

A Brief Screening Scale to Identify Pedophilic Interests Among Child Molesters

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Among child molesters, phallometrically measured sexual interest in children is associated with having male victims, multiple victims, younger victims, and extrafamilial victims. These sexual offense history variables are also associated with risk for sexual recidivism. The present study of 1,113 child molesters was conducted to determine if these sexual offense history variables could be used as items in a brief screening scale to identify pedophilic interests (SSPI: Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests). Using a cutoff score that classified 90% of a sample of 206 nonchild molesters as not having pedophilic interests, SSPI scores identified pedophilic interests among child molesters significantly better than did chance. In phallometric testing, individuals with the highest SSPI score were more than 5 times as likely to show pedophilic interests than individuals receiving the lowest score. The SSPI is not intended to be a substitute for phallometric testing, but it may be useful for triage and risk management when testing is difficult to conduct, or as a research instrument when phallometric data are unavailable.

KEY WORDS: pedophilic interests; child molesters; screening scale; sexual offense histories.

INTRODUCTION

There is very good evidence that phallometric testing for sexual interest in children, which involves the measurement of changes in penile tumescence during presentations of sexual stimuli depicting either children or adults, has discriminative and predictive validity. Studies consistently find that groups of child molesters can be distinguished from groups of nonchild molesters by their

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relatively greater responses to children (e.g., Freund & Watson, 1991; Marshall, Barbaree, & Christophe, 1986; Quinsey, Steinman, Bergersen, & Holmes, 1975; Seto, Lalumière, & Kuban, 1999). A recent meta-analysis of sex offender follow-up studies concluded that relative sexual interest in children was the single best predictor of sexual recidivism (Hanson & Bussière, 1998).

Given this level of empirical support for the validity of phallometric testing, it has been recommended that adult child-molesters should be routinely assessed using this technology for the purposes of risk assessment and treatment planning. However, many clinicians do not operate phallometric laboratories and may not have easy access to such facilities. In the absence of phallometric data, inferences might be made from other information, such as the child molester's sexual offense history. It is not clear, however, how variables should be weighted, or how such information should be combined in making such inferences. Thus, for child molesters who have previously not been phallometrically assessed, a brief, easy-to-use scale that identifies individuals who are very likely to be sexually interested in children would be useful for the purposes of triage and risk management.

Past research has revealed that greater sexual interest in children compared to adults is more likely to be observed among adult child-molesters when their sexual offense histories include a male victim, more than one victim, younger victims, and extrafamilial victims (e.g., Freund & Blanchard, 1989; Freund & Watson, 1991; Seto et al., 1999). The present study was conducted to determine if these correlates could be used as items in a brief screening scale for identifying pedophilic interests. In this study, pedophilic interests are defined as phallometrically measured, relative sexual responses to children that are unlikely to be found among nonchild molesters. It was predicted that child molesters scoring high on the Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests (SSPI), such as those with male, multiple, prepubescent, and unrelated victims, would be more likely to show pedophilic interests than child molesters scoring low on the scale, such as those with a single pubescent daughter as a victim. In other words, child molesters scoring high on the SSPI would be more likely to meet or exceed a conservative cutoff score on a phallometric index of relative sexual interest in children, as determined using a comparison group of nonchild molesters.

METHOD

Participants

The initial sample of child molesters consisted of 1,279 males who committed sexual offenses against children and who subsequently underwent phallometric testing of their sexual interest in children at the former Clarke Institute of Psychiatry (now part of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto, Ontario, Canada) between 1985 and 1996. Individuals were excluded if there were technical problems during their phallometric testing ($n = 30$); there was evidence

of faking in terms of response artifacts that suggest voluntary contractions of the abdominal and perineal muscles, as described by Freund, Watson, and Rienzo in 1988 ($n = 62$); or their responses to neutral stimuli were higher than their responses to any sexual stimulus, indicating nonspecificity of response ($n = 74$). These individuals were excluded because their phallometric responses could not be meaningfully interpreted. The resulting sample consisted of 1,113 sex offenders with one or more sexual victims under the age of 14. Data from most of these participants have been reported earlier (e.g., Freund & Watson, 1991; Seto et al., 1999).

Child molesters had an average age of 36.3 years ($SD = 12.3$, range = 14–81), and a median education score of 3 ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.2$) on a 6-point scale (1 = no formal education; 2 = less than grade 8; 3 = some high school; 4 = high school graduation; 5 = some college/university; 6 = university graduation); information on education was missing for 61 participants. Information on socioeconomic status and ethnicity was not available for most of the participants. Sixty-nine percent of the child molesters were married or living in common-law relationships (stable cohabitation with a sexual partner) at the time of their assessment.

The initial comparison sample consisted of 227 males who denied and had not been convicted for committing sexual offenses against children: 122 nonoffenders recruited from the community and 105 rapists (sex offenders who only had female victims 14 years of age or older). After applying the same exclusionary criteria described earlier, there were 206 nonchild molesters (112 nonoffenders, 94 rapists) in the final sample: 7 were excluded for technical problems, 5 for faking, and 9 because their responses to the neutral stimuli were higher than those to any sexual stimulus. These comparison participants were used to determine a conservative cutoff score for identifying pedophilic interests among the child molesters, and to compare with child molesters scoring low or high on the SSPI.

The average age of comparison participants was 27.6 years ($SD = 6.6$, range 17–52), and the median education score was 4 ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.0$). Nonoffenders were recruited between 1985 and 1990; the majority were recruited from a local community college. Rapists were assessed at the former Clarke Institute of Psychiatry between 1985 and 1996. Sixty-two percent of the comparison participants were married or living in common-law relationships at the time of their assessment.

Materials and Apparatus

Film clips depicted nude individuals of both sexes from four age categories walking towards the camera: very young children (5–8 years old), prepubescent children (8–11 years old), pubescent children (12–13 years old), and young adults (early to mid-20s). Sexually neutral film clips of landscape scenes were also shown. Clips depicting individuals were accompanied by audiotapes describing the figures

as involved in nonsexual activities such as swimming. These audiotaped third-person narratives emphasized features of the figures' body shapes; narratives about female targets were all read by the same adult woman whereas narratives about male targets were all read by the same adult man. Clips depicting landscapes were accompanied by narratives describing the scenery; half were read by the woman just mentioned and the other half by the man just mentioned. Film clips were presented using three commercial 16-mm film projectors (Eiki SNT-0 Slim Line) whereas audiotapes were presented using a commercial audiotape player (Tiffen Pro-Corder System II) and headphones. The film clips were shown on three projection screens located approximately 3 m in front of the participant's chair. Each screen was 1.5 m² in area whereas the projected images were approximately 1.2 m by 1.5 m in size.

Penile responses were monitored in terms of penile-volume change. A photograph and schematic drawing of the volumetric apparatus are provided by Freund, Sedlacek, and Knob (1965), and a comparison of volumetric and circumferential phallometry is found in Kuban, Barbaree, and Blanchard (1999). The apparatus included a glass cylinder that fit over the penis and an inflatable latex cuff that surrounded the base of the penis and isolated the air inside the cylinder from the air outside. A rubber tube connected the cylinder to a Rosemount (Model 831A) pressure transducer that converted air-pressure changes into voltage-output changes. Increases in penile volume compressed the air inside the cylinder and thus produced output signals from the transducer; these signals were recorded using a 12-bit analog/digital converter housed in an IBM-compatible microcomputer (Data Translation, Inc. DT 2811-PGH, 8 input board). The apparatus was calibrated so that known quantities of volume displacement in the cylinder (e.g., 3 cm³) corresponded to known changes in transducer voltage output.

Procedure

The data presented here are taken from the electronic database maintained by the Kurt Freund Laboratory at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Each participant signed a consent form after the procedure and apparatus were explained to them at the beginning of the test session. The test session consisted of three blocks of nine trials, each trial lasting for 28 s. The nine trials consisted of one trial for each age-sex category and one neutral landscape scene; the order of trials in each block was randomized and then the same order was presented to every participant within each block. Film clips of different individuals from the same age-sex category were simultaneously presented on three screens during each trial. The next stimulus was not presented until the participant had returned to within 1.0 cm³ of their baseline volume. Individuals were monitored by a low-light video camera (Sony Shibaden HV-15) trained on their upper body during the testing, in order to inhibit faking tactics such as looking away or tampering with the sensor. Participants who did not comply with the testing procedures were not included in the data set. The entire testing session took approximately an hour.

Preparation of Phallometric Data

Consistent with previous studies from this laboratory, changes in penile volume were measured by the largest deviation from baseline (i.e., peak response) and the total area under the plotted response curve for each stimulus presentation (Freund & Blanchard, 1989; Freund & Watson, 1991). Both measures were converted to standard scores for each participant and averaged. These scores were then averaged across the three stimulus presentations for each age-sex category. A *Pedophilic Index* was calculated as the largest average score for a very young or prepubescent child category minus the largest average score for an adult category. Responses to the pubescent child stimuli were not included in the calculation of this Pedophilic Index or in any of the other analyses.

A differential index calculated from standard scores takes into account individual differences in responsivity and is the most psychometrically appropriate measure of pedophilic interests, based on discriminative and predictive validity studies (e.g., Harris, Rice, Quinsey, Chaplin, & Earls, 1992; Rice, Quinsey, & Harris, 1991). Positive scores indicate a preference for children whereas negative scores indicate a preference for adults.

Consistent with the recommendations of Harris et al. (1992), individuals who minimally responded were retained in the analysis of phallometric data. Excluding low responders (those who did not respond at least 1 cm³ to a sexual stimulus) did not change the pattern of results (see later).

Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests (SSPI)

The items for the SSPI were scored from information about the child molesters' sexual offense histories. Each item was initially coded as present or absent: Any male victims; more than one victim; any prepubescent victims (a child under the age of 11); and any extrafamilial victims (a child who was not the offender's son or daughter, stepson or stepdaughter, or a member of his extended family). Information from police synopses or probation/parole reports were preferred over self-reported details, unless the individual reported sexual offenses that were not officially recorded.

RESULTS

In the present sample of child molesters, 42% of the participants had a male victim, 48% had multiple victims, 81% had a prepubescent victim (the remainder only had victims who were 12 or 13 years old), and 64% had an extrafamilial victim. The correlations between these characteristics (coded dichotomously as present or absent) and between these characteristics and the Pedophilic Index are shown in Table I. All four items were significantly correlated with each other and with the Pedophilic Index.

Table 1. Intercorrelations among Scale Items, Coded Dichotomously, and the Pedophilic Index (all correlations shown were significant at $p < .05$, two-tailed)

Item	Male	Multiple	Prepubescent	Unrelated
Any male victims	—			
More than one victim	.08	—		
Any prepubescent victims	-.10	.08	—	
Any extrafamilial victims	.19	.25	-.12	—
Pedophilic index	.25	.17	.12	.19

A stepwise regression analysis with four predictors—sex of victim (any male or female only), number of victims (multiple or single), age of victims (prepubescent or pubescent), and relationship with victim (any extrafamilial or related only)—and one criterion, the Pedophilic Index, was carried out. The multiple R was .35 among the sample of child molesters, $F(4, 1108) = 38.12$, $p < .001$. Beta weights suggested that the sex of victim ($\beta = .231$, $p < .0001$) had approximately twice the contribution of the other items (number of victims, $\beta = .113$, $p < .0005$; having prepubescent victims, $\beta = .145$, $p < .0001$; and relationship with victim, $\beta = .133$, $p < .0001$) in the regression equation. Thus, all four items had a unique contribution to the prediction of the Pedophilic Index, but sex of victim had twice the weight of the other items. These results were used to determine SSPI item scoring; scoring instructions for the scale are provided in the Appendix.

Total SSPI scores ranged from 0 to 5. The median score was 3 ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.4$) in the sample of 1,113 child molesters. Total SSPI scores were significantly and positively correlated with the Pedophilic Index, $r(1111) = .34$, $p < .001$. It is worth noting that the distribution of SSPI scores for the sample of 1,113 child molesters did not differ from the distribution of scores for the 166 child molesters excluded because of technical problems, faking, or nonspecificity of response ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.4$), $\chi^2(5, N = 1279) = 3.93$, ns .

For the following analyses, *specificity* represents the proportion of nonchild molesters who are classified as not having pedophilic interests (cf. Lalumière & Quinsey, 1993). Specificity was conservatively set at 90%, representing the Pedophilic Index cutoff score that would classify 90% of the comparison participants as not having pedophilic interests (in the present study, a Pedophilic Index of .39). Nonoffenders ($M = -.98$, $SD = 1.04$) and rapists ($M = -.95$, $SD = .96$) did not significantly differ from each other on the Pedophilic Index, $t(204) = .25$, ns . In this analysis, *sensitivity* represents the proportion of child molesters who met or exceeded the cutoff value of .39 and were, therefore, identified as having pedophilic interests.

Using the 90% specificity cutoff score of .39 on the Pedophilic Index, 27% (298 out of 1,113) of the child molesters were identified as having pedophilic interests. We then calculated the sensitivity of the phallometric test according to SSPI scores. The proportions of child molesters at each possible score of the

Table II. Proportions of Child Molesters Identified as Having Pedophilic Interests at Two Different Phallometric Cutoff Scores^a (according to SSPI)

SSPI score	Child molesters (<i>N</i> = 1,113)				Restricted sample ^b (<i>N</i> = 772)		
	<i>n</i>	Index ^c	Cutoff = .39 (%)	Cutoff = 0 (%)	<i>n</i>	Cutoff = .39 (%)	Cutoff = 0 (%)
0	28	−.67 (.78)	11	18	16	0	0
1	225	−.59 (.83)	10	23	157	8	21
2	216	−.40 (.96)	17	32	149	17	33
3	298	−.19 (.95)	28	41	206	27	37
4	190	.03 (1.08)	40	47	128	43	50
5	156	.54 (.93)	51	72	116	53	72

^a A cutoff score of .39 results in 90% specificity (i.e., 90% of comparison participants are classified as not having pedophilic interests). A cutoff score of zero indicates equal or greater arousal to stimuli depicting children compared to stimuli depicting adults (using this cutoff score, 83% of comparison participants are identified as not having pedophilic interests).

^b After excluding individuals who responded less than 1 cm³ to sexual stimuli.

^c Means and standard deviations for the Pedophilic Index.

SSPI who were identified as having pedophilic interests, and the number of child molesters with that score, are shown in Table II. The mean Pedophilic Index scores for child molesters at each SSPI score are also shown. It is worth noting that the proportion of child molesters with a SSPI score of 0 or 1 who were identified as having pedophilic interests is almost the same as the proportion of nonchild molesters so identified (given the 90% specificity cutoff).

We repeated this analysis using a Pedophilic Index cutoff score of zero, which is easy to interpret because it indicates equal or greater arousal to stimuli depicting children compared to stimuli depicting adults. Eighty-three percent of the comparison participants were identified as not having pedophilic interests, using a cutoff score of zero on the Pedophilic Index. The proportion of child molesters at each possible score of the SSPI who were identified as having pedophilic interests, using a cutoff score of zero, are shown in Table II.

To further illustrate these results, the mean response across stimulus categories for three groups of participants—comparison participants, child molesters with a SSPI score of 0 or 1, and child molesters with a SSPI score of 4 or 5—are plotted in Fig. 1. Child molesters with a SSPI score of 0 or 1 appeared very similar to the nonchild molesters in their responding whereas child molesters with a SSPI score of 4 or 5 clearly showed a different profile than the other two groups, with a lower mean response to stimuli depicting adult females and higher mean responses to stimuli depicting prepubescent males.

Table II also shows the proportions of child molesters at each possible SSPI score after excluding individuals who minimally responded in the laboratory. The same proportion of these 772 child molesters (27%) were identified as having pedophilic interests at the 90% specificity cutoff score. The distribution of SSPI scores was similar between the 772 child molesters who exceeded the minimal

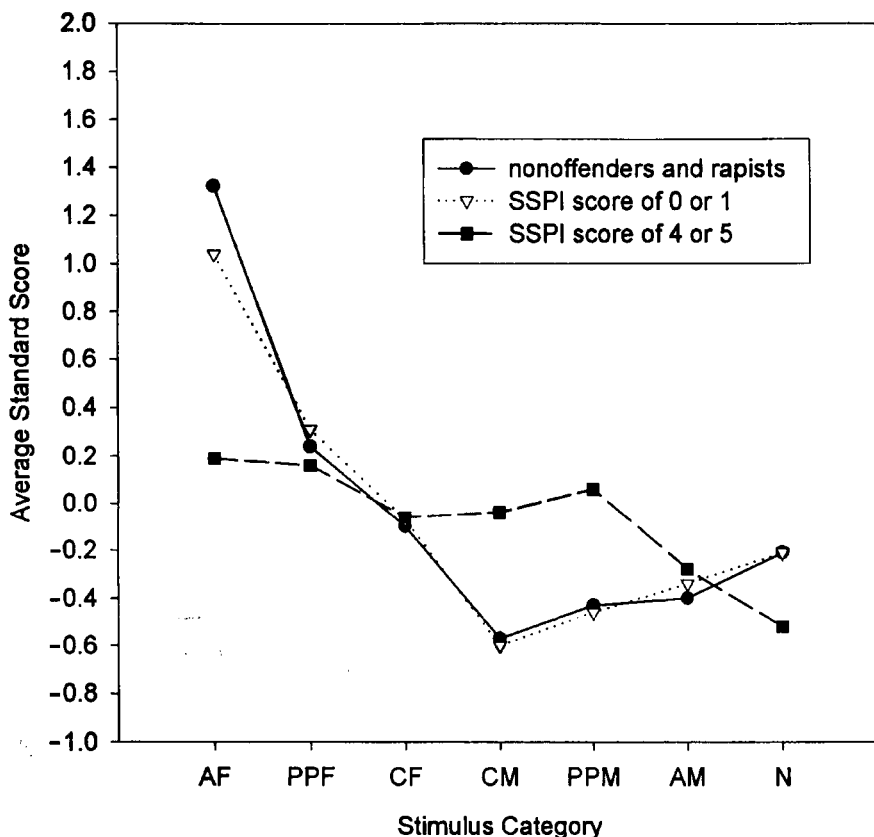


Fig. 1. Phallometric response profile across stimulus categories for comparison participants and child molesters grouped according to their score on the Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests (SSPI). AF = adult female; PPF = prepubescent female; CF = very young female; CM = very young male; PPM = prepubescent male; AM = adult male; N = neutral.

response criterion of 1 cm³ ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.4$) and the 341 who did not ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.4$), $\chi^2(5, N = 1,113) = 4.01$, ns .

The performance of the SSPI was further evaluated using relative operating characteristic (ROC) analysis, a statistical technique that has been used to evaluate medical diagnostic tests. In this context, the area under the ROC curve represents the probability that a randomly selected child molester who shows pedophilic interests has a higher score on the SSPI than a randomly selected child molester who does not show pedophilic interests. Area values can range from 0 to 1; an area of .5 represents discrimination at the level of chance whereas values higher or lower than .5 indicate better or worse performance, respectively. Using the cutoff

value of .39 for the total sample of child molesters, the area under the ROC curve for the SSPI was .70 ($SE = .02$), indicating diagnostic accuracy that is significantly better than chance, $p < .001$. Using the same cutoff for the restricted sample, the area was .73 ($SE = .02$).

DISCUSSION

Scores on the SSPI were significantly related to phallometrically measured responding to stimuli depicting children, and identified pedophilic interests among child molesters significantly better than did chance. Although only a small proportion of child molesters obtained the highest score (14% of the total sample obtained a score of 5), these individuals were likely to respond more to stimuli depicting children compared to stimuli depicting adults. Nonetheless, the scale is not recommended as a substitute for phallometric testing. This instrument may be helpful for prioritizing cases or guiding other kinds of decisions that need to be made quickly, in circumstances where phallometric testing is unavailable or difficult to access. The instrument may also be useful as a research measure of pedophilic interests when phallometric test results are unavailable.

It is noteworthy that most of the items in the SSPI were identified as significant predictors of sexual recidivism in the meta-analysis of Hanson and Bussière (1998), although the magnitude of the relationships between the sexual offense history variables and sexual recidivism tended to be smaller than the relationship found between phallometrically measured sexual interest in children and sexual recidivism in their quantitative review ($r = .32$: having young victims $r = .05$, having a male victim $r = .11$, and having an unrelated victim $r = .11$). Number of victims was not reported, but number of prior sexual offenses had a correlation of .19 with sexual recidivism in the meta-analysis. In fact, other variables that could be construed as indicators of unusual sexual interests were also significantly correlated with sexual recidivism in Hanson and Bussière's review.

It is a psychometric principle that combining items that are modestly correlated with a particular criterion is more reliable than using individual items, thus providing a higher potential ceiling for validity (Anastasi, 1988). The brief screening scale evaluated in this study represents this psychometric principle at work, because total SSPI score had a higher correlation with the Pedophilic Index than any of the individual items did. Because the individual items are significantly correlated with sexual recidivism, as reported by Hanson and Bussière (1998), we predict that total SSPI score would be a good predictor of sexual recidivism among child molesters, and that SSPI score may uniquely contribute to the prediction of sexual recidivism over and above phallometrically measured sexual interest in children.

Future research may identify additional items that contribute to the diagnostic performance of the SSPI. Good candidates are some of the other variables

identified by Hanson and Bussière (1998), such as early onset of sexual offending and variety of sexual crimes. However, any increment in predictive validity has to be weighed against the cost of obtaining the additional information. For example, exploratory analyses showed that, consistent with the results reported by Blanchard et al. (1999), low intellectual functioning among child molesters made a small but statistically significant contribution to the prediction of pedophilic interests in the current sample, over and above the existing items. However, information on intellectual functioning may not be available in case files or archival data. One advantage of the SSPI is that the information needed to score its items is easily obtained.

Another topic of interest for future research is the generalizability of this brief screening scale with adolescent sex offenders. Phallometric testing of adolescents who have committed sexual offenses against children has received little empirical attention compared to adult sex offenders, partly because there have been ethical and practical objections to its use with adolescents. Although existing evidence suggests that phallometric testing has utility among older adolescents (Seto, Lalumière, & Blanchard, *in press*), alternative measures may be needed. One promising candidate is viewing time (Abel, Huffman, Warberg, & Holland, 1998; Harris, Rice, Quinsey, & Chaplin, 1996). Another potential candidate is a scale based on offense history information, such as the one reported in this study. Scores on the SSPI had a correlation of .56 with phallometrically measured sexual interest in children among 40 adolescent sex offenders with child victims identified in the electronic database. This result should be interpreted with caution because these adolescent sex offenders were part of the present sample. Nonetheless, if replicated in an independent and larger sample, this suggests that the SSPI could be used as an alternative measure for adolescent sex offenders with child victims when phallometric data are unavailable.

APPENDIX: SCREENING SCALE FOR PEDOPHILIC INTERESTS

This scale was developed from a sample of primarily adult males who had been convicted of at least one sexual offense involving children (there were also 40 adolescent sex offenders against children in the sample). Items are simply scored as present or absent from information regarding sexual offense histories. File information such as police synopses or probation/parole reports were preferred over self-reported details, unless the individual reported sexual offenses were not officially recorded. Unrelated victims are children who were not the offender's son or daughter, stepson or stepdaughter, or a member of his extended family.

1. Offender has male victim.
Yes = 2 No, female victims only = 0
2. Offender has more than one victim.
Yes = 1 No, single victim only = 0

3. Offender has a victim aged 11 or younger.
Yes = 1 No, child victims were 12 or 13 years old = 0
4. Offender has an unrelated victim.
Yes = 1 No, related victims only = 0

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