MSc in Clinical Psychology

Once a Sex Offender – Always a Sex Offender?

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Forewords and Acknowledgements

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the BSc Psychology degree at Reykjavik University, this thesis is presented in the style of an article for submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

The MSc research thesis in psychology, “Once a Sex Offender – Always a Sex Offender?” has been ongoing for three semesters, and is a partial project in fulfilment of the requirements of the MSc in Clinical Psychology degree at Reykjavik University. In the first semester, a review was written about the research project topic and the main contents of the research. An application, including a theoretical discussion was written and submitted to The National Bioethics Committee, who concluded that the project was not an issue for them, and recommended that The Icelandic Data Protection Authority should be contacted. An application was sent to The Icelandic Data Protection Authority, who gave their consent to the project topic and method. The participants were professionals at the city of Reykjavik department of welfare and undergraduate students in forensic psychology at Reykjavik University.

A method chapter for the research project was written in the second semester. Permission for approval to conduct the research among the personnel was sent to the city of Reykjavik department of welfare (velferðarsvið Reykjavíkurborgar). Two meetings were held for discussions and exchange of information, which led to a submission for the research on behalf of the city of Reykjavik welfare department. The research was performed during the third semester.

In December 2016, the professionals at the department of welfare received an email from the welfare IT department, asking them to participate in the study. Three email reminders were sent to increase the number of respondents. Three measurements were performed on the students; pre, and post-training and a follow-up. In the third semester the research was conducted and the
thesis written. January 2017, the students received the same email as the professionals at the Reykjavik city welfare department, with a link to the questionnaires sent by the supervisor of the study, who was also the teacher of the undergraduate forensic psychology course. By participating in all three measurements, students gained a partial fulfilment of the course. At the beginning of February, the educational workshop was held for the students, lasting one and a half hours within a three day period. Six weeks later, a follow-up was conducted on the students, with the research supervisor sending the students a web link guiding them to the questionnaires for the last time. In total, 115 participants took part in the research; 78 from the welfare department and 37 undergraduate students at Reykjavik University.

I would like to thank the following:

The city of Reykjavik department of welfare for their goodwill and excellent cooperation. The students who participated in the study and were active in in the workshop discussions. My thanks go to Simon Vaughan for his careful reading and thoroughness, as well as his endless patience. Not least, I would like to thank my supervisor, Anna Kristin Newton, for her endless positivity, encouragement and patience – not to mention her extraordinary breadth of knowledge in the field of sexual offences.
Abstract

Studies have repeatedly established the public’s negative and prejudicial attitudes towards sex offenders, and shown that people tend to be even more punitively inclined towards sex offenders than towards other offenders. The purpose of the present study was to evaluate the effect of holding workshops on attitudes toward sex offenders, with the main aim of promoting more realistic attitudes towards this group. Undergraduate students answered two questionnaires; Attitudes Towards Prisoners (ATP) and Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders (ATS). The workshop was designed for two one-and-a-half-hour sessions. Prior to the workshop, immediately after the workshop and six weeks later, the students answered the questionnaires. Professionals at the Reykjavik city welfare department served as a control group with no intervention, and answered the questionnaires once. Compared to professionals, students’ attitudes towards sex offenders were less positive, prior to the workshop. Results also indicated that after the workshop, the students’ attitudes were more realistic than prior to the workshop and remained so six weeks later. The results suggest that the impact of this short educational workshop is promising. The workshop approach should be considered by those who provide services to those who sexually offend against others, in order to enhance understanding of the needs of this client group and to increase the quality of the service in order to reduce the risk of recidivism.

Keywords: sex offenders, attitudes, stigmatization, reintegration, workshop
Once a Sex Offender – Always a Sex Offender?

An increase in sexual crime is a widespread problem in communities (e.g. Anna Kristín Newton & Þórarinn Viðar Hjaltason, 2011; Craig, 2005; Lea, Auburn, & Kibblewhite, 1999; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Nelson, Herlihy, & Oescher, 2002). In Iceland there has been a significant increase in notification of sexual abuse reports, according to the State Prosecutor in Iceland. Between 2001 (State Prosecutor, 2001) and 2015 (State Prosecutor, 2015), reports of sexual abuse increased by 48.4%. Alongside the increase in the reporting of sexual crimes, there has been an increase in the public’s awareness of the harm that sexual offenses can cause (Fortney, Levenson, Brannon, & Baker, 2007).

Research shows that sexual offenses are the crimes which many people fear the most and for which people demand the harshest sentences (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Robbers, 2009). Their opinions are based on many different factors, but it is clear that the media play a large part in shaping attitudes towards sexual offenders (Harper & Hogue, 2014; Katz, Levenson, & Ackerman, 2008). The media’s portrayal of sexual offenders is often characterized by yellow journalism, where things are painted either black or white. A certain view of them is shaped by highlighting the offenders’ subhuman qualities and describing them with words like “monster”, “pervert”, “rapist” or “molester” (Harper & Hogue, 2014; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). Thus, via the media, stereotypes emerge of mysterious, different, frightening, frustrated and psychotic men (Fortney et al., 2007; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). It has been suggested that this one-sided interpretation has a negative impact on public attitudes regarding those who sexually offend. By endorsing such a stereotypical view, a homogeneous picture appears in people’s minds in relation to those who sexually offend. The fact is, the offenses are as different as they
are numerous, and those who sexually offend are not all dangerous (Harris & Hanson, 2004; Katz et al., 2008).

Studies have repeatedly established the public’s negative and prejudiced attitudes towards sex offenders, with the public being even more punitively inclined towards them than towards other types of offenders (Kleban & Jeglic, 2012; Robbers, 2009; Rogers & Ferguson; 2011). However, not all people hold the same view, and experience seems to play a role in shaping their attitudes. To the surprise of many, studies have established that people who have reported being sexually abused hold more positive attitudes towards those who have sexually offend than those who do not share that experience (Ferguson & Ireland, 2006). Another finding is that being in personal contact with sex offenders, for example, being involved in their treatment (e.g. as prison officers and psychologists), affects people’s attitudes towards them in a positive way (Hogue, 1993; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). Gakhal and Brown (2011) compared attitudes among the general public, forensic professionals and students towards those who have offended sexually. Their results indicate that students and the general public hold less positive attitudes than professionals. Their interpretation is that individuals who have experience of, or are more confident in their knowledge in relation to sexual offending, hold a more reasonable view of those who sexually offend and are less inclined to stigmatize them.

Stigmatization and labeling is one of the problems sex offenders face (Kleban & Jeglic, 2010; Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Not only are they treated like outcasts while incarcerated, but also when they return to society (Evans & Cubellis, 2015; Hogue, 1993). One of the consequences of being labeled a sex offender is the stereotypical views that people have which are often not based on factual information - for instance that all sex offenders are dangerous and likely to reoffend at any opportunity (Katz et al., 2008; Levenson & Cotter,
Another is that once they have been labeled a sex offender, it seems to be very difficult for them to assume any other labels no matter how hard they try (Evans & Cubellis, 2015; Fortney et al., 2007; Willis, Levenson, & Ward, 2010). In many cases, even those who take responsibility for their actions, serve their sentence, attend treatment, comply with supervision and want to keep themselves and others safe are still solely identified by their sex offender label (Evans & Cubellis, 2015). This often leads to difficulties reintegrating into society (Brown, Deakin, & Spencer, 2008; Fortney et al., 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2005).

For a nation like Iceland, with a small population, family ties are strong and it is easy to find connections between people, if not through family then through mutual friends or acquaintances. But being part of a small population has its pros and cons. Obvious cons are the fact that news travels fast, is not always reliable, and the public often gets hold of information regarding offenses and offenders. On the other hand, as the population is small, it should make it easier to have an impact on skewed attitudes, for instance about those who sexually offend. In a master study, six male sex offenders in Iceland, released on probation, were interviewed about their reintegration back into society (Henrietta Ósk Gunnarsdóttir, 2017). The study emphasized their adverse experiences during this period. The men reported difficulties they encountered, such as the prejudice they and their family members met, financial and housing problems, lack of employment, lack of support and treatment, hopelessness and social isolation. Meeting the basic needs of convicted sexual offenders once back in society needs to be addressed if we are to keep them and others safe (Levenson & Cotter, 2005)

Kleban and Jeglic (2012) state that the key elements in increasing safety and reducing the likelihood of recidivism are the provision of appropriate treatment, service and support after they are released from prison. Some of the main protective factors for reducing reoffending are linked
to social factors, but offenders’ basic needs for housing and employment are crucial elements, because, if they do not have stability, then the likelihood of reoffending increases (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). A large proportion of those released from prison for sexual offending have to rely on social services for support (Lea et al., 1999). This in turn means that social services are, in many cases, the factor which can have a real impact on the reintegration of offenders back into society. In Iceland, there is no specialized service within the social system for sex offenders upon completion of their sentences.

One of the ways in which professionals within the field of sexual offending have tried to bring about a more realistic view of those who sexually offend is by education. This is in the hope that it may promote a shift in the public’s negative attitudes, which at the moment are hampering their reintegration back to society and possibly making them more of a risk than they need to be (e.g. Craig, 2005; Kleban & Jeglic, 2012; Taylor, Keddie, & Lee, 2003).

To the authors best knowledge, a study evaluating whether factual information has an impact on general attitudes regarding those who sexually offend has not been undertaken in Iceland. There are strong arguments that if the general public’s knowledge was more accurate regarding sexual offending, this would be beneficial both for society as well as for the sexual offender (Katz et al., 2008; Willis & Grace, 2008). Educating people about sexual offending may bring about a shift in attitudes, where the public is more supportive of policies that try to curb sexual offenses, rather than holding fast to stereotypical views that are, in part, built on myths created by the media (Harper & Hogue, 2014; Katz et al., 2008; Willis et al., 2010). More accurate information could also lead to the public being more on board with efforts towards rehabilitation and reintegration into society (Katz et al., 2008; Kleban & Jeglic, 2012; Willis & Grace, 2009).
It is hypothesized that attitudes towards general offenders are more positive than those towards sexual offenders. Secondly, it is hypothesized that professionals with training in social sciences will hold more positive attitudes towards sex offenders than others. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that those who have experienced sexual abuse either towards themselves or towards someone close to them, hold more positive attitudes towards those who sexually offend than those who have no personal experience of sexual abuse. Finally, it is hypothesized that people’s attitudes towards those who sexually offend will shift in a positive direction after they have participated in an educational workshop.

Method

Participants

The present study’s sample size was 115 participants, 98 female (85.2%) and 17 male (14.8%). There were two groups of participants, professionals and students. The professionals worked at the city of Reykjavik welfare department (velferðarsvið Reykjavikurborgar) in the social services, and all had university degrees. The undergraduate students were all students at Reykjavik University. The professionals were contacted via email, asking them to participate in the study by answering a survey. In total, 83 (53.2%) professionals responded, 71 female and 12 male, and of them five respondents did not finish the questionnaires. The professionals’ final sample consisted of 68 females and 10 males. The professionals’ mean age was 41.88 years ($SD = 9.36$ years, range 25-55 years). The students were recruited from a forensic psychology class, but had not received any information regarding sexual offending, and by participating in the study, they gained partial fulfilment of the course. The student sample included 37 participants, 30 female and 7 male. The students’ mean age was 24.50 years ($SD = 2.54$ years, range 25-35 years). The Icelandic Data Protection Authority was informed about the research.
Measures

Two questionnaires were used. The Attitudes Toward Prisoners (ATP) and Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders (ATS) scales. As well as these questionnaires, participants answered demographic questions about sex, age, and if they had ever been sexually violated or knew anyone close to them who had been.

Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders (ATS)

The ATS questionnaire was developed by Hogue (1993), and is modified from the questionnaire Attitudes Towards Prisoners (ATP). Hogue replicated the ATP questionnaire, but replaced the word prisoners with the term sex offenders and shortened the questionnaire from 36 items to 21 items, with eleven negatively worded statements (Harper & Hogue, 2014). The shortened version gave Cronbach´s alpha coefficient .94, an excellent consistency. The ATS scale is on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). The lower the score, the more negative the attitude towards the sex offenders. The ATS scale has been widely used in researches with multiple samples (i.e. correctional staff, community, professionals and students), in the USA, UK and in other countries. The ATS scale was translated into Icelandic by Professor Jon Fridrik Sigurdsson and Anna Kristin Newton, forensic psychologist (Anna Kristín Newton, personal communication, November 8, 2016).

Attitudes Towards Prisoners (ATP)

The ATP questionnaire was developed by Melvin, Gramling, and Gardner (1985). The ATP scale was designed in order to assess individuals´ attitudes about prisoners in general. ATP consists of 36 statements on a 5-point Likert scale, about prisoners (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Nineteen statements are negatively worded (i.e. prisoners never change) and the scores are reversed. The lower the score, the more negative the attitude towards the
prisoners’ group in general. The ATP scale has been widely used in research with multiple samples (i.e. correctional staff, community, professionals and students), both in the USA and in other countries. The ATP split-half reliability has scored $r = .84$ to $0.92$, with test-retest of $r = .82$. (Melvin, Gramling, & Gardner, 1985). It was decided to short the ATP scale down to the same 21 items as the shortened version of the ATS scale, with eleven negatively worded statements for the present study. The ATP scale was translated into Icelandic by Anna Rún Ólafsdóttir, along with four assistances and back-translated to English by Anna Kristin Newton, forensic psychologist (Anna Rún Ólafsdóttir, 2010).

**Procedure**

**The professionals**

The procedure was as follows. The head of standards and research (deildarstjóri gæða og rannsókna), at the city of Reykjavik welfare department sent an introduction via email from the researcher conducting the study to all professional personnel working in the social services. Along with the email was a link, which, if opened, guided personnel to the questionnaires on SurveyMonkey (surveymonkey.com) - an online survey development cloud-based software. Each participant used a unique code word, which they chose themselves, when answering the questionnaires. The code word had two functions; firstly, as a form of consent, that is to say that by typing the code, the participant gave his or her consent to taking part in the research project. Secondly, the code protected the participants’ personal information, which could not be tracked by the researcher. The professionals’ sample served as control group for the study.

**The students**

The teacher of the forensic psychology class shared a web link to the students via email, which guided them to the questionnaires on SurveyMonkey. The same method used with the
professionals was used with the students. The students chose a unique code word. The students answered the questionnaires three times - prior to the workshop as a base rate indicator to the professionals’ attitudes, immediately after the workshop to track learning experiences, and six weeks after the workshop, to test whether the training had a lasting effect. The students answered the questionnaires online in the first and last measurement, but manually after the workshop.

**The workshop**

The main goal of the workshop was to educate and inform students about matters relevant to those who sexually offend. The workshop focused on the nature of the offenses, the relation between those who sexually offend and the victims, the question “who sexually offend?”, myths and facts about sex offenders, treatment and recidivism. The workshop ran for two sessions and the duration of each session was 90 minutes. The workshop was based on a lectures and discussions.

**Analysis**

The eleven negatively worded statements in the ATP and the ATS scales were reversed, so high scores indicated positive attitudes. An independent t-test was used to compare differences between the two scales, ATP and ATS. A paired t-test was applied to pair the observations in the professionals’ sample to the students’ sample and to compare single items on the scales. One-way ANOVA repeated measures were applied to analyze the difference between pre-, post-training and follow-up within the student’s sample.

**Results**

The reliability measures indicated good internal consistency of the ATP \( (N = 115, \alpha = .89) \) and ATS \( (N = 115, \alpha = .92) \). A principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted on the 21 items with orthogonal rotation (varimax). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the
sampling adequacy for the analysis, KMO = .85, which is indicated as a great value. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant \( \chi^2(210) = 811.68, p < .001 \), indicated that correlations between items were sufficiently large for the data. The analysis declared in total 6 components, explaining 64.5% of the variance (eigenvalues 12.13). All of the 21 items on the scale loaded > .4 on the components.

The hypothesis that professionals and students held more positive attitudes towards offenders in general than towards those who sexually offend was supported, \( t(90) = 13.71, p < .001 \), with a medium-sized effect \( r = .45 \). This more favorable attitude towards general prisoners was evident when the means were analyzed, higher mean score, implying more positive attitudes – with higher means score for the ATP scale for all measures (table 1).

Table 1

Means and standard deviation of the ATP and ATS scale, for the control group and prior to training, post-training and follow-up for the students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Professionals&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Students&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>baseline M (SD)</td>
<td>pre-training M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATP</td>
<td>4.03 (.42)</td>
<td>3.60 (.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATS</td>
<td>3.53 (.52)</td>
<td>3.00 (.55)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ATP = Attitude Towards Prisoners; ATS = Attitude Towards Sex Offenders. 
<sup>a</sup>\( n = 78 \), <sup>b</sup>\( n = 37 \).

The results also supported the hypothesis that professionals would hold more positive attitudes towards sex offenders than the students. An independent t-test revealed a significant difference, \( t(97) = -4.74, p < .001 \), with a medium-sized effect \( r = -.44 \), with students’ attitudes towards sex offenders being less positive pre-training than the professionals’ attitudes. The
hypothesis that attitudes towards sex offenders held by those who have experienced sexual abuse - or where someone close to them has - are more positive than attitudes held by those who have not experienced sexual abuse, either personally or towards someone close to them, was not supported, $t(113) = 1.03, p = .297, r = .04$. The impact of training supports the hypothesis that students’ attitudes towards those who sexually offend would shift and be more positive after participation in an educational workshop. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare the impact of training on attitudes pre-training, right after the training, and six weeks later. Mauchly’s test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had not been violated, $\chi^2(2) = .70, p = .70$. The results show a significant effect of the training on attitudes, with students showing a more positive attitude towards sex offenders after training, compared to pre-training, $F(2, 29) = 17.16, p < .001$. Two paired samples t-tests were used to make post hoc comparisons between conditions. The former paired sample t-test indicated that there was a significant difference between students’ attitudes before the training ($M=3.00, SD=.55$) and right after the training ($M=3.32, SD=.48$); $t(34) = -5.27, p < .001$, with students holding more positive attitudes towards sex offenders after the training (Figure 1). There were no significant changes in students’ attitudes right after the training and six weeks later ($M=3.34, SD=.48$); $t(31) = -.870, p = .391$. 

Single items on the ATP and ATS scales were compared. The mean scores for single questions indicated participants’ attitudes towards sex offenders and prisoners in general. The main purpose was to evaluate if there was a trend towards lower scores on all items of the ATS compared to the ATP scale, as the total score on ATP were higher than the ATS total score. Higher items score suggested more positive attitudes. Also to evaluate if there were some items on the ATS that had higher mean score than the same items on the ATP scale. Of all the items on the scales, the means scores were higher for the ATP scale, apart from the questions number 8: “Rehabilitating prisoners is a waste of time and money” and “Rehabilitating sex offenders is a waste of time and money”. An examples of items number 5, 8, 9, 10, 15, 19 and 21 from the ATP and ATS scales are to be found in table 2.
Table 2

Comparisons on single items mean score and standard deviation changes on ATP and ATS scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATP and ATS item</th>
<th>Professionals$^a$</th>
<th>Students$^b$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>baseline $M$ ($SD$)</td>
<td>pre-training $M$ ($SD$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I think I would like a lot of prisoners</td>
<td>3.75 (.82)</td>
<td>3.00 (.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I think I would like a lot of SO’s</td>
<td>2.92 (1.04)</td>
<td>1.89 (.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Rehabilitating prisoners is a waste of time and money</td>
<td>1.41 (.55)</td>
<td>1.28 (.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Rehabilitating SO’s is a waste of time and money</td>
<td>1.62 (.68)</td>
<td>1.47 (.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Prisoners are no better or worse than other people</td>
<td>3.88 (.89)</td>
<td>3.24 (.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. SO’s are no better or worse than other people</td>
<td>3.09 (1.03)</td>
<td>2.62 (.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. You have to be constantly on guard with prisoners</td>
<td>3.50 (.84)</td>
<td>3.08 (.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. You have to be constantly on guard with SO’s</td>
<td>2.77 (.98)</td>
<td>2.62 (.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I wouldn’t mind living next door to an ex-prisoner</td>
<td>3.66 (.82)</td>
<td>3.05 (.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I wouldn’t mind living next door to an ex-SO</td>
<td>2.94 (1.07)</td>
<td>2.38 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I would like associating with some prisoners</td>
<td>4.04 (.64)</td>
<td>3.54 (.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I would like associating with some SO’s</td>
<td>2.58 (1.03)</td>
<td>1.78 (.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. If prisoners do well in prison: be let out on parole</td>
<td>3.87 (.65)</td>
<td>3.57 (.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. If SO’s do well in prison: be let out on parole</td>
<td>3.60 (.91)</td>
<td>2.84 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Questions indicating prisoners are questions from the ATP scale. Questions indicating sex offenders (SO’s) are questions from the ATS scale.

SO’s = Sex offenders.

Questions number 8 and 21 are shortened in the table.

$^a$n = 79, $^b$n = 37

As can be seen in table 1, students’ mean score to a question were nearly always lower than the professionals’ mean score. This was true for the pre-training measure, as well as for the post-training measure, though the gap was less. Question number 5: “I think I would like a lot of prisoners” and “I think I would like a lot of sex offenders”, is an example of the difference between the groups. The mean score for professionals was 2.92 on the ATS scale which is close to the neutral score 3 on the Likert scale on the questionnaires. The students’ score for the question was 1.89 on the ATS scale, implying negative attitudes towards the statement. Most of the students’ answers for question number 5 were between 1 = strongly disagree and 2 = disagree on the Likert
scale, though they more often chose value 2 over value 1. There were more interesting findings, when single items were analyzed, for example, if looked at the values for the questions number 8: “Rehabilitating prisoners is a waste of time and money” and “Rehabilitating sex offenders is a waste of time and money”, they indicate that neither professionals nor students believe strongly in the benefit of treatment for prisoners or sex offenders.

Discussion

The present study’s main purpose was to evaluate whether a short educational workshop could affect attitudes towards those who sexually offend. The results support the study’s first hypothesis that participants hold more positive attitudes towards those who offend generally than towards those who offend sexually. Studies have repeatedly confirmed this, with different groups of people (Craig, 2005; Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). The fact that people hold more negative attitudes towards those who sexually offend than towards offenders in general can stem from the feelings which these crimes evoke within people. Sexual offenses evoke negative emotions within people, including anger, fear and disgust (Taylor et al., 2003). The results also supported the study’s hypothesis that professionals’ attitudes towards those who sexually offend are more positive than the students’ attitudes prior to an educational workshop. These results are in line with many other studies measuring attitudes between professionals and other groups (Hogue, 1993; Nelson et al., 2002; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006; Ware et al., 2012). It has been argued that people who work with those who sexually offend have a more positive attitude towards them than others who are not involved in working with sex offenders (Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). This suggests that being in contact with someone who has sexually offended, for instance in the context of treatment or through the social services, gives one a perspective on the human being behind the crime (Willis et al., 2010). The hypothesis that an educational workshop would
change the student’s attitudes towards those who sexually offend in a positive direction was supported. A number of educational interventions have shown that they have the ability to affect attitudes by means of enhanced knowledge, and give people a more realistic attitude towards the subject (Craig, 2005; Kleban & Jeglic, 2012; Taylor et al., 2003). The present study’s workshop increased the means on the ATP and the ATS scales – indicating that participants’ attitudes were more positive post-training than pre-training. Nevertheless, the gap between attitudes towards prisoners in general and attitudes towards sex offenders was still evident. Finally, the present study failed to support the hypothesis that those who have personal experience of sexual abuse have more positive attitudes towards those who sexually offend than those who have no such personal experience. This is not in line with what Ferguson & Ireland (2006) and Nelson and colleagues (2002) have found in their research. It is possible that these findings can, in part, be explained by looking at what has been happening within Iceland in the past few years. There has been a huge movement to take on and tackle sexual violence against women. There have been advertising campaigns, online forums and many pressure groups have organized protests aimed at this type of violence. The message being sent to women is; Hand over the shame to those who own it. It is possible that these recent campaigns in Iceland have had an effect on women’s views of those who sexually offend. It has brought to the forefront the fact that most sexual abuse is committed by someone the victim knows and that most of them have never been charged or sentenced for their actions. This could have a negative impact on public attitudes regarding those who sexually offend, regardless of whether they were sentenced or not.

Single items on the ATP and ATS scales were compared with some interesting findings. Participants hold less positive attitudes towards sex offenders being rehabilitated than towards prisoners in general. One of the lowest single item scores indicates participants’ lack of trust that
treatment can be effective for those who sexually offend ("Trying to rehabilitate sex offenders is a waste of time and money"). The same was true for the statement "If sex offenders do well in prison, they should be let out on parole". Participants’ attitudes towards sex offenders reflected their being less positive towards the statement about being released on probation than towards general prisoners being released on probation. Research indicates that in Iceland, the public possibly overestimates the recidivism rate among offenders, believing it to be much higher than it is (Anna Kristín Newton & Þórarinn Viðar Hjaltason, 2011). The recidivism rate in Iceland for those who sexually offend and are rated low or medium risk, is 3% (Anna Kristín Newton & Þórarinn Viðar Hjaltason, 2011), compared to prisoners in general, with a recidivism rate of about 24% (Graunböl et al., 2010).

According to studies, stigmatization towards those who sexually offend is hampering their reintegration after imprisonment (Evans & Cubellis, 2015; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Willis et al., 2010). It is suggested that the media coverage of sexual offenses is responsible at least in part for the public stigma associated with these offenders (Harper & Hogue, 2014; Katz et al., 2008). Willis and colleagues (2010) argue that the media interjections of “sex offender” and “child molester” affect the public’s negative attitudes towards those who sexually offend. In Willis and colleagues’ (2010) opinion, the way to affect the public’s attitude is via the media. In their view, researchers should stand together and write informative articles in the papers, give interviews, take part in discussions and replace stereotypical language with less stigmatized wording. In Iceland, the public’s attitudes are reflected in the use of stigmatized language when talking about those who sexually offend (Anna Kristín Newton & Þórarinn Viðar Hjaltason, 2011). The aim is to give people more factual information regarding sexual offending, and possibly facilitate offenders’ reintegration into
society. Hogue (1993) has proposed a way of measuring whether the language associated with offending has an impact on people’s attitudes by replacing the word *prisoners* with the word *sex offenders*. A little pilot study could be performed to measure whether replacing the word *sex offenders* on the ATS scale with less loading words *those who sexually offend* affects people’s attitudes towards that group. By such means, a rather simple and inexpensive method could give an idea if the term *those who sexually offend* is less stigmatizing in people’s minds, than *sex offenders*.

The present study’s results are promising, in that they indicate how people’s attitudes can be affected by a short educational workshop. The sample size was small, 115 participants, and there may have been issues regarding the control sample, as only 78 usable answers were returned out of 156 emails sent out to the professionals. It is possible that those professionals who chose to answer the survey differ in some way from those professionals who did not respond. Those who responded to the survey might hold more positive attitudes towards those who sexually offend and/or are more interested in the subject than those professionals that did not respond. It should also be kept in mind that the students are in part a homogenous group, in that they have all chosen to study psychology, and therefore most of them are interested in human behavior, both normal and abnormal, and that this could affect their attitudes. Another limitation is that the follow-up period after the workshop was short, and thus it is unclear how long the effect of the training lasts.

Harper and Hogue (2014) argue that attitude shift is important among the general public, and that there has to be access for the public to educational programs. Educational workshops and discussions about those who sexually offend could be an effective way for a small nation like Iceland to bring about a change and offer a more realistic view of those who sexually offend.
– that is, by systematically offering workshops for those who come into contact with this group, i.e. welfare and social services. This in turn could further the approach of safely reintegrating those who have sexually offended. There is also, of course, the possibility of reaching the wider public by similar means. The interest in the public forum in sexual abuse is huge and there would possibly be an interest in such workshops if they were offered.

Iceland is a small nation, with a population of approximately 330.000. Within such a small and for the most part close-knit society, it is important that people have a safe environment to live in and have a sense of purpose to their lives. For those convicted of sexual offences this is often not the case when they have served their sentence. Research in the field of sexual offending has shown that there are strong protective factors for recidivism, such as housing, employment, social interactions, and treatment (Kleban & Jeglic, 2012; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Robbers, 2009; Willis et al., 2010). By informing the general public about these issues and working together, it should be possible to facilitate their safer reintegration back into society.

In conclusion, the statement “Once a Sex Offender – Always a Sex Offender?” seems to be quite a prevalent view within the general public. The stigmatization of this group of offenders will perhaps best be challenged by a reaction in the media from researchers in the field. Writing articles, giving interviews and discussions may all lend a hand in providing informative and reasonable information about these offenses and the offenders. The fact has to be faced that those who sexually offend will return back into society after serving their time. Not all of them will return as model citizens and some will reoffend. However, part of the prospect for a safer society lies in the attitudes held by the public in relation to recidivism and reintegration. It is important to realize that those who sexually offend are not equally dangerous and not equally likely to recidivate. What is critical is to help lower the risk of reoffending by addressing factors such as
employment, housing and treatment. These are actions which are known to be supportive and decrease the risk of reoffending, but, likewise, if the problems are not dealt with, the likelihood of social isolation will be increased, which in turn leads to further stigmatization and a higher risk of reoffending. To avoid this, there needs to be a public shift in attitudes, as people have to be willing, under the correct circumstances, to hire and house those who sexually offend. Also, sexual offenders need to be seen as treatable, so that they can become something more than just sex offenders.
ONCE A SEX OFFENDER – ALWAYS A SEX OFFENDER

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ONCE A SEX OFFENDER – ALWAYS A SEX OFFENDER

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