



A gendered strength-based treatment model for female sexual offenders[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Due to the relatively limited knowledge about female sexual offenders, treatment approaches and programs have been primarily based upon models developed for male perpetrators. Although male and female offenders share some common characteristics, there is increasing empirical evidence that many aspects of female sexual offending behaviors are separate and different from those of males. By integrating theoretical constructs from the current literature, this paper proposes a strength-based treatment approach utilizing a gendered paradigm of female sexual offending. In general, a gendered strength-based treatment model involves a collaborative process that builds upon positive skills and provides options to utilize those skills to fulfill unmet needs. This treatment process also considers the contextual nature of the female sexual offender's social functioning and the individual manifestations of her sexually assaultive behaviors.

1. Introduction

As research on female sexual offenders continues to grow and evolve, there is an increasing body of literature which identifies empirically validated factors associated with female sexual offending (Cortoni & Gannon, 2013). Despite these advances, however, the germane research methodologies used to identify factors associated with the sexually assaultive behaviors of women continue to have significant limitations. For example, the available empirically based information regarding female sex offenders is typically obtained from either large data bases or studies of very small nonrandom samples usually determined by availability or convenience (DeCou, Cole, Rowland, Kaplan, & Lynch, 2014; Gannon & Alleyne, 2013; Gannon, Rose, & Ward, 2008; Levenson, Willis, & Prescott, 2014; Pflugradt & Allen, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004; Williams & Bieri, 2015).

Although large scale data reviews provide some useful general information about offense characteristics (e.g., co-offenders, victim characteristics), the results are limited by variation in the data input/collection (Budd, Bieri, & Williams, 2015), assumptions that may or may not be valid, under/over-represented geographical areas and law enforcement agencies, incident level data and a limited number of variables which excludes information that may be of interest (Budd et al., 2015; Sandler & Freeman, 2009; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004;

Wijkman, Bijleveld, & Hendriks, 2010; Williams & Bieri, 2015). Conversely, the available studies which examine the individual dynamics of female sexual offending are derived from very small samples which significantly impair any ability to generalize them to female sex offenders as a group. Additionally, small sample sizes preclude most multivariate research designs and analyses; as a result, empirically guided information is obtained from univariate group comparisons and/or nonparametric correlational procedures (Pflugradt & Allen, 2011, 2013, 2015). Whereas both macro- and micro-analytic approaches provide some constructive information, the consequent suggestions for any practical applications are constrained within narrow parameters beleaguered with caveats about limited generalizability. That is, even though current methodologies provide information from which to derive hypotheses for further studies, it is important to bear in mind the significant limitations of current research.

Another widely cited reason for the paucity of relevant empirical information about female sex offenders is socio-cultural barriers (Budd et al., 2015; Cortoni, 2010; Denov, 2004; Logan, 2008; Rousseau & Cortoni, 2010; Strickland, 2008). That is, there are several recognized social influences that affect the detection and identification of women who commit sexual assaults. For example, society often fails to recognize women as sex offenders and they are more likely than males to avoid detection, prosecution and legally mandated interventions such as monitoring, registration and treatment (McLeod, 2015; Vandiver &

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Walker, 2002). Arguably, the legal system's approach toward female perpetrators of sexual assaults reflects societal views that women who commit such crimes are influenced by extenuating or external causes (i.e., other than sexual deviance) including mental illness and substance abuse disorders (Rousseau & Cortoni, 2010).

A second social consideration affecting the detection of female sexual offending is that it frequently occurs within a care-giver role (Allen, 1991; Bumby & Bumby, 1997; Cortoni & Gannon, 2013; DeCou et al., 2014; Kaplan & Green, 1995; McLeod, 2015). The victims of female sex offenses, who are often children, students or significant others, have pre-existing relationships with their offender and consequently, may be hesitant to report the abuse (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011a, 2011b; Cortoni, 2010; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Additionally, victims may not disclose the abuse due to concerns that officials will not believe their reports (i.e., women do not do such things) and/or because male victims may be fearful of having their masculinity questioned (Elliott & Bailey, 2014; Wijkman et al., 2010). Moreover, if detected, the perpetration of abuse within a nurturing context may not be perceived as harmful relative to victimization that involves coercion, physical harm, and/or perpetration by a stranger (Denov, 2003, 2004; Hetherington & Beardsall, 1998).

To summarize, the detection and prosecution of females who perpetrate sexual offenses has been affected by numerous factors including male self-minimization of victimization, difficulties recognizing abusive acts disguised as childcare/caregiving, the diversion of offenses involving female perpetrators to non-criminal court and/or interventions and the relatively more lenient sentences given to female perpetrators (Elliott & Bailey, 2014). Despite these obstacles, however, the literature pertaining to women who commit sexual offense has increased significantly during the past several years. As stated by Cortoni and Gannon (2013), due to recently identified empirically validated factors related to female sex offenders, there is now adequate information to delineate gender-based or gender-informed assessment and treatment approaches. Although these advances are encouraging, a comprehensive and unified theoretical paradigm which explains the association between gender and dynamic risk factors as not been established.

2. Gender issues

Interestingly, research on female offenders does not typically include a discussion of how gender is defined. Even though empirical research has identified factors which appear unique to female offenders, the implementation of a “gendered” theoretical construct requires an understanding of how gender, as a concept, is derived. Despite differing perspectives, most definitions of gender contain similar terms or concepts; it is generally described as a social construct originating from social processes.

For example, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) describes gender as the socially constructed characteristics of women and men which include norms, roles and relationships between groups. In addition, gender varies across societies and can be changed; that is, while most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviors assigned to their biological sex. When individuals or groups do not fulfill the gender norms established by a society or culture, they may experience stigma, discrimination or social alienation. As the WHO's description further states, these gender norms, roles and relations influence a person's susceptibility to different conditions and diseases and affects their overall health and well-being. Gender norms may also impact a person's ability to access health care and effects health outcomes during the course of his or her life. Moreover, “... it is important to be sensitive to different identities that do not necessarily fit into binary male or female sex categories.”¹

Comparably, the American Psychological Association (2017) defines

gender as the “attitudes, feelings, and behaviors” that a specific culture associates with a person's biological sex. Behaviors that are compatible with the expectations of that culture are referred to as “gender-normative.” Conversely, behaviors that are incompatible with the expectations of a culture of society “constitute gender non-conformity.”² Similarly, from a sociological perspective, *sex* refers to the physiological differences between males and females, *gender* to the social or cultural distinctions associated with being male or female and *gender identity* as the extent to which one identifies with being either masculine or feminine (Little & McGivern, 2014). Furthermore, Little and McGivern (2014) note that a dichotomous view of gender is not universal; some cultures consider gender as fluid or changeable.

Presumably, the use of such terms as *gender-specific*, *gender-informed* and *gender-responsive* (Cortoni & Gannon, 2013; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996; Van Voorhis, Wright, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2010) when referring to female sex offenders are within the context of the characteristics described in the aforementioned definitions. The tasks then becomes how to apply them to a comprehensive model that encompasses both gender similarities and differences to explain the sexually assaultive behaviors of female offenders. Arguably, the best examples of models which describe the influence of gender on non-normative behavior are found in the literature on general criminality (Brennan, Breitenbach, Dieterich, Salisbury, & Van Voorhis, 2012; Schwartz & Steffensmeier, 2007; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1995, 1996; Steffensmeier & Schwartz, 2004; Yesberg, Scanlan, Hanby, Serin, & Polaschek, 2015).

2.1. Gender based theoretical perspectives

As delineated by Steffensmeier and Allan (1996), the influence of gender on criminal behavior may be generally conceptualized from three main theoretical perspectives: gender-neutral; gender-specific; and gendered. The *gender-neutral* theories are described as traditional theories derived from samples of male offenders that are applied to female offenders. Although they provide reasonable explanations for some forms of criminality, they do not explain how gender affects the type, frequency, or context of criminal behavior. In the past, male-based knowledge has often been applied to female sex offenders under the assumption that the factors relating to sexually assaultive behaviors were similar regardless of gender (Cortoni & Gannon, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). In fact, similar to research on general criminality (Van Voorhis et al., 2010), male and female sexual offenders share some common characteristics such as histories of adverse childhood experiences, difficulties with relationships, antisocial attitudes, antisocial associates and substance abuse problems (Cortoni, 2010; Cortoni & Gannon, 2011a, 2011b; Freeman & Sandler, 2008; Ford & Cortoni, 2008; Gannon & Rose, 2008; Gannon et al., 2008; Pflugradt, Allen, & Zintsmaster, 2017).

Despite these similarities, however, there are important differences in regard to recidivism risk and sexually abusive behaviors across gender (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011a, 2011b; Gannon et al., 2008). Consequently, many researchers have asserted that more appropriate models are *gender-specific*³ because they do not assume that the dynamic factors associated with male sex offending are the same as those that apply to females (Cortoni & Gannon, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). That is, the evolving empirical research indicates that the characteristics of women who commit sexual assaults tend to be unique and are behaviorally manifested differently than among male offenders (Cortoni & Gannon, 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Gannon et al., 2008). For example, female sex offenders are usually younger and less educated, have experienced more frequent and severe victimization (including violent domestic victimization), and are more likely to offend with a co-

² (<https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/sexuality-definitions.pdf>).

³ Also referred to as *gender-based*, *gender-informed* (Cortoni & Gannon, 2013) and *gender-responsive* (Salisbury et al., 2009; Van Voorhis et al., 2010).

¹ (<http://www.who.int/gender-equity-rights/understanding/gender-definition/en/>).

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