



What motivates sexual abusers of children? A qualitative examination of the Spiral of Sexual Abuse



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ABSTRACT

This paper is the first in a sequence of explorations into the etiology of sexual offence patterns. Our sample is comprised of 63 males who admitted and/or were convicted of contact sexual crimes against children in the United Kingdom and United States. During semi-structured interviews subjects identified formative life experiences as central to the development of their motivations to sexually abuse. Sexual interest in children, while common, was not the sole motivational factor influencing behaviour; other key factors include the gaining of personal affirmation and a desire for power and control. There appeared to be an association between the type of formative life experience described and the specific motivations offenders developed to facilitate sexual abuse. Additional findings and implications are discussed.

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There exists a pressing need to better understand the causes of sexual crimes against children (Ward, 2014). According to large quantitative research studies, a significant number of people indicate they suffered sexual abuse as children (McGee, Garavan, de Barra, Byrne, & Conroy, 2002; Pereda, Guilera, Forn, & Gomez-Benito, 2009; Radford et al., 2011). While estimates vary depending on definitional criteria and sampling methodology, research suggests as many as 25% of males and 30% of females have experienced childhood abuse (McGee et al., 2002). In addition, it has been noted that child abuse offences are underreported and that official statistics do not represent the totality of the problem (NSPCC, available at <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/statistics/incidence-prevalence/#tab-offences>). Nevertheless, 17,727 reports of child sexual abuse were made in 2010–2011 in England and Wales, almost 50 cases per day (Chaplin, Flatley, & Smith, 2011).

Those who commit such crimes have long been seen as heterogeneous in nature with varied and unsubstantiated causal factors (Ward, 2014; Heffernan & Ward, 2015a, 2015b; Perrot, Bénony, Chahraoui, & Juif, 2014; Seto, 2015). However, certain commonalities have been observed. Childhood emotional, physical and sexual abuse, behavioural problems, and family dysfunction have been noted as developmental risk factors for sexual arousal to children (Lee, Jackson, Pattison, & Ward, 2002; Grattagliano et al., 2015; Grady, Levenson, & Bolder, 2016). Early sexualisation and social isolation in childhood have also

been postulated as having relevance to subsequent sexual harm against children (Sheehan & Sullivan, 2010).

The reinforcing effect of fantasy and masturbation have been noted as components in the development of sexual arousal to children with the suggestion that experiencing sexual abuse during childhood can increase the possibility of going on to offending against children (Marshall, Laws, & Barbaree, 1990). Lee et al. (2002), report that sexual abuse during childhood is a specific developmental risk factor that can result in the emergence of a sexual arousal to children. In a meta-analysis, Jespersen, Lalumière, and Seto (2009) reported that sex offenders are more likely to have been sexually abused than non-sex offenders. They also concluded that there was a significantly lower prevalence of sexual abuse history for those whose offences were against adults, as opposed to those who offended against children.

While a direct link between sexual offending against children and poor quality attachment has not been established, it has been noted in the histories of those who commit such offences (O'Reilly et al., 2004; Wood & Riggs, 2009; Marshall, 2010a; McKillop, Smallbone, Wortley, & Andjic, 2012; Wurtele, Simons, & Moreno, 2013; Levenson & Socia, 2015). The manner in which adverse childhood experiences can impact on neurodevelopment, militate against positive attachment relationships and influence the emergence of maladaptive interpersonal skills in increasingly seen as important in working with and understanding the etiology of sex offenders (Finkelhor & Kendall-Tackett, 1997; Felitti et al., 1998; Weiss & Wagner, 1998; Anda et al., 2006; Creeden, 2009).

More recently research has focused on possible genetic influences to sexual offending against children (Harden, 2014; Långström, Babchishin, Fazel, Lichtenstein, & Frisell, 2015). Genetic differences are seen as significant in how an individual responds to the world (Freese,

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2008) and how in turn the combination of genes, gender, and the environment mediate the impact of negative early life experiences (Copeland & Gorey, 2012). We know that children and young people can respond variously to life stressors (Kim-Cohen, Moffitt, Caspi, & Taylor, 2004; Masten, 2001; Rutter, 2007; Silk et al., 2007). In particular, it is considered that early trauma can bring about fundamental alterations to brain development and in turn how an individual engages with their environment (Perry, 2001; Ward & Beech, 2006).

As the individual uniquely assimilates their early life experiences maladaptive perceptions of the world emerge. Research has long noted that adult sex offenders can view their own offending and the environment around them in partisan fashion, holding what are commonly referred to as cognitive distortions (Grossman, Martis, & Fichtner, 1999; Marshall, Marshall, Serran, & O'Brien, 2009; Beech, Bartels, & Dixon, 2013; Ó Ciardha & Ward, 2013; Hempel, Buck, van Vugt, & van Marle, 2015; Sigré-Leirós, Carvalho, & Nobre, 2015). This feature of offenders has also been detailed as; thinking errors, abuse supportive beliefs and attitudes, justifications, schema, denial, minimisation, excuses and implicit theories (Ward & Keenan, 1999a, 1999b; Mann, Hanson, & Thornton, 2010a, 2010b; Ó Ciardha & Ward, 2013). Unsurprisingly it has been noted that cognitive distortions in sex offenders may serve to maintain a positive self-image and minimise perception of harm to a child (Hudson, 2013; Davids, Londt, & Wilson, 2015; Katsuta & Hazama, 2016). Cognitive distortions allow sex offenders to view themselves and their behaviour in a benign way (Winder, Gough, & Seymour-Smith, 2015), as well as being a process that maximises self-protection (Craissati, 2015).

The concept of implicit theories (Ward & Keenan, 1999a, 1999b; Keenan & Ward, 2000) is typically considered to be the most rigorous theory, when examined against other hypotheses (Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2011). Implicit theories suggest that offenders see the world through the lens of five categories, these include; *Child as a sexual being* (children are sexual and can agree to and instigate sexual behaviour), *Nature of harm* (I am not harming a child), *Entitlement* (I deserve sex), *Dangerous world* (the world is a dangerous place and I am safer being with children) and *Uncontrollable* (I cannot control my sexual urges) (Ward & Keenan, 1999a, 1999b). Such categories resonate with some of the themes that emerge from this study.

The existence of cognitive distortions is seen as a predicative risk factor for recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Helmus, Hanson, Babchishin, & Mann, 2013). It is considered that cognitive distortions emanate from childhood experiences and the nature early relationships (Chakhssi, Ruiter, & Bernstein, 2013; Carvalho & Nobre, 2014; Sigré-Leirós, Carvalho & Nobre, 2014). Accordingly, treatment programmes focus on exploring and challenging distortions (Schneider & Wright, 2004; Marshall & Serran, 2006; Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2011) in order to effect change.

Accordingly, family of origin and early life experiences, in particular negative ones, and how they may have influenced subsequent thinking and behaviour is an important area for exploration when working with this cohort (Levenson, 2014).

This study contributes to the debate about whether sexual abusers of children are born with the predisposition or are products of their experiences and environments by providing a richer understanding of perpetrators perceptions of their developing motivation to engage sexually with children.

1. Method

The use of qualitative approaches to explore sexual crimes against children is becoming more common (Mannix, Dawson, & Beckley, 2013; Pflugradt & Allen, 2012; Winder & Gough, 2010). In research using qualitative analysis of convicted sex offenders, Tidefors and Kordon (2009) found the information detailed by the offenders added value to prevention efforts and treatment planning. Similarly, Ward (2014) argued that qualitative methodologies provide a rich array of

cognitive tools for incorporating phenomenology and agency issues into “interlevel theories.” While once viewed as somewhat dichotomous approaches, there is a growing acceptance that qualitative and quantitative methodologies can co-exist and should even be considered compatible (Brent & Kraska, 2010; Robson, 2011) in light of calls for more evidence-based practice (Hanson, 2014; Ward, 2014).

The process of engaging in qualitative analysis allows for hypotheses to be generated and developed as the data are collected and analysed, and in effect, the subject(s) are core to the creation of theory and the humanistic and holistic understanding of a topic. Qualitative interviews are particularly useful at describing why, and in what way, change occurs (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), leading to the development of theory. Participants in this study were being asked about their early life experiences and to consider retrospectively formative events in their lives.

1.1. Data collection

The most common method for generating data in qualitative research is the interview (Byrne, 2012). A semi-structured interview is used to help collect data during the interview and hypotheses are generated at this stage and during data analysis. Often the interview is recorded, with the permission of the interviewee, and subsequently transcribed. The interview was chosen as the main means of accessing data for this research. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by the authors. This emersion in the accounts of the participants assisted in the authors familiarisation with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

1.2. Role of the researchers

The researchers are central to the collection of qualitative data. Various collection methods (focus groups, interviews, observation, oral histories, case notes) facilitate for exploration of a range of experiences and engagement with the subjects. The qualitative researcher has been described as working in the real world, dealing with first-hand experiences in a non-formal setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The result is a more complex and insightful understanding of the subject and topic than a quantitative approach might allow. The essence of qualitative research centres on the meanings, individuality and unique characteristics of issues, people, and understanding and motivations in particular settings and cultures (Tewksbury, 2009). By focussing on the context, both related and contradictory themes and concepts emerge from the data. This allows for consideration what is absent and ambiguous, as well as the unequivocal and the specific (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

The researcher is required to have the skill to build rapport with interviewees and the ability to respond insightfully within the context of an interview, with a view to encouraging and maximising data collection. Hence, it is preferable that the researcher has a solid knowledge of the subject matter being explored, and experience of working with the cohort can be valuable (Robson, 2011). Both authors were responsible for conducting the interviews of participants and have considerable experience in the field, regularly interview individuals who have sexually abused and exploited children, and are up-to-date with current relevant research. Accordingly, the subject matter was familiar to them and they were able to bring a range of interviewing skills and understanding to the process. It is recognised that individuals will have a variety of responses on the same topic and that validity necessitates that each perception is acknowledged and valued while understanding the limitation of any single viewpoint (Porter, 2007). The interviewers took time at the beginning of each interview building rapport and bringing clarity to the process. As experienced interviewers of sex offenders they were able to facilitate the participants' maintaining focus on the key objectives of the semi-structured interview.

Themes begin to emerge as the interviews progress using qualitative analysis. These themes are then coded and can be analysed using a variety of methodologies which include; Interpretative Phenomenological

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