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Incarcerated Female Sexual Offenders: A Comparison of Sexual Histories with Eleven Female Nonsexual Offenders

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Although there is a body of literature on male sexual offenders, there is a paucity of data on female sexual offenders. In this study, 11 incarcerated female sexual offenders against children were matched with a comparison group of 11 female offenders incarcerated for nonsexual crimes regarding their own prior sexual and physical victimization experiences and sexual histories. Results indicated that the sexual offenders demonstrated a higher incidence of childhood sexual abuse and were victimized exclusively within the family. The sexual offender group also demonstrated a higher incidence of physical abuse. Additional descriptions of psychiatric status are presented. In comparing sex histories between groups, the sexual offenders reported that most sexual activity was initiated at later ages than the nonsexual offenders. Although the sample is small, there also were differences within the groups. The sexually abused sexual offenders had a later age of first masturbation, first orgasm, and satisfaction with adult partners. Prior victimization, regardless of group, played a common role in preventing sexual satisfaction in adulthood. Regarding the sexual offenses, there was a great deal of denial and minimization as well as denial of atypical sexual fantasy. Both groups were given a self-report sexual interest card sort. Four offenders from each group endorsed various atypical sexual scenes. A case study is presented to illustrate the complex nature of a female sexual offender in this study. Recommendations for future research in the assessment of female sexual offenders are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The exact incidence of sexual crimes committed by women is unknown. However, the reported incidence is low compared to reports of male sexual offenders. Case report studies vary from 4% (DeJong, Hervada, & Emmett, 1983) to 24% [National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN), 1981] for male child victims and from 6% (American Humane Association, 1981) to 13% (NCCAN, 1981) for female child victims. Self-report studies of adult victims of child sexual abuse vary from 4% (Russell, 1983) to 60% (Fritz, Stoll, & Wagner, 1981). According to the director at a hotline for sexually abused children, which receives hundreds of calls each day, "For those who are calling and are willing to talk about who their perpetrator is, about a third of them are talking about female perpetrators" (Sue Meier, Childhelp, USA, 1994).

Some researchers have suggested that the low incidence of sexual crimes committed by women is due to underreporting. Some of the reasons cited are that women can mask sexual behavior as caretaking (e.g., while bathing), that women may engage in more subtle forms of sexual abuse, or that sexual offenses by women against their sons may be underreported due to embarrassment. However, Finkelhor and Russell (1984) dispute claims of underreporting of female perpetrators. In a review of the literature, they state that sexual abuse by women occurs in some fraction of cases, "probably 5% in the case of girls and 20% in the case of boys." They conclude that "there is every reason to believe that child sexual abuse is primarily perpetrated by males" (p. 184). Allen (1991, p. 20) cautions, however, that "adherence to beliefs that women do not sexually abuse children may lead to distorted perceptions about the occurrence of such behavior, and underreporting of even the relatively low levels of female sexual abuse that actually occur."

There has been a similar paucity of data concerning female sexual offenders. The majority of studies have suggested classifications or topologies based on outpatient samples of this population (Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; Sarrell & Masters, 1982). In the few studies available, female sexual offenders have been described as having severe psychiatric impairment (Mayer, 1983; McCarty, 1986; O'Conner, 1987) and prior sexual victimization (McCarty, 1986; Travin, Cullen, & Protter, 1990; Wolfe, 1985).

The purpose of the present study was (a) to provide data on the similarities and differences among the self-reported sexual histories of incar-

cerated female sexual and nonsexual offenders and (b) to determine what characteristics, if any, describe this sample of offenders.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited by the Prison Staff of the Bedford Hills, Taconic, and Bayview Correctional Facilities for Women in New York State and the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in New Jersey. A staff member, usually a part of the facility's mental health division, explained the study to each prospective participant, who was told that she would be asked about her emotional problems and sexual behavior. Informed consent was obtained. The New Jersey participants received a \$25.00 stipend for their participation; the New York participants were prohibited from receiving money according to New York State Department of Corrections Guidelines.

Procedure

The following data were collected for each participant.

History of Criminal Behavior

Information was obtained about the participant's most recent criminal offense (sexual or nonsexual) which led to her current imprisonment and about prior criminal or family court offenses and incarceration. This was obtained by prison records and by interview.

Psychiatric Status and Psychopathology

Measures of psychiatric status were based on interviews with the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM IIR (SCID), nonpatient edition (Spitzer, Williams, Gibbon, & First, 1992), and the Harvard Upjohn Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Interview.

Sexual History and History of Victimization

Information regarding each participant's family history, prior victimization, and sexual history was obtained by direct interview and from the Wyatt Sexual History Questionnaire (Wyatt, 1982). The interview and questionnaire were administered by three female interviewers. Interrater reliability was established for nine lifetime psychiatric diagnoses on the SCID. The average intraclass correlation coefficient was 0.76, with a range from 0.41 to 1.00.

Other Information

Information regarding self-reported paraphilic and nonparaphilic fantasy and behavior was obtained by (a) interview and (b) a self-report sexual interest card sort, based on a revision of the card sort developed by Abel (1979) for adult male sex offenders.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

Eleven incarcerated female sexual offenders against children were matched for age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and level of prison security (low, medium, maximum) with a comparison group of 11 female offenders incarcerated for nonsexual crimes. Limitations in the recruitment of participants imposed by the prison system precluded exact matching for ethnicity, so that there were more Hispanic and fewer Caucasian participants in the sexual offender group than in the comparison group. The mean age for the sexual offenders was 36 (range, 21-68). The comparison group mean age was 35 (range, 24-44). The sexual offender group consisted of five Caucasians, three Hispanics, and three Blacks. The comparison group consisted of seven Caucasians, one Hispanic, and three Blacks.

The sexual offenders and comparison group were similar on the Hollingshead Index of Social Status (1977). The sexual offenders had a mean total score of 23.4 (Social Stratum 7), compared to 20.9 for the comparison group (Social Stratum 4). The mean educational scale score was 3.27 for the sexual offenders and 3.18 for the comparison group, corresponding to a 10th- to 11th-grade level. A larger number of the sexual offenders than the comparison group had never married (6 vs. 3) and they

had a higher average number of children than the comparison women (3.3 vs. 1.5).

Types of Sexual Offenses Committed

For the purposes of this study, sexual molestation was defined as either *contact offenses*, including fondling of the genitals, passive or active oral sex, and vaginal intercourse, or *noncontact offenses*, in which the woman coerced the child into sexual activity with an adult accomplice or permitted the codefendant to molest the child in her presence. In a recent study by Maletzky of 50 female sexual offenders, the women rarely coerced the child(ren), but acquiesced in deference to a male companion who was involved in the sexual activity (65%). A minority (35%) offended based on their own arousal (B. Maletzky, personal communication, March 30, 1995).

Eight of the 11 sexual offenders molested one or more girls, while three molested one or more boys. Five offenders molested their biological children, one molested a foster child, and five molested unrelated children in their care. The victims ranged in age from 4 to 15.

Four of the 11 sexual offenders acted alone, while 7 acted in concert with a codefendant, usually a male. One participant acted alone in molesting her foster daughter; her husband was convicted as a codefendant for molesting a foster son. Three of the lone sexual offenders had sexual intercourse with boys; two of them had molested their sons. One lone sexual offender fondled and performed oral sex on a female foster child. Of the seven women who offended only in the presence of a codefendant, two engaged in direct sexual contact with the victim (fondling, fondling and oral sex) and five primarily arranged for, and were present during, the sexual contact with the male perpetrator.

Table I describes the offenses committed, the age of and relationships to the victims, and the age at which each offender was abused. It is of interest that in most cases the ages of victimization and those of their victims were close. (Subjects 1 and 10 were omitted because they were not victims.)

Criminal Offenses of Nonsexual Offenders

Of the nonsexual offender comparison group, seven women had been arrested for drug offenses. Three of these women were convicted of additional crimes, such as assault, murder, robbery, and burglary. The four women not involved in drug offenses had been convicted of (1) assault;

Table I. Sexual Offenders: Age of Own Sexual Abuse, Age of Victims, and Acts Against Victims

| No. | Age at own sexual abuse | Victim(s) | Act(s) |
|-----|-------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| 2 | 9 | Son, age 11 | Intercourse |
| 3 | 16 | Daughters | Noncontact: took nude photos of teenage girls with codefendant, girls observed sexual acts between S and codefendant. The daughters were digitally penetrated in front of her. |
| 4 | 6 | Girlfriend's son, age 6 | Vaginal and anal intercourse, fellatio |
| 5 | 7 | Daughters, ages 5 & 7 | Noncontact: held them down while boyfriend performed vaginal and anal intercourse and cunnilingus |
| 6 | 4 | 2 boys, age 4; care worker | Fondled genitals, performed fellatio, had boys fondle breasts with girlfriend codefendant |
| 7 | 8 | Caretaker of girl, age 6 | Noncontact: took photos of male codefendant having vaginal, anal, and oral sex with child, performed oral sex on male codefendant as child observed |
| 8 | 3 | Sons, ages 4 & 9 | Fondling, fellatio, intercourse with older son |
| 9 | 11 | Caretaker of girl, age 11 | Fondling, digital penetration with husband |
| 11 | 6 | Daughter, age 10 | Noncontact: was paid to allow daughter to be vaginally and anally penetrated by a male friend while girlfriend was present |

(2) burglary; (3) manslaughter, prostitution, and robbery; and (4) robbery, burglary, murder, and prostitution.

Psychiatric History

The majority of the subjects in each group exhibited a substantial degree of psychiatric impairment. Seven of the sexual offenders and eight of the comparison women experienced a past or current episode of major de-

pression. All of the comparison women and 7 of the 11 sexual offenders abused one or more substances. Eight of the sexual offenders and seven comparison women exhibited posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Both groups of subjects manifested a variety of axis II personality disorders; the sexual offender group had a mean of 3.6 personality disorders per subject compared to 2.4 for the comparison group. The sexual offenders suffered more frequently from avoidant (seven) and dependent (five) personality disorders, while the comparison subjects were more often diagnosed as antisocial personality disorder (eight). The sexual offenders demonstrated more psychiatric impairment on the Global Assessment of Functioning Scale on the SCID-OP (Green & Kaplan, 1994).

Sexual Victimization

The sexual offender group had experienced a substantially higher incidence of childhood sexual abuse than the comparison group and were victimized exclusively within their families. Nine of these 11 women were sexually abused during childhood, compared to five of the 11 in the comparison group. Eight of the sexual offenders were molested by family members, compared to only two in the comparison group. The sexual offenders demonstrated a higher incidence of childhood physical and sexual abuse within the family than the comparison group, and these victimization experiences were more severe and more frequently associated with PTSD (Green & Kaplan, 1994).

Physical Victimization

Eight of the sexual offenders were physically abused during childhood. Five of the comparison group were physically abused during childhood. The sexual offender and comparison groups could not be differentiated by their frequency of adult victimization experiences, i.e., physical assault and rape.

Sexual Victimization in Prison

Two participants (both comparison subjects) reported having been victimized sexually while incarcerated. The first woman, age 28, disclosed that she had been raped by two female prisoners with an object on two occasions. The second woman disclosed that at age 14 a male had attempted to rape her while she was incarcerated but she escaped.

Sexual Histories

Childhood

One sexual offender reported masturbation prior to age 12, compared to five nonsexual offenders. Three sexual offenders disclosed sexual arousal prior to age 12, compared to seven of the comparison-group women.

Adolescence

There were no major differences in reported age at breast development or onset of menses between groups.

The age at first self-exploration was higher for the comparison group ($X = 13.5$ compared to $X = 9.5$).

A similar number from each group (four sexual offenders and five comparison women) reported sexual exploration with girls during adolescence. Also, similar numbers of both groups engaged in heterosexual genital touching at similar ages (10 sexual offenders, mean age 14.9; 11 comparison women, mean age 15.7). Seven sexual and eight nonsexual offenders had engaged in consensual intercourse during adolescence.

To the question, "How old were you when you first experienced an orgasm?" for the 9 sexual offenders who responded, the mean age was 16.3; for the 11 comparison-group members who responded, the mean age was 13.9.

Adulthood

Sexual orientation was reported on the WYATT Scale (Wyatt, 1982) and ranged from 1 (other sex only) to 7 (same sex only). Each individual's sexual orientation was computed based on an average of answers in each of five domains: sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, and self-identification.

For the sexual offenders, average past orientation (over 12 months) was 2.70 and present orientation was 3.0. For the comparison group, average past orientation was 3.3 and present orientation was 3.9. Five sexual offenders and seven comparison women had engaged in an adult homosexual experience. The age at first homosexual experience was 15.0 ($n = 3$) for sexual offenders and 20.8 ($n = 5$) for the comparison group.

Two sexual offenders and four comparison women reported past prostitution.

Adult Sexual Satisfaction

Each participant was asked, "What one thing, if any, prevented you from enjoying your sexuality?" There were similar responses from both groups of offenders. The most common answer for those who had been sexually abused was their own victimization. For others, various reasons given were guilt, fear of disease, religious training, and fear of pregnancy.

Both groups of women were compared for ages at first experiences of masturbation and orgasm, satisfaction with adult partners, and sexual orientation. Although the sample was small, there appeared to be differences within groups, in that the sexually abused sexual offenders had a later age at masturbation and first orgasm and less satisfaction with adult partners.

The participants who had been sexually abused reported a higher number of impediments to sexual satisfaction, regardless of group.

Denial of Sexual Offenses

Three of the sexual offenders denied their offenses; most of the others minimized the consequences for the child victim.

Atypical Sexual Fantasy and Expressed Sexual Interests

Information regarding self-reported paraphilic and nonparaphilic sexual behavior and fantasy was obtained by interview. Two sexual offenders reported atypical sexual fantasies, whereas five comparison women reported atypical sexual fantasies. Only one sexual offender reported current and prior sexual fantasies regarding her child victims. The comparison group reported more fantasies of exhibitionism, which involved a description of becoming sexually aroused by stripping or dancing topless in bars. Some reported the aspect of control as being sexually arousing in these settings.

Five of the seven individuals reporting atypical sexual fantasies had been victims of sexual abuse. Table II describes the various sexual fantasies of both groups of offenders and their victimization histories.

Both groups of offenders were given a self-report sexual interest card sort in which they rated various sexual scenes on a 3-point scale with the following responses: "I don't like this," neutral, and "I like this."

Four of the sexual offenders endorsed the following sexual scenes: male children (2), voyeurism (3), female children (1), and masochism (1). The four comparison women endorsed sexual scenes of exhibitionism (2), young girls (1), voyeurism (1), and sadism (1).

Table II. Self-Reported Atypical Sexual Fantasies

| No. | Sexually abused | Physically abused | Current atypical sexual fantasy |
|-----|-----------------|-------------------|---|
| 2 | Yes | Yes | Sexual offenders Young boys/force, female children, male incest, masochism |
| 7 | Yes | No | Voyeurism |
| 8 | Yes | Yes | Male children, voyeurism |
| 9 | Yes | Yes | Public masturbation, voyeurism |
| | | | Nonsexual offenders |
| C2 | No | No | Exhibitionism |
| C4 | Yes | No | Exhibitionism |
| C6 | No | No | 7-year-old girls |
| C7 | No | Yes | Exhibitionism, voyeurism |
| C8 | Yes | Yes | Sadism, transsexual |
| C9 | Yes | Yes | Partner with dog, exhibitionism, sadism, urophilia |
| C10 | No | Yes | Fetishes |
| C11 | Yes | Yes | Exhibitionism, voyeurism, public masturbation |

The following case study illustrates the complex interaction of victimization, sexual history, and psychiatric history of an individual who is representative of the sexual offenders in this study.

CASE STUDY OF P

P is a 41-year-old divorced woman who is serving a sentence of 2-7 years for engaging in sexual contact with her two sons, starting when they were 4 and 9 years old. The sexual contact started with having her younger son, then age 4, fondle her breasts. This progressed to her fondling and then fellating him while he sucked on her breasts until he was 9. In addition, she engaged in intercourse with her older son when he was 9.

Family Background and Victimization

P was 1 or 10 children. She described her mother as "very sweet" and her father as an alcoholic who physically abused her with a belt buckle daily until she was 12. P was severely sexually abused as a child by several family members. From age 6 to age 16 her grandfather engaged in intercourse with her two or three times a month. P says of her grandfather, "He told me he wouldn't love me anymore if I didn't let him do it." Her teenage brother also forced her to engage in intercourse weekly from age 6 to age 14. P admits that she eventually enjoyed this and did not want it to stop. She was jealous and angry when he got married. At 10, her uncle forced her to have intercourse yearly until she was 20. P also reported having sex with two male cousins, one who was the same age, from 8 to 16, and 1 who was one year younger, from age 13 to 14. "These didn't bother me," she said. Describing the effects that the above experiences had on her feelings toward men, she stated, "Men are all assholes." Lasting effects were "lack of trust in men."

Sexual History

P began to masturbate at age 11. She had intercourse at age 12 with a 12-year-old boy. Her first homosexual experience was at age 16 and lasted 3 years. She has had a total of 3 female partners and 150 male partners (140 of them were "less than 1 week" relationships). Her best male and female sexual relationships were "somewhat satisfying" (2 on a 1-5 scale with 1 = extremely satisfying). P married at age 28 and divorced when she was 36. Her husband deserted her when her son was born.

Atypical Sexual Behavior

P stated that she had sexual activity with her sons only when she was lonely and had no lovers. She disclosed the abuse to a counselor; she thought it was normal and did not expect to be arrested. She did not know why she engaged in sexual activity with her sons but could not stop.

P denied any sexual fantasies about her sons prior to the abuse, which began when she was 23. She also denied any current fantasies about her sons or any other children. She denied any other paraphilic behavior or fantasy. On the sexual interest card sort she endorsed scenes of sexual activity with prepubertal boys. P did not express any remorse, stating that this was normal behavior in her frame of reference.

Psychiatric History

P had a history of two suicide attempts, at age 30 and again at age 39. Her psychiatric diagnoses were as follows: Axis I—major depression, current and past, agoraphobia without panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder; and Axis II—avoidant personality disorder, passive-aggressive personality disorder, self-defeating personality disorder, paranoid personality disorder, and schizotypal personality disorder. Her Global Assessment of Functioning was 59 (moderate). She had two prior psychiatric hospitalizations.

P was severely abused as a child and adolescent. Engaging in incest was normal for her. She began molesting her sons when they were each 4 years old, approximately the age at which she was first molested. She may have used her sons as substitutes for adult male lovers, with no apparent remorse. According to her self-report she preferred sex with adults but enjoyed sex with her sons as well. In this case, incest seemed to be learned behavior.

DISCUSSION

In this study, 11 incarcerated female sexual offenders had engaged in sexual behaviors serious enough to result in incarceration. All of these women exhibited severe psychopathology. Nearly all of these women had themselves been victims of repeated sexual and/or physical abuse.

In comparing their sexual histories to those of a nonoffender group of incarcerated women, the sexual offenders reported that most sexual activity was initiated at later ages, including age at first masturbation and age at first orgasm. This suggests an inhibition of childhood and adolescent sexuality compared to the nonsexual offenders. The first homosexual experience is the only sexual behavior that was not initiated at a later age.

Prior sexual victimization played a common role in both groups in preventing the offenders' sexual satisfaction with adult consensual partners. The influence of early victimization could have inhibited the expression of sexual feelings and self-exploration, explaining later-age impediments to sexual satisfaction.

In this small sample of incarcerated female sexual offenders, there was a great deal of denial and minimization of atypical sexual behavior, as well as atypical sexual fantasy. This finding is similar to those of prior studies in male sexual offenders.

This study, as well as previous studies, has demonstrated a high incidence of psychiatric impairment among female sexual offenders. The role

of personality should be evaluated further in a larger study to ascertain what role different personality disorders may play in different types of atypical sexual interests. For example, seven sexual offenders acted in concert with codefendants; several of these had a diagnosis of dependent personality disorder. Further research needs to focus on what role victimization plays in the development of atypical sexual interests and behaviors. Various treatment interventions have been suggested for use with this population, such as family therapy, psychodynamic therapy, and behavioral treatment, but none have been evaluated. Before specific interventions can be formulated such evaluations need to take place.

Future studies will need to assess larger subgroups of female offenders and compare them to control groups of nonsexual offenders to determine treatment needs. In this study, there were differences in sexual histories, psychopathology, and victimization histories, but larger groups need to be studied to confirm these results.

Female sexual offenders are an understudied group. They are difficult to evaluate due to their small numbers compared to male sexual offenders. However, recent studies have shown that victims of sexual abuse report females as perpetrators as well as men (Elliott, 1993; Kaplan, Becker, & Tenke, 1991). To reduce future victimization in our society, we need to treat both genders who perpetrate child sexual abuse.

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