

THE SPIRAL OF SEXUAL ABUSE

A conceptual framework for understanding and illustrating the evolution of sexually abusive behaviour

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THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

It is impossible to effectively intervene in a process, which you do not understand. For professionals working in the area of child sexual abuse it is important to understand how abuse works. Whether you are a therapist helping an offender learn how to control the urge to sexually offend, or a social worker assisting a family adjust to the impact of an abuser's influence, or whether you are a law enforcement officer investigating or monitoring a suspect, not understanding the process can have significant consequences. Nor should this information be kept for the professionals. If offenders are to change and families are to protect children, they too must understand how the process works in order to be effective in terms of child safety.

Both Steven Wolfe (1984) and David Finkelhor (1986) have suggested theories to explain how sexual offending works. Some clinicians have adapted these theories and developed models, which are designed to assist a more general population in understanding the processes involved in sexual offending.

WOLFE (1984) - CYCLE OF SEXUAL OFFENDING

Although never more than a conference paper Wolfe's theory has been influential in shaping the understanding of sexual offending and illustrating the stages perpetrators will progress through, in the lead up to, and immediately following the abuse (Fig. 1). The model continues to be a central tenet of most cognitive behavioural sex offender treatment programmes. The cycle contains many of the most common features of any perpetrator's process of sexually abusing children. It is important for therapists not to attempt to make the offender fit the cycle but rather to use the framework as a means by which they can acknowledge the structure of their developing behaviour and explore it in detail.

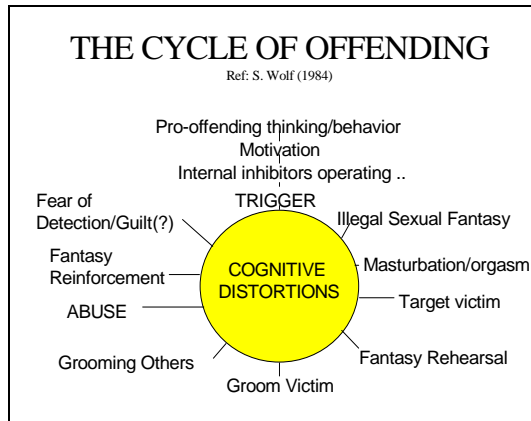


Fig 1

Hilary Eldridge (1990) developed the work of Wolfe by introducing the concepts of 'continuous cycle', the 'inhibited' and the 'short-circuit cycle'. These cycles essentially explore the particular route an offender will take after the commission of the offence.

In the case of a *continuous cycle* (Fig. 2) an offender will recover each of the stages of the cycle, selecting a new victim each time. This is perhaps, most common in the case of with an offender with an indecent exposure pattern, for example, where having sexually offended he will repeat the pattern in its entirety. In the case of the *inhibited cycle* (Fig. 3), the perpetrator

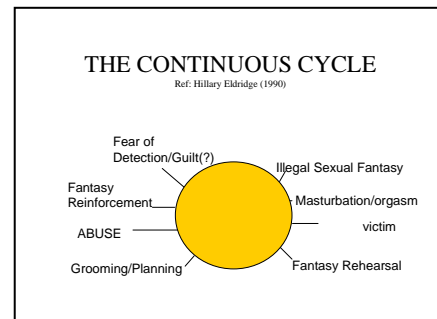


Fig 2

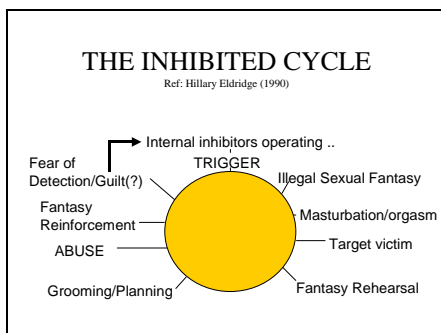


Fig. 3

becomes blocked or inhibited following the commission of an offence and may stop for a period of time. In time the perpetrator finds a means by which they can overcome these inhibitors and progress through the various stages of their cycle to the commission of another offence. Typically, this cycle relates to a perpetrator who

selects a new victim each time they offend and consequently return to general illegal sexual fantasy before choosing their next victim. In the *short circuit cycle* (Fig. 4) the perpetrator does not become inhibited following the commission of the offence but rather returns to the cycle at the point of fantasy rehearsal and speeds up. In this case the perpetrator continues to abuse either the same child or in a similar manner. This cycle is typical where the perpetrator is abusing a child in the family or within a context where they will have contact with the child.

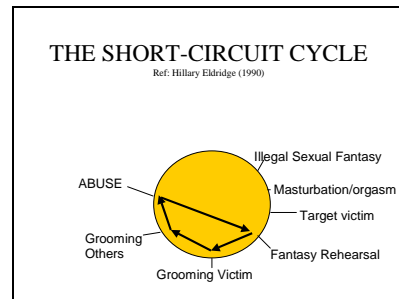


Fig. 4

FINKELHOR (1986) PRECONDITIONS OF SEXUAL OFFENDING

Finkelhor, in his research, has explored the motivations of offenders for engaging in sexual abuse and suggested four preconditions to sexual offending. Practitioners and clinicians have sought to illustrate this theory in a variety of ways. One method is to describe the preconditions as hurdles on a racecourse. Motivation to sexually offend would be the start line, internal inhibitors; external inhibitors and victim resistance would be the three hurdles, which an individual must negotiate in order to sexually offend. Fig. 5 illustrates this clinical application of Finkelhor's four pre-conditions to sexual offending.

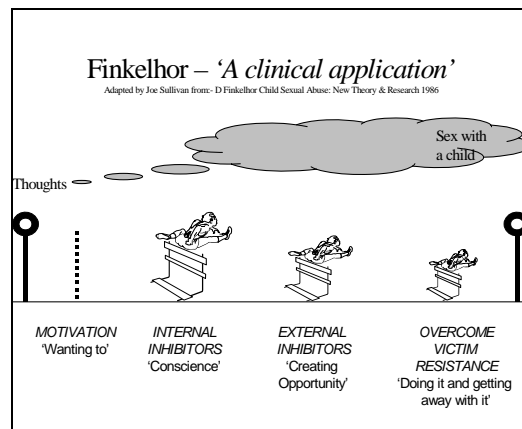


Fig. 5

THE SPIRAL OF SEXUAL ABUSE

The concept of the spiral of sexual abuse has been developed as a result of clinical assessment and treatment work with several hundred sexual abuse perpetrators. Primarily, it has been used as a clinical tool to assist perpetrators to fully explore their pattern of sexual offending, however, it has also been useful in assisting professionals, unfamiliar with the concepts, to better understand perpetrator behaviour.

From the practitioner perspective, the spiral seeks to address some of the difficulties implicit in a clinical application of previous models. The spiral retains many of the features of the work of Wolfe and Finkelhor and as such is not intended to replace these theories, rather expand upon them. One of the benefits of the conceptual framework of a spiral is that it lends itself to illustrating the developing and escalating nature of abuse. It moves from the initial motivation, through the internal struggle, to the decision to offend and follows the steps taken to facilitate the abuse and dealing with the aftermath.

As our understanding of people who have a sexual attraction to children has developed, many of the assumptions we have historically made as therapists have been tested and found to be in need of review. For example, the early development of typologies helped us to structure our understanding of a new field, but as we learned more from perpetrators, we have discovered that such typologies are limited and restrictive. The spiral is an open ended conceptual framework which allows for the illustration of the evolutionary nature of a pattern of offending. Alternatively, as in the example given, it is possible to focus on a part or *phase* of the overall offending pattern. This may relate to one incident or a series of offences against one victim.

Fig. 6 below shows the spiral, which depicts the evolution of a sexual offence, from motivation to sexually offend to a sexual offence. From this point the spiral will develop in any number of ways depending on the behaviour of the perpetrator, the victim and others who might protect the victim. There is also scope for including other stages such as 'targeting' and 're-grooming' and repeating stages, placing them in the order which best fits each individual perpetrator's specific pattern. Because of this flexibility the spiral can be used equally effectively in illustrating the evolution of most forms of sexually abusive behaviour, from the opportunistic stranger attack to the intricately planned inter-familial abuse and can be applied to male and female child sexual abusers as well as

those who sexually abuse adults. While illustrating a whole pattern of sexual offending, the spiral also allows for different types of offending e.g. the indecent exposor who, when presented with the opportunity, graduates to hands-on sexual abuse within a family or abuses within the course of his work.

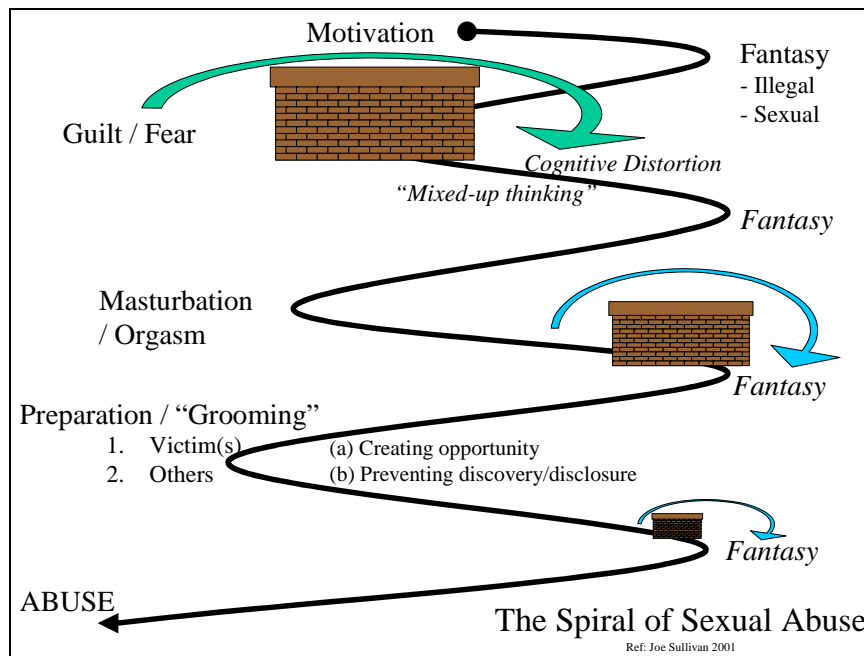


Fig. 6

Clinical experience suggests that typically, offenders are aware of their sexual arousal to younger children in their late childhood or adolescence and many will have sexually abused in a variety of different contexts prior to the current conviction or offence. Practitioners can work with perpetrators on phases of their spiral which may relate to a specific victim and/or set of offences and later combine these with other phases of their offending pattern to produce a complete spiral which can be as long as necessary to illustrate all the different phases of offending in a perpetrators life.

The paragraphs below describe the distinct stages of the spiral and it should be noted that this model is a blueprint to assist understanding of the typical phases of a spiral from which offenders can start to explore and establish their own, offending, component elements and sequence of events. It is critical for perpetrators engaged in the cognitive behavioural therapeutic process to understanding the stages of their spiral and the

outline of these stages below seeks to make some of the important points practitioners may need to convey.

(i) **Motivation to sexually abuse**

As indicated earlier, the desire to engage in sexual activity with a child is unlikely to have one simple cause. While on average 65% of sex offenders report that they have been sexually abused as children this does not explain why someone goes on to sexually abuse others. Many victims of sexual abuse would never contemplate abusing a child while some dedicate their lives to ensuring that children will not be abused. So despite the popular myth, sex offenders are not created by their own abuse experiences. The fact they were physically, emotionally or sexually abused may have a part to play in understanding their journey to offending but it is not likely to be the single motivating factor.

The work of Finkelhor (1986) has informed our understanding of the various factors which might combine to influence the development of an individual's motivation to sexually abuse a child. Factors such as sexual preference and emotional congruence or connection with children combine with feelings of emotional loneliness to form many of the common characteristics of sexual abuse perpetrators.

(ii) **Fantasy**

Perhaps the key development in the spiral when compared with the work of Wolfe, Finkelhor and Eldridge is the central importance given to the role of sexual fantasy in the progression towards abuse. People who have explored the nature of their sexual abuse of children will often refer to fantasy as the "fuel for offending".

Like a lot of other human behaviours, sexual offending is a developing process that begins with thinking. These thoughts are known as fantasy. There are many different types of fantasy, imagining winning the lottery or a future holiday. However, the fantasy that is relevant to understanding sexual offending has two specific elements. The first is that they are sexual thoughts and the second is that they are illegal, or rather that the behaviours would be illegal if they were to be carried out.

(iii) **Guilt / Fear of consequences – ‘the brick wall’**

Having thought or fantasised about an illegal sexual act for the first time, most potential offenders will experience what they might refer to as ‘guilt’. Often on exploration, it emerges that the feeling was in fact one of fear, arising out of the likely consequences if they were to carry out the assault and get caught. This guilt or fear acts like a barrier or ‘the brick wall’, making a return to the illegal sexual fantasy more difficult. For some this may be as far as they are able to progress as they may not be able to find a way past the guilt or fear and back into the fantasy.

(iv) **Role of Cognitive Distortions**

I am quite sure that there are potential offenders who get this far and are unable to negotiate their way past this block. However, others intent upon going on to offend, will need to find some way around this block. They achieve this through a process of mental gymnastics or cognitive distortion whereby permission is given to engage in a behaviour known to be wrong. This process will be familiar to anyone who has struggled with the desire to smoke or consume any substance which they know is not good for them. Cognitive distortions are the excuses we use to allow ourselves to give in to the urge; *“just this once”, “I deserve this”, “no-one will know” or “it’s not that bad, really”*.

(v) **Fantasy / Masturbation**

Having successfully overcome the guilt or fear the individuals allows themselves to return to the fantasies. They take the critical step of linking what is for them the pleasurable thought of the abusive sex with a pleasurable physical experience. This process of sexual stimulation or masturbation and the accompanying orgasm acts as a powerful reinforcer to the fantasy. A lot of sexual offenders will tell themselves that they are in fact controlling the urge to carry out the fantasy by using masturbation, as they experience a drop in arousal after orgasm. Paradoxically, this process of linking fantasy with a reinforcer like masturbation develops the urge and this combination becomes the engine room of the desire to sexually offend.

Technically this process is a form of classical conditioning which strengthens the messages perpetrators derive from their fantasy about children and themselves.

(vi) **Refining cognitive distortions**

As the spiral continues other 'brick walls' may block progress, however, as a consequence of the classical conditioning described in the fantasy/masturbation phase these walls become progressively smaller and the distorted thinking required to overcome the blocks will become more refined, perhaps focusing on making it possible to abuse a specific victim.

(vii) **Preparation / "Grooming"**

The process of classical conditioning has the effect of enhancing and building arousal the desire to act out fantasy. However most people who sexually offend are not stupid and will know that simply attempting to act out their fantasy will result in their being caught. Hence the next stage in the spiral is to create the opportunity to offend while avoiding discovery or disclosure on the part of the victim. This phase is often referred to as the 'grooming' phase. In order to commit a sexual offence, and get away with it, a prospective perpetrator will need to prepare or 'groom' two groups:

- The victim(s)
- Others who might protect the victim

Grooming has two quite distinct functions, which perpetrators will seek to complete before progressing to the abuse.

- Creating the opportunity to abuse
- Preventing disclosure or discovery of the abuse

The grooming techniques perpetrators use will vary, depending upon the context within which they are abusing and will often be modified and adapted as the process develops.

Grooming the victim

Perpetrators will need to groom the victim to ensure that they go along with the abuse and don't disclose what has happened. Studies which have focused on the characteristics of the perpetrators have found that they adapt to their surroundings and

often have more than one type of offence or paraphelia (Gallagher, 1999). A more sadistic offender will wish to observe the discomfort of the victim and will consequently seek to frighten them. In the case of a perpetrator who uses seductive coercion, they may seek to manipulate the victim into feeling responsible for what is happening.

Grooming others who might protect the child.

The perpetrator will need to groom others who might protect the victim. Again the tactics used to achieve this will depend on the context in which an offender is abusing and the nature of the belief system they have developed in order to allow themselves to offend.

Grooming tactics varying between offenders and the order in which the grooming occurs will differ depending on the perpetrator. For example a perpetrator who abuses strangers in parks may well create the opportunity first, by selecting a suitable location before attacking the 'victim' and attempting to prevent disclosure by threatening the victim or hiding their identity from others. In another case the perpetrator may work on developing a relationship with the child and his/her parents in order to prevent discovery or disclosure, prior to creating the opportunity to offend by, for example, taking the child swimming.

(viii) Abuse

Having successfully manipulated and prepared for the abuse the perpetrator can proceed to the commission of the offence(s). The type of offending varies considerably between perpetrators but the processes will be broadly similar. Some offenders, for example, will not be able to touch a child if they see them in distress while others will deliberately behave in a manner designed to make the child distressed. After the abuse the perpetrator may encounter renewed guilt or fear which may inhibit escalation or for others the opposite may be the case and the having successfully negotiated all obstacles to abuse escalation may occur rapidly.

It is important not to assume that all offenders are or react the same. Exploring and understanding the behaviour of the perpetrator will contribute to an understanding of what they seek to achieve from the abuse and will therefore inform the assessment of their motivation to sexually offend.

Therapists and indeed other professionals have long been preoccupied with trying to understand the perpetrator's motivation for seeking sexual contact with a child. Much time has been wasted on exploring this process in the early stages of discussing offences with perpetrators. Anyone who is asked to describe anything illegal, immoral or erroneous which they have done is likely to give an account which places them in the best light, it's only human nature. So, why should we expect sex offenders to be any different? Although it is important to acknowledge from the beginning that without the motivation to be sexual with children, they would never have offended, it is also worth recognising that an exploration of their subsequent behaviour is more likely to indicate their true motivation rather than anything they might say, in the first instance.

For those who prefer the symmetry of cycles, reaching the end of the spiral could be seen as the process by which we explore a perpetrators true motivation to sexually offend, thereby ending where we started on the spiral!

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