PART I

SEXUAL ABUSERS

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Chapter 1

THE COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS AND IMPLICIT THEORIES OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSERS

JOANNE THAKKER

University of Waikato, NZ

TONY WARD AND SHRUTI NAVATHE

Victoria University of Wellington, NZ

Child sexual abuse is typically judged by society to be a particularly abhorrent crime and those who commit such crimes receive severe – typically prison-based – penalties. However, along with the assigned punishment there is also often an expectation that the offender will engage in some sort of rehabilitation process to reduce risk of reoffending. As in many areas of psychological intervention, treatment in the sexual offending area is an evolving field – a work in progress (Marshall, Anderson & Fernandez, 1999). A large amount of both theoretical and empirical research has been conducted but outcome data suggest that there is room for improvement (Hanson *et al.*, 2002). In order to advance treatment it is advantageous to develop an understanding of the many different factors associated with child sexual abuse – in particular causal factors.

A growing body of research since the mid-1980s has explored the role of cognition in the genesis and maintenance of child sexual abuse. This research indicates that child sexual abusers often harbour beliefs that justify sexual offending and appear to precipitate and maintain offence behaviour (Gannon, Ward & Collie, 2007; Ward & Keenan, 1999). It has been determined that child sexual abusers tend to describe their offending in an offence-supportive manner (Ward, 2000). For example, they may suggest that the sexual interaction with the child was justified because the child appeared to enjoy the experience, that it was harmless because there was no actual penetration involved, or that it is inherently good for human beings of all ages to engage in sexual activity.

This chapter discusses and evaluates the theory developed to explain child sexual abusers' offence-supportive cognitions or beliefs, opening with early

theoretical conceptualisations. We then look at the major theoretical developments since; that is, schema-based approaches. The discussion concludes with the presentation of a model that summarises the various key ideas and attempts to identify their interrelationships. Note that this model places cognitive factors within the context of all of the other variables that also play a role in child sexual abuse, thereby acknowledging that cognition is just one of many psychological factors associated with this particular problematic behaviour.

COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

Origins and Early Conceptualisations

The term “cognitive distortions” was first used by Beck (1963) in reference to the intrusive and disruptive thoughts typically associated with depression. It was Beck’s view (a view that he has developed extensively since) that the unrealistic thoughts that are frequently exhibited by depressed individuals are fundamental to their clinical condition and so should be further pinpointed for successful therapy.

It appears that the first researchers to utilise the term “cognitive distortions” within the area of sexual offending were Abel, Becker and Cunningham-Rathner (1984). As argued by Abel and colleagues, men typically engage in sexual activity with children because they experience feelings of sexual attraction to prepubescent individuals. In explaining how such maladaptive feelings of sexual arousal develop in men, Abel *et al.* suggest that during their childhoods, boys are typically exposed to a wide range of stimuli that may be associated with deviant sexual interests. However, most boys learn to control such responses and limit them to stimuli that would ordinarily be considered erotic by the majority of people in their society. In other words, the process by which boys’ sexual fantasies and sexual responses develop is strongly influenced by societal norms and societal expectations. According to Abel and colleagues, for some unidentified reason, this shaping process does not occur in some men, resulting in the manifestation of deviant arousal.

Abel *et al.* suggest that as the individual develops an awareness of the disparity between his own sexual preferences and societal norms, he creates an internal dialogue between his thoughts and attitudes. This internal dialogue then serves to justify his sexual feelings and allows him to feel at ease with himself. Abel *et al.* refer to these thoughts and attitudes as *cognitive distortions* and propose that there are a number of key distortions that are commonly articulated by child sexual abusers. These are:

- A child who does not physically resist sexual advances really wants to have sex.
- Having sex with a child is a good way for an adult to teach a child about sex.
- Children do not tell others about having sex with a parent because they really enjoy the sexual activity and want it to continue.
- Some time in the future our society will come to realise that sex between a child and an adult is acceptable.

- An adult who only feels a child's body or genitals is not really being sexual with the child so no harm is done.
- When a child asks an adult a question about sex it means that the child wants to see the adult's genitals or have sex with them.
- Relationships with children are enhanced by my having sex with them. (Abbreviated, from Abel, Becker & Cunningham-Rathner, 1984, pp. 98–101.)

The way in which Abel and others explicate the idea of cognitive distortions bears strong similarity to aspects of Freud's psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1923/1989), although this connection has not been made elsewhere. Freud coined the term "defence mechanism" in his early writing, in reference to psychological techniques that individuals use to protect themselves from unpleasant thoughts and feelings (Cramer, 2000). Sometimes these mechanisms are referred to as "ego defences", reflecting the idea that their purpose is to protect the ego from some perceived psychological threat. Freud focused, in particular, on the tendency for the ego to suppress aggressive and sexual impulses that would pose a threat to the individual's integrity (Baumeister, Dale & Sommer, 1998). The three defences that are most relevant here are "denial," "rationalisation" and "reaction formation." *Denial* refers to total refutation of an idea. *Rationalisation* refers to the creation of beliefs and explanations that (erroneously) justify particular behaviours or events. Finally, *reaction formation* refers to the process of exchanging a negative feeling for a positive one by taking an opposing view. It has been noted that Freud's hypotheses of defence mechanisms are surprisingly well supported by both theoretical and empirical literature (see Baumeister, Dale & Sommer, 1998).

Thus, cognitive distortions appear to function as cognitive defence mechanisms, which allow the child sexual abuser to feel more comfortable with his behaviour and reduce dissonance between his actions and attitudes condemning such activities. While all seven of Abel's cited cognitions may be described as both denial (insofar as they serve to deny wrongdoing), and rationalisation (insofar as they provide a justification for the behaviour), the potential effect of these is reaction formation. For example, rather than thinking that sex between an adult and a child is harmful and having negative feelings about one's inappropriate behaviour, an offender may entertain the idea that sex between an adult and child is good because it strengthens their intimacy. Subsequently, this offender would be more likely to hold positive feelings in association with that sexual interaction.

Placing their theory within a broader theoretical context, Abel *et al.* (1989) suggest that cognitive distortions are consistent with the account of human behaviour provided by Bandura's social learning theory (SLT) (Bandura, 1977). They state that while SLT emphasises the importance of various conditioning processes in the regulation of behaviour it also maintains that cognition plays a fundamental role in these processes, and that conditioning, in turn, influences cognition. Accordingly Abel *et al.* argue that "cognitive distortions are the products of conflict between external reinforcements and internal self-condemnation" (p. 138). The more prominent focus of this article by Abel *et al.* is the development of a scale for measuring the presence of "cognitive distortions" in child sexual abusers (see Chapter 4 of this volume for more details). Labelled the Cognitions Scale or CS, this measure presents a range of offence-supportive cognitions and

requires respondents to rate their strength of agreement with each cognition on a Likert scale. Using this measure, Abel *et al.* conclude that, "child molesters do report beliefs and attitudes that are dramatically different from those of non child molesters" (p. 147). Abel *et al.*'s findings also illustrate a positive correlation between the number of cognitions endorsed by child sexual abusers and the number of years they have been engaging in sexual activity with children. As noted below there has been criticism of this measure, however, it has nonetheless been widely used in the assessment of child sexual abusers.

Critique and Elaboration of Early Ideas

Perhaps the most notable confusion evident within Abel's early conceptualisation of cognitive distortions is the lack of clarity concerning whether these "distortions" represent some type of permanent belief structure, or whether they are, in fact, more temporary dissonance-reduction cognitions used to facilitate and justify offending behaviour (Gannon & Polaschek, 2006; Ward, Polaschek & Beech, 2005). As Gannon and Polaschek (2006) note, although the latter explanation appears more likely, Abel *et al.*'s development of a scale to measure attitudes and beliefs appears incongruous with this explanation. In other words, how useful is it to develop a scale that measures beliefs and attitudes when the cognitive construct being targeted is more temporary dissonance reducing cognitions? Similarly, Gannon *et al.* (2007) criticise the ambiguity that arose out of Abel's broad and indistinct definition of cognitive distortions. As noted by Gannon *et al.* the literature that followed Abel's work has been littered with a variety of terms and definitions indicating a lack of consensus in regard to the nature of cognitive distortions and their underlying conceptual foundation. On reflection, then, this early conceptualization of child sexual abusers' cognition shows some evidence of theoretical confusion or a lack of internal coherence (Gannon & Polaschek, 2006).

Mann and Beech (2003) also critique Abel and his colleagues for such incoherence arguing that it is unclear whether cognitive distortions are conscious or unconscious cognitive processes. They propose that according to the original description, individuals could use cognitive distortions in a conscious, intentional manner in order to avoid feeling judged by others, or they could emerge quite spontaneously and automatically as a protective mechanism. Interestingly Abel *et al.* assert that one aspect common to all seven cited cognitions is that the offender does not seek support for them from other members of the general public. Abel *et al.* propose that this act of omission indicates that the offender has at least some understanding of the inappropriateness of his cognitions. Hence, in response to Mann and Beech perhaps Abel would suggest that cognitive distortions emerge in child sexual abusers in at least a semi-conscious manner.

In relation to this discussion, Gannon and Polaschek point out that one of the problems with the CS is that it assumes that offenders' offence-supportive cognitions are always accessible for self-report. In other words, Abel and his colleagues appear to believe that the offender has a continuous and stable awareness of his cognitions that is directly transferable to pen and paper assessment. As stated by Gannon and Polaschek, however, the offender's ability to access offence-supportive

cognitions is likely to vary according to key contextual factors clearly absent from questionnaire-testing contexts (e.g., extreme affect and sexual arousal).

Mann and Beech also argue that there is a lack of clarity or coherency regarding the *function* of offence-supportive cognition in the offence process. On one hand such cognition may provide retrospective justifications for past offending, or, it could be construed as preceding offending and therefore playing a *causative* role.

More recently, Drake *et al.* (2001) and Ward (2000) point out that there is no theoretical foundation underlying the presentation of the seven cited cognitive distortions presented by Abel *et al.* (1984). In other words, it seems as though the seven beliefs described by Abel *et al.* (1984) are construed as being independent of each other; a proposal that is simply incongruous with other psychological disciplines (i.e., the developmental or social-cognition literature relating to implicit theories and schemas respectively). A further criticism meted out by Drake *et al.* is that according to Abel *et al.* the seven types of distortions presented are a subset of possible distortions that may be present in child sexual abusers. This begs the questions of: What other distortions may be present? And, on what basis have these seven been chosen?

Feelgood, Cortoni and Thompson (2005) postulate that cognitive distortions are associated with maladaptive coping strategies in sexual offenders. Specifically, they suggest that there is likely to be "... a mechanism whereby distortions may facilitate and maintain deviant sexual coping by reducing internal inhibitions such as guilt and shame" (p. 166). In this instance "deviant sexual coping" refers to a child sexual abuser's tendency to use sexual interaction with children as a means of dealing with stress and high levels of unpleasant emotion. In this way cognitive distortions may be used by offenders to support their maladaptive coping strategies. Feelgood *et al.* found, in their study of coping strategies across three offender groups (rapists, child sexual abusers and violent offenders) that child sexual abusers tended to use sexual coping more than the other two types of offenders. Feelgood *et al.* propose that deviant sexual practices probably develop during adolescence as a way of managing isolation and rejection from peers. It is hypothesised that feeling lonely and rejected by others may result in men seeing sex as one of the few ways that they can experience pleasure and autonomy in their lives. Subsequently, attitudes and beliefs emerge that support the deviant sexual practices and these, in turn, reinforce the use of deviant sexual practices as a coping strategy. Note, however, that Feelgood and colleagues do not provide any detail in regard to the psychological mechanisms that may be involved in the development of such attitudes and beliefs.

Abel and colleagues' theory of cognitive distortions in child sexual abusers has proven to be fertile; it has precipitated further theoretical and empirical research in the area (see Chapter 4 of this volume) and has strongly influenced the development of treatment approaches that target offence-supportive-cognition (see Marshall, Anderson & Fernandez, 1999). It is also reasonably externally consistent (although we have noted some problems with this consistency) as it is broadly consistent with a social learning model of behaviour that provides some detail of how offence-supportive cognitions develop. However, as argued by a number of other theorists, it lacks coherence and explanatory depth (see Ward, Polaschek & Beech, 2006). For example, Gannon and Polaschek (2006) argue that

Abel and colleagues' explication of cognitive distortion theory was conducted in a "piece meal fashion across many published sources" (p. 4). As stated earlier, there is no rationale provided for the inclusion of the seven particular distortions that they listed and there is no overarching theory to structure their interrelationships. In terms of parsimony, the theory itself is fairly straightforward, however, the omission of a more concrete theoretical foundation adds complexity insofar as the theory brings with it, a degree of uncertainty. Also, the lack of clarity around the issue of the accessibility of distortions in one's consciousness is problematic in this regard. Arguably Abel's approach is limited in terms of scope as it is only able to explain a narrow range of psychological phenomena.

A Schema Model of Offenders' Cognition

In response to some of the weaknesses of Abel's exposition a number of theorists have attempted to provide a more coherent account of cognitive distortions in child sexual abusers. One such account (Mann & Beech, 2003) uses the notion of schemas, which feature prominently in cognitive psychology literature. As explained by Mann and Beech schemas are essentially "structures in memory in which prior knowledge and expectancies are organized" (p. 138) and they "contain attitudes, ideas about the self and the world, specific beliefs, conditional assumptions, and core issues" (p. 140). Schemas are categories consisting of prototypical entities that are created over time in response to the multitude of stimuli individuals come across. They allow for more efficient processing of information by simplifying and classifying the information gained from past experiences. Hence rather than having to sift through a large amount of detail in one's recollections one can simply apply the generalised ideas or schema and use these as a framework for interpreting current experiences.

As explained by Mann and Beech (2003) the notion of a schema may be traced originally to Bartlett (1932) who defined a schema as a general mental representation that is drawn from a specific situation. Later, Beck (1964, 1967) defined schema as a "cognitive structure" used for processing information. Safran (1990) emphasised the significance of schemas in peoples' social interactions. It is Safran's view that schemas are fundamental to human relationships because they provide a template for interpreting and guiding the way in which individuals interact with one another.

Mann and Beech review the literature examining schemas in sexual offenders and, as they point out, it is a small body of work. However, as demonstrated by their discussion, there have been some useful empirical analyses (e.g., Malamuth & Brown, 1994; Malamuth *et al.*, 1991; Mann & Hollin, 2001) and there is a growing body of theoretical research. Mann and Hollin (2001) reported the findings of two empirical studies of schemas in sexual offenders. The first study, which used a qualitative methodology, examined transcripts of rapists describing their offences. This approach was used in order to avoid the problems associated with self-report questionnaires (such as beliefs not being immediately present in offenders' conscious awareness). The methodology involved sorting the offenders' statements into general categories in order to determine the overarching schema and five emerged from the data (see also Chapter 2 of this volume). These were:

- Grievance – these statements suggested that the offender believed he had been wronged in some way and felt justified in behaving aggressively.
- Self as victim – these statements indicated the presence of self-pity and feelings of hopelessness.
- Control – these statements suggested a desire to have command over others in order to feel successful.
- Entitlement – these statements suggested that the offender believed he had a right to satisfy his own needs without any consideration for the wellbeing of others.
- Disrespect for certain women – these statements indicated that the offender believed that some groups of women (such as prostitutes) deserved to be treated poorly and without respect.

Mann and Hollin developed a questionnaire based on these results (called My Life) and factor analysis revealed that there were three underlying factors, which they referred to as Passive Victim, Vengeful Entitlement and Need for Control. In their second study Mann and Hollin included child sexual abusers along with rapists and found that the two most prominent schemas for both rapists and child sexual abusers were “grievance” and “need for respect/control”. However, they found that schemas were less prominent in the child sexual abusers’ offence narratives than in the narratives of rapists. This finding is consistent with other research suggesting that cognitive distortions may be present and play a causal role in only some sex offences (Mann & Beech, 2003). For example, Ward and Siegert (2002) conclude (in their comprehensive analysis of key theories in the child sexual abuser literature) that there may be a variety of problems or deficits in child sexual abusers. While some may have “distorted sexual scripts” that are related to faulty core schemas, for others the key problem may be in the area of relationship skills or emotional regulation.

Mann and Beech present a “schema-based model of sexual assault”, which draws on these empirical findings as well as literature in the areas of social cognition and the theory of cognitive therapy. The model provides a linear representation of the role of schemas in offending in which developmental experiences lead to the emergence of dysfunctional beliefs and then these, coupled with negative (or ambiguous) life events, lead to problems with information processing and faulty interpretations. It is these misinterpretations that along with other factors associated with offending, are believed to lead to the commission of a sexual offence. In summary, the model proposes that cognitive distortions, along with a variety of other factors, play an important role in sexual offending, however, Mann and Beech stress that they are not likely to be the most important causal factors.

Mann and Beech also propose that there are two general types of schemas that are present in sexual offenders, namely, “category schemas” and “belief schemas.” These are defined (respectively) as stereotypes about women and children, and assumptions about the self, other people and the world. Category schemas are construed as operating in the same way as ordinary stereotypes; they lead to biased information processing, especially in the case of ambiguous stimuli. Belief schemas are seen as having important connections with emotion, physiology, motivation and behaviour, meaning that they are in a sense entrenched ways of

being and interacting with the environment. Mann and Beech suggest that belief schemas may be conceptualised as a "mode" in that they form an interconnected network of ideas that mediates an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. In this way belief schemas are particularly powerful because their manifestation may trigger certain emotional experiences.

Recent research by Milner and Webster (2005) examined differential schema content in violent offenders, rapists, and child sexual abusers. As in Mann and Hollin's research, they used a qualitative research design in which prominent themes were drawn out of offenders' offence narratives and they also administered the My Life questionnaire. Milner and Webster found a number of important differences between the three offender groups. The most prominent schema for child sexual abusers was "a sense of worthlessness" (p. 434) and this was found to be significantly less evident in violent offenders and rapists (who predominantly exhibited schemas of "grievance/revenge" and "suspicious hostility to women" respectively). In discussing their findings, Milner and Webster relate the apparent importance of a "sense of worthlessness" to literature that has reported the presence of low self-esteem in child sexual abusers. Specifically they suggest that low self-esteem may be the factor that underlies this finding; however, they note that low self-esteem has also been found in other types of offenders.

Milner and Webster point out that their research simply examined the nature of schemas in different groups of offenders and did not seek to determine the role of schemas in the commission of offences. Thus Milner and Webster conclude that the hypothesis that schema play a causal role in sexual offending remains hypothetical. Given society's typical abhorrence of sexual offending and sexual offenders it is of course possible that individuals who commit such crimes and go through the court and prison systems develop low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness in response to the realization that they have stepped well outside the bounds of social norms.

Another recent study (Richardson, 2005) used the Young Schema Questionnaire (Young & Brown, 1994) to analyse schema in adolescent sexual offenders and they reported a number of interesting findings. Comparison of adolescents who abused younger children with those who offended against adults or peers showed that three schemas were significantly more predominant in the latter group, namely: "entitlement/self-centredness", "insufficient self-control/self-discipline" and "emotional inhibition". The study also found that abusers of younger children were significantly more likely to report that they had previously been victims of sexual abuse. Because of this finding, abusers of young children who themselves had been victims of sexual abuse were compared to abusers of young children without such a history (i.e., a *victim* versus a *nonvictim* group). Richardson found that the victim group scored higher on schemas of "abandonment/instability," and "defectiveness/shame," while the nonvictim group scored higher on the schema of "emotional inhibition" and "entitlement/self-centeredness". This suggests that child sexual abusers' past abuse experiences may be associated with the manifestation of specific schema; specifically feelings of abandonment and insecurity and feelings of shame and inferiority. It also suggests that adolescent abusers of young children are less likely to be self-centred and to have problems with self-control and the regulation of emotion when compared with other sexual offenders.

Critique and Elaboration of the Schema Approach

The schema approach to the understanding of cognitive distortions in child sexual abusers represents advancement over Abel's approach. It provides an overarching framework that organises the distortions and illuminates their interrelationships, and this is an improvement in terms of internal consistency although it should be noted that there remains a lack of clarity in terms of how the schemas may be related to each other and how they emerge in offenders. The schema model provides a parsimonious and straightforward means of structuring the various ideas. This framework also allows for superior external consistency as the theory shows greater compatibility with the general clinical and forensic literature. Additionally, self-reported empirical research appears to have confirmed the presence of some offence-related schemas in child sexual abusers, although it is unclear to what extent they play a causal role. Furthermore, it appears that offence-related schemas are less prominent in child sexual abusers than in rapists and other violent offenders (see Chapter 4 of this volume). Evidence suggests that the schemas that *are* present are somewhat different from those seen in other offenders. In particular, thoughts of worthlessness are prominent (Milner & Webster, 2005; Richardson, 2005).

The schema-based approach has yet to be proven fully fruitful in terms of research; however, it is a relatively new model so requires sufficient time for further theoretical and empirical research. Certainly the approach is testable, as demonstrated by Mann and colleagues, but what is more important is to tease out the exact nature of schema and their role in child sexual offending. With regard to treatment the schema approach is likely to be useful given the widespread use of schema-focused therapy (e.g., Young, 1990). In this sense the schema approach has the advantage of being consistent with an already well established clinical intervention methodology. In terms of scope, the schema model appears to be somewhat limited as it does not seem to account for many of the offence-supportive statements articulated by child sexual abusers. The implicit theories approach – described below – appears a little broader in this regard.

Implicit Theories

Ward and colleagues (Drake *et al.*, 2001; Ward, 2000; Ward & Keenan, 1999) propose that cognitive distortions in child sexual abusers arise out of a number of underlying implicit theories (ITs). Ward (2000, p. 494) points out that the term schema is ambiguous:

Schema can refer to an abstract concept or category, a behavioural script (information about a frequently occurring event capturing its temporal sequence and actions), a belief (McGinn & Young, 1996), or an explanatory theory. In all its various senses schemata function to facilitate the encoding, storage, and retrieval of information, and constitutes a framework that actively modifies individuals' experience of the world.

Thus Ward stresses the functional role of schemas and uses the term IT to capture the explanatory nature of this sense of the term. As Ward explains, this proposition was based on research in developmental psychology, which suggests that ITs play a crucial role in children's cognitive development. According to this view children function a bit like scientists who routinely develop theories in order to explain and predict events in the world around them. As in science, hypotheses are tested and may be confirmed or disconfirmed depending on the evidence. In order to develop an increasingly accurate interpretation of the world theories are modified over time according to evaluations of their empirical adequacy. Ward and Keenan write: "According to this perspective, children develop a succession of increasingly adequate theories of mind (where "adequate" refers to their goal of explaining and predicting behaviour)" (p. 822).

Implicit theories are viewed as functioning in the same way as scientific theories insofar as they are used to explain empirical phenomena and to make predictions about the future and like scientific theories they are viewed as being interconnected. A scientific theory that is assessed as having good external coherence will be consistent with other theories in the field. Similarly an enduring IT will be a theory that fits with other ITs. Ward proposes that ITs are essentially a number of interconnected beliefs that form a coherent picture of the world: they are comprised of beliefs concerning the nature of the world, the offender, and the victim, and values or desires associated with all three. In other words, they form a complex framework of interrelated ideas. A noteworthy feature of Ward's (2000) theory is the stipulation that ITs contain ideas of varying degrees of abstraction:

I hypothesize that offenders' maladaptive ITs include general assumptions about the nature of people and the world (e.g., mental states and their relationships to each other and behaviour), middle level beliefs dealing with categories of entities, such as women, children, and finally beliefs attributed to a particular victim. The key beliefs are those at the general and middle level; they persist and constitute the conceptual foundation of offenders' interpretations and explanations of victims' actions and mental states. (p. 499).

Thus, according to Ward, there are elements of stereotyped thinking evident in the middle levels of offenders' ITs. With regard to child sexual abuser-specific ITs, Ward states that they represent "reconstructions" based on analysis of the cognitive distortions that have been described by researchers. In other words they are inferred from the range of distorted beliefs that the literature has identified as being present in child sexual abusers. In explaining his theory Ward first elucidates the ways in which lay knowledge is "theory like." He states that (1) knowledge often refers to the ontology of human psychology; that is, it includes interpretations and understandings of psychological processes, and their instantiation in persons, (2) these interpretations and understandings are used to explain human behaviour, (3) the ideas are interconnected and form a relatively coherent picture, and (4) these ideas have a profound influence on individuals' interpretations of experiences and events.

Ward also points out, however, that there is one important difference between the way in which lay theories are used and the way in which scientists typically

use theories. Whereas scientists strive to evaluate evidence from an objective point of view, generally human beings interpret evidence according to their ITs. While ITs may still change over time in response to new evidence, this process is inhibited by the already held theories. To illustrate, in the case of child sexual abusers, when evidence is presented that contradicts the IT, the offender simply modifies his interpretation of the evidence – implicitly – so that it is consistent with his theory. Naturally, such an approach would not be described as good science. However, it is worth mentioning that those who are cynical about the objectivity of science may well argue that this is in fact how most science operates!

Ward proposes that there are five key ITs which are often manifest in child sexual abusers' cognition. These are:

- *Children as sexual beings.* According to this IT, sexuality plays a central role in the lives of all human beings and all people, including children. Children are seen as having knowledge about sexuality and a desire for sexual interaction. They are also assumed to have the capacity to make informed decisions about whether, when, and with whom, to have sex. Moreover this knowledge and desire is seen as arising out of a natural (biologically determined) inclination to be interested and drawn towards sexual behaviours. This latter point is associated with the suggestion that the sexual interaction is harmless because it arises out a natural (and therefore normal) predisposition. This IT is purported to lead to beliefs such as “the child wanted sex” and “touching a child sexually can be a way of showing love and affection.”
- *Entitlement.* This IT essentially asserts that some individuals are superior to others and that superior individuals should be afforded superior rights and status. For example, men may be seen as being inherently superior to women and children. Accordingly, a child sexual abuser may believe that because he is an adult male he is justified in using a child to meet his own sexual needs because the child will understand that he or she is subservient. Individuals who adhere to this IT see their own superiority and their own needs as legitimising their behaviour and as being more important than the law. Some examples of beliefs that may arise from this IT are “I deserve a special treat and she will make me feel better” and “I’m the boss in this family”.
- *Dangerous world.* According to this IT the world is perilous and dominated by people who are negative, abusive and self-promoting. There are two aspects to this theory. First, there is the idea that given the nature of the world it is important to defend oneself by retaliating and gaining dominion over others. An example of a belief of this nature is “I had to teach her a lesson”. Second, there is the idea that adults are inherently untrustworthy and dangerous whereas children, by contrast, are inherently innocent and reliable. This variant is also associated with the idea that the offender is vulnerable and fragile and therefore should turn to children for affection and care. An example of this sort of belief is, “Kids really know how to love you.”
- *Uncontrollable.* This IT takes a fatalistic view, asserting that the world is basically uncontrollable and unchangeable. The behaviour of human beings is seen as predetermined and immutable and arising out of biological fundamental factors and early life experiences. A variant of this view is that an individual’s behaviour

may be seen as arising out of powerful outside forces such as an *evil* force. Accordingly, a child sexual abuser may believe that he is not responsible for his behaviour because it was precipitated by forces beyond his control. Examples of beliefs emerging from this IT are "Many men sexually assault children at times of stress" and "I did it because I was sexually abused as a child."

- *Nature of harm.* This IT is founded on two general ideas: (1) that there are degrees of harm and if a lesser amount of harm results from an action then the action is justified on the grounds that greater harm was avoided, and (2) sexual activity is inherently good and not likely to result in harm. So, according to this theory, sexual activity is generally harmless and if it does result in harm it is likely to be only a small degree of harm. Examples of this IT are "she is asleep so she will never know what I am doing" and "many children who are sexually assaulted do not experience any major problems."

As mentioned above, these ITs are conceptualised by Ward as influencing the way that experiences are interpreted. For example, when a child clearly states that he or she does not want to engage in sexual activity with the offender, the offender may assume that the child actually wishes to participate but is too shy to articulate his or her desire. Or he may assume that the statement is simply an extraneous piece of data that can be ignored because it does not fit with his view of the world. Thus the Ward theory of cognitive distortions is able to account for the way the *content* of ITs can distort offenders' interpretations of other people and also why they can be used to *manage* social and self-impressions. That is, discrepant evidence is frequently dismissed by offenders or its importance underplayed, a process affected by a desire to be consistent and also acceptable in the eyes of the self and others. This is a facet of the theory often insufficiently noted by commentators.

Ward explains that it is possible for the offender to harbour one, two or many of these ITs but that they tend to be clustered into a number of general content areas. For example, an offender who views children as sexual beings may also see himself as being superior to the child and as therefore being in charge. However he would not necessarily see the world as perilous and unpredictable. Ward suggests that different types of child sexual abusers may hold specific ITs or aspects of these theories (i.e. particular cognitive distortions) and that they may be differentiated from one another in terms of these cognitions. For example, one offender may be fixated on seeing the world as inherently malicious and those in it as generally deserving of revenge, while another may be primarily motivated by thoughts of children's sexuality.

Ward points out that the ITs that he describes may also be present in other types of offenders and nonoffenders. For example, there may be other men, besides child sexual abusers, who believe they are superior to others, who see the world as an essentially dangerous place, and who even see children as sexual beings but who do not sexually abuse children. According to Ward, then, ITs may be necessary for child sex offending to occur, but not sufficient. He suggests that there are likely to be a range of other factors that also play an important role, such as deviant sexual preferences, insecure attachment, and a lack of social competency.

The IT approach is founded upon the idea that just a few core beliefs may give rise to a large number of cognitive distortions. Ward proposes, therefore, that it is vital that therapists involved in the treatment of child sexual abusers recognise the underlying ITs that are associated with the offending rather than simply identifying individualised beliefs. Ward likens this process to the approach frequently used in cognitive therapy that focuses on the identification of core beliefs that are then systematically challenged. This sort of therapeutic approach is virtually indistinguishable from Young's schema-focused therapy (mentioned above) which also aims to identify and modify core belief systems.

A self-report study (by Marziano *et al.*, 2005) examined the presence of these five ITs in child sexual abusers and found evidence that each of these theories occurs in this offender group. The study found that *children as sexual beings* was the most commonly articulated theory (28% total frequency across transcripts), closely followed by *uncontrollability* and then *dangerous world* (26% and 22% respectively). The ITs of *nature of harm* and *entitlement* were less frequently evidenced but were still endorsed by some. One particularly interesting finding was that offenders who reported a history of sexual abuse were significantly more likely to evidence the IT *dangerous world*. Moreover, overall, this subgroup of offenders evidenced significantly more offence-supportive beliefs. The authors reason that this may indicate different developmental pathways among child sexual abusers. Specifically, they suggest that particular sorts of experiences early in life may lead to the development of "specific sets of implicit theories" (p. 7). Note that this is consistent with findings in the schema-focused literature; individuals who identified themselves as being victims of abuse tended to exhibit different schemas from nonvictims (Richardson, 2005).

Critique and Elaboration of the Implicit Theory Approach

The ITs approach to understanding the cognitive distortions that are seen in child sexual abusers bears some similarity to the schema model. Indeed, Ward was careful to point out that ITs are simply another way of conceptualising schema: one that has a clear functional role in helping individuals interpret and explain events in their internal and external environments. It organises the various distortions into categories and in doing so attempts to explain their interrelationships. However, in some respects, the ITs approach has greater breadth (or scope) insofar as it appears to cover more of the cognitive distortions that are exhibited by child sexual abusers. Also, as a theory, it is more fully explicated; ITs are explained and conceptualised in relation to general scientific theories, whereas the exact nature of the schema that Mann and colleagues discuss is not fully elucidated. The ITs conceptualization has good internal and external consistency and it presents a parsimonious model of the phenomena. In terms of the fertility of the theory it remains unclear to what extent it has penetrated the treatment arena, but there is evidence that it has been fruitful in terms of research (e.g., Marziano *et al.*, 2005; Mihailides, Devilly & Ward, 2004).

THEORY INTEGRATION

From Abel’s early work on cognitive distortions to the more recent research on schema and ITs, it is evident that there is a growing sophistication in the understanding of the beliefs that are associated with child sexual offending. As depicted in Table 1.1, most of Abel’s cognitive distortions (six out of seven) are consistent with the IT that views children as sexual beings. The remaining cognitive distortion (that touching a child’s genitals does not count as sex and is therefore harmless) falls within the category of ITs that views harm along a continuum. Comparison of the schema-based approach with the ITs approach (as depicted in Table 1.1) shows a reasonable degree of overlap. The schema of *need for control* is consistent with the IT of entitlement, which includes the idea that those individuals who are superior to others have the right to have control over and dominate other people. The *grievance* schema appears to be consistent, at least to some extent, with the IT of *dangerous world*, which includes the idea that people are generally unkind and rejecting and deserving

Table 1.1 Conceptual organisation of implicit theories, schemas and cognitive distortions

Implicit theories	Belief schemas	Abel’s cognitive distortions
Children as sexual objects		A child who does not physically resist my sexual advances really wants to have sex with me. Having sex with a child is a good way for an adult to teach a child about sex. Some time in the future our society will come to realise that sex between a child and an adult is alright. Children do not tell others about having sex with a parent because they really enjoy the sexual activity and want it to continue. When a child asks an adult a question about sex it means that the child wants to see the adult’s sex organs or have sex with the adult. My relationship with my daughter or son or other child is enhanced by my having sex with them.”
Entitlement Dangerous world Nature of harm	Need for control Grievance	An adult who only feels a child’s body or feels the child’s genitals is not really being sexual with the child so no harm is being done.
Uncontrollable	Abandonment and instability Worthlessness, shame and inferiority	

of retaliation. The schema of *abandonment and instability* is consistent with the IT of *uncontrollability* as it evokes the idea that people have a lack of control over their destinies and are at the mercy of malevolent and unpredictable forces. The remaining schemas of *worthlessness, shame and inferiority*, appear to be quite different to any of Ward’s ITs and are therefore inserted together in the last row of the table.

Given the very broad definitions of each of the ITs it appears that the schemas delineated by Mann and other researchers are subsets of the ITs. For example, the schema of *abandonment and instability* refers essentially to a subset of the IT of *uncontrollability*. It may be theorised, then, that schemas are a more narrow set of cognitions that fall within the broader ITs. However, in terms of the definitions that are provided by the authors of the two approaches it appears that they are referring to the same type of psychological construct. Cognitive distortions are more specific beliefs that may be categorised in terms of both schemas and ITs. These interrelationships are depicted in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 An integrative model of cognition in child sexual offending.

This model is not presented as a complete model of the factors involved in child sexual offending, but rather as a possible representation of (1) the interrelationships between the theorised elements of cognition, and (2) the juxtaposition of the various cognitive factors in relation to other psychological factors. ITs contain aspects of both Mann and Beech's beliefs and category constructs by virtue of their multi-level structures and therefore are listed in both the beliefs and category boxes. In our view they are complex cognitive structures that contain multiple strands and therefore are capable of integrating other structural perspectives while also stressing the important functional role of cognitive distortions.

It is possible that the schema of worthlessness, shame and inferiority may be related to another, as yet unidentified, IT. It certainly features prominently in the schema literature. However, regardless of its classification it may be a particularly important set of distortions due to its potential influence on other beliefs. For example, Abel pointed out the way in which distortions may arise as a way of allowing oneself to feel more comfortable when behaving in an antisocial manner. The distortions serve to allow the offender to continue with the behaviour and avoid negative thoughts and emotions. Therefore if thoughts of worthlessness and inferiority arise, they could potentially perpetuate the other cognitive distortions, which would then serve to minimise the discomfort caused by this set of beliefs.

Note that in the model the sexual offence itself is seen to feed back into the cognitions, and the other influential variables. This is an important feedback loop as it highlights the possible perpetuating nature of child sexual offending. Because the presence of specific ITs and cognitive distortions influence the way in which information is processed, the offence itself is likely to be a belief-affirming event. As it is likely to be charged with emotion it may be particularly powerful in this regard. As depicted in the model, emotion is construed as having an important two-way connection with cognition; it is seen as both influencing and being influenced by cognition. This emphasises the multifaceted nature of human experience. While in a theoretical discussion cognition may be analysed in isolation from other important psychological factors, such discussion may inadvertently present a somewhat skewed impression of reality.

To counter this it is advantageous to refer to the work of Lazarus (1991), who discusses the important relationships between cognition, motivation and emotion. Lazarus argues that cognition is both a necessary and sufficient condition for emotion; thus, cognition alone can lead to emotion and that there can be no emotion without cognition. He makes this argument with reference to the notion of appraisal, suggesting that there is always an element of appraisal in the experience of emotion. For example, even the spontaneous intense anxiety that may be experienced in response to the sudden appearance of a spider involves the cognitive processing of the spider. The word and idea of spider are evoked in the processing of the information and the associated emotional experience. It may be argued, then, that more complex emotional responses and experiences will inevitably involve cognition. It is thus essential to consider the important associations between cognition and various other psychological phenomena, especially emotion, which is also likely to play an important role in offending. The point is that the discussion herein may inadvertently give the impression that cognition is being conceptualised as a distinct entity. This is not the case; clearly, psychological variables interact in

profound ways and cognition is affected by many other variables. As Lazarus points out there is a particularly close and important connection between cognition and emotion and this has important implications for treatment.

As shown in Figure 1.1, physiological factors are also theorised to interact with cognitive factors in the emergence of child sexual offending. These factors may be proximal (for example, sexual arousal) or distal (for example, genetically determined predisposition). As explained earlier, Abel and colleagues (1984, 1989) discussed the socially derived shaping process that takes place as boys develop sexually throughout their adolescence. It may reasonably be theorised that this shaping process is also influenced by evolutionary pressures, as according to Darwinian theory, sexual behaviour in all animals is influenced by the process of natural selection (see Siegert & Ward, 2003, for a discussion of evolutionary theory and sexual offending). It is not simply societal attitudes that motivate individuals to find the opposite gender attractive. It is likely that an attraction to minors would decrease one's reproductive fitness because one would be less likely to successfully reproduce. Successful reproduction obviously requires sexual activity between opposite sex adults.

Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that the process by which males limit and shape their sexual arousal is not simply a matter of responding to social norms but also to biological tendencies. Therefore it is advantageous to consider such pressures when considering the role of cognition in child sexual offending. Clearly, from the point of view of evolutionary theory child sexual offending makes no sense, yet these offenders are able to develop beliefs that allow them to make sense of it and even believe that it is inherently good. One way of making sense of this anomaly is to see sexual arousal to young females as an extension of normal arousal. From an evolutionary point of view an optimal female mate is one who has only just emerged from puberty because they have the most time in which to reproduce. This would have been especially important in prehistoric times when the average human life was significantly shorter. Therefore there is perhaps a natural tendency for men to prefer young females and sexual arousal to preadolescent females may be an unexpected maladaptive extension of that tendency.

CONCLUSIONS

Readers may wonder about the present discussion and especially cynical readers may ask whether the terms and ideas discussed are simply in the realm of semantics. In response it may be suggested that yes it is a matter of semantics but that it is nonetheless an important matter. As eloquently argued by Lazarus (1991) there is no emotion without cognition and this, in itself, highlights the important role of thought in behaviour, and therefore, child sexual offending. In order to effectively treat child sexual abusers it is crucial to understand their psychology and evidence suggests that they may hold a specific range of beliefs that are different from other sorts of offenders and from nonoffenders.

Early research simply identified some of these beliefs, however more recent research has moved towards understanding their structure and foundations. The change in focus in the research is analogous to the process of uncovering the

various layers of beliefs that are central to cognitive therapy, wherein the client begins by identifying the more readily accessible superficial cognitions and then moves over time to the identification of core beliefs. A similar process has taken place in the sex offender literature insofar as the early work focused on particular, easily identifiable, cognitive distortions and later approaches have attempted to "dig deeper" and identify the more fundamental cognitions from which these particular beliefs emanate.

Further research is needed to more fully explicate the significant cognitions in child sexual offending and to determine more accurately the nature of their role in the offence process. More research is also clearly required in order to understand how cognition interacts with other variables such as emotion and physiology, in the manifestation of this sort of offending. The ultimate goal of such research would be the development of improved treatment approaches that accurately target and treat problematic thoughts.

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