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# Influence Of Social Learning Theory On Male Sexual Offenders

Albert Bandura (1977) is a social psychologist that has created the social learning theory. Bandura explains social learning theory as people learning, by observing others and how they form new behaviours, attitudes, and values. He also created four components that are the main principles for observational learning such as attention, retention, motor reproduction and motivation. Social learning theory can be used to explain physical sexual offending against adult victims. The focus will be on male offenders against both male and female victims, in a physical manner.

Statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that sexual assault has increased by 19% in 2013-2014 and that 93% of offenders are male (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013-14). Thus, recognising the importance of understanding the origins of such offence and its possible predispositions. Many studies support various themes that have derived from this context such as the environmental influences consisting of childhood experiences and the impact of media on the offender. These themes help explain the mentality of the offender and by applying the social learning theory the reasons behind their sex offending can also be explained.

## Environmental Influences

Childhood sexual abuse and usage of sexually aggressive pornography are two factors that have been suggested to influence an individual's thinking and behaviour to later commit sexual offences (Seto, Maric, & Barbaree, 2001).

## Childhood Sexual Abuse

The focus on the gender of offenders has been specified to male, and this is due to the majority of offenders being male (Stinson, Sales, & Becker, 2008; Berliner & Elliot, 2002). Some studies suggest that offenders do not have to have been sexually abused as a child to commit sexual offences later on in their adult life (Putnam, 2003; Berliner & Elliot, 2002). On the contrary, other studies suggest otherwise (Craissati, McClurg, & Browne, 2002; Jonson-Reid & Way, 2001). Social learning theory suggests that sexually abused children do proceed to learn from these behaviours and they are much more likely to carry out sexual abuses when they become older (Seto & Lalumiere, 2010).

By applying the social learning theory researchers have found the reason why sexually abused children imitate the same offence when they grow up, and that is due to these children internalizing their thoughts and beliefs (Burton, Miller, & Schill 2002; Hummel, Thomke, Oldenburger, & Specht 2000). The same researchers have found that the children's thinking consists of believing the abuse to be 'normal', pleasurable or happening with a person they believe to love them. This makes it more likely for them to grow up believing the abusive act to be less harmful and more pleasurable for the victim. By having the social learning theory be applied to an offender's past, it became possible to see one portion that explains sexual

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offending by males. Beside childhood trauma, there is one more prominent issue that adds to the abusive behaviour of the offender, and that is pornography.

## **Impact of Media**

In a study by Seto, et al. (2001) it suggests that pornography can be used by offenders as a model to demonstrate sexually aggressive behaviour and to be further encouraged to engage in behaviours that they view in the videos. Another study explains that sexually violent porn videos show men or women in degrading positions that are forced into sex, but the actors demonstrate sexual pleasure (Marshall, 1988). It is also suggested that an offender's repeated exposure to such videos can decrease their empathy toward the victim, internalize rape myths and have an increase in their violence and hostility (Marshall, 1988).

From a social learning theory perspective depending on the reinforcement in the learning process an offender's abusive behaviour could possibly be increased in their future (Seto, et al., 2001). Another study also suggests that depending on porn actor's demonstration of pleasure in the video, and if other people in society deem watching said video as acceptable, then the offender is even more inclined to view the sexually aggressive acts as positive and to have more of a desire to imitate such acts (Allen, D'alessio, & Brezgel, 1995). This will be dependent on the offender's evaluation of the video and the rewards or reinforcements received by the actor that is considered a model, and how likely the offender finds himself is receiving the same rewards or reinforcements through similar acts (Bandura, 1977). There is no direct link found between rape and pornography, but empirical evidence suggests that it still is the main factor in changing the attitudes and beliefs of some men and increasing their sexual aggression (Seto, et al., 2001; Marshall, 1988).

## **The Conceptualisation of Social Learning Theory**

Akers and Sellers (2004) are researchers who have developed four components within the social learning theory consisting of differential association, differential reinforcement, definitions and imitation. These researchers explain that differential association is when an individual has an association with others who engage in certain behaviours and thus becomes influenced to imitate the actions. There are two sources from which the individual can be influenced of and that is primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of family and friends while secondary sources consist of a larger range of people, such as people of community e.g., teachers, neighbours (Akers & Sellers, 2004). This can explain sex offenders, as by associating themselves with others of similar interests, they expose themselves to such behaviours. Primary sources leave a more significant impact on the individual than their secondary sources, and the longer the duration of contact the more influenced they can become (Akers & Sellers, 2004).

Differential reinforcement is the way an individual anticipates their rewards or punishments, and the impact that has on their continued behaviour (Akers & Sellers, 2004). In case of a sex offender, by getting a sexual reward from their act it keeps positively reinforcing their behaviour to continue as well as not having been caught yet by the authorities. Definitions is what an individual believes to be right or wrong behaviour, the morals they have and the way they rationalize a situation (Akers & Sellers, 2004). Imitation is learned behaviour by watching others demonstrate a behaviour or an act, then imitating it (Akers & Sellers, 2004). These four components can further explain beside Bandura's definition of what a social learning theory is.

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## Conclusion

Social learning theory is able to give an explanation of how humans learn through observations, modelling, and imitating, most famously from the researcher Bandura and researchers Akers and Sellers. It cannot fully explain how humans are able to internalize all of their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Studies have shown that just because an individual has had experiences of sexual abuse during their childhood it does not necessarily mean they will become sex offenders later in their future. Although many have been impacted by their trauma and by having had their sexual abuse internalized as normal, it may have led them to reproduce the same behaviour to others. Various studies have shown aggressive pornography as a factor that impacts some men's thinking and behaviour, as well as increasing their sexual aggressiveness.

There are many empirical evidences that have relayed sexual offence as a learned behaviour and explained how multiple factors could have had an impact on the offender, in support of social learning theory being able to be used to explain physical sexual offending against adult victims. Furthermore, it should not be thought that social learning theory is the only theory that can make a contribution in the explanation of sex offending.

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