



Rape-related cognitive distortions: Preliminary findings on the role of early maladaptive schemas



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ABSTRACT

Despite the important focus on the notion of cognitive distortions in the sexual offending area, the relevance of underlying cognitive schemas in sexual offenders has also been suggested. The aim of the present study was to investigate a potential relationship between Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs) and cognitive distortions in rapists. A total of 33 men convicted for rape completed the Bumby Rape Scale (BRS), the Young Schema Questionnaire – Short form-3 (YSQ-S3), the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), and the Socially Desirable Response Set Measure (SDRS-5). Results showed a significant relationship between the impaired limits schematic domain and the Justifying Rape dimension of the BRS. Specifically, after controlling for psychological distress levels and social desirability tendency, the entitlement/grandiosity schema from the impaired limits domain was a significant predictor of cognitive distortions related to Justifying Rape themes. Overall, despite preliminary, there is some evidence that the Young's Schema-Focused model namely the impaired limits dimension may contribute for the conceptualization of cognitive distortions in rapists and further investigation is recommended.

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1. Introduction

Cognitive-behavioral approaches are the current treatment of choice for sexual offenders (Eher & Pfafflin, 2011; Gannon, Collie, Ward, & Thakker, 2008; Yates, 2003). Among the major intervention targets are cognitive distortions which are commonly acclaimed as core cognitive factors implicated in both rape and child sexual abuse (e.g., Hall & Hirschman, 1991, 1992; Ward & Beech, 2006; Ward & Siegert, 2002).

The term cognitive distortion was first referred within the cognitive therapy to describe processing errors or fallacious reasoning with a major role on the development and maintenance of specific psychological disorders, such as depression (Beck, 1963, 1964). In the sexual offending literature, the concept was introduced by Abel and colleagues as a belief system that supports sexual interest and contact with children, in result of a discrepancy between individual's sexual arousal and societal norms (Abel, Becker, & Cunningham-Rathner, 1984). In a later paper, the authors reviewed the concept, defining cognitive distortions as internal processes such as justifications, perceptions, and judgments that sexual offenders use to rationalize their offending behavior (Abel et al., 1989).

Many other definitions have been proposed thenceforth. According to Murphy (1990), sex offenders' cognitive distortions are self-statements that allow denying, minimizing, rationalizing, and justifying sexual abuse. Likewise, they are conceptualized as maladaptive beliefs/attitudes

and problematic thinking styles (Ward, Hudson, Johnston, & Marshall, 1997), which have been shown to be related to the onset and maintenance of sexual offending (Ó Ciardha & Ward, 2013). Thus, the notion of sex offenders' cognitive distortions seems to refer to both offense-supportive attitudes and post-offense elements such as justifications or excuses (Maruna & Mann, 2006). Generally, they are inferred from attitudinal propositions included in the available self-reported questionnaires (Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006), such as the *Abel and Becker Cognition Scale* (e.g., "Having sex with a child is a good way for an adult to teach a child about sex"; Abel et al., 1989), the *Bumby Molest Scale* (e.g., "Sometimes, touching a child sexually is a way to show love and affection"; Bumby, 1996), and the *Bumby Rape Scale* (e.g., "Women usually want sex no matter how they can get it"; Bumby, 1996).

Despite the important focus on the notion of cognitive distortions in the sexual offending area, since the 1990s some researchers began to stress the relevance of underlying cognitive structures namely *schemas* in offenders (Mann & Beech, 2003; Maruna & Mann, 2006; Ward, 2000; Ward et al., 1997). According to Milner and Webster (2005), examining schema-level cognition may provide insight on how offenders' cognitive distortions and thinking errors arise, and how these are associated with sexual abuse. Instead of focusing only on cognitive distortions or post hoc rationalizations, it is proposed that interventions should primarily help the offender in understanding his stable and characteristic thinking patterns such as schemas thus reducing the probability of future processing errors (Maruna & Mann, 2006).

A schema may be defined as a cognitive structure, framework or pattern imposed on reality or experience to help individuals explain and perceive it, and to guide their responses (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003).

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Schemas include stable beliefs and assumptions about the self, others and the world, and function as a broad organizing principle that directs the cognitive processing of one's life events (Beck, 1967; Young et al., 2003).

In the available literature, there are some relevant studies analyzing offense-related schemas (i.e., victim/crime related perceptions) in sexual offenders. Malamuth and Brown (1994) examined the sexually aggressive men's perceptions of women in romantic/sexual situations. They found a "suspicion schema", which suggests that these men believe that women are deceptive and do not tell the truth when it comes to sex.

Milner and Webster (2005) compared the content of schemas in rapists, child molesters, and nonsexual violent offenders. Their findings showed that rapists present higher patterns of "suspicious/hostility to women", and "sexual entitlement", whereas child molesters presented a greater sense of "worthlessness", and violent offenders showed more "grievance/vengeance" and a "need to protect" themes.

Mann and Hollin (2010) developed a self-report instrument to identify schemas in sexual abusers, which they administered to 657 mixed convicted sexual offenders. They conducted an exploratory factor analysis and found two major themes, namely "dominance" (i.e., a need for respect and a desire for revenge), and "disadvantage" (i.e., beliefs that one has been damaged by others and controlled by the past).

Furthermore, according to Ward (2000), sex offenders' underlying schemata could be viewed as "implicit theories" concerning the nature of victims, the offender, and the world, and these would be able to account for the origin of cognitive distortions in sexual offenders. Ward and Keenan (1999) identified five core child molesters' implicit theories, namely "children as sexual objects", "entitlement", "dangerous world", "uncontrollability", and "nature of harm". Likewise, Polaschek and Ward (2002) proposed five rapists' implicit theories that were empirically supported in a later work (Polaschek & Gannon, 2004): "women are dangerous", "women are sex objects", "male sex drive is uncontrollable", "entitlement", and "dangerous world".

Besides the research on specific offense-related schemas in sexual offenders, more recently some researchers have also shown a relationship between the Young's Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs) and sexual aggression (Carvalho & Nobre, 2014; Chakhssi, Rutter, & Bernstein, 2013; Richardson, 2005; Sigre-Leirós, Carvalho, & Nobre, 2013). Within cognitive-behavioral approaches and in order to expand their methods and concepts, Young (1990, 1999) and Young et al. (2003) proposed this particular type of schema that is defined as "a broad, pervasive theme or pattern, comprised of memories, emotions, cognitions, and bodily sensations, regarding oneself and one's relationship with others, developed during childhood or adolescence, elaborated throughout one's lifetime, and dysfunctional to a significant degree" (Young et al., 2003, p. 7). The EMSs develop primarily as a result of adverse early experiences (e.g., neglect, abuse) and unmet core emotional needs in childhood such as secure attachments to others, particularly in the nuclear family. They might be at the core of personality disorders and many chronic Axis I disorders (Young et al., 2003).

There are 18 EMSs which are grouped within five general domains (see Young et al., 2003): (1) the *disconnection and rejection domain* refers to the expectation that one's needs for security, stability, acceptance, and respect will not be met in a predictable and consistent manner by others. It includes the EMSs of abandonment/instability, mistrust/abuse, emotional deprivation, defectiveness/shame, and social isolation/alienation; (2) the *impaired autonomy and performance domain* refers to expectations that interfere with one's perceived ability to function and perform independently and successfully. The EMSs from this domain are dependence/incompetence, vulnerability to harm or illness, enmeshment/undeveloped self, and failure; (3) the *impaired limits domain* concerns to deficiencies in internal limits, which leads to difficulty in respecting the rights of others, cooperating with them, or meeting realistic personal goals. This domain includes the EMSs of entitlement/grandiosity and insufficient self-control/self-discipline; (4) the *other-directedness domain* encompasses an excessive focus on

the desires and feelings of others, at the expense of own needs in order to gain love and approval. It includes the EMSs of subjugation, self-sacrifice, and approval-seeking/recognition-seeking; and (5) the *overvigilance and inhibition domain* refers to an excessive focus on controlling one's spontaneous feelings and impulses in order to avoid mistakes. The EMSs from this domain are negativity/pessimism, emotional inhibition, unrelenting standards/hypercriticalness, and punitiveness.

Richardson (2005) investigated the presence of EMSs in a sample of sexually abusive adolescents. He constituted different comparative subgroups in order to examine potential group specificity regarding these schemas. He found that, compared to the child offender group, the peer/adult offender group presented significantly higher scores in the EMSs from the impaired limits domain (i.e., entitlement/grandiosity, and insufficient self-control/self-discipline), and in emotional inhibition schema.

In another study that used a male college sample, compared to nonaggressors, individuals who have committed any form of sexually aggressive behavior presented significantly higher levels of EMSs from the disconnection/rejection domain (namely, mistrust/abuse schema), from the impaired autonomy/performance domain (namely, dependence/incompetence schema), and from the overvigilance/inhibition domain (namely, negativity/pessimism schema) (Sigre-Leirós et al., 2013).

More recently, two independent studies on this topic have used samples of convicted child molesters and rapists (Carvalho & Nobre, 2014; Chakhssi et al., 2013). Looking specifically at rapists, Carvalho and Nobre (2014) found that, compared to a non-offender control group, rapists presented more schemas from the impaired autonomy and performance domain. Since sexual offenders are frequently described as presenting a negative self-perception (e.g., Bridges, Wilson, & Gacono, 1998; Fisher, Beech, & Browne, 1999; Lyn & Burton, 2004), the authors (Carvalho & Nobre, 2014) suggested that EMSs related to the sense of incompetence could impact offenders' self-view.

On the other hand, Chakhssi et al. (2013) found that rapists presented more subjugation schema (i.e., excessive compliance in relationships) compared to nonsexual violent offenders. According to Young's model (Young et al., 2003), the authors (Chakhssi et al., 2013) pointed out that individuals that are/perceive themselves as excessively compliant may have outbursts of maladaptive coping behavior in order to meet their emotional and even sexual needs. Overall, these recent empirical studies suggest that EMSs may be related to sexual offenders' perceptions about themselves and about the world. Nevertheless, no data exist on the relationship between these early structures and victim/crime related perceptions, despite strong evidence on a distorted cognitive style related to how sexual offenders perceived (or justify) their crimes and their victims behaviors. Based on the recent evidence that core cognitive structures (EMSs) may impact offenders' perception about themselves, it would be predictable that some of these structures would also be related to surface distortions about victims/crime related events.

The purpose of the present study was thus to examine the potential relationship between EMSs and rape-related cognitive distortions. Specifically, guided by the general hypothesis on the role of underlying schemata in the origin of sex offenders' cognitive distortions (Maruna & Mann, 2006; Milner & Webster, 2005; Ward, 2000), it was aimed to investigate the potential role of deeper general schemas on rapists' distorted cognition.

This was an exploratory study since that according to our knowledge to date there is no available research on this topic. However, based in previous studies on offense-related schemas in sexual offenders (Malamuth & Brown, 1994; Mann & Hollin, 2010; Milner & Webster, 2005; Polaschek & Ward, 2002) we expected to find a relationship between the impaired limits domain and rapists' cognitive distortions. Conceptually, this domain refers to difficulties in respecting the rights of others or in cooperating with them. We think that it may be in some way related to "sexual entitlement" and "suspicious/hostility to women" schemas that were previously found in rapists (e.g., Milner & Webster, 2005).

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