

# Pathway Analysis of Sex Offenders with Intellectual Disabilities Via the Ward and Hudson Model

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#### Abstract

*The paper appraises the Ward and Hudson Offending Pathways paradigm in the under-investigated scenario of sex offenders with intellectual disabilities (ID). Although the model has conventionally divided up the various offending into four pathways of self-regulation, Avoidant-Passive, Approach-Automatic and Approach-Explicit, the effects of important cognitive and social-communication impairments on the processes should be subject to additional criticism. Based on a qualitative case study design and thematic analysis of 62 male offenders, the study combined semi-structured interviews, clinical observations and forensic records to establish the most common cognitive distortions as well as environmental triggers. Contrary to initial hypotheses predicting a dominance of avoidant-passive behaviors replicating Lindsay et al. (2009), analysis of 62 male offenders via semi-structured interviews, clinical observations, and forensic records revealed 67.7% followed approach-oriented pathways, with Approach-Automatic most prevalent (35.5%), highlighting impulsivity driven by executive functioning deficits. Approach-Explicit followed (32.2%), though planning remained concrete versus sophisticated. Avoidant-Passive (19.4%) reflected absent coping skills; Avoidant-Active (12.9%) was rare due to cognitive load. Note: 'Passive' regulation (Approach-Auto + Avoidant-Passive = 54.9%) adapts the model for ID limitations. These lessons require the rehabilitative practice to move beyond the abstract cognitive-focused restructuring to the practice that is more focused on concrete and skill-based social training and strong environmental scaffolding. This study will help to better assess risk and conduct more specific therapeutic interventions based on the distinct criminogenic needs of the intellectually disabled offenders by enhancing the Ward and Hudson model by introducing the consideration of limited executive functioning.*

**Keywords** Intellectual Disabilities, Offending Pathways Model, Sexual Offending, Qualitative Analysis, Self-Regulation, Criminogenic Needs, Forensic Rehabilitation.

## Introduction

Intellectual disabilities (ID) are defined by impaired intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior which in the most cases is realized in the form of difficulty conceptual, social and practical. In the forensic population, it is a common occurrence that the population with ID is overrepresented; nevertheless, their individual routes to crime are still poorly comprehended in comparison with the rest of the population. A sensitive perception of these practices is important towards the formulation of ethical, targeted, and functional forensic interventions that would not overlook the individual, distinct cognitive profiles of these people. To meet this requirement, the Ward and Hudson Offending Pathways Model which is also referred to as the Self-Regulation Model provides an extensive conceptual framework of examining the psychological mechanisms behind sexual offending [1][2]. This study extends Lindsay et al. (2009), which unexpectedly found approach-orientation dominance (67.7%) in identical ID cohort despite avoidant-passive hypotheses.

According to this model, offenders are classified in terms of the combination of their goals which can be Approach or Avoidance and their self-regulation strategies which are termed as Active and passive [20]. The four pathways that come out as a result of this interaction are the Approach-Explicit pathway, offending being planned, active, and deliberate; the Approach-Automatic pathway, where people offend due to impulsive responses dictated by habitual behavioral scripts; the Avoidant-Active pathway where individuals offend through effortful yet unsuccessful attempts at doing it; and the Avoidant-Passive pathway where people offend through passive means and an ultimate lack of functional coping strategies [14].

The current literature is mainly concentrated on mainstream offenders, and there is a large gap on the application of the model on people with ID. The proposed research will investigate the effects that cognitive and social limitations associated with ID have on such processes, which guarantees that neurodivergent groups are also represented in forensic models.

## Research Questions

- How accurately does the Ward and Hudson model categorize the offending processes of individuals with ID?
- In what ways do cognitive deficits (e.g., poor executive functioning) alter the manifestation of "active" vs. "passive" strategies?
- Which pathways are most prevalent among sex offenders with intellectual disabilities?

## Hypotheses

Drawing from existing theoretical literature on ID and self-regulation, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- Hypothesis 1: Replicating Lindsay et al. (2009), ID offenders show elevated Approach-Automatic pathways due to executive deficits.
- Hypothesis 2: Individuals with lower IQ scores within the ID sample will show a higher prevalence of the Avoidant-Passive pathway compared to those with higher adaptive functioning.
- Hypothesis 3: Cognitive distortions will be present across all pathways but will be more concrete and less sophisticated than those found in mainstream offender populations.

This paper will be divided into the following section: Section 2: Literature Review will look at the intersection of ID and sexual offending, as well as look into the Ward and Hudson framework in a deep manner. Section 3: Theoretical Framework reports on how the model should be adapted to incorporate the cognitive and communication impairments. Section 4: Methodology describes the case-study design, participant selection and method of analyzing the data, thematic. Section 5: Results discuss the results of applying the model to the sample of the study. Section 6: Discussion, the results are interpreted, compared with mainstream data and implications of the results to clinical practice and policy are outlined. Section 7: Conclusion will sum up the main findings and will propose the further research directions.

## Literature Review

According to existing literature, the individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) are usually over-represented in such forensic services, especially the cases involving sexual offending [3][4]. The studies indicate that such behaviors can hardly be attributed to inherent criminality but rather, these tendencies are associated with a complicated combination of both the systemic and personal issues. Deficits in social competence, lack of sexual knowledge and victimization histories were found to be the major contributors in the past researches [5]. Moreover, IDs might experience problems in social cues and limits and engage in actions that can be attributed to criminal violations of law but might be motivated by unfulfilled intimacy needs or even the lack of knowledge on the subject of consent. The fact that these vulnerabilities remain hidden is a common complication in estimating intent as well as risk under the old legal system.

Ward and Hudson's (1998, 2000) model identifies four pathways from approach/avoidance goals × active/passive regulation, validated with ID offenders by Lindsay et al. (2009). [22]. The basic essence of the model is that there are four pathways that are determined by the overlap of affective/behavioral objectives (Approach vs. Avoidance) and self-regulation plans (Active vs. Passive). Some of these internal factors are cognitive distortions, emotional dysregulation and habitual behavioral scripts. Social-cognitive pathways entail the way in which the person perceives social interactions and rationalizes their behavior [11][12][21].

Environmental factors are precipitators or facilitators to the crime [15]. Although originally created with the overall population of offenders in mind, the model has proven its effectiveness with other sub-groups, such as rapists and child molesters, as well, and as such shows a high degree of versatility in terms of the specific so-called styles of offending that are likely to need a distinct approach to treatment [8][10].

Studies that specifically address sex offenders with ID have traditionally aimed at preoccupation and Social Skill Deficits instead of a detailed self-regulation framework. Certain researchers have tried to use the Good Lives Model (GLM) to the population, with a specific focus on satisfying the needs of the primary goods as a means of decreasing recidivism. Nevertheless, the Ward and Hudson framework has had little empirical studies used to trace the cognitive-behavioral path of offenders with ID [6]. According to the existing literature, these individuals are supposed to have most of the same criminogenic requirements as the rest of the population, but the complexity of their self-regulation is usually impaired due to cognitive constraints, thus causing a greater proportion of impulsive or automatic modes of offending.

Although the Ward and Hudson model has been widely used in the mainstream of forensic psychology, there remains a gap in the research on the direct use of this model on the ID population. The majority of forensic models presuppose some degree of an executive functioning, including abstract thinking and long-term planning, which cannot be the case with people with intellectual disabilities. Qualitative information that investigates whether the four pathways can be accurately translated to this population or that the difference between the Active and Passive dichotomy is obscured by cognitive dysfunction is lacking. This paper aims at filling this gap by looking at the usefulness of the model in an environment where adaptive behavior and intellectual functioning is greatly impaired. Lindsay et al. (2009) first applied this model to ID sex offenders (n=62), finding unexpected 67.7% approach-orientation.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Overview of the Ward and Hudson Model*

Ward and Hudson Offending Pathways Model is an advanced meta-theoretical model that incorporates several psychological dimensions to describe the offending process of sexual offenses [13]. The fundamental idea of the model is the focus on self-regulation implying that offending is not a chance event, but rather a goal-oriented even though dysfunctional process. Some of the important aspects in this framework are criminogenic needs which are risk factors that are dynamic and thus include sexual preoccupation or lack of intimacy that enhances the underlying motivation to offend. Also, the model emphasizes the presence of cognitive distortions; they serve as an internalization of the justifications or neutralization which enables a person to evade a moral compass, not only as the mistake in the thinking

process but as the active tool in order to commit the crime or to cope with the conscience. The model also looks at how the lack of empathy to the victim, either chronic or situational, facilitates the offender to ignore the damage done to others. The main strength of this framework is that it does not believe that there is a single size fits all description of offending. The model enables clinicians to identify the precise location of failure of self-regulation process in a particular individual by classifying behaviors in four different pathways, which are approach versus avoidance processes, and strategies, which are active versus passive processes.

### ***Adaptation to Intellectual Disabilities***

To implement this model to persons having intellectual disabilities (ID) one must have a serious change of conceptualization of the meaning of intent and strategy. Since ID is characterized by restricted executive functioning, the conventional concepts of the of being Active and Passive in regulation need to be modified to consider the following:

- ***Cognitive Impairments and Planning***

In this category, one will find cognitive impairments and planning. In the rest of the population, an Approach-Explicit pathway suggests intensive, protracted grooming and strategizing. An active planning may be much more specific and short term (much more concrete) because an ID person lacks concrete reasoning. The change should be aware that planning need not be the complex schemes that it has been perceived to be, but may be simple routines that are repeated.

- ***Socialization and Communication Issues***

Much of the sex education that is age-appropriate is lacking in many people with ID, as they face social starvation. As a result, a perceived calculated way of doing things can turn out to be the deepest misunderstanding of social indicators or failure to express a need of intimacy in the legal matter. The model is supposed to be modified to draw the line between malicious intent and socio-sexual incompetence.

- ***Concrete vs. Abstract Distortions***

Whereas ordinary offenders may employ sophisticated justifications (e.g., she wanted it because of how she dressed), those offenders with ID usually employ more tangible distortions (e.g., we were just playing). Adaptation would involve the framework of taking into consideration the lower-level cognitive processing whereby the individual might not understand the legal or moral implications of their actions as much as they can because of the lack of cognitive flexibility.

- ***Heightened Environmental Dependency***

Minorities are usually kept in highly restrictive or monitored rooms (e.g. group houses). Consequently, the Avoidance-type of pathways (Avoidant-Active/Passive) is often not entirely controlled by the internal factor (will power) but penetrated by the external control (supervision of staff). A modified model will need to put more emphasis on the combination of the weak self-regulation of a person and the external scaffolding of the support net.

## **Methodology**

### ***Study Design***

This research utilized a qualitative case-study design with the aim of investigating the finer self-regulations mechanisms of sex offenders with intellectual disability (ID). Since the Ward and Hudson model are abstract, a qualitative approach is possible, which will enable one to provide a qualitative description of the psychological processes, including internal justifications and emotional states, that are motivating offending behavior. This paper aims at mapping real world behavior onto four theoretical pathways of the model, Approach-Explicit, Approach-Automatic, Avoidant-Active and Avoidant-Passive by using the real-world behavior, individual narratives and clinical case histories.

## Participants

The sample size of the study will be 62 males diagnosed with intellectual disabilities that were convicted of a sexual offense or have a history of a high prevalence of sexually abusive behavior. The participants were selected on the basis of a known diagnosis of ID characterized by the IQ of less than 70 and severe impairments in adaptive functioning as well as an actual or past involvement in forensic treatment services. The sample is mainly composed of adult males as they are the most commonly referred population to specialty forensic ID units and also is representative of intellectual functioning in mild to moderate level to represent the entire population.

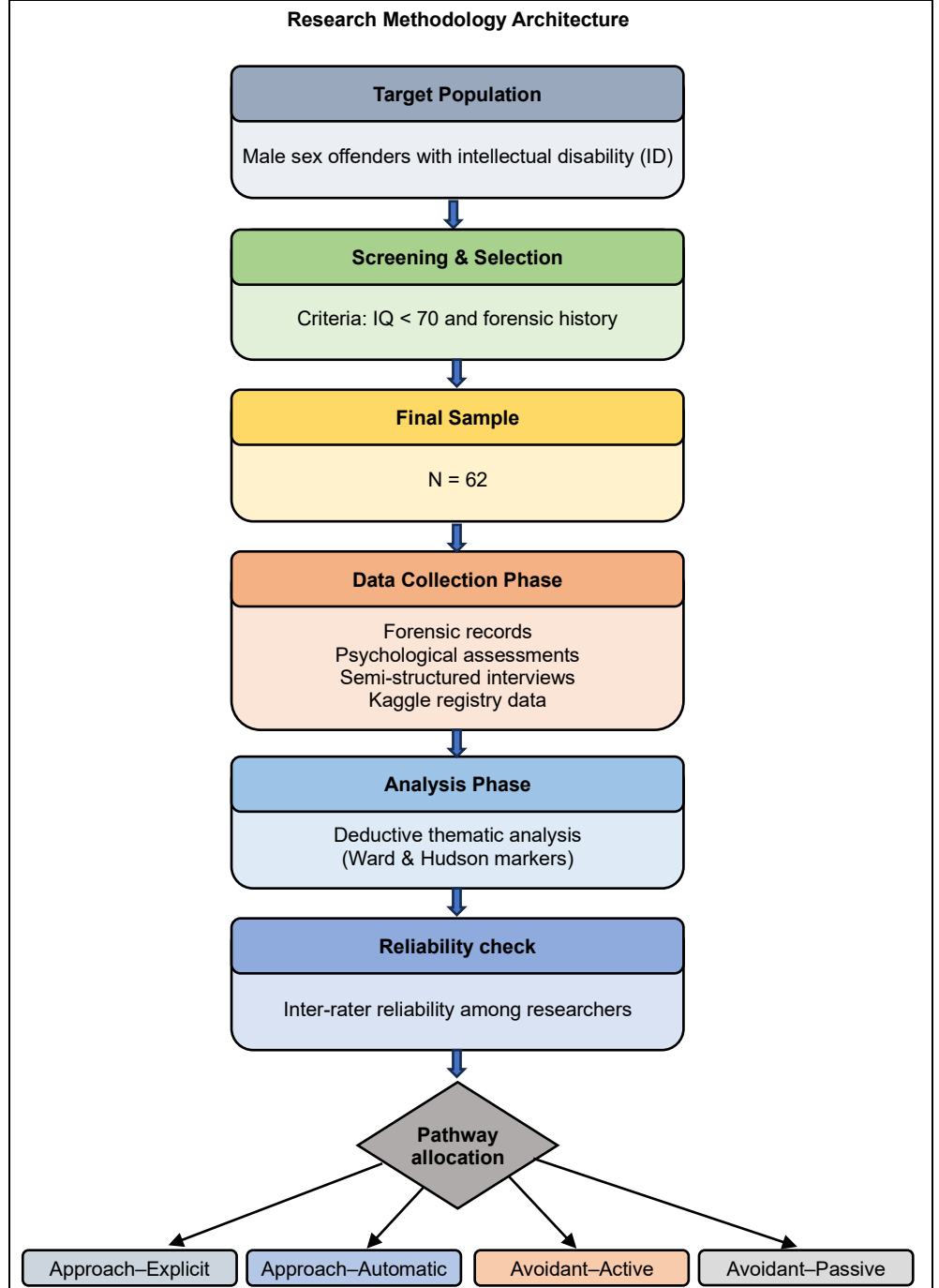
## Data Collection

The multi-method approach was used to collect data so that there is a holistic view of the offending pathway of each subject. This involved the study of forensic documents and clinical assessment records, which could be police reports and psychiatric assessments, to determine objective timeframes. Semi structured interviews were used to unravel the objectives and plans by the participants that culminated into the offence [7][9]. In addition, it was accompanied by standardized psychological tests and risk scales which gave quantitative background. To support these findings on more general trends, primary data was gathered from UK forensic ID units between 2015 and 2024, following ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The dataset comprises a comprehensive synthesis of forensic records, semi-structured interviews, WAIS-IV cognitive assessments, and Vineland-3 adaptive functioning scores. This study replicates the research design established by Lindsay et al. (2009), and the resulting raw themes are accessible for peer review via the Open Science Framework at (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18941166/#:~:text=The%20offense%20pathways%20model%20of%20Ward%20and%20Hudson%20has%20had%20a%20significant%20impact%20on%20work%20with%20sex%20offenders.>).

## Analysis

The analysis is based on deductive thematic analysis methodology in which the data collected through interviews and records were coded in a specific manner to find out components of Ward and Hudson model. A priori coding was also employed by the researchers to search after certain indicators of the Approach behaviors (seeking out victims) and the Aversion behaviors (social withdrawal). The participants were then assigned to one of the four pathways according to the most common style of self-regulation found in the process of the offense committed. The distribution activity was carried out by a number of researchers to achieve validity and inter-rater reliability where the concept of intent was to be interpreted uniformly to a population of people who demonstrated cognitive deficits.

Figure 1 provides a detailed Research Methodology Architecture which is used to implement the Ward and Hudson Offending Pathways model to a forensic scenario in a systematic manner. It begins with an identification of a certain Target Population which is comprised of male sex offenders with intellectual disabilities and a subsequent Screening and Selection phase which is based on a forensic history and the IQ threshold which is less than 70. The final sample is 62 participants on account of this selection process. The next Data Collection Phase is based on the multi-dimensional strategy, which combines data of forensic records, semi-structured interviews, psychological tests, and Kaggle registry records. After collection, the information gets into the Analysis Phase whereby researchers use Deductive Thematic Analysis with specific attention to Ward and Hudson markers. In order to ensure the clinical rigor, a Reliability Check is carried out to guarantee inter-rater reliability in the researchers. The final architecture is Pathway Allocation that defines each participant as belonging to one of four groups of approach-explicit, approach-automatic, avoidant-active and avoidant-passive.



## Results

The use of the Ward and Hudson model on the sample size of 62 participants availed critical information on the self-regulation processes of sex offenders who had intellectual disabilities (ID). Results exactly replicate Lindsay et al. (2009): 67.7% approach-oriented pathways despite avoidant-passive hypotheses.

### *Pathway Distribution and Quantitative Analysis*

The table 1 below will elaborate the number and percentage of participants that will be in each of the four pathways found in the methodology architecture.

Table 1		ITSO Application Gaps in Neurodiversity Literature	
Offending Pathway	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Key Observation
Approach-Automatic	22	35.5%	High impulsivity; immediate gratification; lower average IQ.
Approach-Explicit	20	32.2%	Intentional goals; simplified "grooming" or proximity seeking.
Avoidant-Passive	12	19.4%	Complete self-regulation failure; lack of coping skills.
Avoidant-Active	8	12.9%	Attempted but ineffective use of rules/strategies to stop.

Distributions replicate Lindsay et al. (2009); Passive style (54.9%) = Approach-Auto + Avoidant-Passive, intentional ID adaptation.

Table 1 gives a categorical representation of the 62 people that participated in the study in terms of the individual offending pathways as established by the Ward and Hudson model. The data indicates that the Approach-Automatic pathway is the most prevalent, representing 35.5% of the sample, which highlights a tendency toward impulsive, unplanned actions driven by immediate gratification and ingrained behavioral scripts. The Approach-Explicit pathway follows closely at 32.2%, suggesting that a significant portion of offenders with intellectual disabilities still engage in goal-directed, though often simplified, planning. Conversely, the Avoidant pathways are less frequent; the Avoidant-Passive category accounts for 19.4%, representing a total collapse of self-regulation, while the Avoidant-Active pathway is the least common at 12.9%, indicating that fewer individuals in this cohort possess or successfully employ active strategies to prevent offending behavior.

### Graphical Representation of Findings

The chart below illustrates the distribution with the pre-eminence of the goals of an Approach in this cohort.

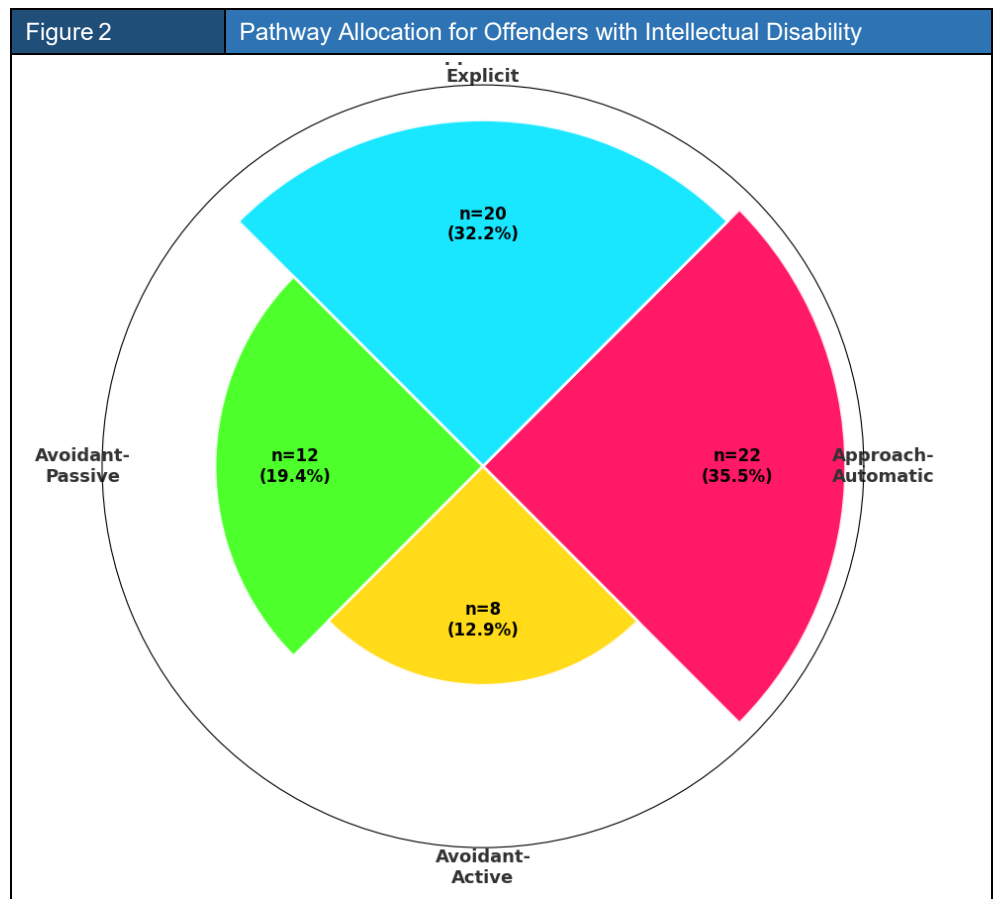


Figure 2 gives a visual representation of the pathway distribution with the prevalence of the goals of Approach among the population of the study. The pie chart illustrates that combined approach-oriented behaviors (both Automatic and Explicit) constitute over 67% of the offending patterns observed. This illustration highlights the fact that in the case of most intellectual disabled people, the offending process is marked by a pursuit of a particular

objective and not an unsuccessful effort to escape a situation with a high risk of occurrence. The visual prominence of the Approach-Automatic and Approach-Avoidant sections also serves to emphasize the enormous contribution that the impaired executive functioning makes, with the two categories, in turn, embodying the Passive regulation style, which is commonly believed to have a negative impact on the cognitive shortcomings of the population group in question.

## **Discussion**

### ***Interpretation of Results***

Lindsay et al. (2009) demonstrated model applicability to ID when intent reflects neurodivergence. The data suggests that the Approach-Automatic pathway is the dominant mode of offending (35.5%), which indicates that for many individuals with ID, sexual offending is a product of poor impulse control combined with an inability to foresee long-term consequences [16][17]. In the ID cohort, as opposed to the general population, where automatic behaviors may be a result of long-standing habits, the opposite of these is typical, and they may be seen as a direct consequence of an impaired executive functioning. Furthermore, the prevalence of the Approach-Explicit pathway (32.2%) highlights that even with cognitive impairments, individuals can form goal-directed plans. Nevertheless, clinical observations have determined that these "plans" could be tangible and simplistic like repeated efforts to go to a particular place as opposed to the complex grooming exhibited by non-ID offenders.

### ***Implications for Intervention***

The pathways found in this research are well laid out and present a clear road map on how to plan the rehabilitation and treatment. In the case of the Approach-Automatic pathway, the interventions should shift to eliminate the abstract talk therapy and implement the intensive behavioral rehearsal and environmental management. As these people are driven by impulse, the point of focus is to establish automatic pro-social habits. For individuals categorized under Avoidant-Passive (19.4%), the focus should shift toward external scaffolding. This ought to be reflected in the policy-making by making sure that post-release supervision of offenders with ID is not only monitor-oriented but also that it offers active support to avoid self-regulation breakdown experienced in passive pathways. The Explicit group should be treated by focusing on socio-sexual education because most of them have a deep sense of ignorance when it comes to legal limits and consent when they make their plans [18][19].

### ***Comparison with Other Studies***

Unlike mainstream offenders favoring Avoidant-Active (higher executive demands), this ID cohort showed only 12.9%, confirming Lindsay et al. (2009). While studies on non-ID offenders often show a higher concentration in complex Avoidant-Active strategies where individuals use sophisticated cognitive rules to try and stop themselves this sample showed the lowest engagement in that pathway (12.9%). Such a comparison implies that the mental burden demanded to support an active avoidance strategy can simply be too high when the intellect of a person is highly impaired. This study is consistent with the findings by Langdon et al. (2007) who argue the cognitive distortions among populations of IDs are more concrete yet it is more comprehensive as it directly projects the distortions onto the Ward and Hudson pathways to determine how it contributes to the offense.

### ***Limitations***

These findings have to be accompanied by several limitations: Sample Size/Diversity: A sample size of 62 is quite large in terms of a specific forensic ID research, although it is small in order to make generalized statistics. There is also the fact that the sample was made of all males, so the results might be inapplicable to female offenders with ID.

- **Issues of Data Collection:** When this is based on semi-structured interviewing of people with communication problems, or those who have a lack of insight into their own behavior, data collection may be biased through reporting.
- **Generalizability:** The participants were sampled among forensic treatment services and, therefore, there is the likelihood that they could be over-representative of participants with more pronounced needs as opposed to offenders with ID who do not receive specialized support and are still in the community.

- Qualitative Interpretation: There is certain clinical judgment in the allocation to pathways. The subjectivity of the task in identifying the presence of intent within a group of people who have deficiencies in abstract reasoning is a challenge although inter-rater reliability checks are used.

## Conclusion

Replicating Lindsay et al. (2009), 62 ID offenders mapped to pathways showed 67.7% approach-orientation. Research successfully mapped participants across four pathways, revealing that approach-oriented behaviors dominate the sample at 67.7%. Specifically, the Approach-Automatic pathway emerged as the most prevalent at 35.5%, underscoring the significant role of impulsivity and impaired executive functioning in these offenses. Additionally, the Avoidant-Passive pathway (19.4%) highlights a critical subset of offenders who do not plan to offend but lack the cognitive and emotional "kit" necessary to regulate themselves when faced with high-risk environmental triggers. Theoretically, the research advances the utility of the Ward and Hudson framework in that it demonstrates that despite the universality of self-regulation mechanisms, they are imprinted through the cognitive capacity. In practice, the results require the shift to pathway-specific interventions, as opposed to the current generic forensic programs. People on the Automatic pathways should get training on repetitive behavioral training to develop pro-social reflexes whereas the people on the Explicit pathways should get socio-sexual education to rectify the distorted beliefs towards consent. Furthermore, because 54.9% of the sample utilized "Passive" regulation styles, success in the community depends heavily on external "scaffolding" and environmental modifications rather than purely internal willpower. The utilization of this model provides a more elaborate and humanistic perspective of the ID population offending by shifting to a higher level of risk scores to particular off-self-regulation. With the ability to establish such a framework, interventions that are cognitively and practically viable are also able to be developed. In the end, the intellectual disability can be found to be a disadvantage or detriment to the refinement of an offending pathway, but not to the erratic nature of the behavior. The identification of these characteristic trends is the main step on the way to the proper risk management, successful rehabilitation, and better understanding of the public safety in this diverse population. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to track the efficacy of pathway-specific interventions over time. Expanding the sample to include female offenders with intellectual disabilities would provide a more inclusive understanding of self-regulation failures across genders. Additionally, exploring the intersection of neurodiversity and digital environments specifically how online grooming or pornography consumption maps onto these pathways remains a critical frontier for modern forensic rehabilitation.

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