

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



NEARI PRESS & TRAINING CENTER

February 2016 NEARI Press Newsletter

By David Prescott and Joan Tabachnick

"The Role of Situational Factors in Online Sexual Interactions"

AUTHORS:

David Prescott and Joan Tabachnick

QUESTION:

What is the impact of situational factors in adult-to-adult and adult-to-child/adolescent interaction in the online environment?

RESEARCH:

Emily Bergen, Anna Ahto, Anja Schulz, Roland Imhoff, Jan Antfolk, Petya Schuhmann, Katarina Alanko, Pekka Santtila, and Patrick Jern investigated the role that alcohol intoxication, sexual arousal, sadness, boredom, stress, and shame play both before and after online sexual interactions. The rise of the Internet and the various new technologies has opened a variety of new communication channels and new opportunities in live sexual interactions such as sexting and online sexual solicitation. There has also been a significant increase in the research of those who are convicted of illegal online interactions. What is clear is that the individuals who are convicted of these

offenses represent a diverse and heterogeneous group. The authors note that those convicted are most often men who are between 10 and 20 years older than the adolescent involved. The adolescent is most often female and aged 14 or older. The authors take note that previous research suggests most of the adults who have solicited adolescents are aware of the fact that their behavior is criminal and at least some of these adults reported being ashamed of their conduct.

The authors decided to explore the questions: 1) What is the immediate situation like for an adult who solicits a child or adolescent online? 2) Does it differ from the situation where an adult solicits another adult online?

The research drew the authors to exploring the impact of alcohol use, sexual arousal, and a set of affective states (e.g., sadness, boredom, stress, and shame). Alcohol was a key factor because of the research finding that alcohol may decrease an individual's risk to perceive risks, can diminish their perception of negative cues, and help to remove any sense of responsibility. Prior research also suggested that men who were sexually aroused were much more likely to engage in a variety of deviant, unsafe, and manipulative behaviors than non-aroused control participants. Last, research also indicated that sexual activities are often sought out to alleviate a variety of negative emotional states.

For this study, data was collected through an online self-report survey, completed by 640 adults with adult online sexual interactions and 77 adults with online sexual interactions with children and/or adolescents. The results showed that adults interacting with a child or teen reported higher sexual arousal and more shame before the interaction compared with adults soliciting other adults. And of these adults, men were significantly more likely to have had some online sexual contact with a child or teen than the women who responded. While there were moderate correlations between sadness, boredom, stress and shame in each phase, there was no association between online contact with any age group with educational degree, employment, relationship, or sexual.

The data of this study suggested that negative emotional states were alleviated during the interaction and at least temporarily. It was not possible to determine how long-lasting this effect was for the individuals. However, these alleviatory effects were associated with higher levels of shame after the interaction in both men and women.

A surprising conclusion and main finding of the study was that adults who do engage in online sexual interactions reported similar situational factors (e.g., alcohol, arousal, and negative emotional states) that did not change whether they engaged with adults, adolescents or children.

BOTTOM LINE: Men who do engage in online sexual interactions reported similar situational factors (e.g., alcohol, arousal, and negative emotional states) that did not change whether they engaged with adults, adolescents or children. Women were more likely to experience shame with interactions with children or teens.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS:

A colleague who had recently sent his son back to college once commented that there are many young men and women in the world who are only a six-pack of beer and a bad decision away from being on the sex offender registry. His point was well taken: negative emotions, alcohol use, and high levels of sexual arousal can be a potent mix. All too often, young people do not get the education and guidance they need. And with the increased use of and access to technology, online solicitation is getting both easier and more socially acceptable in many circles. While there is no question that many factors can contribute to a person engaging in illegal online solicitation, the three factors discussed by the authors can be part of assessment and treatment with this population. Although not a known risk factor for re-offense, it is vital that treatment programs also address client shame.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD:

Perhaps the most important contribution of this study is that it gives us ideas for prevention. There has been a great deal of discussion in recent years about how we might reach people before they abuse (e.g., on-line resources and support groups for people who are sexually attracted to children and don't want to act on that interest). These findings point to the importance of providing education and resources related to managing emotions, arousal states, and alcohol use when developing programs aimed at those at risk to sexually abuse. These findings also point to the high levels of shame endured by people who engage in online solicitation; thus, prevention efforts should take this reality into account when considering how they can reach people who are understandably reticent to look for help.

Abstract:

Alcohol intoxication, sexual arousal, and negative emotional states have been found to precede certain sexual behaviors. Using data from an online self-report survey distributed to adults (N=717; 423 men and 304 women), we compared adults with adult online sexual interactions (n=640; 89.3%) to adults with interactions with a child or an adolescent (n=77; 10.7%) on how much they reported being affected by the following factors surrounding the time of the interactions: alcohol intoxication, sexual arousal, sadness, boredom, stress, and shame. We found that those with a child or adolescent contact reported higher sexual arousal and more shame before the interaction, compared with those with an adult contact. In addition, the levels of negative emotional states varied when levels before the interactions were compared with levels after the interactions, suggesting that engaging in online sexual interactions alleviated negative emotional states, at least temporarily. The alleviatory effects, however, were accompanied by higher levels of shame after the interactions. Overall, adults that engage in online sexual interactions have remarkably similar perceptions of the situation surrounding these activities, independent of the age of their online contacts. Limitations of the study are discussed.

Citation:

Bergen, E., Ahto, A., Schulz, A., Imhoff, R., Antfolk, J., Schuhmann, P., Alanka, K., Santtila, P., & Jern, P. (2014). Adult-adult and adult-child/adolescent online sexual interactions: An exploratory self-report study on the role of situational factors. *Journal of Sex Research*, 0(0), 1–11. DOI: 10.1080/00224499.2014.914462

