New directions in research on well-being: psychological process in everyday contexts

Irene Petruccelli

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International data set to collect best practices on sex offenders (SOs):

From the literature review...

- Profiling
- Assessment
- Interventions (Treatment & Training)
From the literature review... SOs’ profile

Culla & De Leo (2005):
For-W.O.L.F. project
87 incarcerated male SOs in Italy

SOs’ profiling:
• Male
• 50 Italian
• 14 specific recidivism, 17 not specific
  SO recidivism
• 29 Married, 35 unmarried, 16
  divorced...
• 50% middle school diploma
• Employed

• 20 institutionalized, 25 physically
  abused, 13 sexual abused...
• 31 psychological diseases
• 27 Intra-familiar abuse
• 30 alcohol or drug abuse
• 44 Abuse at home
• Victims 3-60 years
From the literature review…
SOs’ profile

Ciappi, Panseri, Sarno, Scotto (2006):
51 incarcerated male SOs in Prato jail (Italy)

SOs’ profiling:
• Male
• Italian
• Low level of education
• Average age of 35 years
• Uncensored or with non-specific previous
• Married
• Employed
• Not institutionalized

• Not reported for psychological problems
• Intra-familiar abuse
• No alcohol or drug abuse
• Alcohol or drug use to facilitate the abuse
• No violence or threat to victims
• Relapse
• Abuse at home
• Victims < 10 years
From the literature review...
Different types of SOs (modus operandi)

Beauregard, DeLisi, & Hewitt (2018):

616 incarcerated male SOs in a Federal penitentiary in Canada

Non-homicidal sex offenders (NHSOs), violent NHSOs, and sexual homicide offenders (SHOs) using data from.

The group of SOs with the worst criminal career profile was not the SHOs, but the violent NHSOs. Violent NHSOs had the greatest number of prior convictions and the most varied and versatile criminal career.

Based on their criminal career, SHOs should be considered more as murderers than sex offenders.
From the literature review...
Different types of SOs (attachment theory)

Grattagliano et al. (2015):
N = 57

Results showed significant differences between offenders and control adults on both the AAI continuous score and the distribution of the two-way attachment classifications.

SOs reported more intense experiences of rejection by the father figure and abuse in the family context during early childhood compared to not offenders subjects with the same attachment classification.
Levenson & Socia (2015):

• They explore the influence of adverse childhood experiences (ACE) on arrest patterns in a sample of SOs (N = 740).

• Higher ACE scores were associated with a variety of arrest outcomes, indicating that the accumulation of early trauma increased the likelihood of versatility and persistence of criminal behavior.

• Rapists of adults had higher ACE scores, lower levels of specialization, and higher levels of persistence than SOs with minor victims only. Child sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and domestic violence in the childhood home were significant predictors of a higher number of sex crime arrests.

• SO treatment providers should recognize the prevalence and role of early trauma in the lives of clients.

• For measures of nonsexual arrests and criminal versatility, it was the household dysfunction factors—substance abuse, unmarried parents, and incarceration of a family member—that were predictive, suggesting that family dysfunction and a chaotic home environment contributed significantly to increased risk of general criminal behavior.
Grady et al. (2016):

They explore the rates of various types of child maltreatments and family dysfunction in individuals who have been convicted of a sexual crime.

Theoretical model: adverse conditions in childhood (ACE framework and attachment theory) can lead to a number of negative psychosocial and behavioural outcomes, including sexual offending.

Presence of ACEs might contribute to sexually abusive behaviour.

Attachment theory offers an explanatory link between early adversity and sexually abusive behaviour in adulthood; attachment can be used as an explanatory theory for subsequent sexualized coping and sexually abusive behaviours.
From the literature review...
Different types of SOs (neuropsychological differences)

Joyal, Beaulieu-Plante, de Chantérac (2014):

Meta-analysis of the data to demonstrate the cognitive heterogeneity of SOs statistically. Main objective was to test the hypothesis to the effect that the neuropsychological deficits of SOs are not broad and generalized compared with specific subgroups of participants based on specific measures.

In all, 23 neuropsychological studies reporting data on 1,756 participants were taken into consideration.

- Different cognitive performances were observed when SOs against children, SOs against adults, and non-sex offenders were considered separately. First, SOs against children tended to score lower than SOs against adults on the WCST (deduction and cognitive flexibility) although they were significantly better on the COWAT (verbal fluency) and the Stroop test (control of internal interference). These results suggest that different subgroups of SOs might present different neuropsychological profiles.
- SOs against adults, as a group, tended to score similarly to non-sex offenders (inhibition and verbal deficits). Neuropsychological data on SOs are still too scarce to confirm these trends or to test more precise hypotheses.
From the literature review...
Different types of SOs (online predators)

**Wolak et al. (2008):**

Internet sex crimes involving adults and juveniles more often fit a model of statutory rape—adult offenders who meet, develop relationships with, and openly seduce underage teenagers than a model of forcible sexual assault or pedophilic child molesting.

Developmentally appropriate prevention strategies that target youths directly and acknowledge normal adolescent interests in romance and sex are needed.

These should provide younger adolescents with awareness and avoidance skills while educating older youths about the pitfalls of sexual relationships with adults and their criminal nature.

Particular attention should be paid to higher risk youths, including those with histories of sexual abuse, sexual orientation concerns, and patterns of offand online risk taking.

Mental health practitioners need information about the dynamics of this problem and the characteristics of victims and offenders because they are likely to encounter related issues in a variety of contexts.
James & Proulx (2014):

• The goal of this current systematic review is to identify the main characteristics of sexual murderers and the areas in which further research is warranted. It analyzes detailed data on 1836 sexual murderers (serial sexual murderers = 176; nonserial sexual murderers = 1660) taken from 45 empirical descriptive studies carried out between 1985 and 2013.

• In order to better characterize:
  • serial sexual murderers (SSMs): are socially isolated, rejected, and humiliated, and take refuge in compulsive masturbation in paraphilias, which compensate for the poverty of their emotional, relational, and sexual lives
  • nonserial sexual murderers (NSMs): are polymorphic criminals who are easily angered when their immediate needs are not met. They adopt a victim stance, and sexual murder is a way of exacting vengeance and an outlet for their anger.

• Three categories of variables were established: developmental variables; adult life and criminal career variables and psychopathological variables.

• These two profiles are consistent with the classification of Beauregard and Proulx (2002), which identified a group of sadistic sexual murderers and a group of angry sexual murderers, corresponding to SSMs and NSMs respectively.
From the literature review...

Aetiology of sexual offence patterns

Sullivan & Sheehan (2016):

• Study on 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.
Rosburg et al. (2018):

Research on: 21 contact Child Sex Offenders (CSOs), 19 non-contact CSOs (child pornography offenders), 21 control participants (nonoffenders).

The findings suggest that response inhibition, processing of stop signals, and error detection are not necessarily impaired in CSOs. CSOs appear to dedicate less cognitive resources to the evaluation of committed errors.

Could reflect a reduced sense of responsibility for misconduct in this offender group, which might contribute to their delinquent behavior.
Pedneault, Beauregard (2013):

3 profiles of rapist & child molesters (Blanchette, St-Yves, and Proulx, 2009):

- **Festive SO**: sensation seeker; lack of premeditation; consumption of intoxicants in the hours prior to crime; selection of a victim from a criminogenic environment; during the aggression uses physical force and a weapon (high level of injury to the victim).

- **Orderly SO**: involved in a relationship; conformist lifestyle; careful planning; selection of a known marginalized victim; consumption of drugs and/or alcohol prior to crime, use of a weapon (inflicting injuries to the victim). They derive their pleasure from the humiliation of the victim.

- **Isolated SO**: no social life; does not consume drugs or alcohol; crimes premeditated but not necessarily triggered by deviant sexual fantasies (victim is not preselected and is often a stranger).
Helmus, Hanson, Babchishin, Mann (2013): “Attitudes Supportive of Sexual Offending Predict Recidivism: A Meta-Analysis”

Based on 46 samples (n = 13,782), this meta-analysis critical findings are:
1. Attitudes supportive of sexual offending predict sexual recidivism;
2. Pretreatment and posttreatment assessments show similar levels of predictive accuracy;
3. Attitudes predict best when they are matched to the type of offender;
4. Attitudes predict better for child molesters, and there is more evidence available for child molesters;
5. There are three empirically validated measures of offense-supportive attitudes: The Abel-Becker cognitions scale (when used with child molesters), the STABLE-2000 child molester attitudes item (when used with child molesters), and the SVR-20 item for attitudes that support or condone sexual offending.
Video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7SYdi36D3g&ab_channel=pajarze
Moral Disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996)
Self-serving cognitive distortions (Barriga & Gibbs, 1996)

These processes help to cognitively overcome dissonance between personal moral standards and behavioural transgressions, facilitating violent or, in general, wrong acts.

(Ribeaud & Eisner, 2010)
Hempel, Buck, van Vugt, van Marle (2015):

Examined the relationships between interpretation process, offenders’ offense-supportive cognitions and levels of empathy. 47 contact offenders completed self-reports on offense-supportive cognitions and empathy. This study showed that cognitions that justify sexual offending against children seem to diminish the threshold for sexual assault by assigning more cooperation and willingness of the victim in a child molestation incident: relationship between CSOs’ cognitions that justify sexual offending against children (offense-supportive cognitions), their understanding of another’s emotional state or context (cognitive empathy), and their interpretation of hypothetical child molestation incidents. CSOs’ higher levels of offense-supportive cognitions were related to lower levels of cognitive empathy and the attribution of more child benefit, more child responsibility, and more child complicity in hypothetical child molestation incidents. Lower levels of cognitive empathy were related to the attribution of more child responsibility.
Carvalho & Nobre (2014):

Study to explore the relationship between early maladaptive schemas (EMSs) and sexual offending, as well as how rapists and child sex molesters differ in terms of these schemas.

32 men convicted for rape, 33 convicted for child sexual abuse, and 30 non-offenders were evaluated using the Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ-S3) and the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI).

Results showed that participants convicted for child sexual abuse presented significantly more schemas from the disconnection/rejection, impaired autonomy/performance, other directness, and over vigilance/inhibition domains than non-offenders, whereas rapists presented more schemas from the impaired autonomy/performance domain than non-offenders. Differences between SOs showed that child molesters presented more schemas of pessimism than rapists. Preliminary findings suggested that EMSs may impact SO's perceptions about themselves and about the world. Schema-focused therapy (Young, 1990, 1999) may thus be an acceptable approach to SO's psychological assessment and intervention.
Sigre-Leirós, Carvalho, Nobre (2015):

The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship between the early maladaptive schemas and different types of sexual offending behavior. 50 rapists, 59 child molesters (19 pedophilic and 40 nonpedophilic), and 51 nonsexual offenders.

Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests (SSPI): a brief screening instrument that measures pedophilic sexual interests among SOs with child victims.

Young Schema Questionnaire – Short Form-3 (YSQ-S3): a 90-item self-report measure that assesses the 18 EMSs.

Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI): a 53-item measure that assesses the presence of psychopathology according to nine dimensions of symptoms.

Socially Desirable Response Set Measure (SDRS-5): 5-item measure that assesses tendency to respond in a socially desirable way.

Results showed that pedophilic offenders were more likely to hold the defectiveness and subjugation schemas compared to the other three groups. Likewise, nonpedophilic child molesters were more likely to hold the social isolation, enmeshment, and unrelenting standards schemas compared to rapists. Rapists were more likely to hold the vulnerability to harm, approval-seeking, and punitiveness schemas compared to nonpedophiles and/or nonsex offenders. Findings suggest that cognitive schemas may play a role in the vulnerability for sexual offending and corroborate the need to distinguish between the two subtypes of child molesters.
FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW...

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

Moral Justification
Palliative Comparison
Euphemistic Labeling

Minimizing, Ignoring, or Misconstruing The Consequences

Dehumanization
Attribution of Blame

Reprehensible Conduct

Detrimental Effects

Displacement of Responsibility
Diffusion of Responsibility

(Bandura et al., 1996)
Moral Disengagement and Sexual Offending

• Mechanism, for instance, of Moral Justification, Distortion of Consequences, Blaming the Victim could seem to be included in that kind of self statement made by offenders that allow them to deny, minimize, rationalize or justify their behaviour.

• In the case of SOs, through the Dehumanization mechanism, victims are deprived of their human dignity so that they do not elicit any feelings of identification or empathy.

• Furthermore, with Blaming the Victim mechanism, all responsibility for a certain harmful event is attributed to the victim’s presumably provocative attitude.
Cognitive Distortions (CDs)

• CDs condone, justify, excuse, minimize, rationalize, or otherwise support sexual offending.

• CDs play a causal role in sex offending (Nunes & Jung, 2011).
Cognitive Distortions

• Self-serving distortions.
• Primary and secondary distortions:
  • “Primary cognitive distortions are self-centered attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs” (Barriga & Gibbs, 1996: 334) and involve “according status to one’s views, expectations, needs, rights, immediate feelings and desires to such a degree that the legitimate views, etc. of others (or even one’s own long-term best interest) are scarcely considered or are disregarded altogether”.

  (Gibbs et al., 1995)
Cognitive Distortions

• Secondary distortions serve to support the primary distortions and “have been characterized as pre- or post-transgression rationalizations that serve to ‘neutralize’ conscience or guilt” (Barriga & Gibbs, 1996: 334).

• Like moral disengagement, Gibbs and colleagues (1995) conceive cognitive distortions as potentially preceding antisocial action.
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**Assessment**

Duwe, G. (2012): developed a risk assessment tool, the Minnesota Sexual Criminal Offending Risk Estimate (MnSCORE), designed for prisoners without any prior sexual offending history (in a study on a sample of 9,064 male offenders released from Minnesota prisons between 2003 and 2006).

Schimmenti, A., Passanisi, A., Caretti, V. (2014): Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL-R) to assess psychopathy in 87 Italian convicted of violent crimes. Child sexual abusers (N = 23) scored higher on the PCL-R interpersonal-affective factor compared to participants who did not perpetrate child sexual abuse. Child sexual abusers showed a very high average score on the PCL-R affective dimension, they showed high scores on the two PCL-R items excluded from its two factors–four facets structure (i.e., the items denoting devaluation of intimate relationships).
The assessment

- **Multiphasic Sex Inventory** (Nichols & Moliner, 1984);
- **Sex Fantasy Questionnaire** (Wilson, 1978);
- **Children and Sex Cognitions Scale** (Beckett, 1987);
- **The Children and Sex Emotional Congruence Scale** (Beckett, 1987);
- **Victim Empathy Distortions Scale** (Beckett & Fisher, 1994);
- **Kingston Sexual Behavior Clinic: Social Response Inventory** (Keltner, Marshall & Marshall, 1981);
- The Molest Scale was used (Bumby, 1996; Dutch translation and validation: De Doncker, Van Beek, Decoene, Luyten, & Koeck, 2003) (to measure offense-supportive cognitions regarding sex with children);
- the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Dutch translation and validation: Van Langen, Stams, & Van Vugt, 2009) (To measure both affective and cognitive empathy);
- 8 Vignettes developed by Hempel, Buck, van Vugt, van Marle (2015), based on clinical case descriptions examined by Stermac and Segal (1989) and studies about the modus operandi of CSOs by Elliot, Brown, and Kilcoyne (1995) and Lang and Frenzel (1988) (to assess the attribution of responsibility, benefit, and complicity in hypothetical child molestation incidents between an adult male and a child that ended in sexual contact).
Moral Disengagement Strategies in Sex Offenders

Irene Petruccielli\textsuperscript{a}, Chiara Simonelli\textsuperscript{b}, Claudio Barbaranelli\textsuperscript{b}, Simona Grilli\textsuperscript{c}, Maria Francesca Tripodi\textsuperscript{b} and Giulio D’Urso\textsuperscript{d}

\textsuperscript{a}Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, “Kore” University of Enna, Italy; \textsuperscript{b}Sapienza University of Rome; \textsuperscript{c}Lumsa University of Rome; \textsuperscript{d}Istituto di Sessuologia Clinica

Sexual abuse is a heterogeneous phenomenon. The literature on sexual offenders considers risk factors in the individual and familial history as well as precursors such as cognitive distortions, defence mechanisms and moral disengagement (MD) mechanisms. This study investigates the MD in sex offenders and non-sex offenders in a sample of 362 males comprising a control group of 268 non-offenders, a group of 42 detained sex offenders and a group of 52 detained non-sex offenders. Participants were administered a semi-structured interview and the Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS). The results show a significant difference between the jailed participants (non-sex offenders and sex offenders) and controls; offenders were found to generally display overall higher levels of MD. Among the jailed participants, sex offenders seem to make more use of MD mechanisms than non-sex offenders.

Keywords: harmful conduct; moral disengagement; sex offender.
The role of moral disengagement and cognitive distortions toward children among sex offenders

Giulio D’Urso, Irene Petruccelli, Valentina Costantino, Carla Zappulla and Ugo Pace

Faculty of Human and Social Science, ‘Kore’ University of Enna, Enna, Italy; Department of Psychological and Educational Sciences, University of Palermo, Palermo, Italy

This study investigated the individual and social characteristics, moral disengagement strategies and cognitive distortions toward children among 120 sex offenders in Italian jails. A semistructured interview was administered to collect data about family, social and medical histories, utilizing the Moral Disengagement Scale and the Hanson Sex Attitude Questionnaire. Results showed that sex offenders with sexual abuse trauma in their past had higher scores of moral disengagement and cognitive distortion toward children than sex offenders without sexual abuse trauma. In particular, the highest levels of moral disengagement, cognitive distortions related to children as sexual objects and sexual entitlement were shown by sex offenders who had been physically and sexually abused in their past. Moreover, moral disengagement predicted cognitive distortions related to children being sexy and sexual entitlement. Studying self-regulatory mechanisms and cognitive distortions is important to expand the literature about sexual behaviors committed by offenders and implement the promotion of effective and targeted treatment strategies.

Keywords: cognitive distortions; moral disengagement; sex offenders

Risk Factors Related to Cognitive Distortions Toward Women and Moral Disengagement: A Study on Sex Offenders

Giulio D’Urso, Irene Petruccelli, Simona Grilli and Ugo Pace

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Abstract

Violence against women is a heterogeneous phenomenon worldwide. In order to better understand this phenomenon, it is also necessary to study the offenders against women. Therefore, the present study investigates, in the light of risk factors, the individual and social characteristics (related to adolescence), the moral disengagement strategies and cognitive distortions of 120 sex offenders detained in Italian jails. We administered the semi-structured interview for data collection regarding family, social and medical histories and the manner in which the deviant act was carried out, the Moral Disengagement Scale, and the Vindictive Rape Attitude Questionnaire to investigate the presence of cognitive distortions toward women. Results show important risk factors in the genesis of moral disengagement strategies in the offenders: the use of substances and being institutionalized in their past. In addition, through a multiple regression model, we noticed how education levels represent a negative predictor of cognitive distortions towards women and the attribution of blame to a positive predictor. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Sex offenders · Moral disengagement · Cognitive distortions · Risk factors · Substance abuse · Institutionalization · Adolescence
Drug Use as a Risk Factor of Moral Disengagement: A Study on Drug Traffickers and Offenders against Other Persons

Giulio D'Urso, Irene Petruccelli & Ugo Pace

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