



## Book review

**Pedophilia and sexual offending against children: Theory, assessment and intervention by Michael C. Seto, PhD, 2007, ISBN: 1-4338-0114-0**

*Pedophilia and sexual offending against children: Theory, assessment and intervention* is a comprehensive text that reviews the major questions facing practitioners that work directly or indirectly with pedophiles and sexual offenders of children. Author Michael Seto, a psychologist with the Mental Health Program at the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health in Toronto, explores the causes of pedophilia, sexual offending and incest, as well as the risk factors, assessment methods and interventions associated with these phenomena.

The book is divided into eight chapters, some of which contain resources for readers requiring additional information. All sections are based on a thorough examination of the most timely evidence based research. For areas lacking a solid foundation in research, Seto presents current theories and research hypotheses.

In the introductory chapter, it is argued that many decisions made by practitioners and policymakers are guided by myths and misconceptions about pedophilia and sexual offending rather than available empirical evidence. This results in children being left at risk, as well as current treatment and criminal responses that inadequately manage scarce resources for offenders (pg. xi). The author thus sets out to present the available evidence in the hopes of guiding practice, policy making and future research endeavors.

Although there is still much to be learned about pedophilia, there is now sufficient research to suggest that it is a fixed sexual preference for pre-pubescent children that appears early in life (pg. xiii). In chapter one, Seto emphasizes that pedophiles are not necessarily sex offenders and vice versa. Community prevalence studies estimate that less than five percent of males (pg. 6) and fewer than four percent of women qualify for this diagnosis; however estimates for women are based on a single study. Approximately fifty percent of all sex offenders are also pedophiles (pg. 8). In a review of historical literature across cultures, sex with children is a prominent taboo and laws against sex with children are common. The author uses Darwinian theories to support the higher prevalence of risk taking, and thus sexual offending, among men (pgs. 14–16). Several appendices are provided with more information on paraphilias and clinical case examples of persons diagnosed with pedophilia.

Chapter two details various assessment methods for diagnosing pedophilia and offers a thorough summary of the major risk factors associated with the disorder. The two most widely used assessment tools are self report and behavioral assessments, with self reports limited in their utility due to the obvious motivations for withholding information about sexual preference for children. The Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests (SSPI) developed by Seto and colleagues as well as phallometric testing (measuring circumference of the penis in response to pictorial stimuli) provide good predictive validity for future offenses for adult males and possibly for adolescents. The SSPI uses four risk factors to assess pedophilic interests: 1) any offense against a boy, 2) any offense against an extra familial child, 3) any offense against a pre-pubescent child and 4) multiple victims (p. 27).

A section dedicated to further information about assessment methods “resource A”—is included in the appendices (pg. 213).

One of the potential problems with research on sex offenders in general is the overuse of prison based or criminalized offenders. This is of particular concern for professionals who work with alleged offenders who have children. For child welfare workers charged with making recommendations for children who have contact with alleged sex offenders, it is often the case that these offenders have only been the subject of one allegation and/or have no criminal record. There are few studies looking at the risk for future offenses in these situations (either against the alleged victim or other children with whom the offender may come into contact). In chapter three, Seto argues that clinical samples of both pedophiles that have not offended and sex offenders with few reported offenses are greatly needed. One study found that 8% of pedophiles had no previous offenses. Other populations that have been studied are self-identified pedophiles, of which approximately 50% report being previously convicted (pg. 50). Recent studies completed on child pornography offenders have found higher levels of attraction to pre-pubescent children through phallometric testing, suggesting that this type of offense may be a better predictor of pedophilia than previous offenses against children.

Chapter four reviews the major theories of sex offending against children, including: Finkelhor's 4 factor (1984), Marshall and Barbaree's integrated theory (1990), Hall and Hirschman's quadripartite theory (1992), Marshall and Marshall's developmental attachment theory (1992), Ward and Siegart's Pathways theory (2002), and Ward and Beech's integrated theory (2005) (pgs. 76–79). Seto acknowledges the contributions of these theories, while pointing out that none of them draw on the well-established criminological literature. He proposes a developmental theory of sex offending against children which incorporates this research. For instance, sex offenders differ from general offenders in that they will have lower levels of social competence and distorted attitudes about sex with children. Furthermore, they are likely to be antisocial, and many will have also committed non-sexual crimes. This theory also takes into account specific vulnerabilities of children: a child with a separated parent is at greater risk because step-fathers are more likely to offend, and early onset of puberty may make these children more attractive to non-pedophilic men (pgs. 91–94). Finally, co-occurrence of other kinds of maltreatment, such as physical abuse or neglect, may make a child more susceptible to sexual abuse. Two appendices are included in this chapter with further explanations of the association between psychopathy, psychopathology and sexual offending against children.

Although research has not yet been able to establish direct causal relationships of pedophilia, Seto addresses three emerging explanations in chapter five: conditioning, child sexual abuse and neurodevelopmental disorders. Many children have their first sexual experience during explorative play, and although most will become attracted to same-age peers as they age, some will remain attracted to children even as they become adolescents and adults. Research has found, however, that pedophiles are likely predisposed to become “stuck” at this stage, therefore conditioning cannot completely explain a diagnosis of

pedophilia (pg. 103). There is strong evidence to support child sexual abuse as one of the contributing factors towards pedophilia; adult sex offenders who reported being sexually abused were more likely to report sexual attraction to pre-pubescent children. In addition, Seto reports on two separate studies that found: 1) adolescents who reported being sexually abused were more likely to be attracted to pre-pubescent children than those who were not abused (using phallometric testing) and 2) previous child sexual abuse is correlated with having a boy victim for both adolescents and adults (pg. 105). However, these results need to be interpreted with caution because they both used samples of incarcerated offenders and convicted offenders may differ from undetected offenders or self-identified pedophiles by their number of offenses or risk taking behaviors. Furthermore, most children who experience sexual abuse will not go on to become pedophiles. Neurodevelopmental research appears to be a promising field to pursue; studies with small samples have found that sex offenders have lower intelligence than other offenders. One study at the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health in Toronto has found that pedophilic sex offenders were more likely to report head injury before age 13, confirming that development of sexual interests seems linked with puberty (pgs. 107–110).

Chapter six addresses the differences between incest offenders and other sex offenders. Interestingly, incest offenders diverge from other offenders in that they show less attraction to children on phallometric measures than other sex offenders and are less likely to be antisocial. Therefore, they are also less likely than other sex offenders to be pedophiles and to reoffend sexually or non-sexually against children (pg. 124). It should be noted, however, that incest offenders who also offend against victims outside of their family score higher on measures of antisociality and pedophilia. Seto explores various explanations behind incest offending and reviews studies on propinquity that reveal that men who spend less time caring for their children as infants and step-fathers are more likely to offend against children in their family. Theories of opportunistic offending suggests that men without access to their preferred sexual partners may seek out children if they are more available to them, just as heterosexual men in prison or boarding schools seek out other men in the absence of access to women. By definition, men living in the same home as children have more opportunity than those who do not live in a home with them (pg. 133). In situations of family dysfunction, girls in homes where there has been conflict or divorce are found to menstruate earlier, be more precocious, and may already be sexually active when step-brothers or fathers move in to their homes. Partner relationships that are fraught with conflict or where the mothers are emotionally unavailable may increase the opportunity for men to offend against their daughters (pg. 134). Finally, the theory of paternal uncertainty proposes that fathers who are less certain of their paternity would be more likely to initiate sexual contact with children in their homes. Seto provides many testable hypotheses for researchers in the field and provides appendices to this chapter on the risk management of incest offenders for professionals working with families as well as further discussion on paternal uncertainty.

Despite the fact that official statistics on recidivism may underestimate the actual number of offenses, not all sex offenders will reoffend in their lifetime (pg. 143). In chapter seven, Seto reviews the research on both clinical and more structured risk assessment tools. Unstructured assessments often have little relationship to factors that have been proven to predict risk and are therefore of minimal service. Seto names four risk assessment tools as having the best predictive validity for adult male sex offenders: the SORAG, VRAG, SSOR and Static-99 (pgs. 146–149). To date, there are no scales that have been validated for work with female or juvenile offenders. Risk assessments are based almost entirely on static risk factors (diagnoses or things that have occurred in the past), although many practitioners have argued for the incorporation of dynamic risk factors (e.g. alcohol consumption, attitudes towards offenses against children). Dynamic risk factors are useful in that they predict periods of time where the offender is more or less likely to commit an offense.

Clinical adjustments of assessment tools have found a few factors that appear to have limited validity in prediction: treatment completion, age at release for offenders (perhaps reflecting decrease in sex drive) and offense-free time. Seto explores the efficacy of combining the results of several scales and finds the practice not only lacks promise but is, at best, inefficient (pgs. 156–158). The author instead suggests choosing one validated risk scale based on what it is intended for and providing an explanation for this choice. Although the scales do not specifically measure risk for sex offenses against children, the Static-99 and SORAG have good scoring validity based on victim age and relationship to the victim. Resource B (pg. 221) continues the discussion of risk assessment tools.

In chapter eight Seto offers an extremely thorough review of the types of interventions that have been utilized with sex offenders and considers the debate about the methodological rigor of several meta-analyses of psychological treatment programs. He concludes that although some studies have found significant differences between offenders that have completed treatment vs. non-completers, the studies of a higher quality have generally found no significant differences between treatment and control groups, with some studies showing a negative effect of treatment on participants (pg. 170). He suggests that new studies with randomized control trial designs should be compared to “treatment as is” (pg. 199). Treatment that draws on already established programs for non-sexual offenders can also be used because many involve similar dynamic risk factors (also called criminogenic factors). Medical research has found that agents that suppress testosterone levels are moderately successful, but a major problem in studies is the high rate of noncompliance with medication. There are no criminal sanctions that have been proven to be effective in reducing recidivism, although incidence rates may be reduced due to offenders serving long sentences. Both primary and secondary prevention programs have shown promising results; however, the most innovative prevention programs (i.e. the Berlin Project in Germany) that target offenders with unreported crimes could likely not be introduced in North America due to mandatory reporting laws of any known or suspected sexual offense against a child. Seto finishes his book by arguing for high quality research in order to advance the knowledge base in this area. He compares psychological interventions to medical interventions in that not all psychological interventions are free of harm and need to be tested to ensure that they have: (1) the ability to effect change in a setting with high treatment fidelity and that (2) when treatments are implemented in the “real world” where clinicians have high caseloads, these same treatments are able to meet the stated goal of a reduction in sex offender recidivism (pgs. 200–204). Resource C (pg. 223) provides further information on sex offender treatment resources.

Michael Seto's book is an extremely valuable resource to policy makers, practitioners and researchers alike. It provides a synthesis of current research and an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses, all with the aim of improving practice and research in the field of pedophilia and sex offending. I would highly recommend it as an essential reference for anyone working directly or indirectly with persons diagnosed with pedophilia, sex offenders and the children that come into contact with them.

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