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“Othering” the Offender

Kieran McCartan, PhD, and David Prescott, LICSW

The public often thinks of offenders, all offenders, in one-dimensional terms (For example, “once an offender, always an offender”). This happens despite clear evidence that people who commit sexual crimes are a diverse population in terms of offence, gender, age, socio-demographic background, cognitive ability and/or mental illness (to name a few factors from an extensive list). If “ordinary decent criminals” (an expression used by paramilitaries in Northern Ireland to discuss non-paramilitary offenders, but is often expanded to cover way is seen as the mainstream offender population) can be a diverse population, then perpetrators of sexual abuse also vary widely in their actions, who they harm, the behavior-chain pathway they follow, and their risk for causing further harm in the future. This makes those who perpetrate sexual harm a complex population to predict, catch, define, understand, work with and [re]integrate.

Of course, painting all who abuse with a broad brush of constant danger can soothe our minds, allow us to see them as very different from us; in effect, this thinking makes it easy for us to “other” them. If they are the problem, as opposed to us, then they need to change and the rest of the world needn’t concern itself about the conditions that contribute to abuse, or our responsibility to prevent it. Too often, it is just as accurate to say that a six-pack of beer and a very bad decision are all that separate many university students from causing harm and ending up on the sex offender registry; but is that a conversation that we are truly comfortable having, it’s easier to “other”. Again, just as some people are truly high-risk, many more are less so; it can be easier, as [Tony Ward](#) has observed, to view them as “moral strangers” than as “fellow travelers.”

One-dimensional thinking about people who abuse means that we do not think about them holistically or consider their inherent complexity as individuals and the impact that this has had on their life course in general and offending in particular. Indeed, we don’t have to think about their families and other loved ones. This reductionist approach can happen



SAJRT Bloggers’ Profile
Chief Blogger Kieran McCartan, Ph.D. and Associate Bloggers David S. Prescott, LICSW and Jon Brandt, MSW, LICSW are longtime members of ATSA. We are dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

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across the board with all offenders, but especially with sex offenders.

Why does this happen particularly with people who offend sexually? One reason may be that we do not want to see them as being the same as us; society would just as soon see them in a one-dimensional frame as “mad”, “bad” or “sick” because that would mean that they are different from us, that they are easy to understand, and that the solution is simple and straightforward. It can be unpleasant to take a more nuanced view: everyone is a sexual being in one way or another, and research has shown that many of us have more [diversity in our sexual thoughts and fantasies](#) than was believed in the past. Indeed, there can be a place for moving beyond “why did he do it” to “what prevents more of us from causing sexual harm to others”? Just like everyone else, all people who break the law, including those who abuse others, are multi-faceted and complex with numerous different aspects, lives, levels of community supports, and needs.

The reality that sexual harm happens in many ways highlights the complexity of the perpetrators, their relationship with their victims, their relationship to their offending behaviour and how they manage themselves. Just as abuse is complicated, so is its assessment and treatment. And herein lies the problem: Just when our field is at a point where our assessment and treatment processes have never been more informed by science and the ability of professionals to share resources and ideas across great distances, financial conditions have worsened, and we have fewer opportunities to put our research findings and expertise into actual practice. In many cases, programs are increasingly turning to one-size-fits-all approaches in order to cut costs. This in turn creates any number of dilemmas: For how long do professionals have to acquiesce to under-funding of programs or providing treatment based on ideological principles rather than science before public safety becomes compromised?

In thinking about perpetrators of sexual harm in a reductionist way we undermine their potential for rehabilitation and successful risk management; we need our responses to sex crimes to reflect the complexity of those who perpetrate it, from risk to protective factors, and the process that contribute to those factors. By focusing on the complexity that is inherent in sex offenders, and in all offenders actually, we are better able to support their rehabilitation and reintegration. We are also better able to maintain a dual focus on client beneficence and community safety.