



A review of the cognitive distortions in child sex offenders: An examination of the motivations and mechanisms that underlie the justification for abuse

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Abstract

The role of cognitions has been widely acknowledged in research, where distorted thinking is recognized as an important factor in both the initiation and maintenance of child sexual abuse. More recently, there has been an emergence of data-driven descriptive accounts based on interviews and analysis of texts formed by the child abuser. Researchers currently suggest that sexual offenders' cognitive distortions emerge from underlying causal theories about the nature of themselves, their victims, and the world, where the focus is on identifying the cognitive processes involved in preference to the content of notionally unrelated independent beliefs held by these individuals. The aim of this review is to examine the nature of these cognitive distortions in child sex offenders by analyzing the core constructs of Finkelhor's Precondition Model in comparison to the more recent implicit theories perspective and Pathways model outlined by Ward and colleagues. Implications for research are discussed in terms of recognizing the value of qualitative methods that address the broader domain of cognitive processes and offer a more dynamic alternative to the traditional approaches within the complex field of child sexual abuse.

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The meaning and concept of child sexual abuse has received much attention in recent years. The public, in particular, has a considerable hostility for pedophiles depicting them as predators who hang around schools and play areas preying on young children. Further, sex offenders have been built up into ‘modern folk devils’ by the popular press (Sampson, 1994), with headlines exposing sex offenders as ‘perverts’ and ‘monsters’. Arguably, these cultural representations are specifically masculine, and empirical evidence has shown that child sexual abuse is overwhelmingly a male activity, with the majority of child sex offenders being male irrespective of the sex of the child they abuse (Finkelhor, 1984). While there has been an emergence in the literature to suggest female-perpetrated sexual abuse does exist, and that it is often hidden or underreported, there is scant published literature in this field to support the veracity of these claims (Allen, 1991; cited in Taylor & Quayle, 2003). Moreover, contrary to public belief that sex offenders are impoverished, socially inept individuals, collectively they will include ordinary heterosexual men; fathers, grandfathers, brothers, uncles and male friends. As Swann (2000) succinctly suggests, the definition of a pedophile is ‘married with children driving a nice car’.

Sexual offending against children is not only a socially significant problem, but it has led many researchers to examine what motivates men to engage in sexual activities with children rather than their adult peers. Researchers have argued that the major flaw in most theories is that they have attempted to explain child sexual abuse with one single theory (Finkelhor, 1984; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990). It would appear that the diverse nature and full range of sexually abusive behavior cannot be adequately explained by a single factor. For example, behaviors can range from a compulsive individual who will stalk and assault their child victim to cases where a man following years of an ostensibly, contented heterosexual relationship with his wife, abuses one of his children. Finkelhor (1984) argues that there is a need for multi-factorial explanations to try and establish the motivating factors that guide an adult male to have sexual relations with a child, and the sustaining factors that contribute to the maintenance of such relations.

Thus, the principle focus in this review will be to evaluate research regarding child sex offenders’ cognitive distortions, in particular the increasing attention paid within the literature regarding implicit theories and how these theories are used to guide an individual’s choice and pursuit of goals. Ward (2000) suggests that the content of these implicit theories are likely to be maladaptive and constructed during the child abuser’s early development, possibly as a result of sexual abuse or exposure to inappropriate behavior. Consequently, developmental perspectives will be reviewed. Additionally, Finkelhor’s Model of Child Sexual Abuse (1984) will be evaluated. While this model is dated, it is considered the first comprehensive theory concerning child sexual abuse and is cited extensively. It follows that other multifactor theories of child sexual abuse, such as the Integrated Theory of Marshall and Barbaree (1990) and the Quadripartite Model of Hall and Hirschman (1992), should be recognized due to their contribution in part to our understanding of sexual offending. However, these models are less relevant to cognitions. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper they will not be considered. For the purpose of this review, it is first necessary to examine both quantitative and qualitative research regarding distorted thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs in child sex offenders to acknowledge not only the content, but also the cognitive processes involved in these individuals’ dysfunctional thoughts.

1. Quantitative evaluations of cognitions

Studies of sex abuse typically use samples of incarcerated sex offenders. Ames and Houston (1990) argue that these individuals are unrepresentative of sexual abusers about which little is known, therefore findings cannot be generalized to the population of non-incarcerated offenders which may be substantially larger than those caught and convicted. Moreover, the influence of social desirability might affect the responses of child abusers, where a need to present themselves in a ‘good light’ rather than reveal their genuine opinions and attitudes is preferred (Stermac, Segal, & Gillis, 1990). This conceivably highlights the difficulty researchers encounter when dealing with this heterogeneous group of individuals. Perhaps, one of the major contentious issues within the literature on child abusers

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