

# An empirical study of the personality characteristics of internet sex offenders



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**Abstract** *The present study evaluated the personality characteristics and psychopathology of internet sex offenders (ISOs) using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, Second Edition (MMPI-2) to determine whether ISO personality profiles are different to those of general sex offenders (GSOs; e.g. child molesters and rapists). The ISOs consisted of 48 convicted males referred to a private sex offender treatment facility for a psychosexual risk assessment. The GSOs consisted of 104 incarcerated non-internet or general sex offenders. Findings indicated that ISOs scored significantly lower on the following scales: L, F, Pd and Sc. A comparison of the MMPI-2 scores of the ISO and GSO groups indicated that ISOs are a heterogeneous group with considerable within-group differences. Current findings are consistent with the existing literature on the limited utility of the MMPI-2 in differentiating between subtypes of sex offenders.*

**Keywords** *Internet sex offenders; sex offence; personality; MMPI; psychopathology; cyber-paedophile*

## Introduction

In recent years, researchers in the field of sexual aggression have attempted to develop empirically derived typologies of sex offenders. However, classification of sex offenders into distinct groups presents significant challenges for two primary reasons. First, **sex offenders appear to be a heterogeneous group with regard to personality characteristics, criminal histories and life experiences (Bickley & Beech, 2001).** Secondly, **within-group differences in current classifications add layers of complexity to the formation of a unified typology. Over the years, numerous classification schemes have been developed but met with little consistent success, due primarily to the great variability in theories explaining characteristics of, and differences between, different types of sex offenders (Araji & Finkelhor, 1985; Barnard, Fuller, Robbins & Shaw, 1989; Beech, 1998; Bickley & Beech, 2001; Blackburn,**

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1993; Conte, 1991; Danni & Hampe, 2000; Groth, 1979; Lanyon, 1991; Marshall, 1996, 1997; Ward & Keenan, 1999).

Studies of deviant practices and the internet are focused primarily upon computer hacking and white-collar crimes, such as embezzlement, falsification of reports and deceptive billing practices (Durkin & Bryant, 1995) and the empirical literature on paraphilic internet use is limited. Available research on deviant sexual behaviour and the internet seems to suggest that paraphilic appetites are being satisfied online through newsgroups, e-mail, websites, chat rooms and interactive games in which people assume characters and “act out” their fantasies (Bates & Metcalf, 2007; Kim & Bailey, 1997). Moreover, paedophiles appear to be utilizing the internet to traffic child pornography, locate victims, communicate with children in a sexual manner and converse with other paedophiles (Bates & Metcalf, 2007; Durkin, 1997).

Using the Internet to sexually offend is a national and global problem. Despite federal prohibitions on the possession of pornography depicting children, the United States Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation investigated 1,500 cases of internet child exploitation in 1999 (Hellwege, 2000). Globally, the Virtual Global Taskforce (VGT), which is an organized effort among various law enforcement agencies from the international community, has been active in attempts to protect children against online abuse. Interpol, as a partner of VGT, is similarly an international collaboration to police sexual crimes against children. While such policing and legal approaches to the problem of internet sex offending are important, additional information is needed on the possible profiles and clinical pathologies of individuals who use the Internet to sexually offend.

In light of the above, the assessment of the personality characteristics of internet sex offenders (ISOs) is a significant step in public health approaches to the understanding and prevention of sex offences. Accurate mapping of ISO personality characteristics may allow for early identification and disruption of the offence chain through therapeutic intervention and subsequent relapse prevention (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittleman & Rouleau, 1988; Barabaree & Seto, 1997; Knight & Prentky, 1990). Despite conflicting views about its utility, the most frequently used measure for identifying sex offender typologies is the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, 2nd edition (MMPI-2) (Beech, 1998). While Lanyon (2001) indicated that the MMPI-2 was not developed for specific use with sex offenders, a number of researchers (Carter, 1999; Langevin, Wright & Handy, 1990a, 1990b; Marantz, 2005; Olander, 2004; Ridenour, Miller, Joy & Dean, 1997) have endorsed the MMPI-2 as a reliable screening device for detecting sexual deviance and profiling sex offenders.

A review of the literature revealed minimal research on the MMPI-2 profiles of internet sex offenders (Cooper, Golden & Marshall, 2006; Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2005). Thus, this work relied exclusively on studies utilizing the MMPI-2 to investigate sex offender personality patterns, in general. McCreary (1975) demonstrated that child molesters with no history of arrests for sex offences demonstrated lower scores on the Pd, Hs, Hy and Sc scales and a tendency to exhibit less intense personality deficits compared to those with a history of such arrests. Rader (1977) examined the MMPI-2 profiles of 129 male sex offenders convicted for crimes of rape, exposure and assault. Compared to the latter two groups, those in the rape group were found to be more psychologically disturbed, exhibiting more bizarre thinking, somatization, depression, aggression, suspiciousness and denial. The most commonly observed MMPI-2 code type within the assault category was the 4-9/9-4. Those in the exposing group were 4-8/8-4, and those in the rape group were 4-8/8-4 and 4-3/3-4. Armentrout and Hauer (1978) similarly found a notably elevated 8-4 profile in rapists who assaulted adults and lower elevations of a 4-8 profile in rapists of children.

Anderson and Kunc (1979) analyzed MMPI-2 profiles of 92 sex offenders convicted of rape, child molestation and incest and found three distinct profiles independent of offence: an F/8 type, a 4/9 type and a 2/4 code type. Quinsey, Arnold and Pruesse (1980) found a 4-8-2 code type among similar groups of hospitalized contact offence groups, including rape of females aged 15 years or older and physical sexual contact with children aged 13 years or younger. The current authors do not believe ISOs to have profiles consistent with those of the aforementioned offenders, given that they have been found to have less difficulty with legal problems, more stable employment histories and fewer adjustment problems (Bates & Metcalf, 2007).

Based upon an examination of 122 MMPI-2 profiles of child molesters, Heersink and Strassberg (1995) identified three specific profile types, while Duthie and McIvor (1990) identified eight distinct cluster variations from analysis of 90 child molester profiles. In comparing MMPI-2 profiles of sex offenders with adult or child victims, Levin and Stava (1987) found that offenders victimizing children had elevations on the D, Pa, Sc and Si scales, whereas the offenders with adult victims did not. In a more recent study, Watkins (2000) utilized the MMPI-2 to differentiate the personality differences among sex offenders and noted a 2-4 code type among child molesters, whereas sex offenders who victimized adults had a single elevation on scale 4. Watkins reported further that sex offenders of child victims had lower scores on the hypomania scale and higher scores on the social introversion scale.

In contrast to the literature highlighting common code types among sex offenders, a number of researchers have found significant heterogeneity among various sexual offender populations. Hall and colleagues (1986, 1989, 1991, 1992), for example, found such variability and consequently have suggested that the MMPI-2 has limited utility in discriminating among groups of sexual offenders. Other researchers' findings have similarly corroborated the variability among MMPI-2 profiles of sex offenders (Kalichman, 1990, 1991; Shealy, Kalichman, Henderson, Szymanowski & McKee, 1991; Yanagida & Ching, 1993). The aforementioned variability has been seen similarly in incarcerated and hospitalized populations; the only commonality noted across populations appears to be a scale elevation of 4 on the MMPI-2 (Bickley & Beech, 2001; Erickson, Luxenberg, Walbek & Seely, 1987; Freeman, Dexter-Mazza & Hoffman, 2005; Mann, Stenning & Borman, 1992; Quinsey et al., 1980; Rader, 1977). More recently, in a multivariate cluster analysis of 72 sex offenders, Siegel (2002) identified five different subgroups, two of which demonstrated severe pathology. The remaining three groups displayed normal profiles with antisocial features.

The reported variability in code types supports the notion that there is no single typology for sex offenders in general. The use of the MMPI-2 to establish the personality characteristics and levels of deviance of sex offenders has generated varied opinions as to its clinical utility. Limited research supporting the distinction between ISOs and contact offenders (COs) may suggest the possibility that the two are not mutually exclusive groups, a finding that would limit further the clinical utility of personality measures with these groups. In light of the limited research on the psychopathological and personality characteristics of internet sex offenders, further research is warranted. The present authors propose that an examination of internet sex offenders may provide useful information not yet explored fully by the research community.

The creation of the internet seems to have resulted in an increased level of heterogeneity among sex offenders and has created a new type of sex criminal who targets and victimizes children, the internet sex offender. Accurate assessment of the personality characteristics of internet sex offenders would inform the development of prevention strategies allowing for enhanced identification, conviction and treatment of internet sex offenders. Kalichman, Szymanowski, McKee, Taylor and Craig (1989) reported that sex offenders demonstrate significant differences in personality features within subgroups in addition to dissimilarities

with the general criminal population. Consequently, it is essential to determine where the personality structure of the internet sex offender is in line with the existing pool of sexual predators. The purpose of this study was to examine the personality characteristics of internet sex offenders using the MMPI-2 to gauge personality profiles and levels of psychopathology. It was hypothesized that internet sexual offender personality profiles would be different to those of contact offenders (e.g. child molesters and rapists).

## Method

### *Procedure*

Demographic information and MMPI-2 data were collected during a record review at a private sex offender treatment facility located in the Southwest United States. The MMPI-2 scores of the present sample ( $n = 48$ ) were compared to the MMPI-2 scores of a control group ( $n = 104$ ) using a univariate analysis of variance.

The sample of interest consisted of 48 male sex offenders, who were convicted of an internet crime and referred to an outpatient sex offender treatment programme for a psychosexual risk assessment. These participants were *not* incarcerated for their offences nor accused of a contact offence. This group ranged in age from 21 to 66 years, with a mean age of 40.67 [standard deviation (s.d.) = 11.37]. The group was made up of 92% ( $n = 44$ ) Caucasian, 6% ( $n = 3$ ) Hispanic and 2% ( $n = 1$ ) Native American participants. Nearly 37% ( $n = 18$ ) of those in the group were married, 42% ( $n = 20$ ) were divorced, 2% ( $n = 1$ ) were separated and 19% ( $n = 9$ ) were never married. A significant majority of the sample was employed (79%), with almost a third ( $n = 17$ ) in unskilled, general labour or minimum wage work. The educational level of the sample was as follows: 6% ( $n = 3$ ) had attended or completed graduate school; 35% ( $n = 17$ ) had attended but not completed college; 33% ( $n = 16$ ) had completed college; 19% ( $n = 9$ ) had a high school diploma or GED; and 6% ( $n = 3$ ) had some high school.

The offences of the 48 sampled sex offenders included: (a) receiving or distributing child pornography ( $n = 31$ ); (b) engaging in conversations with minors in chat rooms ( $n = 1$ ); (c) organizing meetings with minors ( $n = 5$ ); (d) receiving or distributing child pornography and engaging in conversations with minors in chat rooms ( $n = 6$ ); and (e) receiving or distributing child pornography and organizing meetings with minors ( $n = 5$ ).

The control group consisted of 104 incarcerated non-internet or general sex offenders (GSO) reported by Summerhill (2003). The mean age of this comparison group was 45.96 (s.d. = 12.16) years, with an average level of education of 11.63 (s.d. = 2.72) years. The group was made up of 66% ( $n = 69$ ) Caucasian, 13% ( $n = 13$ ) African American, 16% ( $n = 17$ ) Hispanic and 5% ( $n = 5$ ) Native American. Only 7% ( $n = 7$ ) were married, nearly 46% ( $n = 48$ ) were divorced, 5% ( $n = 5$ ) were widowed and 42% ( $n = 44$ ) were never married. The offences of the control group were categorized as either rape ( $n = 25$ ), paedophilia ( $n = 72$ ) or both rape and paedophilia ( $n = 7$ ).

### *Measures*

*Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, 2nd edition (MMPI-2)*. The MMPI-2 is a 567-item true/false scale designed to assess personality characteristics and degree of emotional disturbance. It is organized into four validity scales: (1) the cannot say (?) scale; (2) the L or "lie" scale; (3) the F-scale; and (4) the K-scale along with 10 clinical scales: scale 1: hypochondriasis; scale 2: depression; scale 3: hysteria; scale 4: psychopathic deviate; scale

5: masculinity–femininity; scale 6: paranoia; scale 7: psychasthenia; scale 8: schizophrenia; scale 9: hypomania; scale 0: social introversion. It is the most widely used questionnaire for assessing psychopathology.

## Results

### *Demographic comparisons*

Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine the differences between the GSO and ISO groups with regard to ethnicity and marital status. The results of these analyses indicated that the ISOs were more likely to be Caucasian ( $\chi^2_{(1)}=4.27$ ,  $p=0.039$ ), while GSOs were more likely to be Hispanic ( $\chi^2_{(1)}=4.54$ ,  $p=0.033$ ) or African American ( $\chi^2_{(1)}=13.00$ ,  $p=0.003$ ). Further, ISOs were more likely to be married ( $\chi^2_{(1)}=20.455$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) while GSOs were more likely to have never been married ( $\chi^2_{(1)}=8.672$ ,  $p=0.003$ ) or to have been widowed ( $\chi^2_{(1)}=5$ ,  $p=0.02$ ). No differences were noted in age between the two sampled groups ( $t_{(47)}=-0.465$ ,  $p\geq 0.05$ ). As the GSO group was incarcerated at the time of assessment, no comparisons with ISO subjects could be made with regard to employment status. Regarding education, 74% of the ISO group had at least attempted college, whereas GSO subjects, on average, came close to completing high school (11.63 years). Conclusions regarding the impact of education level must be made with considerable caution, because inferential comparisons between groups regarding education level cannot be made.

### *Comparison of MMPI-2 S-scores*

Results indicated that means of the ten MMPI-2 clinical scales generally fell below the clinical range. Table I provides a summary of the means and standard deviations for each of the validity scales and the 10 clinical scales for the ISOs. There was no indication of a commonly occurring code type with a frequency greater than 3. Recurrent code types included: 3/1 ( $n=3$ ), 4/3 ( $n=3$ ), 4/6 ( $n=2$ ), 1/2 ( $n=2$ ) and 0/2 ( $n=2$ ).

**Table I.** Comparison of the internet sex offender (ISO) and the general sex offender (GSO) means on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, 2nd edition (MMPI-2) validity and clinical scales

Scale	Mean ISO ( $n=48$ )	SD ISO ( $n=48$ )	Mean GSO ( $n=104$ )	SD GSO ( $n=104$ )
L*	54.00	11.81	60.63	13.05
F*	50.71	11.08	61.68	20.16
K	54.65	10.88	53.71	13.65
1 HS: hypochondriasis	55.71	12.38	59.99	13.81
2 D: depression	57.00	13.93	55.99	11.56
3 HY: hysteria	57.27	13.64	56.32	13.05
4 PD: psychopathic deviate*	57.23	13.14	66.52	11.88
5 MF: masculinity–femininity	50.31	8.31	48.96	8.71
6 PA: paranoia	58.50	12.49	59.95	13.73
7 PT: psychasthenia	55.44	13.61	56.83	11.91
8 SC: schizophrenia*	55.83	13.17	63.08	15.37
9 MA: hypomania	50.83	9.88	52.53	9.66
10 SI: social introversion	49.40	13.26	52.31	12.21

\*Significant differences at  $p<0.05$ .

Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) comparing the MMPI-2 scores of the ISO and GSO groups indicated that individuals in the ISO group scored significantly lower on the validity scales of L ( $F_{(1,121)}=8.115$ ,  $p\leq0.005$ ,  $\eta^2=0.063$ ), F ( $F_{(1,121)}=11.891$ ,  $p\leq0.001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.089$ ) and the clinical scales of Pd (psychopathic deviate) ( $F_{(1,121)}=16.477$ ,  $p\leq0.000$ ,  $\eta^2=0.120$ ) and Sc (schizophrenia) ( $F_{(1,121)}=7.256$ ,  $p\leq0.008$ ,  $\eta^2=0.057$ ) relative to individuals in the GSO group. A comparison of the MMPI-2 validity and clinical scales for the ISO and GSO groups can be found in both Table I and Figure 1.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that internet sex offenders are a heterogeneous group with considerable within-group differences. This heterogeneity was evidenced by comparisons of clinical elevations in the present sample with those reported by Summerhill (2003). The finding that only three of the 48 subjects sampled shared a code type demonstrates further the heterogeneity of this population and aligns with existing literature on the limited utility of the MMPI-2 in differentiating between sex offenders. This heterogeneity of code types is consistent with the general lack of a specific MMPI-2 elevation among internet offenders. This suggests that despite behavioural differences, ISOs and GSOs appear to have a common goal with respect to sexual gratification and are further similar by virtue of being heterogeneous in terms of their personality characteristics. That is, there is no personality profile common to those individuals in the present ISO sample, nor does there appear to be a common profile for GSOs. However, results reflecting significantly lower scores on the L, F, Pd and Sc scales on the MMPI appear to suggest that some differences may exist between the two groups. As an aside, it is interesting to note that a variety of internet offender MMPI-2 code types were

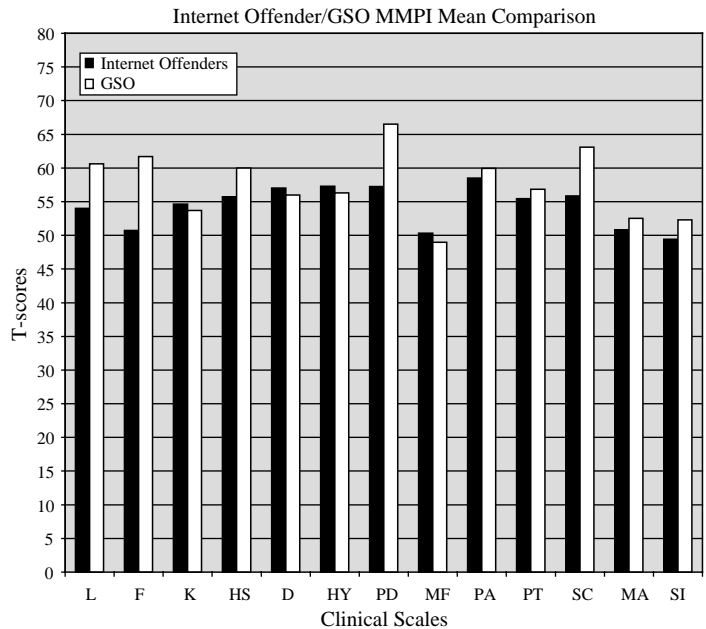


FIGURE 1. Comparison of the internet sex offender (ISO) and the general sex offender (GSO) means on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, 2nd edition (MMPI-2) validity and clinical scales. Significant differences noted on scales L, F, Pd and Sc at  $p < 0.05$ .

found in the present ISO sample, including 4/3 ( $n=3$ ), 3/1 ( $n=3$ ), 4/6 ( $n=2$ ), 0/2 ( $n=2$ ) and 1/2 ( $n=2$ ), which appear to correspond to profiles associated more commonly with child molesters. According to Erickson et al. (1987) and Watkins (2000), child molesters have been known to produce a 4-2/2-4 profile. Erickson et al. (1987) also reported that the 4-3/3-4 profile is common among incestuous biological fathers. Duthie and McIvor (1990) indicated that 8% of their sample of child molesters had elevations on scales 3 and 4 that fell within the subclinical range of 60 and 65. In contrast to these researchers, Rader (1977) stated that a 4-3/3-4 profile was prevalent among the rapists in their sample. Kalichman (1991) reported that paedophiles tend to display elevations on the Hs and Hy scales of the "neurotic triad" and the Pa, Pt and Sc scales of the "psychotic triad".

The present findings regarding MMPI-2 profiles of internet sex offenders suggest that ISOs share similar within-group heterogeneity, as do other sexual offending groups described in past research (e.g. child molesters and rapists) (Duthie & McIvor, 1990; Hall, Graham & Shepherd, 1991; Hall, Shepherd & Mudrak, 1992; Heersink & Strassberg, 1995; Kalichman et al., 1989; Mann et al., 1992; McCreary, 1975; Shealy et al., 1991; Yanagida & Ching 1993). In effect, individuals arrested for internet sexual offences appear to be different from other offenders who have been incarcerated for a contact sexual offence, in that they appear less deviant, less physically aggressive and less impulsive. Other researchers (i.e. Sheldon and Howitt, 2008) have added another point of evidence suggesting that there may be a discernible difference between internet and contact sex offenders, in that ISOs have been found to have more sexual fantasy pertinent to their offending but fewer confrontational fantasies than do contact offenders.

Given the limitations of the present study, the results should be interpreted with caution. One limitation of the present research is that there is a paucity of existing comparison research to strengthen the findings and implications of the data. Moreover, the use of a small, non-random sample and the inequality between the ISO and GSO groups may promote bias and limit the generalizability of the results. For example, 31 of the 48 individuals in the ISO group had downloaded and/or distributed images of child pornography, while the remainder had been in communication with a child. This supports the heterogeneity within the group and may reflect different offences and/or classes of offenders. Moreover, regarding the noted inequality in groups, the present authors believe that the differences in ethnicity and marital status between the ISO and GSO groups are probably artefacts of the demographic variable of the group itself. Given educational and economic status, it stands to reason that an offender group that relies on costly technology (i.e. computers with internet) would include a demographic known for its higher socioeconomic status (SES) and educational background. It also stands to reason that a sex offender group that is more easily concealed (Bates & Metcalf, 2007) is more likely to attract and maintain spousal relationships.

Another explanation for the variability between the groups may be accounted for by varying levels of deviancy of sexual fantasy. For example, Curnoe and Langevin (2002) completed multivariate analyses of sex offenders based on the existence of deviant sexual fantasies and MMPI-2 validity and clinical scales. They noted that offenders with sexually deviant fantasies had elevated scores on the F, Pd, Mf, Pa and Sc scales compared to the non-deviant fantasizers, thus postulating that deviant fantasizers were likely to be more emotionally unstable and socially alienated. Moreover, the MMPI-2 has shown promise in distinguishing between sex offenders that admit to and those who deny their crimes, as evidenced by elevations on the psychopathic deviate and schizophrenia scales (Marshall & Hall, 1995).

Another variable that may have contributed to bias in the MMPI-2 data is that the internet offenders may have been attempting to present themselves in a favourable light

during completion of the psychosexual risk assessment. The fact that the ISO group and GSO group (consisting of only incarcerated offenders) differed in settings (i.e. contact offense versus offense conducted through cyberspace) may account for the variance in the results. Additionally, the fact that ISOs did not endorse problems with intimacy or dealing with negative emotions, distortions in sexual scripts and antisocial cognitions on their MMPI-2 profiles suggests that they may be more similar to individuals in the general populations than speculated originally. The absence of the aforementioned psychological problems ascribed commonly to sexual offenders similarly adds to the challenge of differentiating this subgroup from the general population. While adding an additional control group made up of random sex offenders referred to the same private treatment facility for a psychosexual risk assessment would have been ideal, this stated methodology was not feasible at the time of this study. Nevertheless, the current authors believe that utilization of the MMPI-2 supplemental scales and Harris-Lingoes subscales as additional variables may have proved beneficial in providing a more concentrated test of the hypothesis.

In summary, in light of the paucity in empirical literature specific to internet sex offenders, the current study filled a void by examining the personality characteristics and psychopathology of a select sample of ISOs. Investigation of personality characteristics and psychopathology of ISOs is essential to understanding further within-group differences among sex offenders. **It appears that the ISO is not merely the "same old" sexual predator using a new medium to acquire victims.** This is consistent with the proposal set forth by Cooper et al. (2006), that sexual activity on the internet will fall just short of illegal behaviour but may none the less interfere seriously with the development and maintenance of a satisfying lifestyle.

Unfortunately, the internet has become another mechanism for the commitment of sexual crimes, allowing offenders to build networks and resources to promote victimization, the exchange of child pornography and instruction on how to lure victims, all masked by anonymity. In essence, the internet allows a way for predators to perfect their craft and test personal skills while avoiding detection. The abundance of child pornography on the internet is of particular concern due to its likelihood to fuel fantasy, which could in effect exacerbate offending behaviour and accelerate the offence cycle (Curnoe & Langevin, 2002). Additionally, worldwide access to the internet impacts negatively on the treatment of sex offenders, in that offenders can find ways to engage in prohibited activities such as viewing pornography, and consequently violating probation and treatment regimens without being discovered.

**The present authors recommend that future research further refine examinations of personality characteristics and psychopathology of internet sex offenders.** Larger sample sizes, inclusion of a diverse group of internet sex offenders, and matched comparison groups would provide a stronger basis for movement in this area of research. Additionally, the inclusion of multiple forms of personality assessments may provide a richer picture of the unique characteristics of this group of offenders.

In conclusion, ISOs certainly pose a unique challenge to researchers in this field, such that no single sex offender code type seems to exist. Given the absence of significant elevations on their MMPI-2 profiles, differentiating ISOs from the general population may pose an additional challenge to researchers, especially given the ethical and legal challenges in direct recruitment of sex offenders for studies pertaining to personality and psychopathology. The review of personality profiles like those obtained from measures such as the MMPI-2 are certainly one way to approach the measurement and classification issue. Perhaps another innovative strategy is to conduct a qualitative analysis of online personalities demonstrated by internet sex offenders as a means of comparison with the more traditional personality inventories. Given the importance of this type of research for overall prevention and early intervention with sexual offenders, continued efforts are certainly warranted and in demand.

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