Classification is a fundamental cognitive operation. From the first perceptual contact with stimuli (Pomerantz, 1986; Treisman, 1986) through the ultimate integration and storage of information in long-term memory (Rosch & Lloyd, 1978), the identification, organization, and integration of elements that share common characteristics has been shown to be an essential component of perception and cognition. The critical function of classification in scientific investigation mirrors its central role in general cognition. Phenomenalists, realists, and conceptualists, despite their diverse metaphysical perspectives, all recognize the vital role of classification in science (Ghiselin, 1981). It stands as a necessary precursor and pervasive sustainer of all scientific progress (Hempel, 1965).

In the scientific study of anomalous behavior, the indispensable role of classification is well established. Understanding the taxonomic structure of a deviant population is the keystone of theory building and the cornerstone of intervention. It provides a pivotal underpinning for research on a population and is an essential prerequisite for determining the optimum response of society to deviance. Whether the goal is making decisions about intervention, treatment, and disposition, tracking down the developmental roots of a deviant behavioral pattern, or following the life course of this pattern, failure to take the taxonomic structure of a population into account can lead to serious practical, methodological, and theoretical errors.
In the study of sexual aggression the importance of taxonomic issues has been widely acknowledged in the clinical literature (see Knight, Rosenberg, & Schneider, 1985). Clinical investigators, working with rapists and child molesters, have responded both to the apparent heterogeneity of these offenders and to the demands placed on clinicians to make discrete decisions about treatment and disposition. They have described the consistencies they have observed among these offenders and have proposed typologies that were intended to increase group homogeneity and to inform clinical judgments (e.g., Fitch, 1962; Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy, & Christenson, 1965; Groth & Birnbaum, 1979; McCaghy, 1967; Seghorn & Cohen, 1980). Although there are some basic similarities in the most salient types identified in the various proposed systems (see Knight et al., 1985) and the most widely used subtype-defining dimensions appear to have reasonable discriminatory power (Knight et al., 1985), these systems have remained only speculative models with little or no evidence of reliability or validity. Their potential for enhancing the efficacy of clinical decisions about treatment, management, and disposition has not been tested; and they have provided little guidance to the investigation of etiology, recidivism, or the life-span adaptation of sexual offenders.

Agreement about the level at which taxonomic differentiation among sexual offenders should occur has not been universal. For instance, some have challenged the attempt to subdivide rapists, arguing that the supposed heterogeneity of rapists is simply random variation at the extreme end of a normal distribution of all males (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Scully & Marolla, 1985). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III-R; American Psychiatric Association, 1987) does not include a diagnostic category for rapists—although the advisory committee on the paraphilias recommended one—and only contains the global category of pedophilia for child molesters. Thus, not only is there little evidence about what types of sexual offenders may exist, there does not even seem to be a consensus about where group differentiation should be attempted. Clearly, the critical issue of whether there are useful subtypes of rapists and child molesters is an empirical question. One can rely on neither the clinical intuitions that have inspired sexual offender typologies nor the unsubstantiated conjectures that have rejected such systems. The difficulties encountered when depending exclusively on such intuitions and conjectures have been amply demonstrated (e.g., Knight & Roff, 1985; Meehl, 1957, 1959; Monahan, 1981).

Fortunately, a powerful methodology for generating and testing typological schemes in deviant populations has been clearly delineated (e.g., Blashfield, 1980; Meehl, 1979; Skinner, 1981, 1986), and a detailed description of how these techniques can be applied to the study of sexual offenders has been provided (Knight et al., 1985). One of the major goals of our research program at the Massachusetts Treatment Center during the 1980s has been addressing these critical taxonomic problems by systematically applying this approach to the study of sexual offenders. It is the intent of this chapter to give an overview of this programmatic approach and to summarize some of the taxonomic structures that have emerged from our research.