AGGRESSIVE OFFENDERS’ COGNITION
Theory, Research, and Practice

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AGGRESSIVE OFFENDERS’ COGNITION
To my parents, Fiona and John Gannon for making my education possible – TAG.

To my mentors: Bill Marshall and Richard Laws – TW.

For my Mother and Father – AB.

To my family – human, canine and equine – DF.
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ABOUT THE SERIES

At the time of writing it is clear that we live in a time, certainly in the UK and other parts of Europe, if perhaps less so in areas of the world, when there is renewed enthusiasm for constructive approaches to working with offenders to prevent crime. What do we mean by this statement and what basis do we have for making it?

First, by ‘constructive approaches to working with offenders’ we mean bringing the use of effective methods and techniques of behaviour change into work with offenders. Indeed, this view might pass as a definition of forensic clinical psychology. Thus, our focus is the application of theory and research in order to develop practice aimed at bringing about a change in the offender’s functioning. The word constructive is important and can be set against approaches to behaviour change that seek to operate by destructive means. Such destructive approaches are typically based on the principles of deterrence and punishment, seeking to suppress the offender’s actions through fear and intimidation. A constructive approach, on the other hand, seeks to bring about changes in an offender’s functioning that will produce, say, enhanced possibilities of employment, greater levels of self-control, better family functioning, or increased awareness of the pain of victims.

A constructive approach faces the criticism of being a ‘soft’ response to the damage caused by offenders, neither inflicting pain and punishment nor delivering retribution. This point raises a serious question for those involved in working with offenders. Should advocates of constructive approaches oppose retribution as a goal of the criminal justice system as a process that is incompatible with treatment and rehabilitation? Alternatively, should constructive work with offenders take place within a system given to retribution? We believe that this issue merits serious debate.

However, to return to our starting point, history shows that criminal justice systems are littered with many attempts at constructive work with offenders, not all of which have been successful. In raising the spectre of success, the second part of our opening sentence now merits attention: that is, ‘constructive approaches to working with offenders to prevent crime’. In order to achieve the goal of preventing crime, interventions must focus on the right targets for behaviour change.
In addressing this crucial point, Andrews and Bonta (1994) have formulated the *need principle*:

Many offenders, especially high-risk offenders, have a variety of needs. They need places to live and work and/or they need to stop taking drugs. Some have poor self-esteem, chronic headaches or cavities in their teeth. These are all ‘needs’. The need principle draws our attention to the distinction between *criminogenic* and *noncriminogenic* needs. Criminogenic needs are a subset of an offender’s risk level. They are dynamic attributes of an offender that, when changed, are associated with changes in the probability of recidivism. Non-criminogenic needs are also dynamic and changeable, but these changes are not necessarily associated with the probability of recidivism. (p.176)

Thus, successful work with offenders can be judged in terms of bringing about change in noncriminogenic need or in terms of bringing about change in criminogenic need. While the former is important and, indeed, may be a necessary precursor to offence-focused work, it is changing criminogenic need that, we argue, should be the touchstone in working with offenders. While, as noted above, the history of work with offenders is not replete with success, the research base developed since the early 1990s, particularly the meta-analyses (e.g. Lösel, 1995), now strongly supports the position that effective work with offenders to prevent further offending is possible. The parameters of such evidence-based practice have become well established and widely disseminated under the banner of ‘What Works’ (McGuire, 1995).

It is important to state that we are not advocating that there is only one approach to preventing crime. Clearly there are many approaches, with different theoretical underpinnings, that can be applied to the task of reducing offending. Nonetheless, a tangible momentum has grown in the wake of the ‘What Works’ movement as academics, practitioners, and policy makers seek to capitalise on the possibilities that this research raises for preventing crime. The task now facing many service agencies lies in translating the research into effective practice.

Our aim in developing this Series in Forensic Clinical Psychology is to produce texts that review research and draw on clinical expertise to advance effective work with offenders. We are both committed to the ideal of evidence-based practice and we will encourage contributors to the Series to follow this approach. Thus, the books published in the Series will not be practice manuals or ‘cook books’: they will offer readers authoritative and critical information through which forensic clinical practice can develop. We are both enthusiastic about the contribution to effective practice that this Series can make and look forward to continuing to develop it even further in the years to come.

**ABOUT THIS BOOK**

Following the dissemination of the ‘What Works’ research a great deal of work with offenders has adopted a cognitive-behavioural approach to practice. This cognitive-behavioural orientation has become increasingly evident in a range of programmes aimed at a wide diversity of offenders and types of offending
A cognitive-behavioural approach to both theory and practice seeks to understand human behaviour, including offending, in terms of a complex interplay between the three elements of environment, cognition, and action (Bandura, 1977; 1986). Understanding the complexities of the relationships between these three elements relies on a research base that elucidates the individual properties of each of the three individual elements.

In this addition to the Series, Theresa Gannon, Tony Ward, Anthony Beech, and Dawn Fisher have focussed on cognition and, even more precisely, cognition in the context of aggressive offenders. They have gathered and edited a collection of contributions, written by researchers and practitioners, that seeks to review extant knowledge, ask new questions, and speak to practice. The scope of the text is wide, ranging from sex offences against children to domestic abuse; from cognitive distortions to moral cognition; and to the treatment of angry aggression. Given such a range of coverage, this book can justifiably claim to present the ‘state of the art’ with regard to current knowledge of cognition in aggressive offenders. Further, the emphasis on using the research base to inform a rapidly developing area of forensic practice will be welcomed by all those engaged in working with aggressive offenders.

Clive Hollin
Mary McMurr

REFERENCES

PREFACE

This edited collection originated in a coffee shop in Wellington, New Zealand, where the first two editors were working and where the latter two later came to visit. It became clear to us all – from working and teaching in the area of offender cognition – that professionals and students were forced to consult numerous piecemeal chapters and papers on the topic, as no single textbook synthesised the material needed into one readily accessible resource. From this realisation we began to approach leading professionals involved in various aspects of aggressive offenders’ cognition, about whether they would be interested in writing a chapter for a book devoted to offender cognition. The response that we received was overwhelmingly enthusiastic and we feel privileged to edit a text of special interest to us with such a group of enthusiastic and informed professionals. The strength of this book – we hope – lies in its structure. Each offender population is treated separately, allowing readers to compare and contrast developments, knowledge and practice across sexual offending, general violence and domestic violence. We hope that professionals involved and interested in this area will use this text, not only as a reference but also to further develop an area that is beginning to gain powerful momentum.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge all of the individuals who have made this collection of work possible. First of all, a big thank you to all of the authors who, during their hectic schedules, put so much effort into writing their chapters. We would also like to thank all those at Wiley who gave advice and help with this work from start to finish. In particular, thank you Claire Ruston, Gillian Leslie, Sarah Tilley and Nicole Burnett for dealing with all our queries and little hiccups. A big thank you also goes to the series editors, Clive Hollin and Mary McMurrnan, for supporting this piece of work. We would also like to thank Sage Publications for permission to reproduce the tables presented in Chapter 2. Finally, we would like to thank Mariamne Rose, at the University of Kent for her help with proof-reading this work. Thanks Mariamne!
Studying how the human mind works is always fascinating; perhaps even more so when a person’s behaviour is at odds with legal and moral conventions. In fact, even the most lifeless of dinner parties can be reignited by idle talk of the latest high profile offender: “Why did he do it?” “What must he have been thinking?” “He must be really messed up in the head.” Yet behind such questions lies an important assumption that plays a pivotal role in the theoretical underpinnings of forensic psychology. Put simply, the majority of theories proposed to explain aggressive offending assert that offenders’ thinking at the time of their offence is deviant, abnormal, and offence-supportive.

From an academic perspective, the term “cognition” refers to the basic operations involved in human perception, memory and thinking (Solso, 1998). For example, how do we perceive a written question, interpret its meaning, think about a possible answer to that question and ultimately select and implement a verbal response? (Solso, 1998). All aspects of these operations involve a complex interplay of perceptual (e.g., attention), thinking (e.g., concept formulation) and memory processes (e.g., retention, retrieval). These processes have been investigated by
cognitive psychologists utilising a wide range of methodologies and have resulted in immense payoffs of knowledge production (e.g., Broadbent, 1958; Chomsky, 1968; Loftus, 1979/1996; Posner, 1980). More recently, however, psychology has become interested in understanding these processes when individuals interact with each other.

The term “social-cognition” refers to the study of social or interpersonal relationships using the knowledge and methods derived from basic cognitive psychology. In other words, social cognition aims to explain how people perceive themselves and others, interpret the meaning of interpersonal behaviour, think about the possible answer to a social problem and choose a behavioural response to that social problem.

A cognitive construct of paramount importance for investigating such social-cognitive questions is that of the *schema*. A schema may be conceptualised as a structured framework of knowledge – stored in long-term memory – that contains information and knowledge associated together from prior experience and learning (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Huesmann, 1998). Thus, a schema relating to a particular concept (e.g., children) will contain information concerning characteristics or core attributes (e.g., naïve, innocent) and about the relationships between such attributes and behaviours (e.g., how this naivety relates to a child’s tendency to ask socially unacceptable and sometimes very embarrassing and public questions). Each individual’s unique variety of schemas provides her or him with the capacity to describe, interpret and predict that individual’s own and other people’s behaviour.

When resources and time are plentiful, individuals can and do interpret their own and others’ behaviours in a rational and careful manner (i.e., they behave as naïve scientists; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Most often, however, individuals behave as cognitive misers. Put simply, individuals perceive their complicated and rather ambiguous world through reliance on pre-existing schemas (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Thus, when dealing with a situation that is similar to one encountered previously, individuals use their pre-existing schemas (largely unconsciously) to predict how others will behave and how they themselves should behave (Williams *et al.*, 1997). Consequently, everyday social encounters provide rich opportunities for schema rehearsal, which subsequently strengthen the links between associated knowledge units and increase schema accessibility (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). If a particular schema is rehearsed and supported regularly, it is likely to become *chronically accessible*. In other words, it is highly likely that such a schema will be used to interpret and guide social behaviour in the future (Pettit, Polaha & Mize, 2001). Research suggests that schemas – including those that are chronically accessible – are highly affected by situational priming (e.g., Bargh, 1982; Bargh, Lombardi & Higgins, 1988; Tiedens, 2001). This is probably because situational primes such as positive or negative affective states reduce the individual’s ability to perceive the world carefully and rationally (Kardes, 1994). A variety of situational primes are likely to affect an individual’s ability to process information rationally, including sexual arousal, anger, excitement, alcohol and drug use. Such primes increase individuals’ reliance on pre-existing schemas, leading them to attend preferentially to schema-supportive information, ignore or minimise disconfirming evidence and interpret ambiguous social information in
Thus, this reliance on schemas can create an entire chain of information-processing events that are schema-supportive.

A related conceptualisation in social-cognition is that of sequential information-processing models (see Barber, 1988; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Welford, 1960). Such models typically attempt to break down and describe the intervening steps that occur between initial stimuli perception and the final response, or behaviour (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). All steps – to some degree – are driven by stored knowledge in the form of schemas. The basic components of information-processing may be conceptualised as stages incorporating encoding (i.e., perception and representation of stimuli in memory), comparison (i.e., the generated representation is compared to current memory representations), response selection (i.e., the search and selection of an appropriate responses) and response execution (i.e., the organisation, enactment and cognitive monitoring of responses) as outlined in Figure 0.1.

The advantage of sequential information-processing models is that they can be used by researchers to divide the complex mental operations involved in interpersonal cognition into basic stages that may be tested empirically. For example, Stage 1 is concerned with the basic perceptual processes involved in information processing. Social-cognitive scientists propose that attentional resources are allocated to schema-relevant information. In other words, we attend to schema-consistent information. Thus, Stroop tasks (Stroop, 1935) may be used to test attention at the encoding level as participants should take longer to name the colours of words that are schema-consistent compared with less personally meaningful words due to interference associated with involuntary attention mechanisms. The second stage of the model is concerned with how individuals interpret encoded social information using existing stored knowledge (i.e., schemas). Since ambiguous information is predicted to be interpreted in schema-supportive ways, simple tasks that probe participants’ interpretation of ambiguous social events may provide valuable insight into pre-existing schemas. Methods used to test this stage of the model may involve asking participants to recall a piece of ambiguous text (e.g., Copello & Tata, 1990) in the hope that this recollection will provide some insight into how the ambiguous text was initially interpreted. The third stage of the model relates to the generation of solutions to a social problem or encounter and the decision making involved in selecting a response. Such a stage is often referred to as social problem solving (McGuire, 2005) and may be tested by asking...
individuals to generate options to a hypothetical social event and to isolate a response option that they believe is an appropriate response (see Nezu et al., 2003). The final stage of the model refers to the actual enactment of the behavioural option chosen. This stage is harder to test empirically, but involves the individual cognitively monitoring the effects of an enacted behaviour. Thus, behaviour may be adjusted according to fluctuating context and cognitive feedback. Conceptualising information-processing according to the basic model described above allows researchers to theorise and research potential problems within the cognitive system and to note at which point in the system problems are likely to occur.

Of course, we can all experience difficulty – of one form or another – dealing effectively with social encounters due to the powerful effects of our cognitive apparatus. For example, we may misinterpret a partner’s silence as a personal slight and respond with sullen behaviour or even verbal confrontation. In other words, everyone is susceptible to making biased and unrealistic social interpretations and behavioural responses; especially when our cognitive system is pressured or overloaded. However, when a person is physically aggressive, a key question concerns whether he or she holds unique and offence-supportive schemas that affect information processing and generate antisocial behaviour. For example, how do offenders view themselves and their social world? Do they hold offence-supportive schemas that lead them to see their social world in an offence-supportive manner? Further, do such schemas result in an inability to communicate effectively or resolve interpersonal conflict via nonaggressive means? It is these questions which ultimately drive social-cognitive psychology applications to forensic populations.

Forensic psychology professionals often note that offenders frequently utter offence-supportive statements when recounting their offence, which appear to indicate the existence of offence-supportive schemas (e.g., “He was staring at me all night – he was asking for it” or “She was taking the piss out of me; she needed to know who’s boss”). Such statements and the offence-supportive thinking that they imply are commonly referred to as “cognitive distortions”, which serve to justify, minimise and facilitate offending behaviour (Gannon, Polaschek & Ward, 2005; Gibbs, 1993; Murphy, 1990). It is intuitively pleasing – and comforting – to believe that aggressive offenders think differently from law-abiding members of the community. Perhaps this is why the term “cognitive distortion” has been so readily accepted into the research community. This term implies a type of cognitive pathology that separates offenders from us, implying some type of cognitive abnormality. But are offenders so different from us?

Thankfully, the explosion of interest in social-cognition has penetrated the forensic psychology world since the mid-1980s, allowing us to develop theory and research methodologies that provide some tantalising – albeit imperfect – insights into aggressive offenders’ cognition. Our book describes the fruits of this research on aggressive offenders’ cognition since that period. This text is not intended to be exhaustive but the specific lineup of chapters was chosen to provide readers with one text that would give key guidance on cognition in a broad range of areas. We hope that researchers and practitioners who consult the forthcoming chapters will find the information useful for future theory and research generation and for implementing evidence-based practice.
SPECIFIC CONTENT

Part I of the book concerns sexual abusers. In Chapter 1, Joanne Thakker, Tony Ward and Shruti Navathe describe and evaluate the main theoretical perspectives proposed to explain the concept of cognitive distortions in child sexual abusers. These authors also present their own useful conceptualisation of child sexual abusers’ schemas or implicit theories in the form of an integrative model. Following on from this, Dawn Fisher and Anthony Beech outline current theoretical literature pertaining to rapists’ schemas/implicit theories and describe the results of a unique qualitative study conducted with rapists and sexual murderers. In Chapter 3, Tony Ward, Kirsten Keown and Theresa Gannon put forward a new model, which attempts to clarify the nature of sexual offenders’ cognitions through describing them as belief, value and action-related judgments. Within this model, cognitive distortions are viewed as stemming from a number of mechanisms including implicit beliefs, but also impression management strategies. In Chapters 4 and 5, the empirical research investigating sexual offenders’ cognition is presented and evaluated. Chapter 4 outlines the available evidence pertaining to child sexual abusers (Theresa Gannon & Jane Wood). Gannon and Wood’s review suggests that the evidence supporting generic offence-supportive schemas in child sexual abusers is relatively weak and they conclude the chapter with an interesting question; that is, are researchers misinterpreting the available information in a manner which supports professionals own pre-existing and intuitively plausible beliefs? Chapter 5 (Calvin Langton) systematically reviews empirical findings concerning the cognition of men who rape. To our knowledge, this is the first published review fully synthesising the knowledge of rape-related cognition. We anticipate that this review will prove valuable as a resource for researchers interested in further investigating rapists’ cognition and for forensic practitioners who want to ensure their current practice is empirically guided. Moving onto some more practice-focused chapters, Christopher Dean, Ruth Mann, Rebecca Milner and Shadd Maruna, in Chapter 6, provide readers with what we believe is a most engaging and novel chapter. As well as outlining some of the more traditional methods of treating child sexual abusers’ cognition, Christopher Dean and his colleagues take on the challenge of considering how forensic practitioners should consider dealing with the vast array of offence-supportive accounts in therapy. In particular, they consider the problem of sifting aetiological cognition from red herring accounting behaviours (i.e., normative excuse making). The final chapter of this section – Chapter 7 – is written by Lynne Eccleston and Karen Owen who focus our attentions on the cognitive treatment of rapists. In particular, they evaluate our current tendency to treat rapists alongside child sexual abusers, and report their unique experiences of having developed and run a rapist-only treatment group. Treatment “just for rapists” is seemingly not for the faint hearted, representing a series of unique challenges for forensic practitioners!

Part II of this book examines the cognition of nonsexual, generally violent offenders. The first chapter of this part (Chapter 8) is written by Marc Sestir and Bruce Bartholow and provides a firm grounding for the chapters that follow by evaluating the range of cognitive and social-cognitive explanations of aggression.
and violence. Leading on from this, Rachael Collie, Jim Vess and Sharlene Murdoch provide an excellent review of current empirical evidence regarding violent offenders’ cognition (Chapter 9). Their review highlights the urgent need for further empirical investigation of violent offenders’ cognition using many of the cognitive paradigms so often utilised to investigate clinical psychopathology. In Chapter 10, Emma Palmer then presents a very clear overview of the links between moral cognition and aggressive behaviour and describes the range of tools that may be used to measure moral cognition, as well as the types of treatment programmes that incorporate moral cognitive components. In Chapter 11, Clive Hollin and Claire Bloxsom do an excellent job of describing the current model of choice for treating anger and of the interventions available for treating angry and aggressive individuals; an excellent source for those interested in anger management. Following on from this, Mary McMurran gets to grips with reviewing the fascinatingly complex relationship between alcohol and aggression and makes some important observations and recommendations regarding therapy for aggressive offenders whose antisocial actions appear to be alcohol-linked (Chapter 12).

The final chapter of this section is provided by Elizabeth Gilchrist, who describes and integrates knowledge to date concerning domestically violent abusers’ cognition. She highlights the strong need for the domestic violence literature to establish some more robust measures of cognition since the research base to date is not at all clear regarding the key cognitive factors underlying domestic violence. It seems, then, that this area is one that may potentially benefit in one way or another from a mini “cognitive revolution”.

REFERENCES


