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The perspectives of professionals who work with sexual offenders on how individuals come to sexually abuse children

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**The perspectives of professionals who work with sexual offenders on how
individuals come to sexually abuse children**

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the degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychology, University
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Abstract

People hold powerful, emotionally salient beliefs towards sexual offenders (Petrunik & Deutschman, 2008; Petrunik & Weisman, 2005; Willis, Malinen, & Johnston, 2013) that most likely encompass attributions as to why offenders sexually abuse children (Lea, Auburn, & Kibblewhite, 1999). Individuals who work with offenders are in a unique position as they interact with offenders, have received professional training and are embedded in the wider sociocultural environment encompassing strong emotional reactions to child sexual abuse. To date, research has neglected to explore the experiences that may have influenced individuals' understandings of why offenders abuse children. The aim of the present study is to explore the work-related experiences of individuals who work with sex offenders, specifically those that have impacted their understandings of how an individual comes to abuse a child. A qualitative approach embedded in a phenomenological epistemology was employed to explore participants' perceptions of how offenders came to abuse children. Seven professionals who work regularly with adult male sexual offenders convicted of abusing children, took part in an in-depth interview. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) was used to examine participants' accounts of their experiences, and their beliefs and understandings about sexual offending perpetrated against children. Identified themes related to participants' 'understandings of how individuals come to abuse children' and the 'dynamic interplay between sociocultural context and work-related experiences'.

The findings of this study yielded valuable service-based information and highlighted the contextual challenges faced by professionals working in this area.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
List of Tables and Figures	vi
List of Tables	vi
List of Figures.....	vi
List of Appendices	vii
Preface: The Origins of the Study	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1. Overview.....	1
1.2. Child sexual abuse and sexual offenders in Ireland	1
1.3. Outline of the chapters in the present study	2
1.4. Summary	3
Chapter 2: Literature Review	4
2.1. Overview.....	4
2.2. Child sexual abuse	4
2.3. Aetiology of child sexual abuse.....	5
2.3.1. Postpositivist theories of child sexual abuse	6
2.3.1.1. Review of the empirical literature	11
2.3.2. Constructivist-interpretivist explorations of child sexual abuse.....	14
2.4. Understandings of how an offender comes to sexually abuse children.....	15
2.4.1. Offenders' understandings of how they came to abuse a child.....	16
2.4.2. The perspectives of individuals who work with offenders	19
2.5. Summary	20
Chapter 3: The Present Study	22
3.1. Overview.....	22
3.2. Working with sexual offenders.....	22
3.2.1. Challenges associated with working with sexual offenders.....	23
3.2.2. Educational context	24
3.2.2.1 Qualifications held by individuals working in a therapeutic or rehabilitative capacity with sexual offenders	24
3.3 Rationale for the present study	26
3.4 Research questions	27
3.5 Summary	27
Chapter 4: Methodology	29
4.1. Overview.....	29
4.2. Study worldview	29
4.3. Phenomenological epistemology	30
4.4 Study design	31
4.5. Reflections on the researcher's role	31
4.5.1. The researcher's personal values, assumptions and biases.....	32
4.6 Ethical approval	33
4.7 Sampling procedure and recruitment.....	34
4.7.1 Recruitment.....	36

4.8. Participants	37
4.8.1. Participant training	39
4.9. Interview approach	42
4.10. Procedure	43
4.11 Data analysis	45
4.11.1 Interpretative phenomenological analysis	45
4.11.2 Analysis procedure.....	46
4.12 Credibility check	48
4.13 Summary	48
Chapter 5: Results	50
5.1 Overview	50
5.2 Research questions used to address data	50
5.2.1. Questions used to address data	50
5.2.1.1. Question 1.....	51
5.2.1.2. Question 2.....	51
5.3 Question 1: In what ways do professionals who work with sexual offenders construct their understandings of how an individual comes to sexually abuse a child?	52
5.3.1. The experience of gaining understanding of how offenders come to abuse children.....	54
5.3.2. The role of professional development	56
5.3.3. Factors that contribute to sexual offending against children	59
5.4 Question 2: In what ways do professionals perceive the prevailing cultural attitudes relating to child sexual abuse?	72
5.4.1. Prevailing public attitudes towards sexual offenders who have abused children and participants' work-related experiences	74
5.4.2. Public perceptions of individuals who work with sex offenders in a rehabilitative capacity.....	76
5.4.3. Mass media presentations of sex offenders and participants' work-related experiences	80
5.4.4. Psychological toll of this work.....	84
5.5 Constructed work-related experiences	86
5.6. Summary	89
Chapter 6: Discussion	91
6.1. Overview	91
6.2. Conclusions	91
6.3. A conceptual overview of the results	92
6.4. Discussion of results relating to question 1	94
6.5. Discussion of results relating to question 2	101
6.6. Practical implications of the present study	106
6.7. Limitations of the present study	107
6.8. Considerations for future research	109
6.9. Summery	111
References	112
Appendices	124

List of Tables and Figures

List of Tables

Table 2.3.1. – Postpositivist theories of child sexual abuse

Table 4.8. – Participants' background information

List of Figures

Figure 5.3. – Understandings of how individuals come to sexually abuse children

Figure 5.3.3. – Factors that contribute to sexual offending against children

Figure 5.4. – Exploring the dynamic interplay between participants' sociocultural context and work-related experiences

Figure 5.5. – Broadly distinct ways in which individuals construct their work-related experiences

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical approval from University of Limerick Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B: Project approval from the Irish Prison Services Research Office

Appendix C: Consent form

Appendix D: Information sheet

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Appendix F: Feedback from independent researcher

Appendix G: Linguistic analysis of the data

Preface: The Origins of the Study

This study began with an invitation that Dr. Patrick Ryan, Head of Department, Department of Psychology, University of Limerick extended to all clinical psychology trainees (cohort 2012) to take part in a programme of research investigating child sexual abuse in Ireland. Patrick proposed the exploration of the perspectives of several different populations as to their understandings of how individuals come to sexually offend against children within an Irish context.

I agreed to take part and began to reflect on my own values and beliefs relating to child sexual abuse. What instantly came to mind was the publication of the Commission to Inquire into the Child Abuse seminal report, known colloquially as ‘the Ryan report’ (Ryan, 2009) and the publication of a second report that investigated the Catholic church’s responses to reports and allegations of child sexual abuse within the archdiocese of Dublin, commonly known as ‘the Murphy report’ (Murphy, Mangan, & O’Neill, 2009). I remembered vividly tuning into radio broadcasts and reading newspaper articles on the reports. It struck me that this was a notable point in Irish history that had shaped my values and beliefs relating to Ireland and child sexual abuse and that this had had a similar effect on many other Irish people. Thus, I began this research with an open curiosity to find out what other people thought about child sexual abuse and Ireland, and discover perspectives on this emotionally salient phenomenon. The decision to focus on professionals working with offenders came at a later date, when following a review of the literature it struck me that these individuals were best positioned to provide a meaningful response to the question, how do individuals come to offend in this way?

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Overview

This chapter presents an introduction to the topic of child sexual abuse in Ireland. In addition, it provides a contextual background in terms of the number of sexual offenders in Ireland and treatment considerations. Finally, the overall outline of the structure of this thesis is provided.

1.2. Child sexual abuse and sexual offenders in Ireland

It is estimated that one in five Irish women and one in six Irish men suffer contact sexual abuse in childhood (McGee, Garavan, de Barra, Byrne, & Conroy, 2002a) disquietingly indicating widespread occurrence of this complex social phenomenon. There is a substantial body of research suggesting that those who experience sexual abuse as a child may suffer a myriad of psychological difficulties (Cantón-Cortés, Cortés, & Cantón, 2015).

There are approximately 400 individuals convicted of sexual offences imprisoned in Ireland at any one time (R. Egan personal communication, March 15, 2015). Individuals imprisoned for sexual offending represent a specific cohort of the sexual offender population, in that they are more likely to have offending behaviour characterised by “*repetition and persistence*” and “*the use of violence or the threat of violence*” (Murphy, 1998, p. 191). Prison and community-based treatment programmes are recommended for the perpetrators of sexual abuse in an attempt to reduce the risk of reoffending (The Department of Justice and Equality, 2009). It is well recognized that the perpetrators of sexual abuse

are a heterogeneous group and that extensive efforts at categorisation have failed to inform an effective treatment process. Indeed, most treatment methods adopt an idiographic approach, implementing thorough case-by-case assessment and formulation. Treatment programmes propose the use of interventions selected on the basis of the offender's needs at a particular time (Walsh, 1998). Professionals, such as psychologists and probation officers, carry out the assessment and formulation of sexual offenders and recommend and implement treatment options. The professionals working with sexual offenders are integral to the treatment process and its goal of reducing reoffending behaviour. Deepening our perception of the experiences of individuals working with sexual offenders will provide valuable insights at a local level into service provision, and will influence the way in which we conceptualise the complex area of child sexual abuse.

1.3. Outline of the chapters in the present study

In order to explore the experiences of individuals working with sexual offenders, this thesis, in chapter 2, will review the definition of child sexual abuse and postpositivist understandings of this complex social phenomenon. In addition, this chapter will review research adopting a constructivist-interpretivist worldview that investigates the substantive understandings of how offenders come to abuse children. In chapter 3, the contextual challenges faced by professionals who work with sexual offenders is reviewed and the rationale for the present study is outlined. In chapter 4, the study's worldview, design, methodology and analysis are outlined. Chapter 5 presents a detailed description

of the findings of the present study. Finally, chapter 6 presents a discussion of the findings of the present study in light of relevant literature, the practical implications and limitations of the study alongside directions for future research.

1.4. Summary

This chapter introduced to the topic of child sexual abuse in Ireland and noted the high prevalence rates. Additionally, the greater likelihood that an incarcerated sexual offender will reoffend was discussed and it was highlighted that this is a population in need of treatment. The role of psychologists and probation officers in facilitating sexual offender treatment programmes was outlined. Finally, the benefits of exploring the work-related experiences of individuals who work with sexual offenders were reviewed, including at a local level, providing valuable insights into service provision and influencing the ways in which we conceptualise this complex human phenomenon.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Overview

This section reviews the literature relating to how offenders come to abuse children from both postpositivist and constructivist-interpretivist perspectives.

To facilitate a critical review of the literature, a search of the databases Psychinfo, Pubmed and GoogleScholar, were carried out. Furthermore, searches of University of Limerick and Queen's University Belfast library catalogues were carried out. Finally, reference lists were studied for relevant articles and citation tracking was utilised.

2.2. Child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse is a largely discussed phenomenon. It can have serious and long-lasting repercussions for victims, families, and communities. Definitions of child sexual abuse have been submitted to ongoing debate (Collin-Vézina, Daigneault, & Hébert, 2013; Finkelhor, 1986; Kelly, 1988) and have been criticised for their lack of precision, encompassing too many different types of abusive behaviours, or reducing abuse to too few behaviours (Finkelhor, 1986; Kelly, 1988). Overall, they describe an intentional sexual behaviour carried out by one or more individuals, against any individuals who are statutorily deemed underage. Sexual behaviours may include encouraging a child to touch or be touched in a sexual manner, penetrative sexual acts, exhibitionism, or engaging a child in pornography or prostitution (Collin-Vézina, Daigneault, & Hébert, 2013).

The act may be carried out using coercive techniques or as the result of pressure or force and may or may not include physical contact with the individual (Finkelhor, 1986). Definitions of child sexual abuse focus on the abusive behaviour, and distinguish the behaviour from the thought of committing a sexually abusive act or sexually fantasising about children (Seto, 2009). Currently, there is a consensus among social scientists that child sexual abuse is highly prevalent worldwide (Barth, Bermetz, Heim, Trelle, & Tonia, 2013; Collin-Vézina et al., 2013; McGee et al., 2002a; Stoltenberg, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011).

2.3. Aetiology of child sexual abuse

There is a plethora of theories from several diverse perspectives concerning the aetiology of child sexual abuse. The majority of theory is embedded in postpositivist worldview (Finkelhor, 1984; Hall & Hirschman, 1992; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Seto, 2008; Ward & Beech, 2006; Ward & Siegert, 2002). Stemming from an ontological perspective that posits an objective, observable reality; a postpositive worldview assumes that the social world can be understood in terms of testable theories, which can be modified and refined in light of experimental results (Creswell, 2002). Postpositivist theorists and researchers may employ quantitative, qualitative or mixed methodologies (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011) .

In comparison to theories embedded in a postpositivist worldview, substantially less understandings of why sexual offenders abuse children have adopted a constructivist-interpretivist worldview. A constructivist-interpretivist

worldview arises from an ontological perspective that posits multiple, equally valid realities that cannot be separated from the individual who is experiencing, interpreting, and verbalising reality (Creswell, 2002). Thus, understandings of the psychosocial world are constructed through interactions with the human community and not discovered experimentally (Creswell, 2002; Fishman & Messer, 2013). Constructivist-interpretivist theorists and researchers adopt hermeneutic or dialectical methodologies (Lincoln et al., 2011).

2.3.1. Postpositivist theories of child sexual abuse

Postpositivist theories of child sexual abuse are heterogeneous. Some have adopted broad, catch-all approaches and proposed understandings of sexual abuse that include abuse perpetrated against adult women as well as children (Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Ward & Beech, 2006). Alternative theories have proposed understandings of abuse perpetrated against children only (Finkelhor, 1986; Hall & Hirschman, 1992; Seto, 2008; Ward & Siegert, 2002). Similarly, theories have proposed understandings of offenders without distinguishing between adult and adolescent offenders (Finkelhor, 1986; Hall & Hirschman, 1992; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Ward & Beech, 2006), whereas others have specifically focused on adult offenders (Ward & Siegert, 2002).

Since the late 1970s, theories relating to complex human phenomena have seen a trend towards biopsychosocial multifactorial conceptualisations, with single factor explanations seen as inadequate (as evidenced by the introduction of the biopsychosocial model, Engel, 1977). In keeping with this trend, Finkelhor in 1984 proposed a multi-factor understanding of the aetiology

of sexual offending derived from a review of single-factor explanations considered unsatisfactory. Since then, several multi-factorial understandings of child sexual abuse have emerged (Finkelhor, 1984; Hall & Hirschman, 1992; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Seto, 2008; Ward & Beech, 2006; Ward & Siegert, 2002).

Table 2.3.1. - Postpositivist theories of child sexual abuse

Theorist	Who is classified as victim/perpetrator	Brief outline of theory
(Finkelhor, 1984)	Victims: Children Perpetrators: Do not distinguish between adult and adolescent offenders	Reasons that determine why an individual sexually abuses a child; <i>Emotional congruence</i> – refers to an offender experiencing an easier fit between their emotional needs and the characteristics of a child <i>Sexual arousal</i> – discusses why an individual may find a child sexually arousing <i>Blockage</i> – discusses why some individuals cannot fulfil their sexual and emotional needs in adult relationships <i>Disinhibition</i> - refers to the ways in which sexual offenders are able to circumvent social inhibitions in relation to sexually abusing children
(Marshall & Barbaree, 1990)	Victims: Does not distinguish between adult and child victims Perpetrators: Male only, does not distinguish between adult and adolescents	<i>Biological influences</i> – Men are biologically predisposed to sexually aggress overcome by appropriate learning that instils social inhibitions to constrain this behaviour. <i>Childhood Experiences</i> - Poor parenting fails to instil these constraints and may contribute to the marrying rather than separating of sex and aggression. <i>Sociocultural Context</i> – Cultural beliefs may negatively interact with poor parenting to enhance the likelihood of sexual offending, especially if they express patriarchal views. <i>Transitory situational factors</i> – In addition to the previously described factors, situational factors affect an individuals propensity to sexually offend such as intoxication, feeling angry, or finding oneself in a situation where one thinks they will get away with it.
(Hall & Hirschman, 1992)	Victims: Children Perpetrators: Does not distinguish between adults and adolescents	<i>Quadripartite model:</i> Proposes four factors in combination, with one or more factors more or less prominent, depending on the typologies of the aggression and the event Physiological sexual arousal Cognitions that justify sexual aggression Negative affective states Personality problems as motivational precursors that increase the probability of sexually aggressive behaviour
(Ward & Siegert, 2002)	Victims: Children Perpetrators: Specifically adult offenders, not adolescents	<i>Pathways model:</i> Proposes a primary dysfunctional mechanism (set of psychological processes that affect specific outcomes), with recruitment of other mechanisms and sexual need leading to sexual offending against children

(Ward & Beech, 2006)	<p>Victims: Does not distinguish between adult and child victims</p> <p>Perpetrator: Does not distinguish between adult and adolescent perpetrators.</p>	<p>Dysfunctional mechanisms: Intimacy and social skills deficits Deviant sexual scripts Emotional dysregulation Cognitive distortions</p> <p><i>Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending</i></p> <p>Examines: Factors that affect brain development (biological) – evolution, genetic variations, neurobiology Ecological factors – sociocultural environment, personal circumstances, physical environment</p> <p>Discusses how biological and ecological factors impact core neuropsychological functions that underpin human actions. Then, discusses how clinical symptoms arise from the interaction between neurological systems and ecological factors.</p>
(Seto, 2008)	<p>Victims: Children</p> <p>Perpetrators: Discusses adolescent and adult perpetrators, also discusses female perpetrators.</p>	<p><i>Antisociality</i> - That some incidents of sexual offending may be explained by general theories of crime</p> <p>Factors that are unique to sexual offenders who abuse children: Paedophilia Deficits in social competence Dissonant attitudes and beliefs about sex with children Emotional dysregulation Disinhibition Poor parent-child attachment Sexual development factors – e.g. early exposure to sex in childhood or adolescence Childhood sexual abuse</p>

Table 2.3.1 outlines six prominent theories of child sexual abuse. Some adopt wide aetiological approaches exploring the biopsychosocial or bio-ecological origins of sexual offending (Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Ward & Beech, 2006), whereas others focus more on the clinical symptomatology of sexual offenders (Finkelhor, 1984; Hall & Hirschman, 1992; Seto, 2008; Ward & Siegert, 2002). However, theorists are unanimous that child sexual abuse is a complex phenomenon that requires a multi-factorial biopsychosocial explanation (Ward & Siegert, 2002).

Multifactor theories of sexual offending have been criticised for lacking empirical support. Research has failed to investigate the validity and utility of any particular theory as a whole (Seto, 2008), resulting in partitioned conceptualisations. Efforts have been made to 'knit' theories together, to capitalise on perceived strengths and relinquish weaknesses (Ward & Siegert, 2002). However, a consensus on why offenders abuse has yet to be reached. Ultimately, theoretical understandings of sexual offending are fragmented (Ward, 2013b) and, to date, a unified theory approaching an objective underlying reality of why offenders abuse, has yet to be determined, as is the goal of a postpositivist approach to understanding a phenomenon. Despite flaws, current theories of sexual offending influence clinical practice including the assessment and treatment of sex offenders who have abused children (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005).

2.3.1.1. Review of the empirical literature

A substantial amount of research has been carried out examining the theoretically determined aetiological factors implicated in child sexual abuse. A portion of the investigations compare sexual offending populations to other populations, with the aim of characterising sexual offenders as distinct in terms of causal factors (Seto, 2008). Additionally, there is a large amount of the research investigating the efficacy of interventions aimed at reducing the risk of recidivism. Theoretically determined aetiological factors are the intervention targets. Evidence of treatment effectiveness implies theoretical robustness, in addition to practical implications.

Research examining the causal factors implicated in sexual offending behaviour can be divided into biological and psychological categories (Terry & Tallon, 2013). Research investigating biological factors has focused on neurological mechanisms and the role of the endocrine system (Jordan, Fromberger, Stolpmann, & Müller, 2011). The use of case studies and neuroimaging techniques to investigate neurological factors pertaining to an individual abusing a child is in its infancy, and to date shows heterogeneous results. Although there is some emerging evidence implicating the role of the frontal, temporal and limbic brain areas (Mohnke et al., 2014; Tenbergen et al., 2015). Research investigating the endocrine system has focused on the effectiveness of pharmacological intervention aimed at reducing the risk of recidivism. Androgen-lowering agents are administered to convicted sexual offenders to decrease the individual's testosterone concentration (Jordan et al., 2011), theoretically reducing the risk of re-offense. Despite 30 years of research, no firm conclusions as to the efficacy of pharmacological intervention have been

ascertained (Jordan et al., 2011; Khan et al., 2015). Considering the paucity of research relating to the neurological underpinnings of how an individual comes to abuse a child, and the lack of empirical support for theory purporting the role of the endocrine system, conceptualisations of child sexual abuse from a solely biological perspective appear to be inadequate explanations of a complex human behaviour with diverse manifestations.

There is a multitude of research, grounded in varied schools of psychological thought (e.g. psychodynamic theory, behavioural theory, cognitive-behavioural theory), investigating the psychological factors implicated in sexual offending behaviour (Terry & Tallon, 2013). Intervention embedded in psychodynamic, behavioural and cognitive-behavioural approaches have been devised and research has focused on their effectiveness. Several meta-analytic reviews of psychological interventions have been carried out, with mixed results. (Dennis et al., 2012; Hanson et al., 2002; Lösel & Schmucker, 2005). Hanson et al. (2002) investigated the utility of psychological therapies targeting deviant sexual behaviour and examined 43 studies, with a total of 9,000 participants. They found that the rate of sexual recidivism was lower in treatment groups in comparison to control groups. Lösel and Schmucker (2005) carried out a meta-analytic review of 69 studies, examining the efficacy of all interventions (e.g. biological and psychological) that aim to reduce sexual offending recidivism. When they partitioned the data to investigate the type of intervention administered, they found that those with cognitive-behavioural orientations showed a treatment effect. However contrary to these findings, a recent review from the Cochrane Collaboration found no evidence that psychological interventions were effective at reducing rates of sexual offending recidivism

(Dennis et al., 2012). Dennis and colleagues (2012) analysed ten studies, with a total of 944 adult male participants. They found no difference in terms of risk of reoffending between cognitive-behavioural treatment groups and control groups. For the trials that utilised behavioural approaches, it was not possible to carry out meta-analytic analysis. Finally, a trend in favour of the control group was identified in terms of psychodynamic approaches to reducing recidivism.

The notable difference between the research by Dennis et al. (2012) and the research carried out by previous meta-analytic reviews (Hanson et al., 2002; Lösel & Schmucker, 2005) is the number of research papers included. The Cochrane Collaboration (Dennis et al., 2012) employed more stringent criteria (e.g. randomised trials only, quasi-randomised trials excluded) in evaluating research in this field. Employing more stringent criteria limited the number of studies included, reducing the power of their analysis, but also decreasing the likelihood of identifying false-positive results.

The research investigating the effectiveness of psychological treatments targeting deviant sexual behaviour has shown disparate results. However it may be suggested that cognitive-behavioural approaches show some promise. It is difficult to draw firm theoretical implications from this information and it appears that understandings of how an offender comes to sexually abuse that are exclusively psychologically based, are lacking.

The empirical literature pertaining to sexual offending infers that single-factor explanations are lacking. As discussed, multifactorial understandings may provide more useful conceptualisations of how an individual comes to sexually offend. To date, research has neglected to explore the validity and utility of any one multifactorial explanation of sexual offending. Thus, research exploring this

complex topic from an alternative perspective, such as a constructivist-interpretivist worldview is warranted, and will yield valuable alternative insights.

2.3.2. Constructivist-interpretivist explorations of child sexual abuse

A constructivist-interpretivist worldview constructs substantive understandings of the psychosocial world that cannot be separated from the individual who is experiencing, interpreting and verbalising reality in their sociocultural environment (Creswell, 2002; Ponterotto, 2005). Explorations embedded in this worldview offer insights that deepen perceptions of a phenomenon, rather than accumulating knowledge in an attempt to make a universal step forward in understanding (Frosh, 2003).

Qualitative explorations of individuals' understandings of why offenders abuse children offer insight into peoples' related values and beliefs, influenced by their lived experiences in a sociocultural world (Ward, 2013b). Understandings of child sexual abuse differ from one world culture to the next (Petrunik & Weisman, 2005; Plummer & Njuguna, 2009) and there is evidence to suggest that social structures in a given culture may promote or deter abusive behaviour both explicitly and implicitly (Kisanga et al., 2010; Plummer & Njuguna, 2009).

Child sexual abuse is a psychosocial phenomenon that evokes strong emotional reactions in western society (Petrunik & Deutschman, 2008; Petrunik & Weisman, 2005; Willis, Malinen, & Johnston, 2013). Petrunik and Deutschman (2008, p. 499) reported that sexual offenders are socially constructed as "*highly*

dangerous, mentally abnormal, and morally contaminated persons". Willis et al. (2013) found that community attitudes towards sexual offenders were universally negative across several demographic factors including educational attainment, occupation, and contact with victims and perpetrators of sexual assault. Additionally, sensational media portrayals of sexual offenders, particularly abusers of children, are of predatory societal outcasts (Malinen, Willis, & Johnston, 2013; Petrunik & Weisman, 2005). Research has shown that landlords are less likely to rent property to released sexual offenders (Clarke, 2007) and that released sexual offenders risk being cast out by community organised protests (Petrunik & Deutschman, 2008). Individuals hold powerful, emotionally salient beliefs towards sexual offenders that most likely encompass attributions as to why offenders sexually abuse children. However, there is a paucity of research, which explores both the beliefs constructed by individuals that relate to sexual offending against children, and the context in which these beliefs are constructed.

2.4. Understandings of how an offender comes to sexually abuse children

Previous research has explored people's substantive beliefs of how an offender comes to abuse a child. However a portion of this research has been carried out to support or refute postpositivist theories of why offenders sexually abuse children (Beling, Hudson, & Ward, 2002; Purvis, Ward, & Devilly, 2003; Ward, Connolly, McCormack, & Hudson, 1996). These studies adopted qualitative methodology to establish the substantive beliefs of how an individual comes to commit a sexual offence against a child, as understood by undergraduate

psychology students (Beling et al., 2002), community corrections officers (Purvis et al., 2003), and social workers and social work students (Ward et al., 1996). Using this data, these studies proceeded to verify predictions, providing frequency counts of the conceptual categories and examining comparisons between groups using probability statistics, indicating a postpositivist worldview.

A limited amount of research has explored people's substantive beliefs of why offenders abuse children from a constructivist-interpretivist worldview. Such research has been carried out with two distinct populations: the offenders themselves (Hartley, 2001; Phelan, 1995) and people who work closely with offenders (Lea, Auburn, & Kibblewhite, 1999).

2.4.1. Offenders' understandings of how they came to abuse a child

USA-based research has explored motivations to offend posited by sexual offenders themselves from a constructivist-interpretivist worldview (Hartley, 2001; Phelan, 1995). Adopting a symbolic-interactionist approach, Phelan (1995) conducted in-depth interviews with father-daughter dyads, as the perpetrators and victims of child sexual abuse. A symbolic-interactionist approach postulates that interpreted understandings of events arise through social interaction. For example, within father-daughter interactions, both family members interpreted events and, influenced by these interpretations, mapped out their subsequent course of action.

Based on their interpretations of events, the fathers in this study reported various reasons why they sexually abuse their daughters, such as; eliciting sexual

gratification, the offending behaviour as an expression of control, power, or anger, and the offending behaviour as an expression of their rights, as fathers, a privileged position within the family. Phelan (1995) commented that the variety of motivations for sexual offending reported by fathers in this study may be indicative of men's tendency to sexualise their needs more generally than women in this society, (e.g. the need for closeness may be perceived by a man as the need for sex).

Furthermore, Phelan (1995) found that the fathers in this study reported that the incest began as an extension of an existing culturally normal family interaction, e.g. such as tickling or cuddling. However, many of these fathers reported knowing that child sexual abuse was wrong, morally, maritally or legally. Thus, these men had not failed to internalise the values of society with respect to child sexual abuse. They were men that had "*gone beyond what they know to be culturally appropriate behaviour*". Conversely, several of the fathers appeared surprised "*that the rest of society had an interest in or a right to interfere with what went on in their family*" (Phelan, 1995, p. 18). These men reported confusion that society reprimanded them for violating the incest taboo rather than respecting the families' right to privacy and autonomy in their action.

Notably, Phelan (1995) found that fathers and daughters interviewed in this study relayed accounts of the sexually abusive events that were profoundly different. Several fathers reported that their daughter initiated the activities, whereas all daughters reported that the fathers initiated the activities. Furthermore, fathers reported misconstruing the absence of overt rejection as compliance, as opposed to resulting from feelings of disgust, confusion, disbelief or an attempt to disassociate from the event, as reported by the daughters. This

highlights the idiographic nature of perceptions and understandings of events, accessed when using qualitative methodology.

In a related study, Hartley (2001) interviewed eight offenders who were either a biological, step- or adoptive father to their victim. In keeping with Phelan's (1995) study, she identifies offenders' self-reported motives for offending as 'a need for sexual gratification', and 'contact as an expression of anger', in addition to two other motives not reported by Phelan (1995), 'seeking an outlet from the dissatisfaction in their lives' and 'contact as an inappropriate way to show affection or love'. Furthermore, Hartley (2001) explored the offenders' perspectives of their life-context across three broad realms: offenders' family-of-origin background, life-context prior to the onset of the sexual contact, and adult marital/partner relationships. They found that the offenders reported disrupted family-of-origin contexts, (e.g. by conflict within the parental relationship, physical abuse, or perceptions of rejection by either one or both parents) indicating that these offenders were raised in vulnerable family environments. Furthermore, all participants described more immediate life-contexts as marred with stress prior to the onset of the sexually abusive events. Finally, participants described a history of relationship difficulties. This study recognised the importance of examining life-context as it impacts the offenders' constructed discourse relating to how they came to offend.

Research exploring the understandings and perceptions of perpetrators of sexual abuse offers valuable insights into how these individuals construct their understandings of how they came to offend. However, self-reported accounts may be confounded by the notion that offenders may have an agenda to appear rehabilitated (Darke, 1990). Convicted offenders may choose to report

understandings that they feel will assist them to appear reformed and potentially reduce imposed sanctions.

2.4.2. The perspectives of individuals who work with offenders

Individuals who work with sexual offenders are in a unique position. Such individuals have direct experience interacting with offenders, informing their beliefs in relation to child sexual abuse and their discourse is not curbed by agendas of appearing rehabilitated.

Lea et al. (1999) carried out a study exploring the attitudes towards sexual offending of professionals and paraprofessionals who worked with sexual offenders. Participants in this study worked with individuals who had committed a serious sexual offence against either an adult or a child. The theme of 'understandings of the motivation to offend sexually' was identified from the data, which encompassed four subthemes; 'sexual offending as a learned social behaviour', 'sexual offending as the consequence of not being able to form normal social relationships', 'sexual offending as a symptom of deviance' and 'sexual offending as rooted in the need for sexual gratification'. Notably, individuals reported how sexual offending, as a learned behaviour, was further reinforced by current social norms and judicial practices, highlighting cultural influences affecting sexual abuse. Additionally, Lea et al. (1999, p. 113) discussed that individuals who attributed sexual offending to deviance may not recognise the high prevalence of sexual abuse and stereotype sexual offenders as 'different' from the normal population. They express their concern in relation to this theme, owning their own perspective as interpreting researchers. Furthermore, they

interpret that individuals who had received more training showed “*more tolerance, greater understanding, and more reflexive or critical appraisal than those who had not received training and who did not deal exclusively with sex offenders*”.

The study offers rich data, and employs ample use of quotations, carrying the participants’ voices to the reader. It provides insight into the values and beliefs held by the participants and shows that attributions of why offenders abuse feature as part of a broader narrative in relation to working with offenders. However, Lea et al.’s (1999) study uses a heterogeneous sample of individuals who work with offenders and neglects to explore the experiences that may have influenced individuals’ understandings of why offenders abuse.

2.5. Summary

This chapter provided a review of the relevant literature relating to how an individual comes to abuse a child. It was noted that definitions of child sexual abuse have been criticised for lacking precision. Furthermore, there is a plethora of theories relating to the aetiology of child sexual abuse. Theories of child sexual abuse can be categorized as either postpositivist or constructivist-interpretivist in their worldview. Postpositivist understandings of how sexual offenders come to abuse children have seen a trend toward multifactorial understandings. However, these theories have been criticised for lacking empirical support. At present, there is no consensus as to how an individual comes to abuse a child. Constructivist-interpretivist understandings aim to deepen perceptions of complex phenomena rather than obtain a universal truth. They are largely

influenced by an individual's sociocultural context. Sex offenders are considered by society as highly dangerous and morally repugnant. Previous research adopting a constructivist-interpretivist worldview has examined the understandings of the offenders themselves. However, this research is susceptible to confounding influences. Previous research has examined the understandings of individual who work with sexual offenders. However, this research neglected to explore the work-related experiences that influence understandings of how an individual comes to abuse a child.

Chapter 3: The Present Study

3.1. Overview

This chapter presents a review of the context, within which professionals that assist in the treatment of sex offenders work, the challenges faced by these individuals as they seek to engage in a therapeutic or rehabilitative capacity with sex offenders, and the training undertaken by professionals who work with sex offenders in a therapeutic or rehabilitative capacity. Additionally, the rationale for the present study is outlined and the research questions are detailed.

3.2. Working with sexual offenders

Individuals who work with offenders are in a unique position as they interact with offenders and are embedded in the wider sociocultural environment encompassing strong emotional reactions to child sexual abuse. As discussed individuals who have sexually abused children are socially constructed as predatory societal outcasts (Petrunik & Deutschman, 2008; Petrunik & Weisman, 2005; Willis, Malinen, & Johnston, 2013). Therefore, professionals who work with sex offenders in a therapeutic or rehabilitative capacity face challenges as they attempt to help, or rehabilitate, individuals that society perceives as a threat to public safety.

3.2.1. Challenges associated with working with sexual offenders

There are many challenges associated with working with individuals who have sexually abused children (Chudzik & Aschieri, 2013; Day, Kozar, & Davey, 2013; Ward, 2013a). Professionals working with sex offenders in a therapeutic or rehabilitative capacity are working in a sociocultural atmosphere of blame and anxiety, where their expertise may be challenged if the public perceive that they are failing to manage risk effectively in the community (Kemshall, 2009). In addition to working within the remit of community protection as employees of the justice system, these professionals, therapists or rehabilitation professionals, seek to promote offender well-being and autonomy. Thus, individuals who work with sexual offenders operate between two sets of ethical codes; those that apply to public protection and the justice system, and those that apply to promoting offender well-being (Chudzik & Aschieri, 2013; Ward, 2013a). Operating from this complex ethical standpoint is undoubtedly fraught with challenges and can result in professionals struggling to make and justify expert decisions. Additionally, professionals working from the position of multiple ethical frameworks may “*experience dissonance and lack clarity concerning the right way to act*” and ultimately end up “*feeling confused and ethically disoriented*” (Ward, 2013a, p. 94). Chudzik and Aschieri (2013) report that operating from a dual ethical standpoint will profoundly influence the ways in which professionals construct the offenders they work with. This includes professionals’ understandings of how an offender has come to sexually abuse a child, warranting investigation of this complex context.

3.2.2. Educational context

Professionals, in their approach to work, are predominantly influenced by the conceptual models that organise their knowledge and experience. A 'model' is a system of beliefs used to describe phenomena. It assists the professional to make sense out of what is difficult to comprehend (Engel, 1977). Conceptual models are constituent of the education and cultural background in which an individual trains to become a professional. They are ubiquitously disseminated by a profession's educators. They exist in the literature and in the work-place practice professionals are advised to follow. It is not uncommon for professionals to be unaware of how much these conceptual models influence their practice. Often these models are taken for granted as truths, and their paradigmatic nature is not acknowledged (Engel, 1981). It is important to explore the training undertaken by individuals who work with sex offenders, as it will impact their understandings of how an individual comes to abuse a child.

3.2.2.1 Qualifications held by individuals working in a therapeutic or rehabilitative capacity with sexual offenders

In Ireland, interventions recommended for the perpetrators of sexual abuse are carried out in prison and community settings and are facilitated by psychologists and probation officers (The Department of Justice and Equality, 2009).

Psychologists and probation officers working with sexual offenders are required to have a relevant qualification recognized by their professional association (Association of Higher Education Careers Service, 2015; Psychological Society of Ireland, n.d.-a; The Probation Service, 2015). The

relevant qualification for a probation officer is attained in social work. Both professions require an undergraduate qualification (O'Dea, 2005; Psychological Society of Ireland, n.d.-a), and psychologists are further required to complete a recognized postgraduate training programme (Psychological Society of Ireland, n.d.-a). The training for both psychologists and probation officers involves mandatory completion of work experience placements (O'Dea, 2005; Psychological Society of Ireland, 2009; Ryan, 2014). Although it is not a requirement of qualifying as either a psychologist or probation officer, trainees can opt for work experience in organisations that facilitate therapeutic and rehabilitative interventions with sexual offenders.

Psychologists and probation officers are advised by their professional associations to engage in continuous professional development, and knowing the limitations of one's professional competencies is considered ethical conduct (Psychological Society of Ireland, n.d.-b; Social Workers Registration Board, n.d.). Both psychologists and probation officers are advised to engage in the professional practice of supervision, where appropriate (Psychological Society of Ireland, n.d.-b; Social Workers Registration Board, n.d.). Supervision is a formal arrangement to discuss work, on a regular basis, with a more experienced practitioner. It can be used to promote professional development. Practitioners are invited to discuss their cases, review the service they are providing, and reflect on their decision-making processes. The supervisory space is also associated with regulation and professional accountability (Beddoe, 2010).

3.3 Rationale for the present study

Despite valiant efforts, postpositivist understandings of sexual offending are fragmented. Constructivist-interpretivist explorations of individuals' understandings of why offenders abuse children may offer insight into peoples' related values and beliefs, influenced by their lived experiences in a sociocultural world (Ward, 2013b). Individuals hold powerful, emotionally salient beliefs towards sexual offenders (Petrunik & Deutschman, 2008; Petrunik & Weisman, 2005; Willis et al., 2013) that most likely encompass attributions as to why offenders sexually abuse children (Lea et al., 1999). Qualitative research exploring how sexual offenders come to abuse children has examined the narratives of incarcerated or in-treatment offenders (Hartley, 2001; Phelan, 1995). However these samples may be susceptible to confounding influences (Darke, 1990).

Individuals who work with offenders are in a challenging position as they interact with offenders and are embedded in a wider sociocultural environment charged with strong emotional reactions to child sexual abuse (Chudzik & Aschieri, 2013; Kemshall, 2009; Ward, 2013a). Research has provided valuable insight into the values and beliefs held by the individuals who work with sexual offenders (Lea et al., 1999), however to date research has neglected to explore the experiences-in-context that may have influenced individuals' understandings of why offenders offend.

The aim of the present study is to explore the work-related experiences of individuals who work with sex offenders, specifically those that have impacted their understandings of how an individual comes to abuse a child. In addition, the dynamic interplay between a complex sociocultural context and how

individuals construct their work related experiences and understandings will be examined.

3.4 Research questions

The present study aimed to explore:

- In what ways do professionals who work with sexual offenders construct their understandings of how an individual comes to sexually abuse a child?
 - Additionally, what experiences are reported as influencing professionals' understandings of how an individual comes to sexually abuse a child?
- In what ways do professionals perceive the prevailing cultural attitudes and opinions relating to child sexual abuse?
 - Additionally, what are professionals' perceptions of the impact the prevailing cultural attitudes and opinions relating to child sexual abuse has on them and their work?

3.5 Summary

This chapter reviewed the context within which professionals who facilitate therapeutic or rehabilitative intervention with sex offenders, work. Individuals who work with incarcerated sexual offenders are in a unique position as they interact with offenders and are simultaneously embedded in a sociocultural context that holds strong emotional reactions to child sexual abuse. There are several challenges faced by individuals who work with sexual offenders. For

example, they work in a sociocultural atmosphere of blame and anxiety. Additionally, they operate between two ethical codes; promoting public protection and promoting offender well-being. Furthermore, this chapter detailed the rationale for the present study. Finally, the research questions were presented.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1. Overview

This chapter describes the present study's worldview, epistemology and research design. Furthermore, it presents a reflection on the role of the researcher. The study's methodology is outlined including ethical considerations, sampling, participants recruited, procedure and analysis.

4.2. Study worldview

It is important for researchers to make explicit the philosophical ideas underpinning their approach to studying human phenomena, also known as their worldview. These ideas markedly affect the way in which research is carried out (Creswell, 2002; Mertens, 2007). The present study espouses a constructivist-interpretivist worldview. As discussed previously (in sections 2.3 and 2.3.3), a constructivist-interpretivist worldview posits the existence of numerous, equally valid realities, constructed in the minds of individuals. Notably, an objective reality cannot be differentiated from the person who is experiencing it, and claims about the physical and psychosocial worlds are not independent of the perceptions and interpretations of the person making them. Thus, the goal of the constructivist-interpretivist worldview is to understand individual's lived-experiences. It adopts a hermeneutical approach that posits that an individual may not be consciously aware of their constructed understandings, but that these can be brought forth through a process of deep

reflection. Deep reflection can be facilitated by researcher-participant dialogue (Ponterotto, 2005). A constructivist-interpretivist worldview is appropriate to the study of professionals' understandings of how an offender comes to abuse, examined through reflection on their lived-experiences.

4.3. Phenomenological epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with a researcher's understandings of knowledge; what it is and how it can be gained (Weed, 2009). A phenomenological epistemology of the psychosocial world assumes that individuals are not uninvolved perceivers of their world. Rather individuals interpret their realities by formulating their experiences into a concept that makes sense to them. A phenomenological approach to psychological research explores the ways in which individuals interpret their experiences through engagement with the natural world of objects, relationships and language. Individuals engage with their world using their sensory, perceptual and cognitive capacities. Simultaneously, experience is contingent on the role of others in personal and social relationships (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). A phenomenological epistemology is highly suited to an exploration of the ways in which individuals who work with sexual offenders construct their understandings of why sexual offenders abuse children, that involves an exploration of the experiences that have impacted their constructed understandings.

4.4 Study design

The present study adopted a qualitative research design. A qualitative research design acquires understanding of the psychosocial world through interactions with individuals in their natural environment (Creswell, 2002 ; Fishman & Messer, 2013). The researcher is required to enter the participant's world and, through ongoing interaction, explore their perspectives, beliefs and understandings.

Qualitative enquiry is in keeping with the study worldview and epistemological standpoint as outlined (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and is considered more adept than quantitative enquiry at understanding complex, dynamic and multidimensional psychosocial phenomena (Marshall, 1996; Sofaer, 1999). Therefore qualitative enquiry is the most appropriate research design to explore the ways in which individuals who work with sexual offenders construct their understandings of why sexual offenders abuse children.

4.5. Reflections on the researcher's role

The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection when employing qualitative methodology. Thus it is important for the researcher to reflect on personal characteristics that may impact the data collected. Considering the topic under study, it was considered that the gender of the researcher (female) would affect the data. Feminist theorists have posited that child sexual abuse is a function of a patriarchal social structure (Finkelhor, 1984). Hence, individuals may interpret a discussion about child sexual abuse differently depending on

their gender. Furthermore, the answer a participant provides to a question about child sexual abuse may be contingent on the gender of the interviewer. In keeping with the study's constructivist-interpretivist worldview, the effect of the researcher's gender does not invalidate data, as claims about the psychosocial world are not independent of the perceptions and interpretations of the person making them. This includes participants' perceptions of the data collection process and the impact it has on their responses. In addition to gender, the researcher's personal values, assumptions and biases affect the data collected. Therefore, it is important to make these explicit prior to data collection.

4.5.1. The researcher's personal values, assumptions and biases

My perceptions of child sexual abuse have been shaped by my personal experiences. As a clinical psychologist in training I have been afforded the opportunity to work therapeutically with victims of child sexual abuse. Within the therapeutic relationship I gained knowledge and second hand experience of the emotional difficulties and self-fragmenting impact of persistent sexual abuse in early life. I believe this experience enhances my awareness and sensitivity to an emotionally salient topic and assisted me when working with participants in this study.

Additionally, I have read and watched media portrayals of child sexual abuse, particularly, those that have occurred in Ireland. However, I am aware that research has shown that the "*media sensationalises sexual crimes through its focus on exceptional cases, contributing to an inaccurate representation of the population of individuals convicted of sexual offences*" (Malinen et al., 2013, p. 1).

This experience affords me an understanding of the cultural tone that participants interact with outside of their working environment and raises awareness of exposure to potentially conflicting attitudes or beliefs when moving from one environment to the other.

Prior to carrying out this study, I had never knowingly worked with, or come in contact with a perpetrator of child sexual abuse and undertaking this research was my initial experience of this professional domain. As part of the clinical psychology training programme that I was enrolled in at the time of this research, teaching was provided by individuals who worked with child and adult victims of sexual abuse but not by those working with sexual offenders.

4.6 Ethical approval

The present study is a research project situated within a programme of research exploring the aetiology of child sexual abuse and conducted by the Department of Psychology, University of Limerick. The programme of research received ethical approval from the University of Limerick Education and Health Sciences Ethics Committee (see appendix A) and the present study was deemed ethically appropriate as part of this application. In addition, the present study received project approval from The Irish Prison Service, Research Office (see appendix B).

In an effort to maintain the highest ethical standards, the present study took into consideration four main areas of ethical concern at the study design stage; confidentiality, informed consent, right to withdraw and minimising risk. The present study aimed to protect the agreed level of confidentiality as far as is legally possible. Data storage procedures were carefully considered and outlined

to each participant. Specifically in relation to this study there was an awareness that participants were all employed by the same organisation and that power differentials may have existed between participants and other members of the organisation. In light of this, interview recordings and transcriptions were only available to researcher Aisling Lennon and academic supervisor Patrick Ryan, and were not made available to any personnel at the prison service organisation. Participants were made aware from the outset that interview quotes may be used in publications under pseudonym. Participants were asked for their informed consent to take part in the study, including consent to be audio recorded (see appendix C). Participants were advised from the outset of their right to withdraw from the study and that withdrawing from the study will bear no impact on their current employment. It was considered that the present study involved no more than minimal risk for the participants, and anticipated harm was no greater than that experienced in everyday life.

4.7 Sampling procedure and recruitment

The sampling procedure for the present study was considered with regard to the research goals and theoretical underpinnings outlined (Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). The present study utilised a purposive sampling technique in keeping with a constructivist-interpretivist worldview and phenomenological epistemology. Given the complexity of the topic under study, it was considered that the present study would benefit from an in-depth idiographic investigation of a smaller number of cases in a particular context (Smith et al., 2009). The sample was purposefully selected by the

researcher and a clinical supervisor for the project, who worked for the prison service, and this procedure was deemed most appropriate to answer the research questions (Marshall, 1996).

The aim of the present study was to explore the experiences of individuals who work with sex offenders, specifically those experiences that have impacted understandings of how an individual comes to abuse a child. As discussed, this study was part of a wider programme of research exploring the aetiology of child sexual abuse. Each study involved in this programme explored a different populations' understandings of the aetiology of child sexual abuse (e.g. another study explored the understandings of professionals who worked with the victims of child sexual abuse) (Cosgrave, 2015). It was required of the present study to explore the understandings of a unique population. The present study aimed to explore the experiences of individuals who work with sexual offenders in a therapeutic or rehabilitative capacity. This population was considered unique, as these individuals have a remedial responsibility, whilst living in a sociocultural context charged with strong emotional reactions to child sexual abuse.

Psychologists and probation officers working within the Irish Prison Service were actively recruited, as their remit in relation to the offenders was considered to be therapeutic or rehabilitative. Prison officers were considered as possible candidates for this study, however subsequently excluded, as their role was not considered wholly therapeutic or rehabilitative. The design of the present study warranted a homogenous sample for whom the research questions seemed relevant (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the sample was confined to individuals working in a therapeutic or rehabilitative

capacity, with adult male offenders currently incarcerated for sexually abusing children, excluding those working in alternative capacities.

Suitable candidates for the present study were included if they worked regularly (e.g. on a daily-weekly basis) with convicted offenders who had abused children. Both psychologists and probation officers working within this specific facility were working regularly with convicted adult male sex offenders in one-to-one therapeutic sessions and facilitating group rehabilitation programmes.

The Irish Prison Services were approached as an organisation that employs individuals to work with convicted sex offenders. A prison facility, that accommodates a substantial number of individuals incarcerated for sexual crimes perpetrated against children, was considered to be the most appropriate location for participant recruitment. This facility is a closed, medium security prison for adult male offenders. The majority of prisoners at this facility were carrying out long-term sentences. All participants worked for the same organisation within the context of a sexual offenders rehabilitation programme.

4.7.1 Recruitment

The clinical supervisor provided information to seven potential candidates and invited them to take part in the study. With the candidates' consent, the contact details of those who wished to take part were provided to the researcher. All seven candidates expressed an interest in taking part in the study. Candidates were then contacted by the researcher and provided with further information relating to the study (see appendix D for a copy of the information sheet provided) and given the opportunity to have any questions answered. Interviews

were arranged for a time and place convenient to the participants. All seven of the candidates purposefully samples agreed to take part in the study.

4.8. Participants

Seven professionals who worked regularly with males incarcerated for sexually abusing children were interviewed for the study. Complete interviews with six participants, as well as a partial interview with one participant, were analysed. Fifteen to twenty minutes of audio recording from one interview was lost as a result of technical issues. Table 3.3. outlines the participants' background information.

Table 4.8. – Participants’ background information

Professionals	3 psychologists	4 probation officers
Age	Range: 33 - 44 years; mean age: 38.67 years	Range: 41 – 60 years; mean age: 51.50 years
Gender	2 females; 1 male	2 females; 2 males
Length of time with this organisation	Range: 6 - 10 years; mean: 8.67 years	Range: 8.5 – 20 years; mean: 12.13 years
Prior work experience in a related area	<p>3 out of 3 psychologists reported previously working in a related area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working with victims of sexual abuse • working with juvenile offenders (including juvenile sex offenders) • working with the victims of sex trafficking • working with asylum seekers pursuing refuge from violence (including sexual violence) 	<p>2 out of 4 probation officers reported previously working in a related area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working with sex offenders in a different capacity, • working in child protection • working in a community setting with released sex offenders
Training acquired specifically related to working with sex offenders	<p>2 out of the 3 psychologists reported acquiring training specific to working with sex offenders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • training in treatment approaches e.g. Building Better Lives programme, those advocated by Rockwood Psychological Services (“Rockwood Psychological Services,” 2011) • conference and workshop attendance e.g. hosted by National Organisation for the Treatment of Sexual Offenders (NOTA); Lucy Faithfull Foundation (“Lucy Faithfull Foundation,” n.d.) 	<p>4 out of 4 probation officers/supervisor reported acquiring training specific to working with sex offenders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • risk assessment training e.g. Stable and Acute 2000 (Hanson, Harris, Scott, & Helmus, 2007), Risk Matrix 2000 (Thornton, 2007) • training for specific treatment programmes e.g. “Safer Lives” an intensive sex offender treatment programme implemented by statutory agencies • conference and workshop attendance e.g. hosted by National Organisation for the Treatment of Sexual Offenders (“NOTA,” n.d.)

As is evident from Table 4.8., three psychologists and four probation officers took part in the study. The age of participants ranged from 33 – 44 years for the psychologists, and 41 – 60 years for probation officers. The mean age of the probation officers was 51.50 years, and 38.67 years for the psychologists. Two of the psychologists were female and one was male, and four of the probation officers were female and two were male. The length of time participants had been working with this prison service organisation ranged from 8.5 - 20 years for the probation officers, with an average length of employment of 12.13 years, and 6 – 10 years, for the psychologists, with an average length of employment of 8.67 years. Three out of three psychologists, and two out of the four probation officers had worked in a related area prior to working with this particular organisation. Four out of four probation officers and two out of three psychologists reported acquiring specific training relating to working with sexual offenders.

4.8.1. Participant training

The psychologists that participated in this study held postgraduate qualifications in either counselling or clinical psychology. Additionally, two out of the three participants interviewed reported that they had taken part in training relating to working with sexual offenders. One participant reported that specific training had not been undertaken. It may be considered that this participant was referring to postgraduate forensic qualifications, in contrast to the continuous professional development workshops and seminars referred to by the other

participants. Four out of four probation officers reported that they had taken part in training relating to working with sexual offenders.

Psychologists who participated in this study reported taking part in training relating to the Building Better Lives programme. The Building Better Lives programme is an evidence-based approach to sex offender rehabilitation devised by psychologists working in the Irish Prison Services. The programme is divided into three modules: the Exploring Better Lives programme, the Practising Better Lives programme, and the Maintaining Better Lives programme. The programme's initial focus is on promoting motivation to change. In addition, the programme aims to help offenders obtain a more detailed understanding of their offense. Finally, the programme aims to support offenders' continued personal development throughout their sentence and as they transition to community living. This programme adopts a strengths-based approach, highlighting offenders' resilience, and positive psychosocial resources.

The psychologists who participated in this study reported attending training by the Rockwood Psychological Services ("Rockwood Psychological Services," 2011). Based in Ontario, Canada, the Rockwood Psychological Services provide training to professionals working with sexual offenders, as well as professionals working with other offending populations. The Rockwood approach is evidence-based and targets reoffending risk factors. Similar to the Building Better Lives programme, the Rockwood Psychological Services advocate for a strengths-based approach to sexual offender rehabilitation.

The psychologists who participated in this study reported attending workshops held by the Lucy Faithful Foundation ("Lucy Faithfull Foundation," n.d.), a charitable organisation that operates from the mandate that sexual

offending is preventable. Workshops are offered in a variety of areas including 'understanding the sexual exploitation of children', which was attended by participants in this study.

The probation officers who participated in this study reported attending training in risk assessment tools that determine the static and dynamic risk factors implicated in sexual offending behaviour (e.g. the Risk Matrix 2000: Thornton, 2007; and the Stable & Acute 2007: Hanson, Harris, Scott and Helmus, 2007) (Walker & O'Rourke, 2013). In 2001 the Sex Offenders Act was introduced in Ireland and it became a statutory responsibility of the Probation Service to assess the risk posed by convicted sex offenders transitioning to post-release supervision. The Risk Matrix 2000 (Thornton, 2007) and the Stable & Acute 2007 (Hanson et al., 2007) risk assessment tools were advocated by government departments to assist probation officers to carry out this duty (The Department of Justice and Equality, 2009) . The probation officers who participated in this study also reported attending training relating to the Safer Lives programme, a follow on from the Building Better Lives programme, which adopts a strengths-based approach to offender rehabilitation.

Psychologists and probation officers who participated in this study reported attending conferences as part of their continuous professional development. The National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers ("NOTA," n.d.) hosts an annual multi-disciplinary conference for professionals who work with sexually aggressive individuals.

It is evident from the training opportunities discussed by both the psychologists and the probation officers that the aim, for both professionals, was to promote offenders engagement in positive change. Psychological training

emphasises the facilitation of positive change for individuals through the application of psychological principles (Hall & Llewelyn, 2006). It may be considered that the psychologists in this study intervened with a concentrated use of psychological principles, capitalising on their previous professional training.

The role of a probation officer, among other duties, is to support an offender and the community through the process of transitioning individuals from an imprisoned environment back to a community setting. A proposed definition of social work by the International Federation of Social Workers includes the idea that social work “*intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments*” (Hare, 2004, p. 409). This capitalises on probation officers’ previous professional training that emphasises problem-solving in human relationships (Hare, 2004). It is evident from the training undertaken by the probation officers that they are equipped to continue to promote positive change for released prisoners and to assess the possible risk to the community.

4.9. Interview approach

The interview schedule utilised in the present study specifically set out to explore participants’ constructed interpretations of their work-life experiences. Researcher Aisling Lennon devised the interview questions. They were constructed with the study’s research questions in mind and aimed to investigate participants’ lived experiences, in keeping with a phenomenological epistemology (Smith et al., 2009). The devised protocol utilised both closed and open questions. Closed questions were used to introduce topics to participants

and open questions were used to elicit information relating to participants' work-related experiences. According to McNamara (2009) it can be useful to establish factual information prior to asking questions about controversial themes. Participants engage easily with questions probing for factual information and a comfortable rapport is established ahead of exploring more difficult topics, such as individuals' feelings and conclusions. The interview questions for the present study were piloted with an individual who had previously worked for this organisation and revised in light of feedback. See appendix E for an example of the interview protocol used.

The interview questions were in keeping with a general interview guide approach (Turner III, 2010). A general interview guide is a flexible approach that allows the researcher to modify questions or ask new questions in light of responses to previous questions, whilst ensuring that the same general area of information is gathered from each participant (Turner III, 2010). Hence, the interview protocol was not adhered to in a rigid fashion and the researcher took opportunities to explore topics with participants that were not necessarily listed in the interview protocol. Where possible the researcher probed participants for accounts of relevant experiences, their constructed understandings of these experiences and how these have impacted their understandings of how individuals come to abuse children.

4.10. Procedure

The interviews were carried out in one session, at a time that was convenient for the participant. All interviews were carried out at the participants' place of work.

Participants were asked to sign an informed consent sheet, which included requested consent to audio record the interview (see appendix C for an example of the consent form). Participants were advised of their right to withdraw from the research at any point up until the research is published. Participants were made aware that the decision to withdraw from the research would in no way affect their current employment. Participants were asked to provide demographic information (e.g. age, gender, length of time working with this organisation, previous related work experience, specific training received).

All participants engaged well with the interview process, and appeared interested in the topic under study. They appeared to value psychological research and were supportive of an evidence-based approach to their work. Interview length ranged from 42 - 82 minutes. Participants were busy professionals, and the length of interview was often dictated by the amount of time the individual could spare during their working day. Individual differences in participants' conversational styles also accounted for the discrepancy in interview length. It may be considered that a larger volume of data is gathered in longer interviews, resulting in some participants' views being represented more often than others. Thus, the researcher made efforts during analysis, to draw on each interview in commensurate amounts to offset bias.

The researcher was unknown to the participants prior to the interviews and affiliated with a separate organisation. Thus, it was important to make explicit to participants the researcher's values, motives and experience, prior to interview (Dickson & Green, 2001). It was openly discussed at the recruitment and interview stages of research process that the interviewer was a psychologist in clinical training and that this project was in partial fulfilment of a doctorate in

clinical psychology. The researcher was open with each participant about her knowledge and experience relating to sexual offending and child sexual abuse.

At the end of the session participants were asked if they would like to receive any further information on this study. It was explained to each participant that a copy of the completed dissertation would be provided to the Open Learning Centre, Irish Prison Services College, where all employees can access it. Participants will receive notification when the dissertation is available. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, participants' names were replaced with a pseudonym and all other identifying information was removed from the transcripts. In the final write up, quotes used under pseudonym were checked by the project clinical supervisor to ensure that participants could not be identified.

4.11 Data analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to determine the themes presenting in the participant interviews. NVIVO software (QSR International, 1999) was used to assist with the initial coding of data.

4.11.1 Interpretative phenomenological analysis

The present study analysed the data using IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA aims “to explore in detail the processes through which participants make sense of their own experiences” (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p. 88). This is achieved by examining individuals' accounts of their experiences and their beliefs and understandings about the world. It assumes that all individuals are inclined to

self-reflect, a notion that is supported by the existing wealth of qualitative research, and growing number of IPA studies (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Several qualitative methods of analysis allow an examination of discourse relating to complex social phenomena (e.g. grounded theory analysis, thematic analysis). Grounded theory analysis was also considered as a possible methodology for this study. Grounded theory analysis of qualitative data aims to develop theories about social phenomena from a systematic analysis of qualitative data (Lingard, Albert, & Levinson, 2008). Previous research has explored people's substantive beliefs of how an offender comes to abuse a child using grounded theory analysis (Beling et al., 2002; Purvis et al., 2003; Ward et al., 1996). However, this research neglected to explicitly examine discourse relating to sociocultural context and how dynamic interplay between sociocultural context and individuals' constructed understandings. In addition to exploring discourse relating to complex social phenomena, IPA can be used to consider social contexts and personal meanings (De Visser & Smith, 2006). The present research required analysis to be sensitive to sociocultural context, which is consistent with the IPA epistemological and theoretical framework (Todorova, 2011). IPA allowed for analysis sensitive to context "*through close engagement with the ideographic and the particular*" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 180), providing a depth of analysis suitable to answering the outlined research questions.

4.11.2 Analysis procedure

The IPA procedure employed by the present study followed the protocol outlined by Smith and colleagues (2009). Analysis of the data began with initial

notes on the data, written by the researcher following each interview and during the transcription process. IPA researchers are proponents of the use of a three-layered approach to data analysis. The first layer is an analysis of the descriptive content of the transcripts, identifying understandings of the experiences, events, concepts and ideas that matter to the participant. A second layer of analysis is an account of the discourse used by the participant, identifying the ways in which the participant presents the descriptive content. The final level of analysis is at a conceptual level and involves pronounced interpretation of the data by the researcher, who determines abstract conceptualisations that relate to participants' patterns of understanding. An attempt is then made to integrate all three levels of analysis into a coherent framework of results (Smith et al., 2009).

The transcribed data was uploaded to NVivo software in chronological order as to when the data was collected. Beginning with the first transcript uploaded and working through to the seventh, each section (usually 2-3 lines long) of each transcript was read and coded by the researcher. A code was a phrase that described the meaning of the section, or a linguistic or conceptual interpretation of the section. Each code was categorised as descriptive, linguistic or conceptual, in keeping with the three layers of analysis proposed by IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Next emerging themes were developed. At this stage, attempts were made to reduce the volume of detail. Similar codes across all seven transcripts were merged into themes. Themes were succinct titles that represent what is important in the related data. They simultaneously reflect the data and the researcher's interpretation of the data. The themes were then organised into a graphic that provided a clear and effective picture of how they fit together. Not

all themes were incorporated at this stage of the analysis and those less relevant to the research questions, were discarded. The aim at this point in the analysis is to produce a graphic representation that highlights the most thought-provoking aspects of the interview data.

4.12 Credibility check

In an effort to promote quality in qualitative research, and to check the credibility of the themes and subthemes identified in this analysis, the present study was subject to an independent audit (Elliott et al., 1999; Smith et al., 2009). An independent researcher examined the original research proposal, the anonymised transcribed data, initial coding and the described findings to establish if there was a logical progression throughout the research process (see appendix F for independent researcher feedback). It was found that the described analysis was credible and that there was a coherent and transparent progression from the data through to analysis and interpretation. In addition, the project's academic supervisor examined a sample of the interview transcripts in relation to the proposed findings as a further test of the credibility of the research.

4.13 Summary

In this chapter, the present study's worldview, epistemology and design were outlined. The present study adopted a constructivist-interpretivist worldview, the goal of which is to understand individuals' lived-experiences. The study adopted a phenomenological epistemology that postulated that individuals

interpret their realities by formulating their experiences into a concept that makes sense to them. The study also adopted a qualitative research design and set out to acquire understanding of the psychosocial world through interaction with individuals in their natural environment. This chapter considered that the researcher was the primary instrument of data collection and reflected on the personal, characteristics, values and assumptions that may impact data collection. It was discussed that the present study employed a purposive sampling technique. The sampling procedure considerations were outlined and the rationale for the choice of population, individuals who work in a therapeutic or rehabilitative capacity with sexual offenders, was discussed. The specific population under study worked on a daily basis with incarcerated adult male sexual offenders. Seven individuals took part in the study, completing an in-depth interview which explored their constructed understandings of how an offender comes to abuse a child, and their perceptions of the sociocultural context within which they worked. Data was analysed using IPA and subject to two credibility checks.

Chapter 5: Results

5.1 Overview

In Chapter 5 the aim of the present study is reiterated. Additionally, the results of the data analyses are presented. The research questions are restated and the identified themes and subthemes detailed.

5.2 Research questions used to address data

The aim of the present study was to explore the constructed work-related experiences of individuals who work with incarcerated sex offenders. This allowed for professionals' understandings of how individuals come to abuse children, to be examined. Additionally, the context in which these understandings were constructed, in this instance, the prevailing cultural attitudes and opinions relating to child sexual abuse, was also explored.

Data were collected from seven professionals who work regularly with individuals who have been incarcerated for sexually abusing children. Each individual took part in an in-depth interview. Participants provided accounts of their thoughts, opinions and experiences in response to questions relating to their work-life. The data were addressed using two research questions (each with a sub question) that correspond to the study research questions.

5.2.1. Questions used to address data

The data was analysed using IPA and addressed using two research questions.

5.2.1.1. Question 1

Within the sample of participants' accounts the aim was to examine the ways in which individuals construct their understandings of how individuals come to sexually abuse children.

- In what ways do professionals who work with sexual offenders construct their understandings of how an individual comes to sexually abuse a child?
 - Additionally, what experiences are reported as influencing professionals' understandings of how an individual comes to sexually abuse a child?

5.2.1.2. Question 2

Within the sample of participants' accounts, the aim was to examine the sociocultural context in which participants work, in terms of the prevailing cultural attitudes and opinions relating to child sexual abuse.

- In what ways do professionals perceive the prevailing cultural attitudes relating to child sexual abuse?
 - Additionally, what are professionals' perceptions of the impact the prevailing cultural attitudes relating to child sexual abuse has on them and their work?

5.3 Question 1: In what ways do professionals who work with sexual offenders construct their understandings of how an individual comes to sexually abuse a child?

The first question was addressed by examining the ways in which participants constructed their understanding of how individuals come to sexually abuse children. Participants discussed how they came to their current understandings of why individuals sexually abuse children, including the role of professional development. They also reported at length on the factors they believed contribute to the sexual abuse of children (see figure 3.3).

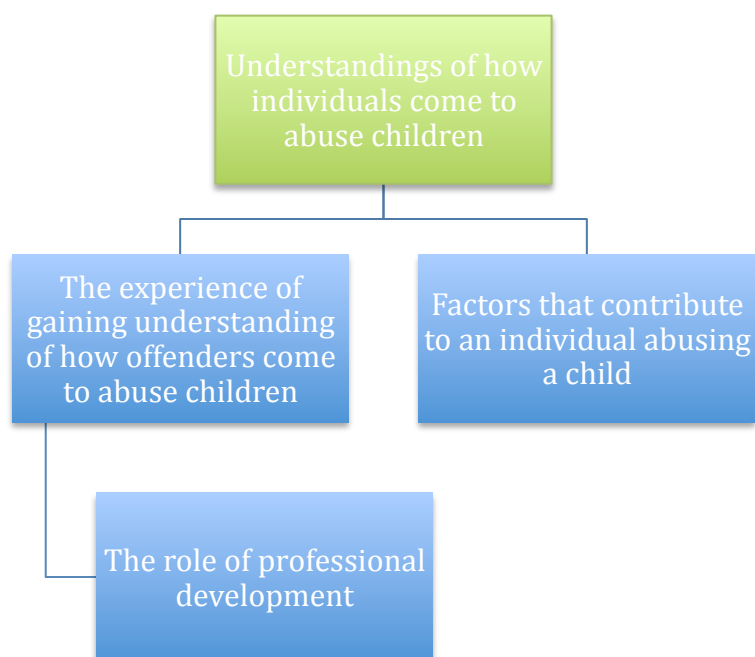


Figure 5.3. - Understandings of how individuals come to sexually abuse children

Two themes were identified relating to participants' understandings of how individuals come to abuse children; 'the experience of gaining understanding of how offenders come to abuse children' (including the subtheme 'the role of professional development') and 'factors that contribute to an individual abusing a child'.

The way in which participants reported their understandings of how offenders come to abuse children was characterised by a discourse that flowed easily. Topics were discussed at length, and participants gave the impression that they had ample knowledge in this area. They spoke with confidence and assuredness and were comfortable giving their opinion as experts in this area (see appendix G for an example of discourse relating to this theme).

5.3.1. *The experience of gaining understanding of how offenders come to abuse children*

Participants reported that they had moved from single-factor explanations of how offenders come to abuse children prior to working in this area to multi-factorial understandings of why offenders offend.

Carol: I definitely didn't understand it. You know, I kind of would have maybe thought more like the disease model, you know that there was something wrong with them, that they were unwell and you know, and that's why they abused children. Kind of sick and unwell and unhealthy. That would have been my thoughts on it. But since working here that's changed quite a bit.

Alan: My ideas about why they had offended would have been that there might have been some kind of deviant fantasy or unhealthy attraction towards children. That would have been my conclusion at that point prior to coming to [place of work].

Ben: I would have had quite a narrow view of why. I thought it was primarily related to a deviant sexual preference for children and I would have believed that anyone who offended against a child had paedophilic tendencies.

These participants reported that prior to working within the field of sexual offending they held single factor views that sexual offending was an innate unhealthy part of the offender. Participants also reported that, prior to working in the area, they held no thoughts or opinions on why sexual offending occurs.

Edward: If I was to think back retrospectively, ehm.... Probably not. Ehm I would freely admit to being, sort of the person who would have given very little consideration to ehm... sexual.. yeah sexual offending.

Gina: I didn't actually have any thoughts. I... I was I suppose... the interest... the area interested me. But not as to why people might abuse their children or abuse children. So no.

All interviewed participants had progressed from either no thoughts, or single-factor explanations as to why offenders abused children, to multi-factorial understandings. Discussing her current understandings, the following participant lists various factors that can affect how an individual comes to abuse a child.

Fiona: Loads of different things. Again it can be traumatic experience, it can be attachment, it may be just pure isolation, victimisation, it could be curiosity, it could be influences...addiction... influences from pornography and curiosity around further experimentation, eh loneliness, an identification, it could be... you know they're mental capacity... they're identifying with children rather than adults, it can be intellectual disability, it can be... so its not just one particular answer.

Participants reported that the ways in which offenders come to abuse children could only be understood as a complex process.

Alan: You could write, you could write multiple books on the topic

Donna: I suppose the singular thing that I'm left with after working in the area and training... I'm only coming to this now, I haven't given it thought before, but I think it is the complexity of it all, you know.

It was reported that at times participants continued to be baffled by the complexity of this phenomenon.

Carol: There's definitely times where it's harder to understand.

Edward: I've told people for the last ten years I've been in the prison service, every kind of six to twelve months, I have this moment where I feel like I

understand what I'm doing. And six to twelve months after that I look back and I go no I was wrong, now it's about this. And its.... No, there's layers and layers and layers to a lot of this stuff.

Carol: Just every day you know, you kind of learn something new about why people abuse, about why people offend sexually. It never..... I mean that's not to say, there's still days when it baffles me, there's still days when I can't grasp it at all, or people... well no that's not true, I've never met someone where I haven't understood it. Which is great. I don't think I'd be able to keep going if it really...

It is evident from this last quote that understanding and being able to formulate why an individual has come to offend against a child is integral to maintaining a level of job satisfaction. Participants noted that despite the complexity of sexual offending behaviour they saw patterns across offences.

Ben: The offences may be quite different. Different range of offences around the room. But the factors that underpin the offending are strikingly similar. Yeah, those patterns are repeated again, and again, and again. So yeah... which makes you even more convinced as to what it is that leads to sexual offending, and sexual offending against children. Remarkably similar.

Gina: It doesn't fit in any box, you know, it really doesn't. None of this... None of these men fit in boxes, you know there's, there's, how would you say... there's common factors alright, you know, but each man is very different.

The latter quote highlights how sexual offending behaviour can be simultaneously perceived in terms of case idiosyncrasy and commonalities with other cases.

5.3.2. The role of professional development

Participants discussed their experience of moving from single-factor or no understandings of how offenders come to abuse, to comprehending sexual

offending behaviour as complex and multi-factorial. Participants were asked to discuss the role of professional development, consisting of various types of facilitated learning opportunities and informal learning opportunities, in promoting this shift in understanding. Several individuals reported that training in the use and interpretation of risk assessment tools promoted a shift in understanding. In fact, for some participants, risk assessment tools had come to structure thinking on how an individual comes to abuse children.

Edward: If I was to take anything, which informed it, it would have been looking at the [risk assessment tool]. You know looking at number of static and dynamic factors. Eh... and just starting to think about sort of the, the offender's lives in those terms. Ehm because I think that gave me a template I could apply.

Ben: So the training would say to you.....these are the areas you must identify when you are looking for risk factors, or causes of sexual offence, we're going to give you some guidance on it. Here's what the research shows that underpins sexual offending. And with that, that's the area for your work, that's highlighting the areas for intervention.

This participant went on to say,

Ben: It puts a structure on it. Very much so yeah. Not just sitting there contemplating or you know stroking your chin, wondering what it is. You have a framework to work off and that's really important. You know, because the men are so diverse group of people, the offences a broad range of offences, the motivation and the factors that led to the offending are very, very different, you know. But you always have this framework as a reference point to guide you to look in the right areas. And eh flag for you the areas where you need to intervene. Because you can get lost in the whole thing.

This participant discussed how risk assessments support his understanding of how an individual has come to offend and informs treatment.

Participants reported that being immersed in the job also furthered their understanding of why offenders abused children.

Interviewer: And so then since you began working in this field, were there any specific experiences that led you to this kind of newer understanding of why offenders offend?

Donna: I suppose again its being immersed, you know, in the reading and the treatment and talking to people and conferences, and so on and then you get a deeper understanding of it.

Participants also recalled specific individuals that they had worked with that exemplified a particular factor or interplay of factors relating to how a person comes to sexually abuse children. One participant recalled a particular case that demonstrated how emotional dysregulation and poor interpersonal skills underpinned sexual offending behaviour.

Ben: He wasn't putting it out there as a reason as to why I sexually offended, eh here's why. He was just talking about the background to it and it was very clear to us what was going on. He couldn't healthily express to his partner that I felt embarrassed by you, I feel humiliated when you do this to me, I feel rejected, and I'd ask you in future not to behave like that way in public with me, in that way. If you have issues with me... you know, healthy management of this kind of behaviour. But he went underground and saw to appease feelings of real anger, real rage at the humiliation he suffered, he sought to appease that, by getting even and focusing on this person. So I think that, that was a big shift for me. I don't know if it sounds right to you.

Interestingly, this participant at times adopted the offenders voice saying 'I' instead of 'he'. This may be indicative of the participant's therapeutic role where he seeks to comprehend the offender's perspective on his behaviour. He discussed how this particular case facilitated a 'big shift' in the way in which he

constructed his understandings of why offenders abuse children. Finally, he seeks validation for his point, recognising the interpretive nature of his work.

5.3.3. Factors that contribute to sexual offending against children

Factors associated with sexual offending behaviour that targets children were identified from the data and categorised into six groups; sexual preference, developmental experiences, distorted cognition, emotional dysregulation, inadequate social skills, and situational and environmental factors. However, it is important to note that all participants reported that the presence of one risk factor was not enough to abet an individual to sexually abuse a child. These factors are discussed separately here, however all participants discussed them in the context of a multi-factor model of understanding. Frequently, participants discussed factors that contribute to child sexual abuse in relation to treatment options highlighting the rehabilitative nature of their jobs.

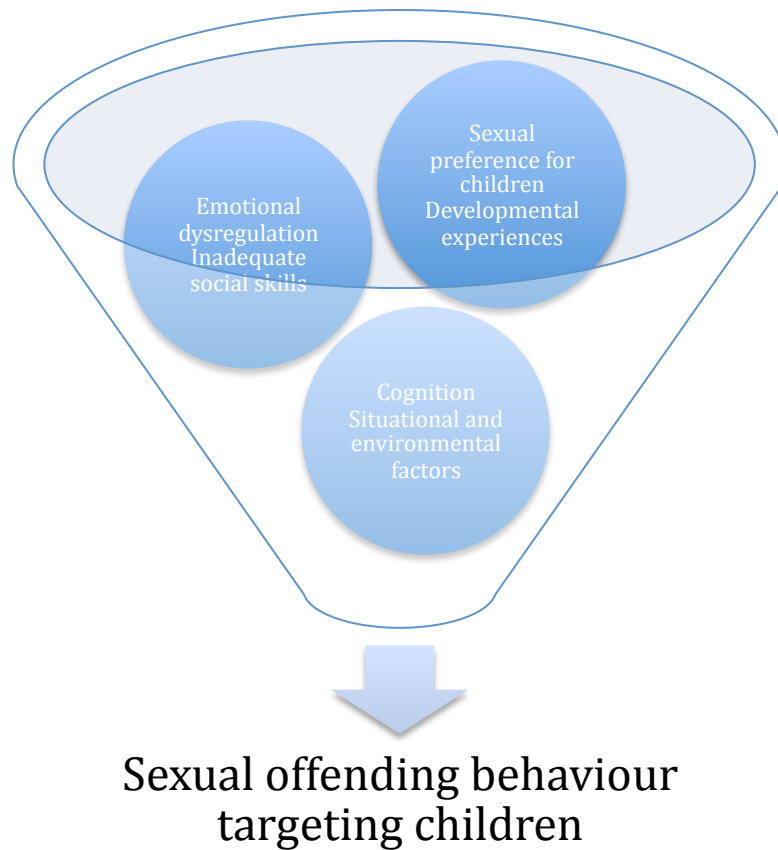


Figure 5.3.3 - Factors that contribute to sexual offending against children

Participants discussed the idea that for some individuals who sexually offended against children there was an inherent sexual attraction to children. This was often referred to as paedophilia and recognized as a psychiatric disorder.

Ben: Sometimes it's an absolute deviance sexual preference for children. It can be almost that clear-cut I think. Eh we would see people like priests who

have... all their life seems to be quite in tact you know. But eh.. they just have a very strong sexual desire for children.

Carol: A man who's sexual orientation is more towards children, so where it starts at about 14-15 with the onset of puberty, where they are attracted to 8-9 year olds, you know, and that remains then as they get older, that is someone who would be classified in the DSM or the ICD as paedophilic.

Edward: The sexual deviancy piece here, the role of sexual fantasy, the sexual attraction to children per se, rather than a single offence against a child. That has been something that has really stood out. Ehm... working with men who are able to say that their sexual preference is for, sort of a prepubescent sort of child.

Participants discussed offenders who were sexually attracted to children as a distinct group in terms of intervention, which centred around risk management rather than treatment per se.

Carol: That type of person, you know, telling them to change their sexual fantasy for example, which is a huge part of any sex offender treatment programme, is like telling you or I to not be attracted to what you are attracted to, so it's impossible. And you know it's... it doesn't work. We know that just avoiding something isn't going to work forever. For them it's more about managing the fantasy, understanding the fantasy, understanding the needs, you know these people are sexually attracted to children, they aren't as keen on adult same-age relationship.

Ben: And you're working at risk management. Avoiding risky situations. Eh you know building a more... investing heavy in other areas of your life, so this desire, this compulsion doesn't overtake you.

Thus, several participants referred to a 'two-type of offender' hypothesis, identifying offenders that were paedophilic from those that were not.

Donna: I think, my understanding was the two categories, the kind of deviant sexual preferences, paedophilia and then people who are acting out in whatever way.

Carol: I think my clearest answer is that there are two types of offenders who offend against children.

This participant further explains,

Carol: I think there is that small category of people who are paedophilic, absolutely, where they're primary orientation is towards children. They are sexually turned on by them; they're sexually attracted to them.

And,

Carol: But they're quite few, and then you have the much larger majority of child offenders where it is not about ehm an actual attraction per se, there is something becomes sexual.

However, participants acknowledged that an inherent sexual attraction to children alone would not necessarily abet an individual to engage in sexual offending behaviour. Paedophilic tendencies were still dependent on other interlacing factors to bring about offending behaviour. Preventative treatment options were discussed that assist individuals with an inherent attraction to children to forestall sexual offending behaviour.

Carol: A more European model like Germany, is more proactive. It's about looking at... like they have a project the Dunkelfeld project, where they actually advertise going, you know, do you think you are going to offend, have you found yourself being sexually attracted to children and if so call this hotline. You know and yes, there's obviously confidentiality issues and that all has to be worked out, but its fantastic. I mean, without doubt,

there's... I mean they're researching it at the moment but I'm sure it is impacting on offending rates, it has to. Even if it is tiny it still a positive impact, it's being proactive rather than reactive.

Remarkably, an inherent sexual attraction to children was often absent as a factor supporting offending behaviour in the second population of offenders discussed in the 'two-type of offender' hypothesis. In this population, offending behaviour was influenced by other factors such as developmental experiences, emotional dysregulation and inadequate social skills, distorted cognition, and situational and environmental factors.

Participants discussed the role of developmental experiences as part of a multi-factorial understanding of why offenders abused children. For example, it was reported that often offenders had experienced abuse as children.

Fiona: Their experiences had an influence... their traumatic negative experience in childhood definitely I felt.... Or I feel affect their offending behaviour.

Donna: I mean most of the people that we come across certainly in this setting are, have you know various deprivation, abuses, neglects in their lives.

Edward: What experience is telling me is for a lot of the men who have that, they seemed to have experienced sexual abuse around, sort of critical periods in their lives, around 7, 8, 9 years of age. Not only do they seem to have develop... experienced sexual abuse, but it happened in an environment which was very chaotic or neglectful where there wasn't sort of parental support or there was very disturbed attachments.

The above quote also highlights the role of troubled parental attachment in offenders' early life experiences. Several other participants also discussed the role of attachment in sexual offending behaviour.

Carol: It's that piece of the early stuff, the early attachment. You know the unavailable mother or the over bearing critical mother. You know the kind of, the early exposure to sexual anything, sexual anything; so whether they've witnessed sexual violence themselves, whether you know it's just been.... they've been sexualised or abused. Or even just unhealthy sexual stuff going on around them.

Ben: When we done the exploration of the immediate context of the offending you could see they were old patterns that were well established, like for example eh in times of need not reaching out, not seeking support eh, not feeling their feelings of loneliness or sadness had any validity. And that might have been back in their childhood where they would have went to their primary caregiver, their mother, their father, whoever and their concerns and worries and issues were really not... they would have been dismissed. So the message is don't really come back to me in times of trouble. Or if they... when they went there, and maybe their mother and father would become all agitated and panicked and they'd actually escalate the child's level of anxiety. So the message again there also is it's better not to go there because it makes things worse. And that's carried on into later life. So you'll see those patterns very active, usually around the time or the lead up to the sexual offence.

In this last quote the participant discusses how early childhood experiences can result in the formation of destructive habits. Thus, the individual struggles to emotionally regulate in adulthood in a healthy manner.

Participants discussed the role of emotional regulation in offending behaviour and how an inability to emotionally regulate in a healthy manner can support offending behaviour. This was discussed in terms of feelings of anger or a need to feel in control.

Alan: There would have been his inability to kind of emotionally regulate. It would have been a factor.

Donna: Yeah, that they're meeting that need for vengefulness and for revenge and for releasing the anger through their sexual abuse of a child, you know.

Ben: Well there was the one I mentioned earlier about the humiliation, embarrassment by a partner, and it was clear that the resentment and anger and the sense of feeling rejected was fuelling that behaviour. It did have a significant part to play in the subsequent sexual offending against his partner's daughter. It was so obvious for me that this offence is being emotionally driven and it's an effort to regain control in the relationship, re-establish himself.

The above participant discussed a case whereby the offender's emotional discontent related to his partner and had less to do with the victim of abuse. Participants also discussed the role of feelings such as sadness, isolation and loneliness in sexual offending behaviour. This was often as a result of inadequate social skills hindering the individual's ability to engage in healthy social interaction and relationships.

Carol: and then you have the much larger majority of child offenders where it is not about ehm an actual attraction per se, there is something becomes sexual, but it is like that, either over-identification with the child, socially inadequate, ehm can't cope in an adult, same peer relationship.

Ben: Ill at ease in adult company, feeling a bit like a fish out of water, not being able to manage the cut and thrust of adult relationships, maybe disappointed by your friend, maybe let down by your friend, eh they do things that surprise you, they may insult you sometimes, but if you... if we are skilled enough we can fix this and we can hold on to all these relationships that are important to us. But for some of these people, men who have sexually offended against children it's beyond them, it's beyond their capacity, so immersing themselves in the child's world, the youth clubs, the football teams, and really these are now your group of friends and mates and there's no real challenge for them. They won't really reject you,

they probably maybe idolise you, they look up to you. So that facilitates sexual.... All those needs are being met in a very unhealthy way.

The above quote describes how for the individual relating to children is simply easier or safer than attempting adult relationships. This participant and others discussed this point further.

Ben: People who just don't have the capacity for rupture and repair in a relationship. Things go wrong, you have the capacity to repair in a relationship, to keep the relationship going. They don't have that maturity. So they find it difficult to be in relationships, but they desire what comes from a relationship, emotional warmth, sexual intimacy, emotional intimacy. They have those needs. And in the absence of being able to attain it in a health way, with someone of a similar age, they take a short cut. It's really about a short cut to meet those needs and they get it from a child.

Carol: But it's more about lack of social skills, inadequacy, you know, intimacy deficits, they cannot... they want an adult intimate relationship, but a child is safer, because a child is not going to judge, is not going to threaten, is not going to reject. Obviously because they can't consent.

Sexual offending behaviour was also described as underpinned by a combination of emotions featuring both anger and sadness stemming from inadequate social skills.

Edward: There is one group who are very socially inadequate. Very very socially inadequate, and they have struggled with similar age partners. They.... in a way in which they often become angry and resentful at their partners. Because they don't understand them, they can't manage them, they feel intimidated by them. And they seek solace with children. You know, they do that in two ways either they grow children up in their mind, you know they start to sort of think of them as small adults and that gives them permission to sexually offend against them. Or they grow themselves down; they think of themselves as children, you know, they immerse themselves into sort of eh.. children's TV programmes and collections of child... sort of children's memorabilia and stuff. Ehm the pop star who has a theme park in

his own, sort of, on his own property kind of stuff. Ehm... the Peter Pan's of this world, I think Peter Pan is a very sinister character.

The above participant describes the cognitive gymnastics that offenders employ to rationalise their offending behaviour. This highlights how several interlacing factors, in this case emotional dysregulation, inadequate social skills, and distorted cognition can support sexual offending behaviour targeting children.

The distorted cognitions of offenders featured widely in participants' accounts and were often used as a means of explaining how an individual comes to abuse children. This was often referred to as the offender's 'sexual script' and detailed their understandings about what is sexuality and sexual behaviour. It was noted by participants that at times offenders appeared to lack knowledge or were confused as to what was healthy sexual behaviour.

Donna: I remember one guy as well who said... who asked me in a one-to-one session, he was in the group. Who actually asked me well what is normal sexual behaviour.

This participant continues to say,

Donna: He had an exploring sexuality relationship with his sister. And at the end of it one day, he just kind of said, you know, what would be normal sexual behaviour in a family.

Fiona: Boundaries are broken down, anything goes, I think children are confused as to where... what is the right behaviour as such or what is sexuality. You know if I feel a particular way, am I wrong you know. And again that increases isolation, it ehm... muddies the water a lot for a lot of people. So you know... that can... I think that can lead to other kind of offending you know.

Speaking about a particular case, the following participant notes,

Edward: You know, and it was that deviancy was... that real confusion about sex is really quite core for him. You know, it's going to be very difficult for it to shift.

Another participant discussed interventions to combat confusion surrounding sexuality and healthy sexual behaviour.

Carol: What I've learned, is that a lot of them believe that children are sexual beings. You know, actually I spend a great deal of my time doing basic sex education. Talking about how the amygdale isn't developed at that level, obviously not, not being too scientific, but you know that children aren't sexual.

In addition, this participant discussed how exposure to sexual abuse at an early age can facilitate distorted cognitions in adulthood relating to sex and children.

Carol: In terms of their own victimisation and how that can be very much... so you know I think of a guy who talked about genuinely, genuinely believing it didn't do me that much harm, so therefore it didn't do my victim much harm.

This participant further remarked on her negative emotional reaction to this type of unhealthy cognition,

Carol: Again in a very unhealthy sexual script, this is normal, this is kind of done, this is, you know, this is the natural thing that happens to children, which is horrific.

The offender's unhealthy sexual script also serves to rationalise his offending behaviour. Participants spoke about various kinds of distorted thinking employed to rationalise offending.

Edward: I've always been very taken by kind of... for the vast majority of offenders, when they commit the act they commit, in the moment it makes sense. In the moment it's justifiable in some way. Ehm... it may not be 30 seconds later when they've calmed down.

Carol: I was reading a book of evidence the other day and the father was threatening the daughter that you know that if we were in [other country], I would be taking you out to the woods and taking your virginity. Aren't you lucky we're not?

The participant continues discussing this case saying,

Carol: To him that's a justification, that's a cognitive distortion to allow himself, give himself permission to offend. Look, I'm not doing that, that's the thing that they do in [other country], that's worse. So I'm only doing this, I'm only touching, I'm only.... Not realising that it doesn't matter, any kind of sexual abuse creates horrendous harm and significant long-term damage.

Other participants discussed how distorted cognition resulted in the offender grossly misconstruing the child's intentions when they behaved in an affectionate manner.

Gina: I do think they're usually there's other factors like loneliness, isolation, ehm... mixed up thinking, misconstrued kind of reading of the signals of relationships with their child... you know with this child. Seeing something that's there, that isn't there. You know misinterpreting the child's affection for something that's sexual, when in fact its just children being children. You know and maybe interpreting that as permission to offend against a child and see the child's apparent compliance as willingness to engage. So lots of that kind of thinking.

Alan: So the children were giving him love and affection as children do by cuddles, but he was returning that by sexualising his own behaviour. Which was instead of giving them cuddles and telling the kids he loved them, his head went into this sexual thoughts and there obviously unhealthy sexual fantasy involving them, around the children where he returned that by sexual assault which was involved. At the time the nature of the offences was touching genitals, so it was an adult sexual response to a child's affections.

The above participant discussed the role of sexual fantasy in offending behaviour targeting children. Other participants discussed the role of sexual fantasy in offending behaviour. The following participant described one particular case of an individual's perpetuating sexual fantasy.

Gina: He was able to also say that despite the fact that he was deeply shamed and upset and very very remorseful for his offending and the loss of his family, but the images of the abuse of that girl were still part of his sexual fantasy. That was still his... where he went to when he was indulging in sort of sexual behaviour in custody. Ehm and then he'd feel guilty about it to a much lesser extent but justify it to himself, it's doing nobody any harm and so on. So its still very much there. And it was very very entrenched.

The example highlights how entrenched sexual fantasy can become. Despite conviction, incarceration and feelings of shame and regret this offender continued to engage in sexual fantasy about his victim and continued to rationalise his fantasising as harmless.

Participants discussed situational and environmental factors that abet sexual abuse against children.

Alan: What led him to go after a child and actually offend against a child. If he hadn't been in contact, if he hadn't been doing the babysitting in this instance for his friend's children, he would have probably been a character who may, now we don't know, he may have lapsed into alcohol misuse and may have ended up taking his own life. That would have been a possible

scenario. But the sequence of events were important because ABC happened in result to XY and Z and by that I mean his childhood experiences, his personality, his own state of mind and then his life events and the lead up to it the previous year, prior to actually coming in contact with the child had deteriorated to such a point that he might have ended up offending but if he hadn't had the bizarre combination of events where he ended up in contact with the child, he may never have committed that offence. We don't know.

The above participant highlighted that there was a range of possible scenarios that might have transpired from this offender's distress. However, he noted the significance of the preceding sequence of events in determining the outcome.

Carol: I think there's the... there's definitely the kind of.. eh... personal psychological factors absolutely. But there are situational one's, there definitely are. So again, if you think about Ireland and the institutional abuse, I do think there were probably a lot of people who offended in those situations, against vulnerable children in a horrific manner, but who may not of, had they not been in this awful toxic unhealthy sexual environment.

Internet pornography has become very accessible in recent years, and considered by these professionals as a new environmental factor impacting child sexual abuse. Several participants commented on this change in the environment.

Carol: We're seeing over the last ten years, massive increase in young people offending. Whether its against children or adults, sexually offending. And without doubt that has to go hand-in-hand with the massive increase in access to pornography. I mean there's children nine, ten, eleven in school with porn on their phones, you know.

Edward: We're seeing this with a range of slightly younger men for here. They're in their sort of 20s rather than sort of 30s or 40s. And they are initially drawn then to the grey area of pornography, sort of younger looking 18-year-old sort of porn pieces. And that sort of... that fantasy, sort of develops and they offend against, typically they seem to be offending

against 13, 14 year old, sort of 15 year olds. Ehm... sort of hebephile sort of territory. Ehm and that's one I'm less clear on at the moment, I don't know if that is something that which is sort of driven by access to pornography. I think it's... my gut feeling is that it is a specific risk factor, but there is something.. again these men typically have really poor emotional control, slight sense of inadequacy, sort some very dysfunctional relationships, they tend to be involved in drug use before they offend aswell so you know.... It's a culmination of risk factors.

The above participant reports that the use of pornography may be considered a specific risk factor in conjunction with other factors, as part of a multi-factor understanding of child sexual abuse.

5.4 Question 2: In what ways do professionals perceive the prevailing cultural attitudes relating to child sexual abuse?

Western society's attitudes towards individuals who have sexually abused children are universally negative and offenders are constructed as dangerous, psychologically abnormal individuals (Petrunik & Deutschman, 2008; Willis et al., 2013). Thus, the present study sought to examine the dynamic interplay between this prevailing public attitude and participants' work-related experiences.

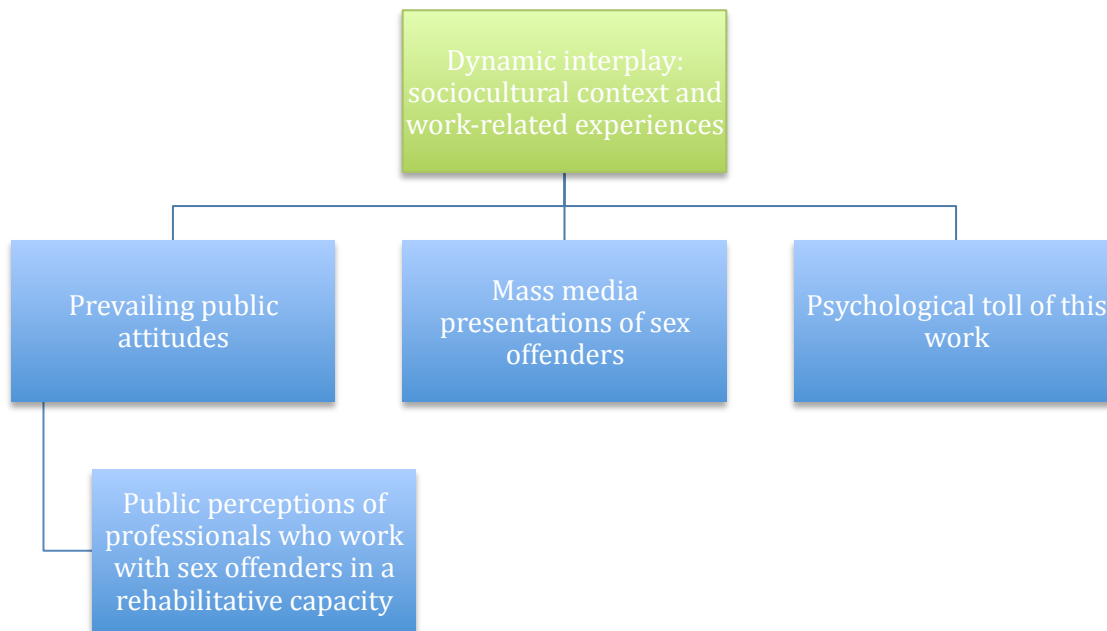


Figure 5.4. - Exploring the dynamic interplay between participants' sociocultural context and work-related experiences

Participants discussed three themes relating to the interplay between sociocultural context and work-related experiences; 'prevailing public attitudes' (including the subtheme 'public perceptions of professionals who work with sex offenders in a rehabilitative capacity'), 'mass media presentations of sex offenders' and 'psychological toll of this work'.

Participants reported their experiences as persons in a unique position, working in a rehabilitative capacity with individuals that are deemed predatory societal outcasts. This was characterised by discourse somewhat different to that used in themes identified by question 1. In contrast to the themes identified by question 1, participants did not provide long passages of easily available information relating to these struggles. However, they were open to discussing them when the opportunity arose as part of their overall accounts of their work-life experiences. These passages were characterised by a somewhat more frequent back and forth interchange between the participant and interviewer as

the participant took the time to reflect on the context within which they work (see appendix G for an example of this type of discourse).

5.4.1. Prevailing public attitudes towards sexual offenders who have abused children and participants' work-related experiences

In order to explore the context in which professionals construct their understandings, participants were asked to discuss how they interpreted public attitudes relating to child sexual abuse. Participants reported that the prevailing public attitude was laden with negative emotion. Participants perceived the general public as angry and fearful. However, it was considered that this reaction was understandable.

Ben: Sex offenders have become quite reviled and fear group by society. And there is some basis for that, ok.

Edward: The kind of the beast, monster kind of stuff, I think that captures something about society. Ehm... I don't necessarily think it is, it is wrong per se. Because I think people have that anger that upset about sexual offending.

Carol: They get quite angry so I think yeah, I hit the wall ofthose bastards they should be shot, they... you know, I know what I'd do with them. And I get that, I understand. Because again I don't have children, but if I did, and a child was harmed or a very close family member, I can't say I'd be all, oh yes rehabilitate this person.

However, it was discussed that perhaps this anger and fear leads society to avoid talking about the subject of child sexual abuse in an open and helpful way.

Edward: And I understand why people get angry. I wish that we could have that more healthy discussion. Ehm... I don't know how we do that. Ehm... and I get frustrated and understand all at once.

Carol: And you know in reality if we ever want to tackle it we need to be looking at all that stuff. People, people don't want to. Too afraid of it, it's too frightening. And its too frightening to think my brother could, my uncle could, my cousin could. These people aren't you know the tiny margins of society that are the hunchbacks behind closed doors, they're not. They're judges, doctors, lawyers, aswell as the deprived, the kind of downtrodden, so it's really about kind of opening our minds to that. Which is a little bit scary.

It was considered that the public perception of sex offenders was of individuals who were innately different or wholly distinct in their moral make-up.

Donna: I mean they are considered to be monsters in the community.

Edward: My wife would have a very clear view on why people offend. I suppose she would act as a, as a voice in my ear. She's a very simple black and white view of the world in as far as sexual offending. Men sexually offend because they are evil, horrible or monsters, you know. That's very much a very held line. Who are unsavable and she has some very simple solutions.

One participant noted that this perception of sex offenders was so pervasive that other criminals that had committed heinous crimes, and were incarcerated in the same facility, held it.

Ben: There's people in there who have murdered more than one person and have changed people's lives irreparably, who have really destroyed lives out there, of their relatives, the children of the people who were killed. But they have a kind of superior attitude over men who have sexually offended. And will tend to disassociate themselves from them, from these men.

It was noted by participants that despite public perception of sex offenders as different to everybody else, this was not the case in their work-related experiences.

Edward: But I think what it seems to do is, it seems to sort of... it splits... it kind of splits it off into some kind of other group that somehow this group of men and women who are involved in that sexual behaviour are just very different. And as we know they're not; there is a much larger population of men, and lesser population of women who have harmful sexual behaviour.

Other participants noted that the men they met were strikingly different to the public perceived stereotypes.

Alan: Normal guys, they look very normal, you've been in the prison, they don't have two heads, they don't look crazy, they could be your neighbour, they could be somebody who lives down the street, they could be family, they are all very normal.

Ben: Even the client group themselves are a very diverse group. They are as wide ranging as any group in society. No they are so different, you know so. That's an interesting piece.

The final participant here reports that individuals incarcerated for sexual offending against a child are similar to any other population in society in terms of their diversity.

5.4.2. Public perceptions of individuals who work with sex offenders in a rehabilitative capacity

Professionals who work with men who have sexually abused children were perceived to be in a unique position in that they worked in a rehabilitative

capacity with individuals deemed monsters by society, thus perhaps susceptible to a negative public perception by association. Participants discussed the perceived public opinion of their work.

Ben: They may not see our work as being the way to go, it's about control, sanctions, monitoring eh.... Admonishing people to the far reaches of the earth or something you know. I don't know whether they put much value on therapy as a means of addressing sexual offending. I don't think very many people do, except mainly people in the profession.

Carol: But the majority of people just don't think they deserve any treatment, I don't think. Don't think they have any rights.

To further probe participants' perceptions of the public's opinion of their work and of them as professionals, they were asked how they described their job to people who did not work with sex offenders. Notably, all participants responded that they do not tell people immediately what they did. Participants had experienced and predicted that there would be negative responses to their professional role with this client group.

Donna: My family don't talk to me about it. Do you know. They would sort of have... share the same views as most of the rest of the community. What in the name of god are you doing in there with those people.

Alan: But as soon as you say sex offenders the general public response might be horror.

Fiona: Only recently someone said to me, I don't tell people, but they had heard through my partner what I worked at, and they lambasted me basically. Ehm I have been slagged off for working with scumbags as a general rule, because of what I do. In a banter, you know. But I do

sometimes.... I don't tell people an awful lot. I might say I'm a therapist to some people if I don't know them that well.

Ben: No I don't, that's the short thing, I never do. My very close friends I do, but no. My family would know, but the general, you know, the chitchat in a pub or restaurant or a café, I wouldn't volunteer that part of my work because I don't want to spend energy either defending it or explaining it or giving them the rationale as to why treatment works or why it doesn't. I just don't do that.

Interviewer: Can I ask you what you tell people you do?

Edward: I work in ceramics. (laughs). That's been a long practiced line, because I've never had anyone ask me any follow up questions about ceramics.

This participant goes on to say,

Edward: No I wouldn't be sharing it with the general world, it would be far too difficult. And eh... when I'm not in work, I'm not in work.

Notably, not all public reactions to working in this profession were negative.

Participants reported several positive reactions.

Donna: I would disclose it to people that I know would have an interest or would have a serious.... You know, would have... would take it seriously as something that needs to be done. Yes I would absolutely.

Ben: They are probably glad someone is doing this work, as long as it's not them (laughs). Yeah so, they're probably glad.

It was discussed by participants that people, who work in the same profession but in different fields, often don't want to do this job.

Donna: It's funny now though in the service, it's kind of very accepted as, as a job that we do. You know, some people obviously don't want to do it, and say no and eh... lots of people are prepared to do it, which is interesting.

Gina: I know we would have done a little bit of training in it, ehm in college, where people would have come in from the Granada Institute. I remember sitting with my peers at the time and... some of them were parents and they were very clear about saying absolutely no way would they work with that population. Absolutely... you know, not a chance.

In participants' experience, people often remarked that it must be a difficult job to do and a difficult place to work.

Alan: And sometimes people don't know [place of work], and sometimes they would know clearly that it is the national sex offenders treatment programme and they would make an exclamation like, oh my god that must be difficult.

Carol: People will say to me, oh you're doing a good job, fair play to you, I couldn't do it. Which is quite nice.

For one participant the surprising experience of a more positive attitude to her work elicited thoughts that public opinion might be changing. She described a conversation with a young man and his reaction upon hearing where she worked.

Donna: He said I suppose its right, suppose you're right, he said, the media don't give people a chance, even if they have done their time, or something like that you know. It was..it really surprised me because I thought he'd say, why don't you lock up and throw away the key, you know. But that's what he said and he was a young fellow in his early 20s. and eh, I thought it was interesting.

Interviewer: Do you think that's a sign that attitudes might be changing?

Donna: A little bit yeah. Very difficult though, it'll take another generation or two, but you know to have.. for people to actually acknowledge that they grow out of their own society.

This participant surmised that a barrier to public opinion changing may be that the general public don't want to acknowledge that sex offenders are part of society in its current make-up.

5.4.3. Mass media presentations of sex offenders and participants' work-related experiences

Mass media (e.g. broadcast media, print media and digital media) present sensationalised portrayals of individuals who have sexually abused children as predatory societal outcasts (Malinen, Willis, & Johnston, 2014; Petrunik & Weisman, 2005). Participants were asked to discuss mass media presentations of sex offenders and how this impacts their work-related experiences. Unsurprisingly, participants reported that the media sensationalises sexual offending.

Alan: It doesn't give you any of the detail; it just gives you the horror. It just gives you the sensationalism.

Edward: Some of it borders on a titillation piece, particularly around offences against sort of teenage victims.

Fiona: They fuel a sense of voyeurism around sexual offending. And I don't think that's helpful, personally, you know.

One participant noted that mass media presentations are often inaccurate in their portrayal of sex offenders. She had previously remarked that according to media presentations sexually offenders are likely to be strangers to their victims.

Carol: What really irritates me about the media is the media leads you to believe that that's the more likely scenario. When as I said it's not, the more likely scenario is a brother, an uncle, a brother in-law, a father, a cousin, you know the bit we don't like to face, the parts of society we want to go, no that'll never happen me.

Notably, these professionals were keen to distance themselves from the mass media highlighting that their own understandings of how offenders came to abuse children were not influenced by mass media presentations.

Alan: It hasn't changed anything except reinforced my own thinking, that there is more to it than meets the eye, and that it is not just about the evidence that's in front of you. If I picked up a paper today and I saw a sensational story, in front of they would have this.... They usually use the word beast or rapist or something derogatory and then they run a story which sensationalises... if I read that type of story now it wouldn't change my thinking, what it would probably do is reinforce my own thinking of what I have learned over the years by thinking... what has led this man to offend, there's more to this story than just the red topped banner with the sensationalised exclamation marks and the bold type.

Other participants noted that they actively avoid mass media coverage of child sexual abuse.

Donna: I haven't seen much, but I'm not a big media person. I wouldn't be scouring the papers every second, you know every day for articles.

Edward: I really don't engage very much with popular media. I don't read newspapers, I don't watch TV..... I don't watch the TV channels, so no.

Participants also discussed the public's morbid fascination with crime, begging the question is it the papers that are driving this interest or demand from the public to read about sensationalised crimes.

Donna: If there's any crime at all anywhere, and they'll even go outside of Ireland to give you a sexy crime. Not necessarily a sexual one, but a murder one or... you know somebody murdered his two children and then set fire to them, I mean that's... that'll be number one on the news for two or three days and then they'll keep doing it. So there's... obviously whether it's a whole issue there that... whether it's the media that drives public interest, or public interest drives the media, that's to me an unknown. I haven't studied it. But I don't know what the answer is. But people seem... the media certainly believe that people are interested.

Carol: You know what it's crazy, it's almost a sexy topic. You know which is screwed up in its own way. But I think people are fascinated by it. You know it's been around for centuries. It's used as a weapon in wars. It's... you know I so I think people are morbidly fascinated by it.

In terms of how the mass media coverage more directly affects their work-related experiences, for the most part, participants discussed how it hampered the treatment of sex offenders.

Donna: They stalk basically sex offenders that are in the community for stories. The newspapers do. So it think its... I don't know, I don't understand it. And I'll leave that to a sociologist or... you know.

Interviewer: And does that impact the work that you are trying to do? Ehm.. the red tops... reaction to...

Donna: Of course it does, because it creates fear. Of course.. it makes our job extremely difficult.

Carol: I think the unfortunate thing is Ireland's so small and the media makes such a huge, huge heinous deal of it that when people are released we don't have proper through care supports, so we're doing a lot of work on rehabilitation and getting them to understand their offending and trying to build a better life. But if they go out into a society that hates them, and

thinks they're horrific scum of the earth's need to be... you know, we're almost setting them up for a fall.

Participants discussed how making life difficult for sex offenders only increases the risk of recidivism.

Fiona: I can understand the scaremongering to an extent. I can you know rationalise that people need to sell newspapers so sometimes they report very extreme cases or very significant cases. Ehm I just don't think it does justice to society as a whole. Because you know its ehm... it's creating that gap. And I think by creating that gap between... and creating shame, and increasing it, it doesn't allow for more restorative work and inclusion which would decrease maybe some level of offending. You know, actually would provide protective factors if there was less shame, less ostracising of individuals. Ehm and I don't think that helps.

Carol: I mean they're terrified most of them, getting out, they're petrified of the media following them and making their lives hell. And that only increases their risk because they're just going to get angry and they're going to think what's the point, sure I'm never going to get a second chance so, I might as well go back to the way I was you know. And so yeah that's kind of I think the media..... I'm very anti-media.

Alan: We do see occasionally, we read stories where they would expose a man's address for example. The man would leave the address. It would happen, regularly happen at the weekend past, a man's address was exposed in a bed and breakfast; it was a hostel in fact. And he then had to leave. And one of my colleagues told me yesterday that he was now street living. So now a dangerous, high-risk offender, who committed an offence against a child, done prison time, who has been significantly destabilised by losing his accommodation. So that man is now in a sleeping bag somewhere in [Irish city].

Furthermore, one participant noted that media portrayals of child sexual abuse inhibits open discussion about the topic, which also hinders the work that these individuals are trying to do.

Edward: What tabloids do is they kind of almost prevent that because we know that there are a body of men that probably haven't offended but aren't far from offending. Ehm... and the tabloid stuff inhibits that as a discussion, you know it inhibits sort of seeing sort of sexual... healthy sexual behaviour as a continuum. Its... in the same way that eh... we now try to promote mental health, you know mental health is a sliding scale. Its not either or eh... and what we work with in [place of work] is the very extreme end. You know its not somewhere in the middle. But there is that work to do in the middle. Ehm.. Particularly around things like, what is active consent for teenage populations and so on. What is... what are sort of sexual rights and responsibilities and so on. That stuff would be important.

This participant reports that preventative measures could be put in place if public opinion was less clouded by the fear-inducing media portrayals of child sexual abuse.

5.4.4. Psychological toll of this work

As noted throughout the above themes, individuals incarcerated for sexual offending behaviour against a child have committed heinous crimes. Thus, it was identified from the data that working in this context, learning of heinous crimes and having to interact with the perpetrators of heinous crimes, placed a psychological toll on these professionals.

Alan: Sometimes it takes me longer to switch off you know I find myself... I can still switch off, I can still.... You go home at night, you go home to your kid and you kiss your kid and you kiss your wife goodnight and you think how could somebody hurt a child.

Carol: I think actually one of the biggest, biggest effects of this job is vicarious trauma. We are without doubt all vicariously traumatised. And that's not good, and I probably am at the end of my road, if I'm to really think about it, six years is a very long time to work with the darkest of dark stuff.

Additionally, it was interpreted from these experiences that participants faced a specific challenge unique to their role as professionals working in the treatment of sex offenders. Participants were required to attain a balance between building a therapeutic relationship with the offender, and condemnation for the crime the offender has committed. Attaining and maintaining this balance is similar to the task of walking a tightrope. Maintaining balance must be kept in perpetual consideration. Fall to one side, and the therapeutic relationship is marred and rehabilitation ineffectual. Fall to the other side and the professional may end up subtly condoning the crime. Participants discussed the challenges faced maintaining this balance.

Carol: And yeah it's horrific and... I don't ever not see the horrific-ness of it. But I suppose I also sit with the person and I sit with the damaged child and I sit with the individual. So I'm able to see both at times. At times I struggle with that too.

Donna: You know I think as you go along you have good days and bad days, off days and you know days when, you don't let it affect you as much or something. It is eh when you're hearing the story of what somebody has done to a child. If its violent or you know, very manipulative and the whole grooming thing. It does it's hard to listen to you know. And eh again I suppose there's kind of resilience there, or an ability to actually compartmentalise it. That's my only explanation. It's not easy but its do-able and that's what it takes.

Edward: It's trying to hold a line which is hopeful, I mean if your going to work with people you need to have some form of hope with change. Ehm... but it yeah.... Its not naïve either, you know there are people here who are substantially dangerous.

Finally, several participants reported that they engaged in self-care activities as a result of the psychological challenges of this work.

Fiona: I trained in counselling before I became a probation officer, so I would use a lot of self-care around my work.

Edward: And again I have a family life, and I keep it very.... A very firm distinction between family life and sort of what I do for a living aswell with work. Ehm sort of my children don't know I work in a prison, they know I'm [a professional] and they know... actually the older one knows a little bit about me working in a prison because she's asked some pointed questions but, ehm... it's just they're not of an appropriate age so I don't have those discussions and so on. Ehm... and given where I work I don't bring anything about home into work or work sort of back into home.

Alan: I'm quite good at detaching from work. I generally have the ability to leave the gates and go home.

The final two quotes note the use of separating work and home life as a means of engaging in self-care for a psychologically demanding job.

5.5 Constructed work-related experiences

The data were addressed using two questions; 'in what ways do professionals who work with sexual offenders construct their understandings of how an individual comes to sexually abuse a child?', and 'in what ways do professionals perceive the prevailing cultural attitudes relating to child sexual abuse?', and several themes and subthemes were identified. Two broadly distinct ways in which individuals constructed their work-related experiences were interpreted from the data. These overarching themes were determined by the researcher's

initial impressions of the data acquired during the interviewing process and were closely related to the questions used to address the data. The two overarching themes were labelled 'the expert' and 'the reflective practitioner' (see figure 5.5).

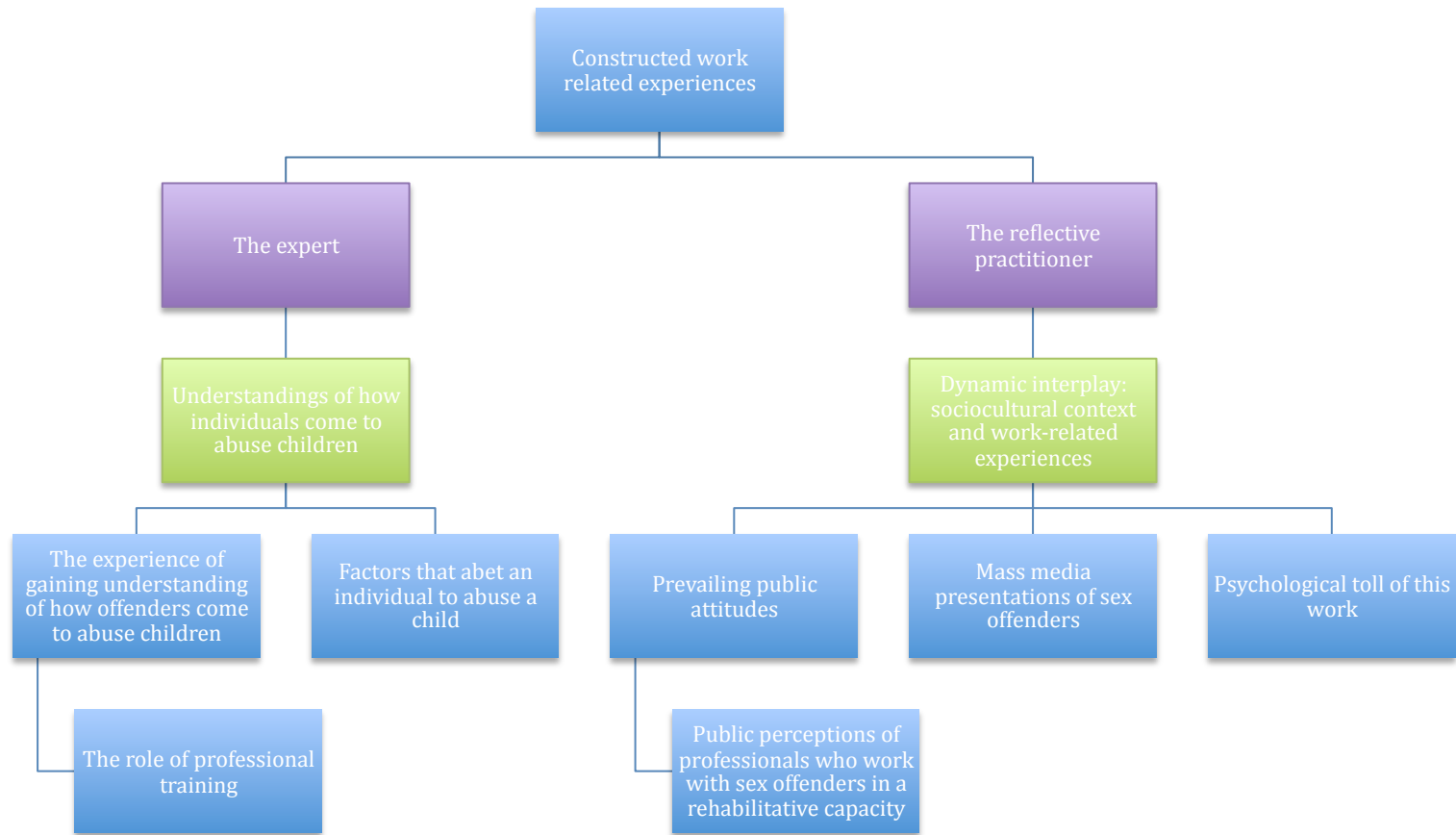


Figure 5.5: Broadly distinct ways in which individuals construct their work-related experiences

The diagram depicts the relationship between the overarching themes, 'the expert' and 'the reflective practitioner' (highlighted in purple) and the questions used to address the data (highlighted in green) and the subsequent identified themes and subthemes (highlighted in blue).

5.6. Summary

In Chapter 5, it was reiterated that the aim of the present study was to explore the constructed work-related experiences of individuals who work with incarcerated sexual offenders. This allowed for professionals' understandings of how an individual comes to abuse a child to be examined. Additionally, the context in which these understandings were constructed, in this instance, the prevailing cultural attitudes relating to child sexual abuse, was also explored. The data collected was addressed using two questions: in what ways do professionals who work with individuals convicted of sexual offenses construct their understandings of how an individual comes to abuse a child, and in what ways do professionals perceive the prevailing cultural attitudes relating to child sexual abuse? Participants discussed how they came to their current understandings of why individuals sexually abuse children, including the role of professional development. They also reported at length the factors they believed contribute to the sexual abuse of children. Furthermore, participants discussed three themes relating to the interplay between sociocultural context and work-related experiences; 'prevailing public attitudes' (including the subtheme 'public perception of professionals who work with sex offenders in a rehabilitative capacity'), 'mass media presentations of sex offenders' and 'psychological toll of

this work'. Two broadly distinct ways in which individuals constructed their work-related experiences were interpreted from the data and labelled 'the expert' and 'the reflective practitioner'.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1. Overview

This chapter presents a conceptual overview of the results and discusses the findings relating to question 1 and question 2. In addition, the practical implications of the research are outlined, as are the limitations of the present study. Finally, considerations for future research are presented alongside the overall conclusions of the study.

6.2. Conclusions

The present study aimed to explore the work-related experiences of individuals who work with sex offenders, specifically those that have impacted their understandings of how an individual comes to abuse a child. Additionally, the present study aimed to explore the dynamic interplay between a complex sociocultural context and how individuals construct their work related experiences and understandings. It was identified from the data that the participants positioned themselves as either 'the expert' or 'the reflective practitioner' when discussing their work-related experiences. Participants discussed their understandings of how individuals come to abuse children including their experiences of gaining understanding of how offenders come to abuse and the factors that abet an individual to abuse a child as 'the expert'. Whereas, participants discussed the dynamic interplay between their sociocultural environment and their work-related experiences including

discussion of the prevailing public attitudes, mass media presentations of sexual offenders and the psychological toll of the job, as 'the reflective practitioner'.

6.3. A conceptual overview of the results

It was identified from the findings that participants constructed their work-related experiences in two broadly distinct ways, named 'the expert' and the 'reflective practitioner'. When participants constructed their work-related experiences as 'the expert' their discourse was characterised by an easy flow, showing ample knowledge on the topics discussed. When the participants constructed their work-related experiences as 'the reflective practitioner' their discourse was somewhat different to 'the expert'. Participants did not provide long passages of easily available information, however they showed openness to reflecting and discussing these struggles as the opportunity arose. These accounts were characterised by a more frequent back and forth exchange between the participant and the researcher as the participant took the time to reflect on the context within which they work.

This finding can be considered in light of positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990). Positioning theory emerged from previous psychological theory postulating the notion of social-roles however the term 'role' was regarded as too static and the term 'position' more dynamic, and a better descriptor for this concept. Positioning *"is the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lives"*. Positioning is a dynamic process. Davies and Harré (1990) discuss two positioning processes, interactive positioning, where what one

person says positions another, and reflexive positioning, where what an individual says positions themselves. Davies and Harré (1990) are careful to note that one should not assume that positioning is necessarily intentional. An individual's sense of self is reconstructed perpetually notwithstanding an agent of responsibility (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Participants in this study have been both reflexively and interactively positioned as 'the expert' that has been working in this field for a substantial amount of time. This is reflected in their discourse as they displayed the ability to produce ample amounts of easily accessible information on the topic. However, the phenomenological epistemology of this project placed an emphasis on experience and self-reflection, and participants were required at times to shift from their original position as 'the expert' to a secondary position, 'the reflective practitioner', facilitated by the interaction between the participant and the researcher. This discourse was distinctly different from 'the expert' as it was not characterised by the same abundance of easily available information. It may be considered that participants expectations of the interview were more in line with 'the expert' position, thus discourse relating to 'the reflective practitioner' was unexpected and unrehearsed. Additionally, it may be considered that discourse relating to 'the reflective practitioner' is not called upon as often in the workplace as that of the 'the expert', and therefore, less practiced. However, all participants were able to adapt and engage in discourse as 'the reflective practitioner'. This may be indicative of the requirements of the job or that this field of work attracted people who were self-reflective.

It was as 'the expert' that the participants in this study discussed their experiences of gaining their current understandings of how an individual comes

to abuse a child, including the role of professional development. Additionally it was as 'the expert' that participants discussed their knowledge of the factors that abet an individual to abuse a child. It was as 'the reflective practitioner' that participants in this study discussed the prevailing public attitudes towards offenders who have abused children, including public perceptions of individuals who work with individuals who have sexually offended in a therapeutic or rehabilitative capacity. Furthermore, it was as 'the reflective practitioner' that participants discussed the interplay between mass media presentations of sexual offenders and their work-related experiences. And finally, it was as 'the reflective practitioner' that participants discussed the psychological toll of their work.

6.4. Discussion of results relating to question 1

Participants discussed the experience of gaining understanding of how offenders come to sexually abuse children as progressing from single-factor or no understandings prior to working in this area, to a complex multi-factorial understanding. These findings may be considered in terms of previous research which showed that qualified social workers reported significantly more reasons as to how an offender comes to sexually abuse a child than social work students, suggesting more complex understandings are held by more experienced practitioners (Ward et al., 1996). Research among experts and novices working in the natural sciences has noted that novices tend to attribute simple causal explanations to complex phenomena. Whereas expert understandings demonstrate "*decentralised thinking*", attributing multiple causes with a focus on

functionality (Hmelo-Silver & Pfeffer, 2004, p. 129), as seen in the present findings.

Contrary to the present findings, Beling et al. (2002)'s investigation of 'lay-persons' understandings of how offenders come to abuse children identified that participants (undergraduate psychology students) reported more than one reason as to why offenders abuse children. One hundred and sixty-four participants reported 716 reasons as to why offenders abused children indicating that they did not hold single-factor understandings. Notably, participants were specifically prompted as part of the data collecting procedure for more than one reason. Participants in the present study may be considered 'lay-persons' prior to working and training in this field. However, in contrast to Beling et al. (2002), the present study adopted a less structured approach to data collection, allowing participants to report, or not, as many reasons as they wished. Additionally, the present study focused on exploring participants' experiences of gaining understanding as opposed to accurately describing conceptualisations prior to working within the field of sexual offending. Furthermore, the ways in which participants constructed their work-related experiences as 'the expert' may also account for their descriptions of a shift from single-factor or no understanding, to multi-factorial understandings. Participants may have endeavoured to realise a perception of themselves as having progressed from novices to experts. Unsurprisingly, participants reported that professional development played a role in facilitating this shift in understanding, highlighting training in the use of risk assessment tools and immersion in the job as key facilitators. In keeping with this finding, Ward et al. (1996) interpreted that qualified social workers hold more complex theories concerning sexual

offending in comparison to student social workers as a function of education and work-place experiences.

A notably absence from the findings was descriptions of postpositivist models of the aetiology of sexual offending (as described in section 1.3.1). Participants did not discuss these models in relation to their experiences of gaining increased understanding. According to Beech and Ward (2004, p. 38) there has been “*relatively little communication*” between what has counter-intuitively become two segregate domains of the sexual offending literature; the research relating to risk assessment and the research relating to aetiological theories of sexual offending. Thus current risk assessment tools are not derived from current theories postulating the aetiology of sexual offending behaviour, or vice versa. The participants in the present study may be utilising the structure provided by risk assessment tools, to enhance and clarify their substantive understandings of how an offender comes to offend. The Irish Department of Justice and Equality (2009) advocate the use of risk assessment tools indicating that the professional bias towards the literature on risk assessment may begin at a policy and legislative level. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that the use of actuarial assessments to determine risk is more effective than other means of assessment, such as the sole use of clinical judgement (Beech & Ward, 2004). Therefore, the emphasis placed on this approach to assessing risk, may be as a result of the evidence-based approach participants employ in their work.

Beech and Ward (2004) are critical of the divergence in the literature on sexual offending and note the benefit of integrating the two domains. Integrating the literature postulating the aetiology of sexual offending, and the literature considering the factors influencing offender recidivism, would establish a clear

link between adverse life-pathways (compounded by early life events) and psychological vulnerabilities (risk factors). This would provide individuals working in this area with greater understanding of offenders' psychological vulnerabilities and maximise their ability to intervene and prevent future misconduct.

Participants discussed the factors they perceived as contributing to an individual sexually abusing a child. For ease of understanding, these factors were divided into six groups however, all participants discussed them as part of a multi-factor understanding of how an offender comes to abuse. The six categories identified were sexual preference, developmental experiences, distorted cognition, emotional dysregulation, inadequate social skills, and situational and environmental factors. There is some overlap between the six factors identified by these participants and postpositivist theories of the aetiology of child sexual abuse outlined (Finkelhor, 1984; Hall & Hirschman, 1992; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Seto, 2008; Ward & Beech, 2006; Ward & Siegert, 2002), however no one theory encompasses participants constructions of the contributing factors, in keeping with previous findings. Thus, it can be interpreted that counter-intuitively participants' approach to their work is not greatly influenced by postpositivist theories of the aetiology of child sexual abuse. Again it may be interpreted that participants' constructed understandings are more influenced by the literature on risk assessment than by the literature pertaining to the aetiology of child sexual abuse.

A sexual preference for children was described in the present study as a factor contributing to child abuse. This theme has been described in several studies with professional populations (e.g. community corrections officers, and

social workers and social work students) as a factor motivating an individual to sexually abuse (Purvis et al., 2003; Ward et al., 1996). A sexual preference for children was not discussed in research examining the narratives of offenders, however a broader category labelled obtaining sexual gratification was noted (Hartley, 2001; Phelan, 1995). The discrepancy between the populations' substantive understandings may be understood in terms of the present study's finding that offenders who exhibited a sexual preference for children were discussed as a distinct group in terms of intervention. Therefore, the notion that offenders abuse because of a sexual preference for children may be related to professionals categorising offenders in terms of treatment, and not discussed by the offenders themselves who's understandings would be less likely influenced by treatment considerations.

The present study found that the majority of offenders discussed by these participants did not have a sexual preference for children but came to offend for a range of different reasons. Figures of between 25 – 50% of detected offenders having a genuine sexual preference for children have been reported (Schaefer et al., 2010), hence the majority of convicted sexual offenders are not paedophilic. Participants noted that offenders have often experienced negative developmental experiences, such as abuse or a troubled parental attachment. Several other studies exploring substantive understandings reported similar findings (Beling et al., 2002; Hartley, 2001; Lea et al., 1999; Purvis et al., 2003; Ward et al., 1996). The present study also found that professionals perceive offenders as having difficulty emotionally regulating in a healthy fashion. This may express itself as strong feelings of anger or a need to be in control, or as sadness, isolation and loneliness, often resulting from inadequate social skills

hindering the individual's ability to develop appropriate social relationships. Research by Ward et al. (1996) also highlighted the role of emotional dysregulation as a factor motivating an offender to abuse a child. They further identified a distinct category labelled 'inadequate social skills'. In contrast to the present study, Ward et al. (1996) did not highlight the interlacing nature of the categories, how inadequate social skills may result in strong unmanageable emotions, or how struggling to regulate one's emotions may result in poorly formed or disrupted relationships. Several studies identified feelings of anger and a need for control as motivating factors for sexual offending behaviour (Beling et al., 2002; Hartley, 2001; Phelan, 1995; Purvis et al., 2003; Ward et al., 1996). However, the present study proposed that the term emotional dysregulation better represented the idea that offenders may have feelings of anger and a need for control that they are unable to manage in a healthy fashion. It could be argued that all individuals have feelings of anger and a need to feel in control, but most regulate these emotions in a healthy manner.

Participants in the present study discussed that offenders engage in distorted cognitive thinking. This was described as marked, at times, by a lack of knowledge or confusion as to what healthy sexual behaviour is and the use of inappropriate sexual fantasy. Several other studies of substantive understandings reported distorted cognition as a factor motivating an offender to abuse children (Beling et al., 2002; Purvis et al., 2003; Ward et al., 1996). Additionally, studies that explored the beliefs of offenders in relation to how they came to offend also identified beliefs that could be interpreted as distorted (Hartley, 2001; Phelan, 1995). This finding raises concerns as to current educational practice informing people about healthy sexual behaviour. In

Ireland, and indeed many other countries, child-focused educational programmes teach children strategies to circumvent becoming victims of sexual abuse (Murphy, 1998). According to Plummer (2001) only 24% of child-focused sexual abuse prevention programmes include educational pieces around the moral and legal wrongness of sexually exploiting younger children and peers.

Finally, the present study identified that professionals perceived offending behaviour as abetted by situational and environmental factors. A similar category was also noted in previous research exploring the substantive understandings of psychology undergraduate students (Beling et al., 2002) and social workers and social work students (Ward et al., 1996). Notably, in an exploration of the substantive beliefs of individuals who had sexually offended against children, Hartley (2001) found that all of the offenders in their study reported dissatisfaction with circumstances in their lives immediately prior to engaging in offending behaviour.

Internet pornography was highlighted by the participants in the present study as an environmental phenomenon that has become increasingly accessible in recent times. It was reported that in their work-related experience, internet pornography was a factor contributing to child sexual abuse. Extensive debate has surrounded the relationship between pornography and the aetiology of sexual offending against children (Marshall, 2000) and to date, the research is inconclusive as to whether engaging with child pornography incites an individual to cross over to sexual offending behaviour (Beech, Elliott, Birgden, & Findlater, 2008; Houtepen, Sijtsema, & Bogaerts, 2014). However, the internet can be used by the perpetrators of sexual crimes against children in several different ways: to propagate child pornographic material for commercial or

personal reasons, to build social networks with other like-minded individuals, to solicit sexual communication or contact with children, and to desensitise perpetrators or victims and lower inhibitions prior to or during abusive acts using pornographic images (Beech et al., 2008). Thus, the relationship between internet pornography and child sexual abuse is manifold and complex.

6.5. Discussion of results relating to question 2

Participants discussed the prevailing public attitudes relating to child sexual abuse. They reported that these attitudes were laden with negative emotions such as anger and fear. This finding may be considered in line with previous research carried out in other countries that showed that the prevailing public sentiment towards sexual offenders was negative (Willis et al., 2013). It was further discussed by participants, that this public emotional reaction was understandable. Professionals who work with sexual offenders who have abused children are situated in the same sociocultural environment as the rest of the public and have the ability to empathise with prevailing public opinion. However, it was noted that negative emotional reactions might lead to an avoidance of discussing the topic in an open and helpful way. Perhaps an unwillingness to discuss this emotionally laden topic is a culture-wide coping strategy and members of the general public wish to distance themselves, both physically and psychologically, from the perpetrators of sexual abuse. Emotionally fuelled public responses to sexual offenders may inspire legislation and sanctions that are more punitive and controlling, with less of a focus on rehabilitation (Petrunik & Deutschman, 2008; Willis et al., 2013). Imposing

punitive and controlling sanctions may serve to distance the public from sexual offenders by keeping them in prisons, whereas rehabilitative approaches may centre on re-integrating offenders back into the community to live among the public.

Participants reported that sex offenders were constructed by the public as innately different or wholly distinct in their moral make-up to the rest of society. This was often not the case in their work-related experience. This is in keeping with research by Lea et al. (1999) in which professionals who work with sexual offenders reported that the perpetrators represented a diverse group and that they could not be seen as one 'type' of person per se. Furthermore, according to Petrunik and Deutschman (2008) the term 'sex offender' tends to be epitomised by individuals who commit the most heinous crimes. It is well known that statistically children are more likely to be sexually abused by relatives or acquaintances, than easily identifiable, predatory strangers (McGee, Garavan, de Barra, Byrne, & Conroy, 2002; Petrunik & Deutschman, 2008). Thus, imprudently parents and guardians protect their children by remaining vigilant to predatory strangers rather than more likely perpetrators, such as relatives or acquaintances.

Participants reported that public reactions to professionals who work with offenders in a rehabilitative or therapeutic capacity vary. Oftentimes participants were wary of telling people what they did, fearful of negative perceptions by association. Notably, all participants did not tell people immediately what they did for a living. Conversely, participants reported positive reactions to their work, such as acknowledgements that it was a job that 'needs to be done' or recognition that it is a challenging, but noble endeavour.

According to Kemshall (2009) an atmosphere of public anxiety surrounds the assessment, treatment and management of sex offenders. Brown (1999) carried out a postal survey of 312 people living in the Cardiff area of Wales and found that just over half (51%) of participants reported that treatment for sexual offenders was a 'good idea'. Notably, a substantial portion of this population was undecided on the issue (35%). In addition, despite the majority of people being in favour of treatment, almost two-thirds (64%) of those surveyed did not want a treatment facility to be located in their area. Thus, public attitudes towards sex offender treatment are inconsistent and conflicting, indicating that the caution reported by participants in the present study in relation to discussing their profession may be warranted. It was noted by Brown (1999) that the provision of accurate information and education may assist to alleviate public concerns.

Petrunik and Deutschman (2008) discussed that public opinion of rehabilitation may be culturally dependent, with European countries being more pro-rehabilitation of sexual offenders than the USA. Walsh (1998) claimed that the Irish public favoured the imprisonment of offenders, however this statement is not supported by research evidence. Future research may endeavour to ascertain the public opinion of the treatment of sexual offenders in Ireland.

Participants discussed mass media presentations of sex offenders and how this impacted their work-related experiences. Participants reported that the mass media sensationalised sexual offending. This is in line with a general consensus in the literature that the mass media very often presents a sensationalised portrayal of sexual offenders (Malinen et al., 2014; Petrunik & Deutschman, 2008; Petrunik & Weisman, 2005). Furthermore, participants reported that these presentations of sex offenders often hampered treatment

and intervention. A portion of Irish newspapers have adopted the practice of publishing the whereabouts of released notorious sexual offenders (Flynn, 2014; Royston, Breen, & Cotter, 2014), acting in some respects as “*guardians of the public*” (Kitzinger, 2002, p. 148). While there is a dearth of research investigating the impact of community notifications on sex offenders recidivism rates, that which has been carried out suggests that there is no evidence that community notifications reduce recidivism (Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2007). In addition, incidences of vigilantism influenced by community notifications have resulted in the misidentification of offenders and tragic consequences (e.g. a 14 year-old girl accidentally killed when her house was mistaken as the house of a sex offender and firebombed) (Petrunik & Deutschman, 2008).

Participants in the present study reported that the public’s negative reactions to released offenders might escalate the risk of recidivism. According to Willis et al. (2013) the strong emotional reactions of the public to released offenders can reduce the chances that an offender will reintegrate successfully into the community. This may be as a consequence of offenders struggling to obtain housing and employment due to public disdain, increasing the risk of psychological instability, raising the risk of reoffending.

Participants discussed the psychological toll of this work. They described working in an environment that involves exposure on a daily basis to heinous crimes and to interacting with the perpetrators of heinous crimes. Furthermore, the perpetrators of sexual offences, at times, can minimise or deny the harm they have caused or worse still revel in it, creating a psychologically challenging situation for the therapist (Moulden & Firestone, 2007). Research has investigated psychological distress among individuals who work with sexual

offenders (Ennis & Horne, 2003; Moulden & Firestone, 2007). Notably, a substantial amount of this research investigates the phenomenon 'vicarious trauma', experiencing post-traumatic type symptomatology through interacting with individuals who have experienced traumatic events. It would seem that individuals who work with sex offenders specifically are considered at risk of vicarious trauma. However, it was beyond the scope of this project to investigate if participants were experiencing vicarious trauma. The participants in the present study reported a good understanding of the psychological toll of the work that they were carrying out and employed self-care strategies with the aim of remediating work-related psychological distress.

Participants discussed a specific challenge of the job where they were required to negotiate conflicting standpoints; building a therapeutic relationship with the offenders to facilitate the work, while maintaining a level of condemnation for the crime. This is similar to Lea et al. (1999)'s findings where they found that professionals attitudes to offenders who had sexually abused contained both positive and negative elements simultaneously, e.g. participants described empathy and understanding as well as negative emotions such as anger, frustration and hatred in relation to the offenders they worked with. In addition, this finding is inline with literature that reports that professionals who work with sexual offenders operate between two sets of ethical frameworks: one which applies to public protection and a second that applies to promoting offender well-being (Chudzik & Aschieri, 2013; Ward, 2013a).

6.6. Practical implications of the present study

At a local level, the present study offers valuable service-based information for the participants in this study and their employer. It provides insight into the participants' knowledge-base which will impact all aspects of their work. It makes explicit the professional conceptual models used by these participants in their work. According to Walsh (1998) the more effective treatment programmes for sexual offenders recommend that intervention be tailored to the specific needs of the perpetrator at a particular point in time. Therefore, the ways in which professionals construct their understandings of how an offender comes to abuse a child may directly affect their choice of treatment option, and the quality of service provision. The participants in this study may wish to use the findings presented in this study to inform continuous professional development.

It is not uncommon for professionals to be unaware of the conceptual models that influence their work-based practice, taking them for granted as truths, and failing to recognise their paradigmatic nature (Engel, 1981). The present study made explicit participants' conceptual understandings of how an individual comes to sexually offend. Through taking part in the interview and engaging with the feedback provided, participants were afforded the opportunity to critically reflect on their constructed understandings of how an individual comes to offend. Increased awareness of the dominant conceptual models utilised in a professional context is beneficial as it counteracts confirmation bias in clinical decision-making.

The present study also provides insight into the contextual challenges faced by professionals working in this field and the psychological toll that many

of these challenges bring. Despite the fact that participants reported an awareness of any psychological distress and are employing self-care arrangements, the service that they work for may utilise these findings in terms of supporting and promoting self-care in the workplace.

The findings of the present study cannot be generalised beyond the population under study, however individuals working in similar contexts may construct similar work-related experiences. Thus, the findings of the present study may be useful to other service providers who provide similar services, prompting investigation as to the level of psychological distress their work-force may be under, or the knowledge-base from which their work force operates from.

6.7. Limitations of the present study

As is expected of all research, the present study had limitations. These limitations were related to aspects of the design, analysis, and the participant sample used. A limitation of the present study is that the findings cannot be generalised beyond the population and circumstances under study (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Smith et al., 2009). However, the goal of the present study, which was embedded in a constructivist-interpretivist worldview, was not to seek an objectifiable universal truth but to deepen our perception of a population and a social phenomenon (Frosh, 2003). In addition, the present study employed an interpretative approach to data analysis and thus, the researcher's perspective cannot be partitioned out from the findings. However, the present study employed two levels of credibility checks. Firstly, an independent researcher

completed an audit of the research proposal, data transcripts and findings to ensure a logical, credible progression throughout the research process. Secondly, the research academic supervisor carried out an independent credibility check of a sample of the data transcripts and findings. Both independent checks revealed that a coherent, logical progression was maintained throughout the research process, and that the primary researcher acknowledged the impact of her own perspective throughout the research process (Elliott et al., 1999), adding credibility to the results.

The present study made efforts to obtain as homogenous a sample as possible in keeping with the phenomenological epistemology. The use of purposive sampling was used. The present study investigated the experiences of both psychologists and probation officers. Due to the small number of people who work in this very specialised field the decision was made to join the two professions together and explore their experiences as if one group. However, it is acknowledged that training and work-related experiences differed between the two groups and that this may have affected their interview responses. Psychologists and probation officers are trained in separate disciplines but with a similar objective, to promote well-being (Hall & Llewelyn, 2006; Hare, 2004). Furthermore, the sample utilised in the present study, worked as a very close-knit team. Both psychologists and probation officers were involved in facilitating therapeutic and rehabilitative aspects of the job and they attended several of the same continuous professional training events (e.g. conferences). Thus, it was deemed suitable to explore their experiences as one group. A relative strength of the present study is that all psychologists and probation officers working in this particular service took part in the study, thus the sample is not biased to those

who wished to discuss their experiences only and represents the an entire, yet specific, population.

The present study utilised both closed and open questions as part of the interview protocol. This was to promote a comfortable rapport between the participant and the interviewer prior to exploring more difficult topics such as the participants' feelings and conclusions (McNamara, 2009). The sole use of open interview questions may have elicited further information relating to participants' constructed work-related experiences. However, the present study adopted a general interview guide approach, allowing ample opportunity for follow-up questions ensuring an in-depth exploration of the topic under study. Additionally, the sole use of open interview question may have had a detrimental affect on the rapport between the participant and the interviewer, introducing demanding topics before the participant was comfortable with the interview setting.

6.8. Considerations for future research

Future research may also wish to further explore the varying types of constructed work-related experiences reported by the participants in this study, labelled as 'the expert' and 'the reflective practitioner'. In light of the work-related psychological toll reported by the participants in this study, it may be worth investigating if there is a protective aspect to either 'the expert' or 'the reflective practitioner' as constructed positions within discourse.

Future research may wish to separately explore the constructed work-related experiences of psychologists and probation officers working with

individuals incarcerated for sexually offending against children. This will identify if differences exist in the ways in which professionals construct their understandings of how offenders come to abuse, and in their perceptions of the challenging context within which they work. Future research may also wish to explore if professionals working with sexual offenders are subject to vicarious trauma above and beyond that experienced by professionals working in other health care settings. The participants in this study reported some level of psychological toll related to their work experiences, but also discussed self-care activities they employed to alleviate distress.

Future research may consider exploring Irish attitudes towards sex offender rehabilitation. The present study found that participants experienced mixed responses to their work by members of the public. According to Walsh (1998), it is most likely that the Irish public favour the imprisonment of offenders as opposed to rehabilitative treatment, however research has yet to be carried out to support or refute this claim. An option for future research would be to explore Irish people's preferred choice of intervention for sexual offenders. Future research may also endeavour to investigate the public's understandings of child sexual abuse as there is evidence to suggest that public thinking may be subject to myths and inaccurate information (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007).

Future research may endeavour to explore the understandings of professionals working with incarcerated male offenders in a therapeutic and rehabilitative capacity in other very similar services. The results of several service-based qualitative studies could be reviewed for comparable themes. This information could then inform theory and research from a postpositivist

worldview that seeks to identify an objectifiable, universal understanding of the aetiology of sexual offending. Unfortunately, the time and resources required to carry out a project of this scale was beyond the scope of the present study.

6.9. Summery

In Chapter 6, a conceptual overview of the results was provided. The finding that participants constructed their work-related experiences in two broadly distinct ways, named 'the expert' and 'the reflective practitioner' was considered in light of positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), a discursive theory that examines the processes that position self-identities in conversation. Furthermore, this chapter presented a discussion of the results relating to questions 1 and 2 used to address the data. The practical implications of the study, such as the valuable service-based information yielded and the insights provided into contextual challenges faced by professionals working in this field, were discussed. The limitations of the present study relating to design, analysis and participant sample were examined. Of note, the findings of the present study cannot be generalised beyond the population and circumstances understudy. Areas highlighted by the present study that might be considered for future research were also considered.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical approval from the University of Limerick Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee

From: Anne.O'Brien
Sent: 23 June 2014 15:39
To: Patrick.Ryan
Subject: 2014_06_24_ EHS

Dear Patrick

Thank you for your Research Ethics application which was recently reviewed by the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The recommendation of the Committee is outlined below:

Project Title : 2014_06_24_ EHS The Sexual abuse of Children in Irish Society: Perspectives of professionals Irish society

Principal Investigator : Patrick Ryan

Other Investigators: Maria Cosgrave, Aisling Lennon, Fiona Quinn

Recommendation: Approved subject to Minor Amendments as outlined in the attached Feedback Sheet.

Please note Minor Amendments (with a cover note outlining changes made) must be submitted to EHSREC within 3 months, otherwise this ethics application will be considered 'Withdrawn'. Please note that full approval will not be granted until these amendments have been approved by EHSREC.

Yours Sincerely

Appendix B: Project approval confirmation from the Irish Prison Services Research Office

The Research Office
Irish Prison Service
College
Brian Stack House
Dublin Road
Portlaoise
County Laois



An Oifig Taighde
Coláiste Seirbhís
Phríosúin na hÉireann
Teach Bhrían De Staic
Bóthar Baile Átha Cliath
Port Laoise
Co. an Laoise

Website/Láithreán gréasáin:
www.irishprisons.ie
Email/Ríomhphoist:
researchoffice@irishprisons.ie

Telephone/Teileafón: (057) 863 4822
Fax/Facs: (057) 862 0946

Why do sexual offenders offend against children? The perspectives and experiences of individuals who work with sexual offenders.

Dear Aisling

I am writing to confirm that the Irish Prison Service grants approval for your research project "**Why do sexual offenders offend against children? The perspectives and experiences of individuals who work with sexual offenders.**" The Irish Prison Service will endeavour to support the project.

- I would be obliged if a copy of the completed research paper could be lodged in the Open Learning Centre, Irish Prison Service College.
- The IPS would be obliged to be granted prepublication access to any research findings.

If you have any queries regarding the grant of approval, please don't hesitate to contact the Research Officer, Irish Prison Service College.

Please note that the grant of approval does not convey the right of access across the prison estate. Access is contingent on available prison resources.

Finally, I wish you the best of luck in your research endeavours.



19 March 2015

Appendix C: Consent Form



CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Why do sexual offenders offend against children? The perspectives and experiences of individuals who work with sexual offenders.

Name of Researchers: Aisling Lennon, University of Limerick
 Dr. Patrick Ryan, University of Limerick
 Dr. Rachel Egan, Irish Prison Services

	Please initial box
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated..... for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, without my employment or legal rights being affected.	
I understand that my verbal responses to interview questions will be recorded. I understand that all identifying information will be removed on analysis of data. I understand that quotes may be used for conference presentations and publications.	
I understand that my answers are confidential unless there is reason to believe that either I or someone else may be in danger.	
I agree to take part in the above study.	
Name of participant: _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____	
Researcher: _____ Date: _____ Signature: _____	

Appendix D: Information Sheet



Information Sheet

Title of Project: Why do sexual offenders offend against children? The perspectives and experiences of individuals who work with sexual offenders.

Investigators: Aisling Lennon, Department of Psychology, University of Limerick
Dr. Patrick Ryan, Department of Psychology, University of Limerick
Dr. Rachel Egan, Irish Prison Services

We are involved in a research project that is exploring the perspectives and experiences of individuals who work with sexual offenders in relation to why offenders abuse children.

You have been identified as someone who is suitable to take part in this study. Please read this information sheet carefully before making the decision to take part. You should clearly understand the benefits/disadvantages in taking part in this study and make a decision that is right for you.

What is the study?

This study is researching why sexual offenders abuse children. We are interested in finding out your understandings of why sexual offenders abuse children. This research is also looking at how your life experiences have influenced your understandings of why sexual offenders abuse children.

How long will it take?

As part of the study you would be asked to take part in an interview. The interview will be audio recorded and should last between 1 and 2 hours. Breaks will be scheduled as needed.

When will it happen?

The time of the interview will be arranged to suit you. Interviews will be carried out at your place of work. If you wish to take part please indicate to Dr. Rachel Egan who will pass on your contact details to me, researcher Aisling Lennon. I will then contact you by phone or email to arrange a suitable time and place for the interview.

Can I decide not to take part?

You can decide not to take part at any time before or during the study and no questions will be asked. Whether or not you take part in this research will have no effect on your current employment with the Irish Prison Service.

Who will see my answers?

Only the members of the research team will be able to see your answers to any questions asked. Clinical supervisor, Dr. Rachel Egan, will not have access to the interview recordings or transcriptions.

All information will be kept on a password-protected computer. Audio recordings will be deleted after data analysis. Your name will not be kept with your data. Transcribed interviews will be destroyed three years after publication. Quotes may be used in publication under pseudonym.

What are the benefits for me?

Participants in this study will not get paid. However, by taking part you will be contributing to the literature on child sexual abuse. This may potentially benefit individuals affected by child sexual abuse in the future by providing professionals, like you, with useful information.

This study has been approved by the University of Limerick Ethics Committee.

If you would like to know more about this research project please do not hesitate to contact me by email 11021888@studentmail.ul.ie.

Yours sincerely,

Aisling Lennon

Department of Psychology
University of Limerick

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Note: Limits of confidentiality

Tell me your experiences, if they involve other people, please keep this information unidentifiable – all information will be de-identified upon transcription

Background characteristics

Name:
Age:
Gender:
Length of time working with this organisation:
Prior work experiences e.g. offenders, victims:
Have you received specific training in relation to why offenders abuse children? Can you provide details?

Questions relating to participants work related experiences

Prior to working at [organisation], did you have any thoughts on why sexual offenders abuse children?
Prior to working at [organisation], what experiences facilitated your understandings of why sexual offenders abused children? Please describe.
Since you began working at [organisation], has your understandings of why sexual offenders abuse children changed in any way? Please describe.
Since you began working at [organisation], can you describe any experiences that have influenced your understanding of why sexual offenders abuse children? <i>Prompt: Can you give me an example?</i>
What life experiences, do you think, have been the most influential in relation to your understandings of why sexual offenders abuse children?
Has your experience of popular media affected your understandings of why sexual offenders abuse children? <i>Prompt: What do you tell people you do?</i>
Has your experience of professional training affected your understandings of why sexual offenders abuse children?
Has your experience of interacting with sexual offenders affected your understandings of why sexual offenders abuse children?
In your opinion, what causes sexual offenders to offend against children?

Appendix F: Feedback from independent researcher

Independent Audit

 Inbox x



 Lauren Kavanagh

Mar 24 (5 days ago) ☆



to me ▾

Having conducted a thorough independent audit of the interpretative phenomenological analysis undertaken for this research project (an audit which involved examination of the research proposal, interview transcripts, table of themes and subthemes, and the final report), I am satisfied that the account of the analysis produced by the researcher is a credible and plausible one. I can attest that there is a coherent, transparent and logical path through the chain of evidence from raw interview data to final report. The process of identifying and developing the themes and subthemes presented in the results chapter was clearly data-driven, and the analysis was evidently conducted in a systematic and rigorous manner.



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Appendix G: Linguistic analysis of the data

IPA postulates the need for three levels of data analyses; descriptive, linguistic and conceptual. Linguistic analysis focuses on examining the participant's specific use of language. Thus, the data was interpreted paying attention to each participant's use of language and the flow of discourse. The following is an example taken from one participant's interview transcript, of two broadly distinct manners of discourse utilised by participants and relating to the ways in which they construct their work-related experiences.

Discourse pertaining to question 1: In what ways do individuals who work with sexual offenders construct their understandings of how individuals come to sexually abuse children?

The way in which participants reported their understandings of how offenders come to abuse children was characterised by a discourse that flowed easily. Topics were discussed at length, and participants gave the impression that they had ample knowledge in this area. They spoke with confidence and assuredness and were comfortable giving their opinion as professionals in this area.

An example of this type of discourse can be seen from the following participant who discussed a range of factors that can abet sexual offending behaviour targeting children.

Ben: Sometimes it's an absolute deviance sexual preference for children. It can be almost that clear-cut I think. Eh we would see people like priests who have... all their life seems to be quite in tact you know. But eh.. they just have a very strong sexual desire for children. And you're working at risk management. Avoiding risky situations. Eh you know building a more... investing heavy in other areas of your life, so this desire, this compulsion

doesn't overtake you. That you really need to be working hard in other areas. Again the whole thing about.... Eh.... Really difficulties in meeting their own needs for intimacy, emotional and sexual, in a healthy way and taking a short cut. You know, it's easy. And that's something that comes up again and again. Eh... we see the emotional identification with children, you know many people who sexually offended are people who volunteered or worked in settings, where they... you know working with children. And they really have a way with children. They can really relate to them. They can go on the same level as a child, they can emotionally identify with children, is what I'm saying. And that's... that's clearly a factor in offending against children. Ill at ease in adult company, feeling a bit like a fish out of water, not being able to manage the cut and thrust of adult relationships, maybe disappointed by your friend, maybe let down by your friend, eh they do things that surprise you, they may insult you sometimes, but if you... if we are skilled enough we can fix this and we can hold on to all these relationships that are important to us. But for some of these people, men who have sexually offended against children it's beyond them, it's beyond their capacity, so immersing themselves in the child's world, the youth clubs, the football teams, and really these are now your group of friends and mates and there's no real challenge for them. They won't really reject you, they probably maybe idolise you. They look up to you. So that facilitates sexual.... All those needs are being met in a very unhealthy way. Eh the focus being completely on immersing yourself in the life of children and then, you know, in that context a lot of sexual offending has taken place. You know so, that's one of the other factors and then emotionally driven, loneliness, isolation, eh rumination on how life turned badly for you, it didn't quite work out, the feelings of resentment, eh the chip on the shoulder, they can all be... the sexual offending can be kind of a lashing out rather than primarily the satisfaction of a sexual desire. You know, it can be eh an expression of anger, you know, humiliating someone, maybe no control in your own life and in the area of sexual... sexual offending against children you're empowered somehow. You know, so that need is being met. It may not just be the... the sexual gratification. All these other needs are being met: company, powerful, being revered by the child, being trusted... not being judged by the child, so they're all the... That's the environment in which sexual offending can happen. You know, a retreat from the challenges of the adult world into this... you know... so that's that bit.

This participant addressed the question of how offenders come to abuse children by offering a range of possible factors that can mediate offending behaviour. He spoke with assuredness and was perceived as having ample, easily available knowledge on the topic. This is evident in his account, which moves comfortably from factor to factor. This was common within the accounts of all participants

interviewed when they were asked to discuss their current understandings of how individuals come to offend.

Discourse pertaining to question 2: In what ways do individuals interpret their wider sociocultural context in terms of the prevailing attitudes relating to child sexual abuse in Ireland?

All participants worked in a treatment-focused or rehabilitative capacity with individuals that society considers outcasts and constructed their work-related experiences from within this context. The manner in which participants discussed their experiences related to themes exploring this context, was somewhat different to the manner in which participants discussed themes relating to question 1. Participants did not provide long passages of information relating to struggles around this theme. However, they were receptive to talking about these struggles when the opportunity arose as part of their overall accounts of their work-life experiences. These passages were characterised by a somewhat more frequent back and forth interchange between the participant and interviewer, as the participant took the time to reflect upon the atypical circumstances within which they worked.

Interviewer: Can I ask you what do you tell people you do?

Ben: Eh.... I'm a probation officer, and I work with men who have offended.

Interviewer: Would you be as straight forward as that with people?

Ben: But I wouldn't say the sexual offending.

Interviewer: Ah ok.

Ben: Because I don't want to get into a discussion about how they should all be lynched, they should all be stoned. I just don't want to go down that route. And I'm not going to stand and defend my work because I realise that... even people feel really strongly about this. And you bring it up and I just give general details that I work in the probation service. We work with men who have... I work in a prison context preparing men for release and

mobilising the supports required to help them reintegrate and eh also challenging or exploring their attitudes and beliefs that kind of supported their offending. But I wouldn't go into the nature of the offence.

Interviewer: You drop the word sexual.

Ben: No, no. Because it's just too much. They can vent their anger on to you. They could either see you as a... you're condoning the behaviour, you're... it's not what you do that's required for them it's A, B and C or... all that stuff, so yeah. So no I don't. That's the short thing I never do. My very close friends I do, but no. My family would know, but the general, you know, the chitchat in a pub or restaurant or a café, I wouldn't volunteer that part of my work because I don't want to spend energy either defending it or explaining it or giving them the rationale as to why treatment works or why it doesn't. I just don't do that. Does that make sense? Yeah.

Interviewer: And then with those kind of closer, your friends and your family, they know what you do and that's.... like they don't come back with the same level of anger or rage or venting at you or...

Ben: They wouldn't no. They are probably glad someone is doing this work, as long as it's not them (laughs). Yeah so, they're probably glad.... Some of my family would say no, that's too good for them, no absolutely no. But they wouldn't come out and... they wouldn't offend me, they wouldn't be disrespectful to me. But I'd know from them, and I'd know they have young children of their own and I know they have great fears against people...men who have s... about men who have sexually offended. And they would have these strong opinions. And it's kind of, you know, protecting their young almost. They wouldn't... they may not see our work as being the way to go, it's about control, sanctions, monitoring eh.... Admonishing people to the far reaches of the earth or something you know. I don't know whether they put much value on therapy as a means of addressing sexual offending. I don't think very many people do, except mainly people in the profession. I think outside there would be little... that's my experience. Could reflect my friends eh... they'd be little belief in the worth of such work, that they would look at the ones, you know the..... they would be convinced by the media, in particular the red top newspapers, the tabloids as to the way these people should be treated, castigated, admonished, sanctioned, devoid of all opportunities and reminded forever of what they've done. You know that kind of way, just to keep them in their place. Well I fully believe in the therapeutic p... I've seen enough progress by men over the years, I've seen transformation in how they live their life, how they manage their relationship, people being transformed. So I'm absolutely convinced. I've absolutely no doubts about the worth of particularly group therapy. Yeah I do.

The above participant answered the question of what does he tell people he does by staying as close to the truth as possible. However, he reported that he omits the word 'sexual' when describing the type of offending behaviour committed by

the individuals he works with. This indicated that he perceives that sexual offenders are viewed differently by the general public than criminals who have committed other types of offences.

The participant appears to employ discretion in relation to who he reveals this information to, actively avoiding telling strangers or acquaintances. He presents as unequivocal in his belief that avoidance was warranted. This is evident in the language used. The participant states several times, in a definite, unambiguous manner, that he does not want to engage with the predicted response to telling strangers or acquaintances where he works, stating;

*"I don't want to get into a discussion...",
"I wouldn't go into the nature of the offence"
"I just don't want to go down that route",
"I'm not going to stand and defend my work",
"so no I don't, that's the short thing, I never do"*

In comparison to the discourse relating to themes identified under question one, there is more emotion evident in this passage. For example, this participant states, *"No, no. Because it's just too much"*. In this phrase, we can interpret that the participant finds engaging with this negative reaction tiring or wearying.

Finally, the participant notes that some people are glad that somebody is doing this job but would not want to do this job themselves. Here we see the participant laughs,

"They are probably glad someone is doing this work, as long as it's not them (laughs)".

Here we see the participant employs a gallows humour type strategy to perhaps lighten the load of working in a serious profession with dark and unpleasant material. Several participants employed this strategy when discussing experiences of themselves as people in a challenging context.

A comparison of the above passages revealed that the participant's discourse differed. Overall, the participant's discourse was more personally reflective and emotionally expressive, in relation to the themes address in question 2 in comparison to the themes relating to question 1. Personal reflection is evident as the content of the passage relates to the participant's own interactions with the social world as opposed to understandings held about a given phenomenon. Additionally, emotional expression was evident as the participant iterates phrases that appear emotion laden and employs emphasis by repeating definite unambiguous statements. Additionally, the participant adopts a 'gallows humour' type strategy to compensate for the challenges faced in his work. These linguistic approaches are not used in the passage relating to question 1 which is characterised by content driven statements reflecting understandings of how offenders come to offend. A similar dichotomy was identified within the discourse of other participants.