

Child molesters' cognitive distortions. Conceptualizations of the term

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Summary

The concept of cognitive distortion was created by A. T. Beck and it is one of the key concepts of cognitive psychotherapy. In the 80s of the twentieth century, researchers began to use it in studies of sexual offending, but with reference to the social learning theory rather than to the theory of cognitive psychotherapy. Subsequent authors continued the use of this term in the determinants of child molestation and defined them as products emerging from specific implicit theory of the offender, the judgements resulting from his beliefs, values and actions, dysfunctional cognitive schemas, deviant cognitive practices undertaken in the interaction of internal and external components of perpetrator's cognitive system and his social practices. The primary theoretical background in the description of the concept of cognitive distortions of child molesters was the social cognition theory, but it was complemented with the assumptions of the theory of cognitive psychotherapy, extended theory of mind and discursive psychology perspective. Particular concepts describe the cognitive distortions relating them to different classes of cognitive phenomena: products, processes and structures, and the only thing they have in common is their incompatibility of their content to the social norms. Giving this concept a normative nature leads to internal contradictions within the conceptions that concern it. Moreover, using it to explain the various processes oversimplifies the picture of this phenomenon and leads to contradictions between theories. It is, therefore, necessary to consider replacing the term cognitive distortions with alternative and more precise concepts.

Key words: cognitive disorders, sex offences, child sexual abuse, offenders, pedophilia

Introduction

The concept of cognitive distortion comes from the conceptual system of cognitive psychotherapy. A.T. Beck was the first to use this term [1] in his description of the cognitive concept of depression. On the basis of clinical observations and research, Beck came to the conclusion that at the root of mental disorders there is distorted thinking reflected in the systematic errors of the suffering person on his/her own experiences. Beck's idea was developed in clinical practice and verified in research long enough to achieve, in the 1980s, the status of a "system" consisting of a theory of personality and psychopathology as well as psychotherapy model. With time, the spectrum of mental disorders, in which the cognitive therapy started to be put in practice, was expanded to e.g., schizophrenia, personality disorders, addictions, stress-related disorders [2].

In the modern expansion, cognitive theory is based on several assumptions. Cognitive functions are crucial for understanding the behavior. They regulate the inference about the present (about themselves and surrounding), future events and possibilities of controlling them. According to the assumptions of the theory, the individual life experiences are collected in the form of cognitive schemas. They are responsible for giving meaning, that is subjective interpretation of a situation in which the individual is placed and his/her relation to this context. Giving the meaning activates the adaptation strategies of an individual and controls other psychological systems – of attention, memory, emotional and behavioral ones. Giving meaning often occurs automatically, unconsciously (automatic thoughts based on more general core and intermediate beliefs), but it can also be the result of a more reflective, conscious and critical information processing.

Meanings that the individual gives to situations are constructed actively and on an ongoing basis. They may be evaluated in terms of relevance to the context (relevancy) or purpose (utility). Errors in cognitive content (meaning) or information processing (developing of a meaning) are called cognitive distortions and considered as unadjustable for the individual. A person may have predispositions to the formation of specific cognitive distortions, and thus to develop symptomatic syndromes such as depression or anxiety disorders [3, 4].

The concept of cognitive distortions, derived from Beck's theory, was also adapted in research on sexual offenses. The first to use it in 1984 were Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner. They described and interpreted the specific statements given by offenders on their acts of child sexual abuse [5]. Despite the convergence of concepts, their works were not based on the theory of Beck. To settle his issue in a broader context of explanations of antisocial behavior, they used the social learning theory of Albert Bandura [6]. Works of subsequent authors describing the cognitive distortions in perpetrators were mainly based on social cognition theory [7, 8].

Broad interest in this issue, noticeable from the 1980s, and the variety of theoretical basis adopted by the researchers resulted in the diversity of conceptualization of the term. In the current debate on the range of its meaning one can observe criticism, accusations of excessive generality and thereby lack of utility [9, 10]. There are also

visible some proposals for the use of alternative, precisely formulated terms, such as etiological cognitions [11] or incorrect/distorted cognitive practices [12].

The aim of the study was to analyze how the concept of cognitive distortions is defined in the literature describing the child sexual offending.

The starting point – conceptualization by Abel

Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner [5] have described cognitive distortions as beliefs arising when a male¹ realizes that his sexual interests are contrary to social norms. Although social norms do not affect the change in sexual interest, the emerging divergence of interests and social assessment cause the tension and impede the fulfillment of desire. In potential offender, therefore, specific thoughts and attitudes arise that are to reduce tension and enable sexual fulfillment. In subsequent works, the authors have argued that cognitive distortions are also internal process involving “justifications, perceptions and judgements used by the sex offender to rationalize his child molestation behavior” [14]. They described seven distortions expressed by the child sexual abuser, such as “a child who is not physically resisted to sexual encounter, wants sex” or “an adult, who only touches the child’s body and genitals is, in fact, not behaving sexually towards him in fact, so he does not cause any harm”.

The conceptualization of the term proposed by Abel et al. was criticized of fragmentation and inconsistency, a description of the distortions both in terms of beliefs and the process, while mentioning the typical contents, what suggests referring to the category of cognitive products [10, 15]. Subsequent attempts to describe this concept were to replenish these deficits.

Cognitive distortions as manifestations of specific implicit theories

Ward pointed out that the conceptualization of cognitive distortions introduced by Abel focused on their external manifestations – cognitive products and thus has not described the mechanism leading to their formation and expression [16]. Together with Keenan, he proposed to describe that “cognitive distortions emerge from underlying causal theories about the nature of their [offender’s] victims, the world, and themselves and about the relationships between these elements” [17].

¹ In the course of the analyses of subsequent conceptualizations of the notion of cognitive distortions, it is seen that researchers apply it almost exclusively to the phenomenon of male sexual offending. Although the authors formulate descriptions of concepts in a general way, writing about cognitive functioning of “an individual”, “a person” or “a perpetrator”, in making empirical verification, they actually refer only to research conducted on male subjects. It seems that they have assumed that their ideas and research pertain to men, but they do not formulate it explicitly. Research and attempts to describe the cognitive distortions of female sex offenders in theory, are in the early stages of development, leave a period of exploration of specificity of these offenders in comparison to the models of male perpetrators [13]. While the use of general cognitive models to explain narrower issues of male sexual crime is logically justified, an attempt to reverse the action (use of models developed for male offenders to explain more general questions, including those related to women) seems to be at risk of simplifying or distorting the image of issue. This topic, although interesting, will be not elaborated in this article due to its secondary nature to the main consideration.

The implicit theories are specific type of cognitive schemas whose function is to facilitate the understanding of phenomena in the surrounding social world. They contain information about mental states of others, the circumstances of their appearance and expression in behavior. The term “implicit theories” indicates similarity to scientific theories [17, 18]. They contain assumptions about the nature of the world. They indicate causal connection related to behaviors of people in different contexts. They are composed of interrelated elements (beliefs/judgments), are also relatively internally consistent. They determine interpretation of the facts by identifying their essential elements and giving them meaning. What is different in implicit theories when comparing to scientific theories is much lower susceptibility to change under the influence of non-compliant information. Implicit theories affect the prediction of other people’s behaviors, the choice of own behaviors and expectations about the reactions of others to them. The term “implicit” indicates that they are rare and difficult to articulate explicitly, whereas they are manifested in behaviors and interpretations of the external situations [16].

Although implicit theories are formed mainly in childhood, they may be changed later in life. Dwek, Chiu and Hong indicate that implicit theories have attribute of adaptability, but not accuracy [18]. In determining the way of understanding reality, they bring benefits or losses to an individual. Adaptability of implicit theory is not determined by its content itself, but rather the fit of content to the circumstances. The same implicit theories maybe highly adaptive in some conditions, but maladaptive in others.

Ward and Keenan suggest that implicit theories of child sexual offenders are distinguished by their specific content [17]. For example, implicit theory of an offender may be built around the belief that adult’s sexual activity with a child is not detrimental to the minor, that it is neutral or even rewarding to him/her. Based on this theory there may arise the following consideration: “If the act was devoid of physical violence, it was not harmful” or “sexual act included in other activities such as play, is normal, harmless part of this activity”. Although not all of the implicit theories that generate cognitive distortions contain content related to sexuality, they all are related to the etiology mechanism of child sexual abuse.

Ward, Polaschek and Beech argue that the described approach of cognitive distortions is characterized by high internal and external consistency, broad scope of application in both theoretical and empirical analyses [15]. These advantages are reflected in the numerous studies that have adopted this concept as a theoretical basis. The weak point of this conceptualization are the following: the lack of description of the nature of compounds of motivation and affective experiences with usage of implicit theories, too much emphasis given to similarities of implicit theories and scientific theories, lack of description of the mechanism mediating developmental experiences and shaping the specific implicit theories, also their role in the commission of the first and subsequent sexual offenses.

Cognitive distortions as individual’s judgments

Since the studies based on the concept of Ward and Keenan only partially confirmed it, the subsequent authors have made efforts to supplement it [8]. One example

is the model of cognitive distortions as individual's judgments (Judgment Model of Cognitive Distortions – JMCD) [19, 20]. In this model, cognitive distortions are regarded as judgments of the relevant for offending aspects of reality, which maybe the result of having certain beliefs, values, taking up actions, or interaction between these elements.

Ward, Gannon and Keown suggest that previous conceptualizations have described cognitive distortion based on the beliefs most precisely. As such conceptualization, they acknowledged a model of cognitive distortions being a manifestation of implicit theories. As the least described in the literature, they indicated the group of distortions based on individual's values. The inspiration for the description of this group of distortions was the Good Life Model, explaining the mechanisms of sexual offenses [21, 22]. According to the model, the perpetrators appreciate the same values as all the people, that is: health, knowledge, interpersonal relationships, creativity or sense of autonomy. However, they often either do not have sufficient resources to reach them in a socially acceptable way, or do not perceive such manners. Creating judgments, reasons for the achievement of goals important to the individual by using criminal behaviors (e.g., child molesting) is explained as a second path of formation of cognitive distortions. Distortions based on actions, the third type, reflect attempts of the perpetrator to change the meaning of his action, so that it was acceptable to him. This group of distortions may be applied to the concept of rationalizations of taken acts, described in the early works of Abel.

Ward, Gannon and Keown do not define clearly the relationship between the judgment model of cognitive distortions and the implicit theories model. They have indicated several times that implicit theory model applies only cognitive distortions based on beliefs. On the other hand, they argue that each type of cognitive distortions is organized into "thematic networks", which then they describe in relation to the five types of implicit theories described by Ward and Keenan.

Cognitive distortions from the perspective of extended mind theory

Another effort to develop the concept of Ward and Keenan was the attempt to relate it to the extended mind theory [12, 23]. According to its assumptions, the human cognitive system is of hybrid nature, including, apart from the internal components (schemas, beliefs) external, physical and social, elements. Having a specific implicit theory is not sufficient for an individual to manifest cognitive distortions; for their formation the presence of external components, such as e.g., access to specific objects (child pornography), participation in certain social structures or culture (contact with people approving pedophilic acts, functioning in a social group with fuzzy borders in adult-child relationships) is necessary. In this grasp, cognitive distortions are aspect of deviant cognitive practices, which fail to meet the normative standards, the result of the interaction of internal and external components of the individual's cognitive system. Having certain cognitive distortions therefore need not be a permanent feature of perpetrators. They may manifest cognitive distortions only in certain situations or contexts, while in others (e.g., in the course of diagnosis and treatment) their tendency

to display distortions may decrease. The described expansion of the concept by Ward [23], has not been fully developed yet and has a status of hypothesis.

Cognitive distortions as schemas

Mann and Beech offered a description of cognitive distortions in sexual offenders in terms of cognitive schemas [24]. Their conceptualization is actually the only one that has been so far directly related to the works of Beck. The authors define cognitive schemas as structures that contain thematically related beliefs and attitudes, or their patterns, developed by the individual in the course of giving meaning to life experiences. Cognitive schemas control processes of attention, perception, thereby saving cognitive resources and enabling shortened automatic processing of information received by an individual. In the offenders, they have dysfunctional character. Being a result of ambiguous or negative developmental experiences, they are used for understanding and giving meaning to the past. These schemas also lead to the formation of distorted beliefs and evaluations in response to stimuli activating them and coming from the environment [25].

Activation of dysfunctional cognitive schemas causes information processing in a way that in interaction with the effects of other factors (intimacy deficits, impulsivity, poor self-control, deviant sexual interest) may lead to the commission of sexual offense. The authors of the concept suggest that distorted cognitive schemas, despite dysfunctional structure of content, are characterized by chronic accessibility. Easily activated, they affect current information processing in a broad range.

While the cognitive schemas themselves and the process of their activation are done automatically, beyond an awareness of an individual, the beliefs which are formed on the above are available for the insight. The ones built during reflective and conscious information processing and those resulting from automatic processing both affect behavior of the individual. The importance of the second group of beliefs grows in situations of time pressure and also when individual's cognitive resources are involved simultaneously with another activity.

Based on the described approach to cognitive distortions research on sex offenders has been conducted [26, 27]. A variety of different methods have been used, among them are: interviews, questionnaires and indirect measures based on behavioral indicators; pointing out the importance of reaching out to the deeper cognitive structures of subjects (thoughts, beliefs and attitudes articulated by the perpetrators are regarded as superficial "products", the effect of information processing based on the deeper structures) [25, 28]. Cognitive schemas, specific in content and related to sexual offence, have been described on the basis of research. Among them were: schema of grievance, need for respect/control (more common in perpetrators of rape on adults), and sense of being worthless in child sexual offenders. Mann and Beech also describe the existence of two structurally different types of schemas in offenders [24]. The first type – "category schemas" – is related to e.g., stereotypes about women and children. They lead to biased information processing, particularly ambiguous ones. The second type is more general "beliefs schemas" related to themselves, others and the world.

The authors assume that second type of schemas work as “operation modes” and, as such, have important impact on the offender’s functioning, affecting the network of associations by triggering specific thoughts, feelings and behaviors (“the mode” is a concept also present in the recent works of Beck) [4].

Although the concept of cognitive distortions as dysfunctional patterns seems to be theoretically consistent and empirically fruitful proposition, its critics point to areas that still require fine-tuning. These include issues of dysfunctional patterns of activation conditions and the nature of the relationship between patterns and taking a sexual offense.

Cognitive distortions as social practice

T. Auburn pointed out that the previous approaches focused on the content expressed by the offenders, describing it as cognitive distortions, largely ignoring the context of its appearance [29]. This led to the recognition of perpetrators’ statements as a reflection of their inner beliefs. However, it was ignored at the same time that the individual revealing the analyzed statements was previously labeled by other people as a sex offender and is often confronted by them with this position. This may activate the individual’s pursuit to minimize his responsibility for an act that is socially regarded as negative. The author, using discourse analysis for recording and transcription of therapy sessions, has stated that the function of the content, according to the previous definitions referred to as cognitive distortions, is, the most often, minimizing liability. That is, therefore, social practice taken in the interaction with the other person, not the simple expression of inner beliefs of the individual. He has set the hypothesis that the discourse on sexual offenses takes specific forms in which the generation of statements, called cognitive distortions, may be an element of the role socially assigned to offenders. *Ipsa facto*, he has put the question about the essence of the phenomenon whose manifestation is to be an expression of specific statements on child sexual abuse in offenders: is it a phenomenon related to the person – offender, or perhaps, the social context of his actions?

Conclusions

The review of the basic conceptualization leads to the conclusion that both the concept of child molesters’ cognitive distortions, as well as their functions and formation mechanisms are defined by different authors in many very different ways. ÓCiardha and Gannon argue that the concept of cognitive distortions “includes belief systems, justifications, perceptions, judgements, defensiveness, rationalizations, denials and minimizations [the significance of the act]” [11]. Particular concepts describing cognitive distortion in offenders relate to different classes of cognitive phenomena: products, processes and structures. They are also based on different theoretical grounds. This concept therefore is presented as a broad and internally inconsistent set of constructs.

The only thing which is common for these different conceptualizations of cognitive distortions is the assessment of their content as incompatible to social norms. This

thesis leads to the conclusion about the likely course of the formation of inconsistencies in the description of the concept apparent today. Initially, researchers and practitioners working with child sexual offenders met their statements, the content of which was incompatible with social norms. These statements contradicted or undermined the definition of the situation of sexual contact with a child as the abuse or crime. To describe and explain these statements the concept of cognitive distortions were used.

Using the term “distortion” means taking an assumption that the information can be processed by the person in a correct and incorrect/distorted way. It seems that the current crisis around the concept is related to the limitation of this implicit assumption, on which arguments can be found in the works of various authors. For example, the model of implicit theories suggests that they are results of developmental experiences and that they are entitled to attribute of adaptability, depending on their fit to the circumstances, where a person functions (not the attribute of correctness). However, the question is: if a property of individual’s implicit theories is the adequate effect of the specific conditions of his/her development or context of life, on what basis cognitive products which are manifestations of them are described as distorted?

Analysis of the idea of Ward and Casey leads to similar question [12]. These authors suggest that the individual’s mind and information processing is embedded in the internal structures of the individual and the external context of his functioning (environment, from which he retrieves information for processing, in response to which the processing takes up). If the context of the individual is specific (e.g., the macho culture, mentioned by the same authors), and the person turns on this specificity in information processing, basing on what criteria the products of information processing of this individual are described as distorted?

Conclusions of the analysis of this phenomenon from the perspective of discursive psychology remain consistent with these doubts [29]. According to its assumptions, statements previously described as cognitive distortions are created in response to messages from the environment emphasizing the responsibility of the perpetrator for the offence. It can be assumed that the perpetrator’s discourse with another person is his attempt to address the social norms and meanings that the other person gives to the perpetrator’s deed. This attempt can be described as an act of social negotiation of meanings in the discourse of these two, the discourse strongly determined by the social context in which it occurs. Both from the perspective of discursive psychology, as well as in opinions of other authors, looking for excuses for own behavior in such situation is typical and adaptive response [9, 30]. On what basis, then, the effects of such response are described as distortions and attributed only to the offender and his inner permanent determinants? In the context of described doubts, the assumption of the existence of a normative way of thinking and the use of the term “cognitive distortions” in the description of information processing in offenders appear to be questionable.

Another consequence of defining perpetrators’ statements on their acts as “cognitive distortions” was a substantial simplification of this phenomenon’s image. Today we know that offenders’ statements, non-compliant to social norms, are effects of many different processes; it is justified by data on the various functions of these statements and possible involvement of cognitive distortions in mechanisms of etiology, justifica-

tions of committed acts and coping with accusations from social environment. Different conceptions of cognitive distortions referred to the various underlying processes. It resulted in inconsistencies and contradictories, because the theories described different phenomena, yet naming them with the same term – cognitive distortions. Here arises the question whether it is possible and reasonable to maintain one concept to describe such a wide class of phenomena?

The concept of cognitive distortions has both historical value and well-established tradition of its use in the literature on sex offenders: etiology models [31, 32], the re-offense risk [33] and therapy [11]. This is an argument for the need to attempt to clarify the term, the analysis of ways of its understanding as well as importance of the individual approaches to the description of the phenomenon. The conducted analysis leads, however, to the conclusion of considerable limitations of this concept. The first results from basing the construct on a normative vision of information processing. The second one – from including a broad class of diverse phenomena to the definition of the concept. It seems that attempts to develop alternative and more precise concepts, present in the recent literature, are an important response to the described limitations. They open a possibility of reconstruction of previously accumulated, rich knowledge about this issue, and maybe a better basis for the continuation of its exploration.

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