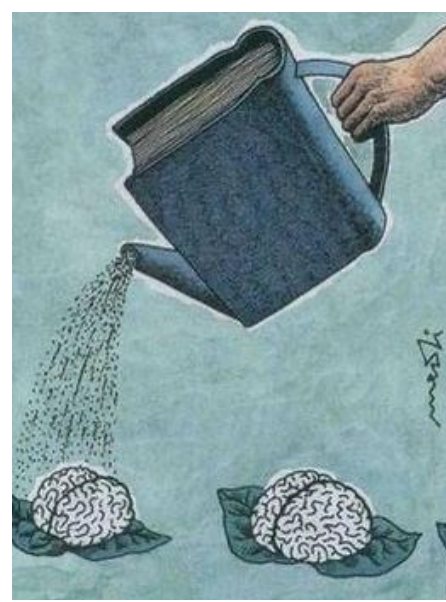


# EDUCATE & SUPPORT



## UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE MOTIVATION TO OFFEND

The last 20 years have witnessed an increase in the attention paid to crimes of sexual violence. Academic research, social services, and the general public have responded to the steady rise in these crimes by subjecting them to increased scrutiny and address. Professionals and paraprofessionals responsible for the processing, supervision, and treatment of sex offenders are under increasing pressure. This study investigated the perceptions and experiences of professionals and paraprofessionals working with sex offenders. Such research is important because these perceptions influence practice. Using a semistructured interview schedule, 23 men and women were interviewed about various aspects of their work with sex offenders for between 1 and 2 hours.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic content analysis.

The findings are discussed in terms of professionals' and paraprofessionals' perceptions of sex offenders and their offences and the manner in which such perceptions affect

Sexual offending is a learned social behaviour, sexual offending is the consequence of not being able to form "normal" social relationships, sexual offending is a symptom of deviance, and sexual offending is rooted in the need for sexual gratification. However, all participants did provide reasons for the perpetration of acts of sexual violence during the course of their interviews. In much the same way that the majority of interviewees asserted that there was no such thing as a typical sex offender, they asserted that motivation to offend sexually is complex and multifactorial. Four reasons predominated. Thus, the negative attitudes and abusive behaviour learned during childhood are seen to be implicitly reinforced by social norms and the criminal justice system.

Of the sample, 70% ascribed sexual offences to social learning. Different attitudes were expressed by professionals who had received training as opposed to those who had not and by professionals who had close working relationships with sex offenders as opposed to those whose contact with sex offenders was sporadic and indirect.

The second explanation given to account for sexual offending was that sex offenders are incapable of establishing normal relationships. Such attitudes tended to become manifest in relation to specific aspects of working with sex offenders. Furthermore, by adopting a view that sees sex offenders as universally suffering from mental or biological problems, one in effect abrogates sex offenders of responsibility for their actions. In the words of one interviewee, "Sex offenders are created, not born."

A proclivity for violent and unlawful sex was accounted for in terms of the "troubled backgrounds" from which many offenders come or, as one interviewee stated, "The feeling I get is that they've been taught the wrong sexual activity when they are very young."

Of these interviewees, 61% mentioned that sex offenders themselves had frequently been the victims of abuse, albeit not necessarily sexual abuse. For instance, some interviewees described how sex offenders have learned to see women as the passive providers of sex, to be used whenever men need sex.