

Chapter 13

Perpetrators

“It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that you do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil.” ~ Judith Herman, M.D.¹

OBJECTIVES FOR THIS CHAPTER

- Learn types and characteristics of sex offenders
 - Understand unique characteristics of college-aged offenders and their crimes
 - Understand stages of violent crimes, including “grooming” victims and others for abuse
 - Examine dynamics involved in sexual abuse and contexts in which sexual abuse takes place
 - Become familiar with the most frequently asked questions about offenders and appropriate responses
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Knowing about sex offenders is critical to understanding issues that victims face. Offenders share many characteristics, including being profoundly selfish and refusing to take responsibility for their criminal behavior. Commonly, they hold beliefs that shape their attitudes, and their attitudes shape their behaviors. However, offenders differ in unique traits based on characteristics related to individual personalities, victim preferences, and in how they commit their crimes. Several models have been developed to classify, understand, and predict future behavior of sex offenders. Most research and literature regarding offenders has been done only on offenders who have been convicted, which is a small sub-set of the total population of individuals committing sex crimes.

Historically, people have focused the blame for sex crimes on victims. Such widespread victim blaming and condemnation does not occur in a vacuum. Offenders, their defenders, and many members of the public point instead to victims’ characteristics and behaviors as “proof” that victims are to blame: what they eat, drink, say, do, and wear; who they hang out with, and where they go.

¹ Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. Print.

Likewise, victim responses to sexual trauma are often misinterpreted (often intentionally) as inappropriate, over reactive, or even “crazy.” Leading trauma researcher and author, Judith Herman refers to such victim behavior as “responding normally to an abnormal situation.”² Other researchers and instructors call these victim behaviors counter-intuitive. For example, a victim may not want to believe that the experience was actually rape (often by someone they trusted), and might contact the perpetrator(s) to try to get an accurate “read” on what happened. A victim may also call to find out where the perpetrator is and what they are thinking (e.g., is the offender angry or planning to return). While the victim’s behavior seems unusual to the outside observer, it makes sense in relation to a response to a traumatic event.

The only thing that determines whether one will be a victim in any kind of situation is if a perpetrator is present. With that realization, let’s turn our attention to learning about the real cause of sexual violence, sex offenders.

CHARACTERISTICS OF OFFENDERS

Characteristics help us understand the primary types and motivations of sex offenders: their differences, similarities, and the dynamics that occur between offenders and their victims.

Similarities

Offenders:

- actively choose their victims based on accessibility, vulnerability and availability.³
- use tools such as coercion, authority, manipulation, emotional terror, and physical assault to try to fulfill their own needs.
- use sex to meet non-sexual needs. For example, they compensate for feelings of helplessness and vulnerability by feeling powerful when they abuse a victim.⁴
- often “groom” victims, family, friends, neighbors, and the community by normalizing questionable or inappropriate behaviors (e.g., giving gifts and trips, touching, wrestling, intensive tickling, hugging, and massaging) to gain compliance and create confusion and doubt.
- appear to be a good person, kind and helpful, good with kids, etc.
- do whatever they want, and then try to justify or minimize their actions to themselves and others.

² Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. Print.

³ Groth, A. Nicholas. *Men Who Rape: the Psychology of the Offender*. New York: Plenum Press, 1979. Print.

⁴ Groth, A. Nicholas. *Men Who Rape: the Psychology of the Offender*. New York: Plenum Press, 1979. Print.

The typical rapist:^{5,6}

- does not use a weapon
- is not a stranger
- uses instrumental, not gratuitous violence
- has access to consensual sex
- comes from any racial and ethnic group
- is not mentally ill
- plans and premeditates attacks
- uses multiple strategies to make victims vulnerable
- uses alcohol deliberately

Differences

Rapists do not meet many of the pre-conceived notions and myths about them. Individual characteristics, psychological make-up, life experiences, and personal choices (type of victims/methods) account for variability in offenders. Factors that account for most differences among perpetrators include: family issues, lack of socialization, distorted thinking, substance abuse, absent or severely restricted conscience (sociopaths), entitlement, and mental illness.

It should be noted that while many sex offenders blame their actions on their own maltreatment (severe physical punishment, sexual abuse, and/or neglect), these explanations do not excuse the perpetrator. That information can only help us understand some aspects of their crimes. Indeed, many perpetrators cite their bad childhoods as the cause of their deviant acting out. However, many people have horrible childhoods, yet grow up and do not choose to hurt others.

In 1978, clinician and researcher A. Nicholas Groth wrote an important book based on his work, *Men Who Rape: the Psychology of the Offender*. He developed a model citing three primary categories for rapists: anger, power, and sadistic rapists. Groth also identified two categories for child sex offenders: “fixated” (pedophiles who are always drawn to children, and “regressed” (those who act out due to a major stressor or for revenge).

⁵ Lisak, David and Susan Roth. “Motivational Factors in Nonincarcerated Sexually Aggressive Men.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 55.5 (1988): 795-802. Print.

⁶ Lisak, David and Paul Miller. “Repeat Rape and Multiple Offending Among Undetected Rapists.” *Violence and Victims* 17.1 (2002): 73-84. Print.

In a more recent article, Voller and Long described the “big five” personality traits in a normal population of college men who sexually assaulted and raped others.⁷ The big five traits are: (1) neuroticism, (2) extraversion, (3) openness, (4) agreeableness, and (5) conscientiousness.

STAGES OF VIOLENT CRIMES⁸

Below is one model that discusses various stages that offenders follow in sexually abusive situations.

Targeting the Victim

Offenders often look for victims who are:

- vulnerable
- isolated
- unassertive
- distracted
- in need
- using their hands (e.g., carrying groceries)
- using drugs or alcohol (either on their own or administered by the predator)

When the Perpetrator is a Stranger

They may test a potential victim by asking questions:

- “Do you know what time it is?”
- “How do I get to Main Street?”
- “Tell me, how does someone pick out a cantaloupe?”
- “Boy, hot weather we’re having!”

In Sexual Harassment Where the Offender Knows the Victim

Offenders use:

- flattery that becomes more and more personal

⁷ Voller, Emily and Patricia Long. “Sexual Assault and Rape Perpetration by College Men: The Role of the Big Five Personality Traits.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 25.3 (2009): 457-480. Web.

⁸ Melissa Bradley. *OmnibusWellness*. 2004. Web. <<http://www.omnibuswellness.org>>

- inappropriate jokes
- “accidental” touching (frottage)
- cruel or aggressive behavior
- hugs that are uncomfortable
- inappropriate sharing of personal/sexual information
- preliminary secrets

In Date Rape or Acquaintance Rape

Offenders use:

- flattery
- manipulation
- coercion
- minimization
- humor
- blame shifting
- defending
- covert/overt threats — physical or emotional
- previous emotional and physical violence
- repeated testing
- one- way “sharing”
- probing and personal questions/sharing that are past the degree of intimacy in the “relationship”

Grooming of the Victim/Potential Victim

Offenders often groom the entire system around the victim, including the victim’s family, community, congregation, and school system by looking and acting “normal,” friendly, and helpful. One offender said that he was anything the community wanted him to be: the “All-American boy next door,” someone who would give special attention to kids whose parents were busy or absent, who would even take them on camping trips. When he was arrested, the community formed a support group to help him with his legal fees and emotional support and spoke of how unfair it was to accuse the man. He admitted that he was guilty of everything he was accused of...and more.⁹

⁹ Miller, Karla S. Personal communication with sex offender inmate, Mt. Pleasant Correctional Facility, Mt. Pleasant, IA. 2007.

DENIAL, THINKING ERRORS, HARMFUL HABITS, AND ADDICTIONS¹⁰

Perpetrators of sexual abuse think very differently than non-perpetrators. Their minds and their lives are compartmentalized, creating cognitive distortion. For example, one clergy member was found guilty of abusing hundreds (if not thousands) of children. When asked how he could at once be a spiritual leader charged with the well-being of his congregation, while sexually abusing children, he said, “Oh, that’s easy. This [being a minister] is my day job, and being with children is my private life.”¹¹

Such cognitive distortions create immense discomfort and conflict within a perpetrator’s mind that can only be resolved by keeping conflicting truths about oneself separated, denying the conflicts, or admitting them and engaging in a sex offender treatment program. Those narratives are illogical, incredible and even bizarre to reasonable people. Yet, they persist.

There are many *predictable* cognition distortions and accompanying statements that are common among sex offenders. In a sometimes eerie way, offenders often repeat them almost verbatim. Below are many of the *predictable* cognitive distortions and accompanying statements that are common among sex offenders.

Types of Denial

- **Responsibility:** “I didn’t do it.” “It wasn’t my fault.” “She made me do it.” “I was drunk.” “I didn’t know what I was doing.”
- **Intent:** “It just happened.” “I didn’t want it to happen.” “Things got out of control.”
- **Harm:** “I did it but it is certainly not as bad as you think.”
- **Frequency:** “I did it, but only 2 or 3 times; not the 10 times she says.”
- **Intrusiveness:** “We only flirted. We didn’t do anything else.”
- **Fantasy:** “I did it but I would never really cheat.” “I *never* get turned on when I think about it.”
- **Minimization:** “I only touched her.” “It wasn’t a big deal.”

¹⁰ Information compiled and adapted by Karla S. Miller and Dudley Allison, 6th Judicial Department of Correctional Services, Iowa City, IA. Material adapted from sources including Sex Offender Treatment Program materials and William Pithers work with Safer Society Foundation, Brandon, Vermont.

¹¹ Miller, Karla S. Personal communication with sex offender inmate, Iowa Medical and Classification Center, Oakdale, IA.

Common Thinking Errors and Harmful Habits

- **Anger:** manipulates and controls others
- **Assuming victim status:** presents self as victim
- **Assuming:** believes they are so powerful that they know how others think and feel
- **Authoritative:** believes it's "my way or the highway"
- **Belittling:** ridicules others and sets them up for failure; makes fools of them
- **Blaming:** places responsibility elsewhere or to justify behavior
- **Credit for behavior NOT done:** says things like "I could've done a lot more," or "don't I get credit for the good things I've done?"
- **Diversion:** diverts the conversation to something more comfortable; changes the subject; brings up another problem; purposely misses the point
- **Entitlement:** may say "people *owe* me," "I'm special," or "I deserve the best"
- **Fact stacking:** states some facts but arranges the facts in a way to feel powerful or explain their behavior. For example, "My daughter came into my room and demanded to sleep with me. This happened the night I molested her." (Omits additional fact that a thunderstorm had terrified the child and the child was seeking safety and security from the adult.)
- **Fairness violation:** believes that everyone treats him unfairly
- **Fighting:** gets others to fight while standing back and watching
- **Grandiosity:** makes little things into great, important things, which changes the focus of attention
- **Helplessness:** acts helpless, incapable, in need of others, and unable to fend for or do things for self
- **Justifying:** finds a way for explaining the reason of things (e.g., "she wasn't my real daughter, just my step-daughter")
- **Keeping score:** may say things like "well, you did this and this," or "I've had to do more than you ever have"
- **Lying:** intentionally states things that aren't true or tells half-truths
- **Making excuses:** uses statements such as "I was feeling bad," or "no one understands or appreciates me"
- **Minimizing:** says things like "at least we didn't sleep together," or "at least I didn't have intercourse"

- **Pet me:** acts selfish and thinks only in terms of his needs; wants to be cuddled, noticed, and praised
- **Phoniness:** uses insincerity and apologizes with no intention of changing behavior
- **Playing dumb:** asks questions such as “what do you mean,” “what did I do,” or “what’s wrong with that”
- **Polarizing:** sees everything in extremes; says things such as “you can’t trust women” and “all women are bitches”
- **Positivity:** uses statements like “I’m okay, you’re okay,” and “no problem”
- **Projecting:** makes comments such as “if it’s true of me, then it’s true of you”
- **Pushing another person’s buttons:** uses information about another person’s issues or insecurities to distract, blame, anger, upset, threaten, or hurt the other person
- **Puzzlement:** presents self as confused while others try to figure it out for him so he doesn’t have to take responsibility for his behavior
- **Redefining:** shifts the focus off self (for example, the offender questions “why didn’t you do your assignment?” when the individual has done all assignments in the last three weeks.)
- **Religiosity/Philosophy:** becomes overly religious or existential, and makes statements such as: “turning it over to God vs. taking responsibility,” “miraculous change,” “making things ‘mystical’” or “who knows why people do the things they do”)
- **Secretiveness:** hides behavior and activities; leaves out important details to keep people from discovering information
- **Self-pity:** uses statements like “my family would be better off without me,” “nobody cares,” “I’m no good,” “I’m a terrible person,” and “nobody appreciates me”
- **Super-optimism:** has an unreasonably positive attitude when there is little or no reason to believe, or evidence that things are going to change for the better
- **Uniqueness:** believes he or she is so special that rules do not apply to them; they are “above” common work, goals, or laws
- **Vagueness:** responds vaguely and unclearly

Types of Addictions Common in Sex Offenders

Substance Addiction

- Drugs, including alcohol
- Food

Process Addiction

- Sex
- Relationships
- Drama; highly-charged emotional situations
- Chaos and confusion
- Fighting/arguing/bickering
- Risk-taking and danger

APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

Victims have many questions about perpetrators. Advocates can answer by giving them information about perpetrators that help them know that the responsibility of the assault lies solely with the perpetrator.

In addition to understanding the impact of perpetrators' actions on victims' lives, we can help provide some of the context for their experience and pain. Below are the most frequent questions and statements that we hear from clients and examples of appropriate answers regarding sex offenders.

It was my fault.

It is the offender's fault for choosing to hurt you. Nothing you did "made" someone sexually assault you, nor would you ever deserve to be treated that way.

Why did he choose me?

Only offenders may know why and how they choose their victims. Sometimes, perpetrators may choose someone who reminds them of someone else. They may choose a victim based on the victim's good qualities or other characteristics such as being polite, giving people the benefit of the doubt, trusting, being shy, vulnerable or accessible.

Is there anything I could have done to avoid being raped?

If you could have done something else, you would have. You did exactly what you had to do to survive. You evaluated your options with the information you had at the time

and chose the safest one(s). Being passive is a perfectly valid self-defense option, as are other responses to danger.

What if he comes back?

One cannot predict what an offender will do. However, when the perpetrator is a stranger, it is unlikely that he will return because there will no longer be an element of surprise, and he could be identified, and apprehended. If the perpetrator is someone you know, another assault is less likely for the same reasons that apply to a stranger. If the perpetrator is an intimate partner, there is a much higher risk of another assault. Safety planning is a good option.

Can someone you know rape you?

Absolutely. In fact, 85-95% of rapes are committed by someone the victim knows and often trusts. In addition to the issues involved in an assault by a stranger, there are feelings of betrayal of trust. Further, questions arise such as “if I can’t trust this person, how do I know that other people in my life can be trusted?” and “I always thought that I would be safe and protected.”

Has this guy done this before? Will he do it again to somebody else?

Yes. Sex offenders’ deviant attitudes, cognitive distortions and behavior patterns begin when they are very young and increase in frequency, intensity and deviance as they age. Offenders typically have committed sexual crimes before and will very likely do it again...and again. If the offender chooses to hurt someone else, it is not your fault. He is the only person accountable for choosing to hurt people.

I did what he said without saying “no.”

Offenders who intend to sexually assault someone do not listen to “no,” whether it is spoken or expressed non-verbally. Not saying “no” doesn’t mean “yes.” Alternatively, not saying “yes” does mean “no.”

I agreed to give him oral sex so that he would hopefully not ask me to do anything else or hurt me worse.

Engaging in oral sex as a possible deterrent against further sexual assault does not mean that any further activity was consensual. It means that you tried to control and minimize the damage.

- There are many similarities and differences among sex offenders.
- Offenders and those who do not want the offenders to be held accountable are largely responsible for perpetuating the notion that victims are to blame for their own abuse. Ignorance, misogyny and alternative agendas account for the rest.
- Offenders groom both individuals and communities to prime them for abuse.
- Rapists do not meet many pre-conceived notions or myths about sex offenders.
- Sex offenders are criminal thinkers who have many cognitive distortions to justify their behavior, making their thinking illogical and unreasonable.

FOR FURTHER READING

Groth, A. Nicholas. *Men Who Rape: the Psychology of the Offender*. New York: Plenum Press, 1979. Print.

Salter, Anna. *Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists, And Other Sex Offenders: Who They Are, How They Operate, and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children*. New York: Basic Books, 2003. Print.

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