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Victim empathy in young sex offenders in the emergent adulthood developmental phase

This article reports on a study which focused on young sex offenders' empathy levels for sexual abuse victims in general as portrayed in a case study, as well as empathy for the offenders' own specific victims. Beckett and Fisher's Victim Empathy Distortion Scale (1994) was used to measure and compare 96 young sex offenders' empathy levels. The quantitative research results indicated that research participants displayed significantly less empathy towards their own victims when compared to the empathy displayed towards a general sexual abuse victim in a case study. Following the completion of the questionnaires, in-depth, qualitative data was obtained regarding the young sex offenders' thoughts prior to, during and directly after committing the offence. In addition, they also explained their current thoughts and feelings for the victims in their case. The divergent responses which were given by the participants is a clear indication of the heterogeneous nature of youth sex offending.

Keywords: Victim empathy, empathy, sex offending, young sex offenders, emerging adulthood

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Introduction

Sexual offenders display different types of problematic behaviour which can be grouped into four main categories, namely social difficulties, emotional dysfunction, cognitive distortions and deviant sexual arousal. Empathy deficits in sexual offenders are considered to resort under the cognitive distortions, or emotional dysfunction category (Ward & Beech, 2006).

It has been postulated 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). Moreover, it is stated that individuals that do not commit rape are inhibited by empathy for the potential victim (Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006).

Marshall and his colleagues (Marshall, Marshall, Serran & O'Brien, 2009) are of the opinion that empathy should not be seen as a trait, but rather as situation-specific and person-specific. Barnett and Mann (2013) concurs with this argument by emphasising that emerging research supports the notion that even though empathy deficits are not always implicated in sexual offending, it could play a role in certain sexual offences. They also emphasise that some offenders demonstrate situational empathy deficits (e.g.

due to feelings of anger, sexual desire or being under the influence of a substance) for their own victims but do not have general empathy deficits.

A difference exists between offenders' general empathy levels and the level of empathy for their own victims (Webster, 2002). According to Fernandez and Marshall (2003) 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) 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. 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, Hudson, Jones & Fernandez, 1995). Hunter, Becker and Lexier (2006) elaborate 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. Ward et al. (2006) indicate that they are not convinced that the empathic process commences when the offender has begun committing the offense, in other words when the offender is in the presence of the victim. According to them, various theories indicate that empathy-like inhibitors should be present before the offender approaches the victim. Thus, empathy should have prevented them from committing the offense in the first place. Hence, if the offender approaches the victim, empathy deficits are already present. Some individuals might fantasise about certain sexual offenses, but the presence of empathy will restrain them from committing such an offense. Furthermore, in the presence of situational reinforcers such as alcohol usage, it will be more difficult to experience empathy and realise the impact of the offense. This coupled with sexual arousal make it less likely that the offender will refrain from offending when they are in the presence of the victim. Thus, empathy must take effect when self-control is still feasible and a victim is not present yet (Ward et al., 2006).

Taking the above mentioned into consideration, it is clear that contention exists regarding the association between empathy and sexual offending and as a result the association between sexual recidivism and victim empathy is questioned as well. This also leads to questions regarding the importance of the inclusion of empathy components in treatment programmes (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Mann & Barnett, 2013).

It serves to be noted that the purpose of this article is not to discuss the association between sexual recidivism and victim empathy, nor the importance of the inclusion of empathy components in treatment programmes. Instead the author will provide an outline of offenders' thoughts and feelings pertaining to their victims prior to, during and after victimisation. This can provide explanations for the presence of own victim empathy, or own victim empathy deficits.

In this article, a young sex offender refers to a male between the ages of 17 and 25 years (in the emergent adulthood development phase) who raped another individual.

Emergent adulthood refers to a development period encompassing the period between late teens and early twenties. It is noteworthy that numerous types of risk behaviour such as unprotected sex and substance abuse peaks during the emerging adulthood period. This can be attributed to aspects such as identity exploration which involves a desire to acquire a wide range of experiences prior to settling down into the responsibilities and roles of adult life (Arnett, 2000).

Rationale for the study

The few studies that have investigated empathy deficits in young 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 research by adding victim specific empathy and own victim empathy in adolescent sex offenders, there was a need to investigate the matter in the South African context. In addition, the researcher could find no qualitative studies focussing on victim empathy in sex offenders and is of the opinion that the voices of offenders are of paramount importance to provide context to the quantitative results obtained. Hence, the researcher decided to utilise a mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) approach. In addition, research is usually conducted with adolescent sex offenders, or with adult sex offenders. This is the first study focusing on young sex offenders in the emergent adulthood development phase.

Methods

Two types of victim empathy were measured in order to establish if young sex offenders within the South African context display these types of empathy, namely:

- General sexual abuse victim empathy (e.g. empathy for a rape victim depicted in a case study).
- Own victim empathy, which refers to specific empathy towards the victim against whom the offender committed the crime.

The following hypothesis was formulated for the quantitative section of the study: A significant number of youth sex offenders have less empathy towards their own victims, compared to empathy towards a general sexual abuse victim.

The rationale for this hypothesis can be found in Varker and Devilly (2007:145) who found that youth sex offenders had significantly less victim empathy for their own victim compared to a general sexual abuse victim. This finding is consistent with research results obtained by Fernandez and Marshall (2003:11) as well as Hanson and Scott (1995:262).

The research question for the qualitative section of the study is: How do youth sex offenders express victim empathy for general sexual abuse victims and for their own specific victims?

The goal was to measure, describe and compare victim empathy in young sex offenders. To attain this goal 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. Furthermore, this design provides an opportunity to corroborate and contrast the results obtained by means of the different data collection methods, and results in complementarity which entails the enrichment, elucidation and clarification of the results obtained by the one data collection method, with the results obtained from the other data collection method (Delpont & Fouché, 2011).

Sample

Non-probability sampling, in particular the purposive sampling method, was applied. The sample consisted of 96 young male sex offenders detained in three Youth Correctional Centres (YCCs) in South Africa (SA) who could understand and speak English. Only two participants were excluded from the sample because they could only speak their native language.

Instruments

For the quantitative section of the study, Beckett and Fisher's Victim Empathy Distortion Scale (VEDS) was used (G. Devilly, personal communication, March, 12, 2009). The VEDS is a four point Likert scale, but a fifth response category (do not know) is included in each question in the scale. If this response is chosen it is not calculated, and it is handled as a non-response. In addition, it is imperative to note that the only changes that the author made to the questionnaire are minor linguistic changes to accommodate the language skills of research participants (e.g. words such as "likely" and "unlikely" were

changed to “possible” and “not really possible”). Great care was taken not to change the context and meaning of the questions in the questionnaire.

The VEDS consists of 30 questions focusing on empathy for a general sex abuse victim in a case study and 30 questions concentrating on the offender’s own victim. 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 and whether victims experience fear and/or guilt (Fisher, Beech, & Brown, 1999).

Procedure

During each meeting with the respective participants, the VEDS was completed first, followed by the semi-structured one-to-one interview (duration was approximately one hour). The author conducted all the interviews personally.

The VEDS scored an internal reliability of .89 and a test-retest reliability of .95 when used in a previous study (Varker & Devilly, 2007). This correlates with the internal reliability score of Fisher et al. (1999) who reports a Cronbach’s alpha of .90. High internal consistency was also found in the current study ($\alpha = .89$). Credibility of qualitative data refers to the accuracy in which the research findings portray the information conveyed by the participants (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

Data triangulation (two collection strategies, namely completion of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews) was employed to enhance credibility. Another strategy that was employed is member checking, which refers to the corroboration of research findings by obtaining feedback from research participants (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). The interviews were not audio-recorded due to the fact that the participants indicated their uncomfortableness during the pilot study. Detailed notes were taken, which is a verbatim account of the research participants’ responses. The author obtained permission from the participants to reflect on what she wrote down, to ensure that it was their direct words. This strategy made the participants aware of the value of their input and the importance of their thoughts and feelings which they shared during the interviews.

Quantitative data analysis was conducted by using Microsoft Excel to obtain descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were obtained by means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). It serves to be noted that only 94 of the 96 research participants’ data were included in the SPSS tests, as one participant did not complete the own victim empathy questionnaire due to the fact that he petitioned his innocence and said that he had no sexual interaction with the victim. The other participant whose data was excluded

only completed half of the questions in the own victim empathy section. Due to the fact that he murdered his victim, he could not comment on questions pertaining to the aftermath of the event and the victim's experience thereof. Their responses were, however, included in the biographical analyses of the quantitative section as well as in the qualitative section.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test on SPSS indicated that a normal distribution was not attained. This, as well as the fact that a non-probability sampling technique was used in this study, necessitated the use of a non-parametric test. The Wilcoxon signed rank test was used to compare the two sets of scores (general sexual abuse victim empathy and own victim empathy).

Thematic analysis was used to identify and analyse patterns in the data derived from the large data set of qualitative interviews and to identify categories and sub-categories (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017).

Consequently the quantitative data was integrated and contrasted with the qualitative data to obtain a holistic understanding of the prevalence of victim empathy in young sex offenders.

Ethical considerations such as written informed assent and consent, as well as confidentiality were employed. Ethical clearance to conduct the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria as well as the South African Department of Correctional Services' Research Ethics Committee.

Results

Demographics

The majority of the participants were older than 18 years (92.71%) and only 7.29% were 17 years old at the time of the interviews. It is worth mentioning that 59.38% of the participants were younger than 18 years old when they committed the sexual offence.

The majority of the participants (93.75%) identified their race as Black¹, 5.21% of the participants identified themselves as Coloured² and 1.04% of the sample was White³.

The majority of the victims that were targeted by the participants were female (93,75%), while 4.17% were male and 2.08% of the offenders indicated that they offended against both a male and a female victim.

The majority (60.43%) of the victims were older than 18 years, 26.04% were between the ages of 14-17 years, 8.33% were between the ages of 11-13 years, 2.08% were between the ages of 7-10 years and 1.04% was younger than 7 years. Two (2.08%) of the participants refused to reveal the age of their victims. Thus, in 60.43% of the cases the young sex offenders targeted adults or peers in the 18-25 years age bracket. Furthermore, 34.37% of the victims were between the ages of 11-17 years. Considering that 59.38% of the participants indicated that they were younger than 18 years when they committed the offence, victims between the ages of 11-17 years can be viewed as their peers. According to Van Vugt, Hendriks, Stamsa , Van Extera , Bijleveld , Van der Laan and Asscher (2011), a young sex offender is classified as a child abuser if the victim is at least five years younger and or pre-pubertal. A young sex offender is categorised as a peer abuser if there is less than five years age difference between the offender and the victim, or when the offender is younger than the victim. Thus, in approximately 94.8% of the cases the young sex offenders in this study victimised adults or peers. Only three (3.12%) of the young sex offenders targeted victims who were younger than 10 years.

According to the participants, the majority of the victims (35.41%) were strangers, 20.83% were acquaintances, 19.79% resided in the same neighbourhood as the offender, 10.42% were friends, 5.21% went to school with them, 5.21% were their girlfriends with whom they were in a relationship and 3.13% were a family member.

¹ Black African individuals comprise 80.2% of the South African population (South Africa Demographics Profile, 2018) and 79.6% of the general prison population (Africa Check, 2017).

² Coloured is a concept used in South Africa, including on the national census, for persons of mixed race ancestry. Coloured individuals comprise 8.8% of the South African population (South Africa Demographics Profile, 2018) and 18.2% of the general prison population (Africa Check, 2017).

³ White individuals comprise 8.4% of the South African population (South Africa Demographics Profile, 2018) and 1.6% of the general prison population (Africa Check, 2017).

Quantitative results

It was found that the young sex offenders in this study had significantly less victim empathy for their own victim than for a general sexual abuse victim. On average their own victim empathy score was 89.17 out of 120⁴ ($SD = 20.01$) and their general sexual abuse victim empathy score was 100.84 out of 120 ($SD = 12.26$). Thus, a significant difference existed between own victim empathy levels and general sexual abuse victim empathy levels in young sex offenders who participated in this study ($z = -4.99, p < .05$) with a large effect size as interpreted with Cohen's criteria ($r = -0.51$).

Qualitative results

After the transcription of the interviews, the data derived from the interviews were sorted into themes and sub-themes. Theme 2 (Own victim empathy) will be discussed in this article. Subsequently the offenders' consideration of the impact of the offense on the victim prior to (Sub-theme 2.1), during (Sub-theme 2.2) and after the victimisation will be discussed (Sub-theme 2.3). This will be followed by an overview of their current thoughts pertaining to their victims (Sub-theme 2.4).

Verbatim extracts from the interviews, and where relevant links to the quantitative results of the own victim empathy section of the VEDS, will be presented next.

Offenders' consideration of the impact of the offense on the victim prior to victimisation.

Most of the participants stated that they did not think about the impact of the offence on the victims prior to the victimisation. This can possibly be attributed to factors such as being under the influence of substances, feeling a sense of entitlement, or a lack of social skills as illustrated in the following quotes.

- RP78: "Just thought I must get. I was totally out of myself, it wasn't me. I only took brandy, cigarettes and dagga."
- RP43: "I thought the girl is in love with me. I thought the girl is boring and now I must threaten her so that she can kiss me. I always have a knife. I

⁴ 120 is the perfect score (30 questions x the maximum score of 4 for each question) and would refer to the absence of empathy deficits.

don't know if I would kill her. Maybe. Maybe just beat and beat and leave her."

RP43 scored 96.6% for the own victim empathy section of the VEDS. Thus, it appeared that he had high levels of empathy towards his own victim. His responses in the interview, however, contradicted his quantitative result. This might indicate that some of the participants were not truthful when completing the VEDS and provided answers that they deemed to be socially accepted instead of what they were really feeling.

Offenders' consideration of the impact of the offense on the victim during victimisation.

Many of the participants also did not think about the impact of the offense on the victim while they were committing the sexual offense. In some instances they admitted that in hindsight there were certain signs indicating that the victim was not a willing participant, but this was only acknowledged at a much later stage.

- RP23: "The girl was good to me, she looked fine. In my friend's house they use candles, so I can't see her face. She didn't say anything. She was just quiet. I was too drunk, not thinking."
- RP53: "I wasn't thinking nothing, because I was enjoying the party. The girls didn't scream or cry. They were scared. They said just rape us and leave us, don't kill us. It didn't make me feel bad."

RP53's response indicates empathy deficits and are in stark contrast to the 94% that he achieved in the VEDS.

A number of the participants indicated that they felt empathy for the victim while committing the offence. In some instances this led to them not proceeding with the offence and in other instances they completed the sexual act despite their feelings, due to an inability to delay the gratification of their sexual urges.

- RP18: "While raping her, the chick was crying a lot. I touched the chick's breast when it was my turn. While I was touching her I had a guilty conscience. I couldn't get an erection. My other friend took his chance. I thought what if I got caught and go to prison for something that I didn't do, so I raped her as well. I wasn't thinking about the guilt while busy. I just wanted more and more."
- RP42: "While I was busy it came in mind that I was doing wrong and I didn't finish. I just left."

Some of them claimed that it was a choice to commit the crime and that they felt no empathy for the victim before or during the offence.

- RP27: “While busy she cried a lot. I didn’t feel anything; I told her she had to enjoy it...”

RP27’s VEDS score of 80% does not resonate with the empathy deficits displayed during the interview.

A few of the participants indicated that they were under the impression that the complainant was a willing participant and in some instances they indicated that they were in a relationship with the complainant prior to the charges being laid.

- RP39: “She very much wanted to have sex, I don’t make her. If she don’t want to have sex she can’t be woman on top, she was totally in control, not first time making sex with me. Me, I told her Friday come to my house we will have sex. She come. She must like. Our love is not secret. People know F and L love each other. My mother know as well...”

RP39 had a score of 37.5% for the VEDS. On face value, that seems like a clear indication of major empathy deficits. If, his version of the incident as portrayed above is, however true, it places his quantitative results in a different light. One can expect a lack of empathy for a person whom you view to be a willing participant and not a victim.

Offenders’ consideration of the impact of the offense on the victim after victimisation occurred.

In many instances, the participants conceded that after the victimisation occurred, they were afraid of the consequences. This means that they thought about the possibility of incarceration, or their reputation that might be ruined, and did not necessarily contemplate the impact of the offense on the victim. Some of these responses follows:

- RP5: “I walked with her to prevent her from screaming or attracting others’ attention. I went home, drank coffee and realised that what I did was wrong. I thought that I might go to prison.”

RP5’s empathy score of 94% is not in line with his empathy prior, during and after the offence was committed.

- RP13: “Afterwards she was upset. When I accompanied her she didn’t want to talk to me. When we get to her house I told her I’ll see her later. When I went back home I thought I was cool. I was shocked when her brother beat

me, I didn't expect it. After he left I was afraid, because they told me they were going to the cops. When they arrest me I regretted what I did. She told me to stop and I forced myself into her. I regretted it because I went to prison."

A number of the participants reported feeling no empathy for the victim directly after the offense.

- RP15: "The next morning when I woke in the park I was scared and alert to run away. I didn't think about the girl. I thought I was good, it wasn't wrong, she deserved it. I knew it was bad but I ignored it. I didn't want to feel guilty."

Other participants reported that they only started to think about the impact on the victim after some time had elapsed.

- RP41: "The next morning I was thinking what I did was wrong, when I was sober... I was thinking that the girl was angry and now we are her enemies and she will never forgive us for the things we did to her."
- RP84: "Afterwards I was happy, I got what I want. In police cell I was blaming myself for everything I done because I'm going to jail. I was thinking about woman because I make her to live with pain."

RP84's VEDS score was 88% indicating high levels of post-offence empathy for his own victim.

One participant explained that directly after the rape and murder, he wanted to undo his actions.

- RP56: "After I killed her, I just went out. I told the neighbour that the child in the house, something happened to her. I couldn't tell her what I did. She came over and saw I raped the girl. I didn't cover it up. At that stage I was thinking maybe the women could wake the child up or do something, but she was gone."

RP56 could not complete the own victim empathy section of the VEDS, as he could not answer questions pertaining to the current feelings of the victim, due to the fact that he killed her.

Offenders' current feelings pertaining to the victim

Various participants indicated that they felt sorry for their victims and some even expressed the wish to ask their victims for forgiveness. A selection of such responses will follow:

- RP5: "I think I traumatised the girl a lot. If I could change anything I would change everything. I would like to see her again. I will try to explain that I was

still young, didn't think straight and didn't mean to hurt her. Some people don't plan it, it just happens. It would have made a difference in my life if I knew what the consequences are for a victim. When I was arrested I realised that I could go to prison for a long time. I have a sister and mother and thought what if it was them, but I only thought about that later. I knew it but in the moment I didn't think about it."

It must be noted that this participant obtained a score of 94% for the VEDS, indicating a high level of post-offence empathy towards his own victim.

- RP28: "Now I'm feeling okay, that I'm serving time for what I did. I feel that this is the right thing that should have happened. I want to go outside and carry on with my life. Right now I 'm just feeling sorry for her."

It should be noted that this participant scored 93% for the VEDS.

The offenders who indicated that the complainants in their cases were willing participants expressed their current thoughts pertaining to their victims as follows:

- RP68: "I feel bad, I'm angry. I buy beers and we talk and she says it's fine and then she goes to the cops."

It should be noted that RP68 scored 63% for the VEDS, which is below average when compared to the scores of the other participants.

- RP83: "Sometimes I think about her, but then I just remove it from my mind. She was in court but she didn't look at me. She told lies, she was scared. Sometimes I'm angry at her, but then life goes on, I can't stay angry forever."

It should be noted that RP83's score for the general sexual abuse victim empathy section of the VEDS was 96%, whereas his own victim empathy score was 26%.

Some participants were still angry about the fact that their victims brought charges against them, while others remained concerned about their reputations which had been tainted.

- RP14: "I can bully the girl, angry with the girl. When I'm outside I can't control my anger. The girl ruined my life."

RP14 obtained a below average score of 72.5% for the own victim empathy section of the VEDS.

- RP20: “I feel sorry for him, sometimes angry. Why did he do it? I feel sorry; when I told him to stop crying he cried worse. Maybe people from outside, like my parents won’t trust me anymore.”

RP20’s score of 80% was above the average score of the other participants.

Some of the participants were self-absorbed, complacent or dismissive by indicating that currently they do not think about the victim at all. Other indicated that they wished that they could forget about the ordeal and move on with their lives.

- RP64: “Sometimes I think about her, but years passed by. I also wanted to make that thing where you apologise. Sometimes I think about myself. She is hurt, she can forget. Me, I can’t. Each day I wake up and see this place. Freedomless.”

RP64’s score was 55%. This correlates with the empathy deficits displayed in his responses during the interview.

- RP71: “To be honest, I’m not really thinking of her. Anger and revenge had always been my motivation. Now I want the past to fade in the past along with its people and move on with my life.”

RP71’s score was 50%, which also resonates with the lack of empathy for his victim displayed during the interview.

Discussion

In the current study some participants were unable to recognise that their victims were distressed and did not consent to the sexual act. According to Blake and Gannon (2008), sex offenders experience difficulties in identifying emotional states such as fear, disgust and anger in photographs shown to them. This is problematic, as these are the emotions that would most likely be displayed by victims during a sexual attack. Being under the influence of a substance can compound the situation as it has an influence on the individual’s inhibitions, judgment and cognitive processing of the situation rendering them prone to behaviour that would not otherwise be exhibited (Bartol & Bartol, 2014; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014). 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).

Some of the participants felt empathy for the victim during the committing of the offense, but continued with the act due to certain factors such as peer pressure, or because they gave in to their sexual urges and acted without thinking of future consequences. This

is congruent with literature stating that, a peer group can initiate or reinforce existing criminal or disruptive behaviour (Harris, 2008). In other instances, some of the participants could not continue with the offense because they feared the consequences of their actions.

Some of the participants indicated that they thought that the victim was a willing participant, or that they were dating. In these instances, the participants denoted that the victims did not resist and did not voice their dissatisfaction, hence they were unaware of the fact that the victims did not want to have sexual intercourse. Some of them claimed that the complainant initiated the sexual act, or that they had sex before and therefore they were of the opinion that it was consensual. In these instances one cannot merely infer that these participants lack empathy towards the victims, as their narrations pertaining to the incidents raise questions pertaining to the legitimacy of the victimisation.

A few of the participants indicated that they did not commit the offence that they were found guilty of. It serves to be noted that whilst exploring one of these participants' current thoughts and feelings pertaining to his own victim, he stated that he was aware of the fact that the girl was raped by a family member and that instead of shaming the family member, they placed the blame on him. Furthermore, he stated that he is not angry with the victim, but instead, he feels sorry for her because the real perpetrator is still at large and can victimise her repeatedly and with impunity. This altruistic response indicates that the participant displays empathy towards the plight of the victim.

Some of the participants indicated that they started to realise what they did and began thinking about the victim once they became sober, or when they were arrested. Some were only concerned about their own fate at that stage and feared incarceration. Some of the participants declared that they still felt no empathy for their victims and thought that they deserved it, or dismissed the victim by saying that they did not hurt or kill them. A few offenders viewed themselves as the victims and were angry that the charges were brought against them. Yet, other participants revealed feeling intense remorse and wishing they could reverse their deeds or apologise to the victim.

The author made a few general observations during the interviews. In some of the instances various contradictions were found when comparing the participants' answers in the own victim empathy section of the VEDS with the answers that they provided during the interviews. For instance, in the VEDS some of them indicated that the victim felt unsafe and some acknowledged that she was harmed in the long term. However, during the interview, they said that the victim in their case initiated the act. Thus, it is unclear

why she would feel unsafe and why she would be harmed in the long term if she did in fact initiate the offence. In other instances the interviews elucidated the answers provided by the participants in the VEDS. Previous studies focusing on empathy deficits in young sex offenders only utilised quantitative measuring instruments. The author views the fact that the current study included a qualitative component as an advantage. As a researcher one is aware of the possibility that participants will provide socially acceptable answers and will not necessarily be truthful when completing a questionnaire. The strength of the current study lies in the fact that the author was able to get detailed accounts of the thoughts and feelings of the offenders prior to, during and after the offence. Even though these thoughts are post-offence, great care was taken to try and take the offender back to the incident and to find out what they were thinking and why they were acting the way that they did.

Limitations of the study

The fact that the research was conducted by a White female and the majority of participants were Black males could be viewed as a limitation. The author, was however, cognisant of her positionality as a White female, interviewing male participants, who in the majority of the cases were from a different culture than herself. In addition, the topic that was investigated was of a sensitive nature. The author remained mindful about the influence of her positionality throughout the research process and was upfront in communicating this with the participants (Bourke, 2014). Upon reflecting on the research process, the author realised that her positionality was not a limitation and that the participants openly shared their thoughts and feelings.

Another limitation includes the fact that the case study used in the VEDS was a generic case study that was not adapted to fit each offenders' victim age and gender preference. It was not possible to access the participants' case files prior to conducting the interviews, hence the use of the generic case study was the only option.

Conclusion

Understanding the thoughts and the feelings of young sex offenders prior to, during, as well as after their offences, may be a desirable point of departure to understand the reasons why empathy deficits were present. In the quantitative section of the study, it was found that that research participants displayed significantly less empathy towards their own victims when compared to the empathy displayed towards a general sexual abuse victim in a case study. This implies that if treatment programmes have an empathy

component, the focus should be on own victim empathy, as that is where the most significant deficits are portrayed.

In the qualitative section of this study, the divergent responses that were given by the research participants is a clear indication of the heterogeneous nature of youth sex offending. Youth sex offenders differ in terms of aspects such as their race, the type of victims they target, methods they use to gain compliance, the amount of violence they are willing to use, as well as their motivation for committing the offenses (Lussier, 2017; Rich, 2012). This highlights the complexity of the phenomenon of youth sex offending and underscores Bartol and Bartol's (2014) opinion that there is no single profile that encompasses even a majority of sex offenders. Thus, it follows that if youth sex offenders differ concerning all of the above mentioned, surely the way in which they view their victims, as well as the way in which they display empathy, if they display it, will vary as well.

It serves to be noted that it is difficult to genuinely determine the level of sincerity of those who indicated remorse and admitted to their wrongdoing. It is, however, worrisome to know that a number of youth sex offenders justify their behaviour and that others are morally and cognitively removed from the sexual crimes which they committed. Additionally, their ignorance pertaining to the impact of their offenses on their victims, as well as the lack of understanding regarding the long-term damage of their actions, are causes for concern.

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