

The impact of science-based knowledge on attitudes towards sex offenders

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Abstract

Background. The general public often holds negative attitudes towards sex offenders, which could result in an exclusion of sex offenders from society. Since lack of social support is a known risk factor for relapse, it is highly desirable that interventions target to reduce the negativity of attitudes against sex offenders. Therefore, the current study aims at exploring the effectiveness of an intervention based on the provision of in-depth scientific knowledge on existing attitudes and degree of dehumanization towards sex offenders in undergraduates that are expected to work with sex offenders in their future careers. **Methods.** A non-randomized experimental study was conducted, involving an experimental group ($n = 9$) and a control group ($n = 5$). In a pre- and posttest measurement participants' attitudes and degree of dehumanization towards sex offenders were measured. During the interval, the experimental group took a four-week course about sex offending, wherein in-depth scientific knowledge was provided, whereas the control group received no scientific information. Comparisons were made between the attitudes towards sex offenders, and between the degree of dehumanization towards sex offenders, between the pre- and post-test measurement within and between the participant groups. **Results.** A significant difference was found for attitudes between the pre- and post-test measurement within the experimental group. The degree of dehumanization towards sex offenders has not decreased during the intervention within both participant groups. **Conclusion.** This study suggests that in-depth scientific knowledge has a positive influence on attitudes towards sex offenders, but not on the degree of dehumanization in future professionals within the field of forensics and psychology. However, the study's small sample size suggests for more extensive research on the subject. Nevertheless, the present findings provide a method for the improvement of treatment and rehabilitation of sex offenders by influencing impeding, negative attitudes.

Keywords

Attitudes, dehumanization, rehabilitation, scientific knowledge, sex offenders.

Introduction

The term 'sex offender' usually evokes a lot of aversion in society. In general sex offenders are viewed as senseless and repetitive in sexually offending behaviour (Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements & Sun, 2008; Kleban & Jeglic, 2011; Lea, Auburn & Kibblewhite, 1999). Types of sexual offending are various. Examples are child molestation, paedophilia, rape and exhibitionism (Sample & Bray, 2006).

Attitudes towards sex offenders

As a reaction to the violating sexual behaviour of offenders, attitudes towards them tend to be highly negative. For example, the general public thinks that sex offenders do not deserve treatment and should be punished by incarceration (Church et al., 2008; Kleban & Jeglic, 2011). Attitudes reflect the way people think and feel about others, and expresses a positive or negative tendency towards another being (Johnson, Hughes & Ireland, 2007).

Whereas positive attitudes towards another person leads to positive behaviour towards this person, negative attitudes cause negative behaviour. In the case of sex offenders it is common that known offenders are (actively) excluded from society. They often lack social support, a job and integration in the neighbourhoods they live in (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). In the United States of America residence restrictions for known sex offenders were implemented in several states and municipalities in order to reduce reoffending. Residence restriction means that a child sex offender is not allowed to seek residence within 1.000 to 2.500 feet of schools, playgrounds and other facilities often visited by children (Huebner et al., 2014). This generally received great support from within society. However, proof for reduction of reoffending is missing (Huebner et al., 2014; Jeglic, Mercado & Levenson, 2011). Even though the behaviour from society is understandable considering the vicious crimes sex offenders committed, it is highly undesirable. The restrictions have shown to increase isolation, lack of social support and shame of sex offenders (Huebner et al., 2014; Jeglic et al., 2011). Subjective distress, for instance stemming from social exclusion, can increase the risk for a new sexual offense, also referred to as relapse or recidivism, since sex offenders experience more deviant sexual urges or fantasies when they are (emotionally) agitated (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Viki, Fullerton, Raggett, Tait & Wiltshire, 2012). Additionally, social support can function as a factor to prevent relapse (Schönberger & Kogel, 2012).

Levels of reoffending for all sex offenders range from 0% to over 50% (Furby, Weinrott & Blackshaw, 1989). In comparison to non-sexual offenders, recidivism rates are relatively low. However, recidivism rates for sex offenders are highly overestimated by the general public (Sample & Bray, 2006). These existing prejudices appear difficult to dismantle (Church et al., 2008).

Professional's attitudes

Attitudes towards sex offenders are generally more positive among professionals working in the forensic field compared to the general population. However, professionals are often torn between the stigmatizing, intolerant and condemnatory norm held by the general public, and demonstrating tolerance and understanding towards sex offenders within their working relationship with them (Lea et al., 1999). This could possibly lead to a negative influence on attitudes held by professionals, which is highly undesirable, since professionals working in the forensic field can play a major role in the prevention of relapse of a sex offender (Kleban & Jeglic, 2011). Professionals' attitudes about sex offenders affect their work with an offender (Craig, 2005; Lea et al., 1999). This is especially true for attitudes reflecting on the ability of an offender to change their behaviour; they play a central role in the professional's influence on an offender's behaviour (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1993). Specifically, negative attitudes could negatively influence treatment results and could, thereby, inhibit rehabilitation of a sex offender. Although professionals' attitudes on sex offenders are more positive compared to attitudes held by the general public, the term 'positive' should be used with care: it is better to say that professionals' attitudes against sex offenders are less negative, rather than saying they are positive (Church et al., 2008).

Since attitudes against sex offenders held by professionals can have a major influence on treatment success in working with sex offenders, it is important to look for ways to train (future) professionals in working with this target group. Craig (2005) pointed out that professional training is essential for successful implementation of therapy for sex offenders. Furthermore, a study performed by Lea et al. (1999) concluded that attitudes towards sex offenders among professionals were most negative for those professionals who did not receive any specialist training. As research has shown that training and experience in working with sex offenders has a positive influence on attitudes held against this group (Church et al., 2008; Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1993; Kleban & Jeglic, 2011; Lea et al., 1999), thorough knowledge about sex offenders seems to be an important influential factor in changing attitudes. In order to confirm this hypothesis, more research needs to be done.

Research objective

This present study focuses on the influence of in-depth scientific knowledge on existing attitudes held by undergraduates. Participants are selected based on their probability to be working with sex offenders in their future careers. For this reason, the selected participants are all students within the field of (forensic) clinical psychology. The aim of the study is to investigate whether scientific knowledge can play a role in positively changing attitudes towards sex offenders. This is important, because, even though recidivism rates are relatively low among sex offenders, any sex crime that can be prevented is worth the effort, since a sexual offense can cause serious psychological harm for the victim (Hogue & Peebles, 1997; Ward & Beech, 2006). In the Netherlands, where the present study will be conducted, almost 7000 sex crimes were registered by the police in 2002. From 1985 to 2002 the number of sex crimes increased with over 40%, from 4800 crimes to 7000. It is likely that these numbers are an underestimation of the true extent of the situation, since not all victims of sexual offenses report the crime (Brouwers & Smit, 2005). Thus, even though recidivism rates for sexual offending are highly overestimated, there is still scope for improvement.

The main research question for this study is; *“Does in-depth scientific knowledge have an influence on existing attitudes towards sex offenders?”*. The hypotheses for this study can be summarized as follows; Foremost, all participants are expected to show (relatively) negative attitudes towards sex offenders at the start of the study (hypothesis 1). Moreover, the attitudes of participants of the experimental group are expected to change positively after receiving in-depth scientific knowledge about sex offenders (hypothesis 2).

Since professionals' attitudes concerning the ability of a sex offender to rehabilitate could influence treatment results (Craig, 2005; Hogue 1993), this study places an additional emphasis on the influence of in-depth knowledge on rehabilitation-related attitudes.

Because a high degree of dehumanization (i.e. a person is not viewed as an individual with its own identity; Viki et al., 2012) towards sex offenders is associated with less support for rehabilitation (Viki et al., 2012), this study also examines a possible association between the degree of dehumanization and attitudes towards sex offenders. The focus is placed on the association between attitudes and animal-like dehumanization because sex offenders are regularly associated with animal-like behaviour (Viki et al., 2012). Dehumanized individuals frequently undergo ethical or psychological rejection, or condescension (Haslam, 2006). It is expected that the degree of dehumanization towards sex offenders

is relatively high among participants at the start of this study; research indicated that the degree of dehumanization is higher among people who had little or no previous contact with sex offenders (Viki et al., 2012), as it is expected that participants included in the current study have had no or only little contact with sex offenders. This degree is expected to be decreased at the end of the study among participants in the experimental group, who will receive in-depth scientific knowledge about sex offenders.

Methods

Participants

Fourteen female students from Maastricht University participated in this study; nine students studying Forensic Psychology and five students studying Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience, Psychopathology track. The ages of these students were between twenty-one and twenty-five years old ($M = 23$, $SD = 1.20$). All data was processed confidentially through the use of anonymous participant numbers. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee Psychology (ECP) of Maastricht University.

Study design and measures

The study had a non-randomized experimental design, including a pre- and post-test measurement. The Forensic Psychology students formed the experimental group, whereas the Research Master students formed the control group.

The pre- and post-test measurements consisted of the completion of three online questionnaires, namely the 'Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale' (SDS) (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), the 'Attitudes Towards Sex offenders scale' (ATS) (Hogue, 1993) and the 'Dehumanization Scale' (DS) (Viki et al., 2006). The Marlowe-Crown Social Desirability Scale was used to check for socially desirable answering on the ATS and DS. The Attitudes Towards Sex offenders scale measured existing attitudes towards sex offenders. This questionnaire was also used to measure the sex-offender-rehabilitation-related attitudes of participants. The Dehumanization Scale measured the degree of dehumanization participants held against sex offenders.

The pre-test measurement also included a short questionnaire in which participants were asked about their demographic personal information and their previously gained knowledge about- and experience in working with sex offenders, since the variables may bias the research outcomes. The pre-test measurement took place within a range of three days, after which the intervention took place.

The intervention included a scientific four-week course about sex offenders. Subjects such as types of sex offending, aetiology of sex offending and risk assessment were covered in the course (Maastricht University, 2015), which was only taken by participants from the experimental group as it was part of their masters' programme. The control group received no scientific information about sex offenders during these four weeks.

After the intervention ended, the post-test measurement took place. All participants filled in the questionnaires within a range of five days.

Results

All data was analyzed using SPSS version 21.0. An alpha was considered significant at $\alpha = .05$ or lower. Because the number of participants for this study was low, all data was analysed using non-parametric tests.

No statistically significant difference was noted for the attitudes towards sex offenders, based on ATS scores, between the participant groups (experimental; $M = 131.44$, $SD = 10.68$, control; $M = 121.20$, $SD = 15.34$) ($p = .190$). For the post-test measurement, a between-group difference was found (experimental; $M = 138.11$, $SD = 10.25$, control; $M = 119.40$, $SD = 15.16$) ($p = .029$). This emphasizes the finding that there is a statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-test measurement (within-group difference) for the experimental group ($p = .033$), while no such difference was found for the control group ($p = .345$).

As for the influence of the intervention on rehabilitation-related attitudes, a change seemed to have occurred for the experimental group between the pre- and post-test measurement ($p = .017$), suggesting more positive attitudes towards rehabilitation for sex offenders at the end of the intervention. Within the control group, no difference was found between the pre- and post-test measurement ($p = .317$).

Analyses showed that the intervention had no statistically significant effect on the degree of dehumanization towards sex offenders for the experimental group ($p = .102$) and the control group ($p = .713$). Furthermore, the degree of dehumanization against sex offenders appeared not to be related to existing attitudes towards sex offenders for the pre-test measurement (experimental; $r_s = -.367$, $p = .332$, control; $r_s = -.649$, $p = .236$) and for the post-test measurement (experimental; $r_s = .312$, $p = .414$, control; $r_s = -.872$, $p = .054$). The changes in scores on the Attitudes Towards Sex offenders scale and Dehumanization scale

between the pre- and post-test measurement were also not correlated (experimental; $r_s = -.647, p = .059$, control; $r_s = -.821, p = .089$).

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of the current study was to explore the effectiveness of an intervention based on the provision of in-depth scientific knowledge on existing attitudes and degree of dehumanization towards sex offenders in students that are expected to work with sex offenders in their future careers.

The results of this study confirm the hypothesis that in-depth scientific knowledge has a positive influence on attitudes towards sex offenders. That is, existing attitudes towards sex offenders, measured with the ATS, changed significantly within the experimental group throughout the intervention. No such change occurred for the control group, which received no scientific information about sex offenders during the study. This outcome is positive, since positive attitudes towards sex offenders can prevent social exclusion of an offender, and can, therefore, reduce the risk for relapse (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). Specifically, attitudes held by professionals working in a therapeutic setting with sex offenders can strongly influence treatment results (Craig, 2005; Lea et al., 1999). Moreover, analyses concluded that rehabilitation-related attitudes became more positive for the experimental group during the four-week scientific intervention. These attitudes did not change within the control group. Thus, analyses concluded a positive effect has occurred during the four weeks of the experiment. It is an important finding that knowledge can positively change the perspectives future professionals have on rehabilitation of a sex offender, because this may lead to increased rehabilitation success when the findings are implemented in practice, and, following this, lower rates of reoffending for sexual offending.

The degree of dehumanization against sex offenders, measured with the DS, did not seem to correlate with attitudes towards sex offenders. The insufficiency of meaningful results might be caused by the small number of participants included in this study. Another explanation is that the participants might ascribe human-like cognitive abilities to sex offenders, as they might view sex offenders as people who knowingly act on their desires. This makes a sex offender less animal-like, so less dehumanized, since an animal is unable to plan and knowingly disguise any behaviour, while sex offenders, with their human-unique cognitive capabilities, are able to reflect on their (planned) behaviour (Costello & Hodson, 2009; Waytz, Epley & Cacioppo, 2010).

Experience did not prove itself to be a significant influence on existing attitudes measured at the pre-test measurement and on the difference in ATS scores between the pre- and post-test measurements. Considering that out of all participants only two participants declared to have gained working experience with sex offenders, the sample may not have been sufficient to verify the previously mentioned hypothesis.

Previously gained knowledge did not show to have affected existing attitudes about sex offenders, but the differences in ATS scores between the two moments of measurement did significantly differ between participants with previously gained knowledge and participants without former knowledge. Looking more closely at the gathered data, these outcomes can be explained by the unequal balance between the participant groups based on the state of knowledge at the start of the study. Only participants from the experimental group confirmed to have gained knowledge about sex offenders prior to the experiment in this study. The pre-test measurement confirmed that there was no significant difference between the participant groups for ATS scores at baseline, so knowledge can be ruled out as an influential factor for attitudes based on ATS scores. Thus, the statistical difference found for the differing ATS scores for all participants between the pre-test measurement and post-test measurement can, for this study, be explained by a significant experimental effect, not an effect of knowledge.

A possible influence of socially desirable answering on the ATS and DS scores was explored, but no significant results were found, suggesting that all participants filled in the questionnaires truthfully.

In conclusion, the research question for this study, *“Does in-depth scientific knowledge have an influence on existing attitudes towards sex offenders?”*, was positively affirmed. Statistical analyses showed significant differences in attitudes towards sex offenders for the experimental group between the pre-test measurement and the post-test measurement, and it is probable that this is due to an experimental effect, as the attitudes of the control group did not change during the weeks of the intervention.

Despite the expectations, the hypothesis stating that the degree of dehumanization held against sex offenders is related to attitudes towards these offenders was not confirmed by the present dataset. No significant change was detected in the degree of dehumanization in DS scores for any participant group. Thus, features associated with dehumanization, such as a lack of cognitive abilities (e.g. reflection) do not necessarily seem to be associated

with negative appraised behaviour like sex offending, and with attitudes following this appraisal.

The study outcomes are relevant in the prevention of relapse by sex offenders. Even though further research is needed to provide more evidence of the efficacy of science-based knowledge as an influential factor on attitudes, the expectations are promising. Scientific knowledge may contribute to the education and training of future professionals in various working fields associated with (previously) convicted sexual offenders.

Role of the student

N.M.G. Peulen was a third year bachelor Health Sciences student at the time of the study. She worked under the supervision of Dr. L. Raymaekers. The research question and hypotheses were proposed by the supervisor, as well as the research design. The execution of the study measurements, statistical analyses, formulation of the conclusion and the writing were done by the student.

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