



# A systematic review and meta-analysis of the characteristics of multiple perpetrator sexual offences



Jennifer Bamford, Shihning Chou <sup>\*</sup>, Kevin D. Browne

Centre for Forensic & Family Psychology, Division of Psychiatry & Applied Psychology, School of Medicine, University of Nottingham, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 December 2014  
 Received in revised form 29 March 2016  
 Accepted 12 April 2016  
 Available online 20 April 2016

### Keywords:

Multiple perpetrator  
 Sexual offenders  
 Group sexual offending  
 Gang rape

## ABSTRACT

This systematic review examined the demographic and offence variables in group sexual offending. Eight bibliographic databases and three thesis portals were searched. The reference lists of five papers and one textbook were hand searched. Nine experts were contacted for ongoing or unpublished studies. The total number of hits was 1853, of which 55 were duplicates, 1769 were irrelevant, 14 did not meet the inclusion criteria and one paper was unobtainable. The remaining 15 papers were quality assessed before the data were extracted and synthesized. There were 2873 cases of multiple perpetrator sexual (MPS) offences in total. The majority of MPS offending in the included studies involved perpetrators in their early twenties (90% of studies) and operated as part of a 'duo' (49.8%). Thirty-five percent of MPS offences were committed by perpetrators with a previous conviction, with 11% of the cases showing a previous conviction for sexual offending. Offenders were most likely to approach victims outdoors with the offence itself occurring indoors. The most frequent offence behaviors included vaginal rape, multiple penetration and fellatio. A model of MPS offending is suggested based on the findings of this review. Future research should aim to explore and refine theories of MPS offending in order to understand the etiology of this unique offending group.

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<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author at: B Floor, Yang Fujia Building, University of Nottingham, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB, UK.  
 E-mail address: shihning.chou@nottingham.ac.uk (S. Chou).

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Sexual offences committed by groups of perpetrators is an area that receives a considerable amount of media attention, inspiring wide spread fear by the general public. Simultaneously such behavior represents an under-researched area of sexual offending. Frequency of this type of offending is difficult to estimate with rates as high as 50% in South Africa and between 2 and 26% in the US (Horvath & Kelly, 2009). Group sexual offences perpetrated by juvenile perpetrators are thought to make up 42% of allegations in the UK (Woodhams, 2004), making this form of offending a considerable social issue.

Terminology for this type of offender group has varied. However, Horvath and Kelly (2009) refined the definition for those who commit offences in pairs or groups of three or more as multiple perpetrator sexual offenders (MPSOs). The purpose and function of these groups can vary considerably depending on context. Research has identified rape-occurring contexts to include fraternities (Ehrhart & Sandler, 1985), war (e.g. Wood, 2009) and as a form of cultural norm (e.g. South Africa; Jewkes & Sikweyiya, 2013). Sexual violence within defined “gangs” is one of the most common contexts associated with MPS offending in the UK (Alleyn, Gannon, Ciardha & Wood, 2014). Gang membership is thought to significantly increase the level of violence committed by an individual even if, before gang membership, they had been associating with like-minded pro-social peers (Hughes & Short, 2005).

### 1.2. Current psychological understanding of Multiple Perpetrator Sex offenders

Research regarding MPS offences initially began in the early 1970s (Amir, 1971) and progressed slowly into the 1980s (Wright & West, 1981) with little else but a basic understanding of offender demographics. Following Wright and West's (1981) publication research became more prevalent, possibly coinciding with an increase in public awareness regarding sexual offenders and an increase in sexual offences reported to the police (Myhill & Allen, 2002). Some authors have made attempts to explain MPS offending, arguably the most comprehensive and relevant of which has been Harkins and Dixon's (2013) multifactorial model. However, the literature that this and other typologies are based on do not show a developmental pathway and were not based on evidence from systematic reviews as there had not been one completed.

To date research regarding MPS offending has informed our understanding of the “type” of perpetrator likely to be involved in a group sexual offence (e.g. Porter & Alison, 2006), the interaction style with the victim (e.g. Horvath & Kelly, 2009), and the role of ‘leaders and followers’ in the group (e.g. Woodhams, Cooke, Harkins, & da Silva, 2012). More recently professionals and researchers have expressed the urgent need to apply existing research as a means of determining the most relevant preventative and treatment programs for MPSOs (Horvath, 2011).

### 1.3. Theories of gang/group formation and group offending

Due to the limited understanding of MPS offending, wider theoretical perspectives may need to be drawn in to guide future investigations and help explain existing findings. Given the association between group sexual offending and gang involvement, it may be useful to consider the process of gang formation and general group formation and attempt to identify aspects that may contribute to or be associated with group sexual offences. Unlike lone sexual offending, MPS offending may be heavily influenced by the dynamics of the group, how it is formed and maintained, and how it evolves.

One of the most recent theoretical introductions to gang formation is the *Unified Theory of Gang Involvement* (Wood & Alleyne, 2010). This

model is distinguished from others based on its inclusion of a non-offending pathway. The authors highlight the individual factors (psychopathy, hyperactivity, anxiety, low IQ, mental health problems), social factors (social control, family bonds, school attainment) and environmental factors (disorganized/organized, neighborhood, family structure) known to make an individual susceptible to gang membership. For a detailed outline of the possible social psychological mechanisms behind the formation and maintenance of gang affiliations, please see Wood (2014).

The critical stage in this theory is peer selection. This aspect is resonant to Patterson, DeBaryshe and Ramsey's (1990) developmental model, which denotes that children and adolescents who have learned coercive behavior in dysfunctional family backgrounds from early childhood and under-achieve academically at school age are more likely to reject or be rejected by pro-social peers and socialize with those with similar backgrounds. The atypical or delinquent peer groups they engage in may provide the support and identity they cannot obtain from their own families. Once they have joined the gang, they will strive to gain acceptance and recognition or enhance their status within the group by meeting the group expectations, which usually involves demonstrating violence, possibly including sexual violence, and engaging in harmful behavior. Even those who disagree with the group norms may display *pluralistic ignorance* where they privately reject a group norm but abide by it publicly because they believe that others are in favor of it.

The *Unified Theory of Gang Involvement* can be understood from the *Group Socialization Model*, which outlines the process of assimilation of an individual into a group in general (Levine, Moreland, & Choi, 2001). The process involves six stages:

- *Investigation*: a decision making process between the individual and the group as to whether to form a relationship;
- *Entry*: the individual joins the group;
- *Socialization*: the group socializes the individual to group norms;
- *Acceptance*: the individual accepts their position within the group;
- *Role negotiation*: the new group member changes and defines their role over time;
- *Maintenance*: the relationship is maintained over time.

It is likely that at the ‘peer selection’ or ‘investigation’ stage, those with the propensity for MPS offending socialize with each other and form a group on the basis of common beliefs about group sexual violence. It is also likely that committing sexual violence is one of the ways to meet group expectations and gain acceptance or recognition. This process of socialization and group bonding may be similar to what Harkins and Dixon (2010) identifies as ‘male bonding’ in their review.

Another social psychological process that may explain what happens during the offence and those offences committed without gang association is *deindividuation*. This refers to a state where individuals experience a reduced sense of self-awareness and concerns about consequences in a crowd (Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952). This may explain why some individuals engage in MPSOs.

### 1.4. Aims and objectives

As there has been no previous systematic review and meta-analysis in this area, the aim of this investigation was to systematically review primary studies that investigated

- the characteristics of multiple perpetrator sexual offending and
- the characteristics of the perpetrators and their victims.

To be included in the review, studies had to fulfill the criteria outlined in Table 1.

The decision on the age cut-off for the population was based on the differences in criminal justice disposal and treatment between child offenders and older offenders. Furthermore, literature pertaining to

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