

ATSA

MAKING SOCIETY SAFER

THE FORUM NEWSLETTER

Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers

Vol. XXVII, No. 4
Fall 2015

Pathways to Sexual Aggression

Reviewed by David Prescott, Review Editor

Pathways to Sexual Aggression

Edited by Jean Proulx, Eric Beauregard, Patrick Lussier, and Benoit Leclerc
2015, Routledge
362 Pages,
ISBN: 978-0-415-70360-4

In 2011, I reviewed a report by a professional regarding a person in residential treatment whose attempts to form close friendships with his peers were considered suspicious. He had a history of trying to find his place in the world, but ultimately fitting in nowhere, especially in his close relationships. Unable to distinguish desperate attempts at human connection from victim-access behavior, the clinician wrote, "His behavior is consistent with the literature on grooming." Setting aside the clinical considerations involved in this statement, one over-arching concern stood out. There is no "literature on grooming." Instead, the considerations are far more complex, involving factors that are predisposing versus situational, stable versus acute, distal versus proximal, trait versus state, etc.

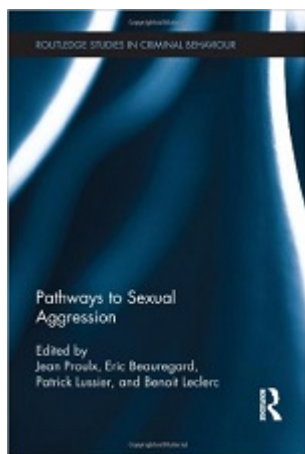


David Prescott

Many who started providing treatment to people who had sexually abused in the 1980s and early 1990s will remember this experience: You opened up your first workbook or other treatment materials and saw something about a cycle of

abuse. It was often used in conjunction with a relapse prevention plan. In many cases, this cycle was borrowed from other areas of treatment endeavor, such as domestic violence. We learned to ask clients about the thoughts, feelings, situations, and behaviors that served as antecedents to abuse. Sometimes this exploration took a nebulous form, and sometimes it took a form based on the expectations and world view of the therapist. That is, the attitudes and beliefs of the therapist about sexual violence could influence the client's narrative and understanding of their own behavior (see David Thornton's article in the spring 2015 edition of this newsletter). There had been unifying contributions to our knowledge, such as Finkelhor's preconditions model; while important, it often had limited utility at the front lines of practice.

Fast forward a few years, and it seemed that Tony Ward and Stephen Hudson were among the first to examine critically our field's assumptions about the antecedents to abuse. They observed, among other things, that one size does



not fit all, and that without an understanding of the goals and motivations of the client at each step of the offense process, one couldn't fully understand or prevent sexual re-offense. Their early papers formed the basis for what is now known as the self-regulation model (SRM, and its revised version, the SRM-R). In practice, the SRM-R is often coupled with the good lives model, and in research it has come to stand on its own as a means of understanding offense trajectories.

Now in 2015, Jean Proulx and his colleagues present *Pathways to Sexual Aggression*, an accessible overview of the past and current research into the antecedents of sexual offending. To the author's knowledge, it is the first entire volume devoted specifically to this most important topic. The editors' own motivation, goals, and predisposing factors are straightforward. From the preface:

Most people who read an article in the newspaper about the brutal rape of a woman by a stranger, or the longstanding sexual abuse of a young boy by his stepfather have a strong visceral reaction which is a mix of anger, fear, and incomprehension. Apart from these aversive reactions, several questions also come to people's minds: Was this offender crazy or sexually obsessed? What is the purpose of such outrageous acts? To answer these questions, the authors of this book review theoretical and empirical models of the processes that lead men to sexually assault children or women, whilst also presenting new results and models on this topic.

After a close reading, this self-assessment is clearly accurate. Proulx and his colleagues provide both old and new information that is suitable to all scholarly audiences. For those unfamiliar with the history of research into the myriad precursors to abuse, the summaries of past knowledge will be very helpful. For those who lived through each iteration of this knowledge, the chapters provide a useful reminder that serves as a springboard for discussion of new results. For those who wonder if they have time to read an entire book on the topic, there is a remarkable consistency across the volume such that the reader can easily focus in on historical and/or newer elements on a chapter-by-chapter basis, making the book far more palatable than it might have been. In the end, there is a singular flow to the many voices that make up this book.

The structure is straightforward. There are four parts:

- Theoretical and empirical bases
- Pathways in the offending process of sexual aggressors: A research program
- Criminal career and recidivism in sexual aggressors
- Pathways in the offending process of sexual aggressors: Additional studies

Part 1 begins, naturally enough, with Bill Pithers' work with relapse prevention and the Tony Ward/Stephen Hudson Pathways/SRM model before moving into a discussion of the routine activities and rational choices in the offending process of adult men who sexually abuse. It lays the foundation for the sections that follow as well as providing necessary historical context.


Part 2 explores the offending process of various kinds of sex offenders, with chapters focusing in turn on extrafamilial sexual aggressors against women, men who sexually assault within a marital context, extrafamilial child molestation, intrafamilial child molestation, sexual abuse of adolescents, and those people who are polymorphic in their offences. These chapters present both new data as well as a historical overview, and are written in various combinations by the editors and a handful of colleagues.

Part 3 explores the criminal career and recidivism patterns of people who sexually abuse, exploring questions regarding the relationship between criminal and sexual offending trajectories among people involved in extrafamilial sexual aggression. The diverse findings again illustrate that one size does not fit all when understanding the origins of sexual abuse. The authors also make the point that when people develop in criminally diverse ways they may also develop more diverse pathways into repeat sexual

crimes.

Part 4 includes chapters from diverse areas, including a study on the offense pathways of extrafamilial child molesters in the UK by Adam Carter and his colleagues, and updated information on the self-regulation model by Drew Kingston and Pamela Yates. A chapter by Shannon Vettor, Tony Beech, and Jessica Woodhams on the combined pathways of men who rape women and those who murder the women they rape found little difference between them. The inclusion of these extra studies from around North America and Europe rounds out the project and provides extra depth.

Returning to the front lines of treatment, the sum and substance of this book is that assessors and treatment providers must be on guard against our own fundamental attribution errors. It is too easy to be limited by the more obvious risk factors that clients bring into our offices and treatment rooms. This book highlights the importance of understanding situational and developmental factors, and the interactions between them.



[ATSA](#) | 4900 SW Griffith Drive, Suite 274, Beaverton, OR 97005