



Review on female sexual offenders: Findings about profile and personality

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Although in the past sexual abuse was perceived as an issue connected only with males the contemporary literature is placing increasing emphasis on the role of female sexual perpetrators. There is still disagreement about the definition of sexual abuse, the frequency that it occurs and the characteristics of the women that are sexual abusers.

Methods: Thorough research of the main databases (MEDLINE and PsycInfo), for case reviews and studies along with restriction on European and North American literature, is due to perceived culture differences. Further investigation for relevant studies through web search engines such as Google, locates agencies and organizations that are interested and connected to sexual abuse issues.

Results: Distinction between sexual offense and sexual abuse has as a result difference in the characteristics of female sexual perpetrators. They are mainly young (age up to 36 years old), friends or relatives of the victim, using more persuasion and psychological coercion and legally charged in a lesser extent compared with male abusers. However the psychological consequences for the victim can be more severe.

Conclusion: A unanimous view of what is female sexual abuse is difficult to reach. Often it is under reported, unrecognized or considered ethically more acceptable than male abuse. It is also connected with an increased self-report of history of sexual abuse of the perpetrators. A typology of female sexual abusers should be developed. Treatments focusing on different psychological interventions along with prevention and public awareness can be a powerful tool in reduction of sexual abuse perpetrated by females.

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1. Introduction

All societies (developed or not) consider child sexual abuse as one of the most heinous crimes. The overall assertion is that the perpetrators are almost invariably males. However, findings during the end of the 20th century have disproved this assumption. It is now established that females can be sexually abusive as well.

In the early 1980s there was the first expressed concern about women sexually abusing children (Banning, 1989). Kelley, Brant, and Waterman (1993) reviewed the literature and reported that in three major United States studies, women identified as perpetrators of sexual abuse comprised 40–55% of the sexual abusers. Despite the fact that official reports have indicated that female sexual abusers comprise approximately 1% of the entire sex offender population (Green, 1999; Vandiver & Walker, 2002). It seems that the true rate is significantly higher as sexual offending by females is often hidden behind their caretaking behavior (Ferguson & Meehan, 2005).

During the same period the first case reports appeared indicating the existence of female perpetrators aged 13 to 18 or even younger. Up until then society appeared to deny the existence of these young

children who are acting out sexually and often aggressively with other children. The lack of attention to young aged female perpetrators is similar to the response to when the alarm was raised for adolescent perpetrators in the early 80s. Society denied the significance of the sexual acting out behavior by saying the adolescents were “just experimenting” or that these sexually aggressive behaviors were part of an “adolescent adjustment reaction” (Johnson, 1989).

Sexual offending by juveniles is an understudied area (Becker, Hall, & Stinson, 2001; Hunter & Mathews, 1997). It appears that as a proportion of all juvenile sex offenders, females constitute a substantial minority (5–10%) (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice). The relatively small proportion of female juvenile sex offenders in comparison to male juvenile sex offenders means that female sex offenders have received less attention than male sex offenders (Roe-Sepowitz & Krysik, 2008).

Before moving on with the characteristics of female sexual offenders we should point out the necessity to use both terms: “female sexual offenders” and “female sex abusers”, as some authors use the phrase “female sexual offenders” and other “female sex abusers”. The main reason for that was that authors use the term sex offenders only when the person defined as such has been tried, sentenced, and in some cases studies originated from correctional facilities. For this reason, for this review the term “sex abusers” has been used in all other instances ie, subjects from treatment facilities or when it is unclear whether they are sentenced.

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Another equally important issue and closely related with the characteristics of the female sexual offenders is the definition of child sexual abuse. Definition of abuse also clarifies who the victims are. From the 80s, each researcher struggled with the definition of child sexual abuse. Schecter et al., stated that “sexual abuse of minors is defined as the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children or adolescents, in sexual activities that they do not truly comprehend and to which they are unable to give informed consent and that violate the sexual taboos of family roles” (Schecter & Roberge, 1976). Krugman claimed that “sexual abuse of minors is the engaging of a child in sexual activities that the child does not understand, to which the child cannot give informed consent or which violate the social taboos of society” (Krugman, 1986). Koonin's definition is simpler. He proposed that “sexual abuse of minors is the exploitation of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult” (Koonin, 1995). Furthermore Denov distinguishes the sexual abuse from the sexual experimentation, by introducing age-related limits in the definition of sexual abuse (Denov, 2003). According to Denov “victims of child sexual abuse were defined as individuals who experienced sexual abuse when they were 14 years old or younger at the time of the sexual contact and the female perpetrator was at least 5 years older”. As an example, if a child of 14 years comes in natural contact with a child of 11 years, it will not be accused for sexual abuse as this action would be considered as sexual experimentation. All researchers on this subject are referring to actions of sexual content practiced by women on children. Speaking therefore of sexual activities, these are not limited to the classic penetration, but they expand to a variety of situations, such as touching and kissing in the genital area, verbal humiliation with vulgar vocabulary and coercion into watching sexual activities or exhibitionism (Denov, 2003; Tardif, Auclair, Jacob, & Carpentier, 2005).

Denov classifies the sexual abuse according the degree of severity:

1. Severe sexual abuse: e.g., intercourse, vaginal and/or anal penetration (with objects or fingers), cunnilingus and fellatio.
2. Moderate sexual abuse: eg consisted of genital contact and fondling (without penetration) and simulated intercourse.
3. Mild sexual abuse: included acts such as kissing in a sexual way and sexual invitations (Denov, 2003).

Tardif et al. (2005), in his study of the various forms of sexual abuse, suggested that the intra-familial sexual abuse includes exhibition of genital parts to the victim or coercion of the victim to present its own genital parts for the pleasure of the perpetrator (30, 8%), oral-genital sex with the victim or from the victim to the perpetrator (23, 1%), finger or object penetration in the anus of the victim (23, 1%) and use of sexual vocabulary (30, 8%). In this respect most of the papers reviewed define in their own way, what sex abuse is. Some accept the definition of Denov, but not all. For this reason we have not tried to group together the findings in a way of a meta-analysis. Such an attempt would request an overall agreement of a definition of abuse by the researchers of what sexual abuse is.

A question the specialists attempted to answer through the years is whether different traits exist for female sexual abusers when compared to males. Little is known about the characteristics of female sexual offenders and how they are related to child abuse. However, despite the assertion that female and male sex offenders are vastly different, almost no study has empirically validated this claim. Although several studies have investigated gender differences for female and male general offenders, limited research has been conducted to examine the differences and/or similarities between female and male sex offenders (Freeman & Sandler, 2008).

It is interesting to note that these women describe high incidence of physical, emotional and sexual abuse in their own life histories. Case studies suggest that many of these offenders were themselves subjected to some type of victimization during childhood or adolescence, or that they have experienced sexual assault as adults (Chasnoff et al., 1986;

Cooper, Swaminath, Baxter, & Poulin, 1990; Higgs, Canavan, & Meyer, 1992; Marvasti, 1986; Rowan, Rowan, & Langelier, 1990; Travin, Cullen, & Protter, 1990). Descriptive empirical studies also suggest a high incidence of physical and sexual abuse in the life histories of female offenders.

Females who sexually abuse children seem to suffer from personality disorders. The majority of women engaging in sexual abuse exhibit significant deficits in self-esteem and tend to experience overwhelming feelings of insecurity, dependency and shame (Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; Matthews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1991a). Case studies and descriptive reports suggest that a range of psychiatric symptoms and mental health problems such as personality disorders, drug dependency, depression, suicidal ideation, cognitive impairments and poor coping skills may be common among females who are sex abusers.

Consequently, the *aim* of this literature research is to examine if female sexual offenders have different characteristics than male sexual offenders. If they suffer from specific psychiatric disorders, if they were victims of sexual abuse during their childhood and finally if there are specific and different types of female sexual offenders.

2. Methods

The research was based on the results by the main databases (MEDLINE and PsycInfo) and search engines such as Google for reviews and studies with restriction on European and North American literature concerning child or adolescent sexual abuse by female sexual offenders. The restriction on European and North American Literature is due to perceived cultural and legal similarities as far as the socially acceptable sexual and physical contact between an adult and a child is concerned.

We combined three different searches with the terms “female or woman or women”, “sex” and “offense or abuse or offends or abusers or perpetrators or “child abuse””. In Ovid MEDLINE(R) (1950 to March Week 1 2009) there were 17,801 studies and in PsycINFO (1806 to March Week 2 2009) 12,746 studies. Further investigation for relevant studies through Google search engines, using terms like “female sex\$ abuser\$” had 10,900,00 hits mostly regarding agencies and organizations that are interested and connected to sexual abuse issues. When we restricted the search with Google we had 2970 hits for “female sexual abusers” and 569 for “female sexual perpetrators”.

All abstracts from 1980 to March Week 1 2009 were obtained and studied by two independent assessors (CT and AD). Abstracts were rated using a “star” system (1 star for relevant but not important studies, 2 stars for relevant with limited importance studies and 3 stars for relevant and important studies). Overall 52 studies were rated with 3 stars by both raters and these were included in this review. Information obtained from these studies were arranged under the following headings: 1. Behavioral differences between male and female sexual offenders, 2. Previous victimization, 3. Mental illness, 4. Deviant arousal, 5. Family dysfunction, and 6. Personality-Typology.

3. Results

3.1. Behavioral differences between female and male sexual offenders

Mathews, Matthews, and Speltz (1989) presented the differences between female and male sexual offenders. According to him: Women abusers in contrast to male abusers, rarely, if ever, coerce others into being accomplices. Women use force or violence in committing their crimes less often than men, and when they do, they are not as forceful. Women are less likely to initially deny the abuse and are more willing to accept responsibility for their behavior. Women start to abuse sexually at a much older age than men. Women use fewer threats to attempt to silence their victims. Women tend to act out against themselves via self-punishment and self-destructive behavior much more often than men.

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