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Measuring offence-related sexual interests in convicted sexual offenders: An initial test of the reliability and validity of a self-report scale

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The 'My Private Interests' (MPI) measure is a short self-report questionnaire that is being trialled as part of the assessment battery for sex offenders undertaking a National Offender Management Service (NOMS) sex offender treatment programme (SOTP). The MPI forms one part of the assessment of an offender's offence-related sexual interests, and the scale has four subscales measuring: 1) an obsession with sex; 2) a sexual interest in children; 3) a sexual interest in violent sex; and 4) multiple paraphilia. This study examined the reliability and validity of this scale when used with a sample of 1,013 men who received treatment for sexual offending either in custody or on licence in the community.

Key findings

- Factor analysis suggests that the items on the MPI measure four factors, as intended: an obsession with sex, a sexual interest in children, a sexual interest in violence, and the presence of multiple unusual sexual interests (paraphilia).
- Analysis suggested the scale could be improved by removing some of the items, creating a shorter, revised MPI scale.
- Those who offended against children had higher scores on the sexual interest in children subscale, compared to those who offended against adults. This subscale was also able to discriminate higher- from lower-risk sexual offenders.
- Scores on the other subscales were not able to discriminate higher- from lower-risk sexual offenders, although the overall revised MPI scale score was able to do so.
- Scores on the MPI subscales converged with the scores on the relevant subscales of another test of sexual interests, the Multiphasic Sex Inventory.
- The MPI and its subscales demonstrated excellent internal reliability.
- Further research is required to cross-validate the measure, as are tests of the MPI's predictive validity and test-retest reliability.

Introduction

Offence-related sexual interests are among the most well-established risk factors for sexual offending (Mann, Hanson & Thornton, 2010). However, the measurement of these interests is a complex task. While self-report measures are likely to be problematic with forensic populations – who may have reason to conceal their offence-related sexual interests in order to avoid stringent containment measures or rehabilitative treatment – the alternatives are often costly and intrusive. The My Private Interests (MPI) scale is a short questionnaire that aims to measure four areas of offence-related sexual interest: 1) an obsession with sex, 2) a sexual interest in children, 3) a sexual interest in violence, and 4) multiple paraphilia. It is intended for use alongside other, more objective measures of sexual interest, as part of the assessment for accredited sex offender treatment programmes. The scale was originally developed for use with sex offenders with mild intellectual disabilities, for whom, in treatment, the term ‘private interests’ is used to describe sexual interests. The name is intended to acknowledge the sensitive nature of sexual interests, and reinforce the message given in treatment that offenders should think about when and with whom it is appropriate to share such interests.

Approach

The study used an availability sample of adult men who started a NOMS sex offender treatment programme in 2009 or 2010, either in custody (N = 345) or in the community (N = 668). All of those for whom assessment data was available were included in the study. For those for whom offence-type data was available, the majority were child offenders (having offended against a victim of 15 years old or younger). The vast majority of the sample were White (89%), had offended against female victims (59% offended against females only, 30% against females and males, and 11% against males only) and most had offended against a victim outside of their family (82%). While there was little missing data for the custody sample, some probation regions did not supply assessment data for central records. As a result, the community sample is not representative of all the offenders who started probation-run sex offender treatment in these two years. Missing information seemed to result from

local resourcing or administrative issues, and therefore is unlikely to have biased the results of the study.

The 54-item MPI scale was administered in a group assessment session as one element of the routine psychometric tests that form part of the sex offender treatment programme (SOTP). The Multiphasic Sex Inventory (MSI) (Nichols & Molinder, 1984), a 300-item questionnaire that assesses offence-related sexual interest, sexual knowledge and sexual functioning, was also administered. Participants were also assessed using a measure of static risk of sexual reoffending, the Risk Matrix 2000/sexual scale (RM2000/s) (Thornton et al., 2003).

To examine construct validity, confirmatory factor analysis was applied to the MPI scale. To test discriminant validity, the scores of those who had abused children were compared with the scores of those who had sexually offended against adults, and the scores of those at higher risk of sexual reoffending were compared with those in lower-risk groups. To test concurrent validity, participants’ scores on the MPI and MSI were compared. Finally, to test the internal reliability of the measure, Cronbach’s alpha was used on each of the four subscales of the MPI, and on the complete scale.

Results

The MPI scale demonstrated construct validity, with a four-factor model producing factors that relate to the four areas of sexual interest that the scale aims to measure. However, this solution explained only 53% of the variance in the sample. As a result of the factor analysis, 24 items were removed from the scale, creating the MPI: Revised measure. Items were removed because they were not associated with any of the factors (had factor loading <.3), had high communalities, or had low correlations with the other items. In addition, some items were removed because of a lack of theoretical coherence. For example, three items relating to a sexual interest in children did not load onto the relevant factor. Instead they loaded onto the factor relating to sexualised violence. As these three items were not conceptually related to this factor they were removed from further analyses. Consequently eight items loaded onto factor one that related to a preference for sex to include violence. Eleven items loaded onto factor two that related to other paraphilic sexual interests. Factor 3 consisted of loadings from seven items,

which seemed to relate to a sexual interest in children. Factor 4 consisted of four items. These all seemed to relate to a preoccupation with sex.

Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare scores of those who offended against children ($N = 534$) and those who offended against adults ($N = 135$). There was no significant difference in the scores of these subgroups on the Sexualised Violence subscale, but those who offended against children had worse scores (showed more of a sexual interest) than adult offenders, on the Sexual Interest in Children subscale.

Subsequent analysis of the discriminant validity of the MPI looked at the subscales scores of those in different risk groups, based on the RM2000/s assessment. The subscale measuring sexual interest in children discriminated higher-risk from lower-risk offenders,

One-way between-group ANOVAs were conducted to test for differences between risk groups on the original MPI scale, the revised total scale and the paraphilia subscale. While there were no significant differences between risk groups on the paraphilia subscale ($p = 0.08$), or the total on the original MPI ($p = .07$), higher risk offenders had worse scores (higher levels of offence-related sexual interests), on the revised MPI scale ($F(1, 953) = 6.25, p < .01$).

To test concurrent validity, the strength of correlations between scores on the MPI and the MSI, were examined. According to Cohen's (1988) interpretation of the strength of correlations, the MPI sexual interest in children subscale and the MSI Child Molest subscale had a strong relationship, as did the MPI Preoccupation with sex and the MSI Sexual Obsessions subscales. Effect size calculations indicated a large effect for the relationship between these subscales (MPI Sexual Interest in Children subscale and MSI Child Molest subscale, $r^2 = .68$; MPI Preoccupation with Sex and the MSI Sexual Obsessions subscales, $r^2 = .56$). The relationships between the other scales were moderately strong. Effect size calculations indicated that there was a moderate correlational effect size for the relationship between the MPI Sexualised Violence and the MSI Rape subscales ($r^2 = .34$) and for the relationship between the MPI and MSI Paraphilia subscales ($r^2 = .47$).

The revised MPI scale and each of its four subscales demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .92 to .94.

Implications and conclusions

The findings suggest that the MPI scale is a promising self-report measure of offence-related sexual interests in convicted sex offenders.

However, further testing is required, which should include tests of the scale's predictive validity and test-retest reliability.

This short self-report measure may be a useful, cost-effective part of a wider assessment of an individual's risk factors for sexual offending, particularly if it is teamed with an objective measure of sexual interest.

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