The Application of Psychoanalytic Complexity Theory to the Protection of Children from Known Sexual Offenders

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Abstract:

Most explanations of child sexual abuse perpetration have been premised on assumptions of the individualist/monological paradigm. Child abuse prevention programs, including treatment for sexual offenders, are also based on monological assumptions. Drawing from the case-study of a Catholic Priest who has sexually abused many children, this paper argues that Psychoanalytic Complexity Theory (PCT) offers a high-definition lens through which the phenomenon of child sexual abuse perpetration can be examined, understood, and responded to. PCT praxis arguably builds the protective factors of known offenders, as well as the community in general, and reduces the risk of reoffending. PCT is consistent with more humane and better informed societal values about the human rights, dignity and worth of each unique person – regardless of whether they are the child-victim, perpetrator, guardian or bystander. As such, PCT promotes individual and social change that has application to all systems and systems-within-systems.
Introduction

Research and theorising about child sexual abuse phenomena has expanded rapidly since Sigmund Freud’s earliest propositions over a century ago (1896a, 1896b; 1896c, p. 147). As part of the women’s rights movement of the 1960s and 70s, many women began to share their personal histories of sexual abuse when children, thereby posing a major challenge to previously held beliefs that denied or minimised the existence of the phenomenon (Sgroi, Canfield Blick, & Sarnacki Porter, 1982). In the decades that followed, empirical research exposed the extent of child sexual abuse in our communities and identified its deleterious impact on victims and their families across the world (e.g. Finkelhor, 1982, 1983, 1986, 1994) – the effects of which are sometimes life-long (Davies & Frawley, 1994). With that task largely completed, the focus of researchers has broadened to examine sexual offenders and their modus operandi in order to better predict the risk of recidivism (reoffending) and to reduce the prevalence of abuse in the community.

A paradigm shift in science (Kuhn, 1962/1970) has been in progress over the last 30 years. The universe is no longer seen as a machine composed of elementary building blocks. A new science of ‘qualities’ is emerging with discoveries about “the material world, ultimately, [being made up of] a network of inseparable patterns of relationships; that the planet as a whole is a living, self-regulating system… with the new emphasis on complexity, networks, and patterns of organisation,” (Capra & Luisi, 2014, p. xi). This fundamental change in world view is yet to dawn on the fields of forensic psychology or criminology. Studies about the perpetration of child sexual abuse have almost exclusively focused on the intrapsychic forces that are assumed to
drive the offender’s deviant behaviour (Richard Wortley & Stephen Smallbone, 2006). That is not to suggest that the achievements, thus far, have failed to advance our knowledge and our capacity to protect children. Empirical research has developed ideas about how (at least some) sexual offenders think and behave, and this has helped to develop partially successful strategies to prevent abuse.

Under the microscope of reductionist methodology in the behavioural sciences, society’s tendency to see sexual offenders as ‘things’ that are different to ‘us’ has been perpetuated and exacerbated. This, of course, lends itself to binary thinking and relating – of us-them, good-bad, saved-damned, winner-loser – that alienate and further compromise the well-being of the person designated as ‘other’ (Sperry, 2013). In so doing, I argue that attempts to protect children from sexual abuse have been compromised. According to the systems view of life, we cannot understand the sexual offender without considering the system(s) within which he offends.

While the ultimate responsibility for harm caused by the sexual offender rests with the offender, societies have increasingly accepted responsibility to reduce the risk of harm potential such offenders pose to children. Article 25.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) proclaims that children are entitled to special care, assistance, and protection. Article 3 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) specifically asserts that, amongst other rights, each child has the right to protection from abuse, and that legislative and administrative measures must be taken to ensure that the “rights and duties” of parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for the child are respected and supported. Article 3 also requires
signatories to ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care of children are child-safe.

Child abuse prevention programs are designed to increase protective factors (attributes that build resilience and thwart episodes of abuse) and reduce risk factors (attributes that increase the likelihood of abuse episodes) within the community. Child abuse prevention is comprised of three levels of intervention that focus either on adults (such as caregivers and professionals) or children (Breckenridge, 1992). Primary prevention involves the general community and attempts to influence community attitudes, values and beliefs which impact upon children’s safety. Community education programs that challenge the use of sexualized images of children in advertising is one example of primary prevention (Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Quayle, 2006). Secondary prevention strategies target pre-defined vulnerable groups in society with the aim of reducing vulnerability to child abuse – such as children with physical or developmental disabilities, those who are isolated, who live in institutions, or who have been previously abused or neglected. Tertiary protective interventions focus on identified cases of child abuse (victims, their families, and perpetrators) with the aim of minimizing the harmful effects of abuse that has occurred and to prevent its recurrence. Sexual offender treatment programs are tertiary crime prevention initiatives that aim to stop known sexual offenders from locating, grooming and abusing more children.

The reported findings of international studies into recidivism (reoffending) rates of untreated sexual offenders vary dramatically – from 3% to 70% being reported (Lievore, 2004). A British study, that has been replicated consistently, found that 18%
of treated offenders with two or more previous convictions for sexual offences were reconvicted, compared to 43% of untreated offenders (Marshall, 1997). Thus, there is strong evidence that treatment programs that target known offenders are an extremely effective form of tertiary abuse prevention that more than halve the likelihood of offenders being caught for sexually abusing at a later date.

Baltieri and de Andrad (2008) identify nine sexual offender treatment models that have developed over recent decades – the psychoanalytic model being one of them. Others include the bio-medical treatment model, the central treatment model (a multi-disciplinary approach that includes clinical, residential, educational program components), the cognitive-behavioural treatment model, the family systems treatment model, the psycho-socio educational treatment model, the sexual trauma treatment model, the relapse prevention treatment model, and the sexual addiction treatment model (which is based on the 12-Step program). Of these, the cognitive-behavioural and the relapse prevention treatment models are currently the most common, having earned the reputation as “the treatments of choice” (Laws, Hudson, & Ward, 2000, p. 5).

Despite evidence that supports the efficacy of psychoanalytic treatment in general (Shedler, 2010), examples of psychoanalytic treatment programs for sexual offenders have been published only rarely. Eccleston and Ward assert that “most therapists today acknowledge that psychodynamic approaches, which focus on helping child molesters gain insight into the causal mechanisms of their antisocial behaviours, are ineffective” (2006, p. 224). Few forensic articles or texts mention psychoanalysis at all, let alone do so in a way that reference the radical and diverse developments that
have occurred since the time of Freud’s theorising (Mitchell & Black, 1996). Yet, some programs, such as Atascadero State Hospital in California (the first custodial treatment program for sexual offenders), and Encompass Australasia, funded by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (1997-2008), have integrated psychoanalytic theory and practice into their ‘evidence based’ programs of treatment. In programs such as these, “the primary emphasis is on client understanding of the psychodynamics of sexual offending… using psychodynamic principles” (Baltieri & de Andrad, 2008, p. 143).

I argue in this paper that contemporary psychoanalysis has a great deal more to contribute to understanding the phenomena of child sexual abuse and the treatment of sexual offenders than is currently acknowledged. Due to space limitation, my argument that ‘contemporary psychoanalysis has much to contribute to the moment-by-moment relational treatment of sexual offenders, resulting not only in a reduction in recidivism risk, but in the deep, holistic growth within the person’ (Webster, 2015), must be left for another time. This paper is focused on how one contemporary psychoanalytic theory, Psychoanalytic Complexity Theory (PCT), challenges the more conservative philosophical premises of sexual offender treatment and other abuse prevention initiatives in order to recognise the intersubjective and systems dimensionality of sexual offending, and their implications for abuse prevention. PCT promotes attitudes that foster social and personal change over social and individual control; and, if embraced, strengthens the protective aspects of the community. Further, PCT supports a Human Rights-Centred approach to the treatment of sexual offenders, which, in itself, results in a safer society.
The treatment of child sexual offenders

Modern developmental psychology holds that adult behaviour, in general, is influenced or largely caused by events that take place during the earlier years of life. Poor learning (Dollard & Miller, 1950; Skinner, 1938), irrational beliefs (Ellis, 1962), poor decision making (Williamson & Darley, 1937), and unresolved intra-psychic conflict resulting from traumatic events (Freud, 1896a) have been, and continue to be, commonly proposed as causes of aberrant behaviour. Causal explanations of sexual offending against children, founded upon empirical research, are based typically on the argument that the abuse occurs because the abuser: (1) is physically and psychologically rewarded by the behaviour (Ryan, Leverage, & Lane, 2011); (2) is deluded by cognitive distortions that support deviant behaviour (Fernandez, Anderson, Marshall, & Perry, 2011); (3) is vulnerable to impulsivity due to poor self-regulation (Yates & Kingston, 2011); and/or (4) is a survivor of extreme physical abuse or exposure to domestic violence during childhood (Hart et al., 2003).

Each of these explanations of sexual offending is Individualist and falls within the monologic paradigm (Taylor, 1989) that conceptualises the individual as primarily the subject of internal representations – thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, motives, emotions, and intra-psychic conflict, etc. Individualism is a monological view that considers each person a single, unique entity in a world of other ‘individuals’. Each is necessarily individuated from the other, always different and separate from others, and (ideally) is self-reliant and autonomous. Since other individuals are identified as objects outside and separate from the subject (individual), any contact he or she has with others is predicated upon the representations he or she has within. These interior,
cognitive processes, commonly referred to as the person’s mind – founded upon René Descartes’ philosophical proposition, “Cogito ergo sum” (1644/2009) – are the stuff within which meanings are shaped.

Most psychological approaches and psychotherapeutic endeavours are committed to the monologic assumption that individuals possess the capacity both to know the world and to act adaptively within it (McNamee & Gergen, 1995). When behaviour falls outside of cultural norms, it is the individual’s internal representations that are questioned, determined to be pathological and, ultimately, become the focus of ‘correction’. So when, for example, a man has been found to sexually abuse and is ordered to undertake treatment – noting that more than 95% of sexual offenders are male (Bagley, 1995) – he is most likely to be required to: (1) become acquainted with, and modify the distorted beliefs and deviant attitudes that support his sexual offending behaviour (Fernandez et al., 2011); and (2) learn about his “situational precipitators” (Wortley, 2001) or “triggers” (Steen, 2001) for offending. The offender is then required to set about implementing newly learned strategies to prevent relapse (Anechiarico, 2011).

Within the monological paradigm, the individual’s sense of agency is conceptualised as both shaping and being shaped by his environment, but the individual remains autonomous in relation to it. This supports the assumption that offenders have moral agency – the ability to make moral judgments based on some commonly held notion of right and wrong, and to be held accountable for these actions (Angus, 2003). The monological paradigm attributes the cause and the responsibility for the sexual offender’s behaviour entirely with, and within, him. The Cartesian divide between
internal and external, individual and environment, supports community attitudes that
render transgressors of societal rules to be ‘other’ (Sperry, 2013). The sexual offender
is ‘other’ to those in society who have not sexually abused. Each one personifies, and
is often named as the single cause of this problem in society. Hence, the sexual offender
is, effectively, on his own when it comes to the attribution of blame (explanation) and
to controlling his future action (agency).

The Case of a Clerical Sexual Offender

Fr Paul fits one profile of the sexual offender predicated on monological theories,
particularly one who has abused within the Catholic Church community (John Jay
College of Criminal Justice, 2004). As a child, Paul was exposed to domestic violence
that was extreme at times. While he loved both parents, his alcoholic father was a source
of shame for the family. Although Paul was highly intelligent and did well at school,
he had few friends, and none that were close. He was sexually abused from the ages of
8 to 12 by an older child. These sexual interactions were initially aggressive (forced),
but Paul came to value his relationship with the abuser, ostensibly as one less
characterised by domination and submission (Benjamin, 2003).

Paul felt empty for much of his life and, as his religious faith was most meaningful
to him, he entered a religious community and was later ordained a Catholic priest. He
was appointed to teach in a residential high school, having completed appropriate
qualifications in education. Paul was assigned a punishing work schedule – including
teaching a full load, caring for large numbers of children as dorm-master, having
responsibility for extracurricular activities, and carrying additional responsibilities
within the local parish. Amongst his peers, he felt empty and lost. However, he felt
excited when in the company of boys and became increasingly attracted to their liveliness. Paul felt like a child when with them, and his feelings of aloneness were eased.

When Paul was first interviewed by police, he volunteered information about every sexual offence he could remember committing. His victims, in excess of 30 boys ranging in age from 6 to 16, had been either pupils at the boarding school where he taught, or alter-boys who had assisted him during Mass. Paul acknowledged that he had felt excited when his victims physically responded to sexual stimulation as it confirmed his perception that they were enjoying the experience as much as he was, and as much as he had come to experience it when he himself was being abused as a child. Paul served 15 years of imprisonment for his crimes.

After Paul’s release from prison, he self-referred to me for psychological treatment. Prior to his release and to meeting me, however, Paul undertook a 12 month intensive custodial sex offender treatment programme that was in line with international best practice standards. This involved educational classes and the group discussion of exercises designed to assist participants in preventing relapse upon release. Behavioural techniques were aimed to reduce Paul’s arousal and cognitive techniques aimed to improve his social skills. Despite some of his misgivings and the mismatch with some aspects of the manualised group program, Paul learned about how his thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions raised his risk of sexual offending in a multitude of situations.

Paul was able to identify his offence pathway – a linear mapping of the cyclic movement from non-offending to offending behaviour. His modus operandi began with
him feeling lonely and frustrated when others were not meeting his expectations. This led him to experience a sense of powerlessness and rage that triggered self-isolating behaviour and rumination. He tended to rely upon poor coping strategies – such as social withdrawal and overworking. As his feelings intensified, Paul would become more focused on himself and his needs. He would then engage in masturbating to deviant sexual fantasies about children. Following the masturbation, he would take advantage of being alone with children with whom he had built a close relationship (groomed) by sexually abusing them. As a result of his newfound awareness of his *modus operandi*, Paul learned how to implement strategies that would interrupt the ‘offence chain’ that precipitated his sexual assaults upon children (Pithers, Beal, Armstrong, & Petty, 1989; Ward, Louden, Hudson, & Marshall, 1995). He also learned more effective and appropriate ways to meet his personal needs (Ward & Brown, 2004).

Clearly, Paul had benefited from the treatment he received in custody. However, at the time of his self-referral, he was still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder that resulted from the assaults and other inhumane behaviour he had sustained from both his fellow inmates and his corrections officers. While he appreciated the insights he gained from the program, Paul found it inadequate. He stated to me,

“I felt I always needed one-on-one counselling. The group thing is not good for me. It didn't work for me. Being in a rolling group, people using special words. Expectations that this or that would be in your relapse plan. It was too much like the Church. Too much expectation of what you should say. Everyone wanted a good report. There was no one-on-one, just group… I fully expected to get everything out of it and to give it my all. But there wasn't a freedom to say
everything. If what I said didn't fall into a category, they’d let you know. A psychologist in her 20s didn’t have 60 or 70 years of experience of life. They are too attached to what they learn in books. There’s not enough freedom to be real.”

**Sexual Offending and Intersubjectivity**

While the *individualist* model of the person has been dominant in psychology and Western philosophy, the ‘*social*’ interpretation of the human condition has been acquiring increased recognition within these disciplines. Philosophers, such as Buber, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Heidegger, and Gadamer, have challenged the monological paradigm and proposed alternate models that emphasise the socially and historically significant dimensions of human experience. Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, argues against individualism, stating: “Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live” (1995, p. 276). Roger Frie adds, “the notion that people are independent and self-determining entities impedes our understanding of the sociocultural contexts of human experience” (2011, p. 4). These social dimensions are referred to in the literature as the *social, dialogical, conversational, hermeneutic* and/or *interpretive* paradigm, and they have been increasingly embraced by all contemporary schools of psychoanalysis.

Unlike monological explanations, the dialogical/interpretative paradigm holds that the subject (the person) can never be defined in terms of individual properties. Rather than seen as separate from the environment, people are defined in terms of their location within social action and relational matrices. Human experience is, thereby,
‘intersubjective’. Each person “is born into and emerges within cultural contexts of shared beliefs, values, rules, and practices. Our cultural contexts determine the language we use to describe ourselves and affect how we exist in the world” (Frie, 2011, p. 3). The dialogical paradigm supports perspectival approaches, holding that the manner in which phenomena is experienced and responded to by a person is determined by the understanding she or he has of that experience. A person’s behaviour is understood to be socially constructed and/or embedded in social interaction rather than, as the monologic paradigm would hold, an interior, cognitive process where individuals are simply influenced by past experience and current circumstances.

The “sociocultural turn in contemporary psychoanalytic theory and practice” (Frie, 2014, p. 371) has radically overturned monological assumptions and has “reconceptualised our ideas about personal autonomy, agency, authorship, ownership, and even free will” (Coburn, 2014a, p. 4). Rather than focussing on one root of maladaptive behaviour, such as biological predispositions, environmental causes, or motivational states in a defective ‘mind’, a fuller understanding of a person’s action, such as the sexual abuse of a child, is found when such behaviour is considered an emergent property of the person’s unique, past and present relational experience, where meanings become manifest in the specific socio-cultural-historical context. Here, then, the individuality of the person is not lost, but is recognised as unique and ever changing in relation to (as opposed to in reaction to) current experience.

Coburn (2007, 2014b) argues that all emotional experience, including our set of underlying organizing themes (Stolorow, Atwood, & Brandchaft, 1994), is inextricably embedded in a larger context, of which each of us is but a part. Concordant with the
dialogic paradigm, Coburn (Coburn, 2007, 2009) rejects the adoption of reified, objective truths and realities that portray emotional experience and meaning as rule-driven, static, and hard-wired, as had been proposed in early psychoanalytic theory. Since emotional experience is dynamic and embedded in the context of multiple systems (thereby bringing psychoanalysis into line with the paradigm shift of science to a systems view, described above), causal claims cannot be demarcated and can never be clearly drawn. The individual is never on his own.

Embracing the work of Thelen and Smith (1994) and Thelen (2005), Coburn elucidates Psychoanalytic Complexity Theory (PCT) as one of the more radical of dialogical theories. Coburn argues that complexity theory provides “a rich, explanatory framework with which to investigate and understand experiential worlds and their corresponding meanings” (2009, p. 184), emphasising context-dependency, context-sensitivity, and historicity. PCT understands emotional experience and meaning as “emergent and patterned (or "soft-assembled") through the cooperation of all of the constituents of a relational system, past, present, and imagined future” (Coburn, 2009, p. 184).

The rigour and appeal of PCT in expanding the “horizons of understanding” human phenomena (Gadamer, 1995) are truly impressive, and its radical nature is perhaps no more apparent than when applied to child sexual offenders. Through an intersubjective, PCT lens, sexual offending is understood in its complexity – that is, as an emergent property of a limitless multitude of systems and subsystems. The actual behaviour perpetrated by an individual is understood as a patterned emotional experience that emerges and self-organizes in specific contexts, and with the cooperation, of many parts. The system of behaviour called “sexual offending” arises
from not only the cognitive-affective-physiological subsystems that may be thought of as self-states in the individual (such as when Paul feels vitalized and aroused by the children he befriended), but also as systems made up of the embodied relational matrix (which may involve the subjectivity of the child, his or her parents, Paul’s colleagues and fellow priests, and other members of his community) as well as the wider social, historical and cultural systems. Changes in the pattern of sexual offending behaviour are seen not as having been triggered by an external event, but rather as an emergent property of a non-offending system that has been perturbed.

A system is considered complex when it is open to the surround, when a large number of elements are present and interact in a dynamic fashion, and when the transference of information from one system constituent to another is ongoing. The individual can be viewed as a system in himself, so that the complex system that we call ‘Paul’ can organise itself in such a way that the preconditions for sexual abuse emerge, and sometimes they do not. One might speculate that some of the infinite number of elements that are expressed in the act of Paul sexually abusing a child on a particular day include his organising principles, his exhausted body, his angry and lonely affect state, his crisis in intimacy, the medication he has taken, questions about celibacy, an angry word from a superior, missing out on his much needed workout, the smell of children in the classroom, and a smile from a child. On another day, these qualities may be present, but would not result in an offence. Monological explanations that are limited to cognition and environmental triggers are, by comparison, poverty stricken.

By definition, each element of the system influences and is influenced by many others (i.e. the interactions are ‘rich’), and because interactions in a complex system are
also nonlinear, small changes can have large results, and the reverse. Paul found the 2000 hour cognitive-behavioural treatment program to be too intellectualised and experience-distant to be truly mutative. However, a single chance observation of a fellow prisoner tenderly interacting with his visiting child utterly shattered Paul’s delusion of equality/symmetry in his relationships with children and, along with it, any desire to abuse again. Paul has never re-offended after that parent-child system influenced his own.

Complex systems are ‘recurrent’ in that the effect of any activity can feed back onto itself either directly or after a number of intervening stages. Monological-behavioural explanations of offending limit attention to the feedback loop of sexual experience being reinforcing (the extreme sexual pleasure, or feeling powerful, etc.) which thereby increases the likelihood of repeating the behaviour. However, PCT recognises the limitless number of systems and subsystems that are implicated – in Paul’s case, the physiological, the conscious, the unconscious, the interpersonal, the social, and the environmental, to name the obvious. Each element in a complex system is ignorant of the behaviour of the system as a whole, responding only to information that is available to it locally. So, from Paul’s perspective, when he was sexually abusing all those children, we can speculate that he was not doing so as a priest, but as another child. His adult-clerical sub-system, amongst a multitude of other sub-systems, was not emergent at that time.

Paul found the analytic process far more transformative than he had the experience of psychological treatment premised on the monological paradigm. He recently stated,
“I can just come in here and open up about what matters most. I don't feel threatened. I don't feel shame. This is essential to life. I feel free, accepted. It’s okay to say what I feel. I don't feel expectation to say this word or that word. As I leave, things happen in my head. I don't know how it works. It's a miracle. It's more real. It's me. It's not a course. It's delving into the deepest part, making me accept the deepest pain of who I am and what I want to do…We all have to see how vulnerable we are and we all need help. But it has to be fair dinkum [authentic, true] help. Not implanting. Psychologists have to look at the whole person with their offenders or victims. Perpetrators have to go back and find out how they got there. The Church has to go back to the beginning as well. What was Christ about? You have to be fair dinkum. Go back to where it starts. The community as a whole has to have integrity, not doing what the media expects. It has got to be genuine. Communication and true listening are essential for everyone. Is there anything harder than really listening?”

As Paul begins to reflect on his experience with me, his mind goes first to the wider system of treatment providers, then to the Church, and then to the whole community. Over the years of his analysis, Paul has been able to expand his sense of truth and reality “by contextualizing and situating his experiences across broader historical and present-day contexts” (Coburn, 2009, p. 188).

Coburn argues that a psychoanalytic complexity sensibility “offers a detailed and powerful explanatory framework for hypothesizing about the emergence of emotional experience and the meaning-making process” (Coburn, 2009, p. 188). This framework is established by highlighting the influence of attitudes, and it distinguishes
three essential levels of discourse: (1) the phenomenological; (2) the interpretive; and (3) the metaphysical.

At the *phenomenological* level, Paul and I used sessions to become aware of how he felt himself to be in his body; in relationship with me and with others; and to being a monk, a priest, a member of the Church, an Australian, and a known perpetrator. Increasingly, he began to recognise these as self-states and as sub-systems within multiple systems, inextricably contextualised by the people and by the world around him. We came to recognise the patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that tended to play out in each of these states – whether a particular self-state/sub-system was ordered, predictable, familiar, or repetitive, or whether it seemed to act more randomly, unpredictably, or with varying degrees of stability.

Paul’s capacity for self-reflection, both when with me and when outside of sessions, brought a wide range of emotional experience into his awareness. He discovered how anxious, sad, and perplexed he could be at times leading up to, during, and after episodes of offending. Having dissociated much of his affect throughout his life, Paul’s greater self-awareness helped him to feel better about himself and to recognise his feelings from one moment or context to the next. Being closer to his affective experience, and feeling safe enough in the therapeutic relationship to notice the links between these and his behaviour, Paul could begin to build a greater understanding about how he came to form such a repetitive pattern of offending.

From the group treatment program he undertook prior to psychoanalysis, Paul learned many rules about the dynamics of his offending. These were based on the evidence of reductionist research that collapsed the unique experience of multiple individuals into a set of ordered claims. While Paul was able to make use of these
axioms to some extent, the unique, personal and emotional meanings of his sexual offending remained unformulated, leaving only emotional impressions – such as feeling vulnerable, like the children he abused.

At the *interpretive* level of discourse, Paul’s greater consciousness of his emotional states, and the patterns of behaviour that can, both predictably and unpredictably, emerge from them, helped him gain deeper insight into his *modus operandi* than had been possible previously. By staying close to the phenomenology of his affective experience, and by interpreting the patterns that became apparent to us, Paul and I were able to speculate about the organising principles, or themes, (Stolorow et al., 1994) that variously and context-dependently shaped his experiential world, and the meanings of those experiences. Paul has come to recognize a number of organising themes that relate to his offending under different circumstances. One example: “When I feel isolated and rejected by others, and a child shows me that he wants to be close, I get thrown into a highly sexualised state and can only see him as wanting sexual closeness as I do. From there, anything can happen, but it feels like the only choice is to act on those feelings. But I can walk away”.

Paul’s protective factors against offending have been increased by a strengthening of his non-offending sub-system/self-states, which have emerged in the context of our therapeutic relationship. His newly organised way of being in the world with me has opened a more child-safe sub-system that is now available to relationships with others. He is more “in touch” with himself, more “aware” of his multiple self-states, more drawn (consciously and unconsciously) to organise himself in child-safe ways, and more attuned to the likelihood that any given state can change at any time
without warning. He is therefore more prepared, and has more freedom to choose his actions, as a result of the analytic work we have undertaken.

**Uniqueness, Agency and Human Rights**

The third level of discourse addresses the *metaphysical, explanatory* assumptions, including the broad universal presuppositions (convictions about the way things work), that organize the contents and processes of the phenomenological and interpretive discourses. The metaphysical discourse is more likely to be concept and process oriented rather than organised by content. It both sets out and explains one's foundational and sometimes unconscious assumptions about how things work. Likewise, it specifies one's convictions about the underpinnings and origination of emotional experience and meaning. By privileging process over content, and thinking in terms of relationships, patterns, and context, PCT advances current theory and practice in relation to child sexual abuse, sexual offending, and abuse prevention, which tends to be content oriented. It does this by foregrounding the uniqueness of the offender and his place in the community.

Most researchers agree that sexual offending against children is a “multi-dimensional and multi-determined phenomenon” (Smallbone & Wortley, 2001, p. 1). Research has consistently found considerable variation in the ways sexual offences against children are perpetrated – e.g. the tactics employed to select and “groom” children; sexual and other behaviours involved in the commission of offences; and methods of avoiding detection. Variation is also found in the characteristics of the perpetrators themselves (e.g. age, ethnicity, education, psychosocial and psychosexual background, level of sexual interest in children, relationship with victims, general criminality). Smallbone and Wortley argue that causal explanations are similarly
varied, but “none enjoys the support of a strong empirical base” (2001, p. 1). While some may be disappointed by the failure of science to reduce the offender to ‘parts’ and ‘causal laws’, I consider it evidence of the uniqueness of the sexual offender as a person and, as PCT asserts, the unpredictable, but patterned, contextualised processes of offending.

The recognition of the offender’s uniqueness not only dignifies him as a person from a human rights perspective, but also provides a higher definition for recognising the risk of harm he poses. By entering into psychoanalytic treatment from a PCT perspective, Paul has expanded his capacity to recognise and engage with his emotional experience (bringing the unconscious in to consciousness), reflect on his complex patterns of acting in the moment, and respond to the potential manifestation of past, rigid patterns of offending in more open and child-safe ways – see Webster (accepted for publication); (Webster & Butcher, 2012) for the Three R’s of sexual abuse.

Speaking at the metaphysical/explanatory level of discourse, Coburn argues that there is no free will, individuality, or personal agency. However, at the level of experience, an individual may experience free will and personal agency (phenomenologically speaking) to varying degrees, noting this always remains context-dependent. Coburn argues in favour of the veracity of autonomous states or agency, and that, ultimately, the individual garners a sense of greater personal freedom by taking responsibility for where one finds oneself. However, he also holds that the constitution of these states is entirely systemically and contextually derived.

Coburn draws from Heidegger’s (1927) concept that human beings are ‘thrown’ into life circumstances that are largely not of their making, and that people often simply discover themselves in emotional and relational circumstances. While rejecting the
notion of fatedness, Coburn suggests that the individual’s ‘current situatedness’ should be owned, thereby inviting an awareness of what freedom, albeit finite, might be garnered from a situation. In this, he argues for the potential for future self-authorship and self-ownership (Coburn, 2014b). Coburn asserts that, “phenomenologically and interpretively, we must seize responsibility (i.e., this is my emotional life, this is how I find myself) for that which, explanatorily, was not of our making” (2009, p. 190). This is particularly important when considering the need for sexual offenders to own their behaviour, recognise their limitations, and do everything they can to avoid reoffending.

Given that the sexual offender’s behaviour is emergent from his personal relational experience and the socio-cultural history of his community, we too – as a local, national and global community – are accountable for our successes and failures in attending to the rights and needs of children to protection. Our collective and individual attitudes and actions create the context in which a sexual offender chooses to abuse. In effect, ‘we’ are with ‘him’ when he offends. We are more than bystanders; ‘we’ are co-creators of his emergent sexually abusive acts.

As suggested above, the monological paradigm perpetrates the myth that individuals are separate entities. Sexual offenders are, therefore, easily designated as ‘other’. PCT challenges this myth. The intricate flow of mutual influence, recognised by PCT, implies that every action by one is bound to have an impact on everyone – big or small, for better or for worse. I argue that the monological paradigm yields considerable counter-effective consequences or repercussions upon the communal aim of a child-safe society. The Individualist assumptions that have been increasingly embraced by Western societies over recent centuries has reduced and rigidified the community’s capacity to think about sexual offenders as one of ‘us’. The monological
dogma of autonomy results in offenders being socially alienated and physically isolated, separated from such personal supports as family, friendships, professional groups, or the wider community.

The tendency to shame and retaliate against sexual offenders for their crimes has been well documented (McAlinden, 2007). As a consequence of being caught for sexually abusing a child, sexual offenders are likely to lose some of their rights. The loss of the sexual offender’s right to freedom, in the extreme form of imprisonment, serves both as a punishment for the harm caused to individuals and society, as well as a preventative measure (usually temporary) against recidivism. In addition, there have been many legislative and policy reforms over recent years that have targeted sexual offenders (restricting their rights further), such as “campaigns to increase public awareness and reporting rates, the formation of special police taskforces, changes in rules of evidence, increased penalties and sentences, the establishment of a national offender register, reviews of community notification laws, implementation of wide-reaching employment screening programs, major investments in specialized sex offender treatment programs, a tightening of parole policies, the introduction of preventative detention legislation, and so on” (Richard Wortley & Stephen Smallbone, 2006, p. 2). Each of these strategies has both positive and negative impacts on the system as a whole.

I met Fr Paul within a month of his release from prison. He was staying in a half-way-house, and he was already facing the challenges of being a known sexual offender, living in the community, on parole, and therefore under strict conditions. Among these, Paul was required to wear an electronic criminal ankle bracelet and he
was required to submit a movement plan each week for approval by the corrections department. Any deviation from the specified route would result in his immediate apprehension and return to prison. He was also required to find affordable accommodation that was not located near locations where children congregate, and he was forbidden from engaging in any form of activity that involved children.

With the increasing intention to punish and deter offenders, and to protect vulnerable children from sexual abuse, potential offenders now have less access to potential victims and fewer opportunities to offend (Kaufman, Mosher, Carter, & Estes, 2006). While preventative strategies are employed for the purpose of social control of sexual offenders and are therefore intended to raise the protective factors in a community, the unfortunate paradox is that the resulting marginalisation of, and multiple side-effects for, sexual offenders actually raises the risk of reoffending. Considering the principles of PCT, it is arguable that more children will be abused if people with established patterns of offending are ‘thrown’ into their offending system – an attractor state (Coburn, 2014b) of predation. This calls for a radical revision of the assumptions of primary, secondary and tertiary abuse prevention programs that portray the offender as ‘other’.

If one recognises the interrelatedness of systems, then the impact of primary prevention strategies upon the secondary and tertiary prevention strategies must also be recognised. If primary prevention programs inflame community sentiment that is hostile to offenders, denying their dignity and their place in the community, then the best attempts of sexual offender treatment programs are bound to be undermined. Regardless of how well ‘trained’ a sexual offender is when he emerges from custodial
treatment into the community, he is likely to react to constant obstacles and exclusionary practices.

Social change in attitudes across the community (primary abuse prevention) is required in the direction of inclusiveness and respect for sexual offenders’ inalienable human rights. The first Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). Failure to respect the rights of those who have failed to respect the rights of children raises the risk of abuse. Recognition of the dignity and rights of sexual offenders, while not minimizing the risk they pose, is a protective factor against future criminal acts.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that it is important not only for sexual offenders to become aware of the multiple systems that contextualize their harmful behaviour, but that it is essential that the whole of society and the institutions of each community become more aware of how, as a system or subsystem, each part contributes to the entirety of the problem. By holding an inclusive attitude toward sexual offenders that recognises them to be part of the whole, we may have cause for greater hope that their subsequent ‘thrownness’ will be in the direction of pro-social, child-safe attractor states.

Paul’s exploration of his lived experience is instructive about how systems can be made more aware of the dynamics that they are a part of, from which the phenomenon of child sexual abuse emerges.
1. The corrections system, at least as it functions in Australia and most Western Countries, takes a sexual offender and places him in a hostile environment, often exacerbating any pre-existing trauma, and often failing to provide treatment. While it is sometimes necessary to withdraw an individual’s right to freedom due to the risk they pose to others, there is no justification for detaining people in environments that increase their risk of relapse upon release. Healthier custodial environments that can safely offer both forensic psychotherapy and relapse prevention programs, may have a great impact on the rehabilitation of offenders.

2. Complexity Theory provides the potential for systemic patterns of child abuse perpetration to be perturbed across societies, so long as governments ensure that resources are available to sexual offenders within community based treatment facilities where such an intervention might be made viable and child-safe.

3. Churches and other organisations must consider the cultural beliefs and practices that support offending behaviour. The patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church, for example, which institutionalises a culture of domination and submission (Benjamin, 2004; Ghent, 1990) that has contextualised the sexual abuse of children throughout the centuries, is now, finally, exposed. We now know that failure to provide professional support and counselling to all members of the clergy at all levels of the hierarchy who need training, supervision, and/or treatment makes for a system that is non-responsive to the vulnerable, despite Church teaching to the contrary.

Yet, as Paul’s case demonstrates, the Church can also be a positive influence upon, and an example to, other systems where the sexual abuse of children emerges. Paul’s religious community offered him a place of safety, where he was supported
in living a meaningful life post-release, where he felt connected to his religious community, and he was assisted in maintaining his protective strategies in relation to the ongoing risk he poses. In this way, the Church demonstrates congruence with its stated values of recognising the uniqueness and dignity of the human person who is “capable of self-understanding, self-possession and self-determination” (Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace, 2004, p. 66). Where this congruence is effected, the Church can and does actively contribute to a safer and more compassionate world.

4. Finally, the community as a whole must examine its attitudes towards sexual abuse survivors and perpetrators. By holding alienating attitudes and engaging in hateful and shaming practices towards perpetrators, the risk of recidivism escalates. Should the community as a whole become more inclusive of those who have sexually abused (without lowering protective factors, such as awareness of the risk some people pose) the potential for the development of a more child-safe environment is likely to emerge.

PCT poses many unsettling questions for clinicians and the community, but perhaps the disequilibrium that arises when our taken for granted assumptions are challenged will actually increase communal protective factors. If one recognises that human behaviour is not linear, neither as predictable nor as orderly as we might prefer to think, we might recognise as well the need to be very vigilant with regard to the existence of sexual abuse in our communities, and to be on the lookout for sudden, unexpected changes, as well as obvious deterioration in a state of safety.

There are countless systems and subsystems that could be analysed here. However, in reviewing Paul’s case at three levels of discourse, I have argued that a
complex systems sensibility, as one example of the dialogical paradigm, offers greater understanding and opens more options for choice and action for the protection of children and the rehabilitation of offenders. In so doing, PCT promotes a more humane and informed society that values the human rights, dignity and worth of each person.

References


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