Cognitive distortions are considered important in theory and treatment, but questions remain about the conceptualization and measurement of cognitive distortions and their potential role in sexual offending. In this symposium three papers will examine the relationship between cognitive distortions, evaluation, and empathy, and their potential relevance to sexual aggression. The first paper will explore the distinctiveness of cognitive distortions and evaluation of sexual aggression, and their respective independent associations with sexual aggression against adults. The second paper will examine the relationship between cognitive distortions, empathy, and sexual offending against children. The third paper will explore the distinctiveness of cognitive distortions and empathy. Together these papers (a) identify important gaps in knowledge; (b) begin to fill some of these gaps; (c) highlight implications for research, theory, and practice; and (d) identify priority areas for future research.

Disentangling Cognitions about Rape: Evaluations May be Distinct from Cognitive Distortions

Chloe Pedneault, B.A. Honours, Carleton University
Chantal A. Hermann, Ph.D., Carleton University
Kevin L. Nunes, Ph.D., Carleton University

Theory and research suggest that cognitive distortions are associated with sexually aggressive behavior (e.g., Bumby, 1996; Hall & Hirschman, 1991; Helmus, Hanson, Babchishin, & Mann, 2013; Ward, Gannon, & Keown, 2006). Some researchers have suggested, however, that the term cognitive distortion is poorly understood because it is inconsistently defined in the literature (e.g., Maruna & Mann, 2006; Ward, Gannon, & Keown, 2006). As a result, it may sometimes be unclear which cognitions are assessed by measures of cognitive distortions. Nunes, Hermann, White, Pettersen, and Bumby (2016) examined distinctions between evaluations of rape (e.g., rape is positive vs. negative) and cognitive distortions about rape in a student sample; they found evaluations of rape were distinct from other cognitions assessed by a widely used measure of cognitive distortions (RAPE Scale; Bumby, 1996). They also found that evaluations of rape and cognitive distortions assessed by the RAPE Scale were independently associated with past sexually
aggressive behavior and likelihood to rape. The purpose of the current study was to attempt to replicate and extend this past research with a community sample and different measures of sexually aggressive behavior and evaluation of rape.

Men from the community ($N = 386$) completed the RAPE scale as well as measures of evaluations of sexually coercive and/or aggressive behavior, past sexually aggressive behavior, likelihood to rape, and likelihood to engage in sexually coercive and/or aggressive behavior. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to explore whether cognitive distortions assessed by the RAPE Scale are distinct from evaluations of sexually coercive and/or aggressive behavior. The results of the EFA suggested that a two factor model fit the data well; items from the measure of evaluations formed a distinct factor from the RAPE Scale. Moreover, logistic regression analyses revealed that scores on the measure of evaluations and the RAPE Scale were significantly and independently associated with likelihood to rape and likelihood to engage in sexually coercive and/or aggressive behavior. These results are generally consistent with those from Nunes and colleagues (2016). Together, these findings suggest that the RAPE scale may be measuring cognitions about rape other than evaluations of sexually coercive and/or aggressive behavior, and that evaluations of sexually coercive and/or aggressive behavior and cognitions assessed by the RAPE Scale may provide complementary information relevant to sexual aggression. As such, future research should continue to examine evaluations of sexually coercive and/or aggressive behavior and the role they may play in sexual offending. If future research suggests a causal link, then addressing evaluation of sexual offending in assessment and treatment may contribute to further reductions in sexual offending.

Learning Goals and Objectives

- Discuss the concerns expressed by some researchers regarding the ambiguity surrounding cognitive distortions;
- Explore whether the RAPE Scale assesses evaluations of sexually coercive and/or aggressive behavior;
- Examine whether a measure assessing evaluation of sexually coercive and/or aggressive behavior and the RAPE Scale are both independently associated with sexually aggressive behavior;
- Compare these results to an earlier study conducted by Nunes et al. (2016); and
- Discuss the implications of these findings for research, assessment, and treatment.
Despite controversy, cognitive processes, as they are variously defined, appear to play a role in explanations of child sexual abuse. Some argue that such distortions are related to conscious post-offence excuse-making (Maruna & Mann, 2006; Murphy, 1990), whereas others suggest that cognitive distortions arise prior to offending, as a way of overcoming internal inhibitions by inhibiting empathy (Abel, Gore, Holland, Camp, Becker, & Rathner, 1989; Brown, Walker, Gannon, & Keown, 2013; Finkelhor, 1984; Ward & Keenan, 1999). In reality, each perspective on the cognitive processes surrounding sexually abusive behavior may be true, and reflect the many ways in which offenders think about their sexual behavior and victims. In their meta-analysis of sex offending attitudes and recidivism, Helmus, Hanson, Babchishin, and Mann (2013) concluded that cognitive distortions, or attitudes supportive of sexual offending were related to sexual recidivism, and that this relationship was stronger for offenders against children.

The current findings come from a larger study of social competency in child molesters. The goal of this presentation is to examine the contribution of post-offence cognitive distortions specifically, to explain sexual aggression in child molesters. Participants included men convicted of a sexual offence against a child \( (N = 122) \) and non-sexual offenders \( (N = 61) \). Not surprisingly child molesters endorsed more cognitive distortions about sexual contact with children. Additionally, and related to this finding, they also exhibited more difficulties with social skills and empathy. This constellation of factors differentiated between child molesters and the comparison group. Furthermore, cognitive distortions and victim empathy made a unique contribution in categorizing child molesters, over and above a number of demographic and criminal history factors. This study demonstrates the importance of integrating independent factors into a testable model, has implications for theories of causality and recidivism, and contributes to understanding the complex role of social functioning factors in aggression.

**Learning Goals and Objectives:**

- Review literature on cognitive distortions and how it is related to other social cognition and functioning variables.
- Conceptualize cognitive distortions as part of an integrated model to explain child sexual abuse.
- Evaluate the unique contribution of cognitive distortions in discriminating those who offend against children from non-sexual offenders.
- Examine a path model to explain the relationship between cognitive distortions and other social functioning variables.
- Consider implications for treatment and explanatory models.
Empathy deficits have been theoretically and sometimes empirically linked with sexual offending and are addressed in most sexual offender treatment programs in North America. Although sexual offenders have consistently been found to have significantly less empathy for their own victims relative to others’ victims, empirical research does not unambiguously support empathy as a dynamic risk factor for sexual recidivism. Limiting advances in our understanding of the role empathy may (or may not) play in the initiation and maintenance of sexual offending is the lack of precision and clarity with regards to the conceptualization and measurement of empathy. For example, there is some question about the extent to which empathy is distinct from cognitive distortions (e.g., Fernandez, Marshall, Lightbody, & Sullivan, 1999). This question has not yet been tested empirically. The main goal of the current study was to explore the relative overlap or distinctness of latent factors underlying scores on measures of victim empathy and cognitive distortions, and ultimately contribute to improving the clarity and precision with which these constructs are assessed. We used exploratory factor analysis to examine the relationship between victim empathy, as measured by the Child Molester Empathy Measure (CMEM; Fernandez et al., 1999), and cognitive distortions, as measured by the MOLEST scale (Bumby, 1996), in a sample of incarcerated sexual offenders ($N = 188$). A three-factor model best fit the data, with the CMEM empathy items forming two distinct factors – emotional and cognitive empathy- and the cognitive distortions items of the MOLEST scale loading on a third factor.

**Learning goals and objectives:**
- Briefly review empirical evidence linking empathy to sexually aggressive and violent behaviors,
- Briefly review the literature relevant to the conceptualization and assessment of empathy,
- Present evidence regarding the degree of overlap between measures of empathy and cognitive distortions,
- Discuss the implications of the current findings to the assessment of empathy deficits among sexual offenders, and
- Consider potential directions for future research that could help advance our understanding of empathy deficits among sexual offenders.