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A comparative analysis of sexual and violent offenders in youth prison

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1 Introduction [1]

Studies of adult sexual offenders show, that approximately 50 % of them already start with their sexual offending behavior in childhood or adolescence (Davis & Leitenberg, 1987; Abel, Mittelman, & Becker, 1985). The American Academy of Child and Adolescence Psychiatry stated in 1999 that in the USA "approximately 20 % of all rapes and 30 % to 50 % of child molestations are carried out by youths younger than 18 years of age" (p. 55). The 'Rape in American Study' revealed that 44 % of the victims, who were raped as children, reported that their offender was younger than 21 years. Juvenile sexual offenders are also more likely to sexually re-offend than other adolescent delinquents (Hagan, Gust-Brey, Cho, & Dow, 2001) and are at a higher risk of sexual re-offending than adult sexual offenders (Elz, 2001a, b; Rehder, 2001).

Historically, the problem of sexual offending in adolescents has been underestimated and was regarded in the same context as other forms of adolescent deviant behavior. It was also understood as an exploring stage of sexual development confined to a short period of time (Maier & Eiben, 1999). In recent years, as a consequence of the increasing knowledge about the onset of sexual offending, this perception has changed and the research interest in juvenile sexual delinquency has strongly increased. Particularly in the USA, in Canada and in Great Britain many offence-specific treatment programs were developed for youth who sexually abuse. At the same time scientific research tried to identify the special characteristics and needs of adolescence sexual offenders in order to develop more concrete treatment programs.

Research findings, mostly by American and Canadian studies, turned out to be heterogeneous. Some found evidence for special needs and problems of adolescent sexual offenders, while other studies could not replicate these findings. In Europe, however, there is a fundamental lack of research and of treatment programs for adolescence sexual offenders. The focus of research and treatment is exclusively on adult sexual offenders, which is troublesome, because the European juvenile justice system contrasts sharply with the American system in a number of important aspects. Therefore, it is impossible to transfer research results and treatment programs easily to Europe and the European prison system.

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Until now, in many cases adolescent and young adult sexual offenders, who are incarcerated in a European youth prison, have no chances to get any kind of offence-specific treatment. In Germany, for example, only one out of 16 federal states provides a specific treatment (since 2001) program for all adolescent sexual offenders (14 to 17 years) and young adults (18 to 24 years), who were sentenced to prison because of a sexual offence. Other prisons offer half-baked programs, not theory-based or evaluated. Consequently, there is little knowledge about the specific characteristics of adolescence sexual offenders in prison, although this knowledge is important for the development of more concrete and effective treatment programs.

Because of this, the aim of this study is to compare incarcerated adolescent and young adult sexual delinquents and violent offenders via relevant psychological variables, which are considered as important risk factors for re-offending. The variables are grouped along two main areas:

(1) *Deviance and antisocial behavior* (aggression, impulsivity, hostility, neutralization)

(2) *Predisposing personality factors* (self-esteem, self-efficacy, empathy).

Participants are 78 violent and 27 sexual offenders (13 rapists, 14 child abusers), between 17 and 24 years. They were incarcerated in a German youth prison and interviewed during detention. The first sample consists of sexual offenders who were within an offence-specific treatment unit in a juvenile prison in Hameln/Lower Saxony, the second sample consists of serious violent non-sexual offenders. Differences between the two groups are discussed in order to highlight implications for further research and for offence-specific treatment of sexual offenders in the juvenile justice system

2 Research findings

The focus of American scientific research, dealing with the specific characteristics of juvenile sexual offenders, primarily lay on biographical, environmental, and personality differences between adolescent sexual and non-sexual delinquents. In terms of *biographical variables* there is broad evidence that the probability of sexual abuse in childhood is higher for juvenile sexual offenders than for other offender groups (Ford & Linney, 1995; Krauth, 1998; Macri, 2000; Truscott, 1993). Furthermore, juvenile child abusers were sexually abused in childhood more often than adolescent rapists (Ford & Linney, 1995). In addition, the history of sibling-incest offenders is more often a history of victimization than the history of offenders who

acted against children outside the family (Worling, 1995). Although only a few victims of sexual abuse become perpetrators, being a victim of abuse does increase the likelihood of becoming a sexual offender, particularly in adolescence (Weinrott, 1996). Because sexual abuse is associated with higher rates of PTSD diagnoses (Macri, 2000), the therapeutic treatment of juvenile sexual offenders needs to include the special history of victimization.

Considering the likelihood of victimization among juvenile sexual offenders, it is no surprise that studies referring to *environmental characteristics* primarily investigate family systems. Altogether, there is little empirical evidence of family conditions unique for juvenile sexual offenders. Bischof, Stith, and Wilson (1992) found more family cohesion for juvenile sexual offenders than for other offender groups, but less than for non-delinquents. They also found no differences regarding to family adaptability. An expansion of this study found no differences between the family environment of juvenile sexual delinquents and of other offenders, whereas delinquents generally differed from non-delinquents in terms of cohesion, expressiveness, independence, and control (Bischof, Stith, & Whitney, 1995). Even though, in one study sibling incest was distinctively related to a specific family pattern like marital discord, parental rejection, physical discipline, negative family atmosphere, and general dissatisfaction with family relationships (Worling, 1995). It can be concluded that most family interventions that proved to be effective for juvenile offenders in general are likely to be helpful for juvenile sexual delinquents, too (Bischof, Stith, & Whitney, 1995).

Looking at studies investigating *personality characteristics* of juvenile sexual offenders a wide range of variables has been considered. Referring to the therapeutic treatment, two relevant domains of variables are distinguishable: (1) deviancy and antisocial behavior and (2) predisposing personality factors. The first category includes variables like anger/aggression, hostility, and impulsivity, the second mainly focuses on social skills, self-esteem, self-control, self-efficacy or empathy. With respect to the broad range of *deviancy and antisocial behavior* sexual offenders are often described as being less aggressive (Kempton & Forehand, 1992) and less hostile (Valliant & Bergeron, 1997) than violent non-sexual offenders, although some studies found high levels of negative aggressive characteristics among sexual offenders (Csercsevits, 2000). In terms of *predisposing personality factors* adolescent sexual offenders show less social skills than non-delinquents (Walk, 2000). They were described as being more socially isolated, and more resentful than general offenders (Valliant & Bergeron, 1997). Despite the fact that sex offenders are often considered to denying, minimizing and justifying

their offending behavior, there is little empirical evidence of denial in juvenile sexual offenders (Tierney & McCabe, 2002). Although empathy and self-concept variables are considered as important predictors for re-offending, only few studies focused on self-concept characteristics (Ford & Linney, 1995) and empathy variables (Reynolds, 2000) of juvenile sexual offenders. Concerning personality characteristics in general, research results seem to be incomplete and inconsistent. Many comparative studies found no psychological distinctions between juvenile sexual offenders and non-sexual offenders (Barham, 2000; Jacobs, Kennedy, & Meyer, 1997; Lewis, Shankok, & Pincus, 1979; Truscott, 1993).

At large, mixed results about sex offender characteristics in comparison to other offender groups mainly show up in the area of personality traits and antisocial behavior, whereas the knowledge about family and biographical variables is more homogeneous. Further investigations seem to be necessary, especially because studies are often afflicted with at least three limitations: Firstly, some studies did not differentiate between subtypes of sexual offenders. Thus it is left unclear whether rapists and child abusers have similar therapeutic needs or not. Secondly, results referring to outpatients cannot be transferred easily to inpatients. There are important sample differences, mainly in the wider range of antisocial behavior. Thirdly, most findings are restricted to clinical samples and for that reason juvenile rapists are underrepresented in many sexual offender samples. Therefore it remains still unclear, how juvenile sexual offenders differ from other offender groups.

3 Research question

The main purpose of the present study is to identify psychological characteristics that might be predictive for sexual offending but not for other types of juvenile violent offenses. Sexual offenders are compared to violent non-sexual offenders, and additionally subtypes of sex offenders are compared to each other. Offender characteristics are measured along two domains: (1) Pro-offending attitudes (anger/aggression, impulsivity, hostility, neutralization) and (2) predisposing personality factors (self-esteem, self-efficacy, empathy).

4 Method

Data were obtained within the Prison Service in a German juvenile prison in Hameln/Lower Saxony. The first sample consists of sexual offenders being imprisoned within a offence-specific treatment unit (Spitczok von Brisinski, 2001). Because every juvenile sexual offender who is imprisoned in Lower Saxony is transferred to this unit, this study represents a complete sample of sex offenders in this state. The second sample consists of serious violent non-sexual offenders (serious bodily injury with and without weapon, robbery, man slaughter or homicide), who were members of a waiting-list for an Anti-Aggression-Training.

Comprehensive psychometric data were gathered from both groups during 2001 and 2002. Youths were invited to participate voluntarily in the study. Statements of assent and informed consent were given to each offender to explain the purpose of the research. Standardized instruments were self-administered in group-settings with a reading assistant provided to the youths if needed.

4.1 Participants

Altogether 105 prisoners participated; 78 of them were violent offenders and 27 were sexual offenders (14 rapists, 13 child abusers). The mean age of the participants was 20.0 years (median: 20.1; *SD*: 1.9). This high mean age is characteristic for the inmates of juvenile prisons in Germany, because juveniles under 18 years are only represented with a proportion of roughly 15 % (Federal Statistic Office Germany, 2003). Most offenders in the sample were of German nationality, 24 % were of other nationalities, mostly Turkish. At the day of the interview the average time in prison was 10.5 months (median: 8.6; *SD:* 7.5). The average duration of the prison sentences was 32.9 months (median: 30.0; *SD:* 14.4) in the total sample. Previously served prison sentences were reported by 19.0 % and 61.0 % of the participants declared that they had already been on probation.

As expected, there were different signs for social deficits and disadvantages, in particular with regard to the offender's family background and level of education. More than a half (55.7 %) of those who were interviewed grew up with both parents, 23.7 % only with their mother, whereas 10.3 % of the juveniles grew up with other relatives. 4.1 % stayed in foster care or with foster parents. In addition, 31.3 % of the juveniles who grew up with their parents

reported that they spent at least one longer term in a care home. The mean level of education was very low, 34.5 % have no formal graduation, only 34.5 % have a main graduation, 10.3 % showed a higher graduation. 20.7 % went to specialized schools for children with learning disabilities. Consequently the vocational situation of the study members was equally poor. 59.2 % of the offenders were unemployed before imprisonment.

Both offender groups did not differ significantly in age, family structure or size, duration of prison sentence, number of former prison sentences, probation or other sanctions under the German Criminal Law for Young Offenders. Sexual offenders more often had a formal school graduation ($\chi^2(5)=12.5$; $p<.01$) than violent offenders, but nearly 50 % of the sexual offenders missed to answer the question.

4.2 Measures

Anger/Aggression is measured by the Novaco-Anger-Scale (NAS; Novaco, 1994; 73 items) in a german translation by Schmelzle (2000). Part A of the questionnaire consists of 48 items, scored on 3-point Likert scales. Along three domains (cognitive, arousal, behavioral) it assesses how people experience anger. Part B measures causes of anger across different social situations (disrespect, unfairness, frustration, annoying traits, irritations). It consists of 25 items, scored on a 4-point Likert scale. In the present sample, Cronbach's Alphas range between .72 and .91, and .93 for the total score.

Impulsivity is measured by the impulsivity subscale from the Impulsivity Scale ($I_{7:}$ Eysenck, Daum, Schugens, & Diehl, 1990). It consists of 17 items, scored on a 4-point Likert scale. Cronbach's Alpha is .86 in this sample.

Hostility. The Hostile Interpretation Questionnaire (HIQ; Mamuza & Simourd, 1997) consists of 7 vignettes representing a broad range of common social situations. After reading each vignette, 4 questions have to be answered, scored on a 5-point Likert scale (Simourd & Mamuza, 2000). Scores can be computed to form accounts for an overall measure of hostility, and scores for hostility for five specific social situations (hostility towards authority, intimate, distant/interpersonal, work and anonymous relationships), and for different components of hostility (overgeneralization, attribution of hostility, hostile reaction, external blame). Alphas range between .71 and .83, and .89 for the total score.

Self-Esteem is assessed with the Self-Esteem Scale (SES; Rosenberg, 1965; German version: Ferring & Filipp, 1996; 10 items). The internal consistency is sufficient, Cronbach's Alpha is .76.

Self-efficacy is measured by a subscale of the Questionnaire of Competence and Locus of Control (FKK; Krampen, 1991; 16 items), which is a translated, adapted and newly factorized form of Levenson's IPC Questionnaire (1974). Alpha is .75.

Neutralization. As a prominent aspect of denial, neutralizing evaluations of own delinquent behavior are recorded on a 15 item subscale from a German Prisonization Questionnaire (NED; Ortmann, 1987; Cronbach's Alpha is .86). The NED items score on a 4-point Likert scale, a characteristic sample item is "I live by my own rules, and according to those rules I did nothing wrong."

Empathy. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980; 28 items) consists of four different subscales (perspective taking, fantasy, empathic concern, personal distress), scoring on a 4-point Likert scale (Davis, 1983). The mean score is an overall index for empathy. Here a short German version of the IRI (Enzmann, 1996) with 22 Items was used. Alphas is .84 for the total score (subscales: fantasy .74; perspective taking .76, concern .75, distress .65).

5 Results

To examine which variables differentiate between sexual and violent offenders a logistic regression analysis was performed on the offender group variable (0 = violent offender; 1 = sex offenders), using the total scores of the scales as predictor variables. The results show how well the offenders could be classified into violent and sex offenders from the knowledge of the independent variables. The goodness of fit of the regression model is 81.36. Altogether, 79.57 % of the offenders – 92.54 % of the violent offenders, but only 46.15 % of the sexual offenders - could be classified correctly (see table 1). The independent variables as a whole significantly affect the group variable, but of all included variables only self-esteem has a significant effect on sexual offending.

Table 1: Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Sexual Offending

Variable	*B*	*S.E. B*	*Wald*	*df*	*p*	*Exp(B)*
Step 1						
Aggression	-1.07	.96	1.25	1	.264	.34
Impulsivity	-1.66	.92	3.28	1	.070	.19
Hostility	-.07	.53	.02	1	.889	.93
Step 2						
Self-Esteem	**-1.56**	**.69**	**5.04**	**1**	**.025**	**.21**
Self-Efficacy	-1.55	.94	2.70	1	.100	.21
Empathy	.57	.67	.72	1	.395	.95
Neutralization	- .19	.60	.10	1	.749	.83
Constant	13.99	4.30	10.60	1	.001	

Note. $N = 105$; $\chi^2_{(3)} = .6.51$ for Step 1; $\Delta\chi^2_{(4)} = 20.73^{***}$ for Step 2;
Odd-Ratios > 1 are shown as reciprocal (1/Exp(B)).

On the next step, ANOVA tests were performed to examine differences between the *three* offender groups in a detailed way. Results show significant group differences for the following variables: anger cognition, anger arousal, self-esteem and self-efficacy (table 2).

(1) Pro-offending attitudes

Significant group differences were found on two out of eight subscales of the NAS Part A. Post-hoc Tukey-tests indicate that violent offenders have higher scores in anger cognitions than rapists and child abusers ($F(2;99)= 3.89$; $p = .024$). They also have a slightly higher level of anger arousal than both sexual offender groups ($F(2;99)= 3.31$; $p = .04$), but post hoc comparisons were not significant. No differences were found between the groups in terms of the behavioral domain of aggression (see figure 1). There was no significant overall effect of the total aggression score of Part A and Part B as well as the summarized aggression score of the whole NAS. Also, groups did not significantly differ in terms of impulsivity and hostility, but violent offenders tended to have higher scores (see figure 2).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Violent offenders		Rapists		Child molesters	
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
1. Aggression	2.51	.45	2.29	.34	2.22	.29
NAS Part A						
Cognition *	**2.28**	**.40**	**2.06**	**.33**	**2.03**	**.31**
Arousal *	**2.12**	**.48**	**1.87**	**.43**	**1.83**	**.39**
Behavior	2.18	.53	1.91	.46	1.89	.45
NAS Part B						
Disrespect	2.70	.66	2.57	.60	2.47	.48
Unfairness	2.84	.52	2.61	.55	2.60	.59
Frustration	2.86	.73	2.77	.55	2.74	.53
Annoying Traits	2.80	.73	2.61	.66	2.80	.50
Irritations	2.72	.64	2.44	.57	2.58	.44
2. Impulsivity	2.77	.48	2.50	.36	2.56	.49
3. Hostility	2.71	.78	2.58	.85	2.39	.45
4. Self-Esteem**	**3.15**	**.52**	**2.79**	**.36**	**2.81**	**.57**
5. Self-Efficacy **	**2.86**	**.37**	**2.51**	**.43**	**2.72**	**.36**
6. Neutralization	2.05	.6	1.73	.60	1.70	.62
7. Empathy	2.32	.42	2.40	.46	2.43	.45
Fantasy	2.15	.62	2.26	.53	2.56	.56
Perspective taking	2.41	.63	2.49	.64	2.42	.72
Emotional concern	2.49	.54	2.58	.54	2.52	.55
Personal distress	2.19	.60	2.30	.70	2.12	.48

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ for tests of mean differences.

Figure 1: NAS-Scores (Part A) in different offender groups

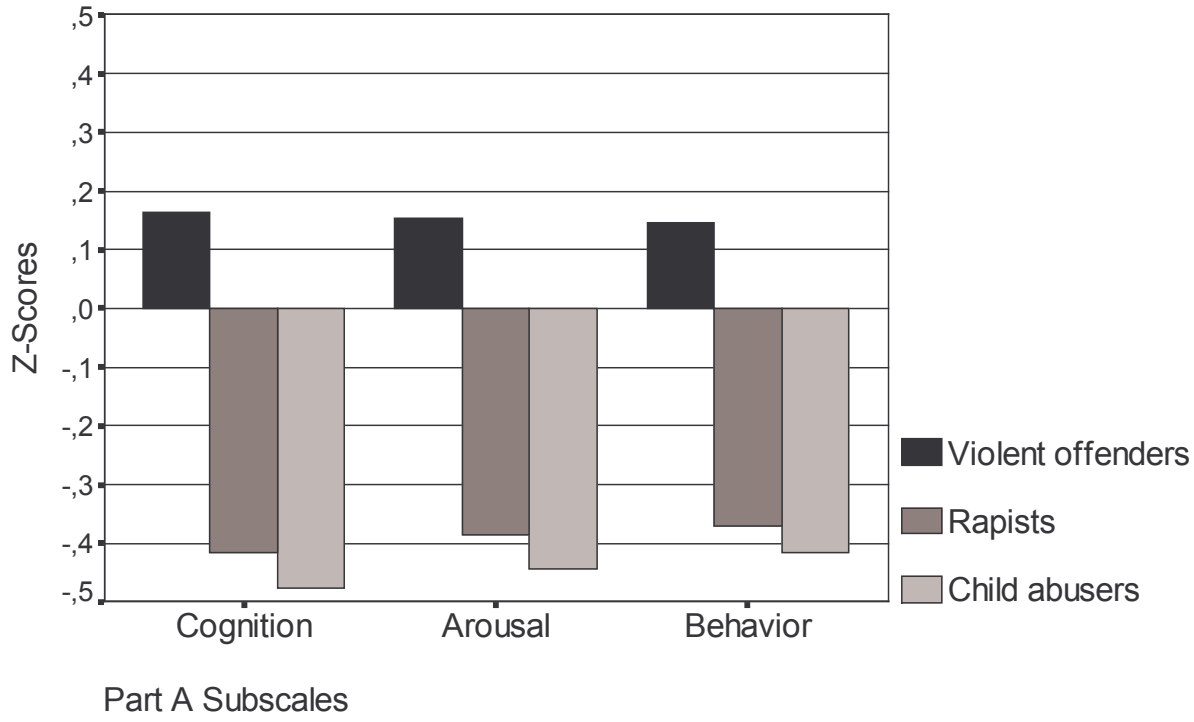
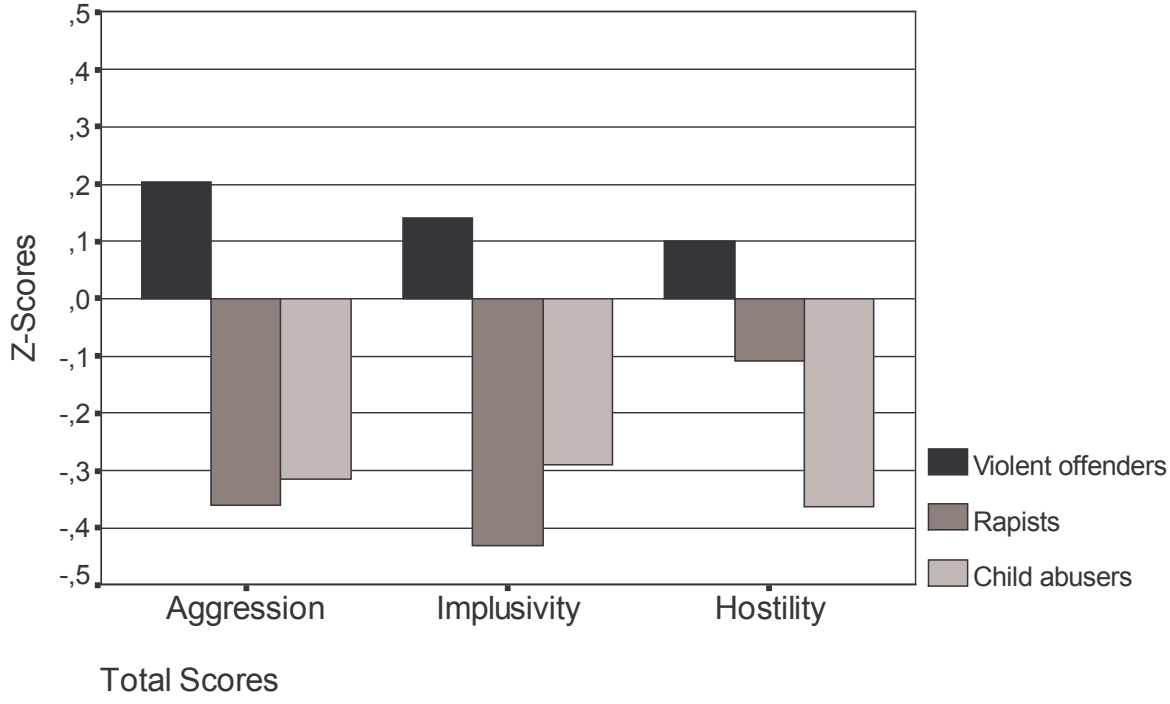


Figure 2: Antisocial behavior and offender groups



(2) Predisposing personality factors

In line with other studies, the analysis showed significant differences among the offender groups in self-esteem and self-efficacy (figure 3). Rapists and child abusers have a significantly lower self-esteem than violent offenders ($F(2;92) = 5.37$; $p < .01$). On self-efficacy ($F(2;92) = 5.09$; $p < .01$) violent offenders scored higher than rapists, but no differences were found between violent offenders and child abusers, who tended to have the highest scores. There were no significant group differences in empathy, neither on the subscales nor on the total score (figure 4). Both groups did not differ in neutralization.

Figure 3: Predisposing personality factors and offender groups

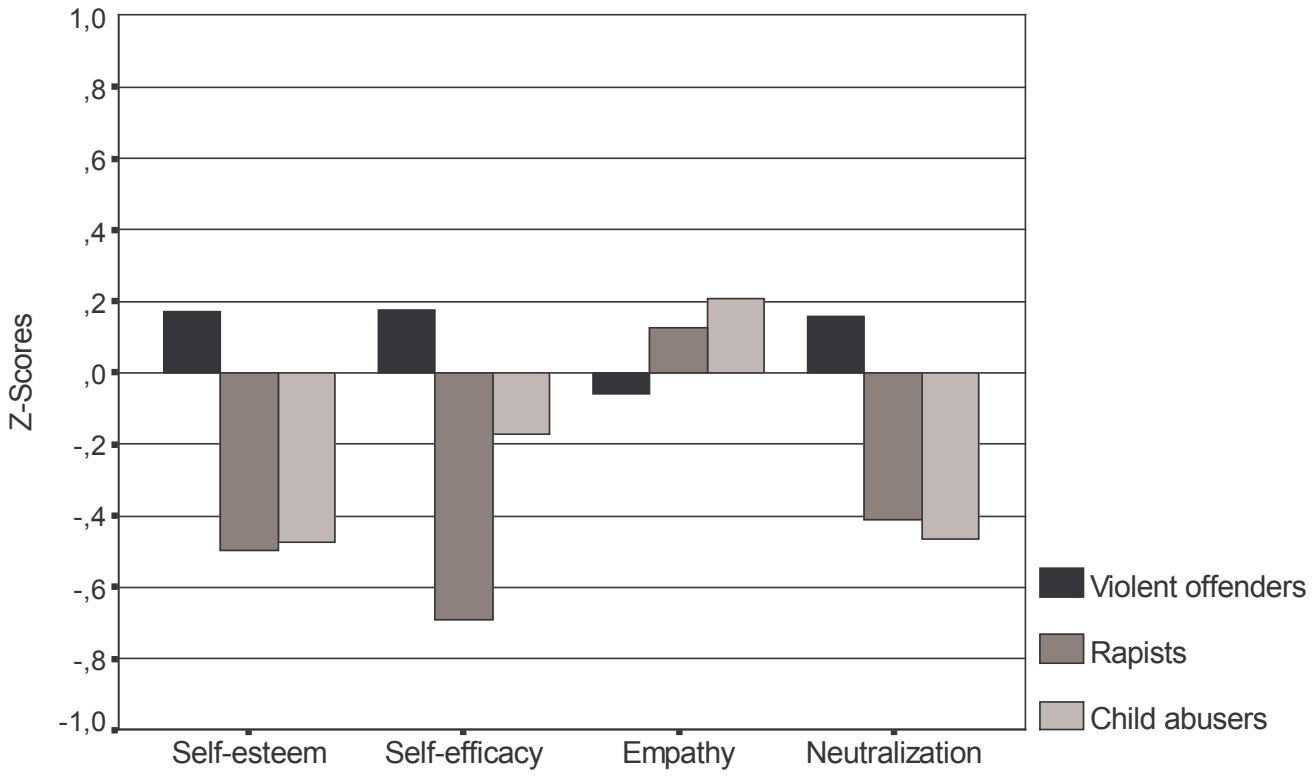
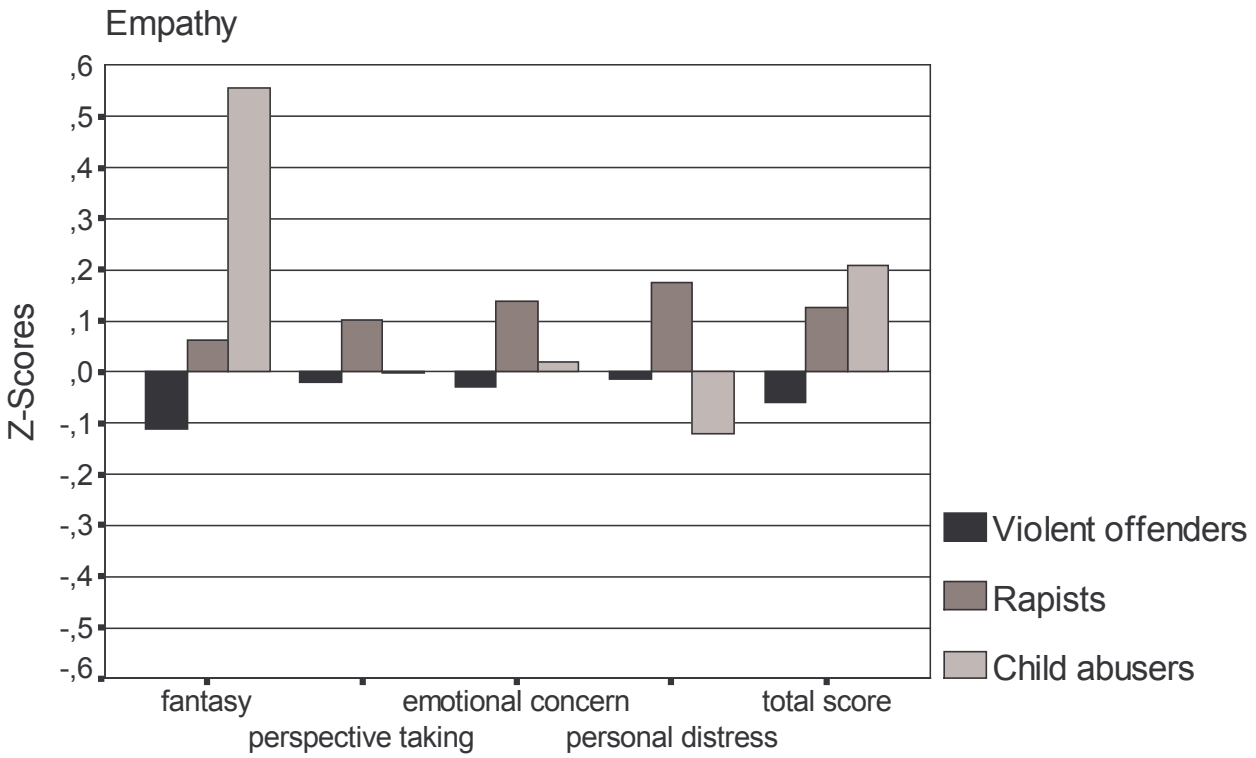


Figure 4: Empathy scales and offender groups



6 Discussion

This study is one of the few European comparative analysis of juvenile sexual and violent nonsexual offenders in prison samples, also differentiating between subtypes of sexual offenders. In accordance with other studies, only a few differences emerged between the offender groups in the present sample. Sexual offenders showed significant lower levels of anger cognition, anger arousal, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Those convicted of rape did not differ from those convicted of child abuse on any of the dependent measures, but they tended to exhibit lower self-efficacy. In contrast to other studies there were no significant differences in hostility or impulsivity scores found between the offender groups. This demonstrated that juvenile sex offenders in prison in comparison to sexual offenders in psychiatric care are a special group showing a broader range of potential risk factors for antisocial behavior, which must be considered in the development of treatment programs in prison. Because incarcerated young sexual offenders show very similar behavioral problems and personal risk-factors as violent offenders, treatment programs for sexual offenders should incorporate elements from

anti-aggression or self-assertiveness training. In this context it is important to note that specialized treatment of juvenile sexual offenders in prison is still an exception in Germany. Until now there are no laws regulating a specialized treatment for this age group.

In contrast to other studies sexual offenders tended to lower neutralization scores in this sample. Disregarding treatment duration, juvenile sexual offenders seem to have less difficulties with accepting responsibility for their offences. Perhaps this is a characteristic for our specific sample, influenced by the living conditions in prison, the separation of sexual offenders in special units with high security orders and intensive therapeutic care. Additional ratings by therapists or prison personnel and control of treatment factors should be incorporated into future research.

The study has some limitations, which should not remain unmentioned. The results of the analysis were limited by the small sample size of sex offenders and the sample collection in only one correctional facility for juveniles. A further limitation could be seen in the small age range of the study members, which was restricted from 17 to 24 years. But this age range being characteristic for all German juvenile prison samples, studies involving younger sexual offenders in Germany would have to be conducted in psychiatric hospitals and are not comparable with this investigation.

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