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EDITORIAL ARTICLE

Motivation and opportunity in explaining and preventing sexual offences[☆]

Motivación y oportunidad en la explicación y prevención de los delitos sexuales

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Submission or subjecting the will of another person forms a part of practically all sexual offences. In sexual assault it is usually achieved by physical force or domination of the victim by means of the ingestion of substances (alcohol, drugs or medication, etc.), as is described in the paper published here¹; in child sex abuse it occurs by means of the psychological sublimation deriving from deceit by or the superiority of an adult.

Two of the most important scientific questions about sexual offences or the sexual submission of a person are what leads certain individuals to commit them, and how they can be prevented. Regarding the first question, it is a well-established criminological fact that sexual offences (and crimes in general) originate in two main etiological factors:² the criminal motivation or tendency of those who commit them, and the existence of a favourable opportunity to carry them out. Scientific analysis of the criminal motivation of sexual aggressors has identified different risk correlates for their criminal behaviour: these run from genetic predispositions³ to childhood experiences such as

sexual victimisation and the use of violent pornography⁴ and a range of psychological and psychopathological dysfunctions. They also include deviant sexual fantasies, cognitive distortions, solitude, hostility, social skill deficits, alcohol or drug abuse, low self-esteem, social anxiety, paedophilia or depression.⁵ It is thought that the confluence in an individual of several of these risk correlates, in different combinations, may favour their preference for abusive or forced sex.

Respecting the second question, in sexual assaults the opportunity simply consists of the availability of a potential victim, somebody in a vulnerable situation, in the reach of the criminal.⁶ This circumstance may arise due to their isolation, the impossibility of their defending themselves physically, or the fact that they are unconscious or unable to reject an attacker. The latter would apply to a woman who had consumed a large amount of alcohol or other drugs (cocaine, among others), or certain psychoactive drugs (methamphetamines, benzodiazepines or inhaled drugs).

According to this, each sexual crime would be the result of a particular conjunction of the above-mentioned elements, a criminally motivated aggressor and the availability of a suitable opportunity. Both would contribute to the crime in equal proportions or to different degrees. For example, criminal motivation would predominate in serial sexual criminals who attack successively. These would be individuals with a strong criminal tendency who seek or create opportunities for their crimes (following unknown women or administering incapacitating substances, etc.). On the other

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hand, the influence of opportunity would predominate when the author of a sexual offence essentially "takes advantage" of a favourable occasion in the context, for example, of a date or party where a lot of alcohol has been consumed. The author's criminal motivation here too is indispensable, although it would be "stimulated" by the emergence of a suitable opportunity.

Thus the mechanisms by which criminal motivations and opportunities interact are also specifically applicable to sexual offences in which the victim is attacked in a state of chemical submission. They run from opportunist aggressors who although they lacked any previous decided criminal motivation, take advantage of the helplessness of a woman who has voluntarily abused toxic substances (ones that cause sedation, amnesia or lack of inhibition); to those criminals who are highly motivated and administer such substances to the victim with the aim of abusing her. There may also be a mix of both types of circumstances, in which individuals who are aware of the vulnerability of a person (due to abusive alcohol consumption, for example) increase this vulnerability by surreptitiously giving them an additional substance.

In any case, both factors, the criminal motivation and the suitable opportunity, are indispensable for a sexual offence to occur.^{2,6} If a highly motivated sexual attacker is unable to find a minimally vulnerable victim then no crime will be committed. And inversely, if a clearly vulnerable victim is out of the reach of individuals with any degree of motivation for sexual abuse or assault, then here too no crime will be possible.

This leads us to the second question and core subject of this editorial: how can sexual offences be prevented? As occurred with the precipitating factors, the answer to this question about prevention also involves both of the said elements. Traditional criminology is chiefly concerned with the prevention and treatment of criminal motivation, with the aim of preventing sexual infractions by young people (primary and secondary prevention) as well as reducing reoffending by convicted criminals (tertiary prevention or treatment). The social achievements in this respect have not been small. The immense majority of men fully learn during their education and development about an appropriate sexuality that has nothing to do with abuse or aggression. The treatment of sexual delinquents has also been shown to be relatively effective, reducing reoffending rates by from 10% to 22%.⁷

Nevertheless, it is true that in spite of the above considerations, certain men in each generation tend to display sufficient criminal motivation to commit sexual offences for the first or successive times. This leads us to the press-

ing need for prevention to also concentrate on the second factor that favours sexual offences: the existence of suitable opportunities. This has been covered most recently by environmental criminology.⁸ This form of primary prevention should be aimed firstly at society as a whole, as this is where potential sexual victims are found. Awareness-raising, educational and self-protection campaigns⁹ should target young people, families, schools and sports groups, etc. However, it is also necessary that secondary and tertiary protection targets individuals and groups (girls, boys, young people and women) who, due to their individual and social characteristics (their age, disabilities, addictions or lifestyles) may be more vulnerable to specific sexual offences.

There is no need to say that this prevention as a whole, which should combine actions aimed at those who are motivated to commit sexual offences as well as taking steps to protect their potential victims, is far from easy. Nevertheless, these are the routes that scientific knowledge points out as the most accurate, so that they are also the most effective and surest in better preventing sexual offences.

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