

Men Presenting With Sexual Thoughts of Children or Coercion: Flights of Fancy or Plans for Crime?

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: There is limited evaluation of clinical and theoretical claims that sexual thoughts of children and coercing others facilitate sexual offending. The nature of these thoughts (what they contain) also is unknown.

Aim: To examine the relation between child or coercive sexual thoughts and sexual offending and to determine the nature of these thoughts and any differences among sexual offending (SO), non-sexual offending (NSO), and non-offending (NO) men.

Methods: In a cross-sectional computerized survey, anonymous qualitative and quantitative self-reported sexual thought and experience data were collected from 279 adult volunteers composing equal numbers of SO, NSO, and NO men recruited from a medium-security UK prison and a community sample of 6,081 men.

Main Outcome Measures: Computerized Interview for Sexual Thoughts and Computerized Inventory of Sexual Experiences.

Results: Three analytical approaches found child sexual thoughts were related to sexual offending; sexual thoughts with coercive themes were not. Latent class analyses identified three types of child sexual thought (primarily differentiated by interpersonal context: the reporting of own emotions, emotions of others, or both) and four types of sexual thoughts of coercing others (chiefly discriminated by the other person's response: no emotional states reported, consent, non-consent, or mixed). Type of child sexual thought and participant group were not significantly related. Type of coercive sexual thought and group were marginally related; the consensual type was more common for the NO group and the non-consensual type was more common for the SO group than expected statistically.

Conclusion: Child sexual thoughts are a risk factor for sexual offending and should be assessed by clinicians. In general, sexual thoughts with coercive themes are not a risk factor, although thought type could be important (ie, thoughts in which the other person expresses an enduring lack of consent). Exploring the dynamic risk factors associated with each type of child and coercive thought could lead to more targeted treatment.

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual fantasies are almost universally experienced¹ and related to greater sexual arousal,² orgasm,³ and satisfaction.^{2,3} They can be subject to clinical attention when particularly (in)frequent or consisting of certain themes; “unusual” fantasies causing distress or impairment might indicate a paraphilic disorder⁴ and some sexual thoughts (eg, of children or coercing others) can raise concerns about risk of harm to others.^{4,5} Similarly, theories of sexual offending posit that “deviant” fantasies facilitate and

maintain sexual offending in men,^{6–8} and sexual fantasies often identified, implied, or operationalized as “deviant” are those of children and coercing or forcing others into sex.

Although the premise, clinically and theoretically, is that sexual fantasies of children and coercing others facilitate action, empirical evaluation of this claim is limited and beset with definitional issues. Sexual fantasy is rarely defined,^{9–12} and although there is often an implicit assumption that fantasies are pleasant and wanted, they are usually operationalized as nearly any sexual thought.^{2,13–16} Sexual fantasies of children also are not defined or are operationalized differently (eg, “children” might include prepubertal children or all people younger than the country's legal age of consent^{11,15,17}), and sexual fantasies of coercing others might be operationalized with items on “rape” (without a definition), non-consensual sex, or ambiguous references to “threats” and “force”.^{9,15,18,19}

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One evaluative approach to examining whether sexual fantasies of children and coercing others are related to sexual offending would be to compare the prevalence of these fantasies in men convicted for sexual offenses (a sexual offending [SO] group), men convicted for non-sexual offenses and screened for sexual offenses (a non-sexual offending [NSO] group), and community men screened for previous offenses (a non-offending [NO] group); a greater prevalence of such fantasies in the SO group than in the comparison groups implicates the fantasies in sexual offending specifically, before and/or after the offense. However, prior research is problematic; inferential statistics are sometimes missing, fantasies of male children and adults are combined, fantasies of rape are combined with fantasies of pain or subsumed within broader “deviant” categories, and comparison groups sometimes have a sexual offending history.^{9,20} Other studies include only one comparison^{10,13,14,21} or no comparison¹¹ group, failing to confirm whether the prevalence is highest for SO men, comparable to men with similar criminal, legal, or prison experiences, or men in general. Studies also rarely separate fantasies of rape and sadism.^{10,21}

A second empirical approach would be to compare the prevalence of sexual fantasies of children and coercing others in NO subgroups with a lower and higher proclivity for sexual offending and SO subgroups with a lower and higher risk of sexual reoffending; a greater prevalence of these fantasies in the “higher” than “lower” subgroups suggests the fantasies are a risk factor for first-time (in NO subgroups) and repeat (in SO subgroups) sexual offending. To our knowledge, in NO groups, the relation between sexual fantasies of children and sex offending proclivity has not been examined (although these variables have been examined separately in community samples²²), and although some studies have investigated the relation between sexual fantasies of coercion and rape proclivity, fantasies of rape are combined with bondage or sadism, and men with a sexual offending history have not been excluded.^{18,19,23} In convicted SO groups, research has examined the relation between broader sexual variables (eg, “sexual interests”) and the risk of sexual recidivism.²⁴

A third empirical approach to examining whether sexual fantasies of children and coercing others are related to sexual offending would be to establish whether these fantasies are related to the number of child and adult victims in the SO group. Sexual fantasies of children have correlated with the number of child victims and offenses, indicating a relation between these fantasies and sexual recidivism.^{12,15,25} Other conclusions are limited; studies examining sexual fantasies of coercing adults have predominantly or completely sampled men who sexually offended against children^{15,25} or investigated broader “deviant” or “crime” fantasy categories.^{16,26,27}

Sexual fantasies of children and coercing others cannot be a sufficient factor for sexual offending because these fantasies also are reported in NO groups and the causes of sexual offending are widely recognized to be multifactorial.²⁸ However, although

particular psychological, social, situational, and other factors likely moderate any fantasy-offending relation, the characteristics of the fantasies themselves also might be moderating variables. Typically, prior research has used long fantasy checklists,^{9,10,17,20} providing insights into the prevalence of fantasies but nothing about their nature. Each checklist item is presented as a separate, discrete fantasy (eg, “sex with your ex-girlfriend”); however, fantasies likely include a combination of people, actions, and settings (eg, oral sex with an ex-girlfriend on a beach).²⁹ Therefore, fantasies of “having sex with a child” or “forcing someone to have sex” are unlikely to be homogenous constructs. Some studies have examined descriptions of men’s sexual fantasies, usually their favorite or most frequent,^{30,31} but typically only selected aspects are analyzed and comparisons with SO groups are rare.²¹ To our knowledge, descriptions of men’s sexual fantasies of children or coercing others have not been examined specifically, raising questions about the nature of these fantasies (ie, what they entail) and whether SO men have qualitatively different (ie, different in kind) sexual fantasies of children and coercing others than NSO and NO men.

In the present study, a sexual thought was conceptualized as a thought with sexual content (ie, content typically seen as sexual within a given culture, eg, oral sex) and/or thoughts that are sexually arousing to the individual (eg, a sexually arousing thought of an inanimate object). Within this construct, sexual fantasy was conceptualized as a sexual thought with particular experiential and functional properties; that is, a pleasant, engaging, elaborated mental picture that creates, maintains, or intensifies sexual arousal. The broader construct of sexual thoughts was examined, rather than sexual fantasies, for a more complete understanding of the potential relation with sexual offending, recognizing that sexual thoughts of children and coercing others also are experienced as unpleasant or unwanted, and that some sexual fantasies lead to negative feelings after having been arousing or enjoyable initially.³² For this study, children were defined as all people younger than 16 years, commensurate with the age of consent in the United Kingdom. Sexual thoughts with coercive themes were defined as forcing someone to have sex—whether simulated or not—and sexual thoughts of coercing others were defined as those involving forcing someone to have sex against their will.

The first aim of the present study was to examine the relation between sexual thoughts of children or coercive themes and sexual offending using the three empirical approaches described earlier. Convergent findings would provide evidence for a sexual thought-offending relation overall, whereas divergence might suggest a more nuanced relation or possibly a methodologic artifact of a particular approach. The second aim was to examine descriptions of sexual thoughts of children and coercing others to determine their nature and a subsidiary aim was to explore whether these differed by group (ie, SO vs NSO vs NO). Sexual thoughts with coercive themes were examined for the first aim to explore whether sexual thoughts with any coercive theme might

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