

I am a member of the Professional Advisory Board for Youth Protection of the Boy Scouts of America. I also testify in legal cases at times regarding standards of practice for youth serving organizations, and I frequently train on child molesters in youth serving organizations. For those reasons I am always looking for techniques which will better enable organizations to screen out child molesters.

I have been trying for some time to obtain information on research which does or doesn't support the Diana Screen. I have made two calls to the number listed on the website and spoken with two psychologists, neither one of which admitted knowing anything about the research on the validity of the Diana Screen, although they are using their Ph.D.'s to market it. The website for the Diana Screen claims that it has been "scientifically validated and thoroughly field tested" and that "6 federal grants led to the publication of many peer reviewed articles which support the Diana Screen". However, the 6 federal grants listed on the website appear to have been granted between in the late 79's and early 80's so it is unlikely they were involved in field testing the Diana Screen. In fact, in combing through the bibliographies that are on the website, I see articles on behavioral therapy treatment for sex offenders, general information on paraphilias, recidivism studies of convicted sex offenders, current treatment of paraphiliacs, info on sibling and parent-child incest offenders, and Ken Lanning's typology of child molesters. I can find only one article that actually has anything at all to do with validating the Diana Screen. That is Abel, Wiegel, Jordan, Harlow, Hus and Martinez in July of 2012. Naturally, I obtained and read the article with some care.

The article is clear that the Diana Screen is not trying to screen out offenders who have the propensity to molest but have yet to do so. Thus, the article at least, admits that it will not stop offenders with a sexual interest in children who are seeking entry into a youth serving organization to get access to them, unless they have already molested a child in the past.

The Diana Screen was apparently developed not on a sample of "hidden offenders," the population the screen is intended to detect, but on known sex offenders who "had to have been convicted of molesting a child, denied the current accusation/charge of sexually abusing a child, have the evaluating therapist report his or her belief the client was an abuser, and either have been accused of sexual abuse by children from more than one family or have been convicted of a sex crime against a child" (p. 1382). Since the first criteria is having been convicted of molesting a child and the joiner is "and" it is difficult to determine if there was anyone in the sample who was accused of sexual abuse by children of more than one family but was never convicted of it. If there were such individuals, the study does not say how many. Thus the sexually abusing sample was comprised either of all offenders who had been previously convicted of child molestation or a high percentage (unknown) had been previously convicted of sexual abuse.

They were compared with volunteers who denied sexually abusing a child but responded to an ad to participate in research on "attitudes and behaviors related to the sexual abuse of children," or who had taken a previous version of the AASI (2 different samples). Individuals were not

removed if they had flunked the AASI in the past, but only if they admitted to having abused a child or answered positively to one or more of five (face valid) cognitive distortion questions. This does not suggest that Abel himself has a whole of faith in the AASI since some of those who flunked it were put in the non-offending control group. Although Figure 1 in the article suggests that the community volunteers were subject to the AASI, the written description in the article says otherwise. According to the written description the only screening for the volunteers who responded to an ad was that they denied ever having sexually molested a child. A polygraph was not used because the authors deemed it “unethical” and “very costly”. More surprisingly it appears that background checks were not even done. Thus we have a sample with an unknown rate of hidden offenders compared with a sample of offenders sufficiently inept that they have already been convicted of child molestation. However, Abel et al., assure us that they don't think the “non-sexual abusers” sample actually contained more than 4 to 7% of sexual abusers. This is ironic since it means that the non-offending sample likely had more hidden offenders (offenders who had not been caught and convicted of a sexual offense) than did the offending sample since all or virtually all of those had been. As is typical of individuals caught and prosecuted by the criminal justice system, the number who were college educated (40% m; 53%f) in the convicted group differed significantly from controls (73%m; 77%f) a difference that was highly significant. These were two very different populations.

The bottom line was that even with a conviction for child molestation, when the specificity was set at .90, the sensitivity for males was .51 and for females .37. What does this mean? This means that when you set the cut-off score such that you have limited the number of false positives to 10%, the Diana Screen was successfully able to detect 51% of known, convicted male child molesters and 37% of known convicted female child molesters. In short, the Diana Screen was able to detect ½ of the male child molesters and a little over one third of the female that a simple background check would have found. The instrument has nothing to say at all about true “hidden” offenders, that is, offenders never detected and prosecuted by the criminal just system, because they were not included in the sexually abusing sample. If they were anywhere, they were in the sample of non sexual abusers since either all or nearly all of the sample of sex abusers had a criminal conviction for child molestation.

I invite you to compare this to the claims on the website. We are told how easy it is to administer and score the Diana Screen, how many survivors exist in the US, that 6% of adults have a sexual interest in children (the research is considerably more complex than that, but that's another blog), we are told 92% of adults pass the Screen and the inference is somehow that because 8% fail, it is the right 8% who fail, but we are not told it will pick up half of what a criminal records check would pick up.

Let's look at who it does pick up. Let's say that Abel's figures are correct, that 6% of adults are sexually attracted to children (by the way, this Screen does not try to identify that group but only the group who have already molested a child for any reason). That means out of 100 volunteers taking this test, 94 would not have a sexual interest in children. By these figures 6 would have a sexual interest. However, the test is only 90% accurate at picking out the innocent so out of every one 94 innocent volunteers it will identify 9.4 as false positives. Of the 6% it should pick out, it will only pick out 50% of them. Therefore, out of every 12 people who flunk the test, 9 of

them have not previously been convicted of child molestations (the only group the screen can detect) and 3 of them will have been, leaving three convicted offenders who would pass the Screen.

In essence, Abel's own figures suggests that the Diana Screen will only do what a criminal background check will do, only a criminal background check will pick up 100% of the people with a criminal conviction for child molestation and the Diana Screen would pick out 50% of them. In addition, 75% of the people it picks out will be false positives. But worse of all, the organization will have a false sense of security not afforded by criminal background checks and perhaps not supervise as closely as they could, perhaps not insist on a no-leader-alone-with-a-child policy.

I would argue strongly that any psychologist who supports this screen should be thoroughly familiar with the research on its validity before they put their professional reputation on the line for this. If I am wrong, and there is better research than Abel's 2012 article on the screen, I will be happy to be corrected.

I initially wrote this and sent an email to a Diana Screen representation, a Ph.D. psychologist trying to market the screen to the Boy Scouts, and was told that Dr. Abel would respond. A few days later, the Boy Scouts received an email saying that Dr. Abel could not respond to my critique without revealing information that would allow child molesters to fake the screen. However, if we would sign a non-disclosure agreement, Dr. Abel would give a one hour presentation on the screen and answer our questions. We asked for the research, the "many peer reviewed articles which support the Diana Screen," the field testing research and the research that shows it has been "scientifically validated". We were told we could see the research after we signed a non-disclosure agreement and went through the presentation.

It is difficult to reconcile the scientific process of peer review and publications with Dr. Abel's methods. None of the points I made related to the content of the screen. The questions I raised had to do with the composition of the control and experimental groups as well the sensitivity and the specificity of the instrument. This was all information that Dr. Abel himself had published in his article. In addition, other instruments such as the MMPI and the PCL-R II are controlled in the sense that only psychologists are able to order them. Release of the actual items would aid test-takers in faking the tests. However, neither instrument places any limitations on information about the scientific validity of the instruments. The stats about how well these instruments work, and for what purposes, are readily available to anyone. It is difficult to see why anyone would sign a non-disclosure agreement. Let's say a psychologist did sign one and concluded after the presentation that the instrument had serious flaws. If they then commented on the flaws of the Screen they could be accused of violating the non-disclosure agreement.

It is easy to see where this is going to lead. Organizations that blindly buy this screen without thoroughly vetting it are all too likely to put their faith in it. That means other parts of their program -- for example, two-deep leadership --are less likely to be strongly adhered to because of a sense of false security. After all, didn't the Diana Screen keep out all the molesters? When those programs fail to protect children -- and they will fail to protect children --the law suits that

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*The Diana Screen: Is It All It's Claimed to Be?* by Anna Salter, PH.D.

follow are going to force Dr. Abel to subject the screen to proper scientific scrutiny, the kind of scrutiny that led a number of courts to refused to admit the AASI in evidence. I doubt a jury will be very impressed with a screen that picks up half of what a background check will pick up. Not that this will be much comfort to the new round of victims.