Theoretical explanations of the cycle of child sexual abuse (CSA): are they convincing and what are the practical implications?

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Theoretical Explanations of Cycle of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) — Are they convincing and what are the practical implications?

I. Introduction and Background

There have been beliefs that experiencing sexual abuse in childhood results in later child sexual abuse (CSA) offences by the victims. This is often referred to as cycle, or the cycle of CSA. A number of studies have been carried out by experts in different fields to investigate this issue and the findings from which they developed their own theories were diverse, and shocking indeed.

There are plenty of explanations and hypotheses in respect of (the) cycle of CSA, the majority of them are psychological ones but they are also taken from a sociological and ecological standpoint. Theories include suggestion that a victim becomes an offender to assert their masculinity (Carmen 1984), which is similar to seeing immature individuals as substitutes (Freud 1901-1905); There are also sociological theories on stigmatisation, labelling and so on. Many psychological, neurological and socio-ecological factors such as alcohol abuse, domestic violence and socio-economic status can act on an individual at the same time to form the cycle of CSA, and a narrow approach to explaining complex behaviour is never ideal. Every single individual leads a very different life from others, therefore, it is important to note that, beyond any reasonable doubt, specific application to different contexts is essential in any attempt to explain human behaviour such as this.

Jespersen and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis and found evidence including many studies that supported the victim-victimiser cycle, one of which was Glasser and colleagues’ study in 2001, that found a high correlation (see figure 1) between victimisation and CSA offences. It cannot yet be supported that one causes the other, as many other environmental factors may also have an impact on victims of CSA, as previously noted. Solely from a psychological perspective, the aim of this project is to review and assess various theories, to explore and evaluate the connections between them, and then some useful practical implications are to be developed.

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Definitions of Incest and Paedophilia (two of the most common forms of CSA)

For the purposes of the current study, incest was defined as any sexual act carried out within the subject's family, including any substitute parents as well as uncles, aunts, grandparents or first cousins. Paedophilia was defined as including a contact sexual act which was carried out with any child outside the subject's family by an adult who had a sexual interest in children. There is also a narrow definition where a sexually mature individual involves dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in contact sexual activity (breast, oral, anal or vaginal).

II.

The Cycle of Sexual Abuse in Males and Females (analysis of data from a forensic psychotherapy clinic for antisocial and sexually deviant subjects)

Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not a perpetrator</th>
<th>Perpetrator</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not a victim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>466 (76%)</td>
<td>146 (24%)</td>
<td>612</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89% of non-perpetrators</td>
<td>65% of perpetrators</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previously a victim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56 (41%)</td>
<td>79 (59%)</td>
<td>135</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11% of non-perpetrators</td>
<td>35% of perpetrators</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>522 (70%)</td>
<td>225 (30%)</td>
<td>747</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( x^2 = 63.1, \, d.f. = 1, \)
\( P < 0.001, \) odds ratio = 4.5, 95% CI 3.05-6.65

Victim-to-victimiser cycle summarised: male subjects

Here are some further details derived from the same study:

a) 24% of the reported non-victims were perpetrators (146 of 612);

Ibid. 4.

\(^5\)Ibid. 4.


\(^7\)Ibid. 4.
b) 51% of reported incest victims were perpetrators (24 of 47);

c) 61% of reported paedophile victims were also perpetrators (46 of 76);

d) 75% of those who reported that they were victims of both incest and paedophilia were also perpetrators (9 of 12).

It also appears that very few female previous victims became perpetrators (2%) whereas of all reported male victims (135 of 747) 59% (79 of 135) were also perpetrators, evidently this shows a very strong link between being a victim of CSA and becoming an offender, but it is gender specific, as this happens much more often amongst male victims.

As shown in the left bottom corner of figure 1, the chi-square test performed using these statistics concluded that the results were statistically significant:

1, x²=63.1, the value exceeds the critical value at the probability of 0.001 level when the degree of freedom is 1 (d.f.=1) for a one-tailed test, this means there is less than 0.1% of likelihood that the findings of this study are due to chance (see figure 2 below, critical value of chi-square for one-tailed test).

Figure 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degrees of freedom</th>
<th>Probability of exceeding the critical value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.987</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2, The odds ratio⁹ equals 4.5. Odds ratio is one of three main ways to quantify the extent to which the presence or absence of property A is associated with the presence or absence of property B in a given population. If odds ratio is greater than 1, it is said that they

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are associated, 4.5 is much greater than 1, therefore according to this, victimisation is strongly associated with victimising.

However, it can be argued that as these samples were all from a forensic psychotherapy clinic, there would be a strong likelihood that the participants personally had a high interest in this issue, therefore the representativeness of the samples may not be very high. Also, it is likely that many extraneous variables (variables that affect the actual results) were present so the validity of this study may have been lowered. As an example, one may lie about one’s real experience simply because it is too embarrassing to talk about previous abuse due to social desirability (i.e., wanting to be liked).

III.

Behavioural Theories

Classical conditioning\textsuperscript{10}: a learning process that takes place when an unconditioned stimulus and a neutral stimulus are repeatedly paired: a conditioned response which is at first elicited by the unconditioned stimulus is eventually elicited by the conditioned stimulus (the previously neutral stimulus) alone, becoming a conditioned response.

Operant conditioning\textsuperscript{11}: a learning process can be described as attempts to modify behaviour through the use of positive and negative reinforcement, as well as positive and negative punishment. An individual makes an association between a particular behaviour and a consequence. For example, if a behaviour is reinforced it is more likely to be repeated.

McGuire, Carlisle, and Young (1965)\textsuperscript{12} hypothesised that non-normative (abnormal) sexual arousal may become conditioned (classically and operantly) through masturbatory fantasies paired with orgasm. These researchers suggested that early sexual experiences, such as sexual behaviour with an adult, supply the material for these masturbatory fantasies and that through classical conditioning (i.e., the neutral stimulus is fantasy, the natural stimulus is orgasm), the fantasy stimuli becomes increasingly sexually arousing. McGuire and colleagues suggested that these masturbatory fantasies might become progressively more non-normative (relating to children) as a result of memory distortion and selection over time. They also allowed that other factors, such as feelings of physical or social inadequacy, might be important determinants of a preference for non-normative sexual fantasies over more conventional ones.

To clarify, since teenage sexual life almost entirely consists of indulgence in masturbatory fantasies, which serves as the neutral stimulus paired with orgasm (the unconditioned response), they normally associate these masturbatory fantasies i.e. sexual behaviour with a peer, with the later conditioned response, orgasm. However, sexual behaviour with an


\textsuperscript{12}McGuire, R.J., Carlisle, J.M., and Young, B.G. Sexual deviations as conditioned behaviour: A hypothesis. \textit{Behaviour Research and Therapy}, 1965, 2, 185-190.
adult in early childhood can provide imaginary materials for these masturbatory fantasies (the neutral stimulus) to indulge masturbatory orgasms (the unconditioned response), therefore the subject becomes to associate these masturbatory fantasies, i.e., sexual behaviour between an adult and a child, with orgasm. Now, the neutral stimulus has become the conditioned stimulus and the unconditioned response has become the conditioned response. It follows that as they become grown-ups and are able to carry out sexual interactions, they are more likely to commit CSA offences because their masturbatory fantasies are entirely based on the early sexualisation and they have somehow fantasised the self in the role of the adult. There is also a more direct way of conditioning, in which case increased sexual interactions between peers directly condition sexual arousal to children, therefore, resulting in subsequent conditioning through masturbatory fantasies as stated above. Both of the proposed processes are supposed to be kept operantly reinforced by constant rewards of masturbatory orgasms.

Discussion

However, as behaviourism has always been accused of being deterministic, these behavioural explanations of the cycle of CSA have the same drawback: arising from the idea that CSA victims are destined for becoming offenders because they have all been programmed to have sexual interest in children, without any chance of having any free will and self-consciousness. This theory is also to be blamed for being beta-biased, as it minimises multiple major differences between male and female victims, as shown in the study (Glasser et al, 2001) mentioned in the last section: it classifies all as identical blank pieces of paper, irrespective of the differences in their biological, developmental and social background; it also labels all unfortunate victims as 'future criminals'. There was a large proportion of previous male victims who were not offenders as the data showed, in this case, 41% of male victims did not become offenders; furthermore, only 2% of female victims were offenders. This contradicts the behavioural explanation as it is clear that not all the CSA victims have become offenders, hence they are not like machines, pre-determined to commit CSA. It is however possible that all the victims are sexually attracted to youngsters (i.e., they are paedophiles) although they are sufficiently self-conscious to stop themselves from committing any offences. Therefore a better theory that takes the free will of individuals into account is needed, hence the behavioural explanation is still acceptable but other approaches such as social cognitive theory could provide an alternative.
An essential part of the theory is the meditational processes\textsuperscript{14}, which consist of attention, retention, motor reproduction and motivation. Along with classical conditioning, a behaviour such as CSA may be learnt by the victims through these processes.

\textbf{Meditational processes:\textsuperscript{15}:}

\textbf{Attention}

This is the observational part of the processes, the child would obviously observe the behaviour of his offender.

\textbf{Retention}

This refers to whether or not the child would remember the event(s). If he/she is unable to remember the incident(s), the processes are terminated and the behaviour is unlikely to be learnt.

\textbf{Motor reproduction}

This is a very important part: the physical ability to repeat the behaviour. If the victim is not physically capable of carrying out the offence in the future, the behaviour is unlikely to be repeated. For instance, the individual is not yet a grown up.

\textbf{Motivation}

This relates to the will to perform the behaviour, which is based on the outcome of vicarious reinforcement i.e. the consequence of the action carried out by the learning model (the adult offender). If the consequence is positive, the observer (the victim) is thus likely to repeat the behaviour.

Once the behaviour is learnt, the child will undergo the process of operant conditioning: depending on the outcome of his imitation of the behaviour, the probability of repetition of the learned behaviour varies.

\textbf{Role Modelling}\textsuperscript{16} plays an essential role in the meditational processes: the more the observer identifies with the learning model, the more likely he/she is going to imitate the behaviour of the role model. It is also said that the more similar the role model is to the observer, the more likely the observer will identify with him/her. A typical example is the gen-

\textsuperscript{13}Transmission of Aggression Through Imitation of Aggressive Models
Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross & Sheila A Ross (1961)
(Originally published in the Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology 63, 575-582)


\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16}Transmission of Aggression Through Imitation of Aggressive Models, Bandura, Dorothea & Ross (1961)
der of the role model, i.e., if the observer and the role model are both male, there is a strong likelihood that the learner will imitate the role model. This to a certain extent explains why there were fewer female offenders who were previously victims: all victims, regardless of gender, were hardly abused by female offenders\textsuperscript{17} (see figure 3) (5.6% of heterosexual paedophiles, 6.5% of homosexual paedophiles, 8.0% of child molesters, 2.7% of gynophilic (attracted to women) controls and 2.0% of androphilic (attracted to men) controls were abused by a female who was older than 17, compared to 24.7%, 25.9%, 17.6%, 9.3% and 9.8% respectively being abused by a male equivalent), which means a female victim is much less likely to identify with a male offender and subsequently imitate him.

**Figure 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Heterosexual paedophiles</th>
<th>Homosexual paedophiles</th>
<th>child molesters</th>
<th>Gynophilic controls</th>
<th>Androphilic controls</th>
<th>Gynophilic offenders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>77</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abused by a male &gt; 17</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abused by either</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abused by either</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

SCT has provided deeper insights into the issue as the individual’s free will is accounted for and they can decide what to do or not to do, instead of being passively told by the environment to do something they may not want to do themselves. This explains why a large portion of the victim population did not become offenders, especially the female victim population. However there is still a problem with this theory: it appears to be a circular argument just like whether there was a chicken or an egg first, no one has yet been able to find out if there were fewer female offenders at the very beginning or fewer victims. Another limitation of SCT is the emphasis on the nurture side: the theory is still undeniably proposing that whether the victims become offenders simply depends on what they have experienced though they have free will to decide whether or not they want to perform the behaviour, without any elements of natural influence. There has been a study\textsuperscript{18} done by experts that supports the theory that early sexualisation of children brings about significant


\textsuperscript{18}Swaab D F. Sexual differentiation of the brain and behavior[J]. Best Practice & Research Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism, 2007, 21(3):431-44.
changes in certain components of their brains, such as a structure called hypothalamus (the marked blue area in figure 4): “In recent years, the first structural differences have been reported between the brains of pedophiles and those of control groups. A study involving magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) showed that the former have less grey matter (neurones) in various areas of the brains, like the hypothalamus, the bed nucleus of the stria terminals (whose size also differs in transsexuals), and the amygdala, which plays a role in sex, fear, and aggressive behaviour.” However, the experimental group who were examined in this study were all reported offenders and there are still plenty of non-offending paedophiles out there who have not been examined as they are never reported and so no one understands whether or not there is any difference between their brains and those of reported perpetrators.

Figure 4 Location of the hypothalamus in relation to the pituitary gland19.

SCT only explains the motivation of the offenders but not necessarily the actual action of their offences, because firstly, experiencing and observing such behaviour does not mean people are going to repeat the behaviour; second, knowing the consequence of committing such heinous crimes would presumably significantly regulate people’s behaviour. However, as shown in the data, 59% of male victims still went on to offend thus SCT cannot properly explain this simple fact. SCT only includes a single learning process but many other factors like the environmental backgrounds and mental health problems caused by CSA. Studies have found that CSA could cause severe mental impairment20 and other developmental issues, therefore, normative theory of social learning might not be suitable in this scenario as there can be tremendous differences between the ways that normal people and CSA victims reason things, as well as between their moral standards and boundaries, yet SCT failed to consider the significant impact this may have on them.

SCT, however, raised a very important issue: the influence of role modelling which later results in social learning processes suggests that parental lifestyle potentially plays a major part in the development of a child, especially those who are sexually abused. Psychologists such as Sigmund Freud began to focus on the parents and sought explanations of


the abnormal sexual life of individuals. They attempted to analyse abnormal sexual behaviours like CSA as mental disorders of some sort, caused by inappropriate parental lifestyle, e.g., a father who sexually abuses his child, or even in some cases, shows interest in children (i.e., a non-offending paedophile) because that is potentially going to affect his caring behaviour.

V.

*Freudian ideas: The Three Personality Structures: the id, the ego and the superego*21

Sigmund Freud, the founder of the psychodynamic theories, came up with some ideas that were seen as ground-breaking in the field of psychology and are still very influential today.

As stated in the previous section, SCT has failed to explain why some CSA victims did not offend even though they are psychologically paedophiles, supported by brain activity tests (Swaab 2007)22, whereas psychodynamic theory appears to be better at explaining the action of CSA instead of the motivation (being pedophiles does not equal committing CSA offences). Freud proposed the theory of three distinct personality structures including the id, the ego, and the superego that affect our decisions and actions.

*Definitions of the id, the ego and the superego*23:

- **The id**: Individuals are all born with the id, as their basic natural instinct such as hunger, libido and governed by the pleasure principle: seeking pleasure and comfort and avoiding pain, both physically and psychologically, the id contains unconscious desires (i.e. individuals are not directly aware of, and/or control such desires, especially sexual and aggressive). In the case of CSA, the id is acting on the sexual arousal towards children, and it is believed to be an unconscious reaction triggered directly by erotic images of children and the individual is completely unable to suppress such feelings.

- **The ego**: The ego is rational, developed out of the id at around the age of three, the ego tries to find a balance between natural instincts and reality and social conventions. It is half conscious and half unconscious.

- **The superego**: Unlike the ego, the superego is entirely conscious and subsequently we have full awareness of it. The superego is often developed by the age of five and, to be clear, it is more similar to a set of our own moral standards. It is often achieved by complex learning processes including all the learning theories mentioned before, and individuals begin to understand and decide what they must/must not do. Parents play an essential role in the formation of the superego. Poor parental lifestyle may cause a weak superego, as some behaviours are not rightly reinforced and negative behaviours are not punished, and also there may be a lack of appropriate education about the expectations of society. A

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22Ibid.15.

23Ibid.18.
person who has a weak superego may easily let the id override the superego and consequently take over his/her mind and do something socially unacceptable, such as having sexual interactions with a child.

Discussion

A child who experienced CSA often suffers from many long-term effects such as depression, low self-esteem and the degree of closeness to parents (Gold 1986), growing up in a family suffering from CSA such as incest or abuse from a close relative or friend can also expose the child to an environment that is lacking in appropriate parental care and education, both of which mean they are more likely to develop a relatively weaker superego compared to other healthy children who grow up in a better familiar environment. That said, if they have seen the perpetrator (a same-sex family member whom they feel comfortable with) as the role model and learn to imitate them, and consequently been conditioned to show sexual interest towards children, they are then more likely to offend even if they know it is highly socially unacceptable and illegal.

The theory of three personality mechanisms has managed to explain the behaviour even better. It has succeeded in explaining the actual causes of action of CSA offences despite perpetrators knowing the consequences of such horrific criminal offence. Those who are paedophiles but did not offend have a relatively stronger superego compared with those reported perpetrators. In summary, they are simply incapable of controlling themselves so as to prevent offending because they are not self-conscious enough due to insufficient/inappropriate parental lifestyle.

VI.

Exploring the links between The SCT, The Three Personality Structures and Bowlby’s Attachment Theory

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The Internal Working Model

This is a cognitive model developed by the child based on the quality of his/her attachment with the primary caregiver, awareness of how the world works and about interactions and relationships with others. For instance, if this relationship is loving and cheerful, the individual will expect a future life relationship to be so as well, although it is not supposed that he/she will be directly aware of such expectation. If internal working models of the self, others and the relationship between them develop within close relationships, we can see that the quality of these intimate relationships will influence how children view both themselves and other people. In this sense, external relationships become mentally internalised.

Attachment is an emotional bond built between two or more individuals through interactive behaviour over a period of time, for example that between a mother and her baby, or in the case of CSA, the initial perpetrator and the victim. Unlike SCT, the attachment and internal working model theory does not emphasise a direct learning/imitating behaviour but a psychological model formed beneath the surface of awareness. A more understandable example can be a friendship developed between two colleagues spending a long period of time working together, they may not deliberately require that they make friends, but through interactive behaviours such as cooperation at work, they unconsciously form a bond with each other.

Similarly, a child may develop attachment with a perpetrator over a period of time through frequent sexual encounters, more importantly, perpetrators who are close to the family often take over the essential place of the rightful primary caregivers and provide comfort to the victims due to poor parental lifestyle such as parental absence. The child, therefore, forms an attachment with the perpetrator, an abnormal relationship on which his internal working model is going to be based. As a result, the individual will expect a relationship in adulthood that is, for example, obsessed with sex at its basis and consisting of an adult and a child.

The connections and discussion

It is often suggested that adult androphilic i.e. homosexual paedophilia may be the long-term outcome of a previous emotionally gratifying experience of sexual contact with an adult during childhood or adolescence (Halleck, 1965; Rush, 1980; Seghorn, Prentky, and Boucher, 1987; Storr, 1964; Summit, 1983). Theoretically, for the emotionally deprived and neglected male child, sexual interaction with an older male could prove comforting and enjoyable. Furthermore, most sexual abuse offenders are acquainted with their victims: approximately 30% are relatives of the child, most often brothers, fathers, uncles, or cousins; around 60% are other acquaintances, such as ‘friends’ of the family, babysitters, or neighbours; strangers are the offenders in only approximately 10% of child sexual abuse cases. Through the mechanism of identification with the older partner, the male child or adolescent could be predisposed to become sexually involved with other male children or adolescents when he is an adult. Such an individual may identify with young males as the recipients of his affection and can therefore easily rationalise his behaviour.


LIN. X.

In one of the subject’s memoirs\(^28\), he wrote, “They came voluntarily”; “I told myself that I was the only person who cared about them. After all, I was the one who gave them my time, the benefit of my experiences and put some fun into their otherwise miserable life.”

In the views of the author of this section, due to the insights and generalisability provided by certain parts of these theories, the SCT, the three personality structures and the attachment theory can be convincing only on the condition that they are all considered carefully and applied specifically to the concept.

However, there are still some major downsides to these explanations, one of which is the validity of the three personality structures of psychodynamic theory. As Freud himself said, the id and part of the ego are unconscious, so there is no possibility to falsify his theory, which goes against the scientific principle that one cannot entirely prove a hypothesis correct but attempt to prove it wrong to improve one’s understanding. To elaborate, the mind being unconscious is not something individuals are directly aware of, meaning that everything that is called ‘unconscious’ by Freud, is wholly based on his subjective interpretation of what he observed from his patients and what he heard about his patients’ dreams. In other words, this theory is supported by little empirical scientific evidence, but mostly very qualitative, judgmental conclusions. There is no doubt that the validity of the theory is not particularly high; this does not mean that his theory is wrong, but being highly unscientific results in such a risk.

A number of the subjects of the cycle of CSA claimed that experience of being abused by an androphilic paedophile was not ‘comforting’ or ‘enjoyable’ or ‘painful\(^29\). This involves very high levels of social sensitivity but more importantly, contradicts the SCT: since the victims claimed to not enjoy and potentially hate the experience with the offender, there is little chance of them identifying with and subsequently modelling him. However, some men did reveal that though the sexual act itself was undeniably uncomfortable and painful, on the whole, the relationship with the perpetrator was very comforting and happy; they also revealed that they thought the painful sexual life was a very low price to paid for the overall loving relationship. “I wish my father did that (male affection in the family).” one of the subjects mentioned.\(^30\) In one’s view, high levels of social desirability bias i.e., the unnatural response of participants in a way that is more likely to be favoured by others, or at least some kind of confusion was involved when some subjects made the claim of such relationships between him and a close family member/friend being painful, it is believed that although a process of role modelling (see page 3 content on SLT/ SCT) did take place during the victimisation of CSA, later in life society may have converted his conscious mind into thinking that it is wrong to have sex with a child, therefore he might ‘think’ (consciously) such relationships were unenjoyable, though his unconscious mind beneath the surface still guides his sexual interest towards youngsters, and once his invitation is accepted by a child who does not understand what he is actually doing, he can easily rationalise his behaviour and thus becomes a perpetrator.

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\(^{28}\)Anonymous, In search of love, P32, From Victim to Offender\[J\].

\(^{29}\)Ibid.

Due to the damaging effects CSA had on victims (Gold 1986), they may become less capable and more cowardly in social life and therefore have become impotent and adopted an immature person or animal as a substitute, or when an urgent instinct cannot at the moment get possession of any more appropriate object, such as a normal romantic relationship. The sexual attraction seems to override the barrier between species or generations. Bear in mind that it can be said that this is simply closely related to the loss of balance between the id and the superego. In this case, there is not a clear direct connection between victimisation and offending, as a weak superego can result from many other factors. To exemplify, simple physical child abuse or the absence of one of the parents may also cause a weak superego. That would suggest that many of those who did not experience CSA also are at high risk of offending, making it not specific enough, therefore, unable to explain the reason for the victimising behaviour of previous victims. Using purely personality structures to try to explain cycle of CSA is impossible unless it is accompanied by a more specific approach like the SCT or the attachment theory as that means CSA victimisation is being directly considered along with offending. To explain further, a weak superego may be an important component of such a cycle that contributes to victimising, but it does not have a direct effect on the formation of it.

**Figure 5**

**A proposed model of CSA**

Given the connection drawn, the author of this chapter hereby proposes the following model of the victim-victimiser cycle (figure 5 above).

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31Ibid.21.

Followed by the first encounter, the offender would develop a relationship, a form of attachment with the victim, gaining trust from the latter. Upon forming the attachment, the child’s internal working model (which is generally an expectation of a future relationship) starts to develop, of which the fact that such a relationship between an adult and a child is a part, and this will develop further, later in the cycle.

This will lead to the first victimisation. Upon receiving the first victimisation, the victim would naturally pay attention to and remember certain procedures of the behaviour. At the same time, it is likely that the victim would imitate the offender as he would certainly identify with him due to the formation of the attachment, and as a result, learn and accept the behaviour. This is likely to become a part of his internal working model as this behaviour (abuse) would appear to be an important part of the relationship.

Re-victimisation would occur to reinforce the model existing in the victim’s mind, this is achieved by the continuous caring and affection given by the offender to reward the otherwise painful and abusive life. For many, the painful sexual abuse part of the relationship is simply a rather low price to pay for the overall loving relationship.

The willingness of offending would emerge when the surviving victim sees opportunities. The pressure from the society could be diminished by the ill-formed personality structure due to the early ill-established relationship. Brain scan study suggests structural differences within their brains, these differences can contribute significantly to the action of abuse, as biological responses are, beyond any reasonable doubt, difficult to resist.

The surviving victim is now unconsciously using the internal working model as a recipe of the abusive relationship and targeting children, the way the individual (the surviving victim) treats his victim now is likely to be similar to what he experienced as a previous victim. The cycle is completed. Another factor that may affect the willingness to offend is described in the following section.


**Psychodynamic: Barrier Against Incest (Freud 1901-1905)**

**Fixation:** fixation is a concept to denote the persistence of anachronistic sexual traits. The term subsequently came to denote object relationships with and attachments to people or things, in general, persisting from childhood into adult life.

**The Barrier against incest**

Freud suggested that a child’s sexual instincts may be awoken prematurely (i.e., “Before somatic mental excitation breaks through in an unmistakably shin to the genital system”) by his/her parents’ affection. If on the other hand, they are fortunate enough to avoid this, then parental affection can perform its task of directing the child in his choice of sexual objects. These are the same persons whom, since his childhood, he has loved with what may be described by Freud as damped-down libido. To be clear, Freud suggested every single child fancies his parents, unconsciously. But, by the postponing of sexual maturation, time has been gained in which the child can erect, among other restraints on sexuality, the barrier against incest, and can thus take into himself the moral precepts which expressly exclude from his object-choice, those blood-relations whom he has loved in his childhood. To clarify, the barrier against incest is basically a cultural demand made by society and it is taught by society to the child that incestuously sexual acts are essentially wrong.

**The choice of object**

Freud wrote: “The choice of object is accomplished at first; and the sexual life of a maturing child (reaching the age of puberty) is almost restricted to indulging in phantasies, that is in ideas that are not destined to be carried into effect. In these phantasies the infantile tendencies invariably emerge once more, but this time with intensified pressure from somatic sources.” This means the child begins to show sexual interest towards the parents again, but with more physiological responses such as erection and so at this time these incestuous fantasies will be “overcome and repudiated.” With much pain, the important psychical achievement of the pubertal period is completed: detachment from parental authority. It is at this point, the opposition emerging between the parents and the child becomes the primary means by which the child has withdrawn their affection from his parents.

**The connections to cycle of CSA**

As stated earlier in the last chapter, a victim (he himself may not be aware of that) may see an ideal relationship as being incestuous as that is all he has learnt from his early role model, or from his internal working model based on his relationship with his carer who was the offender. According to his own moral standards, it is not true that incestuous relation-

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35-Ibid.30.
ships are unacceptable but rather are more than reasonable to him—when he has a child, it is his responsibility to teach the child that incestuous relationships are wrong and he will apparently fail to do that due to what has been explained earlier in this paragraph.

This means the barrier against incest never exists in such families, and this naturally allows the child’s infantile fantasies to be continued. If there are not any interventions from the society other than the family itself to develop such a barrier against incest that suppresses these feelings, incestuous fantasies will accompany the child into puberty and he may well display sexual interest towards one of his parents (the victim of CSA) and that is going to help the parent easily rationalise his intention of victimising the child by thinking it is a ‘mutual love’ as well as easily gaining approval from the victim to do so. After this, the same model applies as to what will happen to the new victim.

Discussion: Social sensitivity and risks of bias

This theory is deemed by many as extremely unacceptable because of its suggestion that every child has had incestuous fantasies since they were very young which seems to go against most of general public’s moral standards, irrespective of the fact that Freud did mention these fantasies would be repudiated by the society. On one hand this highlights the levels of social sensitivity and controversy that Freud’s theory generates, on the other hand, how strongly the society has reacted to his theory provides solid evidence of exactly what happens in real life where a child’s natural incestuous fantasies are eliminated by a part of the society, in this case, most surprisingly, usually the family (i.e. the parents, with whom the child is in love). Furthermore, using “The barrier against incest” to explain the cycle of CSA seems to be a victim-blaming act and has obviously increased the levels of social sensitivity.

Continuing the theories mentioned in the discussion section of Id, Ego and Superego, Freud is accused of being highly biased due to the fact that he came up with his theories purely based on his interpretation of what was going on in his patients’ mind and sometimes even personal experience such as his own childhood memories. This is unscientific and some critics believed that Freud was perhaps simply a child who made explicit the Oedipal complex36 and apply that into his work. If this is proven to be true then the level of bias is undoubtedly high.

It is necessary to add that the connection between CSA and this theory is entirely drawn by the author of this section because so far few researchers have proposed the hypothesis that the barrier against incest has an impact on the probability of CSA victims offending, consequently, there is no evidence either supporting or contradicting the hypothesis.

VIII.

Summary and Discussion: Practical Implications of The Findings

(The) cycle of child sexual abuse is generally a very difficult issue to study as it requires a long period of time to observe the behaviour of subjects. Many sources synthesised were

all from retrospective interviews of convicted perpetrators and the information from them may not be particularly accurate. It is also very difficult for victims of such crimes to come forward to take part in studies as they may find it very challenging to talk about their experiences with others especially strangers like a researcher. Even if they are willing to talk, the fact that it is such a terrible memory to share with others may cause them to modify or choose different and socially acceptable, moderated languages, such as deliberately understating certain things, all of which may lower the validity of studies on this particular topic.

**Issues and debate:**

1. **The usefulness of quantitative and qualitative data**

   It is important to note that all theories require research evidence to have scientific credibility, which governs the extent to which a theory is valid (i.e., how ‘true’ it is) in terms of the issue it is addressing. Most psychologists have carried out quantitative research in the area and produced significant findings. These statistical findings provide a broad picture of the issue to many professionals, such as other experts, policy makers and even the law enforcement, and are useful for identifying the patterns, whilst enabling experts who seek the root of these behaviours to gain insights into them and potentially find solutions. At the same time, some have conducted qualitative studies and the large amount of detail is useful for searching potential formulations. However this type of research usually assesses a small number of individuals, consequently, any theories developed from these studies may not be very generalisable. Overall, an approach of combining both quantitative and qualitative data was used in this project. Qualitative research contributed majorly to the project, assisting the author in identifying various relevant formulations of CSA and drawing connections between them.

2. **A lack of research evidence due to social sensitivity and practical difficulties.**

Despite having mentioned many of the relevant theories, there were few researchers actually testing them. Although there are a number of research studies, which are mostly studies of correlation that suggest such a relationship, it is still simply incorrect to say that CSA causes offending, both morally and scientifically. On the scientific side, no causation can be inferred in a study of correlation, no matter how strong the correlation is. This means there is no causal relationship but only a connection. On the moral side, there is a common problem with all socially sensitive studies, which is that they risk having certain implications about a certain group of people, especially vulnerable groups such as CSA victims, causing negative attitudes towards them. The reason why this is causing difficulties to the researchers is that, to support any of the theories, researchers are forced to establish hypotheses based on the assumption that CSA causes victims to offend (all theories that can effectively explain the victim-victimiser cycle need to be based on a causal relationship).

As a result, any researcher who attempts to conduct a study based on this assumption is likely to face many criticisms and face a lot of pressure from the public. For example, the study may not be published because of the “file drawer effect” (i.e., publication bias), as publishers deliberately prevent the study from getting published due to the potentially damaging impact. Consequently, over time, research on the issue may receive very little funding and the issue becomes under-researched and even if it is researched, the depth of this research is limited.

However, it is still undeniably necessary for the researchers to carry on with these highly socially sensitive studies because although the outcomes can be damaging, they can be
tremendously beneficial to the society, such as, most importantly, being able to break the victim-victimiser cycle of CSA. At present, research is still a long way from achieving that, as researchers are finding it very challenging to establish a causal relationship because it is still impossible in practical terms, and subsequently they are unable to test the models suggested. To exemplify, even with the most advanced technology like the brain scan, the only possible way to find a causal relationship is to scan the victims-to-be first and scan their brains after the incident(s), which is morally unacceptable and impossible practically.

Since there is hardly any appropriate measures to bring a halt to the prevalence of many CSA victims becoming offenders, it is perhaps a more practical, less controversial idea to prevent CSA from happening in the first place, and to prevent it from happening to more children, by educating children. This may not be very useful because arguably (according to the statistics in section II), just less than half of the offenders are likely to be identified as former victims, meaning stopping them is most important.

A minimum legal age for sex

It is said that frequent sexual behaviour with peers when very young may cause a direct conditioning of sexual interest towards children. This means as they grow up, their sexual interest may remain at the stage where they were having sex with very young individuals when they were children themselves through the association between orgasms and their sexual objects who were youngsters. Therefore, it is believed by some that a higher minimum legal age for sexual behaviour is potentially needed to tackle this issue but it does not mean people will not have sex simply because there is a law restricting it. After all such law is almost impossible to be enforced. For example, there is a minimum legal age of 16 for sex in the UK, but it is obvious that people cannot be ‘policed’ from having sex anytime earlier than that.

In addition to that, increasing the age of consent may encourage some to become sexually active at a much younger age as imposing a stricter rule on them may result in reactance, which is a phenomenon where individuals feel their freedom is being suppressed and deliberately break the rule as a result. As an example, some particularly “reactant” individuals (those who react strongly to the restriction of rules) may have sex at a young age, purposely, in response to the laws.

This remains as a matter for debate due to multiple issues involved, such as those stated above. However research has shown there is a certain degree of connection that is unwise to ignore, between the age of sexualisation and CSA.

Appropriate educational methods about sexual life

According to what Freud said regarding the barrier against incest, the child will continue to have sexual fantasies about one of his parents if there are no inventions from society, which includes the parents themselves. A paedophilic parent and even some normal parents may not teach his child the moral standards which will act as the barrier against incest. This exposes their children to the vulnerability of being abused by their own parents.

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or another individual who may look like or act like their parents. Similar situations can also happen to those who have their parents absent from home and in the meantime a stranger takes over and hence could take advantage to exploit the vulnerable child. This raises a very controversial issue, which is whether or not school-based education about sexual life is too early, or too late. In this particular case, if the theory is true, the interventions from school-based education are too late. In the author of this chapter’s opinion, school-based education should be initiated much earlier than it is at the moment (which is year 7 and onwards in the UK) and children should not ever be left alone to blindly explore such an essential aspect of their adulthood life as they can be misled by someone whose motives are ulterior. Nowadays in many areas across the world very young children are being taught to self-guard such as rules taught to children in nurseries like “no one touches the place where our pants or top covers”. However, this also has limitations, one of which is that some children are unfortunately abused before the age of school or ben nursery, in some most seriously CSA cases the children victimised were only, shockingly, 2 to 3, and even as young as less than 1. It will be impossible for schools and nurseries to prevent CSA happening as for some it is already too late.

Victims’ family backgrounds and support

Despite being highly socially controversial, there is an implication from all the theories stated in this report that victims of CSA have a higher possibility of becoming perpetrators themselves. Above all, should a CSA case ever occur, the victims should be given a clear picture of what has actually happened to them. The way in which this is going to be expressed should depend on the age of victimisation, the need to be appropriately supported by trained specialists to overcome the trauma and recognise the nature of the incident(s). Secondly, the relationship between the victim and the offender needs to be assessed with care to determine the vulnerability of the victim in order to provide the victim with appropriate specialist assistance. For example, if the perpetrator is the father of the male victim, whom the victim admires and would describe as his role model, the specialist who provides support to the victim should be aware of this in order to respond to the case with care and suitable approaches. Victims abused by someone who is a close family member should be allocated to a suitable relative and they should be regularly visited by social services in order to monitor the state of the victim so as to minimise the vulnerability of one.

A brief summary

The range of theories that have been discussed have shown the wide divergence of views and approaches. It is true that each theory has its strength as well as limitations, but it is clear that any successful approach to prevent the cycle of CSA will need to take aspects from several of these theories and be highly individualised. This poses a challenge for professionals involved in this work and would require a good investment of time and resources.

38https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum/other-compulsory-subjects
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