

## BOOK REVIEW

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### Review of: *Pedophilia and Sexual Offending Against Children: Theory, Assessment, and Intervention*

**REFERENCE: Seto MC. Pedophilia and sexual offending against children: theory, assessment, and intervention. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008, 303 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1-4338-0114-3**

In the current social and political climate, few psycholegal issues generate as much heated debate as sexual crimes against children and the punishment and/or rehabilitation of sexual offenders. Public discourse, fuelled by sensationalistic media reports, forms the basis for much social policy, often in the absence of scientific support. Indeed, “much of what laypeople and professionals believe about pedophiles and sexual offending against children—and the policies and laws that are implemented as a result—is not supported by empirical research,” (from *Preface*). Author Michael C. Seto sets out to rectify this in a comprehensive, multidisciplinary synthesis of current knowledge on the topic. In a new, readable volume, he addresses child sexual abuse from diverse perspectives integrating theory and research findings from anthropology, sociology, neuroscience, psychology, psychiatry, and criminology—all evidence, he believes, that pedophilia is a universal characteristic of humans, a behavior, albeit objectionable, manifested across cultures throughout all of recorded history. The author believes that to advance the science and improve prevention of child sexual abuse, we must draw on multidisciplinary fields of inquiry, and not rely on clinical knowledge and lore alone. The result is a volume that summarizes much current research on this complex subject, written in an accessible format suitable for academics, practitioners, and interested lay-persons alike.

In this volume, the author brings together information from many sources to address such issues as: What are the origins and causes of pedophilia and sexual offending against children? How is research on pedophilia/sexual offending conducted? Do all pedophiles sexually offend, and are all sexual offenses against children committed by pedophiles? How do we detect or diagnose pedophilia? What do we know about pedophiles and/or sexual offenders who are women? What is the nature of the relationship between psychopathy and sexual offending? What are the characteristics of children who are victimized? How are incest perpetrators different from other sexual offenders? How is risk of reoffending assessed? To illustrate key points, the author provides case studies, sample interview questions, links to online resources and materials, and information about assessment tools (and procurement information). Appendices provide additional resources.

As reflected in the title of the book, the point is made early that “contrary to popular belief, not all sex offenders who target

children are pedophiles, and not all pedophiles commit sexual offenses” (from cover). This central distinction highlights the fact that a pedophile, by definition, is an individual *with a sexual preference for prepubescent children manifested in intense, persistent, and recurrent thoughts, fantasies, urges, sexual arousal, and/or behavior*. It is this last criterion, *behavior* which, when acted out turns the pedophile into a sexual offender against children. According to the author, estimates based on research to date indicate that only 50% of males who commit sexual crimes against children are pedophiles (depending upon criterion used to identify pedophilia). The reasons why a *nonpedophile* might sexually offend against a child are discussed (including general antisociality, poor social skills, emotional dysregulation, sexual abuse in childhood, disinhibition due to substance use, or lack of other sexual opportunities).

The volume begins with a discussion of cross-cultural and historical evidence of adult sexual contact with children in an effort to explain and define pedophilia (Chapter 1). Moving next to the assessment of pedophilia and sexual offending (Chapter 2), the author discusses the strengths and weaknesses of different methods of scientific inquiry: self report (e.g., questionnaires, interviews), behavior (e.g., confirmed offense history), laboratory measures (e.g., viewing time of pornographic materials), and psychophysiological measures (e.g., polygraphy, phallometry [the measurement of penile responses to visual/auditory pornographic stimuli of children]). The author believes that phallometry currently shows the most promise and “has the best validity for assessing pedophilic sexual interests” (p. 23). Given the current controversy in the field over this position, the author devotes a significant amount of space to supplying evidence in support of his claim, while also addressing serious criticisms (e.g., lack of standardization, lack of reliability, intrusiveness, and ethical concerns about the use of child pornography). Following this, the author describes different approaches to studying the causes and correlates of pedophilia and sexual offending (Chapter 3). Chapters 4 and 5 include theoretical and etiological perspectives. Beginning with a review and critique of major theories of sexual offending against children (Chapter 4), the author transitions to a discussion of the etiology of pedophilia (Chapter 5) reflected in the literature (e.g., conditioning, childhood sexual abuse, neurodevelopmental disruptions). In Chapter 6, the author addresses the troubling issue of incest, noting that this offense is committed largely by individuals who are *not* pedophiles, and who are more likely not to be genetically related (e.g., stepfathers). The next chapter (Chapter 7), discusses current risk factors for sexual offending, distinguishing between dynamic and static risk factors, and includes a brief review of a number of different measures.

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Following this description of actuarial tools, the author devotes a chapter to intervention and prevention strategies (Chapter 8). In this chapter, the author reviews results from studies of intervention effectiveness ranging from surgical and chemical castration, through cognitive-behavioral therapy, to sentencing and supervision sanctions (e.g., community notification and registration).

Despite the fact that much work remains to be done in this area, much work *has* been done—and the reader of this volume will doubtless come away with a greater appreciation of the challenges facing researchers, as well as an enhanced knowledge of the theory and research of pedophilia and sexual offending against children.