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Female Sex Offenders' Relationship Experiences

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Abstract

Interventions for child sexual abusers should take into account their perspectives on the context of their offenses, but no descriptions of everyday life from the offender's point of view have been published. This study therefore explored female offenders' views of their strengths and challenges. Documented risk assessments of 20 female offenders were analyzed using inductive content analysis (Cavanagh, 1997; Priest, Roberts & Woods, 2002; Woods, Priest & Roberts, 2002). The Good Lives Model provided the initial coding framework and Atlas/ti software (Muhr, 1997) was used for simultaneous data collection and analysis. The content analysis yielded 999 coding decisions organized in three themes. The global theme was relationship experiences. Offenders described the quality of their relationship experiences, including their personal perspectives, intimate relationships and social lives. These descriptions have implications for treatment planning and future research with women who have molested children.

Keywords

Forensic nursing; child sexual abuse; sex offenses; female sex offenders; women

Introduction

It is not uncommon for the general public to be alternately horrified and titillated by accounts of child sexual abuse by women. Sex offenders are considered the worst of the worst, even by other criminals (Auburn & Lea, 2003); but this attitude leads to the vilification of offenders and makes it difficult, if not socially dangerous, to investigate treatment approaches that conflict with the common focus on being “tough on sex offenders” (Wakefield, 2006, p. 141). While it is difficult to reconcile the harm that offenders cause in their quest for pleasure, bliss, and intimacy (Gilgun, 1995), it is important to recognize that they share the basic human quest for survival within strong social networks (Ward, in press). Treatment effects may be maximized if emphasis is placed not only on reducing risk but also on enhancing hope and increasing self-esteem (Maison & Larson, 1995; Marshall, et al, 2005). An analysis of offenders' everyday lives would help treatment providers develop interventions to promote pro-social behavior in women who have molested children.

Background

Modern investigation of the attitudes and behavior of women who have molested children began in 1960 when Wahl (1960) published two case studies focusing on the experience of the victim. In this classic study, the offending mothers were said to have been actively or passively seductive with their sons. Since then a number of case studies and record reviews (Chasnoff, et al, 1986; Marvasti 1986; McCarty 1986; O'Connor 1987; Chow & Choy, 2002; Krug 1989; Travin, Cullen, & Potter, 199), phenomenologic studies (Bouchard 1998; Tardif, et al. 2005), and survey or interview studies (Condy, et al. 1987; Fehrenbach & Monastersky 1988; Green & Kaplan, 1994) have examined the characteristics of offenders, but none of the

studies examined everyday life from the offender's perspective. Further, the studies were small, poorly controlled and limited to offenders who came to the attention of investigators through legal and clinical systems, so the results of the studies must be interpreted cautiously (Grayston & De Luca, 1999).

Female child molesters are a heterogeneous group (Grayston & DeLuca, 1999). Apart from their abusive behavior, they are virtually indistinguishable from the general population, with one notable exception: there is a high incidence of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in their histories. The women's relationships with their mothers were problematic, with physical and psychological abuse present in nearly all the relationships. Perhaps as a result, some studies have found that these women have serious deficits in self esteem as well as significant involvement in intimate partner violence and other forms of family dysfunction (Hendriks and Bijleveld 2006; Tewksbury 2004).

Female offenders have been found more likely than male offenders to offend with an accomplice. Further, those who offended with a male were frequently involved in abusive relationships with their co-offenders. Women who molested children independently were more likely than women who molested with an accomplice to have been severely molested themselves prior to the age of 10 (Faller, 1987). Female offenders were rarely sexually violent with their victims but were often physically abusive, especially if the offender was the victim's mother or stepmother. Fondling and oral sex were the most common forms of sexual activity and the women were as likely to choose female victims as male victims though they rarely offended against adults. Most victims were preschool and school-aged children for whom the offenders provided a substantial proportion of care, either as mothers/stepmothers or as day care workers. Female offenders rarely kidnapped or killed their victims; even so, victims of female offenders reported that the experience harmed and damaged them (Denov, 2004). A substantial proportion of men convicted of rape, for example, reported having been molested by a female, usually on more than one occasion and often by more than one female (Petrovich & Templar, 1984).

While the descriptive studies provide useful information about female offenders' characteristics and backgrounds and the nature of their offenses, none have addressed everyday life from the women's own perspectives. Therefore, this study examined the everyday life experiences of women who were required to register as sex offenders.

Methods

The study used inductive content analysis (Cavanagh, 1997; Priest, Roberts & Woods, 2002; Woods, Priest & Roberts, 2002) of records compiled during a sex offender risk assessment process to explore female offenders' perspectives on how they manage the challenges all people face. Inclusion criteria for the study were convictions for criminal sexual conduct toward a minor or solicitation of a minor to engage in sexual conduct as defined by Arkansas Statute. Criminal sexual conduct was defined as rape, sexual indecency with a child, sexual assault or incest. Solicitation of a minor to engage in sexual conduct included sexual solicitation of a child or permitting the abuse of a child. In cases where the offender was convicted of solicitation or permitting the abuse of a child, the offender was present during the offense. Data collection and analysis strategies included theoretical sampling, the constant comparison method of simultaneous data collection and analysis (Glaser, 1965), theoretical coding and memo writing. Reliability was evaluated using Cohen's kappa. Data collection and analysis ceased when saturation was confirmed.

The Data Set

The data set consisted of 20 records compiled by the Sex Offender Screening and Risk Assessment (SOSRA) Program for assessing the risk offenders pose in the community. The data included a documented interview with the offender and the offenders' responses to the Simon Incomplete Sentences Test. The Simon Incomplete Sentences Test (SIST) is an information gathering tool that has been refined regularly by the SOSRA program in the years since its development in 1999. Early versions of the test were used to provide information to help prepare risk assessment reports. Currently, interviewers use the SIST to help them prepare for risk assessment interviews. It provides interviewers with information to address during the interview. It also allows offenders to provide information about themselves in a way that gives clues to their insight and judgment. Further, offenders sometimes reveal previously unsuspected problem sexual attitudes, behaviors, or deviance, such as flashing or molesting boys as well as girls, as well as tactics they use to protect themselves, such as religiosity or denial or blaming the victim, and other themes, such as an antisocial outlook or a poor view of women. The SIST is not a risk assessment or a measurement tool but is only used for information gathering; it has not been subjected to psychometric testing.

Consistent with the principles of theoretical sampling, the questions that arose during coding of each record guided the selection of subsequent records.

Data Analysis

Following approval by the UAMS IRB, data were analyzed by inductive content analysis (Cavanagh, 1997; Priest, Roberts & Woods, 2002; Woods, Priest & Roberts, 2002). Ward's (2006) Good Lives Model (GLM) provided the initial coding structures. The GLM addresses nine primary human needs organized in three categories, Body, Self, and Social Life (Ward & Stewart, 2003). To facilitate constant comparison within and between cases a matrix of quotes (x) and case (y) was generated as each record was coded. A unique set of analytic variables emerged through the coding process, and then were organized hierarchically. This hierarchical organization of analytic variables is shown in Table 1; detailed descriptions of the variables are given in Tables 2, 3, and 4.

Results

Sample

The interview data revealed characteristics of the offenders, their victims and their offenses. The SISTs yielded 999 statements. Cohen's kappa was 0.91. The average age of the women in the sample was 33 years (range 21-57). Three of the women were black and 14 were Caucasian (missing data: 3). Twelve were married or in a marital type relationship and the remaining 8 were single or divorced. The records contained incomplete information about offenders' level of exposure to abuse as a child or interpersonal violence as an adult. Most of the women were unemployed at the time of the assessment (60%). All had at least some high school education; 13 had graduated or received a GED and 6 had some college or a college degree.

The 20 offenders had 28 reported victims. The victim's average age was 14 years (range 8-17); 22 were adolescents aged 13-17. There were 13 female victims and 15 male victims. The boys and girls were the same average age.

The theoretical sampling process ensured that offenders were diverse in terms of their charges and their relationships with victims. Offenders were typically convicted of sexual abuse, sexual assault, and/or sexual solicitation of a child. They had molested children well known to them, including family members, sons and daughters of friends, acquaintances and children over whom they held some authority. None of the women kidnapped or killed their victims or

molested children who were strangers to them. There were considerable differences between what they wished for and what had actually happened in their intimate and social relationships.

Content Analysis

The global theme found within the interviews was relationship experiences. The offenders described how the quality of their relationships and their ability to communicate their needs and expectations influenced their behavior. Their responses to the incomplete sentences stems showed how their personal attitudes, experiences and backgrounds, as well as their offenses and the resulting legal sanctions, had influenced their family and social relationships. Relationship experiences influenced the offenders' capacity to meet their needs, the means they used to address physical and social needs, the scope of their social, educational, and physical resources, and their ability to meet one set of needs without interfering with other, equally significant but conflicting needs. Three main categories emerged from the data: personal perspectives, intimate relationships and social lives

Personal Perspectives—The offenders described their personal experiences, fears, hopes, and sources of pride and happiness as well their attitudes toward their offenses and themselves. They explained their recreational activities, hopes and dreams, and their experiences with sex and sexuality. The theme was represented in 476 (48%) of the offenders' responses to SIST items. Table 2 gives a sample IST stem and offender response, the defining characteristics of each subtheme and the subthemes related to personal experiences and attitudes.

Competence: The records indicated that the women were proud of their ability to complete their education and learn new skills. They were concerned, however, about their ability to work, either because they were not given the opportunity to work or the skills they needed to be successful in the workplace.

Happiness and inner peace: The offenders wanted to be connected with others, to feel better, and to do better but did not have the experiences, resources, and attitudes needed to meet their needs. They felt sad or worried when something happened in their families that they could not participate in or fix, or when there was something (like the future) they did not have the resources to manage. They felt happy when they were connected with family and were able to do something for or with them. They felt better when they could rely on someone or something outside themselves to take care of things.

Offense: Occasionally an offender took responsibility for the effect of her offense on her family but in general, offenders blamed their offenses on someone else. They reported feeling embarrassed, sad, or distressed when they thought about the charge or had to face the consequences. Those who did take responsibility for what they did saw the charge as a “wake-up call.”

Recreation: The offenders' recreational activities moved them either toward or away from a sense of connection. Many of these activities – gardening, fishing, reading, shopping, listening to music, playing video games, and watching movies – were done in isolation. They consistently moved away from connection with others even though being with other people, especially their families, made them feel better.

Self-Perception: The offenders described feeling good about themselves when they were in a supportive relationship or environment. They felt bad about themselves when they were alone, when they could not control the situation, or when they described their appearance. They liked to take care of people and felt bad when they lied or were unkind to people who were important to them. They were proud of accomplishments, such as having children, finishing their

education or facing up to their responsibilities. They got into trouble when they spoke up, failed to stop and think about what they are about to do, trusted too freely or let people pressure them into doing something they knew they should not be doing.

Sex and Sexuality: Some offenders were interested in sexual activity, while others said they were not interested. Those who acknowledged being interested found sexual satisfaction in intimate relationships. They were rarely in favor of masturbation or pornography, which are essentially isolating expressions of sexual activity, although some accepted it as normal. Most, however were either uninterested in sexual activity or imprisoned and thus could not engage in sexual activity without being subject to disciplinary action.

Wishes: Offenders had hopes and dreams both for themselves and for others. They wished they could go back to a time before the offense and change what they had done. They wished that people felt differently about them. They wished no one knew about their offense and did not want to be where they were. Their wishes for others were global in nature. For example, they wished that people were nicer, that the world was at peace, or that people felt differently about issues like race or religion.

Intimate Relationships—Intimate relationships included their own childhood memories, their relationships with their own children, relationships with family members and marriage and intimate relationships. The theme was represented in 214 (21%) of the offenders' responses to SIST items. Table 3 gives a sample IST stem and offender response, the defining characteristics of each subtheme and the subthemes related to intimate relationships.

Childhood memories: The offenders described childhood activities, including playing outside, spending time with siblings and cousins, learning to crochet, and fishing. The memories were generally happy, except for two women who indicated that they were raped as children.

Children: Children were seen as rambunctious, giggly, and stubborn, with great minds and ideas. Those who did not have children thought having a child would be wonderful. Others remembered the births of their children and those who had their children removed from their custody were upset about it. They expressed love and joy about children in general, and wished they could be with their own children. They worried about the effect of their offense on their children and were distressed at the thought of children being hurt or in trouble. One woman said she thought most children were lonely, but in general, the group thought children were adventurous and fun to be around.

Family: Attitudes toward family members, especially parents, were mostly positive. They saw their families as supportive, loving, and kind, although they said that some family members were not good people and their families were not close. In other instances, family members were seen as good people but with irritating quirks, attitudes, or habits.

Marriage and intimate relationships: The offenders described marriage and intimate relationships in general terms, and provided limited information about specific and personal marital issues. Under some circumstances, marriage could “be like being with your best friend forever,” but when those circumstances were not present it could be very destructive. Those who were not married were ambivalent about the prospect of marrying or remarrying in the future.

Social Lives—Social lives included beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that made society run smoothly. The offenders expressed their attitudes toward the law, about other people and the

way other people treated them. Further, they described their attitudes toward personal matters, relationships with their spiritual communities and their values and norms, including attitudes toward work. They expressed needs for comprehension, recognition and empathy. The theme was represented in 309 (31%) of the offenders' responses to SIST items. Table 4 gives a sample IST stem and offender response, the defining characteristics of each subtheme and the subthemes related to social lives.

Legal Issues: Offenders viewed the law in black and white terms. On the one hand, they considered the law important, saying “it keeps us safe” and “it should not be broken.” When applied personally, however, they thought the law was unfairly or inappropriately enforced. The law failed to protect the right people and interfered with the offenders' personal agenda. It was supposed to support safety and security but failed to do so.

Offenders' attitudes toward others: In general, people were seen as disrespectful, judgmental and immature. Men in particular were seen as arrogant and demanding; women were thought to be bitchy and untrustworthy. Deep down, however, the offenders thought almost everyone had some good points. At their core the offenders thought people could be kind, special in some way and good hearted. The disconnect between people's inner lives and social behavior was explained by some hidden pain, fear, or trouble.

People's attitudes toward offenders: Occasionally offenders indicated that other people liked them or liked being around them. More often, however, they worried about what people thought of them. They did not like it when people reacted to the offense rather than to the offender as an individual. They thought people did not like it when offenders were tearful, cranky, depressed or angry, or when they stood up for themselves and said what they thought.

Sharing: It was hard for offenders to be in groups. They were reluctant to discuss problems or issues or to express painful emotions such as anger or fear. One woman said she had never told anyone that she cried every day, and another said that she had never told anyone about how she felt about what was going on or her deepest emotions. Deep down, the offenders thought, most everyone had things they did not want others to know.

Spirituality: Their spiritual life was dominated by being baptized, going to church, and turning their worldly cares over to the Lord.

Understanding: The offenders were bewildered by their circumstances. They explained that they did not understand how they got themselves into the situations they were in and how others could cause them such pain. Other people did not understand their fear, their need for quiet, or the nature of their crime. They wished people understood how they thought, how others hurt their feelings, and who they really were. They would have liked others to understand things that they themselves did not understand.

Values: Offenders believed that no one should go without the basic necessities of life or experience tragedies such as abuse or the loss of a child. They thought it was normal to experience and express the full range of emotions, experiences, and relationships. They wanted everyone to be treated equitably, both in terms of benefits for good and sanctions for bad behavior. They were concerned about the effect of their offenses on others, especially their families and their children, saying that others should not suffer because of their actions.

Work: They liked to work at rewarding jobs and took pride when they did a job well.

Discussion

Previous descriptions of female offenders focused almost exclusively on the offense itself. This record review examined ways in which their relationship experiences influenced their everyday lives. The women had psychological and social problems in creating good lives for themselves (Ward & Stewart 2003). They idealized children, demonized men, distrusted other women and expressed ambivalence about themselves. Children were seen as giggly, playful and full of energy. Men were seen as immature, lazy, pushy, and demanding. The offenders thought that most women had committed adultery, had been abused, and were jealous of their men. The offenders were ambivalent about themselves. One woman saw herself as a good mother doing the best she could, and another indicated that the best thing about her was that she listened well and gave good advice. Many, however, had very little good to say about themselves. One woman said that other people thought she should grow up. Other women indicated that they were lazy, could not accept compliments, and got into trouble because they did not pay attention to what they were doing.

They were almost exclusively self-referential. When discussing their offense, for example, they generally reported how it made them feel. When asked about the effects of the offense, they described the effect on themselves, most often in terms of what happened when they got caught. In the rare instances in which they answered questions about why they did what they did, they answered in terms of emotions and relationships, rarely acknowledging any sort of sexual response. When they verbalized their regret or said how bad they felt about what they had done, it was in relation to how their behavior had affected them. They expressed little regret for the impact on the victim.

The ways these women behaved in social relationships reduced their chances of meeting their physical and personal needs. Their stated attitudes toward adult sexuality were at odds with their observed behaviors. Their abilities to express intimacy, understanding, empathy and competency were limited. Their educational, marital and work histories were unstable. The range of their recreational activities was small. Their interpersonal skills and personal capabilities were limited and as a result their opportunities for successfully meeting their commitments and responsibilities were limited. They could not see that their inability to meet their life goals was the result of their own actions, so they felt out of control of their lives and did not know why.

Limitations

This study addressed offenders' perspectives after they were caught, convicted, and required to register. The data were collected in a coercive environment for the purpose of risk assessment, so the responses were probably to some degree self-protective, rather than genuine and spontaneous. HIPAA required that the dataset be de-identified so there was considerable missing data. Further, the small sample size and theoretical sampling method limit the generalizability of the study. Thus the results should be interpreted cautiously.

Nevertheless, the analysis shows that these women believed it was not possible for them to get their needs met. Their memories of childhood were generally positive, if not blissful – in stark contrast to their lives as adults. They believed that other people could not be trusted because of their characteristics and life challenges. These women felt that they were doing the best they could under very trying circumstances. They thought that their failures were not their fault, and they thought that they should be given credit for their innate goodness.

Given the context within which the offenses took place, it would be useful to know what people can do that would help, what would help the women deal better with children, help them deal better with men and help them get along with people better. It would also be helpful to know

what kind of treatment would help them have a better view of themselves and address the problems all women face. These are questions for future research.

Implications for Practice

Treatment providers should determine whether or not an offender has the experiences, resources and attitudes needed to meet her personal, intimate and social needs, and provide specific, instrumental support for meeting those needs. The women in this study longed for nurturing relationships, but their personal perspectives, intimate relationships and social lives did not support a satisfactory level of connectedness. Often there was limited environmental support for meeting their needs. When an offender tries to meet her personal, intimate and social needs, she should be encouraged to address her adult responsibilities rather than focusing exclusively on trying to feel better. Interventions should also remediate offenders' deficits in social skills. Specific attention should be paid to how these women address the everyday concerns that face all adults, so that they develop the skills needed to engage in responsible sexual and social behavior.

Treatment should focus both on reducing and managing the risk of re-offense and on enhancing the quality of offenders' everyday lives. Although treatment approaches based on offenders' deficits are intuitively appealing, they tend to neglect what offenders are doing when they are not offending. An approach that values human beings' attempts to develop pro-social behaviors is more consistent with strength-focused treatment philosophy and would have a better chance of succeeding. Current treatment approaches include cognitive behavioral therapy in group and individual settings, sex education, community aftercare, and family and couples therapy. Based on the relationship problems these women identified, it would be useful to incorporate social skills training and values clarification into treatment regimens. Interventions should be individualized based on offenders' view of themselves and the men and women around them, and tailored to help them identify the social supports available to them and enhance their existing skills.

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Table 1
Global Theme: Relationship Experiences

| Theme | Subthemes | Qualities |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Intimate Relationships | Childhood memories | Happy or neutral memories |
| | | Unhappy memories |
| | Children | Children in general |
| | | Children as individuals |
| | | Children in relation to adults |
| | Family | Relationships are supportive |
| | | Relationships are destructive |
| | Marriage and intimate relationships | Marriage is supportive |
| Marriage is destructive | | |
| Personal Perspective | Competence | Resources available |
| | | Resources unavailable |
| | | Uses resources productively |
| | Happiness and inner peace | Expressions of happiness |
| | | Expressions of unhappiness |
| | Offense | Takes responsibility |
| | | Blames others |
| | Recreation | Moving toward relationship |
| | | Moving toward isolation |
| | Self-Perception | Would like to feel better |
| | | Would like to do better |
| | Sex and Sexuality | Sexually active |
| | | Not sexually active |
| | Wishes | For self |
| For others | | |
| Social Lives | Legal Issues | The law supports safety and security |
| | | The law interferes with personal agendas |
| | | The law fails to protect the right people |
| | Offenders' attitudes towards others | Superficial characteristics |
| | | Core characteristics |
| | People's attitudes towards offenders | Things other people like and do not like |
| | | Things that get the offender in trouble |
| | Sharing | Openly discusses problems |
| | | Guarded and isolative |
| | Spirituality | Social context |
| | | Inner experience |
| Understanding | People understand | |
| | People do not understand | |

| Theme | Subthemes | Qualities |
|-------|-----------|------------------------------------|
| | Values | How people should be treated |
| | | How the offender should be treated |
| | Work | Rewarding |
| | | Not rewarding |

Table 2
Theme: Personal Perspectives

| IST stem and offender response | Defining characteristics | Subtheme |
|--|---|---------------------------|
| I was proud of myself when I started my own business. | Ability to make their own way Sources of pride and worry Ability to stand up for themselves Educational achievements | Competence |
| If I could I would change what I did that day. | Presence or absence of emotional turmoil and stress Expressions of sadness, fear, regret, sorrow, worry, or distress Expressions of joy, pleasure, or calm Responses to loss, abuse, or poor choices | Happiness and inner peace |
| My sex charge has almost destroyed so many people's lives. | Attitudes offenders express about their offenses | Offense |
| For fun I sometimes laugh and dance | Ways offenders enjoy themselves or have fun | Recreation |
| I am the kind of person who is sympathetic to others | Observations offenders make about themselves Personal preferences | Self-perception |
| Pornography: I don't like it because it is of the devil | Offenders' attitudes toward sexual relations in and out of intimate relationships. Attitudes toward masturbation and pornography | Sex and sexuality |
| I secretly wish I had done a lot of things in my life differently | Ways the offender would make her own or others' circumstances if she could | Wishes |

Table 3
Theme: Intimate Relationships

| IST stem and offender response | Defining characteristics | Subtheme |
|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| When I was a child I was the “good girl” everyone doted on | Memories of childhood activities, relationships and experiences | Childhood memories |
| Children are special and when one is hurt my heart weeps | How offenders see children in general and their own children in particular Hopes and fears for their children Relationships with their children | Children |
| My family has stood by me through this whole case | Relationships with family members, including parents and siblings, as well as extended family members like nieces/nephews, cousins, aunts/uncles and grandparents. All generic references to family activities, which may include husband and children | Family |
| Marriage is great if it's the right person | Characteristics of and attitudes toward marital and intimate relationships | Marriage and intimate relationships |

Theme: Social Lives

Table 4

| IST Stem and offender response | Defining characteristics | Subtheme |
|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| If I had my way I would change a couple of laws | Perception of the law and the offenders' relationships with it Legal nuisances | Legal issues |
| Most people don't tell the truth about their inner needs and disappointments | What "everyone" believes, wishes, or does Other people's attitudes and behavior Attitudes toward men and women in general | Offenders' attitudes towards others |
| Most people judge you before they get to know you | Attitudes others express about the offender May or may not be related to the offense | People's attitudes toward offenders |
| I have never told anyone that I cry everyday | Offenders' attitudes toward discussing personal matters What they are and are not willing to discuss What other people do when they express emotion or personal opinion What happens when they isolate themselves | Sharing |
| The best thing I ever did was volunteer at my local church | Offenders' attitudes toward spiritual matters Expressions of spiritual benefits to the offender and others Relationships with others in their spiritual communities | Spirituality |
| If only others understood how my mind works | Expression of need for comprehension, recognition, or empathy | Understanding |
| No one should ever have to go through rape or abuse | What the offender thinks is fair, ethical, right, wrong, or normal Activities and attitudes that foster trust between people Expressions of how the world ought to be Expectations for evenhanded treatment | Values and norms |
| I cannot say for sure but I think I am capable of hard work | Offenders' attitudes toward their own and others' work | Work |