How does sexual deviance develop?

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Impact Chapter

Sexual deviance can be problematic if it negatively affects health or quality of life, or acts as risk factor for sexual offenses. It can be necessary to address sexual deviance in treatment for people who suffer negative consequences from their deviant sexual interests. It can also be necessary to address sexual deviance in treatment of people who have committed sexual offenses to reduce the risk of future reoffenses. Current treatment may not be optimal. One of the most important reasons for this is that little is known about the development of sexual deviance. This thesis centered around the question: how do deviant sexual interests develop? An interplay of changeable factors seems to contribute to the development of deviant sexual interests, among which excitation transfer and a normative deficiency. Excitation transfer concerns the transfer of arousal from an initially nonsexual emotion (e.g., anger) to sexual arousal. As a result sexual arousal is higher in an emotional state than in a neutral, nonemotional state. Normative deficiency means that there is a lack of sexual interest in normative stimuli, for instance, “vanilla” sex, consent, or adults. Three concluding key statements were formulated.

1. Deviant sexual interests seem malleable, to some extent;
2. Emotion can increase sexual arousal to deviant stimuli;
3. A normative deficiency seems related to deviant sexual interests.

Deviant sexual interests seem malleable, to some extent. The roles of normative deficiency and excitation transfer designate that dynamic, changeable processes take part in the etiology of sexual deviance. These same processes could potentially be deployed to diminish unwanted deviant sexual interests. There is evidence that sexual deviance can be reduced by comprehensive cognitive behavioral treatment programs or general behavioral and conditioning approaches, but more research is needed to explore which specific techniques are effective. Improving emotion regulation and strengthening normative sexual interests are promising treatment directions.

Dissemination

The findings from this thesis are informative for a wide audience, including treatment providers and individuals with sexual deviance. The findings were disseminated via peer-reviewed journals, social and professional internet platforms, conferences, lectures, a podcast, and a magazine.
A PhD trajectory that is embedded in an outpatient treatment organization allows research and practice to continuously reinforce each other. Therapist expertise and client experiences have informed the research and its conclusions. The findings from this thesis regarding emotion regulation and normative sexuality have been input in the development of treatment programs and in training for professionals, to ensure that these are in the focus of attention in treatment of sexual offense behavior.

Knowledge about sexual deviance is not only informative for treatment providers, but also for clients and individuals with sexual deviance, researchers, judges, probation officers, policy makers, and society. We have tried to reach this wide audience in various ways. Each study was published in an international, peer-reviewed journal. The meta-analysis of sexual interest in adults in people with pedophilia (Chapter 7) went viral on r/Science3, a community of the popular forum Reddit. This was picked up by B4U-act: a community of therapists, researchers, and “minor-attracted persons”4. They reviewed our meta-analysis in their quarterly journal (B4QR, 2023) and invited us for an author response (Schippers, 2023). For each study in this thesis, a layman’s summary was distributed via LinkedIn to a professional network consisting of psychologists, sexologists, probation officers, researchers, and treatment providers. The findings of this thesis were presented at international conferences of the Association for the Treatment & prevention of Sexual Abuse (ATSA), and national conferences of ATSA’s Dutch liaison (NL-ATSA) and the Dutch Scientific Society for Sexology (NVVS). The research findings were also presented in various other outlets including lectures with psychology students, sexological therapists, or probation officers. Also, one episode of “De DFZS-Podcast”5 covered this thesis. Finally, the contents of this thesis were published as a magazine, IN PRESS magazine, to be accessible to a nonacademic audience.

Scientific Relevance

The current thesis is scientifically relevant because it provides a framework to understand sexual deviance, including starting points for further research. Also, it adds to the debate regarding the changeability of sexual deviance. Furthermore, we provided concrete research materials that are available for wider use.

The current findings are relevant to various scientific fields, as they result from research at the intersection between forensic psychiatry, sexology, general

3 https://www.reddit.com/r/science/comments/1015ymr/pedophilia_is_associated_with_lower_sexual/?rdt=61595
4 https://www.b4uact.org/
5 https://open.spotify.com/show/32aUbbWCvlhR81MCBU156i
psychology, and emotion psychology. As discussed in Chapter 2, many scholars have stated that there are no theories explaining the development of sexual deviance. This chapter also showed that there is no lack of theories, however, not many theories were of good quality. Nonacceptable quality theories, for instance, were not precise, generalizable, or parsimonious. We provided a useful framework to understand deviant sexual interests, in the form of an incentive motivational model. This model is already commonly used to understand general sexual motivation.

Additionally, this thesis focused on excitation transfer and normative sexual interests. Excitation transfer is a known phenomenon, but its application to sexual arousal mostly dates back to the previous century. The impact of normative deficiency on sexual deviance has been suggested before, but never systematically researched. These starting points can inform further research.

There is a discussion on whether pedophilia develops as a result of nature or nurture, and whether it is changeable. Our conclusions could be positioned somewhere in the middle of these extremities. This thesis concluded that changeable factors may contribute to deviant sexual interests, and that deviant sexual interests seem malleable, to some extent.

On a practical level, this thesis included a procedure for a follow-up study to excitation transfer (Chapter 5). We have carefully screened, selected, and tested film fragments suitable for virtual-reality environments, which are available for wider use in experimental paradigms with emotion induction. In Chapter 2 we devised a checklist for “good theories”, including criteria regarding, for example, falsifiability, precision, and generalizability. This was, to our knowledge, not previously available, and can be used by other researchers for similar purposes.

**Societal Relevance**

*This thesis has societal relevance because its findings can be used to improve treatment of sexual deviance. This can ultimately reduce negative consequences for individuals, victims and perpetrators of sexual offenses, and society.*

Besides scientific relevance, the current findings have societal relevance. More knowledge about the development of sexual deviance contributes to better treatment of people who have sexual deviance and people who have sexually offended. Sexual offenses can have severe and long-lasting negative consequences for victims. Additionally, the related costs and efforts of the judicial and health care
systems have an impact on society. By aiming to improve treatment, the ultimate goal of this thesis is to reduce negative consequences for individuals and society.

On various levels there are still many misconceptions about sexual deviance as well as sexual offenses. This feeds societal upheaval and stigma and may complicate access to adequate treatment. A common example is the idea that pedophilia is inevitably and intrinsically connected to sexual offenses. Such misconceptions are not only present in the general population, but even in probation officers and forensic professionals. More knowledge about sexual deviance will hopefully nuance these ideas. In lectures and workshops, we try to paint a picture about sexual deviance that is less black and white.

The forensic field does a lot of research to risk assessment that predicts the risk of recidivism. This important work is, unfortunately, limited to risk factors in people who have already committed sexual offenses. The research in this thesis explicitly focuses on a broader target group than that. Also, it dove into the origin of one of those risk factors, sexual deviance. The fundamental research in this thesis provided many new starting points for further research. On a practical, societal level, we aimed to translate the findings to clinical practice, with the ambition to improve treatment of sexual deviance.