

Sexual victimization and sexual delinquency: Vampire or Pinocchio syndrome?

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Were you molested when you were a child? This is the unavoidable question faced by all offenders who are accused or convicted of a sex crime. A retrospective analysis of sexual victimization among offenders showed that from 30% to 60% of them — with pedophiles predominant — said yes.² But what is the true story?

Sexual offending is often explained as being the consequence of previous sexual victimization. This perception of “cause and effect” is supported by various writers who believe that the presence of unresolved sexual trauma (deviant sexual experience in early childhood) plays an important role in the development and persistence of deviant sexual behaviour.³ Some even emphasize that sex crimes are often a reproduction of previously experienced sexual abuse.⁴ They call this the “vampire” syndrome.⁵ Other researchers question the assumption of a cycle of abuse — that is, the theory of the abused abuser.⁶ Some even doubt the accuracy of the reported rate of sexual victimization among sex offenders, and talk about “pseudo-victimization” or “overvictimization”.⁷ It would appear that some sex offenders falsely claim that they were victimized as a way of explaining or excusing their own sex crimes. We do not know how widespread this practice is, but an American study of sex offenders showed that after they were told that they would be subject to a polygraph test, the percentage of those claiming sexual victimization dropped from 67% to 29%.⁸

Most studies concerned with sexual victimization and sexual abuse are based solely on self-reporting, and their subjects are people caught in the criminal system. In this context, we are entitled to assume that some of the subjects may magnify and transform any traumatic experiences they may have had in order to adapt them to their present circumstances, and furthermore, that they may invent sexual victimization scenarios in order to reject responsibility for their own crimes. This is an aspect of the “Pinocchio” syndrome.

We recently conducted a study to see whether signs of early victimization could be found in the criminal behaviour of sex offenders who claimed to have been molested in the past.⁹ A similar study had already been conducted but with a limited number of variables and subjects. A surprising fact in that previous study was that the majority of the subjects

reported having been sexually abused by a woman and that their victims were also female.¹⁰ In our study, on the contrary, we did not find any link between the sex of the aggressor (victimization context) and that of the victim (offence context). In fact, 85.7% of the subjects reported having been abused by a man and 83.3% had abused women. Moreover, our results showed that the kind of link (immediate or extended family, known or unknown person outside the family) that the subjects had with their abusers (victimization context) did not influence the kind of link that the subjects, as abusers, would seek with their victims. Whether they were sexually abused by their fathers, by members of the extended family, or by a known or unknown person, it is not possible to predict that their victims will fall into the same category. We did find that subjects who had been abused while under 12 years of age were more likely to have abused a similarly prepubescent child. However, not all pedophiles were abused prior to puberty. In fact, our research sample showed that among the subjects who reported having been sexually abused only prior to puberty, only 57.1% molested prepubescent children. In addition, one third (36.5%) of rapists (abusers of women) also reported that they had been abused only before the age of 12. This shows that the age of sexual victimization is not a good predictor of pedophilia. Furthermore, the possibility still remains that some subjects may have falsely claimed sexual abuse to excuse or rationalize their crimes. It may be that sexual abusers who falsely claim to have been abused tend to say this occurred at an age similar to their victims’ simply to add credibility to their statements. We do find the highest rate of sexual victimization among child molesters.¹¹ Another interesting point is that there was significant correspondence between the number of abusers reported by our subjects and the number of their own victims. Those who reported having been abused by more than one person were those who had the greatest number of victims. This observation reinforces the theory of “overvictimization” or “pseudo-victimization”.

Several studies of sexual victimization show that there are significant differences between sex offenders who were themselves victimized and those who were not. Not only do those who were victimized

display greater sexual deviance than those who were not, but they also come from more troubled family situations.¹²

We conducted another study to see whether sex offenders who reported having been sexually abused in the past (almost 50% of our subjects) showed significant differences from those who reported no victimization.¹³ We compared them on the basis of their personal history (behavioural problems, criminal record), their family history, and their sexual development. The results show that subjects who reported sexual victimization also reported victimization in several other areas of their lives. More of them had been exposed to unsuitable models (violence, substance abuse), exhibited behavioural problems before the age of 18 (introversion, social isolation), and committed sex offences (as juveniles and as adults). These subjects also had their first sexual experiences (masturbation, consensual contacts) earlier than the non-victimized, and considered themselves less competent in sexual matters. The results also show that sexual victimization is not the sole influence on personal and sexual development. Exposure to violence, sexual promiscuity or substance abuse during childhood are also important factors — perhaps even more important. The behavioural problems observed in victimized subjects had usually appeared even before they were sexually abused. We also found no significant difference between victimized and non-victimized subjects in an examination of sexual preferences (penile plethysmography). We may therefore ask whether the subject who reports sexual victimization

might not have become sex offenders even if they had not been molested in childhood. And indeed, this does appear to be true of nearly half (49.3%) the subjects in this study.

The results of these studies therefore lead us to question the importance that is placed on the role of sexual victimization in the development of sex-related criminality. Moreover, as previously mentioned, these studies are usually based only on self-reporting. It is therefore possible that some subjects invent sexual victimization scenarios (Pinocchio syndrome) or that they magnify or transform traumatic events in their lives to excuse or justify their crimes. Regardless of whether the sexual abuse did or did not occur, sexual victimization is not the only factor that may have a negative influence on a person's emotional, social and sexual development. The vampire syndrome does not explain the high percentage (about 50%) of individuals who reported that they had not been molested in childhood but who still committed sex crimes. Conversely, many people were molested in childhood or adolescence but never became molesters themselves. It is clear that several other factors may influence the display of deviant sexual behaviour — hence the need for carrying out further comparative studies. These should focus on sex offenders who did not report any sexual victimization and on non-offenders who were abused. It would then be possible to identify other factors — personal, environmental — related to the development and persistence of sex-related criminality. ■

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³ Groth, A. N. (1979). Sexual trauma in the life of rapists and child molesters, *Victimology*, 4, 10-16. Also see Freeman-Longo, R. E. (1986). The impact of sexual victimization on males, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 10, 411-414.

⁴ Freeman-Longo, 1986.

⁵ Worling, J. R. (1995). Sexual abuse histories of adolescent male sex offenders: Differences on the basis of the age and gender of their victims, *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 104(4), 610-613.

⁶ Langevin, R., Wright, P., and Handy, L. (1989). Characteristics of sex offenders who were sexually victimized as children, *Annals of Sex Research*, 2, 227-253.

⁷ Hilton, N. Z. (1993). Childhood sexual victimization and lack of empathy in child molesters: Explanation or excuse? *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 37(4), 287-296.

⁸ Hindman, J. Research disputes assumptions about child molesters, *NDAA Bulletin*, 7, 1988, 1-3.

⁹ St-Yves, M., and Pellerin, B. (1999). Victimization sexuelle et scénario délictuel chez les délinquants sexuels, *Revue Internationale de criminologie et de police technique et scientifique*, 52(2), 179-189.

¹⁰ Romano, E., and De Luca, R. V. "Exploring the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and adult sexual perpetration", *Journal of Family Violence*, 12(1), 1997, 85-98.

¹¹ Romano, E., and De Luca, R. V. (1996). Also see Hanson, & Slater, 1988 and Seghorn, Prentky, & Boucher, 1987, as well as, Tingle, Barnard, Robbins, Newman and Hutchinson, 1986.

¹² Langevin, Wright, and Handy, 1989.

¹³ St-Yves, M., Pellerin, B., and Guay, J.-P. (1999). *Is sexual childhood abuse an etiologic factor in sexual aggressors?* Paper presented at the Annual ATSAC Conference, Orlando, FL.