

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Aggressive Offenders' Cognition: Theory, Research and Practice*

REFERENCE: Gannon TA, Ward T, Beech AR, Fisher D, editors. *Aggressive offenders' cognition: theory, research and practice*. Chichester, West Sussex, England: [Wiley Series in Forensic Clinical Psychology] John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2007, 296 pp.

Forensic mental health practitioners and researchers alike have long known that patterns of distorted thinking play an important role in the facilitation and maintenance of offending behavior. These *cognitive distortions* arise out of faulty core beliefs and are so called because they are overtly self-serving and implicated in the offender's attempt to minimize or justify harm done to the victim (for example, the belief that child victims do not report abuse because they enjoy sexual contact with an adult). Although offence-supportive beliefs can be identified in a range of criminally motivated behaviors, they are never as disturbingly apparent as in the area of sexual offending. Although effect sizes were exceedingly modest at best, mid-1990s meta-analyses of treatment studies suggested that cognitive-behavioral approaches showed the most promise with offenders. However, despite decades of empirical attempts to define and measure these cognitive distortions, a clear, cohesive, and integrative theory or model continues to elude the field. Others have argued for a more practical focus on the critical intersection of person, environment, and behavior. This more cognitive-behavioral approach grows out of the *What Works* literature of the mid-1990s, and is endorsed by editors of this new book from Wiley's *Series in Forensic Clinical Psychology*. Editors claim to offer readers "state of the art" knowledge in aggressive offender cognition (from the *Preface*). The articulated goal of the volume is to explain *cognition in context*, that is, to identify factors impacting upon and related to aggressive offenders and their maladaptive thinking patterns.

This edited volume, featuring leading researchers from the U.K. and New Zealand, focuses specifically on aggressive offenders and comprises two sections: the first concerns itself with *Sexual Abusers* and includes chapters addressing both pedophiles and rapists. The second section is entitled *Violent Offenders* (perhaps more accurately *other violent offenders*). Both sections include discussion of theory, current research and practice-related information. Throughout the text, the unifying theme is that of a *constructive* approach, namely, that punishment and deterrence tactics alone have failed to produce positive change (i.e., reduced recidivism), and therefore practice should be informed by evidence-based research shown to bring about a change in offenders' *functioning* (e.g., greater self-control, empathy, better family functioning, and employability). Authors argue that while noncriminogenic needs

are arguably relevant, it is only by targeting criminogenic need that recidivism is effectively reduced.

The volume begins with a discussion and evaluation of dominant theories of cognitive distortions in child sexual abusers, and then presents a more integrative model (Chapter 1). Leading from this, authors consider the *implicit theories* or underlying core false beliefs of rapists and those who commit sexually motivated homicides (Chapter 2). In Chapter 3, authors propose a new, more broadly based tripartite model (belief-values-action) that seeks to explain cognitive distortions as the result of a multifaceted process including faulty implicit theories as well as other factors including impression management strategies. In the succeeding two chapters, the empirical evidence on sexual offenders' cognition is evaluated. In particular, authors reveal that research fails to support a common or generic pattern of cognitive distortions for all child sexual abusers, and ponder the significance of this (Chapter 4). Rape-related cognitions are reviewed next in a comprehensive synthesis of existing theory and research (Chapter 5). The final two chapters of the first section address treatment issues with sexual offenders against both children and adults. In Chapter 6, authors discuss practice-related concerns in the treatment of child abusers; these same issues are treated in Chapter 7, only with a focus on rapists. Treatment-providers who work with this exceedingly challenging population would do well to note the lessons learned and experience of authors in developing and implementing a "rapists-only" therapy program.

The second section of the book focuses exclusively on non-sexual violent offenders, and draws from a more social-cognitive base. The first two chapters deal with current theory and empirical evidence of generally violent offenders' cognitive distortions (Chapters 8 and 9). Adding to this is a discussion of *moral cognition* (how people reason about and justify their actions) based on Kohlberg's original theory, and its application to aggressive offenders (Chapter 10). Current practice in anger management treatment is addressed in Chapter 11, with theoretical explanation rooted in Novaco's anger model. Chapter 12 focuses on a related topic—the relationship between alcohol abuse and aggression (Chapter 12). Finally, the concluding chapter addresses the cognition of domestic abusers. Here, the author highlights the need for further research, noting the often equivocal research findings and significant heterogeneity in domestic offender groups (Chapter 13).

In summary, editors have brought together one of the first readers comprising current knowledge about violent offenders and the cognitive distortions underlying their offending behavior. This volume represents a significant contribution to the field and both students and researchers alike will benefit from a close reading of the material.

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