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**Juvenile Sexual Offenders: The Influence of Modeling, Verbal Instruction, and
Relationship Structures on Sexual Offenses**

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**Submitted to the
Smith College School for Social Work
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Social Work**

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Abstract

The main aim of this study was to examine the ways in which obedience, social learning theory, and moral motives influence to sexual offenses of juvenile sexual offenders.

From a sample of 502 incarcerated sexually abusing youth, 40 endorsed a question indicating that they "...had been told to sexually abuse others." Eighty-four percent of the sample used in this study had been sexually abused. Sixteen percent of the sample had not been sexually abused. The findings support that physical modeling did have an impact on the sexual offenses committed by juvenile sexual offenders however, being told to offend did not impact future offenses.

Introduction

Sexual assault costs the United States billions of dollars annually (Post, Mezey, Maxwell & Wibert, 2002) and many questions exist as to how well that money is being spent. While most criminal offenses are committed by adults, at least 15% of criminal offenses in the United States are committed by juveniles (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). Furthermore, over 40% of sexual offenses are committed by juveniles (Gray, Busconi, Houchens, & Pithers, 1997). As debate continues over whether juvenile sexual offenders should be required to register on a national sexual offense database (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010), it becomes increasingly important to gain more information on juvenile sexual offenders and the etiology of their behaviors.

The Impact of Being Sexually Offended Against

Researchers have examined the relationship between juvenile sexual offenders and their history of being sexually abused as children. Researchers have posited that being sexually offended against serves as a model of sexual offense, influencing the victim to become a perpetrator (Burton, 2000; Burton, Nesmith, & Badten, 1997). Adult male sexual offenders who were sexually abused as children have more child victims (Craissati & Beech, 2004; Simons, Wurtele, & Heil, 2002), have more male victims, and are more likely to be recidivists (Craissati, McClurg & Browne, 2002) than adult male sexual offenders who were not sexually offended against as children. It is important to note that being sexually abused as a child does not always lead a person to become a sexual abuser (Leifer, Kilbane & Kalick, 2004). Furthermore, when compared to other forms of abuse and neglect, victims of childhood sexual abuse do not offend, sexually or

non sexually, in greater numbers than those who were not sexually abused (Widom & Ames, 1994).

An unpublished data set notes that 16 out of 100 adult sexual offenders studied had been told by another to commit a sexual offense (Burton & Peterson, 2012), thus introducing the issue of compliance and sexual offending to this researcher. Researchers have also previously examined the impact of being sexually offended against on offending against others on juvenile sexual abusers (Burton, 2000; Burton, Nesmith, & Badten, 1997) and reported that when compared to sexually victimized delinquent peers who had not committed sexual offenses, sexually victimized sexually aggressive youth's victimization was more severe in nearly every way measured and that sexually abused sexually aggressive youth tended to repeat what was done to them in terms of age, act, level of force used and other characteristics of crime (Burton, 2003). So from some youth, learning was clearly in play. But little attention has been given to the issue of being verbally instructed to offend against another. In this study I sought to examine both the impact of being sexually abused and being told to sexually abuse another. There are three potential approaches that may assist in understanding the impact of being told to abuse and being abused on juvenile's sexual victimization. Those approaches are Milgram's work on obedience (1963), social learning theory (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1963), and Rai and Fisk's work on moral motives (2011).

Compliance

“Compliance refers to the act of complying with the request or demands of others. It can be conceptualized in two different ways. First, it can be viewed as a

personality trait, and secondly, as a behavioral response to a given situation”

(Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Brynjólfssdóttir & Hreinsdóttir, 2002, p.146).

Researchers on Milgram’s infamous obedience study sought to provide understanding around how the Nazi officers could commit such inhumane acts during World War II (1963). The study was designed to test obedience. The researchers reported that participants abandoned their moral values to follow an authority figure who, in actuality, had no means of imposing their authority (Milgram, 1963).

Researchers from a recent Milgram replication study in the United Kingdom (Burger, 2009) found no statistically significant difference between participant’s obedience in 1963 and 2009, validating the current applicability of Milgram’s findings. Milgram believed people’s responses to authority had to be understood within the context in which they were receiving the orders. He attributed the subjects’ willingness to comply in his experiment to the institute they were at, the assumption that the experiment had a worthy purpose, and the assumption that the person they were shocking was there voluntarily and was obligated to obey. The participants were also being paid to participate, and although they would be paid regardless of whether or not they administered all of the shocks, Milgram (1963) felt this might have impacted their sense of obligation. Milgram also felt that because participants perceived that they were randomly assigned as the shocker, and could have just as easily been the learner, they were more willing to comply (Milgram, 1963).

Whereas Milgram (1963) used adult subjects, a follow-up study was designed to test Milgram’s findings on children age 6-16 years old (Shanaba & Yahya, 1977).

Milgram's findings (1963) revealed that 65% of his adult population continued administering the shocks until the end, whereas 73% of the children in Shanab and Yahya's study (1977) continued to administer the shocks until the end. This study highlights the multigenerational response to obedience and how age may influence children's responses due to their desire to obey commands given by adults, who are perceived as an authority figures. This may carry over to sexual aggression. If a parent or authority figure instructs a child to commit a sexual offense, the child is likely to carry out their orders because, as these researchers have demonstrated, people, and especially children, are obedient to authority.

Social Learning Theory

The authors of Social learning theory (Bandura, et al., 1963) suggested that people watch an imitated behavior, view the consequences and benefits of that behavior, and then perform that behavior (Stinson, Sales & Becker, 2008). Social learning theory has been used to examine adult sexual offenders' (Stinson, et al., 2008) and juvenile sexual offenders' (Burton & Mezzan, 2004) history and actions. There are two common hypotheses in the field of sex offender research that utilize social learning theory (Stinson, et al., 2008). The first is that the abused become the abuser, and the second is that violent sexually explicit material becomes that catalyst for sexual impulses to become sexual actions with sexual offenders (Stinson, et al., 2008).

Researchers have postulated that there are three elements that lead to one use a modeled behavior. The first element is that the model must be an esteemed figure, trusted or somehow close to the person learning the behavior. The stronger the

relationship the more influential the modeling is (Stinson, et al., 2008). Beginning in infancy, children look to their mothers for social referencing, gaining assurance and approval of their actions (Hirshberg & Svejda, 2008). Additionally, older siblings' delinquency can lead to an increase in younger sibling delinquency (Craine, Tanaka, Nishina & Conger, 2009). In terms of sexual aggression, the closeness of the relationship the abuser has with their victim may impact whether or not the victim will model the sexual abuse later in life.

The second element in modeling is that the behavior needs to be within the realm of already existing behavioral patterns. For example, children whose parents use harsh physical punishment are more likely to be aggressive than those whose parents do not (Weiss, Dodge, Bates & Pettit, 1992). This effect may be multigenerational. Parents who were the recipient of corporal punishment as children were more likely to spank than those who were not, and their children are more likely to turn to physical aggression in peer and sibling relationships (Simons, & Wurtele, 2010). Regarding sexual aggression, being sexually abused seems to add perpetrating sexual abuse to existing behavioral patterns.

The third element in modeling is that the consequence the model receives as a result of his/her action determines the likelihood of the behavior being adopted. Viewing an immediate negative consequence makes a person less likely to model a behavior, but a positive consequence or lack of consequence for the model makes a person much more likely to model the behavior (Stinson, et al., 2008). Researchers found that children who witnessed a model being awarded for aggressive behavior were

much more likely to repeat the aggressive behavior than those who witnessed a model punished or disregarded for the aggressive behavior (Bandura, et al., 1963). In terms of sexual aggression, if the person sexually abusing another is not punished effectively, their lack of punishment may entice their victim to offend against others.

Relational Models Theory

Researchers have reported that it is likely that the decisions one makes are completely dependent on the context of the situation in which they are formed (Gilovich & Griffin, 2002). Relational models theory (RMT) operates from the assumption that moral motives, judgments, sanctions, remedies, emotions, and actions are entrenched in social relational models for living in groups (Rai & Fiske, 2011). Rai and Fiske's theory built upon the structures of social relationships present in RMT (Rai & Fiske, 2011) to include the moral obligations demanded by different schemes, the ways in which schemes can be violated, and the ways in which people are motivated to comply to the obligations and violations to maintain adaptive, functioning, social relationships.

One of the moral motives in relational theory is hierarchy. Hierarchy is based on the RMT scheme of authority ranking. In authority ranking and hierarchy, individuals are placed within a linear hierarchy, where certain individuals are seen as higher or lower than other individuals. A linear hierarchy is seen in the relationship between adults and juveniles (Rai & Fiske, 2011). In a linear hierarchy those in positions of authority are expected to guide and direct their subordinates. Subordinates are motivated to respect,

obey, and follow the will of their superiors because of the guidance and protection they receive from superiors (Rai & Fiske, 2011).

Although not inherent in the design of hierarchies, researchers have found that hierarchies have the potential to become immoral, oppressive, and disagreeable. Within a hierarchy, a moral expectation is formed that people on the top of the hierarchy deserve more and better things than those on the bottom of the hierarchy (Rai & Fiske, 2011). Superiors may feel more entitled than their subordinates, but they are also seen as being morally responsible for the actions of those below them. Adhering to this moral motive creates levels of power between the leader and the subordinates. In regard to illegal acts, superiors may tell subordinates to commit a violent offense, and the subordinates often follow through because they feel they are morally obligated to obey the demands of their superior (Rai & Fiske, 2011). With sexual aggression, it is possible that subordinates comply with the demands of those above them instead of following their own personal desires.

Current Project

In this study I will use the ideas postulated by Milgram's in his work on obedience, social learning theory and relational models theory to examine the effects of being instructed by someone to commit a sexual offense and being sexually offended against on the type and frequency of a sexual offense among juvenile sexual offenders.

Methods

After obtaining consent to collect confidential data, youth from 6 residential facilities in a Midwestern state across 2 time periods (2004 and 2009) with sexual and

non-sexual offense were surveyed. Multi-paged pencil and paper surveys were collected from 502 adjudicated juvenile sexual abusers.

From a sample of 502 incarcerated sexually abusing youth, 40 endorsed a question indicating that they "...had been told to sexually abuse others". Two of the 40 were removed from the sample due to inconsistent and odd response patterns that disallowed analysis on the salient variables. The 38 remaining youth were then matched with youth from the remaining group of 462 youth on age, race and extant sexual child abuse. This resulted in a total sample of 76 youth for this study.

The age range for each group was 14 to 20 years. The average age for the "told to abuse" group was 16.81 years ($SD = 1.79$ years) and for the comparison group the average age was 16.86 ($SD = 1.78$ years). There was no difference between the groups ($t = .13$, $DF = 72$, $p = .88$) on age – validating the match on age. For both groups the youth were distributed racially with 44.7% ($n = 17$ in each group) Caucasian youth, 23.7% ($n = 9$ in each group) African American Youth, 10.5% ($n = 4$ on each group) Native American Youth, 7.9% ($n = 3$ in each group) Hispanic Youth and 13.2% ($n = 5$ in each group) who endorsed other or multiracial. The equal proportion of each race within each group also demonstrates the matching by race.

The average CTQ sexual abuse score for the sample was 14.56 ($SD = 7.53$) with no difference between groups ($t = .099$, $p = .922$). While the youth were not matched on sexual abuse score (rather on a simple yes/no "were you sexually abused" question) this validated that the two group's experiences of sexual abuse were somewhat similar in severity. This is important as the experience of sexual abuse is a salient variable for

these youth and differences in this scale could be confused with other differences being sought in compliance and its potential correlates. Eighty-four percent of the sample had been sexually abused. Sixteen percent of the sample had not been sexually abused.

Instruments

Demographic information and data regarding the context of the youth's sexual victimization was obtained through a detailed psychosocial history form (Burton 2003). On this form, questions about race, grade and age were asked. To determine if a youth was forced to abuse, a simple yes/no question was used within the demographic form: "were you ever told to sexually abuse another person". Additionally, a question about the youth's total number of sexual abuse victims was included in this survey.

The *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire* (CTQ) (Bernstein, et al., 1994) is a 37-item self-report scale screening for traumatic experiences in childhood. This measure is brief and relatively non-invasive for participants. Only the sexual abuse scale is used in the current study. In this study, the sexual abuse scale had good internal consistency with $\alpha = .85$

Sexually aggressive behaviors over the lifespan were measured using the *Self Report Sexual Aggression Scale* (SERSAS). SERSAS is a multi-item inventory used in prior studies (Burton, 2003; Burton, Miller, & Shill, 2002). Questions about several sexual acts are all prefaced with "Have you ever conned or forced someone to ...?". The original several page survey was reduced to two pages based on collapsed variables used in previous projects. This instrument is essentially a checklist of relationships and acts with a previous 8-week test-retest agreement, for a small sample, of 96% (Burton, 2000).

From this instrument a perpetration severity score, previously used by Burton (2003), was created. This score is a fifteen point rank order scale which runs from 1 = exposure to 15 = penetration, oral sex, exposure and fondling. The score is calculated to consider the highest and most severe form of perpetration across all victims. Similarly a 7 point force scale also previously used in other studies was created from this measure in which 1= the youth used favors, games or babysat the victim, and 7 = the youth used force, threats and used favors, games or babysat the victim. This force score is also calculated to represent the most severe force used across all victims. Finally, this measure includes a number of behavioral scales, including various potential areas of sexual arousal (e.g., arousal to males under 12, females 12-18, etc.). These items used a 0 (not at all) to 4 (a great deal) ordinal scales. While self-report may elicit concerns regarding the validity of such measures, Worling (2006) reported that a self-report measure of deviant arousal was very highly correlated with a measure of viewing time, which also assessed deviant arousal for juvenile sexual offenders

Results

The perpetration severity score was an average of 9.38 for the *told to abuse group* and 8.58 for the control group, with no significant difference between groups ($t = .734, DF = 68, p = .47$). Similarly, there was no difference between groups on the amount of force used in their perpetration of others; the told to abuse group *mean* was 2.75 and the control group *mean* was 2.88.

The total number of victims was similar in the two groups with the told to abuse group having an average of 3.2 victims ($SD = 2.96$ victims) and the comparison group having an average of 2.7 victims ($SD = 2.45$ victims) ($t = .22, DF = 72, p = .83$).

The deviant arousal score was also not different between groups, with the told to abuse group having a *mean* score of 2.10 ($SD = 3.34$ points) and the comparison group *mean* of 2.14 ($SD = 3.28$ points) ($t = .039, DF = 73, p = .969$).

In a follow-up analysis to assess the effects of sexual abuse and being told to abuse on sexual abuse severity, a hierarchical regression was used, entering sexual abuse first (CTQ scale) then being told to abuse as a dummy variable. The frequency of sexual abuse is a significant predictor of severity of sexual abuse, while being told to abuse others is not. In fact, when the second variable was added, the regression became non-significant (see Table 1) although the F^{Change} was insignificant. Addition of the second variable evidently took a very small amount of the variance away from sexual abuse, making it insignificant – as it was only just significant in the first model. In other words, the first model is the only viable model of the two, and being told to abuse did not, for this sample, relate to sexual abuse severity. Basically, no meaningful differences between the groups exist on this variable.

Table 1: Hierarchical Regression Sexual Victimization History Variables x Sexual Abuse Severity Scores

Model 1 †	Model 2					
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Sexual Abuse	.141	.072	.235*	.144	.072	.238*
Being Told to Abuse Someone				.867	1.08	.095

†sorted by p value

$R^2 = .055$

$F = 3.90, p = .05$

* $p < .05$

$R^2 = .064$

$F = 2.26, p = .113, F^{Change} = .64, p = .43$

Discussion

The youth provided responses that offer some support for social learning theory. The youths' responses supported the impact of physical modeling as a not very strong, but statistically significant, method of learning about sexual crime for this sample of youth who have been sexually abused and subsequently sexually abused others. This supports prior projects with similar findings (Burton 2003; Stinson, et al., 2008). However, being verbally instructed to offend was not a significant predictor of the offense among this small matched sample.

The youths' responses did not provide support for the impact of compliance on the type of offense. I focused on the impetus for offending in the hopes of understanding why some offenses were more severe than others, which is beyond the scope of Milgram's study. Obedience may be a strong factor in influencing a person to commit an offense (Milgram, 1963), but verbal instruction did not have lasting power over the severity of the offense in this sample. Verbal commands and the actions carried out as part of following orders seemed to be contingent on the commander's actual or

perceived presence in Milgram's work – which could not be tested here (Milgram, 1963). Being told to abuse did not relate to worse sexual offenses than those who were not told to offend. Milgram was interested in the conditions under which people obeyed those in authority, and these findings may indicate that those conditions do play an important role, because simply being commanded did not have a significant effect on the juveniles' sexual offenses.

The frequency of being sexually abused impacted the juveniles' sexual victimization of others. This can be understood using the three elements outlined in social learning theory regarding the elements that lead to a modeled behavior being adopted (Bandura, et al., 1963).

Rai and Fiske (2011) found that in hierarchies, subordinates turn their moral obligations over to the person in the position of authority. Those who have been sexually abused may feel that those who initiated them into sexual abuse, their own abuser, is responsible for the abuse they perpetrate onto another, thus freeing them from the moral weight of that action. It is possible that more severe abuse scores are associated with those who have been more frequently abused because the hierarchy has been well-established and is much more engrained, therefore causing the perpetrator feel less moral obligation for the action.

In Milgram's study (1963), the participants administering the shocks were physically showing signs of anxiety and stress as they continued with the experiment. Being verbally commanded did not seem to relieve them of the moral obligations of their actions. This seemed to be true with the current sample, as being verbally

instructed did not lead to a more violent sexual offense, whereas frequent sexual abuse did. It is possible that having been frequently sexually abused released the perpetrators from the shame and guilt of offending against another in a way that being verbally commanded to offend did not.

Research Implications

Though Milgram (1963) wrote of the impetus for offending, I was not able to explore that in this study. Being verbally instructed to sexually offend against another is not something that has been researched in adult or juvenile sexual offender populations. In this study I could not adequately explore if being told to offend leads to more long-term offending. There is still the unexplained finding of the 16 out of the 100 adult sexual offenders who were told to offend (Burton & Peterson, 2012), leaving the unanswered question, does being told to offend lead one to offend for a longer period of time? Only 40% of juvenile sexual offenders continue on to be adult sexual offenders (Abel, Osborn, & Twigg, 1993). Being told to offend could be a valuable clue as to why some children continue to offend into adulthood and some do not. Also, Rai and Fisk (2011) addressed hierarches and the manner in which moral obligations are released to the superior. It would be interesting to see how this affects shame and guilt in those who were both instructed to offend and who were offended against. More research differentiating the behavior of juvenile sexual offenders based on how they received their learning, be it social learning theory, compliance, or hierarchies would be helpful in better understanding their offense patters and potential treatment.

Clinical Implications

This study provides insight into how the behavioral patterns of juvenile sexual offenders with different past abuse histories commit different offenses. The social learning component of modeling sexual abuse should be used to inform the treatment of juvenile sexual offenders who have long-term abuse histories. This study highlights the importance of being aware of trauma when working with juveniles, whether they have committed a sexual offense or not, as it may impact their future actions. It is also important for clinicians to have an awareness of hierarchies and compliance in families in order to work with the families to make these dynamics healthier.

Limits

The sample size in this study was small and drawn from an exceptionally and unusually large sample – this event does not occur very often. The questions regarding being instructed to offend were broad, and in future studies, more extensive questioning on this would be beneficial. This was a pencil and paper survey, and the information that was collected was limited by this design, as nothing was known about who told the youth to offend, the circumstances of the youth being told, and the manner in which the instruction to offend was conveyed. It is also possible that there is something to being told to offend that was not captured in the limited sample size or with the particular variables examined in this study. For example, knowing who told them to abuse others would have been helpful.

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