

A qualitative study of incest offender implicit theories with the use of a modified assessment tool

Abstract

This article aims to provide an insight into the Implicit Theories (ITs)¹ harboured by Incest Offenders. This study was conducted on a sample of 27 inmates, all convicted for incest offending, from TePiriti, a Special Treatment Unit within the Auckland Prison located near Auckland, New Zealand. The sample comprised of five sub-classifications of Incest Offenders – Fathers, Brothers, Grand Fathers, Step-fathers and Uncles. The study took place in two stages. Stage one involved a questionnaire administration. The questionnaire was inspired from Multiphasic Sex Inventory-II (MSI-II). The researchers have selected 100 questions, suggestive of the Five Implicit Theories - Children as Sexual Objects, Nature of Harm, Dangerous World, Uncontrollability and Entitlement - from the MSI-II and formulated a questionnaire for the study. After the questionnaire was administered, five incest offenders, who endorsed each of the five ITs, were selected on the basis of their scores, for the second stage of the study which involved an interview. These five subjects were interviewed with an aim to get a deeper understanding of their endorsements of their ITs. The questionnaire was analyzed using quantitative analysis while the interviews were analyzed using the qualitative analysis method. The results indicated that the subjects strongly endorsed implicit theories to justify their offending behaviours.

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Introduction

The present study involved inmates from the Auckland prison who were convicted for incest offences. Incest offense is defined as “child sexual offense(s) where the perpetrator is related to the child either by blood or marriage.”² There is an abundance of empirical evidence present, pertaining to child sex offense, but, unfortunately, there is very limited research done on the topic of incest offending. This study hopes to close that gap a little.

The limited evidence available on incest offense suggest that, researchers often maintain that more than 70% of abusers are immediate family members or someone very close to the family and research suggests that these offenders, similar to other identified types of sex offenders in general, are almost always men.³ Nonetheless, female sexual offenders do exist-women commit 14% to 40% of offenses reported against boys and 6% of offenses reported against girls.^{4,5} However, the present study intends to focus primarily on male incest offenders of different kinds-fathers, grandfathers, uncles, cousins and brothers, due to the limited availability of female incest offense cases.

Most child sexual offenders happen to be well known acquaintances of their victims; approximately 30% are relatives of the child, most often brothers, fathers, grandfathers, uncles or cousins (incest offenders); approximately 60% are other acquaintances such as ‘friends’ of the family, babysitters, or neighbours; strangers constitute approximately 10% of the child sex offender population.⁴

The most-often reported form of incest offending is that of father-daughter and stepfather-daughter incest, with most of the remaining reports consisting of mother/stepmother-daughter/son incest.⁶ Father-son incest is reported less often, however it is not known if the prevalence is less, because it is purported to be under-reported by a greater margin than other forms of incest offending. Similarly, some argue that sibling incest may be as common, or more common, than other types of incest; Goldman & Padayachi⁷ reported that 57% of incest involved siblings; Finkelhor⁵ reported that over 90% of nuclear

family incest offending involved siblings. Incidentally, incest between a child or adolescent and a related adult has been identified as the most widespread form of child sexual abuse with a huge capacity for damage to a child.⁸

Cognitive distortions in incest offenders

Hall & Hirschman^{9,10} as mentioned in Blumenthal et al.,¹¹ suggested that the cognitive distortions of child sexual offenders, particularly incest offenders, are more deviant than those of offenders against adults because, sexual offending against adults may be justified with certain culturally supported attitudes available in that particular social group, whereas, it is extremely uncommon to find such culturally supported attitudes to justify the concept of child sex offending.

ITs are currently considered extremely important in understanding the offending behaviour of sex offenders, as well as their attitude towards their offenses and their victims.⁸ These beliefs enable sex offenders to validate their forced sexual intimacy with children and also allow such offenders to justify their continued offenses against their victims.³ Ward¹²⁻¹⁴ argued that ITs determine how the offenders interpret their experience with their victims.

Research suggests that child sex offenders use various distorted beliefs to rationalize and justify their actions towards their victims. Tony Ward has proposed five such distorted beliefs (ITs), which are the central focus of this study, as mentioned in the abstract. These ITs are:

(i) Children as sexual objects

The primary basis of this IT is that, human beings are, by nature, driven by the need for pleasure and that their desires are sexual in nature. Children are also believed to share the same sexual drives as adults and therefore capable of wanting and relishing sex. The belief that “children are sexual objects and initiate sexual behaviour because they want it” is often viewed to be reasonable and quite beneficial to the child in question.¹

(ii) Entitlement

This IT is based on a core belief that some individuals are superior to others and their actions are expected to be accepted without retaliation due to their supreme status. This belief can stem from factors like age, gender, cultural difference, and social class.¹

(iii) Dangerous world

This IT is based on the core belief that the world is a dangerous place and that all the other people in it are likely to harm the offender in one way or the other. Thus, the offender acts to protect himself by acting offensively against others. There are two variants of this theory. The first one states that it is necessary to fight back in order to protect one's self from people trying to inflict harm on the offender.¹ Thus children who are viewed to be potentially harmful to the offender are punished or retaliated against through sexual victimization. The second variant of this theory is based on the perception that the world is a threatening place. In this latter variant, the prime focus is on the unreliability of adults and the dependability of children.¹

(iv) Uncontrollability

This IT is based on an assumption that human beings are subject to undergo certain events that are beyond their control. For example, emotions and sexual feelings naturally happen and human beings cannot exercise any kind of personal influence to stop or alter them. In some variants of this IT, strong cultural, spiritual or religious factors act as triggers to their distorted beliefs. In other cases, traumatic experiences in their childhood like being molested or physically abused, or a loss of a parent or some other significant figure in their life, may also form the basis of these deviant beliefs.¹

(v) Nature of harm

This IT is based on two general beliefs: first, there are degrees of harm and, second, sexual activity in itself is beneficial and unlikely to harm a person. The first belief holds that the degree of harm ranges from little or no painful consequences on one end of the scale, to extreme harm at the other end of the scale.¹ The second belief is concerned with the nature of sexual experience and is based on the core belief that sex is inherently a beneficial experience. This IT focuses on the assumption that all human beings are sexual beings and thus, fulfilling this basic need is extremely beneficial to the victim and is not like to be harmful in anyway.¹

Offenders are thought to reinterpret, reject, or reconstruct a sexual offense against a child in the face of an inconsistency between their ITs and the evidence (e.g., the child whom an offender may believe is interested in sex may scream or cry when assaulted rather than appear to be a willing participant), but rarely are the ITs modified.¹ Some studies have suggested that it takes rather compelling evidence on the contrary for the offenders to consider modifying their ITs.³ Hence, this study is intended to observe these ITs specifically among incest offenders to determine how they look in exemplar cases. The findings of the study strongly indicate the existence of ITs and that offenders do utilize them in order to justify their offense to themselves and the world around them. The current study also hopes to also shed some light on the importance of taking ITs into consideration in strategizing effective treatment strategies for incest offenders.

Methodology

The questionnaire was a modified assessment tool, inspired from the MSI-II. The researchers selected 100 questions which endorsed all

the five ITs of Tony Ward, to formulate the questionnaire for the study. The participants were given information sheets and consent forms explaining the purpose of both the questionnaire and the interview sessions. Data collection commenced once consent was obtained.

Initially 28 inmates have agreed to participate in the study after reading and signing the information sheets and consent forms. Eventually, 26 participants completed the questionnaire. These questionnaires were analyzed through Quantitative analysis.

After the questionnaires are analyzed, five subjects from the initial sample group are selected based on their significant endorsement of each of the five ITs. These participants were then interviewed to gain an insight into how these ITs look in exemplar cases. These interviews lasted for 30 to 45 minutes and the interview data was analyzed using qualitative analysis.

Results

Questionnaire phase

The scores obtained by each subject on each of the subscales indicate that a significant number of subjects have provided responses that endorse each of the five implicit cognitions. The results obtained by the participants on each subscale are illustrated in the table below (Table 1).

In summary the scores indicate that there is a significant distribution of scores on each subscale. Further looking at the percentages of the scores obtained on each subscale, the researcher observed that out of the five ITs, Uncontrollability has scored the highest, followed by Dangerous World and Nature of Harm and Entitlement. Children as Sexual Objects Implicit Theory, appears to have scored the least among the five. The subscale Entitlement has scored 27.27% of positive answers to statements endorsing this IT. The Dangerous World subscale has obtained 41.29 % positive answers.

The subscale Uncontrollability has scored 44.13 % positive responses. While the subscale Children as Sexual Objects has scored 26.11 % of positive responses and the subscale Nature of Harm has scored a percentage of 33.40 positive responses.

Further the researcher has used the above information to identify the frequency of distribution of scores obtained on each subscale, in order to determine a suitable subject pool for each subscale. This is done to facilitate the selection of the secondary sample to conduct the follow-up interviews with. The objective was to find at least five participants, from the subject pool, representing each of the five implicit cognitions.

Entitlement

Score 1 was observed to have the highest rate of incidence while scores 14, 11, 5 and 2 shared the lowest frequency on this subscale. However, 0, 1, 2, 5, 11, 14, 8, 12, 7, 4, 9, 3, were seen as recurring scores.

Dangerous world

The frequency distribution of the scores obtained on this subscale indicate that the scores 0, 2, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16 and 19 were observed to have frequented least number of times while 3 & 4 appeared the highest number of times. Nonetheless, the scores 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16 and 19 were observed to have reoccurred throughout the scale.

Table 1 Scores obtained by each subject on each subscale

Subject Code	Implicit Theories				
	Entitlement	Dangerous world	Uncontrollability	Children as sexual objects	Nature of harm
8A	0	9	6	0	3
8B	0	4	6	0	1
8C	5	9	7	3	8
8D	1	4	8	4	4
8E	7	6	14	11	11
8F	7	4	8	2	6
8G	14	16	11	8	12
8H	1	12	11	13	5
8I	9	15	9	2	5
8J	2	6	8	0	3
8K	12	10	11	8	8
8M	8	3	2	1	5
8N	1	1	3	0	2
8O	8	3	12	0	5
9B	9	11	16	5	6
9C	12	8	8	8	14
9D	7	13	11	12	12
9E	0	3	5	1	2
9F	9	13	10	7	5
9G	1	2	8	1	3
9H	0	0	1	1	0
9I	11	5	8	8	4
9J	1	1	4	0	1
9K	1	5	6	5	3
9L	7	19	16	8	11
9M	1	3	11	2	7

Table 2 Mean Median and Score range of the sub-scales

Implicit Theory	Mean	Median	Score Range
Entitlement	5.1	7.5	14
Dangerous world	7.1	8.5	19
Uncontrollability	8.4	7.5	15
Children as sexual objects	4.2	5	13
Nature of harm	5.6	5.5	14

Uncontrollability

The scores obtained on the subscale, Uncontrollability indicate that the scores 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12 and 14 have appeared with the lowest frequency 8 appeared with the highest frequency. Further, the scores 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14 and 16 were observed to have frequented throughout the scale.

Children as sexual objects

The scores obtained on the subscale Children as Sexual Objects indicate the scored 3, 4, 7, 11, 12 and 13 have appeared with the lowest frequency, while 0 appeared with the highest frequency. The scores 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13 were observed to have recurrently appeared throughout the scale.

Nature of harm

The scores obtained on this subscale indicate that the scores 0, 7 and 14 appeared with the lowest frequency, while 5 appeared with the highest frequency. Further, the scores 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12 and 14 were observed to have frequented throughout the scale.

The mean median and score range of each of the subscale are identified in the table below (Table 2).

Summary

In summary these scores indicated that there is a good distribution of score on the subscale Entitlement, although skewed low, the median score 7.5 which is the cut-off indicated that participants falling on the range of 8 and above which gave a number of offenders (n = 9) from which the interview sample has been randomly selected.

For the subscale Dangerous World, the scores show a good distribution-normal distribution where the median score is 8.5. This is used as a cut-off score making participants belonging to the range of 9 and above, potential subjects for selection. This gave a number of offenders (n=10) to randomly select from, for the interview.

For the subscale Uncontrollability, the scores indicated that there is a best distribution of scores – normal distribution, with a median score of 7.5. This constitutes the cut-off score making all the participants falling in the range of 8 and above ideal for selection. This gave more than half the offenders (n = 17) to randomly select the interview sample from.

For the subscale Children as Sexual Objects, the scores indicate that there is a good distribution although skewed low. The median score, 5 was used as a cut-off which gave a number of offenders

falling in the 6 and above range ($n = 10$). The interview sample was randomly selected from this number.

For the subscale Nature of Harm, the scores again indicate that there is a good distribution although skewed. The mean, 5.5 was taken as the cut-off which allowed all the participants falling in the range of 6 and above ideal for selection. This gave a number of offenders ($n = 10$) to randomly select the interview sample from.

Finally the researcher has selected five participants, one each from each of the five subscales to conduct the interview.

Interview phase

After conducting a comprehensive analysis of the interview transcripts, it was apparent that one core theme has emerged with five sub themes. The core theme was Distorted Beliefs. The five sub-themes were the five Implicit Theories (ITs)-Entitlement, Uncontrollability, Dangerous World, Children as Sexual Objects and Nature of Harm. There were a number of aspects that have emerged through the course of the interview which were observed to contribute to the distorted beliefs. These distorted beliefs were further witnessed to be the primary causal factors to the continued offense. The core theme and its major sub themes are illustrated in the Figure 1.3. The distorted beliefs observed and the ITs that have emerged as a result are discussed in detail in this section (Figure 1).

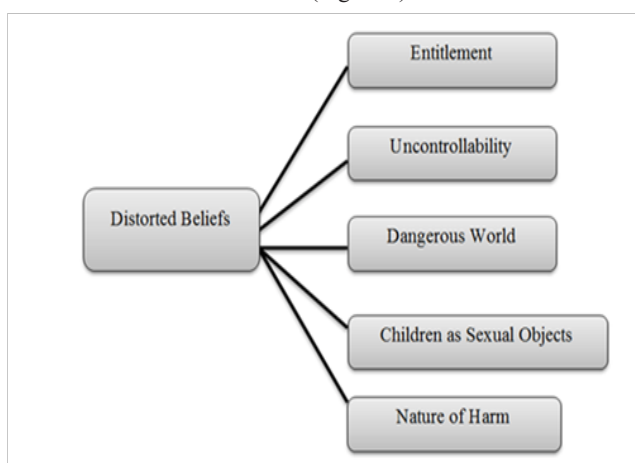


Figure 1 Summary of the core themes of this data set.

Distorted Beliefs are considered to be the forces driving the motivation (of the sex offenders) towards committing their offenses. These distorted beliefs are primarily observed to be driven by the offender's tendency to perpetually misinterpret information to fit their beliefs.¹⁵ Therefore, the distorted beliefs or justifications which are studies and discussed in this study were observed in the offender's perception of their offenses, to determine the extent of distortions in their beliefs. Throughout the interview session a number of these justification were observed to emerge, which were observed to have aided the offenders to rationalise their continued offenses towards their victims. Here are some examples of these beliefs that were observed:

"I believe that my sexual offense happened because my partner and I were not able to talk or understand each other. Especially we were not able to communicate about our sexual fantasies and that, I think, is the main reason why I felt inclined towards molesting my victim"

"I was angry at my partner for not respecting me enough. I saw molesting her kids looked like the best way to get back at her for not treating me the way I wanted to be treated. At that time, I did not

think it was wrong because it was simple revenge for me, more than anything."

"I am by nature a very sweet and loving person. I do not know how the offenses happened! I think I was drunk and that is why I did what I did. I am sure I would not have done it if I were not drunk."

"Of course she wanted it! Her behaviour was a big signal for me! It felt like she was asking me to have sex with her with every gesture she made." "She wanted it! She used to ask me to have sex with her. I used to refuse. It was annoying when she asked for it. She used to make sure I was drunk or on drugs before she came to me so I could not refuse. It was not my fault! She asked for it and she got it."

"My kids love me some much. I know that! And I also know that they would do anything I ask of them. I needed love and they loved me so much and made me feel like I belonged with them. They made me feel wanted. And I could not help it. Sex is an expression of love for me. So I had sex with them in a way of showing my love towards them."

The above and a significant number of statements of distorted cognitions direct towards the possibility of these offenders embracing cognitive distortions to justify their offenses. These distorted beliefs, which are termed Implicit Theories by Tony Ward¹²⁻¹⁴ provide a clear understanding of how these offenders perceive themselves, their victims and the world at large. These ITs which were further explained as the "causal-explanatory framework" go on to provide an insight into the reasons why (in the offenders' opinion) the offenders indulge in victimizing their victims. Further, relating that to the context of the subject of the present study - child sex offenders, specific ITs are employed to infer the mental state, present behaviour and future behaviour of their victim's together with their victim's beliefs, desires and attitudes.¹ The distorted belief statements expressed by the subjects in the interview sessions, draw attention to the conformation that these offenders harbour ITs in order to rationalise their actions towards their victims.

Entitlement

The interview participant has expressed that the primary cause of his offense, according to him was the "lack of sexual intimacy with his partner." Participant explained that the lack of intimacy caused anger which in light of the easy availability of the victims have given raise to thoughts of vengeance, which the offender viewed, could be achieved by sexually victimizing the children.

Uncontrollability

The interview participant has expressed that there were many external factors contributing to his offense. According to his explanation, lack of communication between him and his partner, has rendered him helpless, and out of control. Further, this factor, together with alcohol and stress, has played a vital role in feeding him motivation towards indulging in sexual intercourse with his victims.

Dangerous world

The interview participant expressed that there were various factors that contributed to his offense. According to the participant, "the world seemed a better place" when he was with his victim. The participant also expressed that he felt he was often misunderstood by others and felt uncomfortable around women his age. His perceived discomfort around women, according to him, was a result of his belief that women are not safe to be with because of the possibility of being rejected.

Children as sexual objects

The interview participant expressed that there were some external factors that contributed to his offending behaviour. According to him, the sex was initiated by his victim. The participant has quite particularly expressed that his victim wanted it and that she would ask for it as opposed to the claims that he initiated the sexual intercourse.

Nature of harm

The interview participant expressed that there were several external factors that contributed to his offending. Particularly, the participant has expressed that the sexual violation that he has committed was not harmful to the victim in his opinion.

Discussion

The findings obtained from the analysis from both the questionnaire phase and the interview phase; indicated that these offenders do in fact use various Implicit Theories in order to justify their actions. The findings from the quantitative analysis of the questionnaire strongly suggested the incidence of offense supportive statements in the participants' responses. It was observed that the participants seemed to endorse the highest number of distorted beliefs representative of Uncontrollability while they seemed less inclined towards statements endorsing Children as Sexual Objects. Nonetheless, the incidence of each of the five implicit theories by the of offenders' offense supportive beliefs was obvious.

Further, the interview had provided a deeper and comprehensive understanding of how these ITs look and dictate the offenders' perception of the world and themselves, in real life cases. The researcher has discussed the history of the participants with their therapists to obtain a baseline about their offending stories. This enabled the researchers to compare the facts with the stories that the offenders related in the interviews. These comparisons had ultimately proved that the stories recounted by the offenders were indeed in conflict with the reality, which clearly indicates that, the practice of using ITs in order to justify their own offending to themselves and the world. Subsequently, the interview sessions have also brought forward various issues of concern. The participants have expressed deep beliefs in the offense supportive statements they have shared. For example, one participant has adamantly claimed that his victim has initiated sex regardless of his constant refusal to indulge in any sexual activity, while another participant claimed that he believed that the offense he has committed was not as bad or harmful as the victim claims it to be, because he was under the influence of alcohol at the time of the offense and that he does not remember most of what had happened. This consequently made him believe that he his offense was not "as bad" and also he claimed that there is a discrepancy in the victim's report. According to him the offense only happened once, while the victim claimed that it happened three times. This clearly suggests that these offenders evidently have not accepted their offense as an act of choice on their part, but rather a result of external forces.

In addition, all the participants in the interview have at some point or the other claimed that one of the reasons for their offense was alcohol, drugs or lack of communication between them and their partners. This visibly implies that they hold external influences responsible for their offenses rather than their own choice to commit the offense.¹¹

As discussed in the relevant research found on the subject of child molester implicit theories with specific focus on incest offenders, ITs are distorted beliefs emerging from underlying causal theories about the nature of themselves, their victims and the world.¹⁵ Keeping in

view the above argument, it is safe to assume that the offenders in the sample group clearly harbour distorted beliefs about themselves, their victims and the world which facilitated their motivation to both initiate and maintain their sexual abuse towards child victims.

In light of the fact that the incidence of re-offending in incest offenders is significantly low,¹⁶⁻¹⁹ there was a limited array of research done on the subject of incest offender ITs. Nonetheless, the prevalence of this kind of offending is increasing in today's time, which calls for treatment interventions to increase the recidivism rates of incest offense. Also, it was pointed out earlier that the interview findings suggest that the offenders hold their distorted beliefs very strongly. Thus identifying these cognitive distortions which dictate the initiation and the continued maintenance of the offender's offending will obviously enable the therapist in get to the root of the problem. In a case of strongly held distorted belief systems, one requires compelling evidence on the contrary to change or eliminate the wrongly held beliefs.³ Gaining a thorough understanding of these beliefs is the first step towards an effective treatment intervention.³ So it is imperative to concentrate on these strongly held beliefs in order to help the offenders unlearn their deeply rooted beliefs and make them realise the effects the offense had on their victims.³ This might help the therapists come up with interventions which could in turn help the offenders control their desire to commit the offense. This research was done with the primary objective to shed light on these distorted beliefs and point out how they look in model cases, to provide a comprehensive understanding of these beliefs.

Conclusion

This research distinctly brought into light, the various distorted beliefs the incest offenders, in the sample group, use in order to help them validate their offensive behaviours to themselves and the world at large. These beliefs were also found to be strongly imbibed in the offenders' minds, restricting them from seeing the reality of their offensive behaviours, consequently, facilitating the continued maintenance of their offenses. However, further research in this area is strongly recommended, keeping in view the restricted array of research done on this subject. The recent times have seen an increasing need for effective intervention to eradicate the incidence of incest offense. Although there are various numbers of organizations and institutions providing counselling and help for victims of child sexual abuse, the increasing existence of child sexual offenders in the society does not help, neither the victims nor the society at large. Therefore, concentrating on the offenders proves to be the best way of reaching to the root of the problem. Subsequently, concentrating on the reasons for the offense (in the opinion of the offenders) can be an effective step towards reaching to the root of the problem. Thus, the researcher suggests that further research should be done in order to ensure reduced occurrences of incest offense.

Note

- i. This article is an excerpt from a thesis completed by Vijetha Jamisetty as partial fulfilment of a Master of Arts Degree in Psychology, from the University of Waikato, New Zealand. Vijetha Jamisetty currently works as a Clinical Manager at Safe Network, New Zealand.
- ii. This thesis was completed under the supervision of Dr Douglas P Boer, who was employed at the University of Waikato at the time of the thesis completion. He currently works as a Professor of Clinical Psychology in the Centre for Applied Psychology (Faculty of Health) at the University of Canberra, Australia. Professor Boer has co-authored this article.

Ethics

This thesis was approved by the University of Waikato ethics committee and was granted ethics approval from the Department of Corrections, New Zealand.

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

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