The Use of Penile Tumescence Measures with Incarcerated Rapists: Further Validity Issues

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The use of penile tumescence to categorize and assess the treatment of sex offenders has gained increasing popularity. Recent publications have expanded the use of tumescence measures for the classification of rapists. The majority of studies in the past using mainly subjects seeking treatment or admitting to difficulties in controlling rape urges have shown the technology to be a valuable asset in classification. The present investigation, however, points out the limitations of using this technology in certain populations. The responses of incarcerated rapists and incarcerated nonrape offenders were compared. Analysis of the data indicated that there were no significant differences between the responses of rapists and nonrapists and that the rape index proposed by Abel et al. (1978) did not reliably classify incarcerated rapists. This paper points out the limitations of penile tumescence assessment with certain populations and discusses possible reasons for the failure to discriminate in this investigation.

KEY WORDS: rapists; penile tumescence; prisoners.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major advances in the study of sexual functioning in males has been the introduction of reliable physiological measurements of sexual

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arousal. Zuckerman (1971), in reviewing various physiological measurements, concluded that direct genital measurement (penile tumescence) was the most sensitive physiological index of sexual arousal. Because of the assumed reliability and validity of tumescence measures, behaviorists working in the area of sexual deviation have adopted direct penile measures as a major dependent variable. The application of penile tumescence technology to sexual deviation had been well reviewed by Abel and his colleagues (Abel, 1976; Abel and Blanchard, 1976; Barlow and Abel, 1976; Murphy et al., 1980) and will not be reviewed here.

As the technique of penile tumescence measurement becomes widespread, it becomes necessary to take a closer look at the validity of the measurement and at the types of populations for whom the measurement is appropriate. It has been shown that heterosexuals (Laws and Rubin, 1969) and homosexuals (Abel et al., 1975) can suppress erection responses. More recent data has directly investigated the ability of individuals (both offenders and normals) to alter erectile response (Laws and Holmen, 1978: Quinsey and Bergersen, 1976; Quinsey and Carrigan, 1978). These studies have been reviewed in more detail previously (Murphy et al., 1980). The major conclusion is that subjects can alter their erectile response as measured by penile circumference techniques and that some offenders can be quite ingenious in the methods they develop for response faking (Laws and Holmen, 1978).

The above data become extremely important for the mental health professional who must make decisions about rapists in situations where there might be strong motivation to appear normal. Since rape is an aggressive sexual behavior that has serious consequences to the victims (Burgess and Holmstrom, 1979) and since mental health professionals have been rather poor at predicting aggressive behavior (Megaree, 1970), it is extremely tempting to adopt an "objective" measure of aggressive arousal to make decisions. Previous, literature on the penile response in rapists (Abel et al., 1977, 1978, 1980; Barbaree et al., 1979; Quinsey et al., 1979) would suggest that such assessment is a valuable means of separating rapists from nonrapist offenders and normals. Although subjects in the above studies came from a variety of situations, including both outpatient volunteers and forensic treatment units, it appears that the majority of subjects admitted to committing rape. In addition, most of the subjects were seeking treatment, with the exception of some of the subjects in the report of Quinsey et al. (1979). Many times, however, the clinician is faced with another problem, that is, a requirement to evaluate a sex offender who denies his guilt or who denies that his past behavior is still a problem. The present study presents data on a group of incarcerated rapists who either denied the crime or denied that urges to rape were a problem, and contrasts their data to a sample of offenders incarcerated for nonsexual offenses. The purpose of this report is to present prelimi-