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THE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE OFFENDER: A REVIEW OF CURRENT RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSONNEL SECURITY

Suzanne Wood

August 1988

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At the request of the Navy Appeals Board which is sometimes required to adjudicate cases of people requiring security clearances who have histories of committing child sexual abuse, a literature review was conducted on child sexual abuse offenders. This review, based on Finkelhor's Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse, covers the areas of offender profiles, treatment efficacy and recidivism rates. Theories of adult sexual interest in children are described according to Finkelhor's typology, but it is emphasized that adult sexual relationships with children are not explainable with single theories. The paucity of good research on offender recidivism and on efficacy of treatment is described. A bibliography is appended.

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Preface

Part of PERSEREC's mission, in addition to performing research and analysis for DOD to improve personnel security procedures, programs and policies, is to provide educational assistance to DOD agencies on personnel security matters. This technical note represents PERSEREC's response to a request from the Navy Appeals Board for help in conducting a literature review in the area of child sexual abuse--offender profiles, treatment efficacy and recidivism rates.

PERSEREC will provide similar research reports on various topics relevant to screening, selection, and adjudication of personnel requiring security clearances.

Carson K. Eoyang
Director

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Prepared by
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Summary

Issue and Background

The Navy Appeals Board is required from time to time to adjudicate relatively rare cases of people requiring Top Secret or SCI clearances who have histories of committing child sexual abuse. Often these individuals have been declared cured. This situation has posed a problem for members of the Appeals Board, many of whom are as yet unfamiliar with practice and research in the area of child sexual abuse.

Objective

PERSEREC was asked to review research literature in these areas in order to educate the Appeals Board on current theories on offender recidivism and treatment efficacy.

Approach

An extensive bibliographic search was undertaken on the research on child sexual abuse, offender profiling, recidivism rates and efficacy of treatment. Finkelhor's Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse was found to be the only work that reviewed all recent literature and was thus used as the basis for examining the subject.

Results

Theories of adult sexual interest in children were described according to Finkelhor's typology, emphasizing that adult sexual relationships with children cannot be explained by single-factor theories.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Due to the paucity of good research on offender recidivism and on treatment efficacy, personnel security adjudicators were advised to consult one or more of the books reviewed in this research and, lacking real guidance from current research, consider the special circumstances of each individual case in assessing the personal strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to security reliability.

Foreword

From time to time the Navy Appeals Board is required to adjudicate cases of people requiring Top Secret or SCI clearances who have histories of committing child sexual abuse.* Often these individuals have been convicted and have received treatment for long periods of time. Many have been declared cured by therapists, ministers and parole and probation officers and consequently may be suitable candidates for high level security clearances. This situation has posed a dilemma for members of the Appeals Board, many of whom are as yet unfamiliar with practice and research in the field of child sexual abuse. PERSEREC was asked to conduct a literature review in the general areas of offender profiles, treatment efficacy and recidivism rates. This review is intended to inform Board members about the theoretical and empirical work on child sexual abuse offenders. An extensive bibliography is appended for the reader requiring indepth information.

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*See "Definitions" at end of this paper.

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Introduction

Child sexual abuse is often referred to as the "last frontier of child abuse." The battered-child syndrome was first described in France in 1860 by Ambroise Tardieu. However, it was not until the early 1960s that the phenomenon of child abuse was again recognized as a major issue. This increased attention resulted from the publication of C. Henry Kempe's 1962 pivotal article on the battered-child. The following decade witnessed a confirmation of Kempe's work by other professionals and scholars in the field. Studies of incidence, epidemiology, characteristics of abusing families, and other variables appeared in the literature. Child abuse was found to be an alarmingly common occurrence across all social classes.

The specific issue of sexual abuse of children emerged in the mid-1970s and has developed quickly. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of cases reported to authorities, and the public has become aware of the epidemic proportions of the problem through media attention. Professionals and academic researchers have also shown an interest in the subject, resulting in a growing body of literature.

Finkelhor (1987) has conducted a thorough review of the present literature on child sexual abuse. As might be expected, special methodological problems confront researchers in this area. Victims, offenders, and other family members are loath to discuss such a delicate subject; this is particularly true in the case of incest. Additionally, research interest is recent and researchers are scattered across a number of disciplines. This retards communication and fertilization across disciplines. Finkelhor's major problem in reviewing the new literature and linking it with older research is the disparate quality of the work. It is marred by "inadequate samples, oversimplistic research design, conflicting definitions, and unsophisticated analyses." Despite these problems, certain common findings emerge. It is these patterns which are the topic of this review.

Research on the Offender

Most theories of adult sexual interest in children derive from psychoanalytic theory and, more recently, from theories of social learning and feminism. Finkelhor criticizes these efforts for their single-factor explanation and their inability to handle the full range of pedophilic behavior; no single factor can begin to explain child sexual abuse in its diverse manifestations. Finkelhor classifies the theories of adult sexual interest in children into four psychological categories: emotional congruence, sexual arousal, blockage,

and disinhibition. These sets of theories answer respectively the following questions: (1) Why does a person find sexual relations with a child emotionally gratifying and congruent? (2) Why is a person sexually aroused by a child? (3) Why is a person frustrated or blocked from obtaining sexual and emotional gratification from more conventional sources? and (4) Why is a person not deterred by social constraints and inhibitions against having sexual relations with a child.

TABLE 1

Summary of Empirical Evidence for Explanations of Child Molesting[a]

Theory	Evidence
(1) Emotional congruence	
Children attractive because of lack of dominance	One positive study.
Arrested development/ immaturity	Some support but inferences weak.
Low self-esteem	Some support but inferences weak.
Mastery of trauma through repetition	Several studies show frequent histories of sexual abuse in offenders' backgrounds.
Identification with aggression	Several studies show frequent histories of sexual abuse in offenders' backgrounds.
Narcissism	Untested.
Male socialization to dominance	Untested.
(2) Sexual arousal	
Heightened arousal to children	Clear experimental evidence except for incest offenders.
Conditioning from early childhood	Several studies show frequent histories of sexual abuse in offenders' backgrounds.

[a]Adapted from Finkelhor(1986).

TABLE 1 (continued)

Modeling from earlier childhood	Several studies show frequent histories of sexual abuse in offenders' backgrounds.
Hormonal abnormalities	Mixed evidence.
Misattribution of arousal ("parental" or "affectionate" labels mistaken for sexual by some individuals)	Untested.
Socialization through pornography or advertising	Untested.
(3) Blockage	
Difficulty relating to adult females	Generally positive evidence.
Inadequate social skills	Suggested by 2 studies.
Sexual anxiety	Some support from uncontrolled studies.
Unresolved Oedipal dynamics	Family problems evident, but not necessarily the ones Oedipal theory would predict.
Repressive norms about sexual behavior	Suggested by 2 studies.
(4) Disinhibition	
Impulse disorder (e.g. poor impulse control)	True for some small group of offenders, but not for all.
Senility	Negative.
Mental retardation	Negative.
Alcohol	Present in great many instances, exact role unclear.
Failure of incest avoidance	Two studies show higher rates of abuse in stepfather families.
Situational stress	Only anecdotal evidence.
Patriarchal/cultural norms	Untested.

Emotional Congruence

These theories assume offenders have an emotional defect such that children are suitable sexual objects. Some theories of pedophilia (e.g., Howells, 1979) suggest that abusers select children for sexual partners because children have some driving emotional meaning for them. Another (Hammer & Glueck, 1957) posits that child molesters suffer from arrested psychosexual development, are emotionally immature and, therefore, relate to the child at the child's level. Still another theory maintains that molesters have a low self-esteem and few social skills so that relating to children gives them a feeling of omnipotence and control (e.g., Loss & Glancy, 1983). It has also been proposed that abusers, in relating to children, try to overcome the effects of some trauma in their own childhood by visiting a similar trauma on a child, who is less powerful (e.g., Howells, 1981).

Sexual Arousal

Theories grouped under this heading assume that ear conditioning accounts for sexual preference for children, i.e., early sexual experiences with children leads to a sexual fixation on children (Wenet, Clark & Hunner, 1981). Some researchers (e.g., Atwood & Howell, 1971; Quinsey et al., 1975) assert that pedophiles have an arousal preference for children, but the preference may be mediated by the notion of the relationship between victim and offender. For example, Quinsey et al. (1979) found that incestuous child molesters have more appropriate sexual age preferences (adults) than those who are nonincestuous. One consistent finding in this area is that many child molesters were themselves the subjects of sexual abuse while children (e.g., Groth & Burgess, 1979). It is hypothesized that such experiences for various reasons condition arousal to children in later life.

Blockage

These theories assert that child molestation occurs because offenders are blocked from satisfying sexual needs through conventional relationships. Often the blockage is attributed to problems in the maternal relationship which make it difficult to relate to other women (e.g., Hammer & Glueck, 1957; Gillespie, 1964). Trauma in early sexual experiences is seen as another possible cause for blockage. Related theories suggest that child molesters are timid, awkward and have poor social skills which prevent them from attaining adult relationships with women (e.g., Gebhard et al., 1965; Langevin, 1983).

Finkelhor breaks down the blockage category into two types: developmental blockages in which a person appears to be prevented for some reason from moving into the adult heterosexual stage of development, and situational blockages where a person with seeming adult sexual interests is prevented from normal sexual activity by some temporary crisis. The blockage theory which receives most support is that sex abusers for various reasons have problems relating to adult females (Hammer & Glueck, 1957) and perhaps even to adults in general (Panton, 1978).

Disinhibition

In this category, child sexual molestation results from ineffective moral inhibitors that do not prevent abhorrent behavior. Some theorists have suggested that child molesters have generally poor impulse control (e.g., Gebhard et al., 1965; Groth et al., 1982). Situational factors may also contribute to abusive behavior. Stressors such as unemployment or loss of a loved one are recognized as factors which might lower a person's inhibition to pedophilic behavior (e.g., Mohr et al., 1964). Many theories see alcohol as playing a major role in the commission of sexual offenses against children (e.g., Rada, 1976). Also incest against stepdaughters, more common than against daughters, is theorized to be a weakening of the normal incest avoidance mechanisms developed naturally by biological fathers over years of bonding and care-giving (e.g., Finkelhor, 1980; Russell, 1986). The strongest theories of disinhibition implicate alcohol as the major contributing factor in sexual molestation, with abuse of stepdaughters considered a special case because the incest taboo is severely weakened.

It cannot be overemphasized that adult sexual relationships with children are not explainable with single theories. While it is true that many molesters have a history of child abuse during their childhood, most of the studies contending this were conducted on imprisoned child molesters--a small sample of all offenders and a group whose behavior was so compulsive and flagrant as to require imprisonment. A high incidence of sexual abuse in the backgrounds of this more pathological group is to be expected. In any case, it is clear there are many molesters who do not have a history of childhood abuse. Moreover, not all people with such a history become molesters.

Research on Offender Recidivism

It is unfortunate that recidivism, one of the most important issues for policy in connection with child abuse, has received so little attention. Professionals who work with child molestation offenders have scant information available to predict whether a person will continue to commit this crime. Finkelhor uncovered ten recidivism studies, and these are difficult to compare because of different research designs and variables. The results are presented below.

TABLE 2

Recidivism Rates from Various Studies of Convicted Offenders

	Recidivism Rate (percentage) Any Offense	Sex Offense	N	Years of Follow-Up	% of Sample Who Are Child Molesters
Christiansen et al.	24	11	3175	14-24	68
Fitch	42	25	139	4-9	100
Groth	30	13	194	3	a
Frisbie & Dondis female victims		18	1035	1-7	100
male victims		35	428	1-7	100
Hall		23	313	5	100
Meyer & Romero	44	6	48	10	100
Prentky	50	30	137	1-24	100
Radzinowicz	28	18	404	4	100
Soothill & Gibbons	48	23	174	23	85
Tracy et al.	23	13	141	5	<52

[a]Combines 122 untreated and 72 treated sex offenders, exact offense unspecified.

The percentage of sex offenders who subsequently committed a specifically sexual offense ranged from 6% to 35%.

Finkelhor cautions these results probably underestimate the amount of recidivism since researchers only counted offenses that came to the attention of the authorities, and often only those that resulted in conviction. On the other hand, the samples were taken from populations most likely to reoffend in the first place--hardened cases in prison. One other study (Smith & Wolfe, 1985) with a nonincarcerated population reported unusually low recidivism rates (3%). However, the information on re-offenses was not obtained from records but from self-reports or reports from family members or police; this may explain the low rate. Abel et al. (1984) reported that of a group of 24 outpatient child molesters 21% had committed another sexual offense.

Finkelhor suggests that another problem with these studies is the short follow-up time. The only long-term follow-up study (Soothill & Gibbons, 1978) indicated that recidivism increased dramatically with a longer period of time.

There is solid agreement among researchers concerning who is most likely to reoffend: abusers of boys as opposed to girls (Frisbee & Dondis, 1965; Radinowicz, 1957) and exhibitionists (Frisbee & Dondis, 1965; Meyer & Romero, 1980). Studies also agree that incest offenders tend to have lower recidivism rates than other offenders against girls (Frisbee & Dondis, 1965). Once a daughter or stepdaughter has grown up, incest offenders are less likely than other child molesters to reoffend (Abel et al., 1984) although there are cases of men who at a later point in their lives sexually abuse their grandchildren (Goodwin, Cormeir, & Owen, 1983).

Other characteristics associated with higher recidivism are prior arrest for a sex offense in adulthood and a self-reported history of indecent exposure (Meyer & Romero, 1980). It also seems likely that offenders who begin offending at a younger age continue to commit more crimes (Christensen et al., 1965).

Research on Efficacy of Treatment

Finkelhor decries the lack of helpful research in the area of treatment efficacy. Only three studies directly compare treatment and nontreatment groups. Of these, Meyer and Romero (1980) find no difference between the groups after ten years; Hall (1985) finds no difference between groups after five years. Groth (1983) reports treatment differences after five years, but Finkelhor claims the short follow-up measurement flawed the study. There are many studies (cf. Kelley, 1982, for a review) which describe treatment improvements, but Finkelhor cautions these are short-term successes

and do not address the problem of reoffense in the longer run. In addition, Finkelhor points out that there have been many advances and innovations recently in treatment techniques which have not yet been studied in terms of long-term recidivism.

Significance for Personnel Security

Finkelhor's comment about the absence of evaluations of good treatment programs in relation to long-term recidivism is a somewhat disappointing outcome of this review. In the absence of any definitive estimates of recidivism probabilities, adjudicators can only fall back on conventional wisdom (e.g., frequency, severity, and recency of offenses) which are largely unsubstantiated by scientific evidence.

It is difficult for the average person not to consider child sexual abuse, which runs the gamut from simple exhibitionism to fondling to rape and other physical violence, as a heinous crime. A child is psychologically and often physically harmed, and the reaction of a normal person is abhorrence. The commission of such acts demonstrates a character defect in the perpetrator which flies in the face of conventionally accepted behavior standards.

Some may argue that the sexual offender, whether reformed or still active, poses no threat to national security. The rationale for this assertion is that as long as the offender continues to perform the job efficiently and loyally protects sensitive information he/she is entitled to a private life free from scrutiny. The counter-argument suggests that crimes against children are extremely serious and that a person who, for whatever reason, engages in sexually abusive behavior against children may lay himself open to pressures of blackmail or extortion. There is sufficient social approbation of child sexual abusers that few if any of them are willing to acknowledge publicly their sexual orientation. Consequently fear of exposure or prosecution would make child abusers especially vulnerable targets of hostile intelligence services. If the theories of child sexual abuse discussed earlier are true, child molestation may well cluster with other personality "weaknesses" that could be exploited by foreign agents.

There is no doubt that therapists believe sex abusers can be cured, and doubtless many are. A penitent and willing client will spend two years in therapy and may go on to live a good and productive life. The evidence on recidivism and treatment efficacy is equivocal at best. There is little information on treatment effects and the results of the few studies of recidivism are uneven. Controlled, long-term

studies are clearly needed. This is a relatively new field of research endeavor and it is premature to make definitive recommendations without more detailed research.

It is suggested that meantime the Board should refer further to Finkelhor's book, A Source Book on Child Sexual Abuse, and to the bibliography appended to this paper as a way of familiarizing themselves with this subject. There are certain kinds of child sexual abuse which research has shown to have high recidivism rates. These are abusers of boys as opposed to girls; exhibitionists; persons with prior arrests for sex offense in adulthood and a self-reported history of indecent exposure; and offenders who begin offending at a younger age. Future research will give more insight into the causes of child sexual abuse, recidivism rates and treatment outcomes for abusers.

Definitions

Literature about sexual abuse of children often uses terms interchangeably. Precise definitions have been offered by Ruth S. and C. Henry Kempe in Child Abuse; Robert L. Geiser in Hidden Victims: The Sexual Abuse of Children; and Fay Honey Knopp's Retraining Adult Sex Offenders: Methods & Models. The following definitions are generally accepted:

Child sexual abuse:	The exploitation of immature children and adolescents in sexual activities they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to give informed consent, or that violate the social taboos of family roles. These include:
Pedophilia:	An adult's preference for or addiction to sexual relations with children. This often involves an adult's nonviolent sexual contact with a child. Can never be cured, but the behavior may be brought under control.
Child Rape:	Sexual intercourse with a child without his/her consent, by force or threats of force. No cure for an aggressive sociopath who commits this crime.
Molestation:	Various forms of sexual contact between an adult and a child short of actual intercourse. Considered as equivalent to rape by some.
Incest:	Sexual acts committed on young children, forceful or otherwise, by family members, often continued over many years. Treatable.
Paraphiliac:	Person with compulsive thoughts and urges to carry out sexually aggressive behaviors.

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