



Addressing attitudes and challenging stereotypes: Preparing students for careers in applied psychology

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Introduction and Rationale

Undergraduate psychologists are among the most likely group to move into therapeutic roles relating to sex offender rehabilitation. A positive attitude and good working knowledge about characteristics of sex offenders improves the therapeutic alliance between psychologist and offender, which is a factor cited as potentially increasing the likelihood of treatment success (Craig, 2005; Timimi 2009).

With this in mind, and Given the range of psychology courses now offered by British universities, it was considered important to examine the contributions of different specialities in the breaking down of stereotypical thinking and encouragement of positive attitudes toward stigmatised populations. Establishing success of undergraduate psychology programmes in addressing stereotypical thinking is important for developing courses that produce high-quality psychologists for professional practice in their subsequent careers.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Questions

- Do attitudes towards sex offenders vary depending upon the age of the offender?
- Do psychology undergraduates differ from those studying in other disciplines in their attitudes towards sex offenders?
- Does specialising in different areas of psychology impact upon attitudes towards sex offenders?

Hypotheses

- All students would express more punitive attitudes toward an adult sex offender than a juvenile sex offender
- Psychology students would express more positive attitudes toward sex offenders than non-psychology students.
- Forensic psychology students would express the most positive attitudes, followed by clinical, single-honours psychology, and child studies students respectively.

Methods and Materials

178 undergraduates (98 psychology and 80 non-psychology) volunteered to take part in the study. The breakdown of the number of participants in each sub-category is provided in Figure 1.

Each participant read two short case vignettes of sexual offences (one adult offender, one juvenile offender), and completed a modified version of Hogue's (1993) 'Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders' (ATS) questionnaire. The modification involved changing the generic phrase 'sex offender' to the names of the offenders depicting in the vignettes, focusing participants' minds on the cases they had just read. ATS scores range from 0-144, with high scores indication positive attitudes.

Key Findings

A significant difference was found between attitudes toward adult and juvenile offenders, with the juvenile being viewed more positively (average ATS scores of 68.44 and 78.27, respectively; $p < 0.001$; see Figure 2).

No significant differences were found between psychology and non-psychology students in relation to attitudes toward sex offenders, with non-psychology students actually expressing slightly more positive attitudes than the psychology sub-sample (average ATS scores of 73.75 and 73.07, respectively; see Figure 3).

Nor were there statistically significant differences between sub-groups of psychology undergraduates specialising in different areas (forensic, clinical, general, and child studies). Figure 4 shows the average ATS score for each sub-group of psychology participants.

Conclusions

The present study indicates that the group of undergraduates that are most likely to move into psychology-related careers harbour similar attitudes to those who are not. A psychology background is essential for forensic psychology training, and it is therefore argued that the low ATS scores as reported in this study could in fact contribute to ineffective sex offender treatment in subsequent years. This leads to the possibility of increased rates of re-offending, fuelling media outrage at the way that sex offenders are able to walk the streets whilst they are still a threat. It is argued that this cycle must end, through the dissemination of psychological research, more effective academic psychology programmes, and more responsible media reporting of what is an incredibly sensitive topic.

An undergraduate psychology degree is only accredited by the BPS if it covers certain domains. It is noted that none of the applied psychologies feature on this list of topics, which could explain the results presented here. The literature suggests that education leads to more positive attitudes being reported and, as such, it is argued that incorporating applied psychology modules into the standard undergraduate psychology degree could, in addition to giving students a more rounded education, encourage more positive attitudes towards stigmatised populations, and contribute to the development of better qualified graduate psychologists.

Group	Number of Participants
Psychology Students	98
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Clinical Psychology Students	25
Forensic Psychology Students	25
Single-Honours Psychology Students	25
Psychology with Child Studies Students	23
Non-Psychology Students	80

Figure 1: Number of participants in each subcategory

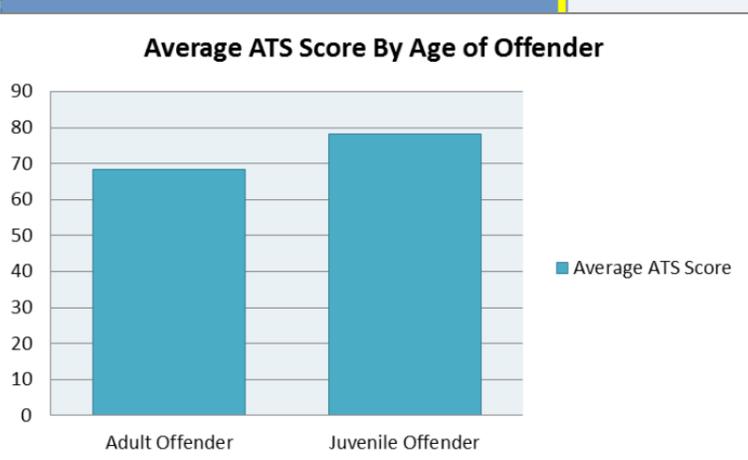


Figure 2: ATS Scores by Age of Offender

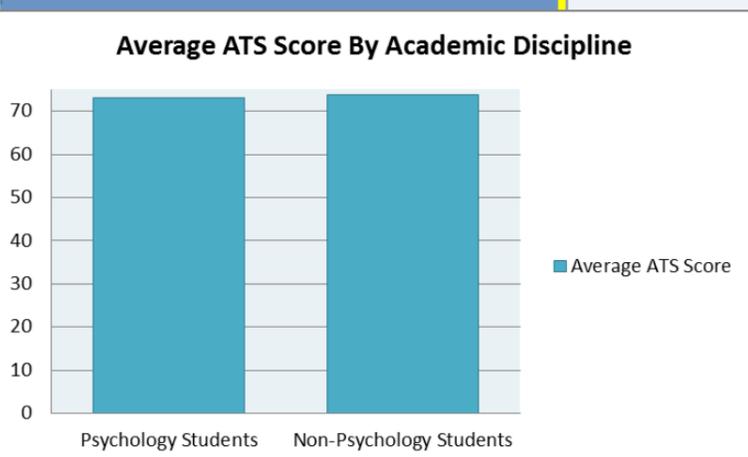


Figure 3: ATS Scores by Academic Discipline

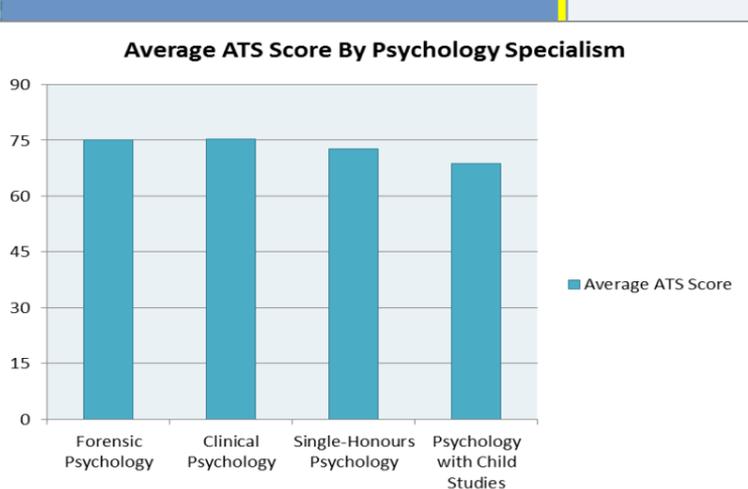


Figure 4: ATS Scores by Psychology Specialism

References:

- Craig, L. A. (2005). The impact of training on attitudes towards sex offenders. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 11(2), 197-207.
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- Timimi, S. (2009). What Works with Children, Adolescents, and Adults? A Review of Research on the Effectiveness of Psychotherapy. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 195, 372-373.