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CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS FOR OFFENDING AND VICTIM-RELATED PERCEPTIONS OF IMPRISONED CHILD SEX OFFENDERS. A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN GREECE

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study with a sample of 10 child sex offenders in Tripolis prison, Greece, aimed to evaluate their causal attributions for offending and their victim-related perceptions. The deductive thematic analysis revealed the following themes concerning their attributions for offending: 1) No explanation provided; 2) "I don't know why I am in prison. I don't accept the accusations and I didn't do anything"; 3) "My action was misunderstood. It wasn't molestation"; 4) "I did it but not in the way it was presented"; 5) "I did it, but I don't accept the culpability"; 6) "I did it and I accept the culpability". With regard to their victim-related perceptions, the following themes were revealed: 1) "The victim is very well and hasn't been affected by the molestation"; 2) "I don't know where the victim is-I suppose he/she is fine"; 3) "I don't know where the victim is-I suppose he/she has been affected by the molestation"; 4) "I don't know where the victim is – I suppose he/she isn't fine due to other reasons". The above themes provide a new framework for evaluating this topic. By enhancing our understanding of this field, we can better plan interventions that respond to the clinical needs of these offenders.

Keywords: child sex offenders, child sexual abuse, causal attribution, victims, deductive thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse is a worldwide phenomenon that takes large dimensions. This type of abuse, also called child molestation, is an umbrella term describing offences in which an adult engages in sexual activity with a minor or exploits a minor for sexual gratification. According to the World Health Organization (2017), "Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society". In some cases, the adult is in a position of power or control over the child.

Forms of child sexual abuse include engaging in sexual activities with a child, indecent exposure (e.g., of the genitals, etc.), child grooming, exploitative use of a child in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practises, exploitative use of children in pornographic performance and materials, etc. (Vrolijk-Bosschaart et al., 2018; Williams, 2019).

Child sexual abuse is usually committed through physical contact (e.g. rape, molestation), and many cases are committed via non-penetrative sexual touch (e.g. fondling or kissing). It can also take the form of non-physical contact offenses (e.g. child pornography, online grooming, exhibitionism, etc.) (Lim et al., 2021).

The worldwide prevalence of child sexual abuse remains unknown and ranges from 3% to 31%. Girls appear to have a twofold higher risk of being victims compared with boys (Barth et al., 2013; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011).

Child sexual abuse can occur in various settings, including home, school, playgrounds, and work-place. Approximately two-thirds of all cases reported to the police were perpetrated by a family member or someone close to the child. Approximately 30% are relatives of the child (most often fathers, uncles, grandfathers, etc.). Around 60% are other acquaintances, such as 'friends' of the family, babysitters, or neighbours. On the other hand, in approximately 10% of child sexual abuse cases, the offenders are strangers (Whealin, 2007).

In Greece, there are about 10,500 prisoners and only a small percentage of them (about 3.48%) are sex offenders. The vast majority of them have offended children (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2010).

The psychological and medical consequences of child sexual abuse can persist through adulthood (Johnson, 2004). Various studies have indicated the initial reactions of fear, depression, anxiety, anger, hostility, aggression, and sexually inappropriate behaviour. Long-term effects can include depression and self-destructive behaviour, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, feelings of isolation and stigma, poor self-esteem, difficulty in trusting others, a tendency towards revictimization, substance abuse, and sexual maladjustment. The most damaging forms of abuse are experiences involving father figures, genital contact, and force (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Widom, 1999).

Intra-familial child sexual abuse refers to child sexual abuse that occurs within a family environment. Perpetrators may or may not be related to the child, and the key consideration is whether the abuser feels like family from the child's point of view. Incest, as a form of intrafamilial child sexual abuse, can result in serious and long-term psychological trauma, especially in the case of parental incest (Courtois, 1988).

According to Heider (1958), people make either internal or external attributions. In internal attributions, causal explanations for behaviour are attributed to an individual. In contrast, external attributions locate causal explanations outside social and environmental factors.

Attributions are strongly related to criminal issues, and several studies have found that offenders tend to blame their behaviour on societal factors or victims' provocation (Storms, 1973; West et al., 1975). Offenders may attribute blame for their criminal acts to various factors, including their mental state, personality, and the reason why they confess to the police, etc. (Gudjonsson, 1984; Gudjonsson & Singh, 1989; Gudjonsson & Petursson, 1991). Thus, they reduce guilt and anxiety,

maintain self-esteem and a sense of personal worth, and enhance their feelings of control over the environment (Wortman, 1976).

Causal attributions can be evaluated through open-ended questions or experimenter-generated causal lists (Paulauskas, 2013). Furthermore, Gudjonsson (1984) developed the Blame Attribution Inventory and found that it consists of three dimensions of attribution of blame: 1) external attribution, which assesses the extent to which offenders seek external justifications for their offenses (e.g. social circumstances, the victim, or society); 2) mental-element attribution, which assesses the extent to which offenders view their crime as being "out of character" (e.g. blaming the crime on mental illness, low mood, or loss of self-control); and 3) guilt-feeling attribution (e.g. feelings of regret, guilt or remorse concerning the offense). Although the above dimensions are relevant to criminal behaviour, only a few studies have systematically examined this issue (Gudjonsson, 1984).

Individuals who commit a crime during a state of mental illness may attribute blame to internal factors. This type of attribution may also have the effect of reducing feelings of responsibility. The third type of attribution, which is largely independent of the internal-external dimension, is related to the extent to which the causes of the behaviour are perceived as being beyond self-control.

Alcohol use or addiction is also frequently used by offenders to justify their crimes (Scully & Marolla, 1984).

According to related studies, there is a positive association between reporting guilt and mental element attributions but a negative association between guilt feeling and external attribution (Dolan, 1995; Gudjonsson & Singh, 1989; Gudjonsson & Bownes, 1991; Gudjonsson & Petursson, 1991).

Several studies have also investigated the relationship between blame attribution and personality. External attribution of blame may indicate a personality disorder (Gudjonsson & Singh, 1989). Externalization of blame is related to impulsivity (Gudjonsson & Petursson, 1991) and high psychoticism (Fox et al., 2002). Psychoticism also indicates tough-mindedness and lack of empathy. Moreover, both impulsivity and psychoticism are considered to be closely related to antisocial personality (Fox et al., 2002). In contrast, guilt-feeling attribution is closely related to neuroticism and introversion (Gudjonsson, 1984; Gudjonsson & Singh, 1989; Gudjonsson & Petursson, 1991).

Dolan (1995) argues that external attribution is strongly related to personality characteristics associated with criminality, whereas those with the greatest neurotic distress blame mental factors. The reporting of feelings of guilt is interpreted as being related to anxious and fearful personality types. Lack of remorse and a strong tendency to externalise blame are often considered as predictors of re-offending (Horne, 1999).

McKay et al. (1996) investigated 50 males convicted of child sex offenses and found that they attributed their offending to internal, stable, and uncontrollable causes. Garlick et al. (1996) found that child sex offenders made more internal attributions for relationship problems than rapists. Other studies have found that sex offenders have the highest guilt-feeling scores, followed by violent offenders. In addition, the greater the degree of social disapproval for an offence, the greater the feelings of guilt following the transgression. Consequently, child sex offenders are likely to report more guilt than those who offend against adults (Gudjonsson & Singh, 1988; Gudjonsson & Petursson, 1991; Gudjonsson & Bownes, 1991).

When considering causal attribution for offending, self-responsibility is a useful concept. It refers to an individual's accountability for actions that have already been performed or will be performed in the future. Partly related concepts are "personal responsibility," "individual responsibility," "autonomy," or "choice" (Maier, 2019). Diffusion (or denial) of responsibility has been referenced as one of the techniques of neutralisation used by offenders to neutralise the guilt of involvement in criminal behaviour, as it can release them from personal and social disapproval (Cohen, 2001; Rowan et al., 2022).

The social cognition framework is also useful for considering child sex offenders' attributions for offending. Distorted thinking seems to be central to sexual offending, and some sex offenders tend to hold attitudes and beliefs that minimise and justify their crimes. Related research tends to evaluate these rationalisations after the offence (Blumenthal et al., 1999; Maruna & Copes, 2005).

According to a common definition, cognitive distortions are incorrect attitudes and beliefs that support offending behaviour and offenders use them to deny, minimise, and rationalise their behaviour (Murphy, 1990; Marshall et al., 1999). For example, a paedophile may blame the victim and believe that the child was seductive (Hall, 1996). The term cognitive distortion has been used interchangeably with a variety of other terms, including irrational attitudes (Prentky & Knight, 1991), maladaptive beliefs (Ward et al., 2000), cognitive products (Segal & Stermac, 1990), thinking errors, rape myths, excuses (Pollock & Hashmall, 1991), justifications, minimizations, and rationalizations (Nichols & Molinder, 1984).

Bumby (1996) suggests that child molesters may experience more cognitive distortions related to sexual deviance in general. It has also been argued that child sexual offenders endorse more cognitive distortions relating to sex with children and report more guilt-feeling attributions than those who offend against adults (Blumenthal et al., 1999).

Sex offenders can also misperceive their victim's actions, behaviours, or cues. Beckett et al. (1994) found that child sex offenders hold distorted beliefs in which they believe that the children consented to the molestation and were not harmed by sexual interaction with adults.

Another very common form of cognitive distortion is the denial and minimisation of sexual offences (Beckett et al., 1994; Moster et al., 2008). Denial is the acceptance of explanations that reduce accountability and are reinforced by distorted beliefs and self-deceptive thinking processes (Schneider & Wright, 2004). Barbaree (1991) found that 66% of child molesters deny their offences, and Maletzky (1991) found that 87% of sex offenders deny at least some part of the crime.

There are similarities and differences between cognitive distortions and blame attribution, and both may be viewed as different means of justifying an offence. While blame attribution relates to an individual's perception of the specific circumstances of the offence, cognitive distortions relate to more global attitudes and beliefs about the acceptability of sexual offending behaviour in general (Blumenthal et al., 1999).

However, only a few studies have examined child sex offenders' cognitive distortions and their relationship with blame attribution (Haywood et al., 1994; Segal & Stermac, 1990). In a related study, Gudjonsson (1990) examined child sexual offenders and found a significant relationship between cognitive distortions and external attribution. These findings indicate that the more these offend-

ers justify the idea of child sex offending, the more likely they are to blame their offence on the victim or social circumstances.

Furthermore, a sex offender is believed to have victim empathy when he/she has a cognitive and emotional understanding of the victim's experience of his sexual offence (Mann & Barnett, 2013). However, it is well established that sex offenders suffer from deficits in their capacity to experience empathy (Marshall et al., 1995; Pithers, 1994). Many of them know what their victims feel, but this is not enough to stop them from offending. Although "empathy" has diverse meanings, those working with sexual offenders are primarily concerned about the offenders' lack of compassion or sympathy for victims. Different sexual offenders have deficits in different domains. For example, some sex offenders truly fail to appreciate the harm they caused, whereas others know that their offences are hurtful but are too ashamed to admit it (Hanson, 2003).

According to the aforementioned evidence, there is very little research in the area of causal attributions of sexual crimes, especially child sexual abuse. To the best of our knowledge, no other studies have examined causal attributions for the offending and victim-related perceptions of child sex offenders in Greece. Thus, this study aspires to fill this gap and increase the understanding of this scientific topic.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The main aim of the current study was to evaluate the causal attributions and explanations for offending, as well as the victim-related perceptions provided by convicted child sex offenders. Thus, the main research questions were as follows:

- How do these offenders explain their crimes? Do they deny or admit it?
- Where do they pose the culpability for the abuse?
- Have the victims been affected by the molestation?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

A qualitative study with in-depth semi-structured interviews was conducted in Tripolis prison, Greece. In this prison, only sex offenders are incarcerated, and the majority are accused or convicted of child sexual abuse. The sample consisted of 10 imprisoned child sex offenders, and the quota sampling method was used to select the participants. Child sex offenders (with either contact or non-contact sex offences against minors) were anonymously questioned about their attributions to their crime and their victim-related perceptions.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted in the prison's canteen by an expert mental health practitioner who works in this facility. This room was used during the time when the rest of the prisoners were locked in their cells, based on the daily programme. In this way, we secured confidentiality and privacy. There was no video or audio recording. In contrast, the practitioner recorded the answers in a paper. An informal interview was previously conducted with every offender, in which a good climate was created, and they were fully informed about the aim of the study. The mean time of every interview was 1 h, and the duration of the study was two months (June-July 2022).

Attributions of blame for the crime were evaluated through questions like "Why are you in prison?"; "Who accused you of child molestation?"; "What did it happen?"; "How do you explain your offense?"; "Do you accept the accusations?"; "Who is responsible for the offense?"; "How is the victim (or the alleged victim) now?"; "Where does he/she live now?"; "Do you believe that you have caused great harm to the victim?", etc.

Sampling – participants

The quota sampling method was used to select participants. According to the statistics of the Social Service of the above prison, it is recorded that in 70% of the cases, the victim was a girl (or girls), 25% was a boy (or boys), and 5% were both a boy and a girl (or both boys and girls). It is also recorded that the mean age of the child sex offenders was 50 years. Based on this information, we chose to include 8 prisoners who had sexually abused a girl (or girls), 1 prisoner who had abused a boy (or boys), and 1 prisoner who had abused both a boy and a girl (or both boys and girls). We also included in our sample 5 prisoners older than 50 years and 5 prisoners younger than 50 years. The selection of participants was based on the following eligibility criteria:

- 1) prisoners convicted of child sexual abuse, either contact or non-contact
- 2) sufficient ability to understand and respond to the questions
- 3) ability to understand the Greek language
- 4) persons wishing to participate voluntarily in the research.

Offenders without a court conviction (temporary detainees), child pornography offenders, those who did not wish to participate voluntarily in the research, and those who suffered from serious psychiatric problems or were unable to respond to the questions were excluded from the study. According to the eligibility criteria, 10 imprisoned child sex offenders participated in the study. All of them had Greek ethnicity.

The participants reported their age, education, marital status, and job. They also reported their victim's gender, number of victims, time (in months) that they were imprisoned, and if they had previous convictions for sex crimes (see Table 1). Based on the relationship between the offender and the victim, the offenders were classified as intrafamilial or extrafamilial. It is noteworthy that the intrafamilial offences in this study included incest crime, molestation by a stepfather, etc. In addition, they provided information about their drug or alcohol history and answered if they took or had

taken psychiatric medication. Questions about the consumption of psychiatric medications, alcohol, and drugs were used to examine possible connexions with the blame attribution of the crime.

Only one offender had a job related to children (eg. teacher, trainer, etc). No offender reported drug usage or alcohol addiction, and only one said that he had taken psychiatric medication in the past.

Several demographic and criminal characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic and criminal characteristics of the sample

Offender	Age	Marital status	Education (years)	Job related to children	Months in prison	Previous convictions for sexual crimes	Crime contact-noncontact	Crime Intrafamilial-Extrafamilial	Victim's gender	Number of victims
1	37	Divorced	8	NO	44	NO	contact	intrafamilial	Girl	1
2	64	Separated	16	NO	14	NO	contact	intrafamilial	Girl	1
3	39	Divorced	6	NO	36	NO	contact	intrafamilial	Girl	1
4	51	Married	6	NO	38	NO	contact	extrafamilial	Girl	1
5	54	Divorced	11	NO	36	NO	contact	intrafamilial	Girl	1
6	59	Divorced	14	NO	84	NO	contact	intrafamilial	Girl Girl Boy	3
7	60	Divorced	12	NO	73	NO	contact	intrafamilial	Girls	3
8	49	Divorced	14	NO	108	YES	contact	extrafamilial	Girl	22
9	37	Married	6	NO	15	NO	contact	intrafamilial	Boy	1
10	39	Single	12	YES	18	NO	contact	extrafamilial	Girl	1

Data analysis

Deductive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data concerning the attributions of child sex offenders for their crimes, and their victim-related perceptions. It is an independent qualitative descriptive approach mainly described as "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to this method, the attributions were organized into themes and subthemes. Similarly, they organised their victim-related perceptions.

To secure the validity of the research findings, the triangulation method was used, and three scientists (the mental health practitioner who conducted the interviews, one sociologist, and one psychologist) analysed the content of the interviews and reached the final results presented in this article. In the end, three out of the ten offenders were randomly selected, and we conducted a feedback interview, asking them to say if they agreed with the results.

Ethics

Approval was sought from Tripolis Prison and the Ministry of Public Order, Greece, and was granted. A signed informed consent form was obtained from all participants. They were informed in detail about the purpose of the study and were assured anonymity and confidentiality. They were also assured that the collected data would be used only in the study. All participants voluntarily participated without receiving any compensation.

RESULTS

Causal attributions: Explanations for the crime

After combining the facts of the sexual abuse and the culpability for it, deductive thematic analysis revealed the following main themes:

- 1) No (direct) explanation provided
- 2) "I don't know why I am in prison. I don't accept the accusation and I didn't do anything"
- 3) "My action was misunderstood. It was not molestation"
- 4) "I did it but not in the way it was presented"
- 5) "I did it, but I don't accept the culpability"
- 6) "I did it and I accept the culpability"

Theme 1: No (direct) explanation provided

In these cases, no direct explanation is provided. For example:

- *It's better not to talk about it.*
- *It's better not to bother you with this topic.*

These offenders were excluded from the sample because they did not give a clear explanation of their offence and the interview lasted only a few minutes.

Theme 2: "I don't know why I am in prison. I don't accept the accusation and I didn't do anything"

In these cases, the offenders state that they have not abused the child (or the children) and they do not accept the accusations. They attribute the complaint to others unrelated to the abuse reasons. The main characteristics of this theme are denial and external attribution for offending. Some subthemes:

Separation and child custody-other family problems:

- *I am innocent. I had a bad relationship with my mother-in-law, and she wanted to take revenge. She forced my wife to get divorced. We were arguing about parenting (offender 9).*

Jealousy:

- *I don't accept the accusations. They were jealous of my wife and forced the girl to tell these lies (offender 4).*

For the money:

- *It's all lies. I was helping them. I paid their bills and bought their food. I didn't give them money because they would buy drugs. As soon as I stopped, they accused me of molestation of their daughter (offender 3).*
- *They want to take my property. I have property problems with the girl's parents (offender 4).*

Theme 3: "My action was misunderstood. It was not molestation"

In these cases, the offenders minimised their crime and stated that their actions were misunderstood, e.g., a friendly touch was seen as an obscene gesture. Here the main characteristic is minimisation, which could be seen either as a core maladaptive belief or as an ex-post justification and rationalisation.

- *I grabbed the girl by the shoulder to take her a little closer, and they accused me of molestation (offender 4).*

Theme 4: "I did it but not in the way it was presented"

In these cases, the offenders stated that they had abused the child (or the children), but they said that the abuse was not as serious as it was recorded in the complaint. Here we also notice a minimisation of the crime. The main difference with Theme 3 is that in this case, the victims admitted that they had committed sexual abuse. Here, the main characteristic is also minimisation, which can be seen as ex-post justification and rationalisation.

– Okay, it happened but only once. Not as they wrote in the complaint (offender 7).

Theme 5: "I did it, but I don't accept the culpability"

In these cases, the offenders state that they have abused the child (or the children) and admit their guilt. However, they do not accept the culpability and attribute their offence to external reasons (to the victim/s, to alcohol or drug use, to their mental health problems, to their impulse control disorder, to the bad moment, etc.). These causal attributions appear to be external.

– It was a bad moment. It should have never been done. It happened several times, and it was a huge mistake. However, it happened. I wish I could turn the time back. It was a bad moment (offender 1).

– Yes, I did it with this girl. She was 16 years old, and it happened with her consent. Her boyfriend brought her into the home. It's her fault. She provoked me to have sex (offender 6). It is noticeable that this offender did not give any information about the other two victims (one boy and one girl).

– It is the third time I have been imprisoned. I posed as a policeman who wanted to check a school. In total, the victims were 22 unknown girls. I did this because I can't control my impulses. I know that sounds like a good excuse. I want to find a solution. I need help. I'm trying to find out what's wrong with me. With children, it is easy because they do not react, and they have little supervision. I was driven by adrenaline. I had a tension and an anxiety. My motive was not purely sexual, I had no sexual intercourse with the victims. In some cases, I ran away due to my fear (offender 8).

Theme 6: "I did it and I accept the culpability"

In these cases, the offenders accept their guilt and culpability, and they state that they have abused the child (or the children). They express sentiments of shame, guilt, and humiliation, and apologise for the crime. These causal attributions appear to be internal. However, in one case (offender 2) the given causal attributions (mid-life crisis) could be classified either as internal or external.

– I am guilty. I did it and I admitted it in the court. That's why I got a low sentence. There is another incident pending and I will admit that, too. When I did it, I was in a deep darkness. I wanted to experience everything. I couldn't see in front of me. Perhaps it was a mid-life crisis (offender 2).

– The complaint was made by the victim herself and her mother (my ex-wife). I also admitted it in court and apologised. I was the adult, and I had to say stop. It is always the adult's responsibility. I have learned from my parents to take responsibility for my mistakes. I felt very humiliated (offender 5).

– I admitted it in the court. What can I say? That it didn't happen? I fell in love with a minor, I don't feel lewd. I am responsible for this. It is not the girl's fault. I was an adult and I had to show maturity. It was something immature, frivolous, and impulsive. Sure, it's not ideal (offender 10).

The only offender who had previous convictions for sexual crimes with many victims accepted the molestation but attributed the blame for it to external reasons (impulse control disorder). As expected, intrafamilial offenders tended to deny the molestation more frequently and attribute the accusations to their spouses' willingness to revenge them. No differences were noticed based on the victim's gender (boy, girl, or both). In other words, we did not find a special pattern of attributions in these categories.

Victim-related perceptions

Along with the causal attribution for offending, we examined the offenders' perceptions of their victims. That is, we first asked them to provide information about the victim (gender, age, school performance, etc.) and to describe his/her character and their relationship to the victim. Then, we asked them if they knew where the victim lived, if they believed that he/she had been affected by the molestation, if they understood that they had harmed him/her and experienced empathy etc. Following the above, deductive thematic analysis revealed four main themes:

Theme 1: The victim is very well and has not been affected by molestation.

- To the best of my knowledge, the girl is very well and has no problems. She is doing well at school and has not been affected by molestation (offender 1).*
- Now the girl is fine. Very well. I can say that she is a very normal kid, doing well in school, socialising, and spending her time well. I think she has not been affected by this case. She did not come to the court to testify, as is usual in such cases (offender 2).*
- She came to testify in the court. Now she is 21 years old. She is engaged, and she has a good job. Thus, I think she hasn't been affected by the case and has found her way. And I wish it (offender 5).*
- I have not seen the child for 9 years. I know they live somewhere close to my home. We have been banned from communicating. Since nothing happened, I suppose he is well, goes to school, and has not been affected at all" (offender 9).*
- I have never seen her again. She only came to testify in the first court. She is just fine (offender 10).*

Theme 2: I don't know where the victim is – I suppose he/she is fine.

- The alleged victim is now about 21-22 years old. I suppose she lives in Athens, and she is fine. I am not sure, and I don't know. It's not my business. Other are her problems (offender 3).*
- I don't know where the victims are currently. I suppose they live in a nearby village. But I'm not sure. I have not spoken to them for over 10 years (they are close relatives). I think they are fine and that they can continue with their life (offender 7).*

– *I don't know where the girl is at the moment. I suppose she is fine and has gone abroad with my ex-wife and my children (offender 6).*

Theme 3: I don't know where the victim is – I suppose he/she has been affected by the molestation.

– *I don't know where the girl is at the moment. I suppose she lives somewhere nearby. After the divorce, she was with her mother. I know that I have harmed her ("I hurt her") and I have apologised (offender 5).*

– *I do not know where the victims are currently. Anyway, they were completely unknown to me. But I certainly understand the pain and damage I have caused to them (offender 8).*

Theme 4: I don't know where the victim is – I suppose he/she is not fine due to other reasons and not due to the alleged molestation.

– *The child was neglected and from a broken family. Maybe she is in a child welfare institution for these reasons (offender 4).*

– *The child consumed alcohol from the age of 12 and used drugs. These were her problems and not the alleged molestation. There is a possibility that she died due to drug addiction (offender 3).*

All the above results concerning causal attributions and victim-related perceptions were fully confirmed by the prisoners who participated in the feedback interviews.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to examine in a qualitative design the causal attributions and explanations for offending, as well as the victim-related perceptions provided by convicted child sex offenders. This is the first related research in Greece and highlights its importance in the scientific field.

The main result is that the themes revealed by the deductive thematic analysis are very similar to those presented in other studies. In terms of the causal attributions and explanations for the crime, the deductive thematic analysis revealed six main themes, many of which fully correspond to the internal – external distinction provided by Heider (1958) and the Attribution Theory. Some of these explanations can also be divided into the following themes, based on Gudjonsson's (1984) dimensions described in his Blame Attribution Inventory:

- **External attribution** (*"It's her fault. She provoked me for having sex", "It was a bad moment", "They are jealous of me", "I don't remember. I am an alcoholic/drug user"*).
- **Mental-element attribution** (*"What I did was beyond my control", "I suffer from impulse control disorder", "I was initiated by adrenaline. I was in tension", "I was very depressed and anxious when I committed the crime"*).
- **Guilt-feeling attribution** (*"I feel very ashamed and humiliated of the crime I committed. I hate myself"*).

In addition, some offenders denied having committed child molestation, and these cases cannot be included in the internal – external attribution. More specifically:

- *No (direct) explanation was provided.* In these cases, no direct explanation is provided, and the offenders prefer not to discuss any details about the crime. It seems to be a defence mechanism that resembles the denial. However, in this case, the offenders do not explicitly deny the crime. One given justification was that the offender did not want to bother the interviewer with the topic.
- *“I don’t know why I am in prison. I don’t accept the accusations; I didn’t do anything”.* In these cases, the offenders state that they have not abused the child (or the children), they don’t know the reason for their imprisonment, and deny having committed the crime. They attribute the complaint to other reasons unrelated to the abuse: separation and parenting problems, other family problems, jealousy, for money, etc. The core element in this type of attribution is denial, which is a well-established attribution provided by child sex offenders (Barbaree, 1991; Maletzky, 1991). In the above-mentioned attribution, the offenders deny the entire offence and not some parts of it.
- *“My action was misunderstood. It was not a molestation”.* In these cases, the offenders minimised their crime and they stated that their actions were misunderstood, e.g., a friendly touch was seen as an obscene gesture. The core element in this type of attribution is minimisation. The other core elements are denial and not acceptance of culpability. Several other studies have also found that minimisation is a very common form of cognitive distortion of sexual offences (Beckett et al., 1994; Moster et al., 2008).

Those who admit child molestation can be divided into the following categories:

- *“I did it but not in the way it was presented”.* In these cases, the offenders state that they have abused the child (or the children), but they say that the abuse was not as serious as it was recorded in the complaint (e.g., *“Okay, it happened but only once. Not as they wrote in the complaint”*). In this type of attribution, the offenders minimise their actions, too. However, they identify their actions as molestation. This is a significant difference from the above theme (*“My action was misunderstood. It was not a molestation”*).
- *“I did it, but I don’t accept the culpability”.* These offenders attribute their offence to external reasons (to the victim/s, to alcohol or drug use, to their mental health problems, to their impulse control disorder, to the bad moment, etc.). Various other studies have found that offenders tend to blame their behaviour on societal factors or victims’ provocation etc. (Gudjonsson, 1984; Storms, 1973; West et al., 1975). This type of attribution fully corresponds to the external attribution presented by Heider (1958) and Gudjonsson (1984) and the *“Blaming the victim”* attribution. Attributing the crime to mental illness, low mood, or being beyond self-control is also common in child sex offenders. In addition, this type of attribution corresponds to the mental-element attribution, presented by Gudjonsson (1984) and was supported by one offender in this study. Furthermore, although the effect of alcohol is frequently used by offenders to justify their criminal behaviour (Scully & Marolla, 1984), no offender attributed his crime to alcoholism in the current study.

– *“I did it, and I accept the culpability”*. These offenders state that they have abused the child (or the children) and accept the culpability. In this study, one offender mentioned feelings of humiliation regarding the offence. However, *guilt-feeling attribution* (e.g., feelings of regret, guilt, or remorse regarding the offence) (Gudjonsson, 1984) was not presented by the offenders in this study. This type of attribution (acceptance of the molestation and the culpability) may be scarce, as several other researchers (e.g., Barbaree, 1991; Maletzky, 1991) have found that most child molesters deny their offenses. Consequently, this issue requires further examination by a quantitative study.

Interestingly, no one attributed his offence to sexual reasons (e.g., an urge for sexual gratification or a paedophilic interest).

We also recorded that intrafamilial offenders tended more frequently to deny the molestation and attribute the accusations to their spouse’s willingness to revenge them. On the other hand, we didn’t find a special pattern of attributions based on the victim’s gender (boy, girl, or both).

With regard to the perceptions of the victim, deductive thematic analysis revealed four main themes. More specifically:

– *“The victim is very well and has not been affected by the molestation”*. In these cases, the offenders say that the victim has not been affected by the case. Perhaps it is a minimisation of the harm caused to the victim or a denial or rationalisation of their crime. Such a perception serves as a mechanism that reduces offenders’ guilt and anxiety and maintains their self-esteem and sense of personal worth (Wortman, 1976). The above victim-related perception is also indicative of a lack of empathy, which is reported as a common cognitive distortion of child sex offenders (Bumby, 1996). Several other researchers have also found that sex offenders minimise the harm caused by child molestation and suffer from deficits in their capacity to experience empathy (Marshall et al., 1995; Mann & Barnett, 2013). In this way, some truly fail to appreciate the harm they caused, while others know their offences are hurtful but are too ashamed to admit it (Hanson, 2003).

– *“I don’t know where the victim is – I suppose he/she is fine”*. These cases are very similar to the above, and the difference is that the offenders don’t know where the victim is. One offender said that it was not his business to have such information. This also indicates a lack of empathy for the victim, too.

– *“I don’t know where the victim is – I suppose he/she has been affected by the case”*. In these cases, the offenders admit the harm they caused to the victim, express regret, and apologise. This victim-related perception is associated with the guilt-feeling attribution (e.g., feelings of regret, guilt, or remorse concerning the offence) reported by Gudjonsson (1984). However, feelings of guilt were not explicitly presented by the offenders in this study.

– *“I don’t know where the victim is – I suppose he/she is not fine due to other reasons and not due to the alleged molestation”*. In these cases, the offenders do not admit the harm they caused to the victim. They admit that the victim has serious problems, but they attribute them to other situations (drug addiction, alcoholism, etc.) and not to the crime. This indicates a lack of empathy for the victim and is consistent with the *“blaming the victim”* attribution for the crime, too.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

A limitation of the present study is that the causal attributions and victim-related perceptions of the child sex offenders were not compared with the corresponding attributions and perceptions of other offenders (e.g., of violent crimes) or of other sex offenders (e.g., of adult victims). Another limitation is that only Greek-speaking sex offenders were interviewed, and the experiences, attributions, and perceptions of other child sex offenders were not recorded. In addition, we should keep in mind that in forensic settings responses about causal attribution and victim-related perceptions are likely to be presented in a socially desirable manner. This is very important if we consider the fact that the interviews were conducted by a mental health practitioner who works in this prison. It is also a disadvantage that the interviews were not recorded for ethical and security reasons. Despite these limitations, this is the first related study from Greece and seems to cover a large gap in the scientific field of child molestation.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

By enhancing our understanding of the frequency and correlates of every type of causal attribution and victim-related perceptions, we can make suggestions for the treatment of child sex offenders. The described causal attributions for offending and victim-related perceptions should be examined in every child sex offender and should be considered in their management. Additionally, mental health practitioners can evaluate the core elements of the above attributions and perceptions (e.g., denial, minimisation, etc.) and record their change or stability over time. Thus, they can set personalised and realistic goals and plan effective interventions that respond to the clinical needs of these offenders.

CONCLUSION

This study presented the causal attributions for offending in themes and victim-related perceptions of child sex offenders and confirmed many of the previous scientific findings. These themes are not unique; however, they provide a basic framework for understanding and evaluating this topic.

Future research would be useful to further examine the results of this study. These preliminary findings could be confirmed by a quantitative research design with a large sample of incarcerated child sex offenders. Such a study is still being conducted by our research team. Future studies could also examine the causal attributions and victim-related perceptions of the child sex offenders in a follow-up study, to assess the role of the prison environment or specific therapeutic interventions on these variables. Causal attributions and victim-related perceptions could also be examined in comparison among subgroups of sex offenders (child sex offenders, rapists with adult victims, etc.) or among child sex offenders in relation to other variables (victim's gender, intrafamilial or extrafamilial offending, etc.).

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KAUZALNE ATRIBUCIJE ZA POČINJENJE DJELA I PERCEPCIJE ŽRTVE KOD ZATVORENIH POČINITELJA SEKSUALNIH DELIKATA NA ŠTETU DJECE. KVALITATIVNA GRČKA STUDIJA

SAŽETAK

Cilj ove kvalitativne studije s uzorkom od 10 počinitelja seksualnih delikata nad djecom u zatvoru u Tripolisu, Grčka, bio je procijeniti kauzalne atribucije počinitelja i njihove percepcije vezane uz žrtve. Deduktivnom tematskom analizom dobivene su sljedeće teme u vezi s njihovim atribucijama za počinjenje kaznenog djela: 1) Nema objašnjenja; 2) „Ne znam zašto sam u zatvoru. Ne prihvaćam optužbe i nisam ništa napravio“; 3) „Moj postupak je pogrešno shvaćen. To nije bilo zlostavljanje“; 4) „Učinio sam to, ali ne na način na koji je predstavljeno“; 5) „Učinio sam to, ali ne prihvaćam krivnju“; 6) „Učinio sam to i prihvaćam krivnju. S obzirom na njihovu percepciju o žrtvi, dobivene su sljedeće teme: 1) „Žrtva je vrlo dobro i nije bila pogođena zlostavljanjem“; 2) „Ne znam gdje je žrtva, pretpostavljam da je dobro“; 3) „Ne znam gdje je žrtva, pretpostavljam da je na nju/njega zlostavljanje utjecalo“; 4) „Ne znam gdje je žrtva, pretpostavljam da nije dobro iz drugih razloga“. Gore navedene teme daju novi okvir za evaluaciju iste. Što bolje budemo mogli razumjeti ovo područje, moći ćemo bolje planirati intervencije koje odgovaraju kliničkim potrebama ovih prijestupnika.

Ključne riječi: počinitelji kaznenih djela na štetu djece, seksualno zlostavljanje djece, kauzalne atribucije, žrtve, deduktivna tematska analiza



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