexual abuse represents distortions in both sexuality and emotionality in the abuser, distortions which are usually best understood in terms of the distorted life experiences and previous learning of those abusers. These factors are important and inform our belief that the perpetrators of abuse must be required to take responsibility for, and constructively address, their offending behaviour, but in so doing deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. We must avoid seeing abusers as nothing other than 'sex offenders' and remember that this is only one aspect of their lives. It is vital that we do this not only because of the moral imperative but also because there are reasons to believe that this approach is more effective in producing the changes in behaviour necessary for the protection of potential future victims (Beckett *et al.* 1994).

We have a shared responsibility to engage the perpetrators of sexual abuse in work aimed at reducing the likelihood of further abuse. The effects of sexual abuse upon its victims are inevitably damaging, usually very traumatic and debilitating, and extend beyond them to their families and to others close to them.

Our aims in working with abusers are consistent with those of colleagues working with victims and we therefore seek to work collaboratively whenever possible. These shared aims provide a powerful motivation for our work but at a time when many agencies are facing ever increasing financial constraints and cut backs we need to be able to support our belief in the value of our work by seeking evidence that intervention is effective and therefore worthwhile.

Our work with sexual abusers remains a relatively new and continually developing area. However, a consensus is developing which recognises that a cognitive behavioural approach is effective in reducing recidivism in child abusers. Marshall (1993) and Pithers (1993) have suggested how cognitive behavioural approaches may be extended to work with rapists.

In his meta-analysis of recent treatment studies, Hall compared the long term recidivism rates of treated and non treated offenders and found that the effect of that treatment was a reconviction rate of 8 fewer sex offenders per 100. He concluded that:

‘The results of the present meta-analysis suggest that the effect of treatment with sexual offenders is robust, albeit small...’ (Hall 1995)

Given that reconviction rates are fairly low within some groups of offenders (notably intra-familial abusers) (Marshall 1990), this represents a highly significant impact amongst those abusers who tend to have multiple victims. In 1992 the Home Office commissioned a three-stage sex offender treatment evaluation project, the STEP Project (Beckett *et al.* 1994). This was the first major study of the effectiveness of the work of community based programmes in England and Wales looking at six probation programmes and one privately run residential facility. A total of 59 offenders were subject to the research which assessed their deviancy levels before and after interventions using a range of attitudinal and behavioural tests. The results merit consideration in far greater detail than we have space for here but of those men who were undertaking the long term treatment programmes, 64 per cent showed a beneficial treatment effect as did 59 per cent of those who completed the short term programmes. Provision was made for the examination of reconviction rates, two, five, and ten years after offenders completed the programmes. The results of the two year follow up were published in October 1996 (Hedderman and Sugg 1996) and the key points are as follows:

- When compared with a sample of sex offenders put on probation in 1990, those referred to the seven programmes evaluated by the STEP team were less likely to be reconvicted for a sexual offence (5% compared with 9%). This difference still held true when differences in the samples were taken into account.