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Original article

Cognitive distortions in sexual aggressors against children: An examination of the Abel and Becker Cognition Scale (ABCS)



L'évaluation des distorsions cognitives chez les Auteurs d'Aggression Sexuelle sur enfant : une analyse de l'Abel and Becker Cognition Scale (ABCS)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Cognitive distortions are generally considered a key factor in the evaluation and treatment of sexual aggressors against children.

Aim. – The aim of this study was to examine the discriminant properties of the Abel and Becker Cognition Scale.

Method and results. – The results of analyses of covariance, in a sample of 265 aggressors against children, do not support ABCS's discriminating properties.

Conclusion. – Limits and implications for future researches are discussed.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – Les distorsions cognitives sont généralement considérées comme un facteur important aussi bien dans l'évaluation que la prise en charge des auteurs d'agression sexuelle (AAS) sur enfant.

Objectif. – Partant du consensus théorique que les AAS sur enfant forment un groupe hétérogène, le but de cette recherche est d'étudier les qualités discriminantes de l'Abel and Becker Cognition Scale (ABCS).

Méthode. – À partir d'un échantillon de 265 AAS, une série d'analyses de covariance a été privilégiée.

Résultats. – Les résultats obtenus montrent que la validité discriminante de l'ABCS s'avère insatisfaisante.

Conclusion. – Les limites, mais également les implications de la recherche sont discutées.

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of sexual aggression against children is a tremendous preoccupation of modern societies. Explaining sexual aggression is one of the principal issues researchers and clinicians grapple with. It is expected that the development of etiological theories will lead to the identification of the causes of sexual aggression, the development of appropriate treatment programs, and,

ultimately, the prevention of recidivism and the protection of the society (Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006). Analysis of cognition, based on information processing models, is a central topic to the study of sexual offending. Cognitive distortions are therefore generally considered highly relevant to both the evaluation and the management of sexual aggressors (SAs) against children (Gannon, Ward, Beech, & Fisher, 2007).

1.1. Theoretical framework

Cognitive distortions – in essence, a process by which individuals erroneously interpret information about their environment – were first advanced by Beck (1963), in his work

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on depression. Their application to sexual aggression against children can be traced back to a 1984 study by Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner (Vanderstukken, Schiza, Archer, & Pham, 2007). In sexual aggression, in contrast to depression, cognitive distortions are defined as the range of arguments and beliefs that are related to deviant sexual behaviors and serve to rationalize, minimize, and justify sexual aggression (Abel et al., 1984; Abel et al., 1989). Cognitive distortions' etiological role was initially seen as a protecting SAs' self-image, by freeing them of the anxiety, guilt, or loss of self-esteem that usually accompanies antisocial behavior (Abel et al., 1989). However, it has also been suggested that cognitive distortions are a form of post-hoc reinterpretation (Marshall, Marshall, & Kingston, 2011). In this latter view, which is incompatible with the etiological view, cognitive distortions are simply excuses and justifications presented by SAs, particularly in the face of judicial proceedings (Gannon & Polaschek, 2006; Hanson, Pronovost, Proulx, Scott, & Raza, 1998; Maruna & Mann, 2006).¹

More recently, it has been suggested that distinguishing between cognitive *products* and cognitive *structures* would help elucidate the role of cognitive distortions in sexual aggression against children (Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2011; Ward & Keenan, 1999). Cognitive structures are sets of cognitive content rooted in long-term memory (Ward et al., 2006). More specifically, they are networks of content-related knowledge and associations, responsible for bias in the selection and interpretation of stimuli, constructed from individuals' life experiences (Ó Ciardha, 2011). Cognitive distortions should therefore be understood as the expression of latent cognitive structures or implicit theories rather than as an etiological factor in sexual aggression (Ward, 2000; Ward, Hudson, Johnston, & Marshall, 1997; Ward & Keenan, 1999). Cognitive structures allow the rapid processing of information in the face of temporal or environmental stress or ambiguous information. On the other hand, the use of cognitive shortcuts (or heuristics), even at the expense of incorrect information processing – i.e. arguments that minimize, justify, or rationalize sexual aggression – is favored by implicit theories.

Regardless of whether cognitive distortions are viewed as etiological factors or post-hoc rationalizations, all treatment programs for SAs against children address cognitive distortions in some way. In fact, as these distortions are considered an obstacle to accountability, and as accountability is considered essential to therapeutic success (Marshall et al., 2011; Maruna & Mann, 2006), the cognitive distortions of SAs against children are preferential intervention targets (Hanson et al., 1998).

1.2. The Abel and Becker Cognition Scale (ABCS)

The evaluation of cognitive distortions is of critical importance from both theoretical and clinical perspectives. Not surprisingly, therefore, considerable effort has been devoted to the development and validation of instruments that measure cognitive distortions with adequate discriminant validity. Given the posited role of cognitive distortions in sexual aggression against children, it is reasonable to expect that these instruments distinguish SAs against children from other individuals.

The Abel and Becker Cognition Scale (ABCS; Abel et al., 1989) is a self-report instrument for the evaluation of cognitive distortions in SAs against children. It comprises 26 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Completely agree" (scored as 1) to "Completely disagree" (scored as 5). The items are related to children's attraction to adults (e.g. "If a young child stares at my genitals, it

means the child likes what he (she) sees and is enjoying watching my genitals"; "A child who does not physically resist an adult's sexual advances really wants to have sex with the adult"), and to the innocuousness of sexual aggression against children (e.g. "Sex between a 13 year old (or younger child) and an adult causes the child no emotional problems"; "When a young child has sex with an adult, it helps the child learn how to relate to adults in the future").

Although the ABCS is widely used in clinical and research settings (Grady, Brodersen, & Abramson, 2011), research results raise reasonable doubts about its discriminant validity (Abel et al., 1989). Thus, although many studies indicate that the ABCS distinguishes between SAs against children and members of the general population, other studies report it to be incapable of distinguishing SAs against children from other offenders, either sexual and non-sexual (for a review, see Benbouriche, Vanderstukken, Guay, Testé, & Renaud, 2013). It has been suggested that these contradictory results – which partially challenge theory-based claims to the role of cognitive distortions – are due to sample-related limitations (Ó Ciardha, 2011), specifically insufficient statistical power resulting from inadequate sample size (Arkowitz & Vess, 2003). Moreover, because of these small samples, SAs against children have usually been considered a homogeneous group, such that it has not been possible to identify characteristics associated with the expression of cognitive distortions. For example, of the 11 ABCS-based studies reviewed by Benbouriche et al. (2013), only one studied the relationship between the presence of cognitive distortions in SAs against children and the aggressor–victim relationship.

1.3. Issues

SAs against children are a heterogeneous group (Knight & Prentky, 1990). Several studies have identified patterns of SAs' pre-crime decision making (Beauregard, Leclerc, & Lussier, 2012), modus operandi (Proulx, Beauregard, Lussier, & Leclerc, 2014), and, more generally, self-regulation of offending behaviors (Ward & Hudson, 1998). Recently, it has been suggested that SAs against children who exhibit certain characteristics – particularly with regard to the victim's sex and relationship with the SA – associated with a higher risk of sexual recidivism possess more cognitive distortions (Bickley & Beech, 2002; Gannon, Keown, & Polaschek, 2007). Classification of SAs against children into groups based on these characteristics is likely to improve the evaluation of both cognitive distortions and the discriminant validity of the instruments. More specifically, it is possible that the reported absence of significant differences between cognitive distortions in SAs against children and other offenders (both sexual and nonsexual) reflects the reliance on study designs inconsistent with the identification of subgroups of SAs against children with more cognitive distortions. The assumption that all SAs against children are part of a single homogeneous population may thus have contributed to the underestimation of some important characteristics. From a theoretical perspective, a more refined analytical strategy is therefore likely to yield a more accurate evaluation of the role of cognitive distortions in offending behavior. Cognitive distortions may be a factor in the sexual aggression of some SAs against children, but may be irrelevant in others. Finally, from a clinical perspective, identification of subgroups of SAs against children who exhibit significantly more cognitive distortions could facilitate the development of treatment programs based on personalized cognitive restructuring, rather than the current one-size-fits-all approach (Polaschek, 2011).

1.4. The importance of the aggressor–victim relationship and the sex of the victim

The relationship between the SA and the victim is generally considered to influence the likelihood of cognitive distortions

¹ To articulate these two perspectives, it also has been proposed that some cognitive distortions could be etiological in nature whereas other could be a form of post-hoc reinterpretation (Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2011).

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