

NEARI NEWS:

TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

An Essential Tool for Professionals Working with those who Sexually Abuse or... A Great New Way to Stay Current with Cutting Edge Sexual Abuse Research.



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Dear Colleague,
This month's research article looks at the validity of risk assessment in two assessment tools commonly used within the adolescent field, the JSOAP-II and the ERASOR. Their findings support the idea that risk assessment is more accurate and helpful to the youth if it accounts for the both the nature of the offense as well as the presence of other antisocial/pro-social traits.

Our discussion of the research examines the impact of the assessment research, the complexity of risk assessments with diagnostically variable and psychologically developing youth, and the emerging assessment tools on our ability to effectively work with this adolescent population.

We hope you enjoy the article and if you want us to examine a particular issue, please let us know. As always, we welcome your feedback.

Sincerely,

Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis

Validity of Assessing Risk

by Steven Bengis, David S. Prescott, and Joan Tabachnick

Question

Is it possible or even advisable to predict re-offense in a youthful offender population?

The Research

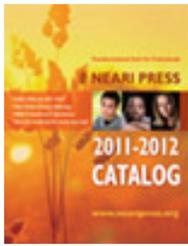
In 2010, Gordana Rajlic and Heather M. Gretton published research examining the validity of risk assessment in two assessment tools commonly used within the adolescent field:

- JSOAP-II
- ERASOR

Unlike previous studies, the authors applied these risk tools to two sub-types of youth, those who only offend sexually and those with other antisocial but non-sexual offending. They examined the predictive validity of the two measures when applied to these different groups. The authors acknowledge methodological limitations, such as criminal records as the sole indicator of re-offense, retrospective analysis of antisocial tendencies based on records and not clinical assessments, and the low base-rates of sexual recidivism in the sex-offense only cohort. Their findings support the idea that risk assessment is more accurate and helpful if it accounts for the both the nature of the offense and the presence of other antisocial traits.

Implications for Professionals

This research highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment tools currently in use. The current tools have been proven to be useful for making structured professional judgments about adolescents and their treatment/supervision needs. However,



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by David Prescott and Rob Longo

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when used alone, they do not adequately consider the developmental, contextual, or diagnostic realities of adolescent. For example, there is nothing inherent in the scoring to differentiate traumatized adolescents from those with an autism spectrum disorder. The risk to re-offend likely differs for diagnostically different youth even though the behaviors may be the same. For example, the lack of empathy in a youth with a Pervasive Developmental Disorder does not have the same meaning or significance as the same characteristic in a youth who is Conduct Disordered. The instruments are silent on guiding treatment for these often very different populations and thus cannot be adequately used as stand-alone instruments.

Further, the variation in predictive validity of these tools across a variety of studies indicate that they also have significant limitations when used as predictors of re-offense. A high score on these measures does not necessarily indicate high likelihood of sexual re-offense, just as a low score does not indicate a safe adolescent with no need for intervention. The future of adolescents is too important to rely on a cutoff score on a single instrument, particularly when one considers the high stakes involved in future illegal actions.

At this time, we believe professionals should use risk assessment tools to develop better plans for managing risk and guiding treatment and not use them as vehicles for predicting re-offense. After all, the primary concern for the treatment profession is to understand the nature of risk and identify the steps required to mitigate it. Classifying people according to risk is less helpful than collaborating to ameliorate whatever risks exist and ensure a safe and healthy adolescent when he or she lives in a community.

Implications for the Field

The desire to create or use validated, actuarial type instruments for adolescents is understandable. Courts sometimes insist on their use and often base their sentencing on the results. Placement agencies often base their use of residential or secure treatment beds on these same results and several research-based instruments continue to be refined in an effort to ever-more accurately predict re-offense. It is one thing to use these instruments to develop plans; it is quite another to use the numbers they produce to determine a teen's future life. The complexity of an adolescent's life and development and the opportunities for change is why the authors believe that providing cut-off scores cannot be applied for general use at this time. In addition, when provided with a numbered score, all professionals must take great care not to make assumptions about risk even if the evaluating clinician takes great care in establishing the limitations/meaning of that objective number. Remaining focused on youth's ability to change is the highest priority.

The search for prediction has not always recognized the fluidity of adolescence. Given how much all adolescents change in just a few years, and the complexity of their development, it may never be possible to classify them according to risk in any meaningful way.

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Instructor: David Prescott

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Given the dynamism of this population and the positive impact of targeted interventions, our field can be more effective when we include these measures as key components of comprehensive assessments of treatment and supervision needs, and not be used as stand-alone tools that determine a young person's future.

Abstract

The present study explored the predictive validity of two measures designed to assess risk for sexual recidivism in adolescent sexual offenders (ASO), the Juvenile Sex Offender Assessment Protocol-II and the Estimate of Risk of Adolescent Sexual Offense Recidivism, in the context of an antisociality-based typology of adolescent sexual offenders. The authors distinguished between adolescent sexual offenders with a history of general offending (delinquent ASO) and adolescent sexual offenders without a history of general offending (sex offense-only ASO). They found differential predictive accuracy of risk measures according to offender type: Both instruments predicted sexual recidivism in the sex offense-only ASO group (large effect sizes), whereas in the delinquent ASO group, the measures did not predict sexual recidivism beyond chance levels. Risk assessment in the context of an antisociality-based sex offender typology is discussed.

Citation

- Gordana Rajlic and Heather M. Gretton. (2010). An Examination of Two Sexual Recidivism Risk Measures in Adolescent Offenders: The Moderating Effect of Offender Type. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*. 37: 1066.

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An internationally recognized expert in the field of sexual abuse assessment, treatment, management, and prevention, Mr. Prescott has published numerous articles and authored, edited, and co-edited books on risk assessment, interviewing, and providing residential treatment to youth. He is a Past President of ATSA and is currently Clinical Director for the Becket Programs of Maine, overseeing inpatient and outpatient services for juveniles.

Questions/Feedback

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