

**Women Sexual Offenders: Theory, Research, & Practice**

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The main aim of this symposium is to provide a collection of papers, from leading international forensic researchers, on the clinical features of women sexual offenders. Research examining women sexual offenders' treatment needs is still very much in its infancy and so a symposium devoted to this topic is bound to be popular with a whole range of professionals attending the ATSA conference. I have invited four internationally recognized speakers to comprise this symposium: Professor Antony Beech, Dr Franca Cortoni, Clinical Psychologist Richard Beckett, and myself (Dr Theresa Gannon). All authors have published articles and conducted research examining the etiological features of women sexual offenders which fit together nicely into a symposium format.

**A Descriptive Offence Chain Model for Women Sexual Offenders**

Dr. Theresa Gannon  
Mariamne Rose  
Professor Tony Ward

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 women sexual offenders about the cognitive, behavioral, and volitional factors associated with their sexual offences. Using a grounded theory approach, we constructed a descriptive offence chain model that describes the sequence of cognitive/affective and behavioral events associated with female-perpetrated sexual offending. The model incorporates background factors, proximal factors, offender type, offence behavior, and offence consequences. This is the first attempt to develop a descriptive offence chain for women sexual offenders and the findings suggest that the model is reasonably valid and reliable. Future theoretical, research, and clinical implications of the model are discussed.

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### **Assessing Female Sexual Offenders' Motivations and Cognitions: An Exploratory Study**

Professor Anthony Beech

Semi-structured interviews eliciting cognitions and motivations were carried out with 15 incarcerated female child sexual abusers (nearly 40% of the current female sexual offender prison population). Qualitative analysis indicated that four of the five motivational schemas (implicit theories, Ward & Keenan, 1999) underlying sexual offenders cognitions found in men could be clearly identified in women, these were: *Uncontrollability* (UN, identified in 87% of participants), *Dangerous world* (DW, 53%), *Children as sexual objects* (CSO, 47%) and *Nature of harm* (NH, 20%). *Entitlement*, a final implicit theory (IT) commonly found in males, was not identified in any participants. Further analysis indicated that there were four main groups of offender within the sample based on combinations of these ITs. These were: 1) presence of DW/CSO indicating sexual motivation and cognitions with fear of violence; 2) presence of DW/no CSO, indicating fear of violence with no sexual cognition or motivation; 3) presence of CSO/no DW, indicating sexual motivation and cognition. The NH IT also strongly featured in this group; 4) presence of UN/no DW or CSOs, indicating lack of control, sometimes with sense of protection for the victim. Suggestions are made on how the results can inform theoretical developments in the field as well as policy and practice.

### **Female Sexual Abusers: A Comparison with Men Who Sexually Abuse Children**

Richard Beckett

While there has been substantial work on the development of measures to assess the criminogenic needs of male sex offenders, the equivalent work has not been undertaken with women who sexually abuse. The extent to which female abusers share the same 'offence specific' problems as male sexual offenders has yet to be examined. This presentation reports a national UK study of over eighty female sexual abusers drawn from criminal justice and child protection sources who have been assessed on a range of standardized psychological measures. The presentation has three main sections. The first describes the developmental and offence characteristics of the women studied. The second reports on the socio affective, personality

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and 'offence specific' problems (e.g. cognitive distortions, victim empathy, etc) of the women as measured on a range of psychometric tests which have been standardized on British non offending women. The third compares the female abusers with a large sample of male sex offenders assessed on the same standardized measures. The results show that female sexual abusers share many characteristics with men who sexually abuse children. These include socio-affective problems in the area of self-esteem, emotional loneliness, social competence etc and also similarly poor levels of victim empathy and high levels of cognitive distortions. Finally the paper examines how these characteristics vary across different types of female sexual abuser and considers how these findings can guide treatment interventions.

### **Assessing and Treating Women who Sexually Offend: What Do We Know and What Do We Still Need to Know**

Dr Franca Cortoni

As female sexual offenders increasingly come to the attention of the criminal justice system, we need to develop a better understanding of the issues related to the assessment and management of these women. This paper will provide a review of the current knowledge in the area of risk of sexual recidivism, assessment, and treatment needs of women who sexually offend. First, a review of the reported sexual recidivism rates of women sexual offenders in several jurisdictions, including the U.S., England, Australia, and Canada will be presented (Cortoni & Hanson, 2005). Second, on the basis of available evidence, factors related to sexually offending behavior in women will be discussed. Finally, treatment aspects will be detailed, including a contrast and comparison between male and female offenders. Tentative conclusions will be provided to help evaluators, case managers, and treatment providers in their assessment of risk of recidivism, and management and treatment of female sexual offenders.