

Course Reflection
CPSY 4040—Issues in Forensic Psychology II
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Introduction

“We are what we are because we have been what we have been, and what is needed for solving the problems of human life and motives is not moral estimates but more knowledge.”

Sigmund Freud

The purpose of this course, in line with Sigmund Freud’s thoughts above, is for its students to gain understanding, increase self-awareness, explore personal reactions, discuss further, and integrate the many areas of each knowledge point encountered throughout into our work and lives. Knowledge and learning require change, a compare and contrast of an initial state adapted into the current. Through this paper I will discuss three subjects that have changed my perspectives, as well as what I have been into what I am now throughout and due to this course. The three general subject areas that I will be focusing on include pedophilia, adult sex offenders, and juvenile sex offenders. Each tie into the other, and knowledge gained within and surrounding each has morphed my conceptualizations, misconceptions, and goals henceforth.

Pedophilia: Deviance, Desire, and Sexual Orientation

If you ask someone in law enforcement, and perhaps even beyond, what the worst crimes one can commit are, you will likely get similar responses along the lines of: murder, rape, and crimes against children. Growing up with both of my parents in law enforcement at least, this is what I came to know. Crimes against children were the worst crimes of the worst, and according to my parents and the ones that worked alongside them, perpetrators of such crimes were deviant and better off dead. While I have always worked to understand others and have steadily grown into my own differing opinions on many things through time and education, growing up on

stories of the horrendous things that people not only do to one another, but to children, gave me lasting pause. It was hard to hear stories of parents, grandparents, caretakers, family, and friends who had betrayed a child's trust with physical and/or sexual abuses, and difficult to want to even try to consider what lead these people to commit such crimes against a most vulnerable of populations.

I came into the master's in forensic psychology program with some small prospective idea of what I might want to end up doing and definitive ideas of what I would not end up doing. Work with perpetrators of sex crimes, and specifically sex crimes against children, was not something I had thought I would ever consider when coming into this program and coursework, and yet it is now something that I may very well end up in after all. This program and coursework have challenged me further than I already attempt to challenge myself, and has left me with questions that continue to change my perspectives and misconceptions daily. Are all sex offenders truly deviant, or might some be troubled and scared to get help? Can any individual truly help what it is they desire; must we not all be taught when and how to control our urges and actions? Is paraphilia and chronophilia deviant at base or does it depend? Is a pedophile a criminal outright, a minor attracted person, a sexual orientation?

It is my understanding now, under present and continued education and investigation, that pedophilia is not necessarily deviant, a sexual desire toward children is not automatically criminal, and while not definitively advisable, could be described at its base as a sexual orientation. It all depends, and it is the consideration of things from multiple viewpoints, I think, that best lends to solving these problems of human life and motives. As forensic psychologist Michael Seto (2012) once wrote, "our efforts to respond to pedophilia and the associated social problems of sexual child exploitation—through child pornography, sex tourism, juvenile prostitution, and child sexual

abuse—require a more compassionate and less discriminatory treatment of pedophiles” (p. 235). It is therefore imperative that individuals such as myself, who aim to work in the field of forensic psychology, work to transcend judgements and misconceptions into compassion, advocacy, and action.

Sex Offenders: Definition and Registry

The American Psychological Association (2020) defines a sex offender as a person who has committed a sex act or offense that is prohibited by law, subject to variation by culture and jurisdiction, such as forcible and statutory rape, child molestation, incest, prostitution, bestiality, sodomy, and forcible sexual assault. Under current federal legislation brought into place by various acts such as Megan’s Law, people who commit a sex offense are put state-by-state, collectively, onto the National Sexual Offenders Registry for a period of 15 years to life. It was my understanding coming into this course that the National Sexual Offenders Registry had a positive impact on sex offense specific recidivism and prevention, and I did not think much more beyond that. When I would hear the term “sex offender” I would immediately think of pedophiles and rapists, the “worst of the worst criminals.” One of my greatest fears in life is the chance that I could be raped, and studies show that is a real possibility, with the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2018) showing statistics that one in five women will be raped at some point in their lives.

While I still hold child and sex crimes to be among the worst crimes an individual can commit, it is my perspective upon why these crimes happen and how we can prevent them from happening again, or at all, that has shifted. I now choose to ask, “why?” and to continue beyond to seek answers. Why did the individual commit the sex offense? Were they cognitively impaired? Were they treated that way themselves a child, or simply never taught the “right and

wrong” of such actions? Were they brought up thinking women are things to own, rather than shown to respect and earn? While none of these reasonings or any others available should qualify as an excuse for committing a sex offense, each presents an idea of where we can find compassion, begin advocacy, and start action.

One action taken toward the prevention of sex offenses was the creation of the National Sexual Offender Registry. As important as it is for an individual to continuously obtain knowledge and adjust from who we have been to who we will become, it is also just as important for our actions to adjust along with us. Over time, the registry as currently structured in the United States has shown to perpetuate more harm than good, and yet, fed by media and fear, still grows in its breadth, encouraging international registry possibilities and registries for other offenses as well. Initial theory behind sex offender registration and community notification (SORN) focused on deterrence and opportunity reduction (Napier, Dowling, Morgan, & Talbot, 2018, p. 4). Studies since the creation of the public registry in the United States have generally shown only a small deterrent effect for first time offenses and largely show no effect on sex offense recidivism, with some studies even finding an increase in sex offense recidivism (Napier, Dowling, Morgan, & Talbot, 2018, p. 6). Unfortunately, SORN policies in the United States seem to be based on assumption and have yet to adjust to facts, simply creating an illusion of safety rather than safety itself.

In addition to discovering a certain compassion within myself for the offender, as well as a lack of supportive evidence for SORN, I have gained knowledge of other collateral consequences I had not previously considered. Sex offenders living in one area versus another can potentially impact property values, create additional stresses and work for law enforcement, and cause an increase in vigilantism (Napier, Dowling, Morgan, & Talbot, 2018, p. 10-11). Each

of these factors can affect the community in a negative way, and does not even take into account the additional consequences created for the offenders themselves. According to a recent SafeHome.org survey, there are an estimated 752,000 people listed on state sex offender registries in the United States (2020). For many of these people, registering as a sex offender for 15 years to life can create legal, emotional, and collateral consequences. Those registering as a sex offender have often already served their time, and are essentially being “double punished,” facing at least 15 years of labeling, restrictions, and issues with jobs and housing, family and community, targeting and harassment, and mental health problems stemming from anger, hopelessness, despair, and suicidal ideation (Ackerman, Sacks, & Osier, 2013, p. 35). All this, and there is additionally another category of people who have committed a sex offense yet unconsidered that stands to suffer consequence even further—juveniles.

Juvenile Sex Offense: Same, But Different

I consider the juvenile population to be one of the most vulnerable populations a forensic professional can work with. I also consider work with this population to be key to the reduction and prevention of juvenile and adult offenses alike. While I am extremely interested in working with juvenile populations and delved into this program at least partially due to a juvenile encounter, I had not considered all the caveats within juvenile offenses. Juvenile offenses are often the same as many adult offenses but, due to the considerable difference in perpetrators, are often handled differently. One offense, however, that I have come to learn is not treated differently for juveniles, is sex offense specific crime.

It was stated at one point in this course that half of offenses committed unto children are committed *by* children, and often, victims of child sexual abuse tend to continue on to abuse as well. It may stand to reason then, as I had personally considered, that work done with juvenile

sex offenses is key to prevention and reduction. However, as it stands, juveniles are placed upon the same SORN listing as adult offenders, and therefore suffer the same, if not a worse, fate for it. Apply all of the above mentioned negative factors to juvenile sex offenses—negative community impact and double punishment via housing, family, and community issues, targeting and harassment and mental health concerns—and then, on top of all that for juveniles, tack on some more.

In most other criminal offenses, court cases have noted juveniles' lack of maturity and concept of responsibility, as well as stating that these individuals as compared to adults are "less fixed," finding their developmental capacities to diminish culpability (Parker, 2014, p. 183). Given that "sexual exploration is a normal part of adolescent development," "juveniles are less culpable and less predatory than adults," and "juveniles are less likely to reoffend and are more amenable to treatment," it seems unreasonable given this perspective to subject a juvenile who has committed a sex offense to the potentially lifetime consequences and labeling of sex offender (Parker, 2014, p. 185-188). What would be reasonable is for the judicial system to aid in solving the problems of human life and motive, by taking a look at what the system has become and adjusting through knowledge from there.

Conclusion

My cohort and I began this course with likely more misconceptions than any of us would care to admit, but through this coursework and program were given the opportunity to gain insight and knowledge, improving and adjusting ourselves and our perspectives along the way. I have learned from beginning to end in this course that human sexuality exists on a spectrum more broad than I had originally conceived. Therefore, I have broadened my reaches of compassion, advocacy, and action to reflect such, and aim to continue to broaden further still.

References

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