Psychological and Psychophysiological Examination of the Sex offence Process

Utilising a Guided Imagery Methodology

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Tasmania

November 2007
This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of this thesis.

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Caroline Spiranovic
November 2007

23/11/2007
ABSTRACT

The majority of child sex offender (CSO) typologies lack a theoretical basis which limits their applications in treatment and risk assessment. In contrast, it has been argued that the Self-Regulation model of the sex offence process (Ward & Hudson, 1998a, 2000a) offers a typology that may have considerable practical benefits. The Self-Regulation model classifies CSOs based on offence goal (Approach/Avoidant) and strategy employed to achieve that goal (Active/Passive). Utilising an Australian sample of CSOs (N=12) and non-offending controls (N=12), the present studies assessed the accuracy of the Self-Regulation model with regard to descriptions of offence pathways and examined differences between pathway offenders in treatment needs and recidivism risk. However, given the small sample size, interpretations of findings were limited to describing the characteristics of the current sample.

In the first series of studies, the assumptions underlying, and accuracy of, the Self-Regulation model were examined utilising a guided imagery methodology. The psychological and psychophysiological responses of CSOs and Controls to scripts depicting an emotionally neutral event (Neutral), adult consensual sex (Consensual), and child sexual assault (CSA) were compared. Although CSOs demonstrated a typical response to the personalised Consensual script, their response to the personalised CSA script was unique. Further investigation revealed some unexpected differences in responses between CSOs, classified as Approach- or Avoidant-goal and Active- or Passive-strategy, to the personalised Consensual and CSA scripts. It was proposed that these observed differences would likely have implications for the treatment and risk assessment of these offenders.
In a second series of studies, the present sample of Avoidant-goal and Active-strategy offenders unexpectedly emerged as groups with higher treatment needs, as these groups demonstrated relatively higher psychological symptomatology on the Symptom Checklist-90-R (Derogatis, 1983) and higher scores on the Screening Scale for Paedophilic Interest (Seto & Lalumière, 2001). Although not statistically significant, these same offenders, when assessed using the Static-99, were also estimated to pose a higher risk for sexual recidivism than their counterparts.

The final series of studies implemented the aetiological model of risk (Beech & Ward, 2004; Ward & Beech, 2004) as a guiding framework for exploring these unexpected results. A guided imagery examination demonstrated that offenders categorised as high or low in recidivism risk did not differ in peri-offence responses. Furthermore, offenders classified as relatively high or low in dispositions predictive of recidivism risk (i.e., paedophilic sexual interest/psychopathy) demonstrated relatively homogeneous peri-offence processes. However, given these null findings may have been an artifact of methodological issues (i.e., small sample size and low statistical power), the basis for the higher treatment need and recidivism risk of the present sample of Avoidant-goal and Active-strategy CSOs could not be determined.

In the final chapter, the significance of these findings with regard to existing theory and practice was discussed. Although the present series of studies demonstrated some meaningful differences between the CSOs that were not predicted by the Self-Regulation model, interpretations of these results were limited due to methodological issues. Hence, it was proposed that further research, employing larger and more representative samples of CSOs, is needed to determine the efficacy of incorporating theory-driven offence process variables in treatment and risk assessment.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In hearing of people who put themselves and their loved ones through considerable heartache simply to achieve a few letters in front of their name, you may think the world has truly gone mad. In thinking this, you are not alone. In reflecting on the past few years of my life, I realise that in striving to achieve the letters “Dr” in front of my name, I have changed both on the inside and also unfortunately on the outside.

The people who have supported me, as crazy as they may be, deserve a medal. I believe that if you are surrounded by truly wonderful people, you can achieve any letters you desire in front of your name. I would like to acknowledge the wonderful people in my life here.

For loving and supporting me through all the times when I was a down right brat, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my loving partner Matt. Although you say you only put up with me because I will earn a good wage, I am so grateful that you are and will be my best friend until old age.

Matt is clearly the product of a good family, Testament to this, they have put up with me. For providing support and encouragement when I was in pain, I am sincerely indebted to Ruth, Mike, Luke and Jane.

I know that I am blessed for the parents I have been supplied, I am forever grateful for the love and unending support you provide. John and Veronica, for always being a rock to lean on when I am in need, I make my pledge to surround you with grandchildren and good company indeed.

To my sisters Annie and Tania as well as my brother Mark, I appreciate your encouragement and mostly positive remark. Although it regrettably may sound like a cliché, I hope to repay the hands you have lent me some day.

At this point, my supervisors I wish to acknowledge, I must thank you both for your support, patience and expert knowledge. I would especially like to recognise my supervisor Dr Janet Haines, I thank you for your supportive feedback, time and brains. I am also greatly indebted to my supervisor Dr Chris Williams, I appreciate your guidance, determination and role-model mannerisms.

For the colleagues who have been supportive on this road, To you all, much respect and thanks is owed. You are truly talented and kind-hearted souls, I wish you all the best in your future roles.

A special mention goes to the study’s subjects for their time and participation, For your essential contribution, I cannot express enough appreciation. A very special acknowledgment is extended to HM Risdon Prison, I am particularly grateful to you the PSU staff for your kindness and cooperation.

Last but not least, for helping me find my inner strength, I would like to express my thanks to you Elizabeth.
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