Chapter 1

Female Sexual Offenders: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment

An Introduction

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Research and treatment efforts with female sexual offenders appear to have gained substantial momentum in recent years. This is clearly evidenced by the selection of chapters available in this book. Only ten years ago, it would have been difficult—perhaps impossible—to develop an edited volume of works dedicated solely to the research and treatment of female sexual offenders. More recently, however, we have witnessed an outbreak of research activity associated with investigating the treatment needs (Beech, Parrett, Ward, & Fisher, 2009; Gannon, Hoare, Rose, & Parrett, 2009; Gannon & Rose, 2009; Nathan & Ward, 2002; Strickland, 2008), mental health correlates (Christopher, Lutz-Zois, & Reinhardt, 2007; Fazel, Sjöstedt, Grann, & Långström, 2008) offence styles (Gannon, Rose, & Ward, 2008, in press), sexual offence histories (Simons, Heil, Burton, & Gursky, 2008), recidivism rates (Cortoni & Hanson, 2005; Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2009; Freeman & Sandler, 2008), and typologies (Sandler & Freeman, 2007; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004) associated with female sexual offending.

Perhaps the two most prominent questions on the lips of most professionals who work with female sexual offenders and indeed lay persons who hear about female-perpetrated sexual abuse are: (1) To what extent are female sexual offenders similar to, and different from, male sexual offenders?; and (2) To what extent are female sexual offenders similar to, and different from, females who offend non-sexually? Clearly, we are unlikely to discover the answers to these all encompassing questions overnight. In fact, the literature pertaining to male sexual offenders—although substantially more mature than that documented with female sexual offenders—still falls short of answering questions of parallel relevance to male sexual offending (see Laws & O’Donohue, 2008). Thus, professionals who work with female sexual offenders must remain patient, since it is likely to take some
considerable time before the literature associated with female sexual offending reaches a level deemed to be acceptable for the convincing implementation of evidence-based practice.

Nevertheless, it is extremely heartening to witness the recent explosion of research interest in the topic of female sexual offending. It is unclear exactly what has prompted this recent and focussed interest on this special population of sexual offenders. Female sexual offending has typically been reported as being relatively rare in comparison to male-perpetrated abuse (Gannon & Rose, 2008; O’Connor, 1987; Peter, 2009), and even very recent research suggests that the ratio of male to female sexual offenders is in the region of 20:1 (Cortoni et al., 2009). This estimate indicates that females account for around 5% of all sexual abuse (Cortoni et al., 2009). Yet even at these levels, female-perpetrated abuse therefore accounts for a sizeable number of victims and offenders in need of clinical attention (see Cortoni & Gannon, in press). Furthermore, female-perpetrated abuse appears to have received more substantial recognition in recent years from professionals, the criminal justice system, and the media (Cortoni et al., 2009; Gannon & Rose, 2008). It seems likely then, that this increased research attention on female sexual offenders is not coincidental. Rather, we believe that increased recognition of the phenomenon of female sexual abuse both professionally, and in the wider community, has resulted in more concerted research efforts—and associated funding—on female-perpetrated sexual abuse.

The maintenance of current research activity in female-perpetrated sexual offending is likely to result in the generation of significant knowledge that will permit improved assessment, treatment and management practices with female sexual offenders and that will guide future generations of researchers and practitioners in this
area. It is pleasing to see such vigour and enthusiasm in an area of research that has, for many years, been downplayed and minimised—perhaps unintentionally—by professionals as well as the wider society. It is comforting and intuitively reassuring to believe that males are the only likely perpetrators of sexual abuse and to assume that, if a female is involved in sexual abuse perpetration alongside a male, then she must have been forcefully coerced by that male. Research suggests that this is not necessarily the case (Gannon, et al., 2009; Simons et al., 2008), challenging misguided preconceptions—associated with gender stereotyping—that have pervaded the topic of female-perpetrated sexual abuse for many years.

Our edited book describes the most recent research, clinical assessment, and treatment techniques with female sexual offenders. While this book is not intended to be exhaustive, the chapters were chosen to provide interested readers with a single guiding text on the research, assessment, and treatment associated with female sexual offenders. Each of the chapters typically focuses on females who sexually abuse children (unless specifically stated otherwise). Since children tend to be the predominant victims of female-perpetrated sexual assault (see Tewksbury, 2004), contemporary knowledge has focussed almost exclusively on women who sexually abuse children.

Organisation and Content of the Book

The book is essentially divided into two main parts. In the first part, more general contextual and background information is presented (e.g., female sexual abuse prevalence, theoretical explanations of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, information regarding juvenile female sexual offenders, and mental health correlates of female sexual offending). In the second part of the book, the information becomes more practitioner-focused: chapters examine the assessment, treatment needs and services,
treatment process issues, and use of the polygraph with female sexual offenders. The specific chapters have been chosen to provide key guidance on a range of areas likely to be of interest to researchers, policy makers, and practitioners. We sincerely hope that professionals who consult the forthcoming chapters will find the information contained within them useful for future research direction, theory generation, and for the implementation of evidence-based practice. Certainly, we believe that the contributions outlined within this book draw us somewhat nearer to answering the questions outlined earlier - that is: (1) To what extent are female sexual offenders similar to, and different from, male sexual offenders?; and (2) To what extent are female sexual offenders similar to, and different from, females who offend non-sexually?

Regarding the specific content of each of the forthcoming chapters, Chapter 2—written by Jacqui Saradjian—reviews the prevalence of female-perpetrated sexual abuse and the impact of such abuse on victims. In this chapter, Saradjian examines a whole range of formal and informal prevalence studies, and the key factors limiting the conclusions drawn from such studies (e.g., societal attitudes, study design). Saradjian also examines the issue of victim harm in relation to female-perpetrated abuse, and examines the possible interactions that may occur between victim harm and the attitudes of wider society towards female-perpetrated abuse. Worryingly, Saradjian argues that society’s minimisation and conceptualisation of female-perpetrated abuse may well intensify the negative impact of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. In Chapter 3, Danielle Harris describes and evaluates typologies and theoretical perspectives available for explaining female-perpetrated abuse. To our knowledge, this is the first focused evaluation of current theories explaining the phenomenon of female-perpetrated sexual offences. Harris’ chapter highlights that
although there remains a plethora of typologies that classify female sexual offenders along basic demographic and offence characteristics, there is very little theory available to explain the range of interacting factors leading to the perpetration of sexual offences by women. In synthesising the available literature, Harris is able to document some individual or single factor theories associated with female sexual offending (e.g., cognitive distortions, childhood victimisation), and one offence-process theory developed very recently (i.e., The Descriptive Model of Female Sexual Offending; Gannon et al., 2008). However, the lack of comprehensive theory is clearly visible, and Harris suggests that feminist criminology perspectives regarding powerlessness might well provide the context of a convincing multifactorial theory of female sexual offending. In Chapter 4, Lisa Frey provides a comprehensive summary and evaluation of the characteristics, research, assessment, and treatment strategies available for juvenile female sexual offenders. Frey’s chapter highlights the importance of studying this population of offenders separately from their adult female counterparts since, although there remain important similarities between juvenile and adult female sexual offenders (e.g., child maltreatment), there are also some crucial differences. For example, based on currently available literature, it appears that juvenile female sexual offenders are more likely to offend alone compared with their adult female counterparts. Nevertheless, because research examining and comparing juvenile sexual offenders with other relevant subgroups is so scant, Frey warns against forming too many set ideas about this population or their specific treatment requirements until further valid research becomes available. Chapter 5 outlines the available evidence regarding the mental health characteristics of female sexual offenders (Myriam-Mélanie Rousseau & Franca Cortoni). This is a particularly intriguing topic of enquiry that strongly relates to Chapter 2: the wider attitudes of
society—including professionals—appear to support preconceived ideas that female sexual offenders must suffer from some form of psychopathology. Consequently, many researchers have focussed their attention on studying the psychopathological correlates of female sexual offenders and have reported seemingly high rates for this population (e.g., Faller, 1987; Lewis & Stanley, 2000). However, Rousseau and Cortoni highlight the limitations plaguing current research of this nature. In particular, they suggest psychopathology may be more likely recorded for this group due to societal biases in prosecution (i.e., only the most extreme offending is detected and prosecuted), methodological sampling procedures (i.e., recruiting from mental health institutions), and possible over-reporting of mental health issues (for justification purposes) by the women themselves. Thus, Rousseau and Cortoni conclude that this area of research requires substantial investigation to further improve our current assessment and treatment of female sexual offenders.

Turning to some more practically focussed chapters, Franca Cortoni, in Chapter 6, provides readers with crucial information regarding the assessment of risk of recidivism among female sexual offenders. Cortoni highlights some of the core issues facing professionals in these areas (i.e., low baseline sexual recidivism for females; a lack of validated risk factors; a lack of risk assessment tools developed for use with females), and provides professionals with guidance on how to approach the assessment of female sexual offenders given these key constraints. Cortoni suggests that, because female sexual offenders are more likely to recidivate non-sexually, professionals should focus on using tools designed to assess general non-sexual offending risk in female sexual offenders (e.g., LSI-R, Andrews & Bonta, 1995) and supplement this approach with research-based clinical judgement around areas specific to female sexual offending. Such advice appears sound given that
professionals do not have access to the wealth of assessment tools typically associated with male-perpetrated abuse. Hannah Ford (Chapter 7) presents readers with a comprehensive evaluation of the potential treatment needs of female sexual offenders and compares each identified need with current knowledge regarding male-perpetrated sexual offending. In particular, Ford identifies *offence-supportive cognitions, deviant sexual interests, empathy, social and sexual relationships, coping skills, mental health difficulties, male dependency, and previous victimisation* as potential treatment needs for female sexual offenders. Ford notes that although many of these needs appear similar to those of male sexual offenders, it is crucial that treatment providers recognise gender-specific nuances in relation to these treatment needs. Ford also warns researchers—in our view very sensibly—against trying to ‘fit’ female sexual offenders to existing male models and argues that we need to begin more female-specific enquiries regarding treatment needs, treatment effectiveness, and treatment processes.

Directly following on from this, Kelley Blanchette and Kelly Taylor (Chapter 8) provide what we believe to be the first focussed overview of the range of international treatment initiatives available for female sexual offenders. Blanchette and Taylor describe current assessment and treatment in *Correctional Services Canada*, and the *Lucy Faithfull Foundation, UK*, as well as female sexual offender specific services across the US (in the states of Texas, Colorado, and New York). Other developing services within the *National Offender Management Service, UK*, and the *Department of Correctional Services, New South Wales* are also described and evaluated. Blanchette and Taylor’s unique review highlights the distinct lack of treatment services available—internationally—for female sexual offenders, and also highlights some key differences being implemented across some programmes. For
example, some programmes use polygraph-assisted disclosure for therapeutic purposes while others do not. Furthermore, while most programmes treat only females, Blanchette and Taylor highlight some that have treated females alongside male sexual offenders. Clearly, this is an area worthy of our research attention as Blanchette and Taylor suggest that the wider research literature is generally not supportive of mixed genders in offender treatment programmes. In Chapter 9, Peggy Heil, Dominique Simons, and David Burton present research findings critical for those interested in using the polygraph with female sexual offenders. In what we believe to be the first review of polygraph work with female sexual offenders, Heil, Simons, and Burton provide readers with their very latest research findings relating to the use of the polygraph with female sexual offenders (Simons, Heil, Burton, & Gursky, 2008). Heil, Simons, and Burton show that both male and female sexual offenders self-report more extensive previous offending (over and above official records) when asked to undertake polygraph testing. Interestingly, while implementation of the polygraph appears to decrease the age at which males self-report themselves engaging in sexually abusive behaviour; the same effect does not appear to hold true for female sexual offenders (the authors suggest that perhaps women do not label early sexually offensive behaviour as abusive, or simply begin offending much later than males). Perhaps the most interesting result noted by the authors of this chapter is that the prevalence and nature of self-reported co-offending alters dramatically when female sexual offenders are polygraphed. In short, while file information often shows that females have offended only in the company of a male; when females were polygraphed, they begin to disclose having engaged in offending without their male co-offender (either before or following the co-perpetrator abuse). Heil, Simons, and Burton make recommendations for implementation of the
polygraph with female sexual offenders and argue that such testing may be important for fully understanding these women for treatment purposes. In Chapter 10, Sherry Ashfield, Sheila Brotherston, Hilary Eldridge, and Ian Elliott present some of their most valuable experiences of having worked therapeutically with female sexual offenders. A very novel and exciting aspect of this chapter is the authors’ attention to therapeutic process issues with female sexual offenders. While this issue has recently gained significant attention in male sexual offending (e.g., Serran, Fernandez, Marshall, & Mann, 2003); it does not appear to have even been explicitly reviewed in relation to female sexual offending. Clearly, the absence of dialogue—and research—relating to this aspect stems from the small numbers of females who come to our clinical attention. Ashfield, Brotherston, Eldridge, and Elliott discuss therapeutic process issues for female sexual offenders that they believe are both similar to and different from those identified in male sexual offenders. Again, acknowledgement of gender appears to be critical. For example, while developing a strong therapeutic alliance is essential for all therapeutic work with male sexual offenders, Ashfield, Brotherston, Eldridge, and Elliott argue that issues very specific to females should be considered. For example, given the small numbers of female sexual offenders who come to clinical attention, Ashfield, Brotherston, Eldridge, and Elliott suggest that it is vital that therapists communicate to their client that they are competent and knowledgeable in the area of female-perpetrated offences. Clearly, female sexual offenders may experience a number of negative emotions associated with their self-view, and so therapist confidence and experience is paramount.

The final chapter of this book is written by Theresa Gannon, Mariamne Rose, and Franca Cortoni. In this chapter, current knowledge outlined within this book about research and treatment with female sexual offenders is summarised.
Consideration is given to the need for effective research and programming with female sexual offenders, the form and structure required to undertake future female sexual offender research and treatment, and the need to establish female-specific assessments and measures. In particular, we argue that future research efforts must be gender-informed if we are to make significant progress in our knowledge about, and assessment and treatment of female sexual offenders. This final chapter concludes the book with a strong yet clear message: we must not be tempted to go down the somewhat easier road of adjusting male-informed models and assessments for use with female sexual offenders. To do so may jeopardise our research with female sexual offenders and our establishment of empirically-based treatment with this population.
References


Chapter 1


