An Evaluation of the Bumby RAPE and MOLEST Scales as Measures of Cognitive Distortions With Civilly Committed Sexual Offenders

Steve Arkowitz\(^1\) and James Vess\(^1,2\)

Cognitive distortions are commonly viewed as an important factor in the assessment and treatment of sexual offenders. However, consensus about the operational definition of cognitive distortions and the best instrument to measure such distortions is lacking. This paper evaluates the Bumby MOLEST and RAPE scales as measures of cognitive distortions with patients civilly committed under California’s Sexually Violent Predator law. Rapists and child molesters in the current sample endorsed markedly fewer cognitive distortions than the sexual offenders in Bumby’s original study (K. M. Bumby, 1996). It is suggested that current self-report measures such as the MOLEST and RAPE scales are too susceptible to a socially desirable response set to provide useful data with sexual offenders who are involuntarily committed for treatment.

KEY WORDS: cognitive distortions; sexual offenders; assessment; civil commitment.

Cognitive distortions have been proposed as critical elements in both the assessment and treatment of sexual offenders. Marshall (1999) asserts that almost all treatment programs for sexual offenders address the issue of cognitive distortions. However, Geer, Estupinan, and Manguno-Mire (2000) note that although cognitive distortions are frequently mentioned in the sexual offender literature, there is a paucity of empirical research in this area. The authors also suggest that because there are few consistent definitions, researchers often discuss cognitive distortions in different ways. For example, the term cognitive distortion has been used interchangeably with a variety of other terms, including irrational attitudes (Prentky & Knight, 1991), maladaptive beliefs (Ward, Keenan, & Hudson, 2000),

\(^1\)California Department of Mental Health, Atascadero State Hospital, Atascadero, California.

\(^2\)To whom correspondence should be addressed at Evaluation and Outcome Services, Atascadero State Hospital, P.O. Box 7001, Atascadero, California 93423-7001; e-mail: jvess@dmhash.state.ca.us.
cognitive products (Segal & Stermac, 1990), thinking errors, rape myths, excuses (Pollock & Hashmall, 1991), justifications, minimizations, and rationalizations (Nichols & Molinder, 1984). The topic of cognitive distortions is potentially broad enough to also include decoding skills and representations of the self (Segal & Stermac, 1990). This lack of consistent operational definitions is likely to have a negative impact on the accurate measurement of the construct.

A brief survey of the recent professional literature on sexual offenders’ cognitive distortions serves to illustrate the various conceptualizations that have been offered and the role that such distortions have been postulated to play in sexual offenses. Ward et al. (2000) write that there has been no consensus about whether cognitive distortions represent risk markers of future behavior or post hoc mechanisms to manage self-perception. Hayashino, Wurtele, and Klebe (1995) describe cognitive distortions as “self statements molesters use to deny, minimize, justify and rationalize their behavior” (p. 106). They add that these cognitive distortions act to sustain the sexual offender’s deviant actions. Prentky and Knight (1991) describe irrational attitudes that develop within social and cultural contexts and serve to support and perpetuate sexual violence against women and children. Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner (1984) refer to cognition distortions as individualized belief systems that a person uses to analyze his own actions. Bumby (1996) writes that the cognitive distortions of sexual offenders are “learned assumptions, sets of beliefs, and self-statements” that allow the offender to avoid accountability and reduce feelings of guilt and shame so that he is able to continue with his sexually deviant behavior (p. 38). Geer et al. (2000) conceptualize cognitive distortions as automatic thinking errors that are relatively constant over time. Others suggest that cognitive distortions are more situation and victim specific (Ward, 2000; Ward & Keenan, 1999).

Clearly, both clinicians and researchers have suggested multiple hypotheses, mechanisms, and constructs with which to describe the structure and processes of cognitive distortions. Unfortunately, the level of complexity of these various theories has far surpassed current methods to assess cognitive distortions. Nevertheless, several methods and measures have been developed to assess the cognitive distortions of sexual offenders. Clinical file and record reviews (Pollock & Hashmall, 1991), life history interviews (Gilgun & Conner, 1989), responses to sample vignettes (Segal & Stermac, 1990), semantic differential techniques (Horley, 2000), and various self-report scales have all been used in an attempt to measure cognitive distortions. Not surprisingly, the most commonly used instruments are the pencil-and-paper, self-report inventories.

Despite their prevalent use, there may be important limitations inherent in self-report measures when used with individuals involved in the criminal justice system (Edens, Hart, Johnson, Johnson, & Oliver, 2000). Other concerns are that the instruments that assess attitudes supportive of sexual aggression have not been satisfactorily validated in clinical settings (Ward, Hudson, Johnson, & Marshall, 2000).