

IN PURSUIT OF THE BEAST:

UNDERGRADUATE ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEX OFFENDERS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIETY, REHABILITATION AND BRITISH PSYCHOLOGY EDUCATION

By Craig A. Harper¹

Abstract

Positive attitudes toward sex offenders can lead to favourable treatment outcomes and with psychology students being among the most likely graduates to move into offender rehabilitation, it is important to investigate the attitudes of this group. Students from British psychology and non-psychology courses read vignettes depicting an adult and a juvenile committing a contact sexual offence on a child, and completed modified versions of the attitudes towards sex offenders [ATS] questionnaire. The adult offender was viewed significantly more punitively than the juvenile offender, but no significant differences were found between subgroups of participants. It was concluded that undergraduate psychology degrees do not go far enough to address some of the stigmatised views held by the general population towards sex offenders. Implications for media reporting, recidivism and psychology education are discussed.

¹ School of Psychology, University of Lincoln, Brayford Pool, Lincoln, LN6 7TS, UK. Contact: craig.harper90@msn.com

INTRODUCTION

The present study set out to examine potential differences between psychology and non-psychology students in terms of their attitudes toward sex offenders. This is an important issue, as those with a psychology-related academic background are among more likely graduates to be involved in the treatment and rehabilitation of sex offenders.

Who are sex offenders?

According to the Home Office, there are approximately 44,000 individuals who are subject to sex offending registration procedures in the UK, with around 37,500 of these living in the community (Home Office, 2011). Abel et al. (1987) report that many sex offenders do not meet the criteria described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR; APA, 1994) for paraphilia. They also found that sexual offending takes place throughout the life span, with the age range of their sample being 13-76. Over 50% of their sample were living with or married to a woman, and the majority of the sample reported having deviant sexual interests prior to the age of 18. The key finding of the study concerned the number of victims that sex offenders have, with the sample of 561 offenders amassing a combined 195,407 victims. However, it should be noted that the sex offender population is a heterogeneous group, containing rapists, abusers of children, internet offenders, voyeurs, and so on. One individual convicted of an internet offence, for example, the creation and distribution of sexually-explicit images of children (Sexual Offences Act, 2003) could be in possession of thousands of images, meaning that the statistic reported by Awad *et al.* (1987) can misrepresent the extent of offending in the average offender.

Risk factors for sexual offending

Mann and Shingler (2006) describe two schema theories related to sexual offending. The cognitive distortion model (Abel et al., 1989; Finkelhor, 1984) argues that sexual offending takes place once an offender has formed cognitive theories in order to overcome the internal and external inhibiting factors that would usually stop someone offending. It is suggested that these theories are formed after the offence has taken place in an attempt to rationalise the behaviour. Contrastingly, the information processing model proposes that schemata are formed as a direct response to trying to make sense of the world during childhood, when a child tries to make sense of “ambiguous or traumatic experiences where a rational explanation is not possible, given the level of knowledge of the child” (Mann and Shingler, 2006, p.175-176).

An individual’s subjective feeling of isolation has been suggested as a key variable in deciding whether or not an individual with dysfunctional schemata actually offend (Barbaree and Cortini, 1993). This claim has wide-ranging implications in terms of the way society as a whole approaches the issue of sexual offending, and calls into question the background research in formulating community notification policies, such as Megan’s Law.

Megan's Law is an informal name for laws in the United States requiring law enforcement authorities to make information available to the public regarding registered sex offenders,

with individual States able to decide what information will be made available and how to distribute it. Information usually includes the offender's name, photograph, address, and the nature of the crime they have committed. The information is often disseminated through public websites, or via local newspapers. At the federal level, Megan's Law is known as the Sexual Offender (Jacob Wetterling) Act 1994, and requires individuals who have been convicted of sexual offences against children to notify local police of any changes in their personal circumstances, such as their address or employer, following their release from prison. The notification requirement can be set for a fixed period of time, typically a minimum of ten years, or permanently. One contentious issue about notification policies is whether or not to include juvenile offenders (Cochrane and Kennedy, 2010). As feeling isolated seems to be a risk factor for sexual delinquency, Barbaree and Cortini (1993) suggest that making juvenile offenders register may do more harm than good by reinforcing these feelings.

Analysing the effectiveness of Megan's Law, Petrosino and Petrosino (1999) noted that the majority of offences are committed against people to whom offenders are known. This is a limitation of the notification system, with parents tending not to check the backgrounds of people they know. Edwards and Hensley (2001) echo the views of Barbaree and Cortini (1993), but extend that all sex offenders need social support in order to fully reintegrate back into society, implying that policies such as Megan's Law could actually facilitate recidivism. Levenson et al. (2007) sampled 183 sex offenders to establish their opinions about Megan's Law. Participants suggested that notification laws encourage better behaviour by creating a fear of being observed by neighbours, but that sex offenders feel ostracised and isolated in their communities.

The so-called "cycle of abuse" (Woods, 1997) suggests that childhood sexual victimisation is a precursor for sexual offending. The evidence for the cycle of abuse theory is far from unanimous, with prevalence estimates ranging from 4-60% (Awad and Saunders, 1989; Becker et al., 1986; Katz, 1990). Truscott (1993) reported that prevalence of sexual victimisation in juvenile sex offenders is double that of other young offenders. Worling (1995) investigated male juvenile sex offenders who victimised girls, and found that, when an offender reported being abused, the initial abuser was female in 71% of cases, suggesting that these offenders are seeking revenge for their own victimisation. However, Benoit and Kennedy (1992) found no connection between committing a sexual offence and being abused as a child, concluding that victimisation alone cannot account for sexual offending.

In terms of juvenile offending, many cases go unreported (Epps and Fisher, 2004), but published research focuses on the 85% of known juvenile offenders who are male and on how sexually deviant juveniles differ from juveniles who commit non-sexual crimes.

60-80% of juvenile sex offenders underachieve in education (Awad et al., 1984; Ryan et al., 1996), with common precipitating factors being learning difficulties and truancy (Fehrenbach et al., 1986). In addition, juvenile sexual offending is associated with increased levels of aggression rather than a desire for sexual gratification (Palmer, 1988), with a reported link with conduct disorder [CD]. Indeed, 50-64% of juveniles convicted of

a sexual offence meet the DSM-IV-TR criteria for CD (Becker et al., 1986; Hawkes et al., 1997).

Attitudes towards sex offenders

Hogue (1993) devised the attitudes towards sex offenders scale [ATS], an adapted version of the attitudes to prisoners scale [ATP] (Melvin et al., 1985) by exchanging the word “prisoners” to “sex offenders”. In the original paper, attitudes of police officers, prison officers, probation officers, psychologists and sex offenders were compared, and it was found that attitudes became more positive as the individual became more involved with sex offender rehabilitation.

Hogue and Peebles (1997) investigated the influence of intent on attitudes towards sex offenders, and found that attitudes were much more positive when the offender was perceived to have acted spontaneously as opposed to having planned their crimes. McAlindon and Shewan (2004) investigated the views of the general population towards sex offenders in relation to their victim choice, reporting that offenders who offended against children were viewed less positively than those who victimised adults.

A number of studies have investigated the influence of educational programmes on attitudes towards sex offenders. Hogue (1995) measured pre- and post-training attitudes of prison service employees from a range of disciplines. It was found that the training had a positive impact on attitudes towards sex offenders, and indeed prisoners generally. A six month follow up study found that this attitude improvement was still present.

Craig (2005) examined the effect of training on probation officers working with sex offenders. ATS and ATP outcomes pre-training found that non-sex offenders were viewed more positively than were sex offenders. Participants took a two-day training programme, learning about theories of sexual offending, working with sex offenders and preventing relapse. Although ATS ratings did not significantly change, in fact they slightly reduced, participants reported feeling more confident when working with sex offenders post-training. Craig (2005) recommended that future training for sex offender treatment facilitators should focus on improving therapeutic relationships and avoid communicating generalised stereotypes about the client group.

Kjelsberg and Loos (2008) observed significantly more positive ATS scores among Norwegian prison employees than in a sample of students. Lea et al. (1999) examined interviews with prison employees about their work with sex offenders and reported that 57% acknowledged that the sex offender population is a heterogeneous group. The remainder of the sample reported generalised “universal traits” (p.109), with one reported to have made reference to a need for power that runs through all sex offenders.

Church *et al.* (2008) developed a second scale to measure attitudes towards sex offenders. The ‘community attitudes towards sex offenders scale (CATSO) has four sub-scales within it, designed to evaluate respondents’ attitudes towards sex offenders’ feelings of social isolation, capacity to change, dangerousness and deviancy. The original authors claim that

the scale measures attitudes towards sex offenders more specifically than the ATS scale, although they acknowledge that research is needed to validate these claims. Findings from CATSO studies thus far have uncovered views that sex offenders are incapable of change and socially skilled (Church, Sun and Li, 2011). However, a recent study from Conley *et al.* (2011) found that rural probation workings had markedly unique attitudes, calling into question the validity of the CATSO scale's four factor approach.

There is a public desire for strict punishments and effective treatments for sex offenders (West, 2000) although recent press attention has been focused on the desire for punishment. It was recently claimed by the UK Supreme Court that it is a human right of a convicted sex offenders to be given the opportunity to appeal that they have been rehabilitated, and be removed from sex offender registration procedures. This was met with widespread political and public condemnation, with the government claiming that it would make the minimum amount of changes to current registration procedures in order to meet the new requirements. Marshall *et al.* (1993) suggest that sex offenders should be handled through a combination of treatment and punishment, whilst Koulianou (1985) found that both Greek and British students had a preference for a combined imprisonment and therapy sentence for sex offenders.

The nature of undergraduate psychology education

The majority of undergraduate psychology programmes in the UK are accredited by the British Psychological Society [BPS] as offering Graduate Basis for Chartered Membership of the Society [GBC]. This is an essential requirement for postgraduate psychology training courses, and those not holding GBC must undertake a psychology conversion course in order to fully fulfil the requirements of the BPS.

The BPS (2010) states that, in order to meet GBC requirements, 50% of a course must be comprised of teaching in the areas of biological psychology, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, individual differences, social psychology, conceptual and historical issues, research methods and the completion of an individual empirical project. Undergraduate providers must seek accreditation from the BPS by providing a clear programme specification. The BPS reviews each accredited course every five years.

The present study

The present study addressed three pertinent questions:

- Do attitudes towards sex offenders vary depending upon the age of the offender?
- Do psychology undergraduates differ from those studying in other disciplines in their attitudes towards sex offenders?
- Does specialising in different areas of psychology impact upon attitudes towards sex offenders?

Psychology programmes at the University of Lincoln were used for investigating whether or not specialising in specific areas of psychology influences attitudes towards sex

offenders. The courses on offer at the university are divided into four areas: forensic psychology, clinical psychology, single-honours psychology with no applied psychology specialism, and psychology with child studies.

It was predicted that adult offenders would be judged more punitively than juvenile offenders, and that psychology students would hold more positive attitudes about sex offenders than other students due to the nature of their undergraduate studies. In addition, analysis of sub-groups of psychology students was expected to show that forensic psychology hold the most positive attitudes, followed by clinical, single-honours and child studies students respectively.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample comprised of 178 UK undergraduates (98 psychology and 80 non-psychology), with 33 males and 145 females taking part. The mean age of the sample was 20.83 years (s.d. = 4.66 years). The sample of psychology students included 25 forensic psychology students, 25 clinical psychology students, 25 single-honours psychology students and 23 psychology with child studies students, all from the University of Lincoln. The sample of non-psychology students represented a number of disciplines and attended a range of British universities.

Participants were recruited through an opportunity sampling technique, with standardised emails being sent to students from the University of Lincoln. Students from other universities were recruited via similar means using social networking websites and online student communities.

As incentives for participation, first- and second-year psychology students received course credit, and were entered into a draw, along all other participants, to win a £10 gift voucher. All participants were naive to the hypotheses of the study.

Materials

Case vignettes

Two short case vignettes were developed for the purposes of the study, describing both an adult and a juvenile committing a contact sexual offence. The cases were intended to be as similar to each other as possible, to ensure that only the 'age of offender' variable was tested.

Attitude measures

A modified version of Hogue's (1993) ATS questionnaire was used to assess participant attitudes. This is a 36-item self-report questionnaire which asks respondents to state to

what extent they agree with particular statements. Possible responses are 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'uncertain', 'agree' and 'strongly agree', scored from one to five respectively. 19 of the items are reverse scored, and a constant of 36 is subtracted from each respondent's total score, giving a range of possible scores of 0-144. The scale has been repeatedly shown to have strong reliability ratings (Cronbach's alpha values of between 0.85 and 0.95; Ferguson and Ireland, 2006; Proeve and Howells, 2006). The modification of the scale took the form of substituting the term 'sex offender(s)' for the names of the offenders described in the vignettes, ensuring the 'age of offender' variable was measured.

Procedure

After signing consent forms, which included details of the task that they were about to complete and informed them of their rights, participants were given the first vignette, the order of which was rotated between participants. Half of the participants received the adult vignette first, with the other half being issued the juvenile vignette in order to account for counterbalancing effects. No time limit was imposed for reading vignettes. Following this, they were issued with the relevant ATS questionnaire for that case. Participants completed the questionnaire, again with no time limit, and the process was then replicated with the other vignette and questionnaire.

Participants were fully debriefed upon the completion of both questionnaires. This consisted of them being informed about the nature of the study, the aims and some sources of information about the topic area. Participants were invited to ask questions and thanked for their participation. Course credit was then issued (if applicable) and contact details were noted for the draw for the £10 voucher reward, signalling the end of the testing session.

Most non-psychology students (N=76; 95%) opted to complete the study via email due to their geographical location, and were given standardised instructions about how to do this. The remaining four non-psychology students followed the same procedure as described above.

RESULTS

Table one displays data referring to the “age of offender” variable. Descriptive statistics show that the adult sex offender example was viewed more negatively (mean ATS score = 68.44, s.d. = 17.6) than was the example of a juvenile sex offender (mean ATS score = 78.27, s.d. = 17.86).

Offender Type	Average ATS Score	Statistical Analysis
Adult offender	68.44	Mixed model ANOVA: F=84.78; p<0.001)
Juvenile offender	78.27	

Table 1: Analysis of the ‘age of offender’ variable A mixed model analysis of variance [ANOVA] found this difference to be significant [$F_{(1, 177)} = 84.78, p < 0.001$].

Table two presents the data referring to the “degree discipline” variable. For this analysis, the mean of each participant’s two ATS scores (i.e. the ATS value for both the adult case and for the juvenile case) was calculated, giving an average ATS score, which was taken to indicate each participant’s overall attitudes towards sex offenders generally. For example, if a participant’s responses equated to an ATS score of 65 for the adult case and 75 for the juvenile case, their ATS score would be treated as 70.

The data show that non-psychology students held more positive attitudes towards sex offenders (mean ATS score = 73.75, s.d. = 18.78) than did psychology students (mean ATS score = 73.03, s.d. = 16.89).

A mixed model ANOVA, however, shows the difference between the two groups to be non-significant [$F_{(1, 176)} = 3.1, p = 0.08$].

Degree Discipline	Average ATS Score	Statistical Analysis
Psychology	73.03	Mixed model ANOVA: F=3.1; p=0.08, ns
Non-Psychology	73.75	

Table 2: Analysis of the ‘degree discipline’ variable

Table three confirms the data collected in relation to the “degree choice” variable. For the purposes of this analysis, the adult and juvenile ATS data were averaged as described above for the ‘effect of discipline’ analysis.

The data revealed a trend, with clinical psychology students holding most positive attitudes towards sex offenders (mean ATS score = 75.28, s.d. = 17.55), followed by forensic psychology (mean ATS score = 75.05, s.d. = 16.96) and single-honours psychology (mean ATS score = 72.78, s.d. = 17.13), with child studies students holding the most negative attitudes about sex offenders (mean ATS score = 68.68, s.d. = 15.76).

Psychology Course	Average ATS Score	Statistical Analysis
Forensic Psychology	75.05	Mixed model ANOVA: F=1.002; p<0.395, ns
Clinical Psychology	75.28	
Single-Honours Psychology	72.78	
Psychology with Child Studies	68.68	

Table 3: Analysis of the ‘degree course’ variable

A mixed model ANOVA shows that there were no significant differences between groups of psychology students in terms of their attitudes towards sex offenders [$F_{(1, 94)} = 1.002, p = 0.395$].

Further analysis of child studies students’ average ATS scores uncovers a marked difference from the average ATS scores of non-psychology student. This difference, however, is not statistically significant [$t = -1.31, df = 101, p = 0.193$].

DISCUSSION

As expected, the adult offender was viewed less positively than the juvenile, but contrary to expectations, psychology students held more punitive attitudes than non-psychology students. The analysis of subgroups of psychology students also found that clinical psychology students held the most positive attitudes towards sex offenders, followed by forensic, single-honours psychology and child studies students respectively, which was approximately as expected.

The findings of the present study correlate well with the only previous study carried out with students. Indeed, the student sample in Kjelsberg and Loos (2008) represented engineering, teaching and art courses, providing evidence for the robustness of the finding that students are likely to score around 74 on the ATS scale. The importance of establishing this benchmark for average ATS scores makes it possible to compare the effects of training programmes over time. The average ATS score found in the present study is higher than that reported by McAlindon and Shewan (2004), who discovered that the average member of the public will score around 55-59, which may be indicative of the

higher education levels of the present sample when compared to the general public, producing increased tolerance towards offender populations.

Social implications

Data concerning the effect of the age of the offender seems to fit with the certain stereotypes. The ‘once a sex offender, always a sex offender’ stereotype, for example, has been reinforced in recent times by media reporting of high-profile cases of sex offender recidivism (Lowenstein, 2010). However, when a juvenile commits the sexual offence, people more hopeful views are endorsed. Smith et al. (2005) name this the “boys will be boys” stereotype, whereby juvenile sexual delinquency is attributed to experimentation as opposed to sexual offending. Nagin et al. (2006) assessed the American public’s preference for different sentences for juvenile offenders and found that participants were more willing to pay for rehabilitation programmes than imprisonment.

There appears to be a need to educate society as a whole with regards to sexual offending. The ‘effect of degree course’ data show that child studies students held the most punitive views towards sex offenders, even more so than the non-psychology sample. This is suggested to be symbolic of the attitudes of the social work staff that contribute to this particular course, and of the course content, which focuses on safeguarding children (University of Lincoln, 2010). It is argued that this content reinforces stereotypes about sexual offending and produces punitive attitudes. The prospectus claims that graduates often pursue careers in the social services (University of Lincoln, 2010), meaning that they will be responsible for identifying children who may be being abused by a caregiver. By adopting stereotypical views, the chances of social workers jumping to conclusions and wrongly identifying a child as ‘at-risk’ are increased, which could have significant ramifications for the children in question.

With all students in the present study holding almost identical views, it is reasonable to assume that sources external to their education are influencing attitudes. It is hypothesised that these sources are news organisations and social media, and as such it may be helpful to utilise the media as a form of social education. Media outlets have been accused of increasing public anxiety about paedophiles living on their streets, and have been implicated in influencing lawmakers in the UK and America (Levenson et al., 2007), with a former police chief constable accusing the Government of bowing to media pressure from a British newspaper to adopt a community notification in response to the abduction and murder of a child by a convicted sex offender (BBC, 2006).

Willis *et al.* (2010) analysed public attitudes toward sex offenders alongside desistance theory and found that current attitudes are hindering sex offender desistance. They cite stigmatisation, inadequate environmental conditions and sensationalist media reporting as key factors that precipitate re-offending within the convicted sex offender population. The issue of media reporting is particularly pertinent, with the findings reported within the present study supporting the arguments made by Willis *et al.* (2010).

Soothill and Walby (1991) describe the process whereby the national press construct the identities of sex offenders, referred to as 'seeking out the sex fiend'. They argue that the press suggest links between similar crimes in order to create the idea of a serial offender. This type of reporting is misleading, as multiple sexual attacks on strangers are the exception, rather than the rule. Once the television media begins to report on cases of this kind, it is argued that 'sensationalist journalism' (Soothill and Walby, 1991, p.44) is used in order to increase public fear and increase viewing figures. This adds to the national stigma related to sex offenders. The process can be seen in action through the News of the World's name and shame campaign of 2000, whereby the newspaper published the names and photographs of individuals that they claimed were sex offenders. This was widely condemned after vigilante attacks took place on innocent people who resembled those on the list (BBC, 2000). The publishing of names and photographs stopped shortly after, but this is just one example of how the popular media influences public attitudes and behaviour. Greer (2003) goes further than Soothill and Walby (1991) by suggesting that many journalists and associate professionals make increased effort to report sexual crimes in order to give the appearance of expertise in the area and enhance further their careers.

The present study supports the claim that community education and the reduction of stigma are key in relation to helping sex offenders fully reintegrate into society upon their release from prison (Edwards and Hensley, 2001; McAlindon, 2007), and plays a pivotal role in reducing the chances of recidivism. This education must come from media sources, as the current methods used to report about sexual offending seems to negate any influence of psychology education within a university setting.

Implications for rehabilitation

The attitudes of treatment facilitators are important to the success of sex offender treatment programmes [SOTPs]. Levenson and Prescott (2009) studied sex offenders' perceptions of the therapeutic process and found that sex offenders thought that therapist attitudes limited the effectiveness of treatment. Positive attitudes have been found to have been encouraged in a range of studies using different training programmes and samples (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1995; Lea et al., 1999). Weekes et al. (1995) studied correctional officers working with sex offenders and found that only 21% believed that sex offenders were treatable. The sample reported a need for further training in order to increase confidence in working with this population and improving their belief in the therapeutic process. Lea et al. (1999) found that correctional workers with little sex offender training tended to use more stereotypical statements when describing the population than those with more training. They reported that education was needed in order to improve attitudes and that this could improve the efficacy of SOTPs.

The arguments made in response to the data emanating from the present study could equally be applied to the findings reported by Lea et al. (1999) and Weekes et al. (1995). How is it possible to work in the field of offender rehabilitation whilst simultaneously not believing that the client can change? This is a question that has been much debated in the literature, but is still not able to be adequately answered.

Johnson et al. (2007) interpreted their observations of higher ATS than those reported by Hogue (1993) as a sign that society's attitudes towards sex offenders had improved over time. The results of the present study refute this interpretation, and indicate that the educated youth in today's Britain still hold relatively punitive attitudes towards this population. However, the present study does support the recommendations made by Johnson et al. (2007) that training programmes for SOTP facilitators should promote positive attitudes and reduce stereotypical thinking.

Possible implications for education

The present study indicates that the group of undergraduates that are most likely to move into psychology-related careers harbour similar attitudes to those who are not. A psychology background is essential for forensic psychology training, and it is therefore argued that the low ATS scores as reported by the present study could in fact lead to ineffective SOTPs in subsequent years. This leads to the possibility of increased rates of re-offending, fuelling media outrage at the way that sex offenders are able to walk the streets whilst they are still being a threat. It is argued that this cycle must end, either through the dissemination of psychological research or more responsible media reporting of what is an incredibly sensitive topic.

There are two main routes to becoming a chartered forensic psychologist in the UK (BPS, 2011a). These both begin with a student gaining either a) a BPS accredited psychology degree, or b) an undergraduate degree in any discipline *and* the BPS's psychology conversion course. When taking the traditional route to gaining chartered status, candidates enrol on a BPS-accredited postgraduate course in forensic psychology, followed by Stage 2 of the BPS's qualification in forensic psychology. Stage 2 training comprises of supervised practice and research that shows an ability to apply theory to applied forensic psychology, a process that can take a number of years. The second route is still being established in some UK universities, and is a professional doctorate in forensic psychology. Similar to current clinical psychology training programmes, these are three year full-time courses comprising of taught modules within the universities themselves, with the inclusion of compulsory applied placements. Both routes lead to the student being able to register with the Health Professionals Council [HPC] as a chartered forensic psychologist.

As previously noted, an undergraduate psychology degree is only accredited by the BPS if it fulfils the teaching requirements of covering specific domains. It is noted that none of the applied psychologies feature on this list, which could explain the results presented here. The literature suggests that education leads to more positive attitudes being reported and, as such, it is argued that incorporating applied psychology modules into the standard undergraduate psychology degree could, in addition to giving students a more rounded education, encourage more positive attitudes towards stigmatised populations. Psychology courses at the University of Lincoln consist of seven modules per year, with research skills training running in both academic semesters during years one and two, before being replaced by an empirical project in the final year. This leaves ample space in timetables for applied modules to be added to the curriculum should the BPS wish to include them, whilst still allowing institutions to tailor their courses to their staff's areas of expertise.

What is being suggested is not a complete overhaul of the current undergraduate system, but rather modifications that have the potential to produce psychologists who are more aware of how theories of normal and deviant human behaviour influence can be applied to the behaviour of what the wider society would class as abnormal populations. It is argued that psychologists not only play a professional role in society, but also a political one, with psychology-based research often informing government policies (BBC, 2010). This responsibility brings a certain power (Foucault, 1982), and with this power it is possible to influence the attitudes of people on a national level.

The BPS (2011b) suggests that 15-20% of psychology graduates go on to work in professional psychology. This statistic could be presented as evidence for a lack of demand for applied psychology-related information to be supplied through undergraduate education. However, it is suggested that exposure to some of these areas at undergraduate level would stimulate interest in them and inspire the next generation of psychology professionals. Educating undergraduates in areas like forensic psychology is likely to encourage them to speak to peers from other disciplines about such controversial issues as sexual offending, which subsequently could improve the attitudes of other students. Again, this potential improvement in attitudes would contribute to the required improvement in societal attitudes towards sex offenders.

Limitations and future directions

No measure of previous exposure to sex offenders was taken, and this could have impacted on ATS outcomes. Secondly, the ATS scale relies on perceptual self-report, meaning that the participant reports his/her own views. Due to the sensitive subject of the vignettes, participants may have reported more positive attitudes than they actually hold in order for their responses to appear less extreme. Indeed, participants could also skew results in order to live up to societal stereotypes and report more punitive attitudes to what they actually hold.

Future studies should investigate two areas. Firstly, if similar results are found in further analyses of undergraduate psychology students' attitudes towards sex offenders, this may be indicative of a limitation in the current structure of British psychology education. In this case, the suggestions made here could be utilised in a pilot study, when the effect of changing course content on attitudes towards stigmatised populations can be monitored. In addition, it is important to establish the extent to which media reports influence attitudes towards sex offenders.

Conclusion

It was found that adult sex offenders are viewed more punitively than juvenile sex offenders by undergraduate students. No significant differences were found between psychology and non-psychology students in terms of attitudes towards sex offenders, and choosing to specialise in particular areas of psychology has no significant effect either.

Increasing awareness of controversial issues confronting society is proposed as an important method of breaking the habits of this offending population. The role of the media cannot be understated in helping to achieve this aim, as also stated by Soothill and Walby (1991). The breaking down of stigma attached to convicted sex offenders is postulated as a key variable for improving efficacy of sex offender treatment, and ultimately for reducing re-offending rates amongst this population. In sum, Younglove and Vitello (2003) are correct when they state that 'community well-being lies in destigmatising the sexual offender label so that treating the underlying disorder becomes feasible' (p.25).

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