

MANAGING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AROUND OFFENDING & RISK

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Why is the communication problem worsening?

- Public figures and historical sex offences
- Social media
- But
 - There is clear evidence that professionals also struggle to accept counter-intuitive ideas

What are these counter-intuitive ideas?

- The following are ‘cognitive distortions’ & wrong
 - Once a sex offenders, always a sex offender
 - Having undetected offences or prior allegations raises risk
 - Most sex offenders are strangers & predatory men
 - Sex offenders must have treatment in order to change
 - Clinical override (professional judgment) is an important step in improving actuarial risk assessments
- The following factors are **NOT** associated with heightened risk to others (R Mann, 2010)
 - Denial (partial or total, minimisations, justifications)
 - Lack of victim empathy
 - Failing to take responsibility for his behaviour
 - Refusing to seek treatment

So, just a small example of the evidence

- High risk total deniers reoffend significantly less than high risk admitters (Harkins et al, 2010)
- 7,000 sex offenders under probation: 'not taking responsibility for offence' associated with significantly lower reoffending (Harkins et al, 2015)
- In all research papers examining the role of clinical override, all resulted in lower predictive accuracy (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2009)

Why does this matter?

- The purpose of risk assessment, primarily is to be as accurate as possible
- We might do things in our risk management plan that makes things worse

‘Thinking Fast & Slow’ Kahneman, 2011

- Nobel prize winning psychologist
- Behavioural economics with focus on public perceptions of risk, and risk taking behaviour
- Compelling evidence base

Error of judgment	As seen in our judgments of sex offenders
Illusion of truth An idea that is familiar (often repeated) is likely to be thought of as true	Judges/police only see recidivists again Media images & words
Cognitive ease (versus strain) Is association with +ve emotions; strain associated with –ve emotions	Explaining why denial is NOT linked to risk is too complex & lowers mood
Rules of associative coherence Our brains perceive intentional causality and/or illusion of pattern	We insist on a story that is not there for ‘he had many victims’; ‘he denied the offences’; ‘I was terrified’
Exaggerated emotional coherence Attitudes driven by our emotional responses (conflicting information suppressed)	We are horrified by the offences & therefore attend to risk variables that emphasise a moral imperative
Substitution heuristic We substitute simple questions for complex questions in order to solve a problem easily & in keeping with mood	‘How can a man who has committed appalling crimes be low risk?’ = ‘Do I forgive him?’

THANK YOU
