The Role of Cognition in Sexual Assault

ZINDEL V. SEGAL AND LANA E. STERMAC

As even a casual perusal of the psychological literature on sexual assault reveals, the areas of investigation receiving the widest research attention seem to be those related to the constructs of deviant sexual arousal, heterosexual social skills, or the sexual and drug history of the offender. While it has been noted that cognitive variables may be especially relevant to work in these areas, cognition in sexual assault remains virtually unstudied (Lanyon, 1986; Stermac & Segal, in press). The reasons for this may be manifold, yet one explanation which suggests itself is that psychosocial investigations of sexual assault have yet to experience the "cognitive revolution" which has permeated the study of other problem behaviors (e.g., unipolar depression, Segal & Shaw, 1986; anxiety disorders, Ingram & Kendall, 1987). Alternatively, within the area of sexual assault the dominant theoretical construct of deviant sexual arousal has, up till recently, held sway over competing etiological accounts such that it has contributed to the development of a number of unimodal theories which leave little room for additional explanatory constructs (Abel, Barlow, Blanchard, & Guild, 1977). As the explanatory power of models based solely on the role of deviant sexual arousal becomes increasingly questioned (Baxter, Marshall, Barbaree, Davidson, & Malcolm, 1984), the need for multimodal models, which integrate other factors implicated in the commission of sexual assault, becomes apparent.

In such a context, examining the role of cognition in sexual assault and attempting to fashion a link to the social antecedents from which the specific attitudes, beliefs, or processing styles which sex offenders utilize in their interactions with potential victims may be particularly fruitful. It is also important to try to map out the role of cognition in the maintenance or reinforcement of con-
continued offending once this behavior is established or, conversely, to provide clues to the process of recidivism, once an individual has been able to refrain from sexual misbehavior (Pithers, Marques, Gibat, & Marlatt, 1983). Given that an increasing number of treatment programs are incorporating cognitive elements, or procedures, it is necessary to have a well-articulated position on the role which cognitive factors play, not only for the effectiveness of these treatment elements to be maximized, but also to be able to specify what meaningful cognitive change following treatment would look like.

This chapter will address itself to some of these questions in reviewing those cognitive studies which have been conducted with these populations, as well as attempt to provide a theoretical framework within which their findings can be best construed. To begin with, however, a brief overview of some operative constructs in the assessment of cognition will be provided.

**ISSUES IN COGNITIVE ASSESSMENT**

One of the most fundamental issues pervading efforts in the cognitive assessment of sex offenders is that concerning which level of analysis is to be employed. The reasons for this are twofold. One has to do with the fact that cognition can be assessed at a number of different levels of abstraction which proceed from a micro to a more macro level of information processing. A second reason is that while most cognitive assessment efforts are guided by a theory which specifies the putative role of cognitive factors in behavioral performance, such a theoretical framework has yet to be established with respect to the role of cognitive factors in sexual assault. Without such a theoretical framework, those studies which have examined cognitive factors have done so in a relatively unsystematic fashion, and in cases where differences have been documented, these differences have yet to be incorporated into a more synthetic framework.

For the present discussion, we can distinguish cognitive processes operating at a number of different levels of interest, namely, cognitive structures, cognitive propositions, cognitive operations, and cognitive products (Hollon & Kriss, 1984; Ingram & Kendall, 1986). *Cognitive structure* refers to the organization of memory content and the various linkages and associations among stored features of memory. *Cognitive propositions* refers to the type of information which is actually stored or represented in the various cognitive structures. An example here would be a cognitive schema of women or a schema of children. *Cognitive operations* can be viewed as the various processes by which the components of the information-processing system operate. These operations emphasize the active manipulation of information throughout the system and emphasize the use of such processes as attention allocation, encoding, control processes, and spreading activation among related concepts. Finally, *cognitive products* are the actual thoughts or images which come to mind that result from the input of information and the interaction of cognitive structures, propositions, and operations. Examples of these may be things such as self-statements, attributions, or inferences.