



Early maladaptive schemas and child sexual offending: implications for understanding paedophilia

Abstract

Background: Early maladaptive schemas (EMS) are enduring cognitive and emotional patterns that develop in response to unmet core emotional needs in childhood and are associated with a range of psychopathology and maladaptive behaviours, including compulsive sexual behaviour and sexual aggression. **Aims:** This critical narrative review examines the empirical literature on EMS and paedophilia, with particular attention to methodological limitations within the existing evidence base. **Methods:** Four primary studies using the Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ) were identified and reviewed. These studies compared child sexual offenders with other offender groups, including offenders against adults and non-sexual offenders. **Results:** Findings indicate that child sexual offenders, particularly those meeting criteria for paedophilia, most consistently endorsed elevations in the Defectiveness/Shame and Subjugation schemas. However, the literature is constrained by small sample sizes, reliance on self-report or screening measures of paedophilia, and the absence of non-offending paedophilic comparison groups. **Conclusions:** Current findings provide preliminary insight into schema profiles associated with child sexual offending but do not clarify whether similar patterns characterise paedophilia more broadly. The absence of YSQ data from non-offending individuals with paedophilic interests represents a significant gap in the literature, particularly given that related constructs have been examined in non-offending paedophilic populations using other psychological measures.

Keywords: Schema therapy, Young Schema Questionnaire, child sexual abuse prevention

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INTRODUCTION

Early maladaptive schemas (EMS) are broad, stable, and self-defeating cognitive-emotional patterns that typically originate in childhood and develop in response to unmet core emotional needs within the family environment.[1] These schemas shape how individuals perceive themselves, others, and their interpersonal relationships, and they have been consistently associated with a range of psychopathological outcomes. In particular, EMS have been linked to antisocial features,[2,3] aggressive and compulsive sexual behaviour.[4,5] The Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ) is the most widely used self-report measure of EMS and has demonstrated acceptable psychometric properties across both clinical and non-clinical populations.[6-8]

One domain in which EMS may be particularly relevant is the study of paedophilia. Paedophilia is characterised by recurrent, intense sexual attraction to prepubescent children.[9] Research indicates that sexual arousal patterns toward minors exist on a continuum within the general male population, with both phallometric and self-report studies identifying non-trivial levels of arousal to child and adolescent stimuli.[10-17] Given the established associations between EMS and maladaptive sexual behaviour,[4,5]

examining schema profiles in relation to paedophilic interests may inform clinical intervention and support child sexual abuse prevention efforts.

This critical narrative review evaluates the limited empirical literature examining early maladaptive schemas in relation to child sexual offending and paedophilia. The review focuses specifically on studies using YSQ, with attention to methodological strengths, limitations, and the extent to which existing findings can be applied to paedophilic interest more broadly. Particular attention is given to the absence of non-offending paedophilic comparison samples, as this represents a central limitation in determining whether identified schema patterns are associated with paedophilic interest itself, offending behaviour, or broader forensic and developmental factors.

METHODS

Literature identification and scope

This review adopts a critical narrative approach to examining the empirical literature on EMS in relation to paedophilia and child sexual offending. Literature searches were conducted using PsycINFO, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Scopus.

Search terms included combinations of “early maladaptive schemas,” “Young Schema Questionnaire,” “YSQ,” “schema therapy,” “paedophilia,” “paedophilic disorder,” “child sexual offenders,” “child molesters,” and “sexual offending.” Reference lists of identified studies and review articles were also examined to identify additional relevant publications.

To be included in the present review, studies were required to: (a) utilise YSQ or a recognised variant of the instrument, (b) examine individuals who had sexually offended against children and/or individuals identified as paedophilic, and (c) report findings relating to early maladaptive schemas. Studies focusing exclusively on adolescent sexual offenders were excluded due to the developmental and diagnostic distinctions between adolescent sexual offending and paedophilia. Broader studies examining cognitive distortions, attachment, adverse childhood experiences, or related psychological constructs were included selectively where relevant to contextualising schema findings.

Only four primary studies were identified that directly examined EMS using YSQ in samples relevant to paedophilia or child sexual offending. All four studies were conducted with offender populations, and no identified study included a non-offending comparison group of individuals with paedophilic interests. Given the limited number of studies and the heterogeneity of comparison groups and methodologies, a quantitative synthesis was not feasible. Accordingly, the present review adopts a descriptive and critical approach, with particular attention to methodological limitations and implications for future research.

RESULTS

Empirical studies of early maladaptive schemas and child sexual offending

The following section reviews the four primary studies identified in the literature search. These studies are organised chronologically and according to the comparison groups employed. Together, they represent the current empirical evidence base concerning EMS, child sexual offending, and paedophilia as assessed through YSQ. Although the studies vary in sample composition and method of assessing paedophilia, they provide preliminary evidence of recurring schema patterns while also highlighting substantial limitations in the existing literature.

Early maladaptive schemas in child sexual offenders compared with other offender groups

Chakhssi *et al.*[18] assessed EMS in a forensic inpatient sample of 66 male offenders. The sample included child sexual offenders ($n = 23$), sexual offenders against adults ($n = 19$), and non-sexual violent offenders ($n = 24$), all admitted between 2002 and 2009. Paedophilia was assessed using the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) diagnostic criteria, and 95.7% ($n = 22$) of the child sexual offender group met criteria for paedophilic disorder. EMS were measured using YSQ. Psychopathy was controlled for using the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R). Axis II diagnoses were also considered, and no

statistically significant differences in personality disorders were found between groups.

The findings indicated that child sexual offenders demonstrated significantly higher levels of EMS compared to non-sexual violent offenders. Elevated scores were observed for Abandonment, Defectiveness/Shame, Social Isolation, Subjugation, and Self-Sacrifice schemas. No statistically significant differences were identified between child sexual offenders and sexual offenders against adults. A trend toward significance was observed for the Social Isolation schema, with higher scores among child sexual offenders. This pattern is consistent with research indicating that child sexual offenders often experience loneliness and fear of intimacy,[19] and show reduced social and hetero-social competence compared to rapists.[20, 21]

No significant differences were identified within the Impaired Limits domain, including the Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline and Entitlement/Grandiosity schemas. This is notable given that the Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline schema is associated with impulsivity,[1] and that narcissistic traits have been linked to sexual offending.[22-24] The authors did not provide an explanation for the absence of differences in these schemas.

Several limitations constrain the interpretation of these findings. The relatively small sample size ($n = 66$) reduces statistical power. Important distinctions between offender typologies were not examined, including fixated versus regressed offenders and intrafamilial versus extrafamilial offending.[25-27] Larger samples would allow for a more detailed analysis of EMS across subtypes, including potential differences between paedophilic and non-paedophilic offenders. The absence of a non-offending paedophilic comparison group represents an important methodological limitation. Including such a population may help clarify whether observed schema patterns are associated with paedophilic interest itself or are specific to offending behaviour, with important implications for child sexual abuse prevention.

Comparison of early maladaptive schemas in child sexual offenders and non-offenders

Findings from Carvalho and Nobre[28] provide one of the few comparisons of EMS across child sexual offenders, adult rapists, and non-offending individuals. In this study, individuals convicted of child sexual abuse demonstrated higher overall levels of EMS relative to both comparison groups. Elevated scores were observed across four of the five schema domains when compared to non-offenders, specifically Disconnection/Rejection, Impaired Autonomy/Performance, Other-Directedness, and Over-Vigilance/Inhibition. “In contrast, differences between child sexual abusers and adult rapists were generally limited, with a significant distinction identified only for the Pessimism schema, on which the child sexual abuse group scored higher.” No statistically significant differences were observed within the Impaired Limits domain, a finding that mirrors the pattern reported by Chakhssi *et al.*[18]

At the level of individual schemas, child sexual abusers scored higher than both comparison groups on Abandonment,

Defectiveness/Shame, and Subjugation. Within schema theory, Abandonment and Defectiveness/Shame are situated within the Disconnection/Rejection domain and are associated with disruptions in early attachment relationships.[1,29] This pattern is consistent with broader research linking insecure attachment and adverse parent-child relational dynamics with sexual offending.[30-32] These findings suggest that elevated schema scores may reflect underlying developmental vulnerabilities rather than processes specific to sexual offending.

The Subjugation schema reflects a tendency to perceive one's own emotions and needs as less valid than those of others, often resulting in excessive compliance to avoid conflict, criticism, or abandonment. Over time, this suppression may contribute to the accumulation of unexpressed anger, which can be expressed through maladaptive outlets such as passive-aggressive behaviour, outbursts, substance use, or acting out.[1] Such dynamics may be relevant to the development of maladaptive sexual behaviours.

Methodologically, Carvalho and Nobre[28] assessed EMS using YSQ in a sample of 33 men convicted of child sexual abuse, 32 adult rapists, and 30 non-offenders. This inclusion of a non-offending control group addressed a limitation of Chakhssi *et al.*,[18] who did not include such a comparison group. However, the study did not assess participants for paedophilia using DSM criteria or phallometric methods. Given that a substantial proportion of child sexual offenders do not meet criteria for paedophilia,[33] the findings are more accurately interpreted as reflecting patterns associated with sexual offending rather than paedophilic interests specifically.

“Several limitations constrain the interpretation of these findings.” The relatively small sample size ($n = 95$) reduces statistical power, and the absence of differentiation by offender typologies limits the ability to identify variation across subgroups. As in the previous study, non-offending individuals with paedophilic interests were not included. Inclusion of this population would be important for determining whether observed schema patterns are associated with paedophilic interest itself or are specific to offending behaviour.

Early maladaptive schemas in paedophilic and non-paedophilic child sexual offenders

Sigre-Leirós *et al.*[34] made a significant advancement by being the first to distinguish between paedophilic and non-paedophilic child sexual offenders when examining EMS. “Given the well-established differences between these subgroups,[35] this distinction represents an important development.” The study is the only one to date that directly compares EMS in paedophilic versus non-paedophilic child sexual offenders. Paedophilia was assessed using the Screening Scale for Paedophilic Interests (SSPI), an instrument shown to correlate positively with phallometric measures of sexual arousal to children.[36] The sample included 168 participants: 50 adult rapists, 19 paedophilic child molesters, 40 non-paedophilic child molesters, and 51 non-sexual offenders.

Building on earlier findings, Sigre-Leirós *et al.*[34] found that paedophilic offenders were more likely than non-paedophilic offenders to endorse high levels of Defectiveness/Shame and Subjugation schemas. In fact, paedophilic offenders were more

than twice as likely as the other three groups to show elevated scores on these two schemas.

Although this study had the largest sample size to date ($n = 168$), it shares limitations with the previous research. The sample size for the paedophilic group remained modest ($n = 19$), and the study did not use phallometric assessment to confirm paedophilia. There is also potential overlap in the adult rapist group, as some may have offended against children or met criteria for paedophilia. The authors appropriately note that the cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences. In addition, the study did not include a non-offending comparison group with paedophilic interests.

Early maladaptive schemas and cognitive distortions in child sexual offenders

Although not directly comparable to the three primary studies reviewed above, Velásquez Marafiga *et al.*[37] provide additional evidence on the role of EMS in sexual offending. In a sample of 49 convicted male sexual offenders against children and adolescents, the authors examined associations between cognitive distortions and EMS using YSQ. They reported significant links between specific cognitive distortions and the schemas of Defectiveness/Shame, Grandiosity, and Vulnerability to Harm, with Vulnerability to Harm emerging as a significant predictor.

However, the relevance of this study to the present review is limited. Its primary focus was on cognitive distortions rather than EMS profiles per se, and the authors did not assess participants for paedophilia or distinguish between paedophilic and non-paedophilic offenders. Consistent with the broader literature, no non-offending individuals with paedophilic interests were included. These findings add modest support to the association between certain schemas and sexual offending, but do not advance understanding of schema patterns specifically in relation to paedophilic interests.

DISCUSSION

Consistent schema findings across studies

Despite some variability in findings across the four studies reviewed, there is notable convergence in key schema domains associated with child sexual offenders. Across all studies, offenders demonstrated elevated scores in Domain One schemas, which are characterised by disruptions in attachment and the expectation that one's need for security, stability, and emotional support will not be met.[1] These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that child sexual offenders report impaired parental identification and higher levels of perceived rejection, particularly maternal rejection, which has been linked to diminished self-esteem.[38,39] Descriptions of caregivers as emotionally distant, rejecting, or unsupportive are also commonly reported in this population.[32,39]

In addition to domain-level findings, the reviewed studies consistently identified elevated Defectiveness/Shame and Subjugation schemas among child sexual offenders relative to non-sexual offenders, sexual offenders against adults, and non-offending controls. One study further differentiated between

paedophilic and non-paedophilic offenders, reporting that paedophilic offenders were more likely to exhibit these schemas. These findings align with broader evidence linking Defectiveness/Shame to low self-esteem and heightened sensitivity to rejection,[1] as well as research demonstrating lower self-esteem in child sexual offenders compared to other groups.[40] Both schemas have also been associated with increased rates of depression, anxiety, and personality pathology,[41-44] which are likewise more prevalent in this population.[40] More broadly, sexual offending has been associated with cognitive distortions, offense-supportive beliefs, and other criminogenic risk factors, which may interact with underlying schema vulnerability.[45-48]

Methodological limitations of the existing literature

However, the methodological limitations of the existing literature substantially constrain interpretation. Sample sizes across studies were modest ($n = 66$, $n = 95$, $n = 168$, and $n = 49$), and none of the studies employed phallometric assessment to confirm paedophilic interest. Only one study distinguished between paedophilic and non-paedophilic offenders, and importantly, none included a comparison group of non-offending individuals with paedophilic interests. As a result, the current evidence base is limited to offender samples, which may confound sexual interest with offending behaviour.

This limitation is evident across the broader literature. A recent systematic review by Turhan *et al.*[49] similarly synthesised research on early maladaptive schemas in sexual and violent offenders but relied exclusively on forensic populations. While that review further supports the presence of elevated schemas, particularly Defectiveness/Shame and Subjugation, in sexual offenders, it does not address whether these schema patterns are associated with paedophilic interest itself or with offending behaviour more broadly. This distinction is particularly important given that paedophilia and sexual offending are not synonymous; not all individuals with paedophilic interests offend, and not all individuals who offend against children meet criteria for paedophilia.[50-52]

Empirical research indicates that a substantial proportion of individuals who sexually offend against children do not meet diagnostic criteria for paedophilia. Seto *et al.*[33] found that only 35% of contact offenders met criteria for paedophilia. A comparable proportion of non-contact offenders also failed to meet diagnostic thresholds, further illustrating that paedophilia is not a prerequisite for sexual offending against children. These findings underscore the heterogeneity of pathways to offending and highlight the risk of attributing psychological characteristics observed in offender samples to paedophilia *per se*, a distinction supported by broader research on developmental, psychological, and neurobiological correlates of sexual offending.[53-56]

The absence of non-offending paedophilic samples

This absence represents a major limitation within the current literature. Without such comparisons, it remains

unclear whether the schema patterns identified in offender populations reflect characteristics associated with paedophilic interest or are more closely related to factors contributing to offending behaviour.

Research in adjacent domains demonstrates that non-offending populations can be meaningfully studied. For example, investigations of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have successfully included non-offending minor-attracted persons with sexual interests in minors, revealing elevated rates of early adversity relative to the general population and patterns that, in some cases, approximate those observed in offender samples.[57] Given the established relationship between ACEs and EMS,[58] these findings suggest that schema-related vulnerabilities may also be present in non-offending populations.

Within the literature, individuals who experience sexual attraction to minors but have not offended are often referred to as “minor-attracted persons” (MAPs).[57,59,60] This terminology has been adopted in contemporary research in part to reduce stigma and to distinguish sexual interest from offending behaviour.[61] However, the term remains debated within both academic and public discourse.[62] In the present review, the term is used descriptively to reflect its prevalence within the literature rather than to endorse a particular conceptual or ethical position.

Clinical and prevention implications

The failure to include non-offending paedophilic samples has important implications for both research and practice. Without such distinctions, etiological models risk conflating sexual interest with offending behaviour, thereby limiting conceptual clarity and reducing the precision of risk assessment frameworks. Addressing this limitation is essential for advancing both theoretical understanding and prevention strategies.

From a clinical and public health perspective, this distinction is particularly important. Child sexual abuse is associated with significant and well-documented adverse outcomes, including depression, anxiety, suicidality, and post-traumatic symptomatology.[63-66] Epidemiological data indicate substantial prevalence rates, underscoring the importance of effective prevention efforts.[67] “At the same time, estimates suggest that a notable proportion of adult males report some degree of sexual arousal or fantasies involving child or adolescent stimuli (e.g., 4.1% reporting fantasies involving prepubescent children in a large community sample).”[68] However, paedophilia, defined as a persistent and preferential sexual interest in prepubescent children, is estimated to occur in a smaller proportion of the population,[69] further reinforcing the need to distinguish between sexual interest and offending behaviour in both research and clinical contexts.

Expanding research to include non-offending individuals with paedophilic interests may therefore contribute to more precise risk assessment and intervention strategies. If specific EMS profiles are associated with sexual interest independent of offending behaviour, these findings could inform case conceptualisation and therapeutic interventions.

Conversely, if schema patterns are more strongly associated with offending behaviour, this would have implications for targeted prevention and treatment approaches. In either case, the inclusion of non-offending paedophilic samples is essential for advancing both theoretical clarity and clinical utility.

Conclusion

This review critically examined the existing literature on the relationship between EMS and paedophilia, with a particular focus on studies utilising YSQ. Across the limited evidence base, consistent associations were identified between child sexual offending and elevated Defectiveness/Shame and Subjugation schemas, with some evidence indicating higher levels of these schemas among paedophilic offenders compared to non-paedophilic offenders. However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously given methodological limitations, including small sample sizes and the exclusive reliance on offender populations.

A central limitation across the literature is the absence of non-offending individuals with paedophilic interests. Consequently, existing findings are unable to disentangle schema patterns associated with paedophilic interest from those associated with offending behaviour. This distinction is critical, as paedophilia and sexual offending are not synonymous and may reflect partially independent pathways. Continued reliance on forensic samples therefore constrains both theoretical development and the refinement of clinically meaningful models.

Future research should prioritise the inclusion of non-offending samples to clarify the relationship between EMS and paedophilic interest independent of offending behaviour. Advancing research in this area may support more precise case conceptualisation, inform targeted intervention strategies, and contribute to the development of more effective child sexual abuse prevention efforts.

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