The Importance of Context in Risk Assessment, Treatment and Management (of sex offenders)

Douglas P. Boer, Ph.D.
Professor of Clinical Psychology
(douglas.boer@canberra.edu.au)

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Is context important?
Relevance of context

- Risk and treatment do not occur in a vacuum
  - Ideally, both should have ecological validity.
  - Risk is not just a intrinsic feature of the offender, but is an interactive function of the client’s risk issues and the environment.
  - Aspects of the environment can serve to increase or decrease risk and need to appraised in a risk assessment.
Relevance of Context

Risk and treatment do not occur in a vacuum

- Treatment of offenders needs to address how offenders respond to risk opportunities and provide strategies to do so.
- Offenders need to learn how to respond to environmental risk issues in a way that helps to reduce risk, by gaining a sense of “mastery” over their own risk issues as well as their reaction to contextual risk issues – the degree of such mastery may be referred to as a client’s level of “manageability”.
Which contextual issues are important to risk, treatment and management?

- Many risk assessment tools include environmental factors that are related to risk and risk management. In a risk-based case formulation, these should become targets for intervention or development so that “risks” can become “strengths”.
  - For example, how to develop prosocial supports, develop occupational and interpersonal skills, and utilize intervention opportunities.
Risks versus Strengths

- All structured professional judgement instruments assess client risk issues and some assess personal strengths.
- Not many actually assess environmental risks and strengths.
- Client risks and strengths, taken together with environmental risks and strengths provide a much more comprehensive and contextualized risk picture for the client.
HCR-20 V3 (context-related items – all scored in terms of client risk only)

- H3 – History of Problems with Relationships
- H4 – History of Problems with Employment
- R2 – Future Problems with Living Situation
- R3 – Future Problems with Personal Support
- R4 – Future Problems with Treatment or Supervision Response
- R5 – Future Problems with Stress or Coping
This test is not used for long-term risk, given its proposed purpose, target group and validation data.

Many items have an environmental aspect, but most are scored in terms of the client’s ability to interact with the environment (e.g., be involved relationships, occupational pursuits), with the exception of social supports which is scored according to the availability and suitability of the client’s social supports.
SAPROF (de Vogel, et al., 2009)

- This instrument contains 17 items in total and about half of the items have an environmental aspect – all are scored in terms of how protective the item is for the client (not scored in terms of risk-increasing relevance if it is present).
  - Including: work, leisure activities, social network, intimate relationship, professional care, and living circumstances.
ARMIDILO-S (2013) and G (2011) (Boer and colleagues)

- Both versions of the ARMIDILO have a number of environmental considerations that are scored for both risk-relevance and strength-relevance.

- By way of example, the acute environmental item “situational changes” can have risk issues associated with it (e.g., be destabilizing), but also have offsetting strengths (e.g., be a treatment unit or better location for services or support).
Very briefly: the origin of the ARMIDILLO – S

The ARMIDILLO-S was developed for use with sex offenders with a developmental delay/disability (DD) or intellectual disability (ID) or with borderline intellectual functioning (sometimes called learning disabled or LD) because many of the risk assessment tools used with this group are adapted and/or cross-validated to see if the tests are valid.

There were no tests specially designed for this group until the ARMIDILLO-S was proposed by Boer, Tough and Haaven in 2004.
The ARMIDILLO - S

- The ARMIDILLO-S, when used with an actuarial test (usually the STATIC-99R but any locally validated actuarial test will do to provide the actuarial baseline), is a convergent risk assessment procedure which combines the assessment of risk and risk manageability in one instrument.

- The items in the ARMIDILLO-S are distributed amongst environment and client dynamic factors, both of which are further differentiated into stable and acute items.
One recent study that illustrated the validity of the environmental items
Lofthouse, Lindsay, Totsika, Hastings, Boer, & Haaven, 2013 (JARID)

- 64 adult ID (IQ<70) SOs were assessed with the ARMIDILO-S, STATIC-99, and the VRAG using a prospective design (scored from file information from 2003 and recidivism data collected in 2009).

- All variables (client and environmental) were examined with the ARMIDILO-S.

- AUCs: ARMIDILO-S = .92; STATIC-99 = .75; and VRAG = .58
Lofthouse, Lindsay, Totsika, Hastings, Boer, & Haaven, 2013 (JARID)

- AUCs of the stable environmental subscale and the stable offender subscale were .81 and .90 respectively. This finding provides some support for the environmental items that (to date) have never been subjected to empirical evaluation.
The Environmental Items
Stable Dynamic Items (environmental items)

- The environmental items are risk-relevant and strength-relevant issues regarding the staff and the environment in which the client lives.

- While some issues are explicitly identified because of the supporting literature, “other considerations” may be discussed as well, providing there is good evidence that such considerations are also risk-relevant or strength-relevant.
1. Attitude toward ID client.

- This category reflects beliefs by support persons about the client which may be due to the client’s disability, general behaviour or past sexual offending behaviour; which affects the therapeutic relationship.

- This item is assessed by interviewing the members of the ID person’s treatment team and supervisory team and assessing the overall attitude – supportive, problematic, informed, knowledgeable, optimistic, or opposite traits.
2. Communication among support persons.

- Demonstration by support persons of sharing relevant information openly and in a timely manner regarding any changes in behaviour or treatment planning for the client.

- This item examines the quality and nature of communication amongst support persons and looks at whether critical information is shared well or if there are gaps in the sharing process.
Stable Dynamic Items (environment)

3. Client-specific knowledge by support persons.

- Support persons’ familiarity with the client’s risk indicators, offence pattern (pathway), current support plan, and general routine.

- To what degree do the support persons know the client’s offense pathway(s), risk factors, support plan and relapse prevention plan? To what degree do staff monitor the client’s risk factors or are aware of elevations in such factors?
Stable Dynamic Items (environment)


- Support persons’ familiarity with the client’s risk indicators, offence pattern (pathway), current support plan, and general routine.

- ID individuals are remarkably good at exploiting staff inconsistencies and react remarkably poorly to changes in supervision style or personnel. Getting ID clients used to the idea of change as a constant is a challenge, but necessary as things do change.
Stable Dynamic Items (environment)

5. Unique considerations (e.g., situational inconsistency, staff modelling, lack of sexual opportunities, reinforcement of negative behaviours).

- Environmental situations that increase or decrease client’s vulnerability for sexual offending. Some areas for consideration would be: level of supervision of client; opportunities for sexual expression; staff modelling of behaviour; setting and location of residence; adequate number of support persons; appropriate support plans.

- The greater the level of environmental consistency the greater the predictability of the client’s behavior and the better awareness that staff have of the client.

- Also, the more therapeutic (and consistently therapeutic) the environment, the greater the risk reducing effect of the environment.
Acute Dynamic Items (environment)

1. Changes in social relationships.
   - Change in any of the client's intimate, personal, social or professional relationships in the past two to three months from the prior time period.
   - This item looks at major life changes such as the death of a parent, transfer of an important staff person, or departure of a close friend. Negative changes could instigate an emotional change related to self/other harm. Positive changes can increase risk manageability.
2. Changes in monitoring and intervention

Changes in the way in which the client’s behaviours are observed, tracked, and/or intervened by staff and other support persons. Please note that in some cases, there may be planned decreases in monitoring or intervention due to improved behaviour of the client due to the client’s risk being seen as having decreased (or other possible reasons such as funding problems, staff shortages, etc.).

How well have staff noted changes in routine or changes in risk factors? How soon after changes are noted are interventions applied? New personnel also may result in monitoring changes or other behavioural changes.
3. Situational changes.

- Changes in the environment or circumstances that have affected the daily functioning of the client.

- Relocation to new group homes, prisons, hospitals are stressful times for ID clients and their ability to manage risk may decrease markedly and uniquely at such times. External structure is important, and acclimation visits to new facilities is recommended.
4. Changes in victim access.

- Changes in the physical environment which allows for an increase or a decrease to access of victims or means to engage in sexual offending behaviour.

- ID clients have excellent ability to find victims and often, by chance, find that victims find them. Visitors to a group home or treatment center may bring photos of children or actual children to see other offenders and expose the latter to risk.
Acute Dynamic Items (environment)

5. Unique considerations (e.g., access to intoxicants, a new room-mate)

- Any unique changes in environmental condition(s) that increase or decrease the client’s risk for sexual offending.
- Many ID clients have problems with various sorts of intoxicants including petrol-sniffing, glue-sniffing, along with alcohol and drugs.
- Access to intoxicants often (if not always) involves involvement with other users and often the ID person becomes a “mule” or gets in trouble as a scapegoat.
- A new room-mate or a new staff member may provide new risks or new protective factors.
Remember – risk is always context-dependent
Remember – risk is always context-dependent

- The risk of a client is based on his/her own intrinsic risk issues plus context issues (e.g., risk for a client would differ if in custody versus free in the community, with little or no access to certain victims in the former context and possible access in the latter).

- It follows that the more risk-reducing (and strength-enhancing) the lower the functional risk and higher the client’s manageability.

- What makes for a positive context?
Environmental factors: the SOAPP model of risks and strengths

- Boer (2013) suggested 4 categories that can be organized into an evolving plan.
- All factors can be risk-relevant or strength-relevant or a mixture (best evaluated by looking at both)
  - Support
  - Occupation
  - Accommodation
  - Programmes (any risk-relevant intervention)
  - Plans
- These issues can also be included in reports to help guide an environmental risk and strength assessment to reduce risk by increasing strengths.
Many sex offender programmes over the years have been based primarily on the Relapse Prevention model which is focused on risk factor identification and management.

Programmes that have adopted a Good Lives approach focus on strengths and their enhancement.

Most sex offender programmes these days combine both philosophies and associated strategies.

Also, many sex offender programmes include social skills training and other therapeutic modalities that help offenders deal better with their supports, peers, workplace, and relationships.
Integrating risk, strength and context issues into intervention

In her talk on Wednesday, Sarah Senker noted that it’s important to have the following variables in the therapeutic context:

- Autonomy (i.e., having a choice - promote choice)
- Competence (i.e., feeling capable - promote self-efficacy)
- Relatedness (i.e., feeling connected - promote inclusiveness and associating with each other)

It would make sense that we also focus on such variables in community-based programmes to enhance the client’s ability to manage risk (i.e., manageability) and cope with difficult contexts.
In another talk, just yesterday, Gabrielle Salfati noted on one of her slides, that “situational context defines behavioural patterns”. While this quote was in regards to the profiling of offenders, it seems very relevant to risk and strength assessment as well as risk management. Offenders will have better lives and manage their risk issues better in a context that is supportive of positive behaviour. Treatment, like risk, cannot occur in a vacuum, focusing on client risk issues only and expect generalization of treatment to the client’s community context.
Summing up

- The purpose of risk assessment is to inform risk management.
- The purpose of treatment is to help the client learn how to manage his risk issues while developing strengths to ensure having a non-offending and fulfilling life.
- Ultimately, the reasons to contextualize risk and treatment are to enhance risk management and the good lives of our clients, thereby increasing public safety.
“It’s time we face reality, my friends. ... We’re not exactly rocket scientists.”
Finally, a plug for IATSO ...

- **SAVE THE DATE ----- September 7 - 10, 2016 ----- 14th IATSO Conference in Copenhagen**


For further information regarding the ARMIDILLO please look at the www.armidilo.net website or contact me at:

Douglas P. Boer
douglas.boer@canberra.edu.au

Please note: if I don’t email you back within a week, you may feel free to remind me of your request.