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A Descriptive Model of the Offense Process for Female Sexual Offenders

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## Abstract

Although considerable efforts have been made to develop and validate etiological models of male sexual offending, no theory is available to guide research or practice with female sexual offenders (FSOs). In this study, we developed a descriptive, offense process model of female sexual offending. Systematic qualitative analyses (i.e., Grounded Theory) of 22 FSOs' offense interviews were used to develop a temporal model documenting the contributory roles of cognitive, behavioral, affective and contextual factors in female sexual abuse. The model highlights notable similarities and divergences between male and female sexual offenders' vulnerability factors and offense styles. In particular, the model incorporates male co-offender, and group co-offender influences, and describes how these interact with vulnerability factors to generate female sexual offending. The gender-specific research and clinical implications of the model are discussed.

A Descriptive Model of the Offense Process for Female Sexual Offenders

In recent years, considerable efforts have been made to develop—and validate—etiological models of male sexual offending (Hall & Hirshman, 1991, 1991; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Polaschek, Hudson, Ward, & Siegert, 2001; Ward, Louden, Hudson, & Marshall, 1995; Ward & Seigert, 2002). Unfortunately, however, no such efforts have been made with female sexual offenders (FSOs) who also pose significant risks both to children, and adults (Gannon & Rose, in press; Grayston & De Luca, 1999; Logan, 2008; Nathan & Ward, 2001). Since competent clinical practice is governed by the *scientist practitioner model*—which asserts that clinical practice should be informed by empirical theory and research—this places treatment providers in an uncomfortable situation. There is a wealth of available theory and research relevant to male sexual offending which may be applied to females, but there are no theories or models specific to female sexual offending which may be used to inform and guide the treatment process. Given this dearth of research, it is crucial that a model of the female sexual offense process be developed using data from female sexual offenders themselves, rather than data or theory validated within the male sexual offender literature.

A useful approach to theory development, particularly in the absence of existing theory, and when few participants are available for analysis is the qualitatively grounded *offence chain approach* (e.g., Courtney, Rose, & Mason, 2006; Polaschek et al., 2001; Ward et al., 1995). Originally, such models were developed to describe male sexual offending following significant dissatisfaction with the *Relapse Prevention Model* (Laws, 1989; Pithers, 1990), in which male sexual offenders were hypothesized to display a common pathway to sexual offending characterized by negative affect, attempts at

offense desistence, and subsequent self-regulation failure (hereafter referred to as the *avoidant* pathway). In order to test this hypothesis, Ward and his colleagues (Polaschek et al., 2001; Ward et al., 1995) asked sexual offenders to summarize the affective, cognitive, behavioral, and contextual elements occurring at various time points preceding, at the time of, and subsequent to their sexual offending (i.e., narrative *offense chain descriptions*). Each individual offense chain description was then analyzed using Grounded Theory techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in which categories were formulated *inductively* from offenders' qualitative offending accounts and ordered temporally, to illustrate the sequence of events generating sexual offending. The first model developed using such techniques (i.e., Ward et al.'s 1995 model of child molestation) highlighted the heterogeneity of child sexual offenders since many of them did not follow the sexual offense *avoidant* pathway previously specified by Relapse Prevention. In addition to the avoidant pathway, Ward and his colleagues found an *approach* pathway characterized by positive affect, effective self-regulation, and explicit planning. In other words, Ward and his colleagues found that some child molesters, notably those who fitted more pedophilic profiles, were highly likely to seek out offending encounters, were able to effectively plan such encounters, and experienced significant positive affect prior to, and as a result of such encounters. Not only did this offense chain model highlight the heterogeneity of the offense process and describe taxonomic pathways taken by certain types of offender (e.g., pedophilic versus non-pedophilic), but, most prominently, it further elucidated researchers' understanding of the sexual offense process, and of the various components signifying risk-heightening contexts, affect, cognitions, and behaviors.

The available evidence within the female sexual offending literature suggests that FSOs, like male sex offenders, constitute a varied group with heterogeneous treatment needs (Adshead, Howett, & Mason, 1994; Miccio-Fonseca, 2000; Sandler & freeman, 2007). However, the majority of studies examining FSOs have concentrated primarily upon documenting demographic and victim characteristics of these women rather than models of their offending behavior. To date, then, the closest researchers have come to developing theory based treatment models has been the proliferation of preliminary FSO *typologies* based largely upon socio-demographic, offense information, or clinical observations (Faller, 1987; Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; Nathan & Ward, 2001; Sandler & Freeman, 2007; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Syed & Williams, 1996; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004).

Taken as a whole, the information from these studies suggests that there are several typologies of women who sexually offend: those who engage with adolescent males (often termed teacher-lover subtypes; Mathews et al., 1989), those who offend in the presence of a co-offending male (sometimes coerced and sometime not; often labeled *male coerced* and *male accompanied* respectively; Mathews 1987; Mathews et al., 1989), those who offend against prepubescent children (i.e., *female pedophiles*), and those who offend as part of a wider criminal career. However, the largest, and most empirically robust typological distinction has been proposed by Vandiver and Kercher (2004). Using loglinear modeling and cluster analysis, they examined the characteristics of 471 FSOs who had signed the sex offender registry in Texas over a 7 year period and found six subclusters of women who varied according to criminality, victim preferences, and offense motivations: (1) *heterosexual nurturers,* who victimized young males, appearing to view their abuse as a

relationship, (2) *non-criminal homosexuals,* who offended against post pubescent girls, and held fewest number of arrests, (3) *female sexual predators,* who offended mainly against young males and appeared to hold a generic criminal disposition and background, (4) *young adult child exploiters,* who offended against prepubescent victims of either sex, (5) *homosexual criminal subtypes,* who often offended against females, typically to gain economic rewards (e.g., enforced prostitution) and (6) *aggressive homosexual offenders* who sexually assaulted adults, typically within intimate relationships, and possibly as part of domestic violent interactions. A prominent shortcoming of Vandiver and Kercher's research, however, is that they were unable to obtain information regarding whether women were acting alone, or in the company of others. Given the wealth of information illustrating that women commonly perpetrate sexual offenses in the presence of a male (e.g., Gannon & Rose, in press; Grayston & De Luca, 1999; Green & Kaplan, 1994; Vandiver, 2006), this issue is a significant shortcoming, limiting the study's applicability for clinical guidance and treatment. In fact, although many of the typological studies outlined above have provided some basic frameworks for practitioners to use when working with women, there is currently no overarching theory to guide practitioners, and indeed no information available regarding the FSO's offense chain and of the various components signifying risk-heightening phenomena for future re-offending. Given the lack of data and attendant theory available for guiding practitioners entrusted with the task of rehabilitating FSOs, it is vital that researchers begin the task of theory formulation within this arena.

The main aim of this study was to develop a descriptive model of the sexual offense process for female sexual offenders using offense narratives.

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Grounded Theory methodology is ideal for developing theory within this area since it may be used with relatively small amounts of qualitative data to develop inductively driven preliminary theory via a series of systematic procedures. In particular, such methods have been deemed highly favorable for preliminary theory development when little theoretical information within a field of study is available (Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006).

Thus using Grounded Theory, we aimed to elucidate the role of affective, cognitive, behavioral, and contextual factors associated with female-perpetrated sexual abuse, and its maintenance. We anticipated that such theory development may aid professionals working with FSOs through providing the first clear description of FSOs' offending behavior, and of the variety of phenomena associated with their sexually offensive behavior.

## Method

### Participants

Twenty females convicted of a sexual offense against either an adult or child were recruited from five female prison establishments and one probation area in England. Two further women who had not been formally convicted of a sexual offense, but whose file information strongly indicated a "sexual" element to their offending were also included. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 78 ($M$ = 37.05; $SD$ = 12.89), and their mean estimated IQ score was 98 ($SD$ = 17.13; range 71 to 126[1]). The sentence length being served by participants ranged from 4 months to indeterminate ($M$ = 5.68 years; $SD$ = 4.47) and the majority of participants were white (91%; n = 20). None of our participants had previous convictions for sexual offenses. However,

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[1] IQ estimates were unavailable for three participants.

examination of index offense records showed that our participants had offended against 38 victims in total. Thirteen of these victims were male and 25 were female, while a minority of victims were adults (24%; $n = 9$) the majority were children (76%; $n = 29$). All victims knew their offender at least by sight and just under half of victims (47%; $n = 18$) were related to their offender through blood or marriage (i.e., the offender was their mother, aunt, or step relative). A good deal of the offenders recruited for this study had not offended alone. Eleven participants (50%) had offended in the presence of a male (five of these, 23% of the total sample, were male coerced, while six, 27% of the sample, were male accompanied), a further 27% (n = 6) had offended alone (one against an adult victim, two against teenagers, and three against pre-pubescent children). A further 23% (n = 5) offended in groups of three or more people).

Procedure

Data were collected by the first and second authors. General offense-related information and demographic details were obtained using both offender self-report and file records[2]. An interview was constructed to cover aspects of the offender's childhood, early adulthood,  factors leading up to and including the offense period,  and factors occurring directly post offense. The interview questions were used only to *guide* the interview process, enabling the interviewer to follow a standardized sequence of probes whilst also permitting her to follow up each participant's individual comments as their unique narrative unfolded. Because each woman's story was unique, the

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[2] For two women recruited from Probation, we were unable to access file records.

length of each completed offense chain interview varied, ranging from 26 minutes to 88 minutes (*M* interview time = 52.55; *SD*= 15.84).

Data Analysis

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) *grounded theory* methodology was used to analyze each woman's offense chain interview. There are essentially three main steps to this methodology. First, each interview is examined line by line and broken down into basic units of meaning commonly termed *meaning units* (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The second author—MR—was largely unaware of the general sexual offending literature and so took sole responsibility for categorizing scripts into meaning units in the first instance. An example of an interview extract, and the meaning units it was broken down into (depicting using /) is shown below:

> I think at that point [6 months prior to the offense] I was completely isolated[1]/ cos obviously I had split up with her dad[2]/, I'd moved out[3]/ and was claiming benefits[4]/, his mum had called me all the names under the sun[5]/.

These meaning units were then abstracted into more general meaning units (termed *open coding*). Thus, meaning unit [1] from the sample above became "complete social isolation 6 months before offending". This general meaning unit was then allocated to one or more provisional categories based upon conceptual similarity with other meaning units. The conceptual similarity could, for example, be temporal in nature, or could refer to any number of phenomena including contextual factors, abusive experiences, attitudes, affect

and so on. Thus, using the example above, the first provisional category assigned to this meaning unit was *Recent Factors* (a temporal clustering category), and the secondary category was *Poor Social Support* (a contextual clustering category). First and second order categories became generated as new concepts were encountered within data analysis.

Further refinements and additions were made to these preliminary groupings throughout analysis (a process termed *axial coding*) which were then integrated into a temporal model. Thus, each of the final superordinate categories, along with their subordinate associated categories were ordered in temporal sequence for two thirds of the woman ($n = 15$), illustrating the sequence of important life events both before, during, and after offending behavior. The remaining seven scripts were then used to test the validity of our initial model through comparing the fit of these new scripts with categories already developed and adding and refining new categories where necessary (i.e., a process termed *constant comparison*). This ensured that the final model reflected the nature of the sexual offense process as described by our participants.  It is worth noting here that we continued to collect data until the model had been saturated (that is, further offense scripts did not lead to the generation of any new categories or the refinement of existing categories). The first and second authors performed the open coding and overall model development part of the analysis together in order to reduce researcher bias.

*Reliability and Validity*

In order to assure data validity, we examined the validity of interviews—wherever possible—with confidential file information containing sentencing information, witness statements, and psychological assessments.

This ensured, as far as possible, that the information provided within the interviews was a truthful account of each woman's offending behavior. Here, interview information that varied significantly from recorded offense accounts were dropped from the analysis in order to preserve and strengthen model validity. Regarding reliability, two thirds of transcribed interviews were subjected to a random selection of approximately 1000 words of text, and then subdivided into individual meaning units by a second rater (the first author; TAG). This reliability check revealed that there was an average of 74% agreement between raters for meaning unit identification. Discrepancies between raters were often accounted for by *undercoding*, whereby the original rater had taken a more fine grained approach to separating meaning units. In addition to this, the third author—TW—made spot checks of the open coding and collapsing of categories throughout the entire analytic procedure, checking 20% of scripts.

Results

The resulting model describes the temporal sequence of contextual, behavioral, cognitive, and affective events that result in female-perpetrated sexual abuse and may be divided into three main parts: (1) *Background factors;* the offender's childhood, adolescent, and early adulthood experiences, (2) *Pre offense period;* events occurring up to one year previous to the offending behavior and immediately prior to the offense period, and (3) *Offense, and Post offense period;* factors occurring at the time of, or immediately following the offense. Thus, we present our model in three main phases as Figures 1, 2 and 3 respectively. It is worth noting, here, that we have chosen to outline women's background factors in some considerable detail

within our model (cf. Polaschek et al., 2001; Ward et al., 1995). This is because we anticipate that this information will be useful for treatment professionals attempting to understand, engage, and treat a range of women sexual offenders.

*Phase 1. Background Factors*

Data relevant to background factors formed five main categories further subdivided into subcategories reflecting different aspects or responses to that main category. The first category, *Early Family Environment,* describes features of participants' childhood or adolescent family environment. This environment was either predominantly *negative* (e.g., the participant experienced parental neglect, rejection, prolonged absence or dysfunctional parenting style), or *positive* (e.g., family cohesion, stability, and positive relationships with caregivers). Some participants experienced a negative family environment that improved substantially or vice versa as depicted by the double ended arrow connecting the negative and positive early family environment pathways in Figure 1.

*Abusive Experiences* describes whether participants witnessed—or fell victim to—abuse during their childhood and adolescent years. Three subcategories were noted: *sexual*, *physical*, and *emotional*. Numerous women ($n$ = 8) experienced sexual abuse in various forms, including one who was raped by a stranger whilst walking home after college. Many women ($n$ = 14) also described receiving unjustified and prolonged physical punishments from a caregiver, or witnessing domestic violence. Emotional abuse typically took the form of school bullying ($n$ = 9). Abusive subcategories were not mutually exclusive, and a considerable number of participants reported experiencing more than one type of abuse ($n$ = 11). Only five individuals' childhoods were

free from abusive experiences, as depicted by the arrow to the right of abusive experiences, feeding into the third main category of *Lifestyle Outcomes*.

[Figure 1 about here]

*Lifestyle Outcomes* refer to the behavioral, cognitive, and affective experiences characterizing participants' late adolescence and early adulthood in response to early familial experiences and familiarity with abuse. Here, two subcategories of lifestyle outcome were evidence: a *maladaptive* lifestyle (characterized by an erratic, unstable lifestyle evidenced by criminal behavior, unsafe and promiscuous sexual lifestyles, and emotional suppression of unresolved childhood experiences) and an *adaptive* lifestyle (evidenced by satisfactory vocational work, and adequate coping with daily activities). It was at this stage—lifestyle outcomes—that we found a unique set of contextual factors which appeared to contribute to some woman's lifestyle outcome: *deviant peer influences, sexual and violent norms, and social support. Deviant peer influences* (i.e., associating with individuals who encouraged general criminality) and the development of antisocial cognitions in the form of *sexual* or *violent norms* (developed from abusive experiences during childhood), appeared to increase the likelihood that an offender would demonstrate a *maladaptive* lifestyle outcome. Notably, each woman's response to her earlier described childhood backdrop was complex and fluid such that a woman who had been experiencing years of early familial neglect and/or abuse who began early adulthood maladaptively could, for example, due to increased social support, begin displaying a more adaptive lifestyle response. This is evidenced by the double ended arrow connecting maladaptive and adaptive lifestyle outcomes in Figure 1. Most importantly, however, we found that each person's early adult lifestyle reflected early

emerging social, affective, and psychological vulnerability factors which, for many women, became exacerbated and developed into fully-fledged risk factors later in the model. Thus, *Vulnerability Factors* represent the fourth stage of the model subdivided into four clusters: *coping style* (i.e., maladaptive psychological or behavioral methods of tolerating and minimizing stress or adversity such as alcohol or substance abuse), *social support* (i.e., impoverished practical and emotional support received from family and friends), *personality* (i.e., vulnerable traits or characteristics such as aggressive traits and norms, dependent personality styles, and sexual norms), and *mental health* (i.e., deficits in mental functioning caused by depression, severe anxiety or learning disability). Even at this early stage, many women ($n$ = 16) showed some form of vulnerability. Those who did not evidence such vulnerabilities tended to have experienced adaptive lifestyle outcomes, and are shown in the arrow on the right hand side of the diagram labeled "low vulnerability".

The final part of background factors refers to women's early adulthood life experiences in the form of major life stressors. Such stressors were generally associated with personal relationships ($n$ = 20) in the form of domestic abuse (physical, emotional, or both). For many, the abuse was both severe and persistent and some abusive males—who later coerced women to offend—began to desensitize women to inappropriate sexual behaviors (i.e., grooming). Other men with inappropriate interests in children appeared to target women who had previously experienced domestically violent relationships, providing them with a false sense of security that would ironically place them at higher risk of sexually offending. Women experiencing domestically abusive relationships would often have *other* major life stressors

to deal with such as caretaking responsibilities, ill relatives, or death of a loved one as depicted by the subcategory "other". A small number of women did not experience abusive personal relationships ($n$ =2), but did describe other major life stressors during early adulthood.

*Phase 2. Pre Offense Period*

Following extensive life stressors in the form of physical or emotional abuse, and—in some cases—sexual grooming within their personal relationships, women entered the pre-offense period with a series of risk factors placing them at significant risk of sexually offending (See Figure 2). For women who had entered their earlier personal relationships with specific vulnerabilities such as poor mental health, or passive personality characteristics, these vulnerabilities became chronic as a consequence of their abusive relationships and/or a major life event or stressor. For example, one woman, when asked why she had stopped taking her antidepressants stated, "Me husband stopped it, didn't want me to be on medication... he would pour them out [onto the floor]". Unsurprisingly, then, this woman's mental health deteriorated, leaving her feeling isolated, unable to cope, and easy prey for her husband who had been sexually grooming her for some time. Feeling isolated, and lacking social support was one risk factor that many women reported following their experience of adult personal relationships and/or major life stressors ($n$ = 14). A common pattern—particularly for women who were coerced into offending against children—was the experience of slow progressive isolation from friends and relations orchestrated by a physically and/or emotionally abusive partner. Other women, who had left previously abusive relationships demonstrated wholly maladaptive coping strategies characterized by severe substance misuse and passive coping.

An important offense precipitating stage in the offense chain model—

*Unstable Lifestyle*— occurs around six months leading up to the offense.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given women's generally abusive backgrounds, and

the resulting risk factors they had developed, women at this stage were *all*

characterized by an unstable lifestyle characterized by domestic disturbances,

general lifestyle deterioration, multiple caregiver responsibilities (e.g.,

children, sick relatives), financial adversity, criminal activity, and general

negative affect associated with this.

[Figure 2 about here]

Amid this lifestyle adversity, women typically began to formulate *goals*

to offend or *goal relevant distal planning*. These stages are represented side

by side within the model because we found that women often engaged in these

processes either simultaneously, or followed one stage very closely by the

other.  Both stages were influenced by *group effects* (i.e., group discussion

effects), *norms*, *cognition*, *affect*, and *values* and occurred typically in the

weeks or days leading up to the offense.  We found three main goals

established by women during the goal establishment stage: *sexual*

*gratification*, *intimacy* (with either a victim or a co-defendant), and

*instrumental other* (i.e., *revenge/humiliation* or *financial*). *Sexual*

*gratification*, as the label suggests, refers to women who were motivated to

offend in order to receive sexual pleasure. Such women ($n = 6$) tended to be

either solo, or male accompanied offenders, whose cognitions revolved around

their victim being adult-like, sexual, and flirtatious. Another major goal

established by woman was that of *intimacy*. For some women, impending

offending was more about experiencing a sense of intimacy and warmth either

in connection with the victim themselves, or with their co-perpetrator ($n = 5$).

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Women who evidenced these goals tended to be either solo or male coerced subtypes, who held vastly differing cognitions and driving values. Solo offenders tended to value the experience of intimacy, and evidenced cognitions surrounding concepts such as "he is old for his age" or "he needs me." Women who were male coerced, on the other hand, tended to value, not only the experience of intimacy, but also male supremacy. These women tended to be characterized by cognitions relating to the nature of harm associated with their goals such as "the victim is young and so won't remember this", or "if I do this, it will be less harmful than if he messes with her". Other women appeared to believe that their coercive male partner must know more than them (e.g., "I suppose I thought well I've been left to bring her up on my own, he knows more about kids than I do"). The third major goal established by women—mainly adult offenders or those who perpetrated as part of a group—was *instrumental other -revenge/humiliation* ($n$ = 3). Here, the main goal of offending was to seek some sort of retribution, and to humiliate the victim for some perceived wrong (either committed by the victim themselves, or the class of people the victim was associated with). At this stage none of these women intended to commit the *sexual* elements of their offense as part of their goal to humiliate their victim. Some of these women held strong values surrounding friendship, infidelity, and ironically—sexual abuse against children. Cognitions associated with such values largely revolved around not letting others "get away" with their behaviors resulting in women who saw themselves as upholders of their own moral laws. One woman, for example, was provided with some rather inaccurate information concerning an acquaintance's girlfriend whom—after talking with friends—she began to believe was a sexual offender. Clearly, this women (and her friends)

valued child protection, resulting in cognitions associated with retribution (e.g., "They shouldn't be allowed to get away with this"). A further subgroup of women categorized within instrumental-other were women convicted of sex trafficking, who reported offending largely for financial reasons ($n = 2$). Finally, a small number of individuals did not appear to hold any core instrumental goal relevant to their offending instead offending out of extreme fear for their life (e.g., "He told me I would leave the house in a coffin if I didn't do what I was told"; $n = 3$). These women bypass the three core goals outlined for the other individuals via the broken line to the left of the diagram.

*Distal planning* of the offense often followed goal establishment, but not always. Sometimes, for example, women would follow the distal planning pathway (e.g., through co-offender coercion), and then further validate or even develop offense-related goals. Three main types of distal planning were evident: *implicit*, *directed*, and *explicit*; all of which were mediated by *group effects*, *norms*, *cognition*, *affect*, and *values*. *Implicit planning* refers to planning whereby the individual engaged in a form of self deception, subtly adjusting circumstances in a manner highly likely to increase their chances of physical/ emotional contact with the victim. For example, one participant described inviting the male teenager in her care to sit and watch television in her bedroom in the days leading up to her offense. *Explicit planning*, as the label suggests, refers to women who—by themselves, or in the company of other offenders—explicitly set out to offend against their victims either sexually or non sexually. Finally, *directed planning* refers only to women who were coerced into sexually offending by a male partner. Here, sexual abuse is orchestrated by a co-perpetrator, and the woman follows instructions out of passivity, extreme fear, and sometimes an ingrained set of cognitions or

norms developed through years of grooming from their partners and early abusive experiences. It were these *directed* women who then began to establish and/ or further develop offense related goals and motivations such as intimacy. For example, one participant who freely admitted having "a blurry line where sexual behavior was concerned" (i.e., inappropriate sexual *norms*) described reacting to her partners' distal planning "So it's kind of well, if I love him then I'd do it, and if I love my daughter then there is nothing wrong with it"). Notably, a small minority of women (*n* = 3) did not appear to plan at all, these women are depicted by the broken line to the right, which bypasses the core planning styles outlined for other individuals.

There were other interesting relationships noted between the goal establishment and distal planning stages along with their mediating effects. To illustrate, group effects (i.e., discussion within a group of persons) was highly associated with the development of an explicit and precise offense plan which was often non sexual in nature. For example, one group of women who offended against an adult began discussing the infidelity experienced by a friend, but by the end of the night had formulated an elaborate plan which included kidnapping the woman who had "transgressed", the formulation of specific offense behaviors, and the preparation of a kidnapping "kit". Strong affect and cognitions were also noted at this stage (in this case, excitement, and cognitions concerning retribution).

The *proximal planning* section of the model refers to the more immediate planning styles occurring just prior to the offense (i.e., usually minutes before). There were three main types of proximal planning styles evident: *implicit disorganized*, *directed*, and *explicit precise. Implicit disorganized* refers to offenders who tended to have engaged in implicit

planning earlier in the model, and, upon close proximity with the victim became disorganized, implementing fragmented parts of their unspoken plan impulsively. This proximal planning style was often associated with aggression, negative affective states such as anger, and little or no cognition. It could also be preceded by no apparent planning at the distal stage. *Directed proximal* planning refers to immediate planning styles directed by a coercive co-perpetrating male (e.g., "Why don't you go and take her [you daughter's] clothes off?"). This pathway tended to be associated with negative affective states such as anxiety, and cognitions used to alleviate dissonance associated with their offending (e.g., "If I just do it once he will stop asking me"). Finally, *explicit precise* planning refers to the proximal execution of (usually) a distal explicit plan with exact military precision. Such precise, goal focused proximal planning tended to be exhibited by offenders against adults whose goals were instrumental other (i.e., revenge/humiliation or financial). This type of planning was often associated with positive affect in the form of excitement, and facilitatory cognitions such as ("They are going to get what they deserve"). It was at this stage that offenders driven by goals such as humiliation typically added sexual elements to their repertoire of aggressive behaviors.

*Phase 3. Offense and Post Offense Period*

The *offense approach* aspect of the model refers specifically to the style with which the offenders began their sexual offense behavior and was closely linked to the planning styles and offense goals described earlier in the model. We found four main approaches to the sexual offense: *maternal approach*, *maternal avoidant*, *aggressive approach*, and *operationalized approach* which were strongly mediated by the role of cognition, affect, alcohol, and

sexual arousal. *Maternal approach* refers to women who take a coercive, non-aggressive approach to their victim, and make no active attempts to avoid sexually offending against their victim either directly approaching them to engage in a sexual relationship (i.e., effective regulators), or using ineffective strategies to avoid offending (i.e., placing themselves in obviously risky situations; *misregulators*). This offense style was associated with solo offenders, especially those who had offended against teenage boys, and sometimes male accompanied offenders. Some of these women may have been drinking alcohol around the time of their offense. The cognitions experienced by such women pre offense tended to revolve around the perceived maturity of the child and their ability to make informed sexual decisions accompanied by sexual arousal and some positive affect. *Maternal avoidant* refers to women who take a coercive and non-aggressive approach to their victim and actively wish to avoid offending, but do so in the context of extreme coercion from violent and abusive partners. Such women experience extreme dissonance and display cognitions relating to nature of harm themes (e.g., "The child will be less harmed if I do this"), strong negative affect, and little sexual arousal. *Aggressive approach* refers to offenders who take a generally aggressive stance towards their victim. Such offenders tended to offend against adults or work in groups and were characterized by strong pre offense cognitions about particular classes of people (e.g., "It's just wrong for women to cheat on their friends....you shouldn't go around sleeping with other people's partners....I thought it was really out of order"). These offenses were typically associated with strong positive or negative affect and typically women showed little or no interest in the sexual element of their offense (i.e., no sexual arousal), viewing this part of their offense simply as another means to humiliate the victim, that

may or may not have been pre planned. Finally, *operationalized approach* offenders view the sexual element of their offense as necessary in order to obtain particular goals (e.g., sex traffickers). These individuals displayed a variety of pre offense cognitions, and little or no sexual arousal. Finally, the actual *offense behavior* or goal attainment occurred immediately following proximal planning and approach behaviors.

[Place Figure 3 about here]

*Victim response* refers to the victim's response to the sexual assault and was subdivided into three main parts: *engaged*, *submissive*, and *resistant*. *Engaged*, refers to victims who reacted positively to the offense behaviors. Such victims were typically very young, and did not realize what was happening to them (for example, a child who responded to genital massaging by laughing or asking the offender to "do it again"). Offenders who witnessed such responses would often progress into more intrusive offense behaviors within the same offense or during a later offense (depicted via the double ended arrow connecting victim response with offense behavior) through telling themselves "she enjoys it". *Submissive* victims tended not to react strongly during the offense, interacting minimally with the offender. Finally, *resistant* victims asked the offender to stop, cried, or showed extreme discomfort throughout the sexual offense. This type of victim behavior appeared to exacerbate the level of force or intrusiveness already being inflicted by the offender, especially in attacks against adults. Victim responses were not mutually exclusive and would often change either throughout the offense or across multiple offenses.

*Offense consequences* refers to the offender's individual response to their enacted offense and may be split into three main subcomponents:

*Affective*, *cognitive*, and *behavioral* elements. The period referred to by offense response is quite immediate (i.e., minutes to hours after the offense) but could still be influenced by contextual factors such as community response to their crime. *Affective* responses could be either positive (e.g., pleasure, relief, pride) or negative (shame, anger) in nature. *Cognitive* responses refer to the types of immediate thoughts offenders have regarding both themselves and their victims (e.g., about the harmfulness of their act or sexual interest of their victim). For example, for those who had previously viewed their victim as sexual or for whom the offense represented an attempt at victim revenge, there was typically little consideration of victim harm post offense and associated positive affect. Others, particularly those who were male coerced, described not thinking anything, or pushing away negative thoughts about the offense. Finally, *behavioral response* refers to whether the offender responded to the offense in either a controlled or uncontrolled manner. A *controlled* response was often the extension of an explicit, precisely executed plan in which tasks and behaviors were implemented to ensure specific plan implementation and/ or avoid detection (e.g., taking the car used in the offense to be cleaned). An *uncontrolled* behavioral response was either passive in nature (i.e., doing nothing active to either avoid detection or avoid instances of further offending), or associated with severe post offense behaviors (e.g., suicide attempts). Community response played a strong mediating role at this stage in the model, but not in the way that we had anticipated. Interestingly, for those offenders who offended against adults, with the aim to humiliate or seek revenge, immediate community responses were supportive, often treating such women as community heroes and further exacerbating women's positive affect and offense supportive cognitions.

The final stage—*offense outcome*—refers to how the offense behavior was resolved (i.e., whether the woman self disclosed the offense to police or whether she was arrested following investigation). Interestingly, those women who self disclosed (*n* =4) tended to be those who had been coerced into the offending by an abusive male, and disclosure occurred anything up to five years post offense. In one case, however, a male accompanied offender disclosed the abuse in order to seek revenge against her co-perpetrator who had begun to reject her sexually.  Other women were arrested throughout the police investigative process.

Interestingly, when we examined the pathways taken by the women, we found that six followed a pathway characterized primarily by sexual offense *avoidance* (e.g., directed male planning, intimacy or fear-related goals, and negative affect). A further nine appeared to follow a pathway characterized by offense approach (e.g., explicit planning, intimacy, sexual gratification, or other instrumental goals, and positive affect) and four followed a pathway characterized by sudden or disorganized approach behaviors (e.g., implicit or no planning associated with various offense goals and affectual displays). A further four individuals were unclassifiable because their interview did not provide us with enough information to track them through the pre offense and offense phases of the model.

## Discussion

Using FSOs' offense chain interviews, we have developed the first preliminary model of female perpetrated sexual abuse: The Descriptive Model of Female Sexual Offending (DMFSO). This model has some noteworthy strengths. Specifically, the DMFSO provides a clear, yet detailed, account of female perpetrated sexual offending; clearly documenting the contributory

roles of cognitive, behavioral, affective and contextual factors. In addition, the model is sufficiently developed to document commonalities between FSOs, whilst at the same time sensitive enough to account for offender heterogeneity and attendant offense styles. In the section that follows, we describe the most salient aspects of the DMFSO, before considering its etiological and practical applications. Finally, we discuss limitations of the model and future research directions in light of our findings.

One particularly salient aspect of the model is its focus upon the negative developmental experiences of FSOs characterized—not only by poor familial relations—but by physical, sexual, and emotionally abusive experiences. Although previous offense chain models have not paid substantial attention to male sexual offenders' developmental experiences (Polaschek et al., 2001; Ward et al., 1995), Ward et al. (1995) documented a group of men who appeared to hold positive perceptions of their childhood; something that did not appear so clearly within our sample. This aspect of our model appears to support previous research which suggests that FSOs' developmental abuse experiences are more severe and frequent than those experienced by males (Allen, 1991; Mathews, Hunter, & Vuz, 1997; Miccio-Fonseca, 2000; Pothast & Allen, 1994). Further, such abusive developmental experiences may also explain—in part— why many of our FSOs demonstrated problems with self esteem, traits of severe passivity or aggression, and mental health problems early in adulthood (i.e., Vulnerability Factors) and why they became victims of further abuse during their early intimate relationships (i.e., Major Life Stressors).

Thus, a second salient feature of the DMFSO was the finding that the vast majority of women within our sample (91%, $n$ = 20) had experienced

some type of domestic abuse prior to the onset of their offending. This abuse appeared to play a fundamental role in further exacerbating existing vulnerability factors, or creating further vulnerability factors highly likely to place women at risk of sexually offending. To our knowledge, such a relationship—between intimate partner abuse and sexual offending—has never been highlighted in the male sexual offending literature, but has often been documented anecdotally by practitioners working with FSOs (see Hislop, 2001). Our empirical study suggests that FSOs' relationship experiences and their responses to those experiences play a key role in the sexual offense process via the development of key risk factors such as social isolation, maladaptive coping strategies, passive or aggressive personality styles, and mental health problems.

The final unique aspect of the DMFSO is the incorporation of co-offender influences. Such influences are typically absent from male sexual offender models since co-offending is typically less prevalent in male sexual offending (see Gannon & Rose, in press). We found, however, that co-offending males (both coercive and non-coercive), and other co-offenders played a significant role in the distal planning, goal establishment and proximal planning aspects of FSOs' offense preparation. For example, not only did some co-offending males groom FSOs, encouraging them to see sexual behaviors with children as relatively innocuous, but they also orchestrated the first initiation of abuse, praising the coerced FSO for any parts of the abuse initiated by her successfully. Thus, some women began to believe that, in order to attain intimacy with their partner, they must please him sexually, through abusing children. In fact, some women yearned so strongly to please their coercive partner that they occasionally used their newly found sexual

offense script to initiate sexual offending behavior themselves (e.g., taking indecent photos of children to give to their male co-offender as a "present"). Clearly, these women may not only have learnt sexual offense scripts, but may also have begun to develop beliefs or sexual fantasies supporting sex that would require significant investigation by consulting clinicians.

The development of the DMFSO has several implications for clinical practice. First, the types of planning, goals, and methods of approaching potential victims are diverse, illustrating a strong need for individual case formulation prior to treatment. In particular our model suggests that, for FSOs, treating professionals should pay particular attention to both developmental abusive experiences, and domestic abuse experiences and examine their relationship to risk factors (affective, cognitive, and environmental) evident immediately prior to their offending. A second, highly related implication of the DMFSO for clinical practice lies within the similarities and differences we noted between our FSOs and previous offense chain research with male sexual offenders. In brief, we noted a tendency for women to follow one of two pathways within our model: (1) offenders who explicitly plan and approach the offense behavior in order to achieve various goals and (2) offenders characterized by sexual offense *avoidance* who appear to play no formal role in the initial offense planning, instead tending to offend out of extreme fear for their lives or need for intimacy with their co-offender. Generally, the women in our model who *approached* the offending, and explicitly planned it, resembled the types of approach pathways typically documented in male sexual offenders (Polaschek & Hudson, 2004; Ward & Hudson, 1998; Ward et al., 1995). For example, some FSOs in our sample were characterized by explicit planning, positive affect, and sexual offense

persistence; characteristics documented in Ward et al.'s (1995) offense chain model of child molesters. For these women, then, treatment is likely to be most successful if attention is placed upon the *goals* driving sexual offending, and the associated values, and cognitions supporting these goals. Other women following the explicit approach pathway whose goals are likely to require substantial work are sex traffickers (who offend for financial reasons) or those who planned to humiliate their victims (usually in non sexual ways) and then subsequently added sexual elements to ensure their goal of humiliation was obtained. Although these women are semantically labeled as *sexual offenders* within the criminal justice system, they are more likely to benefit from treatment focusing upon generic offense-related attitudes, values, and affect. Furthermore, since our research highlighted the immense influence that *group discussion* could have upon subsequent planning, goals and offense behavior—especially for offenders against adults—education about such effects may be highly beneficial for such individuals. It is worth noting, however, that unlike research with male sexual offenders, we did not find strong evidence for the relapse prevention *avoidance* pathway in our sample (i.e., offenders characterized by negative affect, attempts at offense desistence, and subsequent self-regulation failure), although we did find four individuals characterized by sudden or disorganized approach behaviors who could approximately fit this pattern. Instead, we found a category of women who intended to avoid sexual offending, but who sexually offended following *male coercion*. Thus, our descriptive model of female sexual offending highlights not only aspects of female sexual offending that are similar to men, but also areas of particular divergence in need of clinical attention. In short, women, like men, demonstrate approach and avoidant goal behaviors;

however the goals underlying such behaviors are subtly different, as too are their planning and approach styles.

A particularly useful aspect of the DMFSO is its potential for helping women in treatment understand the range of factors associated with their offending behavior. To this aim, we have developed a simplified version of the model to be adapted as required for use with offenders in treatment (See Figure 4). We anticipate that such a model will not only increase FSOs' treatment motivation (because the model is directed specifically at females and their gender associated risk factors), but will also allow females to more clearly understand (1) how their offending may have occurred, (2) the variety of potential risk factors associated with their offending across time and context, and (3) *why* they are receiving specific treatments and interventions.

[Place Figure 4 about here]

A noteworthy aspect of our model is the numbers of FSOs used for its development. Typically, the numbers of participants recruited for grounded theory model development with male offenders range from between 9 (Courtney et al., 2006) to 24 offenders (Gee, Devilly, & Ward, 2004; Polaschek et al., 2001). Given that by December 2007, there were only 45 adult females incarcerated and sentenced for sexual offences in England and Wales (data from the National Offender Management Service, 2007), our sample represents almost half of the population of incarcerated FSOs in England and Wales.

Despite this strength, however, there are some limitations of the model that require discussion. First, although the proportions of FSO offense types present in our sample reflect roughly those found by other researchers (e.g., Beech, Parrett, Ward, & Fisher, in press; Syed & Williams, 1996), some

offender types were inevitably underrepresented. For example, we recruited relatively few women who worked alone against children (i.e., the teacher-lover, or pedophilic subtypes), and we were unable to obtain greater numbers of women who had sexually offended against adults. Nevertheless, as previous researchers have highlighted (e.g., Polaschek et al., 2001), a core strength of theory developed using grounded theory methodology is its ability for future modification in response to additional data. Thus, the DMFSO has the ability to expand, and to accommodate, future samples of women who work alone against children and those who offend against adults. Given the numbers of FSOs typically recruited for research, however, it may take some time before researchers have sufficient data available to validate our model further although we welcome external researchers to do this.

There are other limitations inherent with grounded theory which may have threatened the validity and reliability of the DMFSO. Most notable, perhaps, was our reliance on self-reported offense chain narratives which may be tainted by unconscious memory distortions, self deception, and conscious impression management strategies. Although such issues are, indeed, a recognized problem with qualitative analyses, we believe that we minimized these validity threats through (1) familiarizing ourselves with FSO's file notes prior to interview so that any inconsistencies with their self-reported narrative could be sensitively probed and (2) checking the veracity of FSO's interviews with the range of collateral information available concerning their offenses. Here, interview information that varied significantly from recorded offense accounts were dropped from the analysis in order to preserve and strengthen model validity.

A final issue is whether the resulting model imitates some type of unconscious researcher bias, perhaps reflecting our own pre-existing hypotheses and theory from the wider sexual offender literature. In order to minimize these effects, we employed the second author (MR)—who had no previous work experience with sexual offenders—to complete all of the initial meaning unit analysis. Paired with the principles of grounded theory used to offset such bias (i.e., the use of simultaneous inductive and deductive strategies), we believe that these strategies helped to reduce such biases. Nevertheless, future cross validation of this study is required, and should be completed to strengthen the empirical underpinnings of the model. Further future work should also be conducted regarding pathways that FSOs take to their offending. In a related paper, then, we plan to document, more specifically, the types of pathways FSOs typically take within the model, present case studies of these pathways, and test the characteristics of women clustering within these specific pathways quantitatively.

In summary, the descriptive offense chain model that we have developed represents—to our knowledge—the very first attempt to document FSOs' offense process behavior. Amidst the paucity of theoretical and empirical research with FSOs, the application of grounded theory methodology has allowed us to formulate a preliminary conceptual model based upon the specific information, knowledge and experiences provided by FSOs. Thus, we sincerely hope that researchers and practitioners in this area will use our work to further develop their understanding of female perpetrated sexual abuse through future research, cross validation, and treatment activities.

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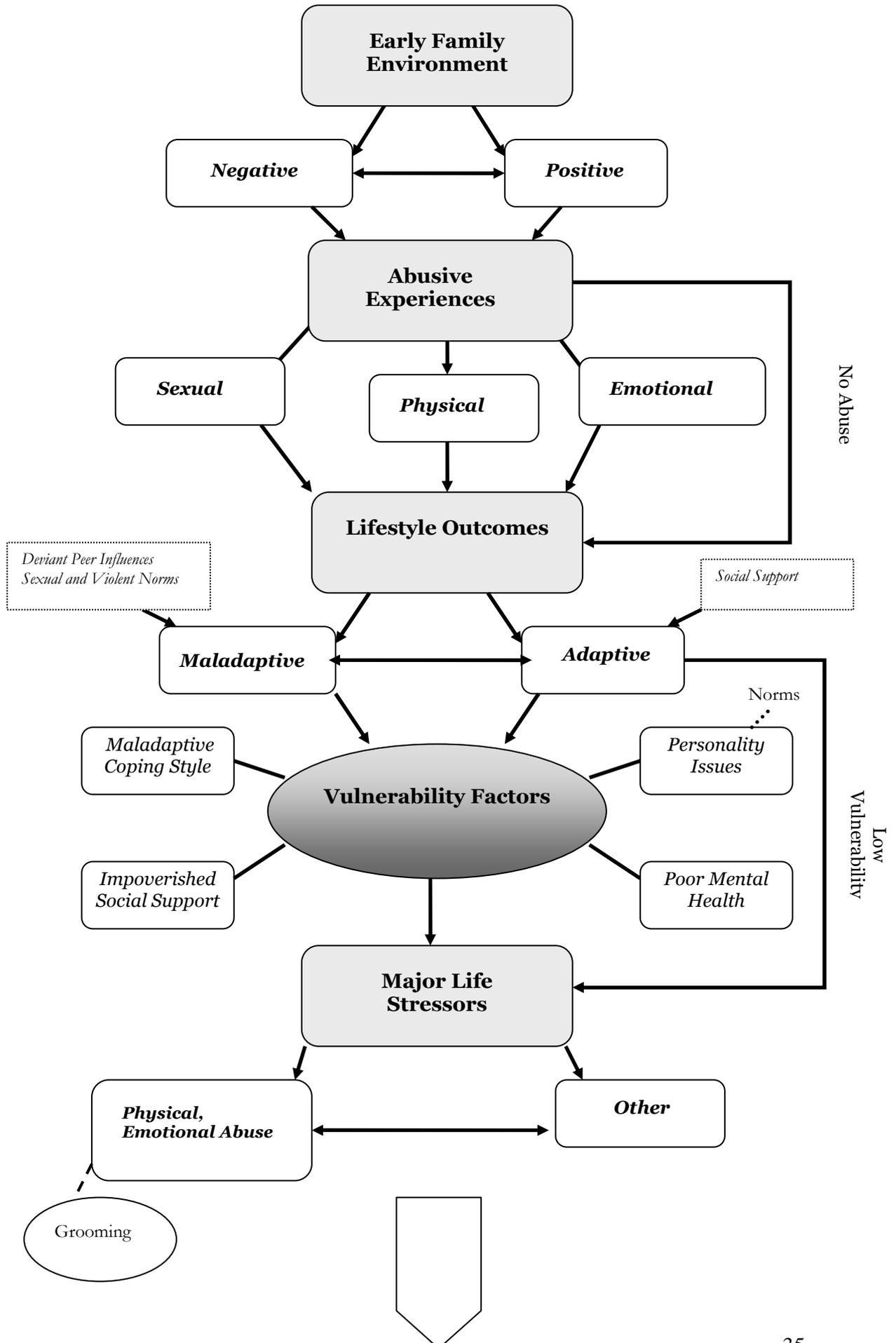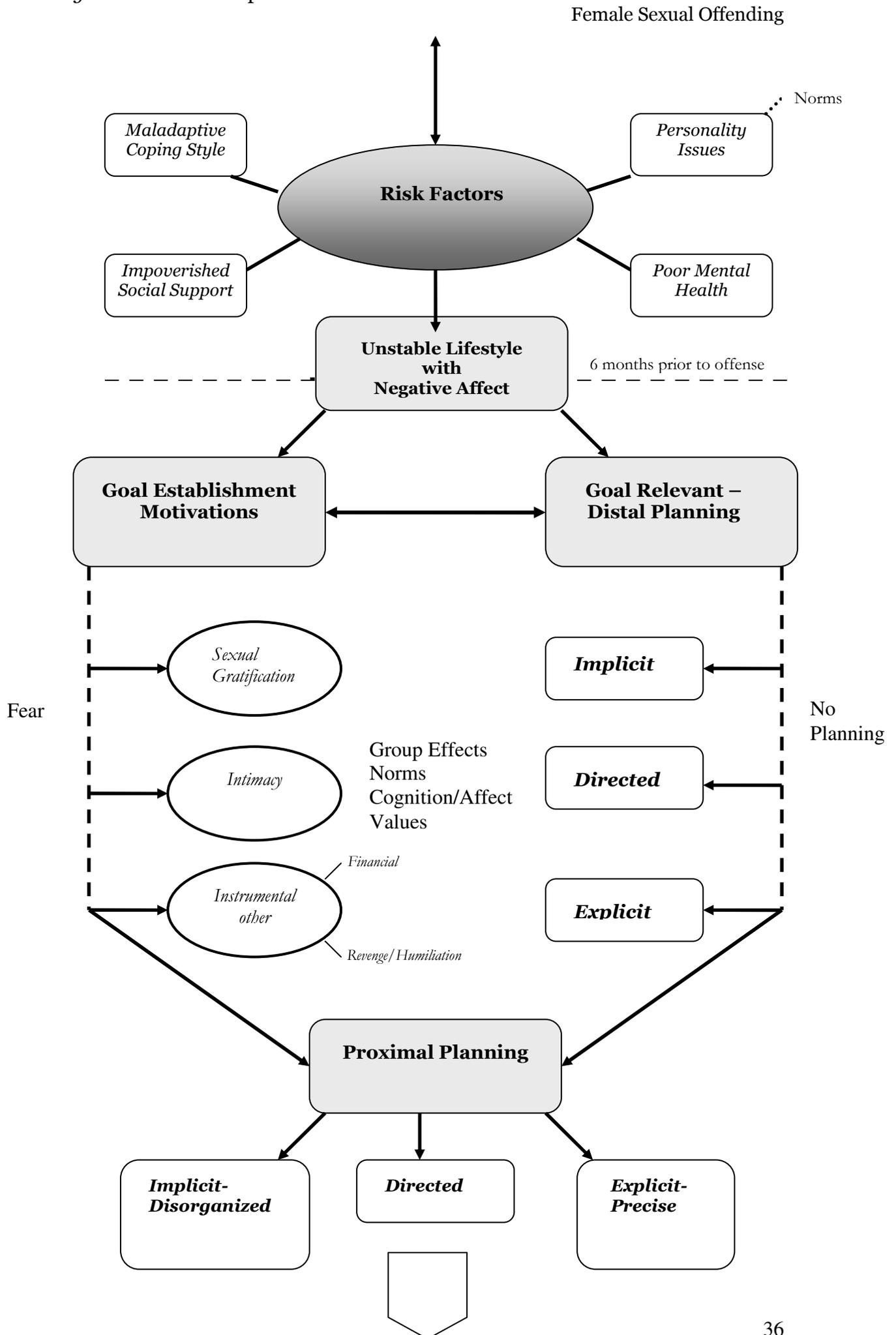
*Figure 1.* Background factors

*Figure 2.* Preoffense period

*Figure 3.* Offense and post offense period



**Offense Approach**

*Maternal Approach*

*Maternal Avoidant*

**Cognition
Affect
Sexual
Arousal
Alcohol**

*Aggressive Approach*

*Operationalized Approach*

**Offense Behavior**

**Victim Response**

*Engaged*

*Submissive*

*Resistant*

**Offense Consequences**

*Community Response*

*Affective*

*Cognitive*

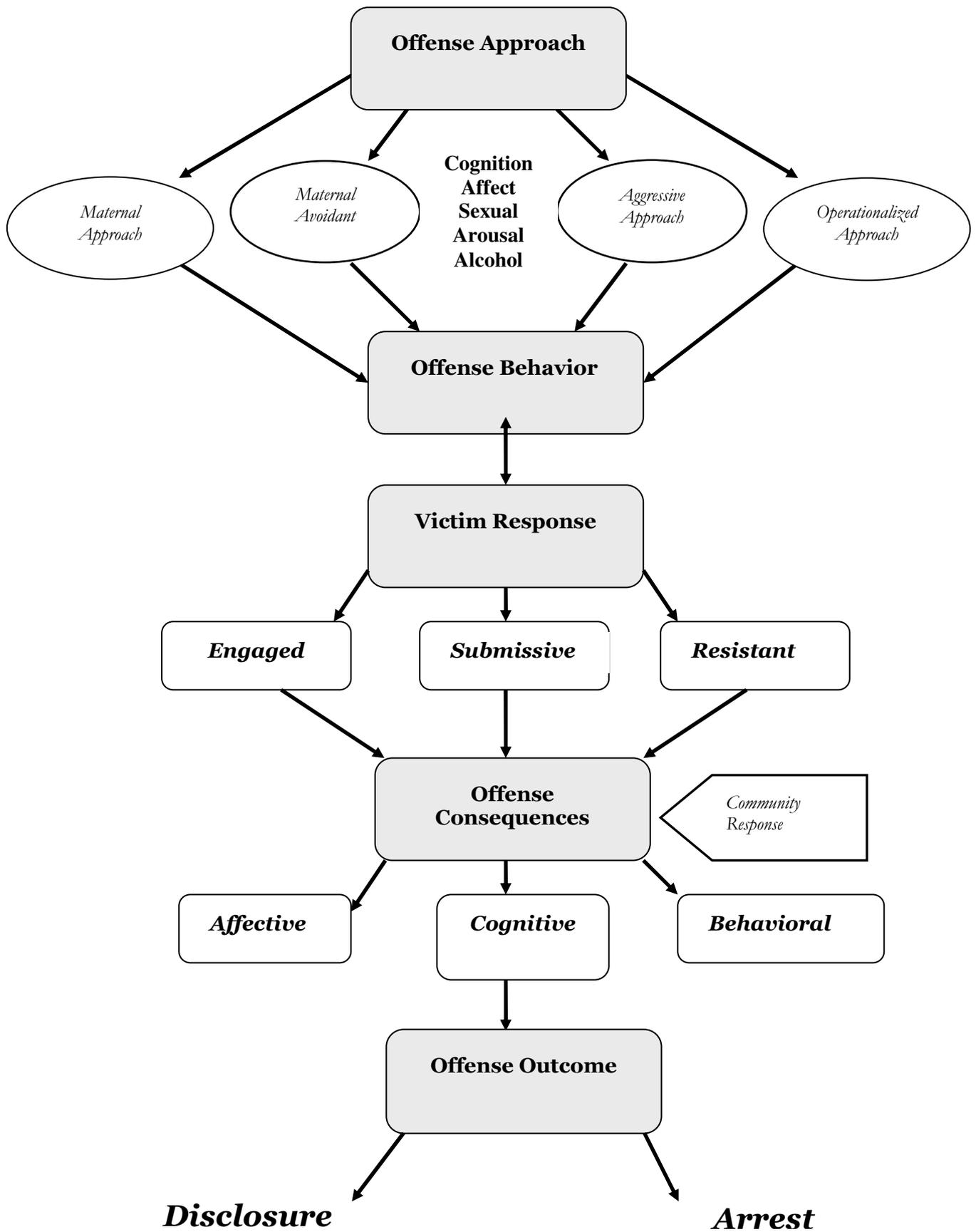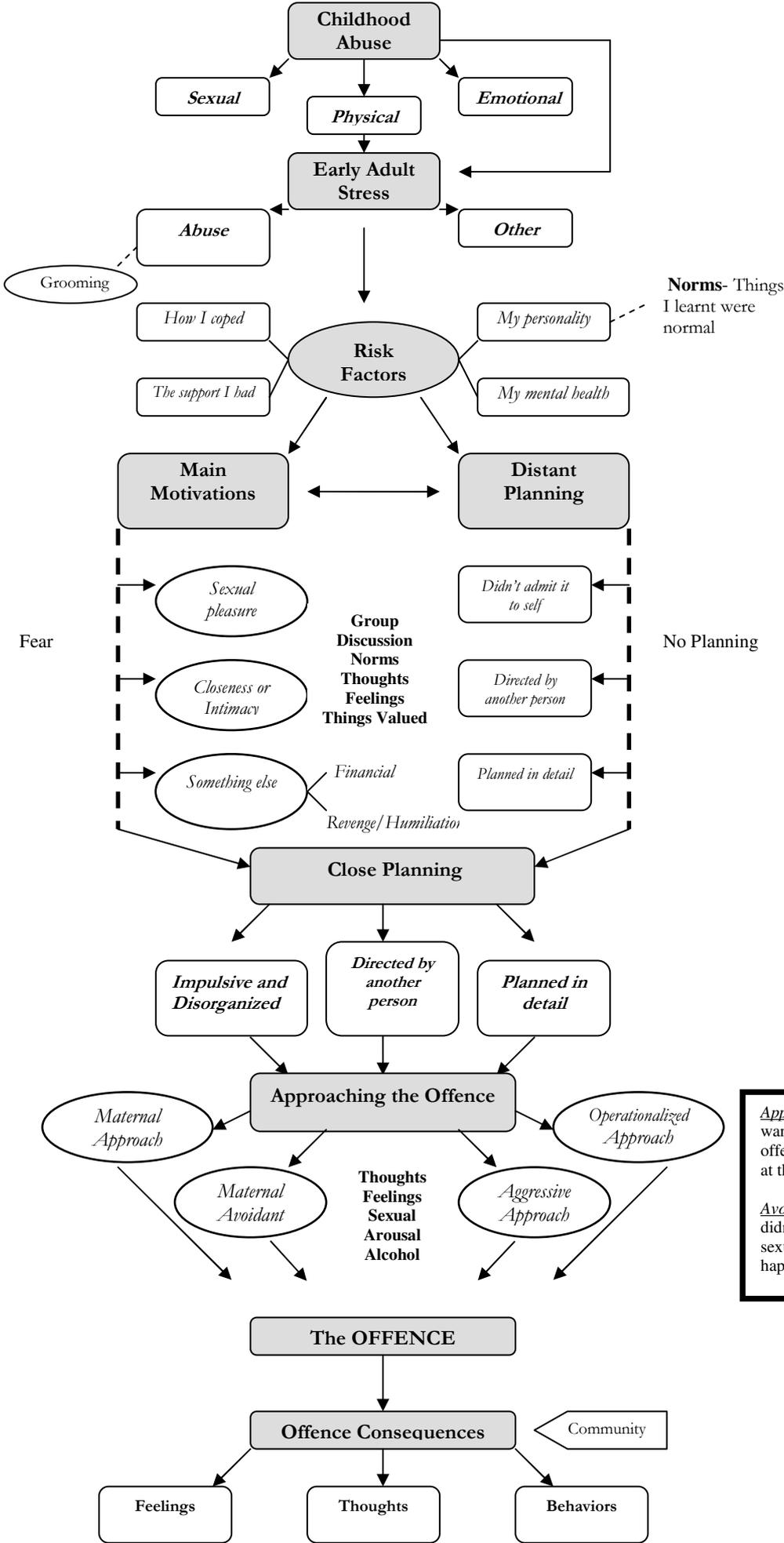*Behavioral*

**Offense Outcome**

*Disclosure*

*Arrest*

*Figure 4.* Abbreviated treatment model

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Please note that the views reflected within this manuscript do not necessarily reflect those of HM Prison Service.