

Chapter 4

Causes of Sexual Abuse: Psycho–Social Factors of Sexual Offence and Psychological Theories of Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of sexual violence as: ‘Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work’. Although there are many factors which contribute to our understanding of the causes of sexual abuse, this chapter focuses on the various psycho-social factors that would lead to sexual abuse and the various psychological theories such as cognitive, behavioural, personality and social learning theories that help us explain the causes of sexual abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence has become a widespread activity spaced around all across the globe. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual violence as: ‘Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work’ (WHO, 2011).

A wide range of sexually violent acts can take place in different circumstances and settings. These include, for example: rape within marriage or dating relationships, rape by strangers, systematic rape during armed conflict, unwanted sexual advances or sexual harassment, including demanding sex in-return for

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favours, sexual abuse of mentally or physically disabled people, sexual abuse of children, forced marriage or cohabitation, including the marriage of children, denial of the right to use contraception or to adopt other measures to protect against sexually transmitted diseases, forced abortion, violent acts against the sexual integrity of women, including female genital mutilation and obligatory inspections for virginity, forced prostitution and trafficking of people for the purpose of sexual exploitation (WHO, 2011).

- **Sexual Abuse:** Unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent.

PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS OF SEXUAL OFFENSE

Sexual offense, being a severe act, needs to be understood from multiple dimensions. Focus on single or isolated elements may be misleading. Various studies have pointed at different factors that are associated with sexual offense. Following psychosocial factors give a comprehensive view about these acts.

Alcohol and Drug

Alcohol has been one of the important factors associated with sexual abuse because it was observed that sexual assaults were more likely to occur in settings where alcohol was consumed (Graham et al., 2014; Mumford et al., 2011). However, substance use needs to be seen as a contributing factors and not a cause for sexual assault. Alcohol has an effect of reducing inhibitions, thus, leading to behaviours that normally would have been inhibited in any given situation, clouding judgments and impairing the ability to interpret the cues in the environment appropriately (Abby et al., 1995). Sometimes, alcohol may act as a cultural “break-time” providing the opportunity for behaviours that are not acceptable in society. Perpetrators might also use alcohol as a means to justify their behavior or diminish their level of responsibility (Abbey, 2002). Binge drinking predicted alcohol-involved sexual assault, and alcohol-related assaults were more severe than those assaults that did not involve alcohol (Kingree & Thompson, 2015). Some drugs, notably, cocaine has been seen to play a dis-inhibiting role in certain types of sexual assault (Grisso et al., 1999).

Peer

Research has shown that in some groups, sexual aggression can be a defining characteristic of manhood (Petty & Dawson, 1998). Sexually aggressive behaviour among young men has been linked with gang membership and having delinquent peers (Quimette & Riggs, 1998; Borowsky et al., 1997). Research has also shown that men with such peers are likely to report enforced intercourse outside the gang context than men lacking sexually aggressive peers (Gwartney G. et al., 1983). In some situations, men consider gang rape as legitimate means of punishing women with “immoral” behaviour such as them wearing short skirts or being in love, drinking. For this reason, gang rape is not seen as a crime and is often sanctioned by the elders in the particular group and/or society (Jenkins, 1998).

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