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The Relation Between Sexual Fantasies and Offense-Supportive Cognitions in People Convicted of Sexual Offenses: A Preliminary Study

Sexual Abuse
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–30
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DOI: 10.1177/10790632241271226
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Abstract

The main objective of this research is to study the relationships of offense-supportive cognitions and sexual fantasies with sex crime. The research involved 48 men: 26 convicted of sexual offenses against minors and 22 convicted of sexual offenses against adults from different prisons in the Community of Madrid, Spain. We used the RAPE Scale and the Sex With Children Scale to evaluate offense-supportive cognitions and an ad hoc adaptation of the Multidimensional Developmental, Sex and Aggression Inventory to evaluate sexual fantasies with minors and sadomasochistic fantasies. The results show that both groups present similar offense-supportive cognitions, while each group had significantly more sexual fantasies related to their specific crime. Participants who had sexual fantasies about minors presented significantly more offense-supportive cognitions justifying child sexual abuse than those who did not present these fantasies, while participants with sadomasochistic fantasies did not present more offense-supportive cognitions about rape. After collecting this information, we ran four

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mediation models to assess potential relationships between fantasies, offense-supportive cognitions, and specific sexual crime. The mediation models showed that both sexual fantasies with minors and sadomasochistic fantasies had direct relationships with sex crimes. Upon further confirmation with studies with larger sample sizes, our findings support the importance of dealing with sexual fantasies in treatment of people convicted of sexual offenses and imply a need for differentiated treatment, since the content of sexual fantasies was different in each group.

Keywords

offense-supportive cognitions, sexual fantasies, sexual offenses, treatment

Introduction

Offense-supportive cognitions are a well-researched phenomenon in people convicted of crimes of sexual assault against minors and against adults because of their relevance for treatment (D'Urso et al., 2019). Offense-supportive cognitions are important because they are a phenomenon that includes beliefs, attitudes, justifications, excuses, rationalizations (Paquette et al., 2020) and erroneous interpretations in the perception process that lead to dysfunctional processing of reality, considerably hindering interventions and sustaining the problem (Beck, 2000; Chambers et al., 2008; Ribeaud & Eisner, 2010; Szumski et al., 2018). These cognitions are more prevalent in people who commit sexual crimes and are therefore a variable that can help to understand sexual aggression (Heldmon et al., 2015; Hermann et al., 2018; Thornton, 2002). However, researchers have over the years proposed different theories about offense-supportive cognitions, giving rise to varied and sometimes even opposing models about when offense-supportive cognitions appear and what function they have in people with sexual assault convictions (Vanderstukken et al., 2015). This is also relevant to therapy, because depending on the role attributed to offensive-supportive cognitions with regards to the crime committed, they will be subject of treatment or not.

Offense-Supportive Cognitions as a Risk Factor

Some initial theories stated that offense-supportive cognitions are beliefs that support aggressive sexual behavior as a psychological risk factor in people with sexual offenses (Helmus et al., 2013), and their function is to alleviate the cognitive dissonance of having a sexual interest that breaks social norms, such as pedophilia or rape fantasies. Therefore, these authors suggest that offense-supportive cognitions have an etiological character and that they are an important risk factor for criminal activity, since the individuals with such cognitions misinterpret the behavior of others (Abel et al., 1984; Trabazo & Azor, 2009). Similarly, Finkelhor (1984) adds another potential reason for the offense-supportive cognitions: the disinhibition of internal desires. These authors

describe offense-supportive cognitions as pre-crime factors and predict that the cognitions will be associated with specific criminal behaviors, with people convicted of sexual offenses against minors having offense-supportive cognitions related to child sexual abuse and people convicted of sexual offenses against adults having cognitions about sexual assault or rape.

Offensive-Supportive Cognitions Serve a Justifying and Protective Function

Other authors disagree with this view and argue that offense-supportive cognitions are the result of much deeper structures, based on basic beliefs or implicit theories whose function is more related to the justification and minimization of sexual behavior (Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2011; Ward, 2000). Finally, other researchers propose that the main function of offense-supportive cognitions is moral disconnection: that is, they function as a defense mechanism to protect people's self-esteem and manage guilt and other emotions that may be associated with the crime committed and therefore, they should appear after the act (Van Vugt et al., 2011).

Whether these cognitions appeared before or after the crime, the fact that there are different perspectives on their function and the way they emerge is a problem for practitioners addressing these cognitions in treatment. Some authors argue that offense-supportive cognitions are understandable excuses typical of people who commit sex crimes against minors and can largely be considered healthy because they play a protective role for the individual's self-esteem and self-concept (Marshall et al., 2011). Such offense-supportive cognitions would be those related to denial, minimization, and excuses. For example, Maruna and Mann (2006) argue that maintaining beliefs that reduce responsibility for one's behavior is common in humans as it keeps their self-concept protected and is a sign of acknowledging that they have committed a negative act. In addition, according to the study by Hanson and Wallace-Capretta (2000), offense-supportive cognitions of excuse, when considered after committing a crime, indicate a lower risk of recidivism than those who admit the crime, since they do not consider offense-supportive cognitions a criminogenic variable.

The Need for Therapeutic Treatment of Offense-Supportive Cognitions

Despite the work done by the afore mentioned authors to define and understand the functions of offense-supportive statements, it has not yet been determined with certainty whether offense-supportive cognitions are deeply held criminogenic beliefs (Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2011; Paquette & Fortin, 2023) or are justifications elaborated after the crime to protect self-image and avoid negative consequences (Marshall et al., 2011; Paquette & Fortin, 2023). This lack of consensus directly affects the need to intervene or not on statements of support for the offense.

Therefore, Marshall et al. (2011) propose that intervention with people convicted of sexual offenses against minors should not be aimed at questioning offense-supportive

cognitions until the participants have a high degree of commitment, and the therapeutic bond with the clinician has been established.

However, other authors focus on offense-supportive cognitions as higher-order belief schemas and structures, that is, they consider such cognitions “etiologically cognitive,” that facilitate sex crimes (Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2011). In other words, Marshall et al. (2011) consider offense-supportive cognitions (denial, minimization and excuses) to be superficial beliefs, while Ó Ciardha and Gannon (2011) consider them to be cognitive schemas or implicit theories. Ó Ciardha and Gannon state that they do not have information about when the cognitions appear but what function they have: in case they appear before the crime, they could facilitate the criminal act whereas in the event they appear after the crime, they could play a protective role. Therefore, Ó Ciardha and Gannon (2011) call for further empirical research to determine whether these cognitions require intervention during treatment. Indeed, whether or not to intervene regarding offense-supportive cognitions during treatment is a relevant debate in the field of sexual aggression.

Differences in Offense-Supportive Cognitions as a Function of Sexual Crime

The main question is whether there is a relationship between the types of offense-supportive cognitions and the type of sex crime committed, and the answer is not clear-cut, given the multiple contradicting studies on the matter. On the one hand, research shows that there are differences in offense-supportive cognitions between people with sexual offenses against adults and children. For instance, Feelgood et al. (2005) found that people convicted of sexual offenses against minors had more offense-supportive cognitions than people convicted of sexual offenses against adults when using the MOLEST scale (a questionnaire produced by Bumby (1996) with items about offense-supportive cognitions related to child sexual abuse). However, they found no significant differences between people with sexual crimes against adults and against minors, when using the RAPE Scale (a questionnaire developed by Bumby (1996) with items on crime-supportive cognitions related to raping an adult woman), although people with sexual crimes against adults scored higher. Similarly, the implicit theory of Ward (2000) refers to the content of cognitions being different depending on the sex crime, proposing that people convicted of sexual offenses against adults report that they believe “women are sexual objects” and people convicted of sexual offenses against minors report that they believe “children are sexual beings.” Other research has yielded similar results (Abel et al., 1984; Arkowitz & Vess, 2003). Given Ward (2000)’s implicit theory and the differences found in the content of the offense-supportive cognitions according to the type of sex crime, it would be possible to design differentiated interventions for both type of sexual offenders. That would also justify clinical attention to offense-supportive cognitions.

However, some studies have found no differences in offense-supportive cognitions comparing people with different sex crimes. Castro et al. (2009) reported that both people convicted of sexual offenses against minors and people convicted of sexual

offenses against adults presented offense-supportive cognitions about rape and about child sexual abuse. Similarly, [Hermann et al. \(2012\)](#) did not find differences in the *RAPE Scale*, since both groups presented similar offense-supportive cognitions on sexual assault. Considering their data, offense-supportive cognitions may merit clinical attention but with no need for differentiating interventions.

Differences in Offense-Supportive Cognitions as a Function of the Type of Sexual Fantasies

One possible proposal to explain why some studies found differences in offense-supportive cognitions between people with sexual offenses against adults and children while other studies found that both groups had supportive cognitions for the crime of rape and child sexual abuse, is that the differences in offense-supportive cognitions are not so much due to the type of crime committed, but to the type of sexual fantasies the participants have. [Bartels et al. \(2021, p. 57\)](#) define sexual fantasies as “*the intentional or unintentional prolonged act of mentally simulating an ongoing sexual scenario.*” Other authors also highlight that these mental acts are sexually arousing ([Leitenberg & Henning, 1995](#)). One might then ask whether those who have fantasies about minors present offensive supportive cognitions related to minors and those who have fantasies about the use of force present offensive supportive cognitions related to violence. The change in the focus of attention is important: it is about thinking about the sexual fantasies-cognitions link instead of the sexual crime-cognition link. [Abel et al. \(1994\)](#) stated that offense-supportive cognitions appear when recognizing the presence of a sexual interest that is contrary to social norms: sexual desires about minors are socially repudiated and provoke a great social stigma ([Heasman & Foreman, 2019](#)) that can generate strong feelings of guilt ([Little and Byers, 2000](#) cited in [Bartels et al., 2021](#); [Barker, 2014](#); [Looman, 1995](#)), as well as fantasies of forced sex. Perhaps the presence of these sexual desires and fantasies facilitates the development of offense-supportive cognitions that justify child sexual abuse or committing rape against an adult person to protect their self-esteem ([Abel et al., 1989](#); [Maruna & Mann, 2006](#); [Snyder & Higgins, 1988](#)).

That is, it could be the presence of specific sexual fantasies that triggers the emergence of sex-crime related offense-supportive cognitions. In fact, these specific fantasies are not present in all subjects in the different studies conducted. For example, [Marshall et al. \(1991\)](#) found that out of a sample of 129 people convicted of sexual offenses against minors only 22% ($n = 28$) had sexually fantasized about children before carrying out the sexual offense against minors. This could be the reason why some studies got such different results: they did not measure the presence of sexual fantasies.

However, the link between sexual fantasies and cognitions may still be related to the commission of sexual crimes. The importance of the content of sexual fantasies lies in the fact that they are of sexual interest to the individuals ([Noorishad et al., 2019](#)). Indeed, [Beech et al. \(2005\)](#) found that of a sample of people who had committed

sexually motivated murder with sadistic motivations, 79% stated that one of their motivations was to act out their sexual fantasies. Similarly, more recent studies have reported evidence that sexual fantasies related to aggression predict sadistic sexual behavior (Birke & Bondü, 2023). Also, Marshall et al. (1991) found that, in a sample of 129 people convicted of child sexual assault crimes, 52% reported having sexual fantasies about children. Therefore, it seems that the content of sexual fantasies plays an important role in sexual crimes.

Sexual Fantasies as a Risk Factor for Sexual Crimes and Their Relationship to Offense-Supportive Cognitions

One of the possible explanations for sexual fantasies being a risk factor for the commission of the crime and a predictor of recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005) is that sexual fantasies can provide numerous positive reinforcers that increase the likelihood of re-offending such as maintaining pleasure through imagination, decreasing behavioral inhibition, promoting a sense of grandiosity, and a feeling of control and allowing the person to plan and practice their desires prior to the actual act (Meloy, 2000). Indeed, it appears that sexual fantasies may play an important role in crime justification cognitions. In a study exploring characteristics related to sexual interest in children and propensity for offending behavior, O'Connor and Gannon (2021) found that participants who were sexually aroused by children had more cognitions supportive of child sexual abuse and more offending propensity than those who were not aroused by children at all. In addition, they had more sexual fantasies related to child sexual abuse.

So, it seems that sexual fantasies could play an important role in offense-supportive cognitions (Bartels & Gannon, 2011; Carabellese et al., 2010) although research examining the covariance of offenses-supportive cognitions, deviant sexual fantasies and sexual offending within the same research is limited (Dyshniku, 2014). Knowing if this is the case would help improve prison treatment as well as prevent recidivism, given that the existence of sexual fantasies with minors or about aggression, together with the presence of cognitions that justify a criminal act, poses a high risk that a sex crime will be committed in the future (Valencia et al., 2016). Multifactorial theories of sexual offending constitute these dimensions in their explanations (Paquette & Cortoni, 2021). One example is the integrated theory of sexual offending (Ward and Beech, 2006, 2017 cited in Paquette & Cortoni, 2021) which explains that sexual offending is caused by an interaction of different factors (biological, ecological and neuropsychological) that give rise to clinical problems associated with sexual offending, such as offense-supportive cognitions, pedophilia, sexual preoccupation and negative sexual coping strategies (Paquette & Cortoni, 2021). Furthermore, in Proulx and colleagues' (1999) study they found that both deviant sexual fantasies and offense-supportive cognitions are important disinhibitors of crime. Therefore, the findings point to the fact that offence-supportive cognitions and sexual fantasies may be correlated (Dyshniku, 2014). However, it is not yet clear which comes first: the offense-supportive cognition

that plays a role in the content of the sexual fantasy, or rather the opposite, sexual fantasies as the principal source of offense-supportive cognition (Wright & Schneider, 1997 cited in Marshall & Marshall, 2000). There are authors who have already studied this link between sexual fantasies and offense-supportive cognitions, with the cognitions legitimizing both the content of their sexual fantasies and their criminal action (Gee et al., 2003). However, in other theories about this linkage, authors have argued that it is offense-supportive cognitions that are incorporated into the content of sexual fantasies related to crime (Marshall & Marshall, 2000). More recent theories such as the Dual-Process Model of Sexual Thinking (Bartels et al., 2021) propose that the content of sexual fantasies is consistent with beliefs already present in the person and encourage their use and are not a form of justification as in other studies.

Thus, our study pursues several objectives. First, we sought to identify differences in offense-supportive cognitions in two groups of people who have committed a sexual crime: people convicted of sexual offenses against minors and people convicted of sexual offenses against adults. Our prediction was that people convicted of sexual offenses against minors will present offense-supportive cognitions related to minors while people convicted of sexual offenses against adults will present cognitions about sexual assault and about adults. Second, we intended to find out if people convicted of sexual offenses against minors have sexual fantasies that differ from those of people convicted of sexual offenses against adults. We predicted that we would find crime-related fantasies in both, that is, sexual fantasies about minors in people convicted of sexual offenses against minors and sexual fantasies about the use of force or instruments that allow immobilization or provoke pain in people convicted of sexual offenses against adults. Third, we checked whether offense-supportive cognitions vary with subjects' sexual fantasies. Our prediction was that those participants with sexual fantasies with minors would score higher in offense-supportive cognitions about minors, and that participants who present sexual fantasies related to the use of force would present more offense-supportive cognitions about rape. Finally, we explored the roles of sexual offense-supportive cognitions and fantasies in predicting crime, considering indirect relationships, following two different theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, some authors suggest that fantasy is a predictor of offense-supportive cognitions (Gee et al., 2003) while other authors suggest that offense-supportive cognitions are incorporated into the content of sexual fantasies (Bartels et al., 2021). To formalize those theories, we built different mediation models to understand the complex interplay between offense-supportive cognitions, sexual fantasies, and specific forms of sexual crime, as these models allow to test indirect relationships between variables through specific mediators. The results derived from these objectives could help to find out whether it is necessary to intervene therapeutically on offense-supportive cognitions with people who have committed crimes of sexual aggression as O'Ó Ciardha and Gannon (2011) argue, or on the contrary not to work on them in therapy as they are not a criminogenic variable as Marshall et al. (2011) defend. We are aware that our data would need to be supported by further research to be conclusive,

however, we hope our findings at least provoke thought on the role of offense-supportive cognitions and sexual fantasies in sex crime.

Method

Participants

The total sample consisted of 48 men with a mean age of 42.5 years ($SD = 13.41$), 26 people were convicted of sexual offenses against minors and 22 people were convicted of crimes of sexual assault against an adult. We used non-probabilistic convenience sampling. The sample inclusion criteria were to have committed a sexual crime against adults and minors, excluding people convicted of other crimes. It was not necessary to exclude any participant from the sample, since all of them met the requirements. Although the sample may seem limited, it is very difficult to access, both because it is not a general prison population but a specific population and because these people may not be willing to participate due to the frequent stigma they carry (e.g., [Jahnke & Hoyer, 2013](#)). Our sample size is comparable to other relevant studies in the field of sexual offense studies, in particular those that compare sexual fantasies across people convicted of two types of sex crimes (40 participants in [Baić et al., 2019](#); 24 participants in [Gee et al., 2004](#)) and offense-supportive cognitions (69 participants [Bumby, 1996](#); 20 participants in [Castro et al., 2009](#)). In addition, the sociodemographic and criminal characteristics, excluding criminal records, of the people convicted of sexual offenses against minors in our sample were very similar to those obtained in the Del Real study (2019) that analyzed 945 convictions for sexual assault against minors prosecuted in Spain in 2017, so, in absence of a similar study with people convicted of sexual offenses against adults, as can be seen in [Table 1](#), at least our sample seems representative because it has similar characteristics to other prison populations in Spain.

The sample of participants were imprisoned in different penitentiaries in the Community of Madrid (Spain). The demographic and penitentiary characteristics of the

Table 1. Comparison of Data on People Convicted of Sexual Offenses Against Children From the Study by Del Real (2019) and the Present Research.

	Spanish nationality (%)	No criminal record (%)	Average age	Marital status (married or cohabiting) (%)	Marital status (single) (%)	Number of victims	Average age of victims
Del real, 2019	71	61	37	42.9	42.8	1.53	12.0
Our study	50	92.3	41.79	38.4	42.3	2.05	12.75

study sample are presented in [Tables 2](#) and [3](#) below. In terms of age, the oldest group is people convicted of sexual offenses against minors. The predominant nationality of the sample was Spanish followed by Latin American nationalities. Half of the sample was single, and the rest of the participants were married or divorced. More than half of the sample had attended primary and/or secondary school. Finally, 42.41% of the people convicted of sexual offenses against minors had had a job involving contact with minors.

[Table 3](#) describes the prison variables of interest of the study sample. Almost half of the participants were at the beginning of their sentence. To evaluate this variable, we divided the total time of each participant's sentence proportionally into three parts: beginning, middle, and end. Most of the participants had not previously been in prison

Table 2. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample.

	Total sample N = 48		People convicted of sexual offenses against minors N = 26		People convicted of sexual offenses against adults N = 22	
	M	S _x	M	S _x	M	S _x
Current age	42.50	13.41	48.27	11.00	35.96	12.74
Age of commission of offense	35.35	12.68	41.79	10.59	28	10.88
	N	%	n	%	n	%
Nationality						
Spain	25	52.08	13	50	12	54.55
Latin	12	25	9	34.62	3	13.64
European/North American	2	4.17	-	-	2	9.09
African	1	2.08	-	-	1	4.55
Asian	-	-	1	3.85	1	4.55
Dual nationality	6	12.50	3	11.54	3	13.64
Civil status						
Single	24	50	11	42.31	13	59.09
Married	12	25	10	38.46	2	9.09
Separated or divorced	12	25	5	19.23	7	31.82
Educational level						
Primary	14	29.17	7	26.92	7	31.82
Secondary	14	29.17	8	30.77	6	27.27
Bachelor	20	41.67	11	42.31	9	40.91
Working with minors						
Yes	14	29.17	11	42.31	3	13.64
No	34	70.83	15	57.69	19	86.36

Table 3. Description of Prison Variables of Interest in Our Study Sample.

	Total sample N = 48		People convicted of sexual offenses against minors N = 26		People convicted of sexual offenses against adults N = 22	
	N	%	n	%	n	%
Point in Sentence						
Beginning	23	47.92	11	45.83	12	54.55
Middle	14	29.17	8	33.33	6	27.27
End	9	18.75	5	20.83	4	18.18
Previous criminal records						
Yes	4	8.33	2	7.69	2	9.09
No	44	91.60	24	92.31	20	90.91
Previous sexual offenses						
Yes	1	2.08	1	3.85	0	0
No	47	97.92	25	96.15	22	100
Treatment in prison						
Yes	7	14.58	2	7.69	5	22.73
No	41	85.42	24	92.31	17	77.27
Total no. of sex victims	75	100	53	100	22	100
Female victims	66	85.48	44	77.5	22	100
Male victims	9	14.52	9	22.5	0	0
	M	S _x	M	S _x	M	S _x
Victims	1.59	2.22	2.03	2.91	1.04	0.30
Age of victims	16.17	7.42	12.75	3.88	24.4	7.43

and had not yet received treatment in prison. As for the victims of the participants, most of the victims of the participants were female but we did also find male victims in the group of people convicted of sexual offenses against minors.

Instruments

To collect the study variables, we first used the *RAPE Scale* (Bumby, 1996) to evaluate the level of offense-supportive cognitions related to women and sexual assault. The scale consists of 36 items divided into two factors: the Excuse factor, which evaluates erroneous beliefs that avoid responsibility for a crime by attributing it to an external motive; and the Justification factor, related to mitigating the illegality or negative consequences of sexual assaults by minimizing the damage to victims. There are four possible answers on a Likert scale from 1–4, where 1 is complete disagreement and 4 is

complete agreement, to avoid neutral answers (Bumby, 1996). The minimum score of the test is 36, which implies that there is no offense-supportive cognition. Since the test does not contain inverse items, the higher the score obtained, the more erroneous the beliefs of the individual. In relation to the psychometric properties of the *RAPE Scale*, the internal consistency was excellent (Cronbach's α : .96), and the test-retest reliability index was .86 over a two-week interval (Hermann et al., 2012). The internal consistency was also excellent in both factors of the scale: the Excuse factor had a Cronbach's α of .92 and in the Justification factor .91 (Hermann et al., 2012). In our sample, the scale showed a high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's α of .95, while the Excuse factor had a Cronbach's α of .91 and the Justification factor had a Cronbach's α of .92.

Second, we used the *Sex With Children (SWCH) Scale* (Mann et al., 2007) to assess the existence of cognitions related to sexual abuse of minors. The scale consists of 18 items divided into two factors; the first factor, "Harmless Sex with Children," (abbreviated hereafter as Harmless Sex) evaluates cognitions related to the fact that maintaining sex with children is harmless to them, and the second factor "Provocative Sexual Children" (abbreviated hereafter as Sexual Children) evaluates the belief that children are sexually suggestive. The scale has five response options on a Likert scale 0–4 (with 0 totally disagreeing and 4 totally agreeing). The minimum score of the scale is zero, which implies an absence of offense-supportive cognitions. On the other hand, since the scale does not contain inverse items, the higher the score, the greater the presence of erroneous beliefs. The *SWCH Scale* has shown an excellent internal consistency index with a Cronbach's α of .94. Regarding the factors, the internal consistency was excellent, in the factor Harmless Sex we obtained a Cronbach's α of 0.93 and in the factor Sexually provocative children we obtained an α of .87 (Mann et al., 2007). We obtained a high consistency with a Cronbach's α of .96. We obtained a Cronbach's α of .94 for the Harmless Sex factor and .91 for the Sexual Children factor.

Finally, regarding sexual fantasies, we evaluated ten types of sexual fantasies through an ad hoc questionnaire based on the Multidimensional Developmental, Sex and Aggression Inventory (MIDSA) (Augur Enterprises, 2011). The types of fantasies were, on the one hand, fantasies with minors, which included fantasies with boys, girls, teenage boys, teenage girls and with a minor relative, and, on the other hand, sado-masochistic fantasies, which included fantasies of forced sex, bondage and use of handcuffs and whips, according to the definition provided by Wilson (1988). In the questionnaire each participant was asked if he presented these sexual fantasies and had two choices of response (0-Does not present fantasy, 1-Yes, presents fantasy).

Procedure

The data collection took place from June 2019 to October 2020. Prior to the field work, we requested authorization from our University Ethics Committee and the Spanish National Prison System Ethical Board. Upon approval, the Spanish National Prison System provided us with a list of people in several prisons who met our criteria for

inclusion: having a conviction for committing a sexual offense against adults or minors. Subsequently, we informed the participants about the objective of the research and its voluntary nature, specifying that there would be no benefit or detriment from participation and that the information obtained would not be shared with the Spanish National Prison System. Those participants who decided to participate signed the informed consent and then we conducted the data collection. It is important to mention that the results in the present study are part of a larger study whose objective is to determine the differences between people who commit sex offenses against minors and adults. Therefore, in addition to the measurement instruments mentioned above, we also conducted a personal interview with each of the participants.

The interviews were initially conducted individually by two trained researchers with experience in prison settings but due to the COVID-19 restrictions some interviews were conducted by a single researcher. To avoid any potential social desirability bias, nobody unrelated to the investigation, such as prison guards, were present. The information collected was confidential and anonymous (i.e., we assigned each participant an individual code known only to us), and we stored the information online in the university's encrypted servers to which only we had access. Prison authorities did not have access to the information collected. Indeed, during the application for the permission acquisition, we explained that we would share no information with prison authorities except in cases with a legal obligation such as imminent suicide risk.

Data Analysis

All the data of the present study can be accessed at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11531/78287>. Different data analyses were performed with the IBM SPSS version 26 statistical program. First, to check whether the variables had a normal distribution we calculated Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality tests. Non-parametric statistics were used for all calculations, since the assumption of normality was not met. To find the differences between the groups in offense-supportive cognitions, we used the Mann Whitney U statistical test and provided the median (ME) and interquartile range (RI). When we found significant differences, we calculated the size of the Rosenthal *r*-effect, and considered differences of .10 or above as small, differences above .30 as medium, and differences above 0.50 large. Secondly, we applied the Chi-square test to find the association between categorical variables. In cases where the relationship was significant, we calculated the contingency coefficient (CC), considering the association to be large above .40. We also calculated corrected standardized residuals, in cases where residuals were greater than 1.96, there were boxes with more cases than there should have been by chance, while residuals smaller than -1.96 revealed that there should be fewer cases than expected by chance.

Finally, we estimated four mediation models with the aim of assessing the direct and indirect relations of offense-supportive cognitions and sexual fantasies as independent variable and/or mediating variables, according to the two different theoretical perspectives on which variable affects the other (see the Introduction for more specifics).

Please note that the role of the *independent variable* is also known as *predictor* in mediation models, although we are not using such term to avoid causality connotations. For this purpose, we used the Mplus 8 statistical program with maximum likelihood estimator and bootstrapping with 1000 replicates to estimate the confidence intervals of the model and the direct and indirect effects. Given that the dependent variable (type of crime, where 1 was sexual offenses against minors and 3 was sexual offenses against adults) was dichotomous, we applied logistic regressions where appropriate. The first mediation model incorporated the presence of sexual fantasies with minors as an independent variable, the scores obtained in the *SWCH* instrument as a mediating variable, and the type of crime as a dependent variable. The second mediation model, on the other hand, incorporated the scores obtained in the *SWCH* instrument as the independent variable and the presence of sexual fantasies with minors as the mediating variable. In addition, the third model incorporated the presence of sadomasochistic sexual fantasies as an independent variable, the scores obtained on the *RAPE Scale* as a mediating variable, and the type of crime as a dependent variable. Finally, the fourth model took as independent variable the scores obtained on the *RAPE Scale* and as mediating variable the presence of sadomasochistic sexual fantasies.

Results

Crime-Related Offense-Supportive Cognitions

We found no significant differences in offense-supportive cognitions between the groups for any of the questionnaires administered (*RAPE*: $U = 282.500$; $p = .942$, $r = .010$, *SWCH*: $U = 257.500$; $p = .528$, $r = .091$) since both people convicted of sexual offenses against minors and people convicted of sexual offenses against adults presented low average levels of offense-supportive cognitions in both scales. The *RAPE Scale* scores for the people convicted of sexual offenses against minors group were $Md = 48.50$, $IQR = 44.50-61.50$ and in people convicted of sexual offenses against adults $Md = 49.50$, $IQR = 44.75-57.00$ and the *SWCH* scores in the people convicted of sexual offenses against minors group were $Md = 29.00$, $IQR = 0-6.50$ and $Md = 31.00$, $IQR = 0.00-6.50$ in the people convicted of sexual offenses against adults, respectively.

Similarly, we found no significant differences in the subscales of both questionnaires. In the *RAPE Scale*, the results found in the factors did not indicate differences related to the type of crime (Excuse factor: $U = 255.500$; $p = .527$, $r = .091$, Justification factor: $U = 217.000$; $p = .151$, $r = .207$). Also, in the *SWCH Scale*, we found no differences in any of the factors according to the type of crime (Harmless Sex factor: $U = 269.000$; $p = .686$, $r = .058$, Sexual Children: $U = 256.500$; $p = .505$, $r = .096$).

Sexual Fantasies Based on Crime

Regarding sexual fantasies, there were no differences in the number of sexual fantasies presented per the sex crime committed ($U = 248.00$, $p = .408$, $r = .020$), since both

groups presented a similar number of fantasies, approximately two per participant (people convicted of sexual offenses against minors: $M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.69$, people convicted of sexual offenses against adults: $M = 1.22$, $SD = 1.47$).

However, there were differences in the content of sexual fantasies depending on the sexual offense. As can be seen in Table 4, the people convicted of sexual offenses against minors group reported more sexual fantasies with minors with a moderate effect size. Corrected standardized residuals indicate that among people in the sample convicted of sexual offenses against minors, more than were expected by chance ($n = 13$) presented with sexual fantasies against minors ($res = 2.7$), while among people convicted of sexual offenses against adults, there were fewer than expected by chance ($n = 3$) with similar fantasies ($res = -2.7$).

With regards to sexual fantasies related to the use of handcuffs and whip, there were significant differences with a large effect size between both groups, with 9 participants from the people convicted of sexual offenses against adults group ($res = 3.2$) compared to only one participant of the people convicted of sexual offenses against minors group ($res = -3.2$).

Table 4. Sexual Fantasies as a Function of Conviction.

Types of sexual fantasies	People convicted of sexual offenses against minors ($n = 26$)		People convicted of sexual offenses against adults ($n = 22$)		χ^2	p	CC
	n	%	n	%			
Fantasies with minors	13	50	3	13.6	7.091	.008	.359
Fantasies with boys (0-13)	2	7.7	0	-	1.766	.184	.188
Fantasies with girls (0-13)	3	11.5	0	-	2.708	.100	.231
Fantasies with teenage boys (14-17)	3	11.5	0	-	2.708	.100	.231
Fantasies with teenage girls (14-17)	10	38.5	3	13.6	3.719	.054	.268
Fantasies with minor family member	3	11.5	0	-	2.708	.100	.231
Sadomasochistic fantasies	7	26.9	12	54.5	3.802	.051	.271
Fantasies of forced sex	4	15.4	4	18.2	.067	.796	.037
Bondage/tied fantasies	4	15.4	8	36.4	2.797	.094	.235
Fantasies of use of handcuffs and whips	1	3.8	9	40.9	9.925	.002	.414

Note. The same participant may present more than one sexual fantasy. For illustrative purposes we list fantasies with children, teenagers, boys and girls and fantasies with a minor relative included in the category sexual fantasies with minors and fantasies of forced sex, bondage and use of handcuffs and whips included in the category sadomasochistic sexual fantasies.

Offense-Supportive Cognitions Depending on the Type of Sexual Fantasy

Table 5 below shows the results on the differences in offense-supportive cognitions on the *RAPE Scale* and its factors (Excuse and Justification) according to the type of fantasies presented by the participants. First, we found differences in scores in those participants who presented sexual fantasies with girls: these participants had higher scores in the Justification factor (with a moderate effect size). Similarly, we found that the participants who scored highest on the *RAPE Scale* were those who had fantasies with a minor relative and the Excuse factor with a moderate effect size in both cases.

Table 6 shows the results of the differences in the *SWCH Scale* and its factors (Harmless Sex and Sexual Children) according to the type of sexual fantasies. First, participants who presented sexual fantasies with boys scored significantly higher on the *SWCH Scale*, in the Harmless Sex factor and the Sexual Child factor with a moderate effect size in three cases. We also found differences with a moderate effect size in the Harmless Sex factor in those participants who presented sexual fantasies with adolescent males. Likewise, participants who presented sexual fantasies with minors scored significantly higher in the Sexual Children factor with a moderate effect size. Finally, we found significant differences with a moderate effect size in the variable offense-supportive cognitions with minors and in both factors, Harmless Sex and Sexual Children based on the presence of sexual fantasies with a minor relative. The participants who presented these types of fantasies were the ones who scored the most in the corresponding offense-supportive cognition.

Mediation Models

To assess the theoretical perspective of authors who suggest that fantasy is a predictor of offense-supportive cognitions (Gee et al., 2003), we present below two models in which the independent variable is sexual fantasies (with minors and sadomasochistic). The standardized results can be seen in Figure 1 and Table 7.

The first mediation model incorporates the presence of sexual fantasies with minors as an independent variable, offense-supportive cognitions with minors as a mediator variable and the type of crime as a dependent variable. Results showed that having sexual fantasies with minors has a positive relationship with offense-supportive cognitions with minors, and that having sexual fantasies with minors has a direct relationship with the type of crime. On the contrary, it also shows that offense-supportive cognitions with minors did not present a statistically significant influence on the type of crime, and that there was no indirect relation of sexual fantasies with minors on sexual crime through offense-supportive cognitions with minors.

The second mediation model consists of the presence of sadomasochistic sexual fantasies as an independent variable, offense-supportive cognitions on sexual assault against adult women as a mediator variable and the type of crime as a dependent variable. In this model, sadomasochistic sexual fantasies have no relationship with offense-supportive cognitions on women and sexual assault, although they have a direct

Table 5. Differences in the RAPE Scale and Its Factors According to Type of Sexual Fantasies.

Factors	RAPE																
	Excuse						Justification						Total RAPE score				
	Md	IQR	U	p	r		Md	IQR	U	p	r	Md	IQR	U	p	r	
Type of fantasies	Yes																
	No																
Minors	Yes 30.50	28-40.50	205	.264	.161	21	17.50-25	181.50	.101	.236	53.50	45-64.50	195.50	.185	.191		
	No 28.50	27-36.50				19	17-20.50				47	44.50-57					
Boys	Yes 28.50	27-36.50	15.50	.128	.227	19	17-20.50	24	.300	.164	47	44.50-57	15.50	.128	.227		
	No 29.50	27-37				36	19-53				48.50	45-57					
Girls	Yes 32.00	31-45	38.50	.229	.178	25.00	23.50-39	16	.024	.319	57.00	54.50-84	28.500	.100	.240		
	No 29.00	27-37				19.00	17-21				48.00	45-57					
Teenage boys	Yes 36	32.50-39.50	42	302	.157	19	17.50-244	65	.936	.015	55	50-63.50	50.50	.489	.104		
	No 30	27-37				19	17-22				49	45-57					
Teenage girls	Yes 30	27-43	192	.409	.119	22	18-25	149	.067	.264	52	45-68	176.50	.236	.171		
	No 29	27-36				19	17-20.50				47	45-57					
Minor family member	Yes 43	39.50-50.50	19	.036	.298	25	22-39	28.50	.100	.241	68	61.50-89.50	19.50	.036	.295		
	No 29	27-36				19	17-21				48	45-57					
Sadomasochistic	Yes 29	25-32	248	.561	.083	18	17-24	225.50	.289	.153	47	42-57	237.50	.422	.116		
	No 31	27-37				20	18-22				51	45-58					
Forced sex	Yes 31	27-37	139.50	.577	.081	20	18-22	147.50	.734	.050	51	45-58	140.50	.596	.078		
	No 30	27-37				19	17-21.50				49	45-57					
Bondage/tying	Yes 28.50	27-31.50	193	583	.079	17.50	17-19.50	159.50	.176	.195	46	44.50-53	178.00	.364	.130		
	No 30.50	27-37.50				19.50	17.50-22.50				50.50	45-58					
Use of handcuffs and whips	Yes 29	25-31	166	.556	.088	17	16-19	115.50	.058	.274	46	42-49	146.50	.274	.159		
	No 30.50	27-37				19.50	18-23				50.50	45-58					

Table 6. Differences in the SWCH Scale According to Type of Sexual Fantasies.

Factors	SWCH															
	Harmless sex with children				Provocative sexual children				Total							
	Md	IQR	U	p	r	Md	IQR	U	p	r	Md	IQR	U	p	r	
Minors	Yes	.50	.00–14	188.50	.089	.245	2.50	0–10.50	174.00	.050	.282	2.50	.00–24.50	176.50	.063	.268
	No	.00	.00–1			0	0–1.50				.00	.00–3.00				
Boys	Yes	27.50	22–33	1.00	.004	.385	19	19	.000	.002	.373	46.50	41–52	.000	.002	.366
	No	.00	.00–1			.00	.00–3				.00	.00–5				
Girls	Yes	1.00	.50–11.50	46.50	.389	.148	5.00	2.50–12	42.50	.302	.167	6.00	3–23.50	44.50	.344	.151
	No	.00	.00–2			.00	.00–3				.00	.00–5				
Teenage boys	Yes	5.00	3–19	19.50	.019	.339	3.00	2–11	29.00	.074	.258	8.00	5–30	24.50	.066	.282
	No	.00	0–1			0	.00–3				.00	.00–5				
Teenage girls	Yes	.00	.00–11	183	.235	.171	3.00	.00–7	162.00	.097	.239	3.00	.00–18	165.00	.124	.222
	No	.00	.00–1			.00	.00–1.50				.00	.00–3				
Minor family member	Yes	23	22.50–28	.000	.001	.477	19	18–19	1.00	.001	.446	41	40.50–46.50	.000	.001	.443
	No	0	0–1			0	0–2				0	0–4				
Sadomasochistic	Yes	0	0–4	270	.894	.019	0	0–2	239	.401	.121	0	0–5	244.50	.484	.100
	No	0	0–2			1	0–5			1	0–7					
Forced sex	Yes	.50	0–9.50	130	.422	.137	.50	0–12.50	140.50	.596	.085	1	0–22	143.00	.654	.072
	No	0	0–1.50			0	0–3				.50	0–5				
Bondage/tying	Yes	0	0–2.50	215.50	.989	.020	0	0–1.50	190.00	.499	.097	.50	0–3.50	203.00	.741	.047
	No	0	0–2			0	0–5				.50	0–7				
Use of handcuffs and whips	Yes	.50	0–4	171.50	.644	.078	0	0–1	166.50	.556	.093	.50	0–5	183.00	.871	.027
	No	0	0–2			0	0–5				.50	0–6				

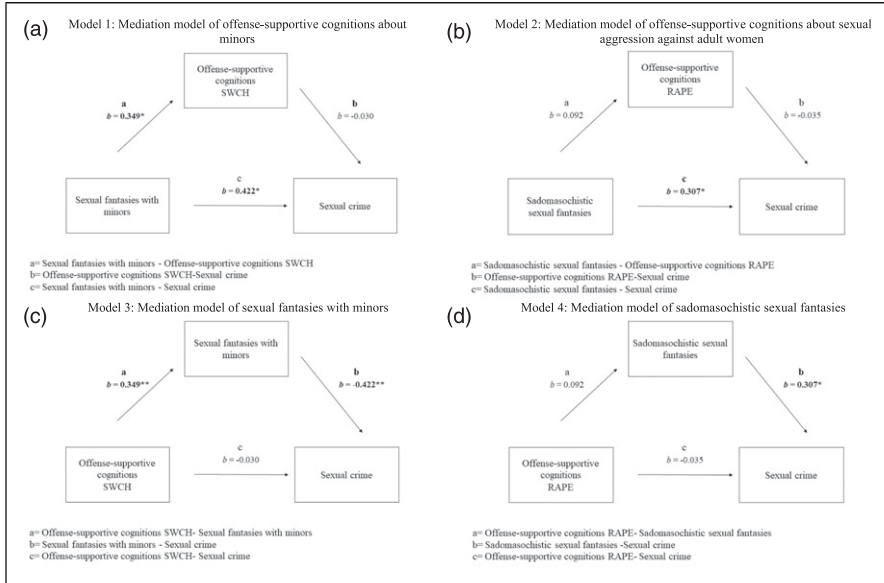


Figure 1. Standardized paths of the mediation models (** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$). (a) Model 1: Mediation model of offense-supportive cognitions about minors. (b) Model 2: Mediation model of offense-supportive cognitions about sexual aggression against adult women (c) Model 3: Mediation model of sexual fantasies with minors (d) Model 4: Mediation model of sadomasochistic sexual fantasies.

relationship with the type of crime. There was no statistically significant relation between these offense-supportive cognitions and the type of crime, and sadomasochistic sexual fantasies had no indirect relationship with sexual crime through offense-supportive cognitions.

To assess the theoretical perspective of authors who suggest that offense-supportive cognitions are incorporated into the content of sexual fantasies (Bartels et al., 2021), we present below two models in which the independent variable is offense-supportive cognitions (toward sexual aggression toward women and toward children). The standardized results can also be seen in Figure 1 and Table 7.

The third mediation model incorporates the presence of offense-supportive cognitions with minors as an independent variable, sexual fantasies with minors as a mediator variable and the type of crime as a dependent variable. The results showed that offense-supportive cognitions with minors have a positive relationship with sexual fantasies with minors, and that having sexual fantasies involving minors was significantly associated with sexual offending against children relative to adults. Offense-supportive cognitions with minors have no direct relationship with the type of crime. In this case, we found a non-statistically significant indirect relationship through sexual

Table 7. Standardized Results of the Four Mediation Models.

Model	Parameter	b	SE	Est./S.E.	p	90%CI
Model 1	Sexual fantasies with minors → Offense-supportive cognitions SWCH	0.349	0.135	2.587	0.010	0.127–0.571
IV: Sexual fantasies with minors.	Offense-supportive cognitions SWCH → Sexual crime	-0.030	0.177	-0.169	0.866	-0.322–0.262
M: SWCH.	Sexual fantasies with minors → Sexual crime	-0.422	0.195	-2.165	0.030	-0.743–0.101
DV: Sexual crime.	Indirect effect (Sexual fantasies → SWCH → Sexual crime)	-0.010	0.066	-0.157	0.875	-0.120–0.100
Model 2	Sadomasochistic sexual fantasies → Offense-supportive cognitions RAPE	0.092	0.143	0.644	0.519	-0.143–0.328
IV: Sadomasochistic sexual fantasies.	Offense-supportive cognitions RAPE → Sexual crime	-0.035	0.157	-0.225	0.822	-0.294–0.223
M: RAPE.	Sadomasochistic sexual fantasies → Sexual crime	0.307	0.147	2.087	0.037	0.065–0.549
DV: Sexual crime.	Indirect effect (Sadomasochistic fantasies → RAPE → Sexual crime)	-0.003	0.015	-0.212	0.832	-0.028–0.022
Model 3	Offense-supportive cognitions SWCH → Sexual fantasies with minors	0.349	0.127	2.751	0.006	0.140–0.557
IV: SWCH.	Sexual fantasies with minors → Sexual crime	-0.422	0.158	-2.681	0.007	-0.682–0.163
M: Sexual fantasies with minors.	Offense-supportive cognitions SWCH → Sexual crime	0.030	0.187	-0.161	0.872	-0.337–0.227
DV: Sexual crime.	Indirect effect (SWCH → Sexual fantasies → Sexual crime)	-0.147	0.079	-1.873	0.061	-0.277–0.018
Model 4	Offense-supportive cognitions RAPE → Sadomasochistic sexual fantasies	0.092	0.143	0.644	0.519	-0.143–0.328
IV: RAPE.	Sadomasochistic sexual fantasies → Sexual crime	0.307	0.147	2.087	0.037	0.065–0.549
M: Sadomasochistic sexual fantasies.	Offense-supportive cognitions RAPE → Sexual crime	-0.035	0.157	-0.225	0.822	-0.294–0.223
DV: Sexual crime.	Indirect effect (RAPE → Sadomasochistic fantasies → Sexual crime)	0.028	0.046	0.613	0.540	-0.048–0.104

Note. IV = Independent variable. M = Mediator variable. DV = Dependent variable.

fantasies involving minors, but this result is interesting for theoretical reflection and will be discussed, with all due caution, in the discussion.

The fourth mediation model incorporates the presence of offense-supportive cognitions on sexual assault as an independent variable, sadomasochistic fantasies as a mediator variable and the type of crime as a dependent variable. Again, the results showed that offense-supportive cognitions on sexual assault have no relationship with sadomasochistic fantasies, and that offense-supportive cognitions on sexual assault have no direct relationship with the type of crime. On the contrary, having sadomasochistic fantasies was related to the type of crime. Also, there was no indirect relationship between offense-supportive cognitions and sexual crime through sadomasochistic fantasies.

Discussion

The objective of this research was to find out if there are differences in the content of offense-supportive cognitions between a group of people convicted of sexual offenses against adults and a group of people convicted of sexual offenses against minors. Also, depending on whether they present fantasies with minors or not, we explored mediation models aligned with different theoretical assumptions about the role of the variables within the complex interplay between offense-supportive cognitions, sexual fantasies, and specific forms of sexual crime. We hope the results would help inform the debate on the need to intervene with offense-supportive cognitions or sexual fantasies during treatment (Marshall et al., 2011; Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2011).

The results show that both groups, despite having convictions for crimes directed at different victims, showed offense-supportive cognitions related to women, sexual assaults, and sex with minors, and no differences in the scores in either of the two questionnaires (*RAPE* and *SWCH*). The results do not support our initial hypothesis that the type of cognition would be related to the type of crime. These results support those of Castro et al. (2009) and Hermann et al. (2012), who also did not find evidence of differences in offense-supportive cognitions in both groups.

However, in other investigations different levels of offense-supportive cognitions were observed between groups (Mann et al., 2007; Marshall et al., 2001). This difference in results might be because the individuals who scored highest in offense-supportive cognitions on minors are those who presented sexual fantasies with minors and, therefore, have a possible sexual interest in minors. Not all people who commit sexual offenses against minors present pedophilia (e.g., Herrero, 2018), but approximately 30-50% of those convicted of sexual offenses against minors are people with pedophilic interests (Seto, 2012). Also, not all of those who have fantasies about minors commit sexual offenses against children, in fact, around 1% of the population has fantasies about minors or pedophile sexual interest (Seto, 2009). In the same way, people who commit crimes of sexual assault against adults do not always present fantasies regarding the use of force and in the general population the percentage of people with this type of sadomasochistic fantasies is high (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995

cited in [De la Rubia, 2010](#)), without the need for them to commit a sex crime. That is, studies that have compared offense-supportive cognitions and sex crimes so far would not have considered which participants of their samples presented sexual fantasies related to the content of the offense-supportive cognitions, although the presence of these fantasies could be the factor most related to the presence of those offense-supportive cognitions ([O'Connor & Gannon, 2021](#)). To test this hypothesis, we evaluated the different sexual fantasies in the participants of our sample. We found that 13 of the 26 people convicted of sexual offenses against minors presented sexual fantasies related to minors versus 3 of the 22 people convicted of sexual offenses against adults, with a moderate effect size. That is, our sample consisted of a high percentage of individuals with sexual interest in minors, and even when most of them were serving sentences for sex crimes against minors, there were 3 participants who presented sexual fantasies with adolescents and had not been convicted of a crime against minors but have been convicted for sex crimes against adults. Furthermore, there was a relationship with a large effect size between the presence of fantasies involving the use of handcuffs and whips and having committed a sexual crime against women, as almost half (9 out of 22) of the people convicted of sexual offenses against adults presented fantasies of this type, something common among people convicted of sexual offenses against adults ([Moyano & Sierra, 2014](#)), compared to one of the 26 people convicted of sexual offenses against minors. Both results are similar to those reported by [Marshall et al. \(1991\)](#) where 52% of their sample reported sexual fantasies with minors and the [Beech et al. \(2005\)](#) study, where 79% of the sample who had committed a sadistic sexual offense reported sadistic fantasies. That is, although both sexual fantasies about minors and the use of violence predominate in the group that commits related sexual offenses, they are not necessarily exclusive to those who committed the specific crime and can also occur in individuals who were convicted for other unrelated sexual offenses.

If instead of considering differences in offense-supportive cognitions as a function of the crime committed, we focus on the type of fantasies presented by individuals, we do find differences. In the first place, participants who presented sexual fantasies with minors (children, teenage boys, minor relatives), regardless of their crime, obtained significantly higher scores with a moderate effect size in offense-supportive cognitions with minors (*SWCH*) than those who did not present these fantasies, which coincides with the recent study by [Eberhaut et al. \(2022\)](#) in which they found that offense-supportive cognitions about child sexual abuse were more present in individuals convicted of sexual offenses with a diagnosis of pedophilia than those who did not have such a diagnosis. These results are also consistent with the study by [O'Connor and Gannon \(2021\)](#) in which participants who felt sexual arousal for minors were more likely to have sexual fantasies about minors and more cognitions supportive of child sexual abuse. In addition, it is important to note that in our study when the content of sexual fantasies was with younger males (boys and/or adolescents) the offense-supportive cognition scores were higher. In these cases, professionals in the field should pay special attention, since, according to the *Screening Scale for Pedophilic*

Interest (Seto et al., 2004), having previously assaulted a male minor is a recidivism risk factor.

We also found significantly higher scores with a moderate effect size on offense-supportive cognitions about women and sexual aggression (*RAPE*) in those participants who presented sexual fantasies with girls and with a minor relative, specifically in the Justification factor. The greater presence of offense-supportive cognitions on women and sexual assault in those participants who presented sexual fantasies with girls, could be because the participants responded to the offense-supportive cognitions on sexual assault without noting the age of the female victim referred to in the items of the instrument (Bumby, 1996). However, we found no significant differences in the offense-supportive cognitions on assault on minors (*SWCH*) or in the offense-supportive cognitions of rape (*RAPE*) between participants who reported sexual fantasies about sex force, use of handcuffs, bondage and sadomasochism and those who did not.

On the other hand, sexual fantasies related to the use of force, use of handcuffing, bondage, and sadomasochism, did not correlate with significant differences in offense-supportive cognitions. The evaluated mediation models also supported these findings. In the first model, centered on fantasies and offense-supportive cognitions about minors, we found that sexual fantasies with minors were related to offense-supportive cognitions related to minors (*SWCH*) and on the commission of a sexual offense, without finding an indirect relationship between sexual fantasies with minors and the commission of a sexual offense through offense-supportive cognitions with minors. In contrast, in the second model, focusing on offense-supportive cognitions on women and sexual assault (*RAPE*), we note that there was only a statistically significant relation of sadomasochistic fantasies on sex crime.

Although the data have been obtained with a reduced sample, it is a preliminary study and we encourage further research to contrast our results, three important aspects are worth discussing now. First, as we hypothesized, sexual fantasies with minors are related to offense-supportive cognitions when it comes to minor victims (Model 1). In contrast, when fantasies are related to the use of force, we do not find a significant relationship with offense-supportive cognitions (Model 2). Therefore, it seems that the type of sexual fantasies that the participants present could have some relationship with offense-supportive cognitions. In our case, it seems that it is sexual fantasies with minors that have a relation with offense-supportive cognitions on minors. This fact can be explained because the social stigma against sexual fantasies with minors (Heasman & Foreman, 2019) makes them rare in the ordinary population (Seto, 2009). When a person has feelings that conflict with social moral norms (Abel et al., 1984), they suffer high cognitive dissonance that results in the development of offense-supportive cognitions that justify or minimize that sexual interest (Gee et al., 2003). However, since sexual fantasies related to the use of force may not be so stigmatized, they may be experienced as something pleasurable (Moyano & Sierra, 2014) or normalized by its widespread consumption in pornography (Sáez-González, 2022), thus, such people would not need to justify their fantasies through offense-supportive cognitions.

Secondly, it is important to note that in the four mediation models the presence of specific sexual fantasies (sex with minors and sadomasochistic fantasies) had a direct relationship with the commission of the crime. Therefore, as several authors point out (Nichols & Molinder, 1984; Valencia et al., 2008), sexual fantasies were associated with sexual offending in line with those fantasies. Thus, this data, in addition to expanding knowledge in this area of research and contributing to thought on the processes that lead a person to commit a sex crime, also have implications for treatment in prisons. Given the relevance of sexual fantasies to crime, it would be advisable to carry out thorough evaluations of sexual fantasies of people with sex crime convictions, regardless of their crimes, but especially if they have pedophilia, given the relationship between that sexual preference and offense-supportive cognitions (Eberhaut et al., 2022) and because both factors are potentially relevant to recidivism. Since each group studied here has different sexual fantasies and their level of social acceptance are different, there is a need for therapeutic interventions adapted to sexual preferences and not necessarily to the crime for which the person is convicted, at least within sex crimes. Health professionals may need to form different therapeutic groups based on participants' sexual fantasies or sexual interests, such as specific groups with pedophilia.

In the third model we do observe that offense-supportive cognitions with minors have a direct relationship with sexual fantasies with minors, which would be in line with other theories (Bartels et al., 2021; Marshall & Marshall, 2000). In the case of cognitions of offense-supportive cognitions toward adults, they have no direct or indirect relation with sexual offending. This result is in line with authors like Hanson and Wallace-Capretta (2000) who do not consider cognitions of support for crime as criminogenic variables. However, in the case of offense-supportive cognitions about minors, there are theoretical reasons to pay attention to the potential influence of sexual fantasies about minors to mediate the relation between offense-supportive cognitions and crime. In this line, we could consider that perhaps in isolation offense-supportive cognitions are not a risk factor, but when offense-supportive cognitions appear together with sexual fantasies with minors they can become a precipitating factor for a sexual crime. Therefore, it is necessary to continue investigating the role of offense-supportive cognitions since they do seem to be related to fantasies, a key variable in the intervention with people convicted of sexual assault.

In conclusion, our findings support those theories that affirm that sexual offense-supportive cognitions have a justifying function for the sexual fantasies involving minors (Gee et al., 2003) and may also affect the content of sexual fantasies by incorporating such beliefs (Bartels et al., 2021; Marshall & Marshall, 2000). However, offense-supportive cognitions do not have a direct relationship with the crime, in contrast to sexual fantasies. Crime-supportive cognitions related to minors could have an indirect relationship between sexual fantasies and crime through fantasies with minors because of, although the results were not statistically significant, it would be interesting to investigate further such potential mediating effect. Therefore, in accordance with Marshall et al. (2011), perhaps therapeutic work should be more focused on sexual fantasies, and work on offense-supportive cognitions reserved for when the

participant shows a high degree of engagement and a good therapeutic bond has been established, to avoid reluctance or confrontation. In any case, given the cross-sectional nature of this study, there could be other interpretations of these results.

Finally, we need to highlight some limitations of our study. First, the design of the study is cross-sectional: we collected the information from participants at a specific point in time without experimental manipulation, so it is not possible to assume causality that would require, a part of covariance between variables, temporal precedence of the independent variable and disqualification of alternative explanations, among others. In this line, it is not possible to be sure of the directionality of our effects, as the relationships of our variables and the type of crime could be more complex since it is still unknown whether the offense-supportive cognitions appear before or after the commission of crime, acting either as a precipitating factor or as a cognitive dissonance, respectively (Trabazo & Azor, 2009). In addition, the selection of the participants was not random, but instead achieved via non-probabilistic sampling for convenience due to the security and anonymity restrictions of the penitentiaries. Even when it is always desirable to have larger samples and carrying out random sampling, our sample size is comparable to that of other investigations as posed in the Methods section (i.e., Baić et al., 2019; Bumby, 1996; Castro et al., 2009; Gee et al., 2004), and the characteristics of the people convicted of sexual offenses against minors sample were comparable to other populations of people convicted of the same crime in Spain (Del Real Castrillo, 2020), it would be desirable to have larger samples and to be able to carry out random sampling. Another limitation would be that the present study provides information on the presence or absence of fantasies, but not on the frequency of sexual fantasization. It would be important for future research to study the frequency of fantasies, as it may be important when examining the relationship between offense-supportive cognitions and sexual crimes. Finally, another limitation of the study is that it was not possible to check the veracity of the self-reports provided by the participants, even though we assume low levels of social desirability bias since we carefully took care that no guard was present during the interviews and there was no reward provided after the participant was involved in our research. Also, we need to be cautious in interpreting our results as, according to Gannon et al. (2007), subjects could have scored at the questionnaires about offense-supportive cognitions differently because of the wording of the scale items.

Given these limitations, we invite the scientific community to carry out future research to further investigate the relationship between sexual fantasies and offense-supportive cognitions, to expand knowledge in this area and to respond to the debates raised above, so that we can see if our findings are replicated or refuted. We think that our results indicate that it is a very interesting area of research and promises to contribute to evidence-based treatments in the future.

Acknowledgements

We thank Spanish Penitentiary Institution for granting permission to access the correctional centers and advance the knowledge in this topic. Also, we want to thank the treatment subheads of the correctional centers in Madrid, that facilitated the access to the sample. Finally, we want to

thank the inmates for volunteering to participate and Clara Bayón, Cristina Moreno, Laura Rastrollo, and Marta Rodríguez for contributing with the data collection.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Authors declare no financial interests. The results of this study belong to the “Comprehensive approach to child sexual abuse” project that participated in funding competition with other projects in the 2019 call for “Proyectos Propios” of the Universidad Pontificia Comillas (PP2019_07) and was eventually financed. However, the University has not commissioned this project.

Ethical Statement

Ethical Approval

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universidad Pontificia Comillas and therefore all the ethical requirements that protect the rights and integrity of the participants have been respected, in accordance with the ethical standards established in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki.

Method

The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data, the accuracy of the data analyses, and have made every effort to avoid inflating statistically significant results. We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in the study. The data sheet for this study is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11531/78287>.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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