Female Sexual Abusers’ Cognition: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Until recently, the sexual offending literature focused on male perpetrators and neglected to examine the characteristics of female perpetrators. As a result, treatment provision for female sexual abusers has been either non-existent or inappropriately adapted from programs designed for males. What we do know is that male and female sexual abusers share similarities; however, there remain distinct differences that warrant empirical and theoretical study. The current review systematically examines the literature on offense-supportive cognition in female sexual abusers. The aim of this systematic review is to aid clinical practitioners who work with female sexual abusers by providing an evaluation of current available research regarding implicit theories, rape myth acceptance, violence-supportive cognition, gender stereotypes, beliefs about sex, and empathy. We conclude that further research examining the offense-supportive cognition of female sexual abusers is needed in order to facilitate more effective empirically-driven clinical practice.

Keywords: Female sexual abuser; Female child sexual offender; Female child molester; Offense-supportive cognition; Implicit theories; Rape myths

Female Sexual Abusers’ Cognition: A Systematic Review

Historically, the sexual offending literature has focused on male perpetrators, and as a result, very little attention has been paid to females who engage in sexually abusive behavior (Gannon & Cortoni, 2010). Therefore, knowledge regarding female sexual abusers’ treatment needs has remained substantially underdeveloped and there is a lack of empirically-focused treatment for females who sexually abuse (Gannon & Rose, 2008).

Recent literature has begun to examine the characteristics of female perpetrators and the findings support the view that although male and female sex offenders share some similarities, there remain distinct differences that warrant further study (Gannon & Rose, 2008; Gannon & Cortoni, 2010). In order to develop effective treatment programs for female sex offenders, a thorough understanding of their treatment needs is required (Cortoni & Gannon, in press; Gannon & Rose, 2008). Key treatment needs believed to be critical for sexual abusers include offense-supportive cognition, social competency problems, emotional regulation issues, and deviant sexual interests (Gannon & Rose, 2008; Ward & Beech, 2004). In particular, research and theory suggests that offence-supportive cognition is an important area of treatment need in sexually abusive males (see Ward & Beech, 2006; Ward & Keenan, 1999). In the female literature offense-supportive cognition is one factor identified by numerous professionals as representing a likely treatment need for sexually abusive females (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011; Ford, 2010; Gannon, Cortoni, & Rose, 2010) yet there is a paucity of empirical studies examining the characteristics of this treatment need.

In the male sexual abuse literature numerous aspects of offense-supportive cognition have been studied including implicit schemas (Keown, Gannon, & Ward, 2008; Mihailides, Devilly, & Ward, 2004; see also Ó Ciardha & Ward, this volume), general beliefs about child sexual abuse (Beckett, 1987; Bumby, 1996), rape myth acceptance (Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991; Marshall & Hambley, 1996), gender stereotypes (Check & Malamuth, 1983; Overholser & Beck, 1986), general sexual beliefs (Abbey, McAuslan, & Thompson-Ross, 1998), and empathy (Fernandez, Marshall, Lightbody, & O’Sullivan, 1999; Marshall, Hamilton, & Fernandez, 2001; see also Barnett & Mann, this volume). As a consequence of this, researchers working with male sexual abusers hold a series of relatively well-developed theoretical conceptualizations of offense-supportive cognition. The most thoroughly researched of these is that of implicit theories or schema (Ward, 2000; Ward & Keenan, 1999; see Ó Ciardha & Ward, this volume). In brief, Ward’s implicit schema theory[[1]](#footnote-1) contends that children who experience unusual or adverse events develop a series of beliefs about their social world that become integrated and unified by implicit schemas. As the child develops, these beliefs are applied to sexual behavior and bias the individual’s processing of social events in an offense-supportive manner. For example, Ward proposes that abusers who have experienced physical or emotional abuse during childhood will likely develop a schema of adults and their social world as being hostile and threatening (i.e., a *dangerous world* schema). Consequently, an abuser holding this schema is likely to view children as warm, accepting, and safe intimate partners. Ward describes four other implicit schemas: *children as sexual* (i.e., beliefs that children are sexually knowing and provocative), *nature of harm* (i.e., beliefs that sexual abuse is not inherently harmful), *entitlement* (beliefs that one is entitled to sexually abuse), and *uncontrollability* (beliefs that one’s actions are controlled externally). Ward contends that these schemas—as with any functioning schema—lead individuals to preferentially attend, encode, and retrieve information in an offense-supportive manner.

In this review, we will use the term offense-supportive cognition broadly to refer to any cognitive structure (including content) or cognitive process that may support female-perpetrated sexual abuse. We define cognitive structure (including content) as schemas or beliefs that support sexual offending either directly (i.e., beliefs about children’s sexuality; beliefs about rape and sexual violence in the form of ‘rape myths’) or indirectly (i.e., general beliefs about sex). While a schema refers to a structured framework of knowledge or beliefs (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), the term belief is used by us to refer to information assumed to be true by an individual regardless of real or objective truth (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). We use the term cognitive process to refer to the cognitive operations at work throughout social information processing (i.e., attending, interpreting, retrieving, perspective-taking; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Thus, we include empathy under the remit of offense-supportive cognition since theory and research suggest that cognitive processes—particularly in the form of perspective-taking—represent crucial stages in the empathic process (Marshall, Hudson, Jones, & Fernandez, 1995; see also Barnett & Mann, this volume).

In the literature examining male sexual abusers, knowledge regarding offense-supportive cognition is relatively abundant enabling effective empirically-based assessment and treatment (Ward & Beech, 2006). However, an empirically informed global understanding of female sexual abusers’ offense-supportive cognition is currently unavailable.As a consequence of this, professionals are often forced to conduct assessments and treatment according to pre-existing knowledge relating to male sexual abusers; a situation resulting in gender-insensitive practice. In this systematic review, we will identify and examine national and international studies examining sexually abusive females’ offense-supportive cognition. This review will contribute to our current understanding of female sexual abusers’ offense-supportive cognition enabling professionals tasked with their assessment and treatment to approach these tasks in a gender-informed manner. In order to ensure that our review is as inclusive as possible we will examine both incarcerated and non-incarcerated self-identified female sexual abusers in the community. We will also examine both adult and adolescent offenders.

Method

Inclusion Criteria

Studies selected for inclusion were those that directly examined the offense-supportive cognition of sexually abusive females. In order to be selected for final inclusion studies were required to (1) include some numerical measure of offense-supportive cognition, (2) be written in English, (3) be published in a peer-reviewed journal, or involve unpublished data that included a control group.

Document Search and Extraction

The databases used for the initial searches were PsychINFO, Scopus, and Criminal Justice Abstracts (all years) using the following search terms: female sexual offender, female sexual perpetrator, or female child molester. The initial search criteria were intentionally broad to ensure all relevant documents were retrieved. Using this strategy, 119 documents were initially extracted. The majority of documents excluded were those that did not directly measure offense-supportive cognition (*n* = 79); see Figure 1. After checking each document against the specified inclusion criteria, there were nine remaining documents. Three additional journal articles were identified from the reference lists of these eight remaining articles. A request for unpublished data examining the cognition of sexually abusive females was made via the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) List-Serve and e-mails to key professionals in female sexual offending. This resulted in two additional studies being identified for inclusion: one unpublished manuscript and one unpublished master’s thesis. Two independent raters read each document and classified a total of 13 studies as meeting the inclusion criteria without disagreement. The final studies included for systematic review were: Beckett, Burke, and Cotton, 2007 (cited by Beckett, 2007); Beech, Parrett, Ward, and Fisher, 2009; Elliott, Eldridge, Ashfield, and Beech, 2010; Fromuth and Conn, 1997; Gannon, Hoare, Rose, and Parrett, 2012; Gannon and Rose, 2009; Gannon, Rose, and Williams, 2009; Kjellgren, Priebe, Svedin, Mossige, and Långström, 2011; Kubik and Hecker, 2005; Kubik, Hecker, and Righthand, 2002; Ring, 2005; Slotboom, Hendriks, and Verbruggen, 2011; Strickland, 2008.

Results

*Samples and Recruitment*

Table 1 shows details of each of the 13 studies extracted for review. The majority of studies recruited participants from the UK (seven studies; 53.8%). Four studies (30.8%) recruited participants from the US, one (7.7%) from Nordic countries, and one (7.7%) from the Netherlands. Participants were most often adult females who were imprisoned for their sexual offending or who had been referred for assessment/treatment through the courts (eight studies, 62%; Beckett et al., 2007; Beech et al., 2009; Elliott et al., 2010; Gannon et al., 2012; Gannon & Rose, 2009; Gannon et al., 2009; Ring, 2005; Strickland, 2008). Two studies examined non-clinical adolescent females from the community who self-reported sexually abusive behavior (15.4%; Fromuth & Conn, 1997; Kjellgren et al., 2011) and two studies examined adolescent females who were imprisoned for their sexual offending (15.4%; Kubik & Hecker, 2005; Kubik et al., 2002). One study included adolescent females from both the community and correctional settings who self-reported sexually abusive behavior (Slotboom et al., 2011).

*Study Focus and Design*

In just under half of the studies included for review, offense-suppportive cognition was the main focus of the analysis (six studies; Beckett et al., 2007; Beech et al., 2009; Gannon et al., 2012; Gannon & Rose, 2009; Gannon et al., 2009; Kubik & Hecker, 2005). For the remainder, offense-supportive cognition was included as one factor amongst other variables. The majority of studies (76.9%; ten studies) included a control group. Four studies (30.8%) included female non-sexual offenders as the control group (Gannon & Rose, 2009; Gannon et al., 2009; Kubik et al., 2002[adolescents]; Strickland, 2008), three studies (23.1%) included females who had not self-reported sexual coercion (Fromuth & Conn, 1997; Kjellgren et al., 2011; Slotboom et al., 2011) and two studies (15.4%) included more than one control group (Kubik & Hecker, 2005; Ring, 2005). Kubik and Hecker (2005) employed both adolescent female non-sexual offendersand adolescent female non-offenders as the control groups. Ring (2005) used preexisting samples of female non-offenders and sexually abusive males. One study (7.7%) employed only a male child sexual offender control group (Beckett et al., 2007). Studies included for review reported using a range of research designs including survey, interview, and cognitive-experimental/quasi experimental (see Table 1).

*Measures of Cognition*

The most common approach used to examine offense-supportive cognition was the self-report questionnaire (seven studies; 62%; Beckett et al., 2007; Fromuth & Conn, 1997; Kjellgren et al., 2011; Kubik & Hecker, 2005; Ring, 2005; Slotboom et al., 2011; Strickland, 2008). The most popular questionnaire measures used were Burt’s (1980) Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (two studies; Fromuth & Conn, 1997; Kjellgren et al., 2011[[2]](#footnote-2)), Beckett’s (1987) Children and Sex Questionnaire-Cognitive Distortion Subscale (two studies; Beckett et al., 2007; Ring, 2005), and Beckett and Fisher’s (1994) Victim Empathy Questionnaire (two studies; Beckett et al., 2007; Ring, 2005). One study used both questionnaire measures and a self-report vignette-based measure in which respondents were required to read a series of child sexual abuse scenarios and provide Likert-scale ratings regarding both the child and adult’s behavior (Kubick & Hecker, 2005). Notably, all of these self-report questionnaires and the vignette-based measure were adapted from versions designed originally for use with male sexual offenders. Furthermore, only three questionnaire studies employed measures to examine social desirability bias (Kubik & Hecker, 2005; Ring, 2005; Slotboom et al., 2011) and one was unclear on this aspect (Beckett et al., 2007)[[3]](#footnote-3).The remainder of the assessment approaches used were semi-structured interview (two studies; Beech et al., 2009; Gannon et al., 2012), retrospective file review (two studies; Elliott et al., 2010; Kubik et al., 2002), or computerized implicit measures (two studies; Gannon & Rose, 2009; Gannon et al., 2009). One of the implicit measures reported was the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al., 1998) while the other was a Memory Recognition Task (adapted from Eysenck, Mogg, May, Richards, & Mathews, 1991).

*Key Findings*

*Implicit schemas/beliefs supporting child sexual abuse.* The identification of implicit schemas or general beliefs supporting child sexual abuse was common amongst studies (ten studies or 76.9%; Beckett et al., 2007; Beech et al., 2009; Elliott et al., 2010; Gannon et al., 2012; Gannon & Rose, 2009; Gannon et al., 2009; Kubik et al. 2002; Kubik & Hecker, 2005; Ring, 2005; Strickland, 2008). Five UK studies (Beech et al., 2009; Elliott et al., 2010; Gannon et al., 2012; Gannon & Rose, 2009; Gannon et al., 2009)—using various methods—examined the existence of implicit schemas previously identified in male child sexual abusers (i.e., Ward & Keenan’s implicit theories, 1999) or some potential female variation of these implicit schemas. Across the two interview studies (Beech et al., 2009; Gannon et al., 2012) sexually abusive females’ offence narratives were analysed by independent raters for the presence or absence of implicit schemas previously identified in sexually abusive males. In short, Beech et al. reported that four of the five implicit schemas typically noted in sexually abusive males were prevalent to varying degrees (i.e., Uncontrollability [87%], Dangerous World [53%], Children as Sexual Beings [47%], and Nature of Harm [20%]). However, they also noted the possible presence of two other schemas not previously noted in the male sexual abuse literature. These were the ‘subjugation’ (i.e., excessive submission to others’ control) or ‘self sacrifice’ (i.e., meeting others’ needs at the cost of one’s own) schemas previously outlined by Young, Klosko, and Weishaar (2003).

Beech et al. provided inter-rater coding statistics (kappa) indicating that agreement between two of the author raters on the identification of implicit schemas ranged from fair to good. Gannon et al. attempted to replicate Beech et al.’s study[[4]](#footnote-4). Gannon et al. found evidence of all five implicit schema similar to those noted previously in the literature associated with sexually abusive males (i.e., Uncontrollability [100%], Dangerous World [100%], Children as Sexual Beings [63%], Nature of Harm [81%], Entitlement [44%]) with good inter-coder agreement statistics except for the nature of harm and entitlement implicit schemas which appeared most difficult to code. In this study, the raters were also the study authors. However, Gannon et al. noted many prominent gender differences in the expression of these schemas. A key finding was that sexually abusive females appeared to view males as ‘dangerous’ (i.e., a ‘males are dangerous’ implicit schema) and ‘entitled’ (i.e., an ‘entitlement of males’ implicit schema) relative to females. Sexually abusive females also appeared to view male child sexual abuse as relatively more harmful than abuse committed by a female (i.e., a ‘harmfulness of males’ implicit schema) and attributed sexual interest to their own child victim but did not appear to view children, more generally, as sexual (i.e., a ‘victim as sexual’ implicit schema). On the basis of these results, Gannon et al. suggest that female sexual abusers’ offense-supportive implicit schemas may stem from some form of gender-role stereotyping (Bem, 1981).

Elliott et al. (2010) analysed 43 sexually abusive females’ clinical file reports retrospectively for evidence of each of the five implicit schemas previously identified in sexually abusive males. Elliott et al. reported all five implicit theories typically noted in sexually abusive males as being prevalent to varying degrees (i.e., Uncontrollability [‘less common’ exact prevalence unspecified], Dangerous World [‘less common’ exact prevalence unspecified], Children as Sexual Beings [72%], Nature of Harm [70%], and Entitlement [67%]). Little mention of prominent gender differences is made by the authors when describing these results. They do, however, note that women who co-offended tended to place their male co-perpetrator’s needs ahead of their own (i.e., appeared to view their co-perpetrator partner as ‘entitled’). Inter-rater coding statistics were not presented in this study.

The two computerized implicit measure studies (Gannon & Rose, 2009; Gannon et al., 2009) both examined the presence of the ‘children as sexual beings’ implicit schema in females imprisoned for their sexual offending. The first (Gannon et al., 2009) employed the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998) with 17 females imprisoned for child sexual abuse and 17 control females imprisoned for non-sexual offending (matched on age, IQ, and sentence length). In short, the IAT (1) provides a latency-based measure of the strength of conceptual associations (e.g., children and sex) held in long-term memory where faster categorical judgment latency times indicate stronger conceptual associations; and (2) has been successful in cataloging the cognitive associations associated with male child molestation independently from social desirability bias (Gray, Brown, MacCulloch, Smith, & Snowden, 2005; Nunes & Firestone, 2007; Schnabel, Asendorpf, & Greenwald, 2008). Using this task, Gannon et al. were unable to detect any accelerated latency times for sexually abusive females when making judgments about children and sex relative to female offender controls. Thus, Gannon et al.’s results suggest that sexually abusive females do not sexualize children cognitively as has been reported in sexually abusive males (Gray et al., 2005; Nunes et al., 2007). It should be noted, however, that Gannon et al.’s sample size is small, no power analysis is reported, and only a small number of lone abusers (i.e., those perhaps most likely to sexualize children) were included in this study.

In the second study, using many of the same imprisoned participants, Gannon and Rose (2009) adapted a memory recognition paradigm used previously with clinical and forensic samples (Copello & Tata, 1990; Eysenck et al., 1991) to examine the automatic interpretations—and subsequent recognitions—made by sexually abusive females regarding sexually ambiguous child-related sentences (e.g., “Young Simon kept wriggling about on the woman’s knee”). All responses made by sexually abusive females were compared to a control group of non-sexually abusive imprisoned females matched on age, IQ, and prison sentence length. Gannon and Rose were unable to detect any differences between the groups in their responses to the sexually ambiguous sentences (i.e., in a memory recognition task of the ambiguous sexual sentences, sexually abusive females did not make preferential recognitions for sentences that sexualized children such as: “Young Simon kept wriggling about *suggestively* on the woman’s knee”). However, in addition to examining the children as sexual beings schema, Gannon and Rose—on the basis of their previous interview study findings (Gannon et al., 2012) also presented women with sentences designed to test the ‘males are dangerous’ implicit schema. Using these sentences, Gannon and Rose found that sexually abusive females made significantly more preferential recognitions of sentences that imbued males with malevolent intent relative to controls. Furthermore, this threat-bias (1) did not appear to be the product of a more general threat bias (as measured via socially threatening control sentences), (2) did not appear to be the product of differential domestic abuse experiences, and (3) was evident across both lone abusers and those who had co-abused with a male. Based on these findings, Gannon and Rose suggest that sexually abusive females hold an interpretative bias specific to *male* threat and do not hold the more general dangerous world implicit schema used to explain sexually abusive males’ offense-supportive cognition.

A number of studies examine offense-supportive beliefs more generally using self-report techniques and were either designed prior to the advent of implicit schema research applied to the forensic domain (Kubik et al. 2002; Kubik & Hecker, 2005; Ring, 2005), or have used measures that have not been designed to tap implicit schemas (Beckett et al., 2007; Strickland, 2008). Kubik et al. (2002) conducted retrospective coding of US correctional records (examining a number of clinical variables) for 11 adolescent sexually abusive females and 11 control adolescent offenders matched on age.[[5]](#footnote-5) Kubik et al. found equally high levels of offence-related ‘distorted thoughts’ across the groups. However, the authors do not specify (1) exactly how coding was implemented, (2) any guidelines used to determine ‘distorted thoughts’, or (3) whether any coding reliability checks were made. In a later study, Kubik and Hecker (2005) asked 11 adolescent sexually abusive females, 12 control adolescent offenders, and 21 adolescent non offender females to read through a series of vignettes depicting child-adolescent sexual interactions. Across the vignettes, the degree of sexual contact was varied (i.e., from touching to intercourse) as was the child’s response. In short, the child was described as either (1) smiling, (2) not responding, or (3) crying and resisting. Participants were asked to rate—using a 5-point Likert scale—the child’s experience and responsibility for the abuse. Compared to the control groups, sexually abusive adolescents attributed less responsibility to the adolescent who perpetrated the abuse. Furthermore, when the abuse depicted was serious (e.g., intercourse) and the child reacted negatively (through crying and resisting), sexually abusive females attributed more responsibility, enjoyment, and benefit to the child. Kubik and Hecker suggest that this latter finding might highlight an emotion recognition deficit in sexually abusive adolescent females. Interestingly, when the authors examined the same participants’ responses on the Adolescent Cognitions Scale—a pre-existing measure of male adolescents’ offense-supportive cognition (Becker & Kaplan, 1988) adapted by Kubik and Hecker for use with females—no differences across the groups were detected *despite* the fact that the authors increased the alpha level to .10. This is interesting given that female abusers displayed offense-supportive beliefs on the vignette self-report measure.

Ring (2005) examined the offense-supportive cognition of 46 sexually abusive females referred for assessment/treatment (who were predominantly mothers) by retrospectively analyzing their endorsements on the Cognitive Distortions Subscale of the Children and Sex Questionnaire (Beckett, 1987) relative to two pre-existing samples, (1) 27 non-offender female mothers and (2) 140 male child sexual abusers. Overall, Ring found that the sexually abusive females made significantly more cognitive distortion endorsements relative to non-offender females (*M*s = 15 versus 10.2 respectively). And, sexually abusive female’s scores were similar to those previously reported in sexually abusive males. When Ring examined sexually abusive females who had offended alone (*n* = 15) and those who had co-abused (*n* = 19) she found that lone abusers endorsed significantly higher levels of cognitive distortions (*Ms* = 22.4 versus 13.6 respectively). Furthermore, the lone abusers’ endorsements—but not the co-abusers’—were significantly higher than the non-offender females’ scores. Ring’s study is one of few in the area to incorporate a measure of social desirability bias (i.e., Paulhus’ Deception Scales, 1998). Ring did not observe any differences between the sexually abusive females and the non-offender female group[[6]](#footnote-6). However, more detailed analysis of the relationship of the Paulhus Deception Scales to offense-supportive endorsements is not specifically reported.

Using the Cognitive Distortion Subscale of the Children and Sex Questionnaire (Beckett, 1987), Beckett et al. (2007) compared the endorsements of 80 sexually abusive females with a control group of sexually abusive males. Beckett et al. found that both groups displayed equally high levels of offense-supportive beliefs. Furthermore, within the female group, Beckett reported lone abusers as making significantly higher endorsements than co-abusers. However, it should be noted that the reported *p* value in this case was .05 and not < .05.

In a US study, Strickland (2008) used the MSI-II Cognitive Distortions and Immaturity Subscale (Nichols & Molinder, 1996) to examine any differences in the offense-supportive cognition of 54 incarcerated female sexual abusers and 63 female incarcerated non-sexual offenders. However, they did not find any significant differences between the self-reported endorsements of these groups on this aspect of functioning despite finding differences in other important areas of psychological functioning (i.e., loneliness and neediness). However, it should be noted that although no statistical differences were found between the groups regarding offense-supportive cognition, both groups were noted to score particularly highly on the part of the subscale that examined lack of accountability and blame. In short then, all offenders in this study showed a tendency to blame others for their offending behavior and associated situation.

*Rape myth acceptance/violence.* An examination of rape myth acceptance was undertaken in two studies (Fromuth & Conn, 1997; Kjellgren et al., 2011) and an examination of beliefs about interpersonal violence in one study (Fromuth & Conn, 1997). Kjellgren et al. (2011) surveyed Nordic female students’ self-reported sexually abusive behavior using a broad framework that encapsulated peer-on-peer sexual abuse (i.e., ‘ever talked someone into, used pressure or forced somebody to masturbate them, to have sexual intercourse, oral sex, or anal sex’; p.3356). Using a shortened version of Burt’s Rape Myth Acceptance Scale adapted specifically for their study, Kjellgren et al. found that female sexually abusive students (*n* = 37) were significantly more likely than female non-sexually abusive students (*n* = 4326) to endorse rape myths (*M*s = 16.60 versus 12.02 respectively). In follow up analyses, using a Swedish subset sample, Kjellgren et al. compared the responses of female sexually abusive students (approximately half of whom held conduct problems; *n* = 23), female non-sexually abusive conduct disordered students (*n* = 50), and female non-sexually abusive/non conduct disordered students (*n* = 2180). Here, female sexually abusive students made significantly higher endorsements of rape myths (*M* = 15.65) compared to both female non-sexually abusive conduct disordered students (*M* = 11.51) and female non-sexually abusive/non conduct disordered students (*M* = 10.72). No measures of social desirability were included in this study.

Fromuth and Conn (1997) surveyed female US university students regarding their self-reports of sexually abusive behavior towards individuals ‘at least 5 years younger than themselves’. Analyses of abuse supportive cognition—amongst other variables—was then compared across the group of females who reported sexually abusive behavour (*n* = 22) and the group of females who did not report sexually abusivc behavior (*n* = 524). No measures of social desirability were included in this study. Fromuth and Conn were unable to detect any differences between the groups on their Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980) endorsements or the additional measure examining Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence (Burt, 1980). This is perhaps unsurprising given that (1) the Rape Myth Acceptance scale surveys attitudes relating to adult women more generally (i.e., not children), and (2) research shows that the majority of female sexual offenders use coercive rather than violent modus operandi in the sexual abuse of children (Ó Ciardha, Gannon, Waugh, & Blake, 2011).

*Gender stereotypes/general sexual beliefs.* Just under one third of studies examined some form of gender stereotyping or beliefs about sex (four studies; Fromuth & Conn, 1997; Kjellgren et al., 2011; Kubik & Hecker, 2005; Slotboom et al., 2010). Kjellgren et al. (2011) were unable to find any evidence of increased gender stereotyping endorsements across Nordic sexually abusive and non-abusive students using a shortened version of Burt’s Sex Role Stereotyping Scale (1980) adapted specifically for their study. Using the Mathtec Attitudes and Values questionnaire (which examines attitudes and values relating to sex including gender sterotyping; Kirby, 1984), Kubik and Hecker (2005) found that female sexually abusive adolescents self-reported significantly less clarity of their sexual values, understanding of their sexual responses, and satisfaction regarding their sexuality compared to female non-sexually abusive adolescent offenders. However, their responses on these issues were indiscriminable from a group of female adolescent non-offenders. Female sexually abusive adolescents also showed a significantly less positive attitude toward contraception-use relative to a group of female adolescent non-offenders but not the female offender control group. However, no differences across the groups were detected regarding attitudes towards gender roles, sexuality or premarital intercourse. In terms of sexual beliefs, Fromuth and Conn (1997) found no significant differences in the levels of endorsements made by US female university students who self-reported abusive behavior and those who did not on Burt’s (1980) Adversarial Sexual Beliefs Scale (group means unreported). Finally, Slotboom et al. (2011) recruited 33 female adolescents who self-reported sexually coercive behavior (against anyone including children) and 299 female adolescents who did not report such behavior in Dutch schools and juvenile correction facilities. Using a sexual beliefs scale—developed specifically for their study—Slotboom et al. examined beliefs regarding male and female peers’ sexual activity levels. Using logistic regression analysis, Slotboom et al. found that females who endorsed beliefs normalizing high levels of sexual activity amongst female peers were more likely to self-report having been sexually abusive. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this analysis, however, is that amongst many other hypothesized predictors (i.e., childhood abuse, ambiguous communication of sexual intent, high sexual activity levels) sexual beliefs about female peers represented the only significant predictor of sexually abusive behavior. Notably, this study examined social desirability bias (in the form of the Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory; Lange, 1994) and the authors reported that controlling for such responses did not affect the results.

*Victim empathy.* Only three studies (23%) examined victim empathy (Beckett et al., 2007; Elliott et al., 2010; Ring, 2005). We included empathy in this review, as stated earlier, since theory and research suggest that empathy holds a key cognitive component in the form of perspective taking. Both Beckett et al. (2007) and Ring (2005) measured this construct using the Victim Empathy Distortions Scale (Beckett & Fisher, 1994) which measures empathy relating to one’s own victim (or ‘specific’ victim empathy deficits; see Barnett & Mann, this volume). Beckett et al. (2007) reported that equally high levels of victim empathy deficits were found across sexually abusive females and sexually abusive males. Furthermore, females who had abused alone appeared to hold more victim empathy deficits compared to females who had co-abused. Ring (2005) reported similar findings. Ring also incorporated a more general measure of empathy (i.e., the Interpersonal Reactivity Index; Davis, 1980)—which examines *perspective taking,* (cognitively placing oneself in another’s shoes), *empathic concern* (positive affective concern), *fantasy* (the ability to identify with fictitious individuals), and *personal distress* (negative affect associated with experiencing others’ distress). Ring found that although sexually abusive females held significantly higher levels of personal distress compared to the female non-offending control group, they also self-reported significantly poorer general perspective taking ability. When lone female sexual abusers’ scores were compared to co-abusers’ scores, however, there were no differences across the groups except that lone abusers showed significantly higher levels of personal distress. Similarly, when sexually abusive females’ scores were compared to the sexually abusive male group, females were similar across all elements except that they appeared to hold significantly higher levels of personal distress. The final study examining empathy (Elliott et al., 2010)—amongst numerous other clinical variables—used retrospective file review to examine the presence or absence of empathy deficits. Elliott et al. report that problems with empathy were noted particularly in sexually abusive females who had lone offended against a victim over 12 years (63.6%, *n* = 7) and sexually abusive females who had been coerced by a male (60%, *n* = 3) relative to females who had lone offended against a victim under 12 years (*n* unspecified), or those who had accompanied or worked alongside a male abuser (*n* unspecified). However, Elliott et al. do not specify any guidelines regarding how coding was implemented, how they determined ‘lack of empathetic concern’, or whether inter-rater coding checks were made.

Discussion

In this review, we identified 13 studies examining the offense-supportive cognition of female sexual abusers. These studies show several important findings. However, they also highlight some key problems associated with this literature and point towards future research avenues that will progress this field further.

Overall, the majority of studies reviewed tended to examine either implicit schemas or general beliefs supportive of child sexual abuse using explicit self-report measures of offense-supportive cognition (e.g., interview or questionnaire methods). All of these studies report support for the hypothesis that sexually abusive females hold beliefs that support child sexual abuse (Beckett et al., 2007; Beech et al., 2009; Elliott et al., 2010; Gannon et al., 2012; Kubik et al., 2002; Kubik & Hecker, 2005; Ring, 2005). However, there is some discrepancy between interview studies that aim to examine the existence of Ward and Keenan’s (1999) implicit schemas in female sexual abusers. While some researchers report that pre-existing theories of male abusers’ schemas accommodate female sexual offenders’ self-reported cognition adequately (Beech et al., 2009; Elliott et al., 2010), others argue female sexual abusers’ cognition is inherently different to that presented by male sexual abusers despite surface level semantic similarities (Gannon et al., 2012; see also Ó Ciardha & Ward, this volume). Some differences in findings are to be expected across differing samples of female sexual abusers. However, researchers should be mindful of their own pre-existing assumptions regarding female sexual abusers’ cognition and how this may affect coding strategies and subsequent interpretations. In future interview studies, it would be particularly helpful for researchers to include a non-sexual abuser female offender control group to examine the ‘baseline’ level of offense-supportive cognition reported across offending populations. Studies are also likely to benefit from employing external independent coders who are unrelated to the study in question.

The questionnaire/vignette studies that we have reviewed tend to be more consistent in findings. Generally, when sexually abusive females are asked to complete measures adapted from the male sexual abuser literature (e.g., the Cognitive Distortions Subscale of the Children and Sex Questionnaire; Beckett, 1987), they endorse offense-supportive statements at a similar level to their male counterparts (Beckett et al., 2007; Ring, 2005), yet make significantly higher endorsements relative to non-sexual abuser female offender controls (Kubik & Hecker, 2005) or female non-offender controls (Ring, 2005). Of particular interest, perhaps, is the finding that female sexual abusers who have abused autonomously (i.e., lone abusers) appear to hold elevated levels of endorsement regarding offense-supportive cognition relative to females who have offended in the company of a male (Beckett et al., 2007; Ring, 2005). This highlights the importance that professionals in this literature should place upon examining female sexual abusers’ offence characteristics in detail when examining datasets regarding offense-supportive cognition. Notably, in Strickland’s (2008) study—in which the offense characteristics of female sexual abusers do not appear to have been analysed—no differences in offense-supportive cognition were noted on the Cognitive Distortions and Immaturity Subscale of the MSI-II (Nichols & Molinder, 1996). Taken as a whole, results of these studies suggest that lone female abusers may hold offense-supportive beliefs that support their offending that are—as yet—absent in women who co-abuse alongside men. Clearly, this could point to relatively differing treatment needs across these two types of female sexual abuser. However, in order to make more substantive conclusions, future researchers using self-report measures need to considerably strengthen their research designs through measuring the effects that social desirability may have on the results they report. In particular, for example, it may be possible that women who co-abuse can more easily downplay their responsibility and offense-supportive beliefs through attributing blame to their male co-perpetrator.

Within the small body of literature on female sexual abusers’ offense-supportive cognition, researchers have examined female sexual abusers’ offense-supportive schema using more implicit cognitive-experimental research designs (Gannon et al., 2009; Gannon & Rose, 2009). The results of these tasks are preliminary yet promising. In short, no evidence has been found to support offense-supportive cognition sexualizing children across these tasks. However, some support has been found for a schema imbuing males with malevolent intent (i.e., a ‘males are dangerous’ implicit theory; Gannon et al., 2009). Given that both of these study samples were comprised of female co-abusers, such findings are unsurprising. These findings suggest that (1) female sexual co-abusers may not have yet developed etiological beliefs that sexualize children and support their abusive behavior, and (2) female sexual abusers hold beliefs about males and their malevolency that lead them to over-interpret male threat. For coerced female abusers this may be particularly pertinent since such interpretations may disable any assertive responses on their part increasing the likelihood that they will offend against children when requested to do so by a male. Clearly, such research designs represent a promising avenue of enquiry that should be tapped into by future researchers.

A small number of questionnaire studies have examined more general offense-supportive cognition in the form of rape myths, interpersonal violence, gender-role stereotyping, and beliefs associated with sex and sexual behavior. A number of these studies have been conducted with non-clinical community samples of females who self-report having engaged in sexually abusive behavior. In brief, rape myth acceptance and acceptance of violence does not appear to be related to adolescent females’ self-reported child sexual abuse (Fromuth & Conn, 1997) although rape myth acceptance has been reported in adolescent females who engage in peer-on-peer sexual assault relative to appropriate controls (Kjellgran et al., 2011). Of the two studies examining self-reported gender-role stereotyping (Kjellgran et al., 2011; Kubik & Hecker, 2005), neither reported any notable responses on the part of sexually abusive youth relative to controls. This is interesting given that Gannon et al. (2012) suggested that adult female sexual abusers’ implicit schemas might be tantamount to gender-role stereotyping. Finally, in terms of sexual beliefs, although Kubik and Hecker (2005) reported that adolescent sexual abusers self-reported less clarity of sexual values, understanding of their sexual responses, and sexuality satisfaction relative to control non sexually abusive adolescent offenders, these responses were no different from community adolescent controls. Thus, the importance of these findings in relation to female sexual abuse is generally difficult to interpret. In Slotboom et al.’s (2011) study, however, beliefs normalizing a high level of sexual activity amongst peers were found to be a significant predictor of adolescents’ self-reported levels of sexually abusive behavior. This latter study is particularly noteworthy for two reasons: (1) socially desirable responses were controlled for within the analysis, and (2) the sample included both non-clinical community youth and youth in correctional facilities. Clearly, there is much work to be conducted to further knowledge regarding the association between female sexual abuse and more general offense-supportive cognition. A notable aspect of this research is that it appears to have been conducted almost exclusively with adolescent samples who self-report sexually abusive behavior. Future research should consider using a select number of agreed measures to examine these constructs in adult sexually abusive females.

Only three studies reported examining empathy and all of these studies were conducted with adult female sexual abusers (Beckett et al., 2007; Elliott et al., 2010; Ring, 2005). When empathy towards one’s own victim is examined, the research suggests that female sexual abusers show (1) more problems in this area relative to non-offender controls (Ring, 2005), and (2) hold deficits in this area comparable to male sexual abusers (Beckett et al., 2007). Furthermore, lone female sexual abusers appear to show higher levels of victim empathy deficits in relation to their own victim relative to co-abusers (Beckett et al., 2007; Ring, 2005; although see Elliott et al. 2010 for an exception). This finding—taken in unison with results suggesting that female sexual abusers hold general beliefs that support sexual abuse—suggests that offense-supportive beliefs are highly related to, and may severely obstruct an individual’s ability to empathize with their child victim (see also Barnett & Mann, this volume). Ring’s (2005) study appears to be the only study that has examined more general empathy deficits in female sexual abusers. Some problems regarding general perspective taking were noted in relation to a non-offending control group. However, further controlled research is needed in this area before any concrete conclusions may be drawn. In particular, research that examines the link between cognition and the affective components of empathy would be most informative in any future work although, as noted in Barnett and Mann (this volume), the male sexual abuser literature is still grappling somewhat with this issue.

This review holds substantial utility for professionals who work with female sexual abusers. In particular, this review suggests that professionals should be particularly mindful of potential gender differences in offense-supportive cognition. Failure to consider such differences could impact upon the therapeutic relationship considerably, and/or result in treatment plans for women that are gender insensitive. Furthermore, when working with women, professionals should pay careful attention to the context and characteristics of the sexually abusive behavior. For example, professionals should examine whether the abuse was lone or co-perpetrated and the exact role of any co-perpetrating male(s). The research suggests that women who are lone abusers hold more entrenched offense-supportive beliefs than females who co-abuse. However, each case should be individually formulated. It may be, for example, that a coerced female holds beliefs that males are superior or that abuse is less damaging if perpetrated by a female as opposed to a male. Or, a co-abusing female may play an equal role alongside the male in the offending behavior. Future research that employs, as standard practice, subgroups of female sexual abusers, measures of social desirability and carefully matched control groups will enable further professional knowledge in the assessment and treatment of female sexual abusers.

The key limitations of this review involve (1) the small number of studies available for review, (2) the lack of control groups employed within identified studies for comparative purposes, and (3) the very small sample sizes reported. Furthermore, the generation of valid conclusions regarding sexually abusive females’ cognition is limited by a general lack of attention to study design in this area. Not only do the majority of studies use self-report measures (in either questionnaire or interview form) but they often fail to consider social desirability bias as a threat to the validity of their results. Consequently, we suggest that this field will continue to be limited until researchers more carefully consider collaborating with each other to increase sample sizes, incorporating a range of suitably matched control groups, and introducing power analyses (both pre and post data collection) into their study preparation and reports. Developing measures specifically for sexually abusive females—rather than adapting existing male measures—is also likely to represent a more effective and suitable method of exploring cognition further. We acknowledge that our review is also limited by our exclusion of studies that were not published in English. However, our examination of the reference lists for identified articles and professional list-serve request increased the number of studies that we were able to include.

Amidst these limitations, however, the conclusions are promising. Offense-supportive cognition does appear to feature prominently amongst a variety of female sexual abuser samples. Consequently, we can more safely assume that offense-supportive cognition represents one of many treatment needs of female-sexual abusers for treatment purposes and begin a more fine-tuned approach to research in this area.

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Table 1. Studies Examining Female Sexual Offenders’ Cognition

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Authors | Sample | Control Group | Design/Measures | Results |
| Beckett et al. (2007) | 80 convicted or suspected female child sexual abusers (age unspecified)  Recruited from UK criminal justice and child protection referrals | 80 convicted or suspected male child sexual abusers (age unspecified)  Recruited from UK criminal justice and child protection referrals | Children and Sex Questionnaire (Beckett, 1987)  Victim Empathy Questionnaire  (Beckett & Fisher, 1994) | Equally high levels of offense-supportive cognition and victim empathy deficits across male and female sexual abusers. Within female sexual abusers, lone female abusers show greatest deficits relative to co-abusers (*p* = .05) |
| Beech et al. (2009) | 15 convicted female child sexual abusers (Mean age = 47.3 years)  Recruited from UK  Prisons | -- | Semi-Structured Interview | Evidence for four of the five implicit schemas typically noted in male child sexual abusers:  Uncontrollability (87% of cases, *n* = 13)  Dangerous World (53% of cases, *n* = 8)  Children as Sexual (47% of cases, *n* = 7)  Nature of Harm (20% of cases, *n* = 3) |
| Elliott et al. (2010) | 43 female child sexual abusers (Mean age = 31.2 years)  Sample comprised of file referrals from the family or criminal courts or child sexual abuse admissions | -- | Clinical File Review (including therapist reports, psychometric data, and other relevant reports) | All five implicit schemas typically noted in male child sexual abusers found:  Uncontrollability (Documented to be “less common”)  Dangerous World (Documented to be “less common”)  Children as Sexual (72% of cases, *n* = 31)  Nature of Harm (70% of cases, *n* = 30)  Entitlement (67% of cases, *n* = 29) |
| Fromuth & Conn (1997) | 22 adolescent females who reported having sexually abused a child (age range 17-21 years[[7]](#footnote-7))  Recruited from US University | 524 adolescent females who did not report having sexually abused a child (age range 17-21 years)  Recruited from US University | Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence Scale (Burt, 1980)  Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980)  Adversarial Sexual Beliefs Scale (Burt, 1980) | There were no differences in the endorsement levels across the groups regarding acceptance of violence, rape myths, or adversarial sexual beliefs. |
| Gannon et al. (2012) | 16 convicted female child sexual abusers (Aged 21-78 years)  Recruited from UK  Prisons | -- | Semi-Structured Interview | Five implicit schemas found which appear similar to those noted in male child sexual abusers. The authors re-label the majority of schemas to account for the gender differences found:  Uncontrollability (100% of cases, *n* = 16)  Males are Dangerous (100%, *n* =16)  Victim as Sexual (63% of cases, *n* = 10)  Harmfulness of Males (81% of cases, *n* = 13)  Entitlement of Males (44% of cases, *n* = 7) |
| Gannon & Rose (2009) | 19 convicted female child sexual abusers (Mean age = 37.6 years)  Recruited from UK  Prisons | 18 convicted female non-sexual offenders (age matched)  Recruited from UK  Prisons | Memory Recognition Task adapted from Eysenck et al. (1991) | Female sexual abusers were more likely to interpret ambiguous information about males in a threatening manner relative to controls. Neither female sexual abusers nor controls interpreted ambiguous information about children in a sexual manner. |
| Gannon et al. (2009) | 17 convicted female child sexual abusers (Mean age = 40.2 years)  Recruited from UK  Prisons | 17 convicted female non-sexual offenders (age matched)  Recruited from UK  Prisons | Children and Sex Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al., 1998) | Both female sexual abusers and the control group were more likely to associate adults with sex rather than children. |
| Kjellgren et al. (2011) | 37 adolescent females who reported having engaged in sexually coercive behavior (Aged 17-20 years)  Recruited from high schools in Norway and Sweden | 4326 adolescent females who did not report having engaged in sexually coercive behavior (age range 17-20 years)  Recruited from high schools in Norway and Sweden | Gender Stereotypic Attitude Measure (constructed from Burt, 1980)  Rape Myth Measure (constructed from Burt, 1980) | Sexually coercive females endorse significantly higher levels of rape myths relative to non sexually coercive females. There were no differences in the endorsement levels regarding gender stereotypes. |
| Kubik et al (2002) | 11 adolescent female child sexual abusers (Aged 13.33 - 18.58 years)  Recruited from open cases over a one year period with a US Correctional Department | 11 adolescent female offenders (age matched)  Recruited from open cases over a one year period with a US Correctional Department | Retrospective coding of file records | Both adolescent female sexual abusers and controls showed similarly high levels of ‘distorted thoughts regarding the offence’ (Female child sexual offenders = 100%, Controls = 90.9%). |
| Kubik & Hecker (2005) | 11 adolescent female child sexual abusers (Mean age = 15.27)  Recruited from US Prisons and Residential Treatment Centres | (1) 12 adolescent female offenders (recruited from US Prisons and Residential Treatment Centres)  (2) 21 adolescent female non offenders (recruited from US community)  Both age matched | 12 vignettes depicting child-adolescent sexual interactions adapted from Stermac and Segal (1989)  Adolescent Cognitions Scale (Becker & Kaplan, 1988)  Mathtech Questionnaire (Attitude and Values; Kirby, 1984) | Adolescent female sexual abusers were more likely to endorse statements (1) absolving an offender from blame and (2) increasing the responsibility and blame to the child victim.  There were no differences in the endorsement levels of the groups on the adolescent cognitions scale.  Adolescent female sexual abusers were less likely to hold clarification of their own sexual beliefs, understanding of their sexual responses or understanding of their sexuality relative to the offender control group but not the non-offenders.  Adolescent female sexual abusers held a less positive attitude to contraception relative to the non-offenders but not the offender control group.  No differences across the groups were found regarding beliefs about gender roles, sexuality or premarital intercourse.  Note that p levels were adjusted such that *p* <.10 was interpreted to be a significant finding. |
| Ring (2005) | 46 convicted or suspected female child sexual abusers (ages unavailable; most of whom were mothers)  Recruited from UK criminal justice and child protection referrals | (1) Pre existing sample of 27 non-offender female mothers (reported in a previous unpublished thesis; Allam, nd)  (2) Pre existing sample of 140 male child sexual abusers (reported in a previous published journal article; Fisher, Beech, & Browne, 1999) | Children and Sex Questionnaire (Beckett, 1987)  Victim Empathy Questionnaire  (Beckett & Fisher, 1994) | Female sexual offenders endorsed significantly higher levels of offense-supportive cognition relative to non-offender females. Within female sexual offenders, lone female abusers showed the greatest deficits relative to co-abusers (*p* = .03). There was no difference between female and male child sexual offenders on offense-supportive cognition or victim empathy deficits[[8]](#footnote-8). |
| Slotboom et al. (2011) | 33 adolescent females who self-reported having engaged in sexually coercive behavior[[9]](#footnote-9)  Recruited from Dutch schools and juvenile correction facilities | 299 adolescent females who self-reported not having engaged in sexually coercive behavior  Recruited from Dutch schools and juvenile correction facilities | The Sexual Beliefs Scale (constructed by the authors) | Endorsements of high levels of sexual activity amongst female peers is a significant predictor of female sexual aggression. |
| Strickland (2008) | 60 convicted female child sexual abusers (Mean age = 36 years)  Recruited from US Prison(s) | 70 convicted female non-sexual offenders (age matched)  Recruited from US Prison(s) | MSI-II Cognitive Distortions and Immaturity Subscale –Female Adult Version (Nichols & Molinder, 1996) | There were no differences in the endorsement levels of the groups on the Cognitive Distortions and Immaturity Subscale. |

Figure 1. Schematic Overview of Study Selection

8 Remaining Documents

Further Documents Identified

*(from References and List Serve Requests)*

1 unpublished manuscript

1 MSc thesis

3 journal articles

Documents Excluded:

26 books/book chapters

3 journal articles not in English

79 journal articles not relevant

4 case studies/no quantitative data

119 Documents Extracted from Database Searches

*PsychINFO, Scopus, Criminal Justice Abstracts*

13 Primary Documents Included

8 examining adult FSOs

2 examining adolescent FSOs

3 examining non-clinical samples

Figure 2. Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

Policy and Practice

* Professionals working with female sexual abusers should be trained to approach female sexual abuser assessments of offense-supportive cognition in a professional manner unbiased by pre existing knowledge concerning male sexual abusers.
* When working with female sexual abusers’ offense-supportive cognition, practitioners should be mindful of any possible gender differences in the expression of such cognition.
* When examining female sexual abusers’ offense-supportive cognition in therapy it is important to examine the context and characteristics associated with the offending behavior (e.g., lone versus co-abuser).

Research

* Researchers should—as standard practice—incorporate measures of social desirability and adequately matched control groups into research examining the offense-supportive cognition of female sexual abusers.
* Researchers should—wherever possible—analyze differences in offense-supportive cognition across various subgroups of female sexual abuser (e.g., lone versus co-abuser).
* Researchers should consider combining studies of offense-supportive cognition with research examining the affective components of empathy to examine the interplay and associations between the two.

1. Note, Ward uses the term “implicit theories”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kjellgren et al., 2011 used an adapted version of the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. None of the other studies reported in this review incorporated social desirability measures. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note that due to the small numbers of imprisoned sexually abusive females in the UK, approximately one third of Gannon et al. and Beech et al.’s participants were the same women (*n* = 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Who had committed a non-sexual offense involving a victim. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Note, that this sample was larger than the female non-offender mother sample and included both mothers and non-mothers (*n* = 72). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This age range is reported for the entire sample. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Although female sexual abusers showed significantly higher levels of personal distress on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, Davis, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Overall ages are provided for the individual samples that coercive and non-coercive participants were drawn from. There were Mean = 18 years, Mean = 18.5 years, and Mean = 16. 5 years. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)