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Community Corrections Officers' Attributions for Sexual Offending Against Children

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Abstract

The present research examined gender differences in Community Corrections

Officers' (CCOs') attributions for child sexual offending. Eighty-five CCOs were

asked to write down the reasons why they thought men sexually abused children, and

then rate their reasons, using Benson's Attributional Dimensions Scale. The results

found that CCOs' reasons regarding why men sexually abuse children strongly

paralleled current scientific theories on the etiology of child sexual abuse. Also,

significant gender differences were found regarding the frequency with which

participants cited certain types of reasons for child sexual abuse. Female CCOs were

more likely to cite power and control as a reason, compared to male CCOs who were

more likely to cite psychopathology as a reason for child sexual abuse. No other

gender differences were found. The research, clinical and educational implications

pertaining to these findings are discussed.

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed an increase in public concern and professional awareness regarding sexual offending within our society (David, 2000; James 1996; Lea, Auburn & Kibblewhite, 1999; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001). Accordingly, few topics elicit the level of emotional response raised by the prospect of releasing sexual offenders back into the community (Wilson, Stewart, Stirpe, Barrrett & Cripps, 2000). In an effort to minimize potential re-offending by sex offenders, community-based treatment programs have emerged to operate together with correctional agencies that oversee an offender's sentence compliance. This overall community-based management of sex offenders typically requires a combination of specialized assessment and treatment strategies coupled with offender supervision and monitoring by correctional personnel. The level of contact and intervention applied to sex offenders, therefore, is quite intensive with most sexual offenders destined, at some stage in their sentence, to be placed under the supervision of a Community Corrections Officers (CCO)[1], either as a result of Parole or by being initially sentenced to a community-based sanction.

Past research has identified CCOs as an important and influential factor in the successful rehabilitation of sex offenders (Lea, et al., 1999). Studies have also found that a CCO's ability to effectively manage and interact with sex offenders is greatly dependent on the attitudes he or she holds toward these individuals (Connolly, Hudson & Ward, 1997; Lea et al., 1999; Ward, Connolly, McCormack & Hudson, 1996; Wilson, et. al., 2000). Furthermore, recent research suggests that expectancy within treatment paradigms can be related to outcome (Devilly & Borkovec, 2000),

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[1] In Australia, Community Corrections Officers are people who supervise offenders who are serving sentences within the community—either on Parole, or on any correctional Order designed to keep offenders from imprisonment, whilst also sentencing them proportionally to their offence.

and older research suggests that such expectations can be easily, and covertly, conveyed by practitioners (Rosenthal and Lawson, 1964; Rosenthal, Fode, Friedman, and Vikan, 1960). For example, a CCO's belief or expectation that an offender will not change is likely to instill a belief in the offender that he cannot/will not change, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy for the offender. Therefore, the attitudes CCOs hold toward the sex offenders they supervise can influence the overall success of rehabilitative interventions being received by these sex offenders. Until recently, however, there has been limited research into the views held by correctional personnel with respect to the sex offenders they supervise (Lea et al., 1999; Weeks, Pelletier & Beaudette, 1995; Wilson et al., 2000).

Past studies have examined the central role of causal attributions in the shaping of attitudes and beliefs regarding sexual offending and offenders (Beling, Hudson & Ward, 2001; Connolly et al, 1997; Ward et al., 1996). In essence, attitudes are considered to emerge from a person's underlying theories about a given phenomenon (Ward et al. 1996). Therefore, attitudes toward sex offenders emerge from, and are shaped by, CCOs' theories concerning the causes of sexually abusive behaviour. These causal theories, or attributions, are the focus of this study, which attempts to examine Community Correctional Officers' attributions for sexual offending against children.

Cognitive Distortions

Current psychological theories on the etiology of sexual offending appear to agree that many different variables and factors can potentially lead to sexually abusive behaviour (Marshall, 1997). Nevertheless, theorists have continued to focus heavily on cognitive distortions and the general role of cognition in the onset, maintenance and treatment of sexual offending (Luirgio, Jones & Smith, 1995; Johnston & Ward,

1996; Ward, Hudson, Johnston & Marshall, 1997). Cognitive distortions in sex offenders are maladaptive beliefs and attitudes and problematic thinking styles that enable sex offenders to rationalize, minimize or deny the true nature of their offences (Ward, 2000).   Blaming the victim, justifying offending, or excusing sexually abusive behaviour are all examples of such cognitive distortions (Beling et al., 2001; Ward, 2000). Recently, Ward (2000) began researching the underlying structure and nature of cognitive distortions and has suggested that an offender's cognitive distortions emerge from his underlying implicit theories. The term 'implicit theories' refers to our own personal theories, which we use, like scientific theories, to understand and make predictions about people and the world. Ward and Keenan (1999) have identified five implicit theories that collectively account for most cognitive distortions characteristic of child molesters: they are children as sexual objects; entitlement; uncontrollability; dangerous world; and, nature of harm.

The children as sexual objects implicit theory is based on the belief that children are primarily motivated by sexual desire and are capable of identifying their own sexual needs and preferences; a cognitive distortion associated with this implicit theory would be, for example, "the child wanted sex". The entitlement implicit theory is predicated upon the notion that some people (i.e. men) are more important than others, and because of their superior status have the right to exert their needs over persons perceived to be of less importance (i.e. women and children). Cognitive distortions like "it's my right as a man to have sex with whomever I please" illustrate this implicit theory.   The dangerous world implicit theory is based on the perception that adults are dangerous, unreliable and rejecting whilst children are safe, dependable and accepting, thus creating cognitive distortions like "children can give adults more acceptance and love than other adults". According to the uncontrollability implicit

theory, the world is essentially uncontrollable and inexorable in its actions; sexual desires are viewed as external to the offender, thereby minimizing his responsibility for his actions. Relevant cognitive distortions may be "I cannot control myself, so I am not responsible" or "I was high on drugs/alcohol at the time". Finally, the <u>nature of harm</u> implicit theory argues that there are degrees of harm, and that sex is essentially harmless and is actually beneficial to a person. An associated cognitive distortion may be "it won't hurt her, it's just sex".

In summary, implicit theories arguably bias the way sex offenders, and other people (like CCOs) explain, interpret and reason their own behaviour as well as the behaviours of others. The terms 'reasons' and 'causes' are often used to refer to 'attributions', and in the literature the three terms are frequently interchanged with one another.

<u>Attributions</u>

Causal attributions account for the occurrence of important, negative or unexpected events (Connolly et al., 1997). The examination of an offender's causal attributions for criminal behaviour can provide valuable information concerning his motives and, subsequently, the appropriate areas to be targeted for rehabilitative intervention. Traditionally, attributions have been studied across four dimensions: internality, stability, controllability and globality (Benson, 1989). In terms of the present study, internality refers to whether or not the cause of offending is seen as internal to the offender or external. Stability refers to whether or not the identified cause is seen as enduring and stable (i.e. difficult to modify) or unstable over time. Controllability concerns the sense that the cause was either volitional (controllable) or out of the offender's control (uncontrollable). Finally, globality refers to whether the cause of sexual offending is confined to specific circumstances (situational), or is

generalizable to all areas of the offender's behaviour (is generally occurring) (Benson, 1989; Connolly et al., 1997; McKay, Chapman & Long, 1996; Russell, 1982).

In examining interpersonal deficits and attributional blame among sex offenders, McKay et al. (1996) found that child sex offenders attributed both their offending and sexual arousal to internal, stable and uncontrollable causes. In contrast, rapists, violent offenders and property offenders attributed their sexual arousal to external, unstable and controllable causes. Furthermore, in attributing sexual arousal and offending to stable and uncontrollable causes, child sex offenders claimed that altering or stopping child molestation was very difficult, if not impossible. Whilst studies such as this offer valuable insight into the attributions offered by child sex offenders, researchers have more recently begun examining both lay and professional attributions for sexual offending. These attributions have a significant impact on the perceived risk of the offender to the community, his options for treatment and his likelihood of rehabilitation.

Furnham and Haraldsen (1998) investigated the relationship between lay theories of the etiology (causes) and cure (therapy) for four types of paraphilias, including paedophilia. According to lay people, the most important factors in the etiology of paedophilia were: fearing the opposite sex, being abused as a child, having strict and dominant parents, and possessing repressed sexual feelings. In terms of therapy, internal factors such as willpower and believing it is possible to change were considered most important to overcoming paedophilia. Overall, the researchers found that etiology and cure factors were strongly correlated with each other.

Also important in the study of attributions is the influence of gender. In studying gender differences in attributions, Ward et al. (1996) found significant differences in the frequency with which male and female social workers cited certain

reasons for sexual offending against children. The researchers found that females tended to cite power and control as the main reason for sexual offending, whilst males were more likely to attribute sexual motivation to such offences. This gender difference is important, particularly with regard to the treatment of offenders and training of staff. In reference to Ward's research, Connolly et al. (1997, pg. 30) stated "the study reinforced the need to moderate potential gender bias by understanding how these gender perceptions can influence approaches to clinical work with sex offenders, and for developing training strategies to address this".

In connection with this study, Connolly et al. (1997) asked social workers and social work students to record the reason(s) why they thought men sexually offended against children. Participants were then required to rate their reason(s), using Benson's Attributional Scale (often referred to as the 4-Attributional Dimensions Scale; 4-ADS), across the four attributional dimensions of internality, stability, controllability and globality (Connolly et al., 1997). They found that social workers considered reasons for child sexual abuse as more controllable and more internal than social work students; no differences were found on the dimensions of stability and globality or gender between the two groups. There was, however, a significant interaction between gender and experience status (student or qualified) for the internality dimension; qualified males saw reasons for sexual abuse as less internal than male students, and in contrast, qualified females rated reasons for sexual abuse as more internal than female students.

Comparable to the above findings, Beling et al. (2001) found significant differences in the frequency with which male and female undergraduate students cited certain reasons for sexual offending against children. Females endorsed significantly more victim reasons (characteristics of children that offenders perceive as motivating

or permitting sexual contact) than males, and also more power and control reasons. In contrast, males endorsed significantly more sexual reasons than did females. Furthermore, females tended to view the causes of abuse as more stable and internal than did males. As stated above, these findings are significant, as research has found that people strongly associate treatment with perceived causes (Furnham & Haraldsen, 1998). For instance, the attributing of child sexual offending to internal biological/physiological factors is associated with the selection of medical interventions as the most efficient form of treatment. However, in actuality, clinical evidence suggests that very few child sex offenders suffer from either psychopathology or disturbances in psychological or biological functioning (Marshall, 1997). Recent studies have therefore emphasized the need to acknowledge gender differences in attributions for sexual offending. These studies have also suggested that forms of treatment assigned to offenders may function according to the gender of the professional, as well as their attributions for sexual offending (Connolly et al., 1997; Ward et al., 1996).

Research Hypotheses

This research proposes to replicate the methodology used by both Connolly et al. (1997) and Beling et al. (2001) with the aim of examining male and female Community Corrections Officers' attributions for sexual offending against children. In line with previous research findings, it is hypothesized that:

(1) CCOs will offer a variety of different explanations regarding why men sexually offend against children, and such reasons will parallel current psychological theories on the etiology of child sexual offending.

(2) Female CCOs will be more likely than male CCOs to cite power and control

as a reason for child sexual abuse.

(3) Male CCOs will be more likely than female CCOs to implicate more sexual

reasons for child sexual abuse.

(4) Female CCOs will be more likely than male CCOs to see motivations for child

sexual offending as internal to the offender.

(5) Female CCOs will view the causes of child sexual offending as more stable

compared to male CCOs.

(6) Female CCOs will be more likely than male CCOs to view child sexual

offending as controllable.

(7) Male CCOs will be more likely to see the causes of child sexual offending as

more specific and situational, whereas female CCOs are likely to perceive

child sexual offending as more global and social.

Method

<u>Participants</u>

Participants were 65 female and 20 male full-time or part-time Community

Corrections Officers who were working for the Victorian Department of Justice

(Australia), and who voluntarily participated in the research project.

<u>Instruments</u>

<u>The 4 – Attributional Dimensions Scale (4-ADS; Benson, 1989).</u> The 4–ADS

assesses attributions across various situations. There are two parts to the scale: an

open question followed by a series of closed questions (multiple-choice items).

Therefore, participants are initially required to record in writing what they believe are

the cause(s) or reason(s) for a given event, in this case, why men sexually offend against children. Participants are then required to rate their reason(s) across four attributional dimensions: internality, stability, controllability and globality. Together, these four dimensions are composed of 16 multiple-choice questions or items: there are four items for each dimension. Each item gives participants the option to choose from one of five different responses. With half of the items being reversed scored, participants' responses are then given a score from one to five accordingly. Therefore, a participant's score for each dimension can range from 4 to 20 (Siegert and Ward, 1995).

The 4–ADS has satisfactory psychometric properties and has been well tested and validated (e.g., see Beling et al., 2001; Benson 1989; Connolly et al. 1997; Siegert et al., 1995; Ward et al. 1996; Ward, Hudson and Marshall, 1994). Benson (1989) noted a median test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.72 for the four subscales with a range from 0.59 to 0.79.

Procedure

Community Correctional Service (CCS) offices were contacted by the researcher and invited to participate in the study. In general, the researcher attended each office to explain the study during a staff meeting. During each visit, the study was explained to the CCOs, and CCOs were invited to ask questions about the research, or their involvement at this time. Those participants who volunteered their participation were asked to complete and sign the informed consent form prior to completing the questionnaire. Some CCOs chose to complete the questionnaire whilst the researcher was present; however, other CCOs chose to complete the questionnaire in their own time, returning the questionnaire to the researcher at a later date.

One metropolitan CCS location and four rural CCS locations that were difficult for the researcher to visit, were contacted by telephone and invited to participate in the study by way of a postal arrangement. Participant information sheets, informed consent forms and questionnaires were sent to each of these locations for completion by any CCOs who were willing to participate. Completed questionnaires and consent forms were then sent back to the researcher. Overall, only 12% of the study's participants responded according to this postal arrangement.

All participants were assured of their anonymity and of the confidentiality of their answers, as completed consent forms and questionnaires were immediately separated such that no one could be identified. Therefore, participants' complete honesty and accuracy in answering questions was encouraged. Subjects were permitted as much time as they required completing the questionnaire, though the task itself generally took no longer than 15 minutes.

Analyses

Step one of the analyses utilized a grounded theory methodology to abstract the reasons provided by participants, with the aim of developing descriptive conceptual categories for the reasons why men sexually offend against children (Beling et al., 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The two researchers (MP and TW) conducted the grounded theory analysis, concurring on the final set of categories. An independent reliability check was undertaken by a third researcher who did not participate in any aspect of the research project prior to the reliability check. Step two of the analyses involved using these categories in chi-square tests, to determine whether the gender of the CCO interacted with each category. Also, analysis of variance tests were used to examine any gender differences in the rating of reasons according to internality, stability, controllability and globality.

Grounded Theory. Traditionally, qualitative methods have received limited attention within various disciplines, often being viewed as merely a precursor to more 'rigorous' quantitative methods, or being dismissed altogether by researchers and labelled as unscientific (Charmaz, 2000; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). More recently, however, qualitative methods have been recognised as advantageous and effective, particularly when used in the early stages of theory development (Rennie, Phillips & Quartaro, 1988). Within this general approach, grounded theory has been identified as a promising qualitative method (Ward et al., 1996). Grounded theory affords researchers the opportunity to create theory in subject areas that are difficult to access through more conventional research methods; thus, grounded theory can be used to obtain fine-grained detail about phenomena such as thoughts, feelings and emotions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In essence, grounded theory consists of a set of systematic procedures that seek to inductively derive a theory or set of categories from qualitative data (Ward, Louden, Hudson, Marshall, 1995). In contrast to traditional approaches, use of the grounded theory approach means that theory is formed through the inductive examination of information, rather than using information to verify existing theory (Rennie et al., 1988). Therefore, by use of grounded theory, data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In applying the theory, participants protocols (i.e. CCOs' written responses about why men sexually offend against children) were analyzed and broken down into distinct meaning units (i.e. ideas that can stand alone within a protocol), from which preliminary conceptual categories were formulated. For example, individuals' could identify the following separate reasons (i.e. meaning units) for child sexual offending: poor communication skills, poor coping skills and the inability to form meaningful adult relationships. These reasons might form

preliminary categories themselves but be later collapsed into one broader conceptual category, labelled 'social competence'. Typically, categories are inductively derived from an initial set of qualitative scripts that, once coded into rudimentary conceptual categories, lead to the collection of either more qualitative scripts or quantitative data (Hudson, Ward, McCormack, 1999). The next step involves the deduction of predictions concerning the ability of the rudimentary categories to account for new protocols (i.e. once the rudimentary categories were derived, their ability to comprehensively cater for all the CCOs' identified reasons was checked). If the rudimentary categories fail to accommodate the new data they are refined and possibly further categories formulated. This process continues until saturation is reached, that is, when the extant set of categories are able to account for all the meaning units. As stated by Ward et al. (1996, pg. 44), "the whole process of model building is dynamic and extremely sensitive to patterns detected in the data".

Upon completion of coding the data using grounded theory, an independent researcher performed an independent reliability check on the coding process. This independent researcher was required to take a 20% random sample of the questionnaires and identify the meaning units within the protocols. Once this was completed, the independent researcher's list of meaning units was compared to those results found by the main researcher. The comparison revealed a very satisfactory level of agreement of 92%.

Results

Data analysis involved two steps: qualitative and quantitative. In step one, the reasons for sexual offending were analyzed according to the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In step two, chi-square tests were used to examine the differences in the types of reasons given according to gender, and independent-

samples t-tests were used to compare the number of reasons offered, and also the number of categories cited, by males and females. In addition, one-way analysis of variance tests were conducted to examine the interaction between gender and CCOs' scores for each attributional dimension (internality, stability, controllability and globality). All quantitative data analysis was conducted using the SPSS statistical package Version 9. Effect sizes were computed using Effect Size analysis software (ES) version 1, which computes a standardized mean difference statistic and derives a d effect size.

Step One Results

CCOs' Reasons for Sexual Offending against Children. The initial data analysis involved coding CCOs' responses, according to grounded theory, into 48 basic categories, by grouping reasons that were of essentially similar meaning. The 48 categories were then collapsed or grouped into eight broader conceptual categories. They were: Developmental Issues, Social Competence, Sexual Motivation, Power and Control, Psychopathology, Victim Characteristics, Values and Beliefs, and Personality Deficits.

Developmental issues formed a major category and integrated reasons pertaining to the offender's personal history and life and general factors that may have influenced the offender's development, thus leading to his offending. Reasons in this category centered upon notions such as the offender's upbringing, past (sexual/physical/emotional) abuse suffered by the offender in his formative years, the offender's learned (negative or anti-social) behaviour, cultural influences and poor role models for the offender.

The second category labelled social competence emerged as a very large general category, and revolved around reasons that either involved other adults or

were a function of society in some way (e.g. financial pressures and stress). For

instance, inadequate social skills, communication skills and coping-skills were all

viewed as factors that decreased the offender's functioning within the community and

as a result, these reasons were placed in this social category. Furthermore, these

factors were considered to lead to other reasons such as the offender's inability to

form meaningful adult relationships, his loneliness, isolation, boredom, and his need

for love and affection. Consequently, these reasons were also viewed as social in

nature and were therefore assigned to this category.

The third general category was <u>sexual motivation</u> and, as the title denotes,

specifically concerned reasons of a purely sexual nature. This category was

multifaceted in that it referred to notions of gratification, preference and fantasy. For

instance, the offender's need or search for sexual gratification was a frequently

endorsed reason, and included references to sadism (the offender's desire to hurt or

punish the child for the purposes of his sexual pleasure) and paedophile tendencies

(the offender as a sexual predator). The offender's sexual preference was also cited as

a reason for sexual abuse with participants indicating that offenders possess

uncontrollable, internal sexual preferences for children. Finally, sexual fantasy

referred to the deviant thoughts or feelings that the offender had about children and

sex; participants indicated that inappropriate sexual fantasies about children led to the

acting out of abuse fantasies (offending).

<u>Power and control</u> emerged as a distinct category very early in the data

analysis. It essentially operates on three levels. First, there was an emphasis on the

imbalance of power between the offender and the child; the offender wants power

over the child. On the second level, there was the offender's attempt to regain control

of his life. Having lost control during his own childhood (as a result of violence

against him) or due to generally feeling powerless because of other problems, the offender attempts to control a child and reverse the feeling of power loss. Third, the offender may abuse a current position of power, by abusing a child whom he already has control over, thereby taking advantage of a child's trust and/or love.

Psychopathology formed another large category and referred to a variety of related reasons linked to emotional, psychological and physiological problems. The types of reasons that were placed under this category were intellectual deficits, chemical imbalances, biological or physical issues, substance abuse and addiction, low-self esteem, insecurities and depression.

Victim reasons formed the next general category and reasons placed in this category had to fulfill two requirements. First, reasons needed to refer to victim characteristics that may be perceived by an offender as motivating or permitting his abusive behaviour. Second, reasons had to refer to generally believed or true characteristics of children. For instance, this category included reasons such as 'children are vulnerable, powerless and easily influenced', 'children will do as they are told and are less likely to say no', 'the child will accept them (the offender)' and 'children are non-threatening to the offender'. Views held by offenders about children, which are not generally believed or true, (e.g. 'children want or initiate sex with adults') were placed in the next category (values and beliefs).

Similar to the above category, the values and beliefs category, included reasons that referred to victim characteristics that may be perceived by offenders as encouraging their abusive behaviour. In contrast, however, reasons included in this category are not generally believed and were not supported by CCOs. For example, reasons in this category centered around offenders' cognitive distortions such as, 'the offender sees his behaviour as acceptable and appropriate'; 'the offender views the

child as wanting or inviting sex' and 'the offender views himself as a mentor or teacher of sex'.

The final category, personality deficits, concerned reasons that related to the offender's internal mechanisms or characteristics. All factors that were an involuntary characteristic of the offender (thereby not a deliberately acted-out or chosen characteristic) were placed under this category. For instance, lack of self-control, lack of boundaries, immaturity, impulsivity, and moral deficits (including deficits in victim empathy) were all considered as factors relating to the offender's personality.

Step Two Results

Frequency counts for CCOs' Reasons regarding Child Sexual Abuse. Frequency counts for reasons in each category were converted into percentages. In total, two hundred and seventy-seven (277) reasons were suggested from both male and female participants. Developmental issues and social competence were the most frequently referenced categories (47 times each), whilst values and beliefs and personality deficits were the least endorsed categories (21 times respectively).

Gender Differences between CCOs' Reasons for Child Sexual Abuse. Chi-squared tests were carried out for each category to determine whether significant differences existed between male and female participants with regard to the types of reasons endorsed (Table 1). To allow the greatest amount of latitude to discover trends and yet not commit a Type II error, Bonferroni corrections were not applied; instead, the alpha level was set to .01 for significance. For power analyses, the alpha level of .01 was retained, which naturally reduces the derived power. The results indicated that female participants offered significantly more power and control reasons than did male participants, χ^2 (1, $\underline{n}$ = 39) = 7.06, $\underline{p}$ < .01 ($\underline{d}$ = 0.85, Power = 0.83). Taking into

account our curtailed alpha level (α = .01) male participants' increased likelihood of offering more psychopathology type reasons than females approached significance, χ^2 (1, $\underline{n}$ = 35) = 6.13, $\underline{p}$ = .013 ($\underline{d}$ = 0.71, Power = 0.66). No other analyses approached our significance criteria.

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Insert table 1 about here

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An independent-samples t-test was also conducted to compare the number of initial, uncategorized reasons provided by males and females. After CCOs' reasons were collapsed into categories, a further independent-samples t-test was performed to compare the number of categories cited by males and females. These tests were carried out to examine whether, on average, one gender was providing a more detailed response, and therefore possessing a more complex understanding of sexual offending, compared to the other. However, there were no significant differences in the number of reasons provided by males ($\underline{X}$ = 4.75, $\underline{SD}$ = 2.97) and females ($\underline{X}$ = 4.46, $\underline{SD}$ = 2.06; $\underline{t}$(83) = −.41, $\underline{ns}$). Similarly, there was no significant difference in the number of categories cited by males ($\underline{X}$ = 3.10, $\underline{SD}$ = 1.41) and females ($\underline{X}$ = 3.25, $\underline{SD}$ = 1.23; $\underline{t}$(83) = .45, $\underline{ns}$).

Gender Differences across four Attributional Dimensions. The mean score and standard deviations for each of the four attributional dimensions are presented in Table 2. One-way analysis of variance tests were conducted to explore the impact of gender on scores for internality, stability, controllability and globality. No significant differences were found on any of the four dimensions across gender: internality $\underline{F}$ (1, 81) = 0.004, $\underline{ns}$; stability $\underline{F}$ (1, 82) = 0.096, $\underline{ns}$; controllability $\underline{F}$ (1, 82) = 0.823, $\underline{ns}$; and globality $\underline{F}$ (1, 81) = 1.845, $\underline{ns.}$

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Insert table 2 about here

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Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine Community Correctional Officers'

causal attributions for sexual offending against children and in doing so the study

yielded both expected and unexpected results. As predicted, CCOs offered a wide

variety of reasons for child sexual abuse. Also as hypothesized, female CCOs offered

significantly more power and control reasons for sexual abuse compared to male

CCOs. However, surprisingly and perhaps more interestingly, no other directional

hypotheses in this study were supported.

The first hypotheses in this study stated that CCOs would offer a variety of

different explanations for child sexual abuse that are congruent with contemporary

theories on sexual offending against children. The findings did, to a large extent,

support this hypothesis. For instance, the reasons for child sexual abuse provided by

CCOs were consistent with many present-day findings on the etiology of abuse (i.e.

Connolly, Hudson & Ward 1997; Finkelhor, 1984; Furnham & Haraldsen, 1998;

Pithers, Beal, Armstrong and Petty, 1989; Saunders, 1988; Stermac & Segal, 1989;

Trute, Adkins & MacDonald, 1992; Ward, Connolly, McCormack & Hudson, 1996;

Ward and Keenan, 1999) and are also similar to offenders' self-reported reasons for

abuse. For example, Ward, Hudson and France (1998) found that child molesters

reported sexual motivation and the need for intimacy as the primary reasons for their

offending behaviour, though it is uncertain to what extent these results can be applied

to all child sexual offenders. Similarly, for CCOs, 'social competence', including the

need for intimate relationships and 'sexual motivation' were two of the three most

frequently cited reasons behind child sexual offending (along with developmental issues).

Most importantly, CCOs identified causes which paralleled and, therefore, supported Ward and Keenan's description of child molesters' cognitive distortions as implicit theories. The <u>children as sexual objects</u> implicit theory was supported and paralleled by the values and beliefs category whilst the <u>dangerous world</u> and <u>entitlement</u> implicit theories were supported by the power and control category. In addition, the sexual motivation, social competence and psychopathology categories supported the <u>uncontrollability</u> implicit theory. Therefore, it appears that CCOs were aware of the role that cognitive distortions play in the commission of sexually abusive behaviour and, accordingly, CCOs were able to explain sexual abuse in terms of cognition. In sum, there is strong support to suggest that CCOs are conversant with contemporary theories on child sexual offending and that they are utilizing these theories in their explanations and understandings of child molesters when completing questionnaires such as those used in this study.

The second hypothesis that females would be more likely than males to cite power and control as a reason for child sexual abuse was also supported and is consistent with past research findings. The results from this study show that the effect size of this difference was large and that the study was sufficiently powerful to have faith in this result. The fact that this finding is so persistent across each study on gender attributions for sexual offending against children (e.g., Beling et al., 2001; Ward et al., 1996) lends itself to be explained on a broader, more societal level, rather than on an individual or organizational level. Females, regardless of their occupation (social worker, student or CCO) have rated power and control as the most contributing factor in the perpetration of child sexual abuse. It seems feasible,

therefore, to argue that female socialization experiences affect their attitudes toward sex crimes, and that their experience or greater awareness of victimization may also contribute to their reasoning of sexual offences (Ward et al., 1996). As males are generally less likely to be sexually assaulted, they may have less fear and hence awareness of loss of power and control (Ward et al., 1996). Female CCOs' responses to explaining child sexual offending, therefore, may simply be a function of their role as females in general, not their role as female CCOs, social workers or students.

The third hypothesis that males would be more likely than females to cite sexual motivation as a reason for child sexual abuse was not supported. Rather, male CCOs were found to be significantly more likely to cite psychopathology as a reason for offending. This difference to past research, however, is not too surprising. In terms of the 'controllability' of sexual offending, sexual motivation and psychopathology are not dissimilar and in actual fact, may be understood in terms of a comparable core meaning. For instance, as psychopathology refers to reasons such as mental illness, chemical imbalances and physiological deficits, it can be said that those persons who believe that sexual offending emerges from such causes are, in essence, suggesting that sexual offending emerges from relatively internal and uncontrollable states within the offender. Similarly, for those males in past studies who cited sexual motivation (e.g. sexual preference for children) as the reason for child sexual abuse, controllability, or lack thereof, is also indicative of this type of reason. As there is no research or evidence to suggest that sexual preferences can be changed or altered (Barbaree & Seto, 1997), the attribution of child sex offending to sexual motivation, suggests that the causes of sexual offending stem from internal, uncontrollable factors. Essentially, what has emerged across these three studies is an apparent tendency for male subjects to pathologize sexual offending. Indeed, these findings

have far-reaching clinical and therapeutic implications. By viewing the reasons behind child sexual offending as internal and uncontrollable, it is likely that the offender will be viewed as less responsible for his offending; thereby, allowing the offender to be less conducive to change. Furthermore, there is an increased potential for male CCOs to unwittingly collude with the offender's tactics for redirecting blame to factors outside of his control.

The fourth hypothesis that female CCOs will view the causes for sexual offending as more internal to the offender compared to male CCOs was not supported. Rather, male and female CCOs' rating of internality was identical. Furthermore, this consistency between genders continued across each of the other three attributional dimensions. The fifth hypothesis that female CCOs will view sexual offending as more stable than male CCOs was also not supported, as was the sixth hypothesis that female CCOs will be more likely than male CCOs to view sexual offending as controllable. Finally, the seventh hypothesis that male CCOs will be more likely to view the causes of sexual offending as more specific and situational, compared to female CCOs who will be more likely to perceive sexual offending as more global and social, was likewise not supported. Given the uniform refutation of these final four hypotheses, it is perhaps easier to explain the findings collectively rather than individually.

The fact that no differences were found to exist between male and female CCOs with respect to the four attributional dimensions is very interesting, particularly in light of past research findings. As stated previously, Beling et al. (2001) found that, for undergraduate students, considerable gender differences existed across the four attributional dimensions. However, the current research findings are congruent with the earlier social work study, which found no gender differences over the four

attributional dimensions.   Therefore, it may be feasible to explain the present findings on an organizational and training level.

Students, by definition, are not uniformly affiliated with or employed by any particular agency for which they would be given guidance or direction on codes of conduct or how to deal with, and respond to, certain groups. Nor do they undergo any special training as is generally required within social work type occupations and correctional agencies. Unlike students, social workers, by the very nature of their role (i.e. a helping role within the community) are likely to be involved in working for welfare organizations, which would undoubtedly provide them with set guidelines pertaining to their ethical involvement and therapeutic work with their clients. Similarly, CCOs work within an organization that has very clear guidelines pertaining to CCO supervision of, and interaction with, offenders. Therefore, in terms of past research findings, it is clear to see how CCOs and social workers have related roles and differ, as a group, from students.

Consequently, the findings of this study with regard to the last four hypotheses appear to indicate that CCOs may have responded to the questions on the 4-ADS in accordance to known CCS purposes and practices.   In effect, CCOs may have conformed to their organization's culture, which in turn may have influenced their thoughts about sexual offending and their responses to the questionnaire. Gender most likely did not emerge as an issue with regard to the four attritional dimensions because all CCOs have been educated with the same set of guidelines and objectives. Furthermore, all CCOs receive the same sex offender training, which educates CCOs on how to manage, respond too, and challenge the sex offenders they supervise. In particular, CCOs are encouraged to view sex offenders as personally responsible for the offences they commit, and that to view the offender as otherwise would result in

collusion with the offender's pro-offending thoughts. It seems, then, that the place of work associated with CCOs (and possibly social workers) could be largely influential in shaping participants' responses to the four attributional dimensions.

However, one might ask how it is possible that CCOs and social workers did not differ significantly from students with regard to the types of reasons endorsed (i.e. females citing power and control and males citing psychopathology or sexual motivation), but did differ on the rating of the four attributional dimensions. This could simply be because the two separate parts of the 4-ADS (open-ended section and multiple-choice section) pertain to very different aspects of accessing attributions, i.e. the reasons given may be similar, but could be viewed differently by participants on each of the attributional dimensions. For instance, one person may view developmental issues, such as the offender's experience of past abuse, as external to the offender (based on where it originated from), however another person may rate the abuse as internal to the offender (based on where the effect was felt over time). In addition, when completing the questionnaire, it is likely that organizational influences may have only commenced after CCOs had completed writing down the reasons why they thought men sexually offended. Following the open-ended section, subjects begin to rate their responses according to the four attributional dimensions, and are presented with several key words (such as responsibility and controllability) that are frequently used in the training and education of CCOs. Thus, it is possible that they were prompted by these words to respond in ways that are consistent with their training as a CCO and their organizations' role (e.g. to encourage offenders' acceptance of responsibility for their actions).

One procedural problem that was difficult to control for was the fact that some CCS locations opted to keep the questionnaires with them, so that CCOs could

consider their answers and have completed questionnaires picked up at a later date by the researcher. Similarly, those CCS locations that participated in the research via post were subject to the same problem. For these locations, it is possible that CCOs completed questionnaires either together, or colluded in some other way on their answers, thus offering consistent responses. However, responses from these locations could not be examined and compared to the responses from other locations as many of the rural CCS offices consisted of only one or two CCOs. The refore, in order to obtain compliance and prevent CCOs from being identified through their responses, no marks were placed on questionnaires to separate them according to their method of participation. Fortunately, however, the majority of participants completed the questionnaires at the time they were distributed, so it is thought that the issue of collusion would not have impacted on the findings of this study in a considerable way.

<div align="center">Conclusions</div>

In conclusion, this research has provided useful information for understanding the way different groups interpret the etiology and causal attributions of child sexual offending. CCOs did offer a variety of reasons regarding why men sexually abuse children, which indicates that to a large extent they are aware of the complexity of issues and range of variables that contribute to sexual offending. This also suggests that CCOs (at least in Victoria, Australia) may be systematically trained, given the consistency with which males and females responded to most questions. However, with striking consistency to past studies, females did tend to endorse mainly power and control type reasons, whilst a majority of males endorsed psychopathology as the primary reason behind child sexual abuse. These two findings with respect to male and female CCOs have noteworthy implications for CCO education and training.   As

it is not a case of one gender being right and the other being wrong, the aim of education and training should not be to correct attributions but rather, to increase both male and female CCOs' awareness of the range of factors contributing to sexual offending. For instance, females may benefit from a greater educational emphasis on the diversity of variables that contribute to sexually abusive behaviour, as they are obviously already aware of the societal factors influencing sexual offending. In contrast, males might benefit from a greater educational emphasis on the possible role of contextual and cultural variables that facilitate sexual abuse, and also the importance of assigning responsibility to offenders for their behaviour (Ward et al., 1996). Given that males placed considerable weight on psychopathology as a reason for child sexual offending, they may benefit from being taught that, in reality, very few child sex offenders suffer from deficits in psychological or biological functioning (Marshall, 1997).

The findings gathered throughout this research should be of interest to the correctional agencies that are responsible for the supervision and management of child sex offenders within our community. If this research had found large differences between male and female CCOs' attributions for child sexual offending then this, potentially, could result in considerable fluctuations in the quality of supervision and management offered to offenders. As stated earlier in this article, attributions influence attitudes and govern the way we intervene with a given problem. If males and females differed significantly with respect to their attributions, then one could argue that males and females were potentially supervising and interacting with child sex offenders in very different ways. This type of inconsistency could be very harmful to the rehabilitative process of child sex offenders, possibly resulting in offenders not taking responsibility for their offending, not feeling as

though they are able to stop or control themselves, and leading to feelings of

helplessness in the offender.   Fortunately, however, the findings did not show large

gender biases.

Future research in this area should attempt to examine attributions across a

wider range of subject groups including sentencing authorities (magistrates and

judges), clinicians (the treatment providers), police officers, and child sex offenders.

It is important to understand the attributions of these groups and examine any

differences that might exist, as they are all instrumental in processing, managing and

treating sex offenders. Also, it is important to observe whether other justice groups

are able to display equally sound knowledge regarding current theories on the etiology

of child sexual offending. It is crucial that persons dealing with sexual offenders are

aware of current theories and are kept up to date with the most recent research

findings.

Table 1.

Number (and percentages) of female and male CCOs who identified each category as

a reason behind sexual offending against children.

Categories / Reasons	Female	Male	Totals
Developmental Issues	37 (57)	10 (50)	47 (17)
Social Competence	36 (55)	11 (55)	47 (17)
Sexual Motivation	32 (49)	12 (60)	44 (16)
Power and Control	35 (54)	4 (20)	39 (14)
Psychopathology	22 (34)	13 (65)	35 (13)
Victim Characteristics	20 (31)	3 (15)	23 (9)
Values and Beliefs	17 (26)	4 (20)	21 (7)
Personality Deficits	15 (23)	6 (30)	21 (7)
Totals	**214**	**63**	**277(100)**

Table 2.

Mean scores and Standard Deviations for each Attributional Dimension according to

Gender.

Attributional Dimension	Males		Females	
	X	SD	X	SD
Internality	16.3	2.3	16.3	2.1
Stability	15.4	2.6	15.6	2.1
Controllability	15.3	2.1	15.9	2.4
Globality	15.6	2.2	14.8	2.3

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