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Brief review spotlight: Females who sexually offend

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Current academic understanding regarding females who commit harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) is at a distinct disadvantage when compared to male offenders. Female sex offending is both under-reported and poorly understood. Limited research is available and most continues to be descriptive, focusing on offender and offence characteristics. This brief review paper aims to capture some of the current thinking in this important area of study, aiming to summarise some of the recent literature and making suggestions about how best to consider this population based on the limited knowledge base available. It does not aim to present a detailed review, just a 'spotlight' on some of the emerging themes and considerations likely important for HSB in females.

Prevalence rates for females who commit HSB continue to be unclear and under-reported. For example, McLeod and Craft (2015) note how in the United States, 20% of sexual offences *involve* females, between 15 to 20% of all sexual offences are perpetrated by women and yet only 1% of sex offenders in prison are females. This suggests notable differences with regard to how female offending is recognised and dealt with, with a further indication that their offences may not necessarily lead to prison sentences. A number of reasons can be suggested for this criminal justice response to females who sexually offend. This includes perpetrators being considered victims based on their reported traumatic backgrounds (leading to more attention being given to mitigating factors) and a view of them predominantly as nurturers and protectors (Hayes & Baker, 2014), which conflicts with a perpetrator role, making it more difficult to accept their abusive actions.

Little progress has been made over the last twenty years in forming a more developed understanding of this group. Understanding does not appear to have progressed much beyond typologies, with causation factors poorly captured or understood. This has been noted by Johansson-Love and Fremouw (2009) in their critique of the literature on female sexual offenders. They recorded only 13 studies from 1989 to 2004, five of which were considered exploratory and did not include any comparison group to assist with determining characteristics distinct to females. The studies were also flawed in terms of methodology, with poorly applied definitions of abuse.

Regarding the latter, there was a lack of clarity over different forms of sexual abuse as a number of the sexual offences by females involved coercing children into prostitution. This is, of course, a form of sexual abuse but not always readily identified as such; not in comparison to the more commonly accepted views of sexual offending, such as a contact sex offences like rape or indecent assault. A failure to capture the diversity of abuse creates difficulties in understanding the risk and protective factors and attempts to formulate such behaviours by females. Put simply, the concept of 'sexual offending' is considerably more diverse than contact sex offences and the research among female offenders has not yet captured this diversity sufficiently.

In terms of typologies, researchers have proposed examples. However, little has been achieved in developing a robustly empirically determined typology. One of the earliest typologies was proposed by Matthews, Matthews and Speltz (1989). They presented a three category typology comprising; '*teacher/lover*' (i.e. a distorted belief that they were 'teaching' the victim); '*predisposed*' (i.e. the perpetrator was likely to have been sexually abused as children); and '*male coerced*' (i.e. perpetration a product of being intimidated to do so by a male). Our knowledge has become more developed since the construction of such basic and untested typologies. For example, we now know that there is no *direct* link between being a victim of sexual abuse and becoming an abuser. Our understanding is more developed in that it is the victims' *interpretation* of the sexual abuse against them, such as whether it fosters offence-supportive beliefs or not (e.g. Lussier, Beauregard, Proulx, & Nicole, 2005) that is the important facilitating factor. Offence-supportive-beliefs then form one potential vulnerability factor (of many) with regard to offenders engaging in HSB harm towards others.

A more recent typology proposed by Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks (2011) consisted of a three tier model; the '*once-only offender*' (i.e. commits a single sex offence), '*generalists*' (i.e. sex offending forms part of a wider repertoire of other offending, usually also violent offending), and '*specialists*' (i.e. engagement predominantly in sex offences yet can have some minor offences, such as theft, vandalism and public order). It could be argued, nevertheless, that this is less of a typology model and more of a versatility approach where sexual offending is considered to fall along a continuum where single (less complex) offending falls at one end and more diverse offending at the other. It is thus arguably less typology focused than a more traditional typology approach offered by Matthews et al (1989).

Following attempts at developing typologies, there has been some discussion in the literature that females who sexually harm may present differently when compared to male offenders when considering risk factors. However, this appears to have been a more dated view with more recent literature suggesting more similarity than dissimilarity with male offenders. This is

perhaps best illustrated by Elliott, Eldridge, Ashfield and Beech (2010) who explored risk, protective and treatment factors in female sex offenders. In a sample of 43 women they noted there were often *similar* risk factors. This does not suggest there are no risk factors *unique* to females who sexually offend, rather that there may be similarities that require consideration since these do underpin treatment and management issues. There are certainly some differences noted in the literature. For example, Hendriks and Bijleveld (2006) report how female sexual offenders were more likely to commit their offences with a co-offender, suggesting that the social environment within which the offending is taking place may have some additional more specific considerations for females.

As noted earlier, research is limited for females who sexually offend. It is a particularly under-reported offence and as such the samples available are likely not to be representative of the offender population more broadly. Attention also needs to be focused on the wider remit of offending that perpetrators are engaging in, as already noted in the 'typologies' offered by Wijkman et al (2011). The importance of controlling for any factors that may be specific to female offenders that could be distorting results has been suggested. For example, Sandler and Freeman (2009) in their sample of 1,466 females convicted of sexual offences found them to have more previous child victims and more previous misdemeanour convictions (i.e. increased versatility) and also to be older. However, removing a factor that appeared specific to female offenders, namely the promotion of child prostitution, resulted in female offenders being more similar in age to male offenders. Sandler and Freeman further argued that female sexual offenders who re-offended were more consistent with general female offenders who offended both sexually and non-sexually. This is a factor that has been well recognised in male offenders where sexual offending is considered to form part of a larger pattern of general offending (Lussier, Van Den Berg, Bijleveld & Hendriks, 2012). This is also consistent with the 'typologies' offered by Wijkman et al (2011) who argued that '*specialists*' (i.e. those who engage predominantly in sex offences, yet can have some minor offences, such as theft, vandalism and public order) were the largest group. It does, overall, suggest there may be more similarities between the male and female literature bases than previously thought and yet still highlights the value in remaining open-minded for factors that could be unique to male and female perpetrators.

Considering the developing literature base currently available for female sex offenders, it does appear there could be an argument for two potentially distinct groups; those who engage in the more commonly recognised forms of sexual abuse (e.g. contact offences) and those that facilitate and/or promote the sexual exploitation of children through activities such as prostitution. The latter group appear more unique and less likely to share characteristics with male offenders.

Current typologies and attempts at formulating an understanding of female sex offenders do not appear to have captured these groups completely as yet. It could suggest that there are three patterns of offending; the *primary child exploiter*, the *contact sex offender*, and the *exploiter-contact offender*. All of these could be considered to fall on a continuum, with engagement in additional, non-sexual offending, potentially running alongside. This is purely speculative but nevertheless such an approach starts to promote discussion about recognising *patterns of offending* as opposed to typologies, further recognising patterns that capture *versatility*. The development of such revised approaches are undoubtedly speculative and restricted by the limited availability of female sex offenders to sample, a focus on cohort sampling with no longitudinal sampling, difficulties in generalising from the available samples, and the obvious limitations on the use of more detailed statistical models due to sampling challenges.

A further recurring issue that is commonly cited in the literature for females who sexually harm that is worthy of noting is that of trauma. Elliott et al (2010) report that among female sexual offenders, trauma may disrupt interpersonal functioning such as emotional regulation, including a difficulty in coping with their own children, as well as promoting an ineffective or neglectful parenting style. It is proposed that this may further link to difficulties in sexual self-regulation, which could be fostered by a distortion that children are 'sexual individuals' who desire the sexual contact of an adult. Whilst trauma is of course an important consideration, trauma as a general concept is a factor that has been largely omitted in male sexual offender research until more recently. It may be the case that trauma is more clearly linked with female offenders as a vulnerability factor, yet it is not true to say that it does not link equally with male offenders. Rather, it is a case that it is an area of research that has not been systematically explored with the male population in as much detail as females.

The obvious challenges in the literature base that this brief spotlight review has sought to capture does create difficulties in how a clinician can be best informed on what risk assessment tools can be used to aid knowledge and guide formulation. Whilst there are instances where some sex offender risk assessments have been purported by professionals to be theoretically effective for use with females, this is without strong basis as an unavoidable difficulty with the literature base. There are tools under considerable development for female sex offenders but as yet no widely accepted, validated or robust sex offender risk assessment that can confidently used with this female population, both as adolescents or adults, that can account full for the restrictions with the literature base. Vess (2011), for example, notes that we must appreciate that we are not yet in a position to offer the same type of risk assessment information regarding females who sexually harm as we can offer for male offenders. The most effective way forward is arguably to provide a detailed

assessment of an individual's pathway to their offending, with a clear explanation of the various vulnerability factors that have contributed. Of further value is additional detail as to the likelihood of these factors recurring and the individual's strengths and vulnerabilities for coping effectively with these factors (Vess, 2011). There is also a need to capture the context in which any sexual harm is most likely to take place.

Finally, regarding the therapeutic engagement with female sex offenders, the focus is of course always on a detailed and individualised formulation that considers the functions of their behaviour, how this can change over time, and the reinforcing and maintaining factors. It should further include consideration of the instances where they could have engaged in such behaviours, but chose not to. Following this should be consideration of a treatment pathway. A helpful guide toward this is suggested by Gannon and Rose (2008). This guide is not dissimilar to general therapeutic themes when working with males. They specifically suggest the following:

- Consideration of issues relating to denial/minimisation, and which may impact on therapeutic progress;
- Examination of the HSB, looking for enhanced understanding;
- Exploration of beliefs and attitudes that support offending and how these have developed;
- Exploration and intervention in regard to victim empathy, looking at the impact of such abuse, and any further links in understanding based on their own developmental histories;
- Consideration of sexual interests that are contributing toward HSB, and how sexual behaviours are engaged with in a healthy manner;
- The fostering of intimacy, looking for difficulties in achieving this and providing relevant intervention to develop effective intimacy;
- Support in emotional regulation and effective development of goals, looking at effective coping across a range of life domains;
- Support in relapse prevention and in the achievement of positive future goals.

Overall, our understanding of females who engage in HSB continues to be limited, and one where there has been little progress past typologies and characteristics. Positive improvements can be made, nevertheless, and particularly if there is a focus on developing theoretical models of understanding beyond typology based approaches, and on the advancement of research that extends methodology to longitudinal studies and matched comparison approaches. Currently the state of the research field appears to inform a very individualised approach to understanding female offenders, an approach that is of equal value with male offenders. Clinicians and risk assessors can

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draw on the most recent and robust literature available to inform their judgements whilst equally recognising the limited state of this field in comparison to the male offender literature. Regardless, helpful and informed care pathways can be developed that focus on risk management, capture protective and contextual risk factors and inform treatment targets.

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