

An assessment of youth sex offender empathy levels for general victims of child-on-child sexual abuse

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The purpose of this article is to focus on youth sex offenders' empathy for victims of child-on child sexual abuse. In a recent study conducted by Coetzee (2015), the quantitative research results indicate that although some of the youth sex offenders who participated in the study showed empathy towards a general victim of child-on-child sexual abuse, certain empathy deficits were displayed. Following the completion of the questionnaires, in-depth information was obtained regarding the youth sex offenders' thoughts pertaining to a sex abuse victim portrayed in a case study. An overview of some of their responses will be discussed in this article.

Keywords: youth sex offender; empathy; child-on-child sexual abuse; sex abuse victim; morality; low level socio-moral reasoning; sexual assault; rape; perspective-taking

INTRODUCTION

The absence of moral integrity is sometimes tied to the high incidence of violent crime in South Africa (SA). Support for this hypothesis can be traced back to June 1997, when the late and then President, Nelson Mandela, called upon religious leaders in SA to partner with the state to overcome the “spiritual malaise” underpinning the crime problem in the country (Moral Regeneration Movement, 2015). Many practitioners, youth workers and community members hold the view that the youth in SA lack morals, values and respect for authority, which can stretch to a total disrespect for human life. Young people may be stuck in a conundrum of low level socio-moral reasoning, which more often than not is the result of a lack of opportunity for healthy growth and development. In its turn, low level socio-moral reasoning can give rise to a lack of victim empathy displayed by youth sex offenders (Liese & Bezuidenhout, 2013: 101).

It has been claimed that sex offenders commit their offences despite the distress experienced and portrayed by their victims, due to the fact that they lack empathy for them (Fernandez & Marshall 2003: 12). In addition, it has been found that sex offenders do not recognise and have compassion with the victim's distress to such an extent that they are able to become sexually aroused while committing the offence (Marshall, Hudson, Jones & Fernandez, 1995: 99). Furthermore, it is stated that individuals that do not commit rape are inhibited by empathy for the potential victim (Ward Polaschek & Beech, 2006: 137). Additionally sex offenders frequently deny their offences and minimise the harm that the victim suffered (Curwen, 2003: 349). Moreover, they rationalise their behaviour and argue that their actions were not criminal. It can be argued that if denial and minimisation are present, it will give rise to a lack of empathy on the offender's behalf. However, Hanson (2003: 18) makes an interesting observation regarding justifications provided by sex offenders, by stating that offenders deny and/or minimise their sexual transgressions due to an attempt to distance themselves from their misbehaviour. Furthermore, he stresses that in these instances offenders are aware of the wrongfulness of their sexual offending on some level and they are trying to make up excuses for their actions, whereas others who do not try to justify their misbehaviour genuinely believe that their actions were acceptable.

According to Fernandez and Marshall (2003: 13) various researchers made assumptions that the empathy deficits displayed by sexual offenders included a lack of empathy towards people and situations in general. Fernandez and Marshall (2003: 13) however, disagree with this statement as they are of the opinion that the lack of empathy portrayed by sexual offenders may be more specific than a generalised lack of empathy pertaining to all people and situations. On the other hand, empathy deficits displayed by sexual offenders may be narrowed down to their feelings towards the group of people that the victim belongs to, for example women or children, it may be directed towards people who have been victims of other sexual offenders, or it may only be displayed towards their own victims (Marshall et al,

1995: 102). In lieu with this Hunter, Becker and Lexier (2006: 157) say that the capacity for empathy might be intact in some offenders. However, circumstances may have an influence on their capacity to display empathy for their own victims.

Before further pondering the absence or display of victim empathy in youth sex offenders, it is essential to define the key concepts to clarify the meanings they will carry in this article.

DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

For the purpose of this article, “a youth sex offender” implies a male youth younger than 25 years who sexually violates another individual (this includes acts of sexual assault and/or rape). The operational definition was formulated by combining aspects of the definitions provided by Booyens, Beukman and Bezuidenhout (2013: 37) and the White Paper on Corrections (RSA, Department of Correctional Services, 2005). The White Paper indicates that a youth or young offender is classified as an offender between the age of 18 years and 25 years. A victim is defined as any individual who is harmed or violated and suffers physically and/or emotionally due to illegal and/or non-consented sexual conduct, including acts of sexual assault and/or rape committed by an offender or offenders (Coetzee, 2015: 5).

“Empathy” is defined as the capacity to distinguish the emotional state of another individual (emotion recognition), to see situations from another individual’s perspective (perspective-taking), to vicariously replicate observed emotions of another individual (emotional replication) and to respond appropriately within the given context, also known as the response decision (Marshall et al, 1995: 101). Later on, Marshall and Marshall (2011: 747) modified their model of empathy. In their modified model of empathy, emotional recognition is still the first stage of the empathic process, as some offenders lack the basic skills to recognise distress in others. This lack of emotional recognition can be attributed to a decision to deliberately distort perceived information. This occurs in scenarios where offenders deny causing harm, even in instances where there is clear evidence of distress being experienced by victims. Offenders who realised that they caused distress might feel shame or guilt. Two ways of responding to these feelings is that they will either block their recognition of the harm they caused, or they will experience elevated levels of emotional distress as a result of their actions. If the latter occurs, the offenders’ focus will be on reducing their own distress, by for example denying responsibility for the harm that they caused. This can entail the downplaying of the consequences of their actions, or denying their involvement in the case. In other instances offenders might find pleasure in another’s suffering and this will prevent them from responding empathically. Thus, in the absence of a positive disposition towards the person in distress, a compassionate response will not occur.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

There is a dearth of knowledge concerning victim empathy of youth sex offenders (Varker & Devilly, 2007: 139), especially within the South African context. Lakey (1994: 756) postulates that youth sex offenders can be characterised as humans with empathy deficits. However, few studies have investigated these deficits (Varker & Devilly, 2007: 139). The few studies that have investigated empathy deficits in youth sex offenders only focussed on general victim empathy, while excluding victim specific empathy and own victim empathy (Varker & Devilly, 2007: 139). Although Curwen (2003) and Varker and Devilly (2007) addressed this shortcoming in their international research by adding victim specific empathy and own victim empathy in adolescent sex offenders, the authors are of the opinion that similar research needed to be replicated in the South African context in order to make specific recommendations that are applicable to the South African context.

Pertaining to research of this ilk in the South African context, a quantitative study focussing on 48 convicted male sexual offenders who committed sex offences against children was conducted in 2004. One of the aspects that were explored during this study was the attitude of offenders towards their victims. Recommendations posed during this study was that a comprehensive study focussing on the attitudes of sexual offenders towards their victims should be conducted, as it is imperative to develop intervention programmes which can assist sex offenders to take responsibility for their actions and to understand the impact of their offending behaviour (Delpont & Vermeulen, 2004: 46).

In order to address youth sex offending, one need to look at the nature and dynamics of these offences, but also have to take note of the extent of this problem. An exposition of the nature and extent of youth sex offending will be discussed next.

NATURE AND EXTENT OF YOUTH SEX OFFENDING

During the 2013/2014 financial year, 62 649 sexual crimes were reported (An analysis of the national crime statistics 2014). In the aforementioned document it is stated that the reinstating and establishment of specialised courts dealing with sexual offences will result in more efficient and swifter finalisation of cases that are currently in the system. Furthermore, it is postulated that the reinstatement of the Family Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Offences (FCS) units has had a positive effect on the curbing of sexual offences. Since its reinstatement in 2010, 659 life sentences have been imposed and 3718 persons have been convicted and sentenced to a total of 51 631 years of imprisonment. The successful prosecution, as well as the assistance provided to victims could possibly increase the confidence that community members have in the police.

It is difficult to determine how many of the reported sexual offences were committed by youth offenders, as the South African Police Service (SAPS) does not distinguish between adult and youth sex offenders in their annual statistics and only provides an aggregate figure of sexual offences committed in SA. The Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (2012) sheds some light on the number of youth sexual offences committed in SA. According to the Department, 4 772 children were charged for sexual offences by the SAPS during the period of April 2011 and March 2012. Furthermore, Naidoo (2011) postulates that 40% of the 530 children that are raped on a daily basis are raped by other children whom they are normally acquainted with. When taking these statistics into account, the sexual abuse of children is a grave matter that needs to be addressed in earnest. Furthermore, Mashaba (2009: 2) states that this figure is not a true reflection of the prevalence of child sexual abuse, as it is estimated that approximately 88% of child rapes are never reported. Brown, Esbensen and Geis (2007: 108) emphasise that the number of unreported crimes better known as the dark figure is considered to be high. Underreporting is common in crimes of a sexual nature due to the sensitive nature of these offences. Reasons why victims are dissuaded to report sexual offences include humiliation, embarrassment and disillusionment, fear of being blamed or fear of repeat victimisation, as well as family pressure not to report the incident. In addition, victims sometimes do not have access to police stations, or they fail to report the crime due to a general distrust in the CJS (Van Niekerk, 2003: 12). Furthermore, some of the reported offences committed by youths are not recorded because it is often viewed as sexual experimentation (Booyens et al, 2013:38) or the victim is incorrectly informed by police officers that no charges can be laid if the offender was a child (Van Niekerk, 2003: 12). Even though youth sex offenders form the minority group of the overall sex offending population in SA, it is a serious problem that needs to be addressed, especially when reflecting on the fact that sexual offences can escalate in frequency and severity (Hoghugi, 1997: 118; Symboluk, 1999: 10; Veneziano & Veneziano, 2002). Sexual offences have detrimental long-term effects for both the victims and the offenders (Da Costa, 2014: 2). Additionally, the sexual victimisation of youth can give rise to an intergenerational cycle of violence and abuse.

General characteristics of youth sex offenders

Even though youth sex offenders do not necessarily form a homogenous group, certain common characteristics displayed by them have been identified. Subsequently an exposition of some of these characteristics will be provided.

Low self-esteem

Individuals with a low self-esteem are usually preoccupied with their own limitations to such an extent that they do not have sufficient emotional energy left to be concerned with other people's feelings (Fernandez & Marshall, 2003: 13). In addition, it is postulated that the empathy deficits displayed by youth sex offenders may occur due to the strategies that they utilise to prevent further judgements or attacks on their already fragile self-esteem. These strategies can include denial of their offending, minimising the harm that their victims experienced and claiming that the victims deserved, or invited the attack (Marshall & Marshall, 2011: 752). On the other hand, Fernandez and Marshall (2003: 21) report that they found that rapists in their study did not portray lower levels of self-esteem when compared to other non-sexual offenders. Both the rapists and the non-sexual offenders scored very close to the normative mean when completing a measuring instrument assessing levels of self-esteem. Conversely, Fisher, Beech and Browne (1999: 474) as well as Cossins (2000: 193) state that a poor self-esteem can be seen as a possible consequence of being the victim of sexual abuse and a significant number of sex offenders were sexually abused as children.

Victim empathy deficits

Debates surrounding the question whether sex offenders lack empathy in general or simply lack empathy towards their own victim are on-going (Fisher et al, 1999: 475). Although conflicting findings have been published, early indications are that youth sex offenders show victim empathy deficits and display callous personality traits when compared with violent non-sex offenders and non-violent offenders (Andrade, Vincent & Saleh, 2006: 165).

High risk factors pertaining to youth sex offending

Various authors conducted research on high risk factors that can give rise to youth sex offending (Da Costa, 2014; Harris, 2008; Hunter, 1999; Smith, Wampler, Jones & Reifman, 2005). In this regard Maree (2013: 70) indicates that the risk of socially unacceptable behaviour increases exponentially with the amount of risk factors present, especially in the absence of protective factors such as positive role models and a nurturing family life. In addition, the various risk factors do not exist in isolation, but are linked and have vicarious effects on each other. An overview of a few risk factors, especially those pertaining to the development or inhibition of pro-social attitudes and empathy in youth sex offenders, will be clarified.

Overcrowding and social disorganisation

Youths living in disadvantaged and overcrowded areas where there is a lack of community cohesion are at risk of displaying aggressive tendencies (McClinton, 2004: 27). These youths usually grow up in an environment where violence and poverty are rife and where there is a lack of constructive recreational programmes and opportunities to develop acceptable, pro-social behaviour (De Wet, 2003: 3). A lack of positive role models, combined with overcrowding and community disorganisation can lead to a lack of norms and values, which can give rise to higher levels of violence and crime (McClinton, 2004: 28). Furthermore, values and respect for another person's life, property and dignity diminishes and as Harris (2008: 38) states the belief that "if one needs or wants something one can simply take it filters down into all aspects of life, including sexual relationships".

Substance abuse

Although the effect of substance abuse and the link to subsequent misbehaviour committed by adolescents has been established in various studies (De Wet, 2003: 96; Lakey, 1994: 755; Mulvey, Schubert & Chassin, 2010: 3) there is controversy pertaining to the frequency of intoxication of adolescent sex offenders during the committing of their offences (Pratt, Patel, Greydanus, Dannison, Walcott & Slaone, 2001: 3). In response to the controversy, Seto and Lalumière (2010: 541) found that the use of substances occurred more frequently among youth offenders who committed non-sexual offences than among youth sex offenders. Conversely Jewkes, Nduna, Shai and Dunkle (2012: 5) found that approximately a quarter (24%) of all the rapes committed by the research participants in their study could have potentially been eliminated if the drug use variable was removed.

In the study on which this article is based (Coetzee, 2015), a number of research participants reported that had they not been under the influence of a substance, they would not have committed the offence. One of the research participants claimed that he could not remember committing the sexual offence as he was under the influence of alcohol and consumed a pill which altered his consciousness. He did not dispute that he committed the offence, as one of his friends witnessed the act and his DNA matched the sample obtained from the victim. He however stated that he was in an altered state of consciousness and was not aware of his actions. He asserted that to date he still has no recollection of the rape. He recalled attending his girlfriend's surprise party, having a few drinks and taking the pill. His next recollection was waking up in the police cell. He verbalised intense remorse and displayed no victim empathy deficits.

Taking the above into account, the authors are of the opinion that the use of substances can be a contributing factor, as it influences a person's inhibitions and might render them more prone to behaviour that would not otherwise be exhibited. Booyens et al (2013: 35) reiterate this opinion, stating that being under the influence of a substance could potentially result in distorted perceptions as well as a heightened sense of bravado. It thus follows that if offenders are sober at the time of their offences, they might recognise the harmfulness of their actions, but while under the influence of substances, they are able to detach themselves from the victim's suffering (Hanson & Scott, 1995: 264).

Family environment

The family can be seen as the primary socialising agent and thus their role in teaching the child pro-social behaviour is of the utmost importance (Maree, 2013: 75). Adolescents who sexually victimise others are often raised in families where violent interaction often occurs. They experience and/or witness the violence, which in turn can lead to a lack of empathy, as well as insufficient sexual boundaries (Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014: 90; Print & Morrison, 2000: 296). The absence of a parent, especially a father figure in the boy's developmental years, is problematic as the boy needs a father to model acceptable behaviour towards females (Harris, 2008: 141). One must also take into account that attachment to a primary caregiver during early childhood is of paramount importance. If children did not experience empathy from others during their early childhood, they may not have the capacity to express empathy towards others (Owen & Fox, 2011: 553; Regehr & Glancy, 2001: 147).

Prior victimisation

A link between prior sexual victimisation and sex offending has been established in various studies (Barbaree & Langton, 2006: 58; Finkelhor, Ormrod & Chaffin, 2009: 3; Veneziano & Veneziano, 2002: 248). Sexually reactive children who commit sexual offences in response to their own abuse may not be aware of the harmful effects of their behaviour and may not recognise their actions as deviant. Furthermore, it serves to be mentioned that sexual stimulation is often experienced by the victim and that subsequent masturbating to images of their own abuse can for instance condition young boys to be sexually aroused by other young boys (Miner et al, 2006: 4). In addition, boys who were sexually victimised by other males might have been aroused by certain acts and could question their own sexual orientation. This might lead to a scenario where the victim becomes the offender in order to regain a sense of control and make sense out of the whole experience (Barbaree & Langton, 2006: 70).

Seto and Lalumière (2010: 564) state that youth sex offenders who have been victims of sexual abuse have more distorted views pertaining to sex and often experience sexual arousal towards children or coercive sex. Additionally, they state that certain aspects such as the relationship between the victim and the offender, as well as the nature and the duration of the sexual abuse are important aspects that can be indicative of the possibility of a victimised youth becoming a sexual offender. Factors such as violence used during the sexual abuse, sexual acts involving penetration, as well as abuse continuing over a long period of time, increase the likelihood that the youth will engage in sexual offending behaviour.

However, it should be emphasised that not all youth sex offenders are victims of prior sexual abuse per se, but that most of them are in fact victims of some kind of abuse, including physical and/or emotional abuse, neglect, or witnessing domestic violence (Lamont, 2010: 1; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014: 89, Pratt et al, 2001: 3; Righthand & Welch, 2005: 19). In an international study Pithers and Gray (1998: 208) found that 84% of the adolescent sex offenders that were interviewed were victims of sexual abuse, 48% were victims of physical abuse, 33% were victims of emotional abuse, 18% were neglected and 56% were victims of a combination of these forms of abuse.

Pornography

Most authors, such as Ven-hwei and Wei (2005: 229) as well as Hodgetts (2012: 140) hold the opinion that adolescents' exposure to pornography can lead to sexual promiscuity. Furthermore, Hodgetts (2012: 146) notes that the consumer of pornographic material might be influenced by the images that they view to such an extent that they might develop negative attitudes towards women. In this study conducted by Hodgetts (2012), it was found that some of the pornographic material viewed by research participants depicted sexually aggressive acts against women as enjoyable for both the male and female participants in the pornographic scenes. In addition, some of the participants indicated that they derived pleasure from viewing pornographic material depicting the rape or violent treatment of women.

Debates regarding the link between the viewing of pornography and the committing of sexual offences are on-going. Rice Hughes (2001) argues that deviant sexual behaviour does not necessarily occur as a result of the viewing of pornography by adolescents. Nevertheless, Hughes admits that pornography may have some detrimental effect on youth. Greenfield (2004: 741) states in this regard that the viewing of pornography can have an influence on the display of sexual violence; it can determine sexual attitudes, influence moral values and increase the sexual activities of young people. Diamond (1999: 14) disagrees as he postulates that increased exposure to pornographic images can reduce youth sex offending, as pornography gives young people the opportunity to explore their budding sexuality and

gratify their sexual needs. In addition it serves as a vent or release for their sexual curiosity. Additionally Groth (1979: 9) emphasises a very important fact by stating that sexual offences such as rape is normally a reaction to the offender's anger or fear and that even though sexual offenders might be aroused by pornographic material, their sexual offences cannot be attributed to the viewing of pornography as such.

Television

Omar (2010: 125) found that a considerable number of respondents (72%) in her study reported that they watch television every day. Furthermore, 70% of the respondents indicated that they normally watch television without supervision. A further matter of concern is that 92% of the respondents indicated that they received the majority of their sex education by watching television. This is in line with international research indicating that television is regarded as one of the most important sources of sex education for adolescents (Ven-hwei & Wei, 2005: 222). This is especially worrisome if one takes into account that an association between watching violence on television and then acting it out in a real life situation has been verified by research (Sigelman & Rider, 2006: 374). If children are not properly informed about human sexuality, watching explicit scenes without any supervision may give rise to confusion and can lead to fear or trauma and feelings of powerlessness. Children might try to regain their feelings of power by committing deviant sexual acts against peers (Newberger, 2001: 18).

Peer relationships

A peer group can initiate or reinforce existing criminal or disruptive behaviour (Harris, 2008: 54). In addition, an adolescent might adjust his perceptions and moral views to be compliant with the values of the peer group, to ensure acceptance within the peer group (Harris, 2008: 55; Symboluk, 1999: 69). Thus, if the peer group adheres to certain violent or intimidating ways of gaining sexual compliance, the adolescent within this peer group might follow suit. Kipke (1999: 32) adds that adolescents gain a substantial amount of information regarding sex from their peers. This is problematic, as the information might be inaccurate and might give rise to distorted views pertaining to pro-social sexual behaviour. In other instances adolescents might engage in sex, even if they have to use intimidation to gain compliance, just for the sake of being able to increase their status within the group and to be able to partake in discussions pertaining to sexual relationships and sexual activities (Ward et al, 2006: 82).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the study that this article is based on (Coetzee, 2015), two types of victim empathy were measured in order to establish if youth sex offenders within the South African context display these types of empathy. The two types of empathy that were measured are:

- General sexual abuse victim empathy, which refers to empathy for victims of sexual abuse in general, for example a rape victim.
- Own victim empathy, which refers to specific empathy towards the victim against whom the offender committed the crime.

For the purpose of this article, only the findings pertaining to general sexual abuse victim empathy will be discussed.

The goal was to measure, describe and compare victim empathy in youth sex offenders. To attain this goal the combined qualitative and quantitative approach, also referred to as the mixed methods approach (Fouché & Delport, 2011: 63) was applied. Quantitative data was collected by means of a questionnaire and qualitative data was obtained by means of semi-structured interviews.

The triangulation mixed methods design was used, which implies that quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection were applied, the data collection took place within the same time frame and both methods were considered equally important. The two distinct, but in the case of this study complementary methodologies, each required its own research design. For the purpose of the quantitative section the cross-sectional survey design was used, while the collective case study research design was used in the qualitative section of the study.

Pertaining to the sampling procedure, the authors made use of non-probability sampling and applied the purposive sampling method. This entails that each research participant is selected based on the unique position and traits of that individual. This means that purposive sampling may involve the inclusion of the entire population of a limited group or subset of a population (Bachman & Schutt, 2003:

108). The sample consisted of 96 male youth sex offenders detained in Leeuwkop, Emthonjeni and Boksburg Youth Correctional Centres (YCCs) in the Gauteng Province of SA who could understand and speak English and who were willing to participate in the study.

With regards to the data collection methods, the first author of the article made use of a structured interview schedule, in the format of a questionnaire for the quantitative section. This entails that the researcher read the questions in the questionnaire to the participants and then recorded their answers on the questionnaire. The authors are of the opinion that the utilisation of the structured interview schedule was the best option as it decreased the occurrence of answers that were omitted due to an inability to interpret or understand the questions correctly (Delpont & Roestenburg, 2011: 186). An existing questionnaire consisting of a 4 point Likert scale, more specifically the Beckett and Fisher's Victim Empathy Distortion Scale (VEDS), was utilised in the research. The scale is designed to assess empathy for a non-specific victim depicted in a case study, as well as empathy for an offender's own victim. The scale consists of 30 questions focussing on empathy for a general sex abuse victim and 30 questions concentrating on the offender's own victim (Varker & Devilly, 2007: 143). The scale measures the value of understanding and what the impact and effect are of the sexual abuse on a victim, as well as his or her beliefs regarding the feelings of the victim during the sexual contact. Items in the questionnaire cover aspects such as the extent to which offenders believe that victims enjoy sexual contact, whether victims are in a position to stop the contact or whether they encourage it, whether victims experience fear and/or guilt and if the victims would prefer to have similar sexual encounters in the future (Fisher et al, 1999: 478).

Following the completion of the questionnaires, interviews were conducted with each of the participants. The first author conducted all the interviews personally. It must be noted that ethical considerations were adhered to meticulously. A brief overview of some of the ethical aspects that were applicable to the study follows:

- Confidentiality: All the information obtained from each research participant was treated confidentially and were only utilised for research purposes. No personal information or their identities were revealed when disseminating the research results.
- Informed consent and assent: Prior to the interviews, an informed consent form was signed by the head of the respective YCC who acts *in loco parentis* of detained children younger than 18 years. Additionally, an informed assent form was signed by research participants who were younger than 18 years. Research participants that are older than 18 years signed their own informed consent forms.
- Debriefing of participants: Upon completion of the data collection process, the researcher held individual debriefing sessions with the research participants by discussing their experiences and the way that the answering of the questionnaire and their participation in the interview impacted on them. If the research participants were negatively affected in any way, a social worker of the relevant YCC was at hand to provide trauma debriefing and/or counselling to the research participant concerned.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

An overview of some of the quantitative and qualitative data obtained in the study (Coetzee, 2015) will follow.

Quantitative results

The VEDS measured the empathy levels of youth sex offenders on two levels. The first level focussed on their empathy for a general sexual abuse victim. The research participants answered questions pertaining to a case study about a seven year old girl named Sarah, who was sexually abused by her 15 year old brother. The current article will only focus on the first level.

It is worth mentioning that only 31 of the 96 research participants' (32.29%) empathy levels measured below 80% for the general sexual abuse victim empathy section. In addition, the research participants' average empathy score for the general sexual abuse victim was 84% (100.8/120) with a minimum score of 48% (58/120) and a maximum score of 99% (119/120).

An analysis of the different responses to the different questions revealed that some of the responses amounted to an average score of less than 84%. As the average score obtained for the general sexual

abuse victim empathy section was 84%, it was used as a benchmark to identify the specific questions that elicited a below average score (i.e.<84%). This strategy highlighted specific areas where youth sex offenders expressed what might be interpreted as a lack of empathy for a general sexual abuse victim. A description of these questions follows:

- In question 3 the research participants were asked if they thought that the victim (Sarah who was 7 years old) thought that it was a game when her brother (the sexual offender who was 15 years old) had sex with her. They had to provide their response on a 4 point Likert scale. The average response for this question was 2.91 out of 4 (72.75%) indicating that on average they were of the opinion that Sarah mostly thought it was a game. This might indicate that the research participants failed to comprehend the seriousness of the sexual offence which was committed against Sarah. However, some of the research participants indicated that due to the fact that Sarah was so young and innocent, she might have lacked comprehension and thought that her brother was playing a game with her. Thus, the average response to this question is not necessarily an indication of a lack of empathy.
- In question 5 the research participants were asked if they thought that Sarah could have stopped her brother if she wanted to. The average response for this question was 2.71 out of 4 (67.75%) showing that on average they opined that it would have been easy for Sarah to stop her brother from wanting to have sex with her. This might be an indication that the research participants are justifying the behaviour of the brother in the case study, while simultaneously blaming the victim for her part in the victimisation.
- In question 13 the research participants were asked if they thought that Sarah felt guilty about how she behaved. The average response for this question was 2.86 out of 4 (71.5%), which is an indication that on average they thought that Sarah felt a little bit guilty about how she behaved. Once again, this might amount to victim blaming.
- In question 18 the research participants were asked if they thought that Sarah felt sorry for her brother over what had happened. The average response for this question was 3.13 out of 4 (78.25%) showing that the average research participant thought that she felt a little bit sorry for her brother over what had happened. This might be an indication that the research participants do not feel that the brother is the only one at fault in this case study, and that might be the reason why Sarah would feel sorry for him. On the other hand, they might project their own feelings onto this case study due to the fact that they might want their own victims to sympathise with them. Some of the research participants explained that Sarah loved her brother and she might feel sorry for him if he got into trouble.
- In question 21 the research participants were asked if they thought that Sarah had experienced something similar in the past. The average response for this question was 2.8 out of 4 (70%) which shows that on average they were of the opinion that it was possible that Sarah experienced something similar in the past. This might imply that Sarah was promiscuous, or that on some level, Sarah wanted to have sex with her brother. However, some of the research participants indicated that they chose this option because lots of little girls are victimised in the area where they reside. Thus, this response is not necessarily an indication of a lack of empathy.
- In question 26 the research participants were asked if they thought that Sarah had been led on by her brother. The average response for this question was 3.11 out of 4 (77.75%) indicating that most of the research participants thought that she was mostly led on by the brother. This means that they did ascribe a little bit of blame to Sarah, as they did not choose the option that she was totally led on by her brother.

Upon comparing the empirical findings of this study with literature, it became evident that some of the results obtained in this study differ from international findings. Rich (2006: 195) indicates that youth sex offenders can be divided into three categories, namely youth sex offenders who offend against adults or peers, youth sex offenders who victimise children and youths who partake in both forms of sexual offending, thus targeting adults or peers and children. Furthermore, he states that most youth sex offenders resort in the second category which refers to the sexual victimisation of children. However, most of the youth sex offenders in the study that this article is based on (Coetzee, 2015) resort in the first category (i.e. victimisation of adults or peers) and not in the second category (i.e. victimisation of children) as stated in literature. A noteworthy number of victims were older than 18 years (58=60.41%)

when they were victimised, thus indicating that in 60.41% of the cases the youth sex offenders targeted adults or peers in the 18-25 years age bracket. Furthermore, 25 (26.04%) of the victims were between the ages of 14-17 years. Considering the fact that 48.96% of the participants indicated that they were younger than 18 years when they committed the offence, victims between the ages of 14-17 years can be viewed as their peers. Thus, in approximately 86.45% of the cases the youth sex offenders in this study resort in the first category of offenders who target adults or peers. Only three (3.13%) of the youth sex offenders targeted victims who were younger than 10 years.

International research findings (Andrade et al, 2006: 163; Hunter, 1999) indicate that youth sex offenders who target adults or peers often victimise female strangers. This is congruent with the empirical data obtained in this study as a noteworthy number of research participants indicated that no prior relationship existed between them and the victim. Thirty-four (35.41%) of the youth sex offenders stipulated that their victims were strangers whom they have never met, or had any interaction with prior to the offence. In addition, twenty (20.83%) of the youth sex offenders indicated that their victims were acquaintances. This implied that they met their victims before, or knew them prior to the offence. However, there was no personal relationship or specific affinity between them. Typical victims in these instances were individuals whom they have only spoken to once, or seen once before. In other instances the victims were friends with someone both the offender and the victim knew, but the relationship could not be described as close or of any consequence.

On the other hand Hunter (1999) opines that youth sex offenders who victimise children are often relatives of the victim. These offenders mostly resort to manipulation to gain compliance, they do not necessarily use violence and their offences mostly occur in private settings. As indicated previously, only three of the research participants in this study victimised children younger than 10 years and two of them indicated that their victims were family members. Thus, this finding albeit emanating from only three participants, is in line with international research findings. In addition, all three of the youth sex offenders in this study used manipulation to gain compliance from their victims. A difference does, however, exist with regards to the use of violence during the committing of the offence. Although the above-mentioned literature indicates that youth sex offenders who target children do not necessarily use violence and prefer a private setting, two inverse responses were attained in the current study. One of the youth sex offenders, who raped a 7 year old girl, killed his victim. In addition, one of the research participants committed his offence against a child at church after choir practice, therefore not in a private setting.

In the following section an overview of some of the qualitative results will be provided.

Qualitative results

After the transcription of the interviews, the data derived from the interviews were sorted into themes and sub-themes. One of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interviews will be discussed in this article.

Theme 1: General sexual abuse victim empathy

In the study conducted by Coetzee (2015) research participants' levels of general sexual abuse victim empathy were measured in the first section of the VEDS. It is stated in Fisher et al (1999: 478) that the scale measures an individual's understanding of the impact and effects that sexual abuse has on a victim, as well as his or her beliefs regarding the feelings of the victim during the sexual contact. The 30 quantitative questions were followed up with an interview where the research participants had the opportunity to explain their feelings towards the victim depicted in the case study. An overview of their responses will be provided next.

Sub-theme 1.1: Feelings for Sarah (victim in the case study)

The responses of participants regarding their feelings for Sarah indicated that some of them felt very sorry for her. One of the verbatim replies illustrating this sentiment was articulated by RP 42 who said: *"I feel sorry for Sarah, because she was a child, she didn't know nothing. She maybe didn't have the power to stop her brother. This might be her memory when she grows up. She will not cope well in school and will see everyone as her brother. The emotions will stay with her no matter how old she is."*

On the other hand, some of the research participants had empathy for both Sarah and the brother. The following is a validation of these mixed feelings:

RP 7 opined: *"I feel sad for the brother. He makes sex with his sister. I feel sad for the sister. The brother does not have another miss (juffrou) outside the family."*

RP 11 disclosed his feelings in the following manner: *"I feel ashamed. I know how hurt it is for the girl and the boy."*

Various research participants held robust views pertaining to the fact that the sexual offence was committed by Sarah's brother. Subsequently a few of these opinions will be provided.

RP 13 conveyed: *"How could her brother force his little sister into sleeping with him. Maybe the little sister trusted the brother and the mother said to the brother he should look after his little sister. Brother shouldn't have feelings for sister from same mother. At least if he did it to someone else..."*

RP 22 replied: *"I feel very bad for Sarah. She is not safe with her brother doing such things to her. Her brother was supposed to protect her."* At face value it may seem as though RP 22 has empathy for Sarah. However, in order to gain a holistic understanding of RP 22's thought processes it is imperative to consider this response in conjunction with some of the answers provided by RP 22 in the questionnaire, as well as some of the explanations given for his answers in the questionnaire. Some of these responses and the explanations for the responses provided in brackets, follows: *"Sarah secretly hoped very much that something similar could happen again (maybe she wanted it), she felt very sorry for the brother (the brother didn't know the consequences), very possible that it happened before (maybe she was scared to tell someone, maybe if it was from outside she could tell, maybe that is why it happened again), very likely that she knows more about sex than her age (when you are young and something like that happen, you will know more than people are the same age than you), she was slightly led on by her brother (the brother is not supposed to do it to his younger sister, he is supposed to protect her. Maybe both of them wanted it)."*

RP 27 said: *"I feel bad. It is bad to sleep with your sister. How are you going to look at him, you stay in the same house? It is unforgivable how do you forgive someone that sleeps with his sister?"*

RP 87 voiced his thoughts about Sarah as follows: *"I think Sarah eish, didn't like it happening to her because she think her brother was playing and then he end up sleeping with her. She was afraid to tell her mother. If her friends found out Sarah was sleeping with her brother, she was scared for that."*

Various research participants conveyed strong feelings with regards to the fact that Sarah was so young, and her brother was much older. Some of their responses will follow.

RP 61 expressed his feelings for Sarah in the following manner: *"Very painful for me, because when I look at age of boy he was 15, the girl was 7 years old. What did that boy think when he raped that little girl? It is disgusting. She is very young and she knows nothing about sex. She was crying, that is the picture in my mind, how could he do it to his sister. For me, it is very, very, very painful."*

RP 88 said: *"Even if I'm a person who do crime I won't think of raping a 7 year old girl."*

Some of the research participants internalised the case study and applied it to their own lives. Examples of their responses are as follows:

RP 75 conveyed: *"I feel very shocked. I will kill for my little sister. I will never do that."*

RP 78 proclaimed: *"That story is sad. Sarah is young and what happened to her with her brother, her brother left a trauma to her. Even me, also, we are used to playing such a game, a mother, father and son but we didn't put it inside. We didn't know what was going on."*

RP 82 commented: *"You see such things, eish. I'm not feeling okay, because some of things we do our victims don't like. We might think we enjoyed it, but to her it is not alright."*

RP 93 declared that: *"To be honest with you, I think that what happened to her was not right for her, because I know how it is to be forced to have sex with someone you don't want to have sex with."*

On the other hand, some of the research participants engaged in victim blaming, by for example referring to Sarah's obligation to report the sexual encounter. Some of their thoughts will be shared next.

RP 6 noted: *"Sarah could have stopped her brother very easily. Sarah and the brother was at home, she must scream. She felt very guilty, she didn't try to scream or prevent it."*

RP 12 stated the following: *"This girl is very, very young. Maybe this girl's future is not going to be fine. She think too much she might commit suicide."* However, in contradiction to this statement, when asked during the completion of the questionnaire if Sarah felt sorry for herself, RP 12 replied *"not at all"*. When asked to explain reasons for his response, he stated: *"She never screamed, seemed like she was enjoying it."*

RP 64 said: “*I was feeling so; I don’t know how to define it. Sarah had a choice. If she didn’t like she was supposed to go to the police station and arrest the brother. She wants.*”

From the above mentioned one can see that youth sex-offenders hold a diversity of feelings towards the victim in the case study. However, even though a noteworthy number of research participants displayed empathy for the general sexual abuse victim (Sarah) as portrayed in the case study, some portrayed empathy deficits. This becomes evident when considering that even though they displayed empathy for Sarah, on average they were of the opinion that it would have been easy for her to stop her brother from raping her, which is indicative of victim blaming being present. Additionally, their ignorance pertaining to the impact of sexual offences on victims, as well as the lack of understanding regarding the long term consequences of sexual violence, are causes for concern.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that even though the youth sex offenders in the current study (Coetzee, 2015) obtained an average score of 84% for the general sexual abuse victim empathy section of the VEDS, some of their qualitative responses indicates certain empathy deficits, such as a lack of insight pertaining to the actual impact of sexual offending on the victims of these offences.

As stated in a recent Supreme Court of appeal case between the Department of Public Prosecutions as the appellant, and Prins as the respondent (*DPP v Prins*, 2012) the presiding officers made the following comment in their judgement:

No judicial officer sitting in South Africa today is unaware of the extent of sexual violence in this country and the way in which it deprives so many women and children of their right to dignity and bodily integrity and, in the case of children, the right to be children; to grow up in innocence and, as they grow older, to awaken to maturity and joy of full humanity. The rights to dignity and bodily integrity are fundamental to our humanity and should be respected for that reason alone.

Against the backdrop of the above-mentioned quote it is clear that the occurrence of sexual violence needs to be addressed, as it has dire consequences for the victims of these offences. In order to address the occurrence of sexual violence one needs to ascertain what contributes to its occurrence. Even though three South African studies (Da Costa, 2014; Harris, 2008; Omar, 2010) recently contributed to this field of study by focussing on the risk factors that contribute to youth sex offending, as well as developing a typology of youth sex offending in the South African context, it is imperative to ascertain whether youth sex offenders have the necessary insight into their harmful behaviour. As the recidivism rate after release from a correctional facility in SA is estimated to be as high as 95 percent, rehabilitation, positive change and empathy building are issues that are of elevated importance (Quan-Baffour & Zawada, 2012: 73). This notion necessitated the current study as the authors are of the opinion that it is imperative to ascertain whether offenders who commit sexually motivated crimes display the necessary moral values and are at a moral stage where they can understand what the impact of sexual offences was, or still is on victims. Should these conceivable deficits exist, repeat offending is eminent. In the study on which this article is based (Coetzee, 2015), own victim empathy was compared to the above findings and a paradoxical picture unfolded. As the majority of the victims of the youth sex offenders were older than 18 years, the section focussing on own victim empathy is unfortunately outside the scope of this journal and therefore the authors decided to only focus on empathy for a victim of child-on child sexual abuse in this contribution.

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