

THE "ILLUSIVE" FEMALE SEX OFFENDER: A QUANTITATIVE CONTENT  
ANALYSIS OF MEDIA EXPOSURE

By  
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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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Abstract

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Fluctuations in societal beliefs towards sexually based crimes are plagued by the same continuous cycles of media attention to which most matters of public interests are subject. To perceive women as sexually aggressive is contrary to traditional sexual scripts which are gendered constructs formulated by our patriarchal society. Through the use of quantitative content analysis, this exploratory study examines whether it is possible to adequately measure through media reports the concepts and attributes derived from the social science literature about female offenders who commit sexually based crimes against children. Data collection and analysis based on the combination of the sex of the perpetrator, the level of violence associated with the criminal offense, and the overall tone of the media publications are examined to determine if a disconnect exists between what we know about sex offenders through social science research and how they are portrayed in the media.

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Carol Sue Chiotti, my father Charles Robert Chiotti, and my brother Justin Butler Chiotti. I owe my success in life to their constant and unwavering love and support. I am truly blessed to call them my family!

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Fluctuations in societal beliefs towards sexually based crimes are plagued by the same continuous cycles of media attention to which most matters of public interest are subject. Beliefs towards the sexual abuse of children, however, still fall into “typical” categories that proclaim the offenders as male and the victims as female. Thus, when the gender of the perpetrator upsets societal beliefs, the reaction of the mass media can become more aggravated and strident.

To perceive women as sexually aggressive, or worse as sexual offenders, is contrary to traditional sexual scripts which are gendered constructs formulated by privileged society (Byers 1996; Denov 2003; Jackson 1978; Koss and Harvey 1991; Johansson-Love and Fremouw 2006; Lorber 2001). Sociology, criminology, psychology, and feminist researchers generally dismiss the notion of female sex offending because it is “unthinkable that a woman might seduce a helpless child into sex play” (Mathis 1972, pg. 54). Lawson (1991) suggests that the historical cultural bias towards viewing women as non-sexual is one of the primary reasons why cases of female sexual abuse have been rarely identified. To believe that a woman, especially a mother, could sexually abuse a child requires one to challenge powerful stereotypes about motherhood and female sexual roles in society and relationships. As stated by Larson and Maison (1987):

Socially, we, as a culture, find it particularly difficult to think that women would sexually abuse children. Our Judeo-Christian heritage places enormous emphasis on women as warm, nurturing mothers. Furthermore, we are, at best, culturally ambivalent about female sexuality. We struggle with the notion of women- particularly mothers- being sexual at all (pg. 30).

Due to the prior ignorance of female sexual offending, the recent exploration in the past decade has laid the groundwork for considerable discourse towards these offenders by the public and policy makers (Becker, Hall and Stinson 2001). Although female sex offenders are rare when compared to their male counterparts, the explosion of extra-legal consequences for sexual offending such as registration and notification has affected female sex offenders equally, if not more adversely, than their male counterparts.

Traditionally, legal policies and practices are formulated and operated under the guise that female and male offenders display similar characteristics and needs according to offender typology. However, research has demonstrated that female and male sex offenders differ markedly, and thus the universal policies and practices utilized by the justice system may facilitate a gendered inequality towards female sex offenders (Adshed, Howard and Mason 1994).

Female sex offenders are more likely to commit harmful acts against young children than other types of victims and many of those acts occur within the family setting (Allen 1991). "Sex offenses committed by females include acts of fondling, digital penetration, oral copulation, and sexual intercourse with a

fewer number of victims in general and are less likely to use physical force in committing their offenses” (Song, Lieb, and Donnelly 1993, p.2). Also of noticeable difference are the overall general characteristics of female offenders. Female offenders are more likely to be younger, have lower income, and be unemployed or employed part-time at the time of the offense than their male counterparts (Vandiver and Walker 2002). Also, many female perpetrators were themselves victims of childhood sexual abuse, with some studies reporting that almost half of female offenders had a history of experiencing sexual abuse during childhood (Faller 1987; Schwartz and Cellini 1995). Although the number of female sex offenders is greatly reduced compared to male offenders, the propensity of female victims of sexual abuse to become perpetrators suggests a need to further examine this rather unique criminal class due to their inherent inclination to continue the cycle of abuse (U.S. Department of Justice 2002; Walker 1980).

“For many years female sexual offending has been ignored or unrecognized” (Johansson-Love and Fremouw, 2006, p.13). Thus, through the examination of theoretical foundations and previous research on female sex offending, it will be clearly demonstrated that our understanding of female perpetrators of sexually deviant behavior suffers from theoretical neglect, under-recognition, and systematic under-reporting. The initial absence of women from the sex offending literature creates a dangerous stigma towards offenders and victims, and perception that carries through to the general public. Although

limited research literature on female sex offending does exist, its paucity advances the perception that female sex offending is a rare phenomenon.

Within the existing research literature on sex offenders, female sex offenders by-and-large are ignored, other than the mention of sheer numerical reporting. According to Johansson-Love and Fremouw (2006), “researchers who attempt to investigate this understudied population should be applauded for their contribution to the scarce literature” (p. 23). Case-study accounts and research based on self-report conduct have demonstrated convincingly that female sex offenders do exist; however, the analysis in question is based primarily on mere descriptive measurements. The theoretical and practical disparities within legal confines regarding female sexual offending may have a negative effect on the public’s perception through media outlets. Through the use of quantitative content analysis, this exploratory study will examine whether it is possible to adequately measure through media reports the concepts and attributes derived from the social science literature about female offenders who commit sexually based crimes against children. Data collection and analysis based on the combination of the sex of the perpetrator, attributes of the sexual event portrayed by the mass media, and the overall tone of the media publication will be examined to determine if a disconnect exists between what we know about sex offenders through social science research and how they are portrayed in the media.

The exploration of media coverage will help alleviate the voids associated with sex offender research, especially when given additional attention to female perpetrators. The lack of research on female sex offenders will be discussed later, however it will become apparent that research into this unique criminal class is deficient at best. This study will focus on societal expectations of female and male roles as associated with sexually based crimes, and how such norms are translated through various media outlets. In addition, policy ramifications concerning sex offenders will be discussed in connection to possible sensational media coverage and publication. Two primary research questions will be explored throughout this exploratory study and quantitative measures will be utilized to determine if a pattern emerges in media portrayal based on a limited number of cases. Do females who commit sex offenses against children receive more media coverage than their male counterparts based on their reported numbers in official data? Do female sex offenders receive distinct media coverage based on the attributes associated with the sexual event? When examining the portrayal of the offender in the media publication, will cases involving female sex offenders reflect gendered stereotypes or theoretical measures of causation?

## CHAPTER 2

### **FEMALE SEX OFFENDING RESEARCH**

In conjunction with the limited attention provided to female sex offending in the literature, the paucity of research on these offenders poses serious problems (Oliver 2007). The disregard for research into this unique criminal class is often justified by the notion of scarce data due to a relatively small number of reported cases. The acceptance of the premise that female sex offending does not occur enough to be a studied phenomena assumes that the scant literature surrounding female sex offending reflects the fact that such offending is an insignificant social and criminological problem (Gannon and Rose 2008; Grayston and De Luca 1999; Matravers 2005; Robinson 1998).

In the following chapter, an overview of the current research methodology utilized to discern female sex offending will be scrutinized. A review of the existing literature will demonstrate that although the incidence of female sex offending is small when compared to their male counterparts, female sex offending is nonetheless a noteworthy problem. In addition, the review of the research literature in this area will show a complete lack of attention to media and its effects on public beliefs towards female perpetrators of sexually based crimes.

## **Current Status of Female Sex Offending Research**

Earlier literature and empirical work has suggested that sexually based crimes are rarely committed by women, thus presenting little significance to criminological research and literature (Freund, Heasman, Racansky, and Glancy, 1984; Howitt 1992; Masson 1984; Mathis 1972; Mohr 1977). Russell (1984) proclaims in the regard that female sex offending occurs so scarcely that it represents a virtually nonexistent sociological and public policy problem as well. Despite the proclamations that female sex offending is a rare and of little significance some research does exist that contradicts such declarations. Upon a closer examination it would appear that the controversy surrounding female sex offending stems from the methodological problems present in earlier research and conflicting findings provided by case-report studies and self-report studies.

### **Case-Report Studies**

Case-report studies provide an efficient method of data collection by utilizing a governmental agency as the tool for collection. Case-report studies are offender record data that have come to the attention of official agencies and are therefore the primary tool utilized to measure sexually based crimes committed against children. Despite their efficiency, case-report studies should be approached with caution due to the problems rising from five inherent flaws that challenge validity and reliability (Brookman, Noaks, and Wincup 1999; May 1993). First, official crime statistics often reflect crimes that are extremely visible,

such as abundant street crimes, rather than the more hidden crimes of a white-collar or domestic nature. Sex offending generally lies within the hidden realm of domestic crimes, thus making it less likely than street crime to appear in official governmental statistics.

Second, professional organizations such as law enforcement play a crucial role in official statistics. Due to the widespread discretion used by individuals within a professional or governmental organization, all criminal actions are not reported or recorded. Also indicative of reporting are the policies that dictate the individual's behavior. Police culture and the policies set forth by law enforcement administration play a crucial role in whether a crime is reported (Brookman, Noaks, and Wincup 1999; May 1993).

Third, just as the definitions set forth by the law enforcement organization or the administration, definitional factors within the law itself plague the identification and reporting of crimes. The ambiguity of legal terms or criminal actions often compounds the already existing discretionary tactics used by both individuals and institutions. For an action to be considered "criminal," it must first be defined as such, and then be a "detectable" action. Due to the enigmatic nature of female sexual offending, such actions have only been considered "criminal" in the last 25 years (Ericson 1982). Also, as described above, sex offending is typically located within the relatively hidden domain of domestic crimes, thus making sex offending (and especially female sex offending) extremely difficult to detect. Thus, female sex offending does not seem to be

consistent with the necessary elements of definitional reliability within case report data.

Fourth, victimization plays a major role in assessing the reliability of official statistics. "Surveys conducted by interviewing a random sample of the general public have shown that only 36 percent, or just under 4 out of every 10 crimes committed on a daily basis are reported to the police. According to these estimates, 6 in every 10 crimes committed never even reach the attention of police who act as gatekeepers of official crime statistics" (Denov 2004, pg. 11). The above statistics are in relation to all crimes, but the nature of sexually based crimes may further complicate the prevalence of victim under-reporting. The taboo nature of female sex offending stemming from societal pressures and traditional sex scripts often presents the necessary barrier to consistent victim reports (Jennings 1993; Lew 1990). Consequently, with the addition of societal ideals to the already straining nature of definitional problems and concerns, it is likely that the majority of child sexual abuse cases fail to appear in official statistics (Finkelhor 1986; Fromuth & Conn 1997).

Finally, research on female sex offending may again be plagued by definitional concerns and unreliability. The definition of what constitutes an "offender" becomes the next focus of concern within the research field. A study conducted by the National Incidence Study on Child Abuse and Neglect (1981) provided figures that imply that almost half of sexual experiences (defined as sexual intercourse, oral intercourse, digital or foreign penetration, and intimate

touching) encountered involve a female perpetrator. However, when the data are re-examined, the study defines “perpetrator” as not only having sexual contact with the child but also permitting the sexual abuse to occur (Finkelhor and Russell 1984). In many sexual abuse cases involving children, even though the female might not have physically committed the sex act she was aware that the abuse is occurring and failed to intervene (Cooper and Cormier 1990). The notion of definitional barriers surrounding the conception of “perpetrator” reinforces the pre-existing need to have a strong definitional foundation to ensure the validity and reliability of case report studies.

Although troubled by such clear threats to validity and reliability, data from official sources suggests that sexually based crimes committed by females are a rare occurrence. In a study conducted by Pierce & Pierce (1985), the researchers used a sample of 25 male and 180 female children and concluded that over the period 1976 to 1979 5% of all sexual abuse cases reported to the child abuse hotline were committed by female perpetrators. In a similar study conducted by Reinhart (1987), the author increased the sample size to 189 male and 189 female children and concluded that during the period 1983-1985 approximately 22% of all cases of sexual abuse reported to medical personnel were committed by a female.

Up to 1987, little attention was paid to whether females were committing crimes against male or female victims, or in conjunction with another offender. However, Faller (1989) made the first large-scale attempt to distinguish the

differences between female and male offenders (if any), and explore the notion that although rare when compared to male perpetrators document the fact that female sexual offending exists. In his study, Faller examined 313 sexual abuse cases of children reported to hospital or clinic staff between 1979 and 1986. In his analysis the author found that when the victims were male, 8% of offenders were female, 63% of offenders were male, and 29% were abused by both a female and male perpetrator. When victimization was analyzed for females, Faller found that only 1% of perpetrators were female, 82% were male offenders, and 17% involved a team of female and male offenders. Faller's analysis clearly demonstrates that female sex offending occurs more often when the victim is male, and is often committed in conjunction with a male perpetrator.

Despite the findings of Faller (1989), the assumption of scarcity continued to plague research into female sex offending. Roanne (1992) examined the reports of child sexual abuse to Child Protective Services between 1985 and 1989 and found that 7.8 percent of all reported cases were committed by a female offender. Although the percentage of female sex offenders in Roanne's analysis was larger than in previous statistical reports, some scholars believed that the number was still grossly underrepresented (Elliot 1993). In addition to previous lower percentages, the U.S. Department of Justice (2002) concluded that 1.2% of those charged with forcible rape, and 8% of those charged with sex offenses, were female. In a similar analysis of Federal statistics, Snyder (2000) found that

between 1991 and 1996, 4% of those charged with sexual assaults against children were female.

Although the case-report and record data literature suggests that the occurrence of female sex offending is a relatively rare event, case-report data suffers from extreme under-representation due to the notion that it reflects only those cases that come to the attention of law enforcement, medical personnel, and victim advocacy programs. In addition, the limited research available was conducted several decades ago, thus also presenting a problem when transferring previous research to contemporary societal constructs and norms. Therefore, data collection and analysis that utilizes other statistical methodologies such as self-report studies may be useful in providing another important perspective on female sex offenders.

### **Self-Report Studies**

The strength of data collected through the use of self-report studies is the overall versatility, efficiency, effectiveness, and generalizability of its results (Binder and Geis 1983; Dillman 2000; Hammersley 1989). The primary strength of self-report studies (especially in relation to female sex offending) is that they are able to uncover information relating to unrecognized and unreported behaviors. Through the use of self-report studies, researchers can expose the multitude of social processes, issues, pressures, and conflicts that surround the criminal justice system by utilizing victim data rather than relying on the

offender-based data collected in case reports. Researchers are able to gain access to this once unattainable information at relatively lower costs and with lower time constraints in comparison to case report analysis.

Despite its strengths, however, as with its case-report counterpart self-report studies suffer from several inherent weaknesses. One of the primary weaknesses of self-report data is the sole reliance on participant recall answers which may not always be accurate (Dillman 2000). This reliance on recall can be questionable due to a participant's inclination to over or under-report past occurrences.

Bias is another potential risk to validity and reliability of self-report studies. Surveys have the potential to be inherently biased due to the constraints of researcher questions. Dillman (2000) argues that not all events and questions can be translated into categorical answers, thus when a researcher creates such fixed categories the researcher forces a participant to answer outside the confines of his/her true response. Beyond the use of fixed responses, the actual questions posed may present a bias concern. If researchers only pose certain questions to the participant, the opportunity to fully explain or recall past occurrences may be extremely limited.

Especially in relation to sensitive, convoluted, and debated topics such as sex offending, the potential for data error due to interpretation and language becomes aggravated. The appropriate use of language is crucial when conducting studies that involve sensitive material. Most self-report studies that

have been utilized to explore female sexual offending have employed phrases such as “sexual abuse” and “victimization.” However, some researchers have argued that using phrases such as “sexual interaction” and “sexual experiences” will yield more accurate responses after the removal of the negative connotations (Johnson and Schrier 1987; Mendel 1995). Interpretation becomes a major issue in self-report studies because the researcher does not have the opportunity to clarify any confusing subjects for the participant, and they have no guarantee that the questions will be interpreted in the manner in which they were intended. Both language and interpretation contribute to the limitations and fragility of self-report studies.

Groth (1979) is credited with being the first researcher to utilize self-report methodology to explore the facets of sexually based offending. By surveying 348 males who have been convicted of sexually based crime and referred to a security treatment facility, Groth found that of the 106 who reported prior victimization, 14% were victimized by a female only, 41% were victimized by a male, and 45% were victimized by both. The Groth data revealed that not only are nearly one-third of convicted perpetrators prior victims of sexual abuse, but that a larger percentage of victims report being abused by a female perpetrator than previously reported .

Following the research conducted by Groth (1979), Fritz, Stoll, and Wagner (1981) conducted research on 412 male and 540 female college students. The results from the survey administered found that of the 314 students who

reported prior victimization, 60% of the male students and 10% of the female students were victimized by a female perpetrator. The research reported the highest percentage of female sexual offending and set the foundation for future self-report studies to examine this unique criminal class. In a follow-up study conducted by Fromuth, Burkhart, and Webb-Jones (1991) they found that of the 253 males and 329 female college students surveyed, 58% reported being victimized by a female. In both follow-up studies, victimization by female offenders was defined as any inappropriate touching, bathing, or penetration of a digit or foreign object with or without the use of coercion and committed alone or in conjunction with another adult offender.

The research conducted by Fritz et al. (1981) and Fromuth et al. (1991), demonstrates the ability of self-report to gain access to information that is difficult to assess due to the under-reporting and unrecognized behavior that eludes case study data. However, despite these achievements, self-report studies are properly subject to criticism. As stated previously, self-report studies possess inherent weaknesses and are subject to validity and reliability questions. Two studies conducted by Johnson and Shrier (1985 and 1987) provide an excellent example of how self-report studies can yield more positive responses to sexual assault questions, but lead to conclusions which become questionable due to their inherent methodological problems. In the first study, Johnson and Shrier (1985) reported that zero participants reported being sexually abused by a female. However, in the second study, the researchers omitted the terms “sexual

abuse” and “rape” and replaced them with more general terms such as “sexual experiences” and “sexual interactions.” When the language of the second study became less poignant, Johnson and Shier (1985), published 11 reported cases of female sex offending.

The differences in outcomes between case study analysis and self-report analysis are obvious when one examines the sheer numbers involved. On the whole, self-report data leads to the impression that female sexual offending (as the sole perpetrator and not in collaboration with a male partner) against children accounts for half of all sexual offending, whereas, case-report data leads to the impression that female sex offending is a rare event and only encompasses approximately ten percent of all sexually based crimes. These conflicting results fuel the debate as to which method suffers from the highest concerns of validity and reliability. What is agreed upon, however, is the need for further research and analysis into the field of female sex offending, not only to improve the information available about these criminals but to also enhance the analytical tools used to examine such atypical criminals.

Researchers are often forced to choose which form of data they want to employ to analyze their assumptions, and despite the benefits of case study analysis the use of self-report data exemplifies better results in many areas of unconventional offending behavior. Although the self-report studies suffer from innate methodological problems, its ability to uncover previously hidden aspects

of criminal offending makes it an important tool in the quest to uncover the “illusive” nature of female sexual offending.

Due to their absence in “mainstream” criminological, sociological, psychological, and feminist research, it is often perceived by social scientists that females do not commit sexually based crimes at a high enough rate to warrant further investigation. However, from the review of literature presented here, it is clear that such offending does indeed occur. It is important to understand the prevalence of female sex offending from a social science perspective and more fully understand the context in which it occurs in order to analyze the public portrayal of these types of crime in national and regional media outlets. Popular media tends to focus on, and sensationalize, the uniqueness of particular crimes (Barak 1995; Boyle 2005; Chermak 1995; Oppliger 2006; Surett 1995). This exploratory study compares national and regional media portrayals with social science outcomes to more clearly understand how female sex offending against children is presented to the general public and to policy makers through the media.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORIES OF CAUSATION FOR SEX OFFENDING

In order to conduct research in a particular area of deviant behavior it is imperative to discuss the possible causes that surround the criminal activity. Perpetrators of sexually based crimes are held to a different standard of punishment due to the nature of the crime they commit and the unique policy and public perception ramifications attached to sexually based crimes. The following analysis of theories surrounding sexually based crimes will demonstrate the need for continual research into the area of female offending, and highlight the need for additional investigation into societal responses and reactions to such criminal acts.

Theoretical explanations for crime causation vary across disciplines and criminal actions, however one constant remains within the field of social science research- namely the quest to discover what causes criminal behavior. For sexually based crimes, the evolution of theory has been exposed to a wide variety of disciplines due to criminological theory's inability to illuminate an all-encompassing explanation for sexually deviant behavior. "Over the years, attitudes toward sex offenders have ranged from the belief that these individuals are congenitally malformed or morally depraved to the view that they are merely expressing a type of behavior that is subtly approved or even encouraged by

their culture” (Schwartz and Cellini 1995, 2-3). Despite the exposure to various theoretical and methodological approaches, sex offending continues to avoid single theoretical classification and resolution.

The following analysis consists of the major contributions made by the fields of Social Psychology, Criminology, and Feminist Studies to explaining the behavior of sex offenders. Each field provides a theoretical explanation for sexually deviant actions; however, most scholars carrying out their research fail to provide an unmitigated explanation and appropriate public policy solution to those who commit sexually based crimes against children.

### **Social Psychological Theories of Sexually Based Crimes**

Although theoretical frameworks and formulations exist, no single factor has been identified that can account for all different types of family violence and child sexual abuse (Malley-Morrison and Hines 2004). Social psychologists offer several different theories in an attempt to explain child sexual abuse, but overall work in this discipline reflects the notion that such theories are limited in scope and do not address all factors of sexual deviance towards minor children.

One of the more prominent social psychological theories that can be applied to female sex abuse of children is that of Strain Theory. Strain Theory asserts that there are two major components that contribute to deviant behavior: culture and structure (Merton 1938). Current cultural beliefs concerning the role of women as primary caregivers of children can be viewed as a possible source of

strain, thus leading to deviant sexual behavior. In addition to cultural strain, the structural development of a patriarchal society may also provide an outlet for sexually deviant behavior committed by women against children. With culture and structure dictating the role of women as caregivers of children, the potential for sexual abuse can be viewed as a reaction to these sources of strain.

Conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion are the different methods which individuals tend to use in reacting to strain. According to Cloward and Ohlin (1960), however, opportunity tends to play the largest role in delinquency and creates the learning structure for sexual deviance.

Through strain associated with their role concerning children and the opportunity to commit sexually deviant acts, Strain Theory offers a significant contribution to the possible causes of female sex offending against children. However, despite its strengths Strain Theory is not an all-inclusive theory of female sex offending due to the notion that some women conform to their “position” in society and chose not to deviate from cultural and structural norms.

Following the notions of cultural and structural strain, “factor theories focus on characteristics of contexts or individuals within context that may lead to, or be associated with, acts of family aggression but are not the direct and immediate causes of those acts” (Malley-Morrison and Hines, 2004, p.3). In this regard, environmental stressors constitute one facet of factor theories that can be associated with child sexual abuse committed by women. According to Malley-Morrison and Hines (2004), environmental stressors can be expressed in the form

of job demotion, loss of pay, separation from spouse or significant other, extramarital affairs, moving to a new residence, daily hassles, and chronic stress within the family unit. Due to women's inherent societal status as family caregivers, disruptions within the family unit caused by exosystem factors can lead to sexual deviance toward their minor children.

However, despite the propensity to explain sexual abuse against children by utilizing the notion of outside stressors, some argue that stress results in sexual abuse against children only when certain factors are present due to the variety of other responses to stress (Malley-Morrison and Hines 2004). Thus, it is important to note that although environmental factors can cause enough stress to lead to child sexual abuse, environmental stressors alone are not indicative to the cause of abuse.

In addition to environmental stressors, another aspect of factor theories is social isolation. Social isolation focuses on child sexual abuse within the family unit; given their focus, this stressor cannot be used to explain predatory sexual abuse. However, due to the frequency of female sexual abuse that is conducted within the family unit, social isolation can be utilized to account for the offender-victim relationship from potent, prosocial support systems that can provide nurturance and feedback (Garbarino 1977). Areas at risk for child sexual abuse can be characterized by social disorganization and decreasing social coherence which supports criminal activity and lacks availability and knowledge of social services networks. The isolation of the offender and victim from resources can

lead to familial stress in which child sexual abuse may become an outlet for the female perpetrator.

Despite the contributions of environmental stressors and social isolation, the major component of factor theories is dependency relations. Dependency Relations focuses on the role of dependency on the offender by the victim. The sexual victimization of children may occur due to the notion that they are typically weaker and smaller than the female perpetrator and have relatively little ability to escape from their abuser (Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman 1994). There is evidence within Dependency Relations which states that the victim is dependent on the perpetrator for aiding in eating, dressing, bathing, and transportation; dependency becomes a risk factor associated with child sexual abuse causation in the presence of other pathological conditions.

Although Dependency Relations contributes important knowledge into the possible causes of child sexual abuse, it is important to note that since almost all children are dependent on their adult caregivers, dependency cannot fully explain female sex offending. In addition, since society dictates that women are usually the primary caregivers to children, Dependency Relations cannot fully explain why some women commit sexually based crimes against the children in their care, and some do not.

In sum, although each of the components of factor theories aids in the explanation of child sexual abuse, each also contains inherent weaknesses. Social psychologists utilizing factor theories address these weaknesses, however,

maintaining that since there is not one universal cause or explanation to child sexual abuse it follows that factor theories can be constructively used to help uncover some of the possible motivations or dynamics associated with female sex offending.

A broader social psychological approach used to study sexually based crimes is Walker's (1980) Cycle of Abuse/Violence. Walker (1980) contends that victims of prior sexual abuse have a higher propensity to become perpetrators of sexual violence than individuals with no prior sexual abuse history. This matrix of theories is utilized to research a variety of sexually based crimes and advocates of this approach contend that sexually deviant actions are a product of inheritance and observation. The Cycle of Abuse continuum accounts for many subsets of sex offenders by demonstrating that prior victimization can be a determining risk factor for future perpetration.

Sullivan's (1953) Interpersonal Theory examines the parent-child relationship to demonstrate the development of one's personality. Sullivan stated that personality development was the result of attempting to reduce interpersonal anxiety with the primary caretakers. Early experiences with a person of importance will be internalized and then replayed in similar patterns with other individuals. Thus, if sexually deviant behavior is demonstrated and experienced, the victim will "adapt" to mirror these early experiences regardless of whether the behavior is culturally acceptable. Chewing (1990) expanded on Interpersonal Theory within the boundaries of sexually based crimes when she

compared adolescent sex offenders to other adolescent offenders. Her work within the confines of sexually based crimes illustrated that Interpersonal Theory is applicable to all types of offenders, no matter how small the criminal class may be. In conclusion, Interpersonal Theory examines the generational patterns of behavior relating to levels of adjustment and adaptation, not simply the perceived pathology of all sex offenders.

Another key theory utilized within the Cycle of Abuse literature to describe sexual deviance is Bem's (1972) Self-Perception Theory. According to Bem (1972), "individuals come to 'know' their own attitudes, emotions, and other internal states partially by inferring them from observations of their own overt behavior and/or the circumstances in which this behavior occurs" (pg. 5). This misconception and continuum of cultural norms helps explain what causes sexually abused children to blame themselves for the abuse. Self-Perception Theory demonstrates that society's mainstream ideas and norms about male and female sexuality (which will be discussed at length in a later chapter) allows for victims of sexual abuse to categorize themselves as either "another female victim" or as a male that should not report the abuse, especially if the abuse was committed by a female perpetrator. In addition, with this mindset formed, when the victims become the perpetrators they continue the cycle of violence and abuse. Thus, as dominant cultural norms and beliefs shift concerning sexually based crimes, some prior victims may believe that their behavior is still considered acceptable due to prior acceptance by the general population.

The final theory employed in the Cycle of Abuse literature is the Family Systems Theory, which “explains the actions of each family member in terms of the dynamics between individuals within the family rather than in terms of individual background and motivation” (Hodson and Skeen 1987, pg. 216). In family systems, society is the environmental framework and the individual family members are the element units. Thus, the abuser-victim relationship is examined to determine the effect and likelihood of sexual deviance to be committed within the family unit. The Family Systems Theory explains female sex offending in conjunction with the ideas associated with Feminist theories (which will be discussed later) by asserting that women, who feel powerless in a patriarchal society, employ the limited power and control that they do possess within the family unit through sexual deviance.

However, despite the strengths of the Cycle of Abuse theories, they do not explain all variations of perpetrators and victims. Interpersonal and Self-Perception theory do not explain those perpetrators who do not have histories of prior sexual abuse or the context in which sexual deviance occurs. Family Systems Theory has been criticized for its strong focus on father-daughter abuse, and the exclusion of other forms of sex offending. According to Finkelhor (1984), the theory limits itself by stipulating that the incest occurs when the marital relationship breaks down and the mother is alienated, creating the opportunity for the father to use his children to substitute for the loss of the spousal sexual relationship.

Although the weakness of the social psychological explanations for female sexual deviance appear to hinder its ability to thoroughly explain sex offending, its contributions lend aid to other areas of theoretical explanations of sexually based crimes committed against children. Social psychological theories will become important in this analysis when testing race, socioeconomic status, marital status, and prior sexual abuse of the perpetrator as a possible causation for the current sex offending accounts published by the media outlet.

### **Criminological Theories of Sexually Based Crimes**

Despite the continuous difficulty to define and explain sexually deviant behavior, criminologists possess two primary theories that could be employed to illuminate the causes and contexts in which sex offenses against children occur. Social Learning and Self-Control Theories provide criminological insight to sex crimes committed against children.

Social Learning Theory asserts that all humans are inherently social and recognize variation or deviation in social norms and expectations. According to Akers (1998), Social Learning Theory contains four major aspects: differential reinforcement, differential association, imitation, and definitions. Differential association comprises a blend of reinforcement and punishment. Reinforcement can occur with the existence of the perpetrator's prior sexual abuse (it is a learned and reinforced behavior), while punishment can be linked to child sexual

abuse through the lack of punishment due to the perpetrator's ability to mask the sexually deviant behavior.

Differential association emphasizes the importance of the groups to which the perpetrator is exposed. According to Haynie (2001), the network of deviant behavior often can be traced back to the family unit; therefore, if a perpetrator of sexually deviant behavior was exposed to a network that "accepted" such behavior, the perpetrator would believe that committing sex crimes was not a significant violation of societal networks or norms. In conjunction with differential association, imitation allows for a non-cognitive route to sex offending. Thus, through perceived societal networks, perpetrators of sex crimes against children may simply be imitating learned behavior.

Definitions lead to social learning through the involvement in subcultures and lack of exposure to outside influences that may contradict previously learned behavior. Perpetrators of sexually based crimes against children often do not define their behavior as deviant, but rather see it as a "normal" part of their subculture (Haynie 2001).

Although research has indicated that victims of sexual abuse can become perpetrators of sex crimes (Finkelhor 1986, Groth 1979, Hanson and Slater 1988, Langevin et al 1989), Social Learning Theory is not able to explain the existence of those offenders who commit sexually based crimes who were not victims themselves. In addition, Social Learning Theory is unable to explain female sex offending due to the pressures provided by our inherent patriarchal societal

structure. Although it is not “encouraged” for men to commit sexually based crimes against children, men are expected to be the sexual aggressors and sexually dominant gender. Mass media plays a large role in the perpetuation of society’s patriarchal nature as they continue to sexualize children and reinforce ideas and norms about sexual aggression in adults (Carll 2003). However, being viewed as the primary caregivers of children, women are generally taught within family, school, and various subcultures not to violate their role as the protectors of children; thus the social learning process for women prohibits sexually deviant acts to be committed against children. In sum, although society’s patriarchal structure may teach women to use what little power they possess on those who are weaker (i.e. their children), Social Learning Theory emphasizes that the rigid and innate behaviors learned by women does not allow for female sexual offending against children.

Self-Control Theory was formulated by Gottfredson and Hirschi, in which the authors stipulate that, “all crimes share certain common characteristics: They provide easy and immediate gratification of desires; they are exciting, risky, and thrilling; they offer few, if any, long-term benefits; they require little skill, planning, or specialized knowledge; and they often cause pain or discomfort to the victims” (Curran and Renzetti 2001, p.161). According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), these characteristics can be applied across all classifications of deviant acts, which encompass sexually based crimes committed against children. If an individual lacks self-control, or is considered to possess low self-

control, then he/she is more likely to become involved in deviant or criminal behavior (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). In relation to sex offenders, the elements of Self-Control Theory correspond with the previous exclusions of sociological theories of sexual offending. The criminology approaches to sex offender research looks at the individual factors of deviant behavior and are able to apply them to sexually deviant acts.

An individual develops low self-control, according to Gottfredson and Hirschi, through inadequate or ineffective socialization. However, they maintain that such socialization is not a direct cause of low self-control because socialization tends to be complete by the age of eight; therefore, inadequate or ineffective socialization can only occur through poor child rearing. The foundation of Gottfredson and Hirschi's low-self control theory rests on the claim that individuals "develop" low self-control only through the absence of nurturance, discipline, or training, emulating from the family unit (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). In addition to the notion of self control, Gottfredson and Hirschi imply that due to low or complete lack of self control, an offender may project the absence of control onto others. That is, if the offender exhibits little or no self control, he/she may use the control over others to compensate. Through the sexual abuse of children, an offender is able to exert control in the only manner in which they are capable.

However, much like other sociological theories of sexual offending, Self-Control Theory suffers from inherent weaknesses. The primary weakness of

Self-Control Theory is that it is not considered applicable to female offenders. Self-Control Theory is primarily used to explain male criminal behavior, and tests involving the theory have yet to explore sexual offending let alone female sex offending. Therefore, despite the grandiose proclamation that Self-Control Theory is a general theory of crime, its inability to explain sex offenses across gender lines makes the theory ineffective in explaining female sex offending. However, despite its perceived inability to explain female sex offending, it will be tested in connection with the relationship between perpetrator and victim to determine if low levels of self control can be a possible causation for the sex offending accounts published by the media. In addition, Social Learning Theory will be tested in conjunction with social psychological theories to determine if prior sexual abuse of the perpetrator is a significant indicator of future offending.

### **Feminist Theories of Sexually Based Crimes**

Social Psychological and Criminological theories aid in the pursuit to uncover underlying reasons for sex offending, however, as discussed above they tend to focus on male offending and therefore are limited in explaining female perpetrators of sexual deviance. Feminist thought and theoretical frameworks provide significant contributions where previous research and theories tend to fall short. Feminists provide sophistication in thinking about gender relations and assert that Social Psychologists and Criminologists no longer need to rely on surmise or guesswork about women's experiences (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988;

Johnson 2001; Lorber 2001). In addition, feminists stress that other disciplines should begin to appreciate that their foundations and subsequent theories are a product of white, economically privileged men's experiences. Feminist theorists also maintain that general theories of crime and deviance may not be applicable to women due to their gendered structure and that most criminological theories address the class, race, age structure but will generally ignore gender (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988).

Feminist theory's roots lie in the privilege and gendered power differential existent in society's social, professional, and economic structure. In addition, Feminist theories comprise various philosophical and political stances and feminist scholars tend to separate the theories into liberal, cultural, and radical categories. Each category within Feminist theory lends vital assistance to the pursuit of knowledge surrounding the possible causations for female sex offending.

Liberal feminists argue that formal equal treatment of men and women will result in formal and functional equality between the sexes (Eichner 2001). The goals of liberal feminists focus primarily on legal reform and contend that law reform are laws and practices that respond to violence absent the spotlight on the gender of the perpetrator or victim. Liberal feminists argue that female sex offenders pose a unique predicament to Feminist theory in that the patriarchal structure denies equal legal treatment for violent female offenders due to their complete departure from traditional gendered stereotypes

surrounding sexual behavior. For purposes of this analysis, the response of the legal system to female perpetrators of sexual violence will be crucial in testing the notions of liberal feminist thought.

Cultural feminists disagree with liberal feminists by arguing that legal equality will not result in actual equality because social, political, legal, and economic baselines favor men (Ertman 1998; Fineman 1983). Cultural feminists argue that traditional institutions are masculine in nature and no equality can exist for female offenders. Most importantly, cultural feminists stipulate that knowing the masculine nature of social institutions, collaboration and interpersonal relationships are generally embraced by women whereas hierarchy is generally embraced primarily by men. For purposes of this study, the collaborative and interpersonal stipulations made by cultural feminists will be tested in connection to possible female collaboration with another perpetrator rather than acting as the sole sexual offender.

Second-wave feminism, also known as gender reform feminism, fights to equalize the position of women within the ranks of social order and status (Lorber 2001). Within the category of gender reform feminism, radical feminism has brought the oppression, stigmatization, and abuse of women to the forefront. Radical feminist analysis of sexually based actions highlights the notion that “all forms of sexual violence should be viewed within the context of male power and masculinities whereby men use their power as a form of social control by denying women freedom and autonomy” (Denov 2004 pg. 2). The contribution of

the concept of a patriarchal society by radical feminists is imperative to the growth of knowledge and recognition of the abuse of woman and the foundation for understanding the potential rebellion by women.

According to radical feminist perspectives, child sexual abuse perpetrated by men is considered to be a direct result of culturally based socialization processes that leads to male dominance and the promotion the sexual exploitation of women and children (Denov 2004; Herman 1981; Johnson 2001; Lorber 2001; Russell 1984). Feminist theory stipulates that male sexual aggression is condoned and often encouraged by the male-dominated culture, and fosters the sexual abuse of children by men. However, the exclusion of women as sexual perpetrators presents a unique challenge to feminist literature. The barrier to the recognition of female sex offenders developed when traditional feminist perspectives are presented as the only viable explanation for child sexual abuse, and female perpetrators of sexual abuse are consequently considered insignificant.

However, radical feminist thought rectifies this perception of exclusion by emphasizing the power struggle fought by women to counteract the oppression placed on them by society's patriarchal structure (Faller 1987; Finklehor 1984; Johnson 2001; Lorber 2001). Radical Feminist theory explains female sexual abuse of children as the only outlet for women to exercise sexual control over another due to their continued oppression and sexual exploitation of our current patriarchal society (Lorber 2001). Regaining their historically withheld sexual

power may also explain why the majority of female sex offenders commit crimes against male children.

Thus, early Feminist theory was used to explain the under-recognition of female perpetrators of sexually based crimes by emphasizing male sexual aggression and female submission, radical feminism has empowered the ideal of female perpetrators of sex crimes as those women exercising the only sex power they possess. Feminist theory allows for the realization that women can commit sexually deviant crimes, and offers an explanation for that behavior whereas previous sociological and criminological theories fall short in this area. In addition, Feminist theory demonstrates a clear connection to media portrayals of female offenders and the reinforcement of socially held notions regarding appropriate sexual behavior of men and women.

In sum, Feminist theory has provided the opportunity for a renewed interest in female sex offending. With the apparent shift from an overpowering patriarchal paradigm, women can now be portrayed as perpetrators of criminal acts rather than simply victims of such acts. The shift caused by feminist theories is the foundation for this analysis and its examination into media coverage of female sex offending.

## CHAPTER 4

### **SOCIAL CONTEXT AND PATRIARCHY**

The assessment of current societal beliefs towards sex offenders and their victims, and the socially accepted and enforced notions of patriarchy and traditional sex scripts, will help uncover the need for further research concerning the gender of sexual perpetrators. In addition, this chapter will elucidate the necessary continuation of scrutiny to be placed on any disparities that exist between public beliefs and perceptions and the reality surrounding sexual offenders.

Our traditional sex scripts, especially those focused on the sexuality of women, carry the perception that women are to be harmless, passive, and innocent (Allgeier and McCormick 1983, Daly and Chesney-Lind 1998, Denov 2004, Finkelhor and Russell 1984, Lorber 2001). Thus, it is these sex scripts that have influenced broader societal beliefs concerning female sexuality and female offending against children and have permeated criminal codes of conduct and legal responses to cases involving female sex offending. "Criminal law is said to have a distinctly social basis; it both shapes and is shaped by the society in which it operates" (Comack and Brickley, 1991, p.54). It follows that the failure of law to recognize women as potential sexual offenders may ultimately contribute to

the gendered nature of policy decisions and their inability to effectively handle female perpetrators.

Where female violence does occur, Pearson (1997) argues that, “we seek a pre-emptive cause for female aggression that preserves an emphasis on female victimization” (p. 57). As a society, we turn away from the notion that the most common victims of female violence are their own children. Instead, society seems content to focus on childhood trauma (particularly sexual abuse), abusive partners, hormonal imbalance, and male influence to explain the causes of physical aggression in females and to lessen their culpability to allay one’s sense of profound unease (Denfeld 1997; Denov 2003). It is important to note that no such explanations for the phenomenon of male violence are perceived as such “enigmas” in criminological, sociological, psychological, or feminist literature because it does not seem to disrupt society’s sense of the social order to the same degree that female offending does. An examination into society’s patriarchal structure is necessary to understand the foundation for current sex scripts and norms that may be enforced by varied media outlets.

### **Patriarchy**

The term patriarchy holds inherent social meaning and the attempt to confine one general meaning or definition often leads to discourse and wrongful interpretation. The narrow definition of patriarchy refers to “the system, historically derived from Greek and Roman Law, in which the male head of the

household has absolute legal and economic power over his dependent female family members” (Lerner 1986, vii). It is this relationship of women to history which explains the nature of female subordination and the conditions for their opposition to it. This narrow definition does not embrace the modern social structure, thus it is necessary to observe a more encompassing definition of society’s current state.

According to Lerner (1986), a more extensive definition of patriarchy refers to the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in general society. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influences, and resources, but rather that women will never achieve the power level that men innately contain and inherit.

With a definitional foundation obtained, it is necessary to understand the history and core rationales for society’s patriarchal structure. “More than anything else, patriarchy is based on control as a core principle around which entire societies are organized. What drives patriarchy as a system--what fuels competition, aggression, and oppression--is a dynamic relationship between control and fear” (Johnson 1997, p.26). That is, that control (specifically male control) becomes the standard against which all norms, ideologies, social and sexual scripts, and acceptable behaviors are measured.

*History of patriarchy.* Throughout history, society's patriarchal structure has changed in many ways, and eluded change in others. As a society develops innovative forms of domination and control, the various systems of oppression have been altered to accommodate them. Throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, gender differences were enforced through philosophical and political doctrine rooted in religion. Under religious rule, women were to obey men because God willed it (Libby 1965). Despite the church's long-standing stronghold over oppression and dominance, the rapid rise of possible social and economic gain began to flourish. "Under European feudalism, for example, class domination depended on military force, control over land, and traditional obligations between nobles and peasants. With industrial capitalism, however, class domination is based primarily on control over complex organizations such as corporations, government, and the mass media" (Johnson 1997, p.41).

In pre-industrial patriarchies the primary modes of control were land acquisition and control over women's reproductive possibilities (Lerner 1986). In such societies, male control and dominance was based principally on the male's authority as head-of-the-house and his property ownership. It wasn't until industrial capitalism emerged that one can see a shift in the nature of control by a patriarchal society.

As the shift from an agricultural-based to an urban-based existence was made, a dramatic change emerged in most patriarchal societies. The arrival of wage labor enabled the devaluation of land as a source of wealth and the value

of children and their labor. As a direct result, men could no longer rely on the family as a basis of power and control because the essence of family no longer held the central position for economic production (Johnson 1997, Lerner 1986). Men were encouraged to break away from familial confines and gain wealth through the exploding market economy while women's work in the home was devalued and marginalized because it did not involve the exchange of monetary wages and could not be used to purchase goods and services like the men's wages could.

The control over money was not the only battle changing the face of patriarchy under industrial capitalism. The possession of power over the human intellect became the next focus of patriarchal oppression and began the rapid reduction of the family's influence and aided the shift toward social power over the growing institutions of state, science, industry, and schools (Lerner 1986). Sociologists and physical scientists alike believed that the world was governed by laws in which men were able to implement methods of control of them. According to Libby (1965), "man's place in the physical universe is to be its master, to be its king, and through the power that he alone possesses-- the Principle of Intelligence" (p.14-15). In essence, this shift to control the human intellect expanded dramatically the cultural importance attached to the notion of control as an organizing principle of social life on every level, from self to society to the entire natural world.

In sum, through the transformations from European feudalism to industrial capitalism one constant remained: the core values of control and domination. These values were embodied in the male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered nature of patriarchal society (Johnson 1997), and are necessary to explore in order to truly understand the nature and implications of patriarchy to modern society and influences on the mass media.

*Core rationales of patriarchy.* With an understanding of the history surrounding patriarchy and its foundation and transformations, it becomes essential to ascertain the core rationales surrounding the necessity for power and dominance of men. "A society is patriarchal to the degree that it is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered" (Johnson 1997, p.5). These three underlying rationales of patriarchy can be seen in the religious justifications for gender differences from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, to class disparities in European feudalism, to control over economic power and obsession with monetary exchange in industrial capitalism, to finally the control over human intellect and the natural world (Lerner 1986).

The first core rationale of patriarchy is that society must be male-dominated. That is, positions of authority--political, economic, legal, religious leaders, members of legislature, at all levels of government, high-ranking members of the military, and even those identified as head-of-the-house--all tend to be male. In the rare occasion that a woman becomes integrated in one of the aforementioned positions, she is immediately labeled as the exception to the rule

and her performance is often measured against that of a man's. Male dominance also promotes the general notion that men are superior to women in all aspects of social life. According to Johnson (1997), "in part, this occurs because we don't distinguish between the superiority of positions in a hierarchy and the kinds of people who usually occupy them. This means that if superior positions are occupied by men, it's a short leap to the idea that men must be superior. In this sense, every man's standing in relation to women is enhanced by the male monopoly over authority in patriarchal societies" (p.5).

Male-identified is the notion that core cultural ideas and norms are associated with men and masculinity. That is, what is considered desirable, preferable, or normal by society are highlighted as masculine traits and behaviors (Johnson 1997). The most notable example of this emphasis is the still current and widespread use of male pronouns and nouns to represent people in general. "When we routinely refer to human beings as 'man,' we construct a symbolic world in which men are in the foreground and women in the background, marginalized as outsiders and exceptions to the rule" (Johnson 1997, p.6). Another example of male identification is the cultural description of masculinity and male social norms that reflects the desirable core values of society in general. Such qualities include control, efficiency, strength, autonomy, and forcefulness and become the basis for identifying society and men as "successful." In contrast, when most women look at these desirable values, they see themselves (as do men and society) as non-conforming and therefore must

succeed in a few narrow areas of life such as “nurturing” occupations and personal relationships.

The final core rationale to societal patriarchy is male-centrality. For a patriarchal society to be male-centered the focus of attention is paid to men; specifically, that primary consideration is given to men in what they do or say. If you look for examples of courage, spiritual transformation, heroism, endurance, or any other significant meanings to human life, the terms used to define such acts are associated with men and masculinity. “Male experience is what patriarchal culture offers to represent human experience and the enduring themes of life” (Johnson 1997, p.9). Although many women are living lives of endurance, transformation, courage, and other significant meanings, it is through the lens of masculinity that their roles in society are judged. Overall, male focus is everywhere in society, and although women tend to emerge from oppression, the systemic dismissal of their accomplishments or failure to adhere to expected behavior is deeply rooted.

Society, through male-dominance, male-identification, and male-centrality, has established prescribed modes of behavior for men and women. These scripts or norms of behavior dictate everyday life and translate what is appropriate sexual behavior. These sex scripts are instilled into young boys and girls that very rarely transform when children reach adulthood. As society’s patriarchal structure remains stable, so do the intrinsic sex scripts held by the members of that society. In sum, the subordination of women has come to be

seen as “natural” and it is with this cloak that has established patriarchy firmly as an actuality and as an ideology.

### **Gender Roles and Sex Scripts**

Exploring the foundations and current status of society’s patriarchal status is necessary in order to discover why men and women are expected to act within prescribed confines, especially when sexual behavior is the focus. Due to society’s patriarchal structure, men and women are expected to hold different levels of responsibility and culpability when it comes to gender-specific behavior and sexual contact. Men are characterized as the initiators of sexual contact, sexually aggressive, sexually experienced, the decision maker in the kind of sexual positions and length of sexual contact, and lacking in any sexual dysfunction; in contrast, women are expected to be sexually inexperienced, sexually passive, and content with pleasing her male partner (Allgeier and McCormick 1983, Byers 1996, Denov 2003; Johnson 1997, Lorber 2001, Lawson 1991, Radlove 1983). In addition, the feminine nature of patriarchal cultural ideology is rigid: Women are the gentler and nurturing sex that includes the importance of motherhood and its inherent responsibilities.

Gender roles are difficult to define due to their deeply entrenched nature into society’s approved norms and mores. Therefore, when it comes to sexual behavior, it is important to understand the importance of gender roles. Gender roles are the “socially prescribed rules for being masculine or feminine-- having

established and continue to reinforce boundaries or limits for expected sexual conduct” (Allgeier and McCormick 1983). That is, they are the expectations about appropriate sexual behavior of men versus women and are a product of a patriarchal structure and gender role socialization.

Three major theoretical frameworks can be utilized to explain the acquisition of gender roles and of psychosexual development. The first framework to emerge is Freudian Theory. According to Freud (1965), a child’s relationship with his or her same gender parent has an enormous impact on the child’s developing personality. “Identification” is the term used for the unique learning process through which the child molds his or her own ego (identity) after the parent. Freud (1965) asserts that through identification, children model their same-gender parental figures and acquire the behaviors expected of them as adults-- including gender specific sexual behaviors. In sum, identification is thought of as the means by which a child obtains total, complex patterns of behavior, attitudes, standard of conduct concerning gender-role sexual behavior.

The second major theoretical framework is the Social Learning Theory. Social Learning theorists argue that the concept of identification is not necessary. Imitation of same-gender individuals and reinforcement (rewards and punishments) for gender-appropriate behaviors are sufficient to explain the acquisition of gender-role identity and sexual behaviors (Akers 1998; Bandura 1976; Ormrod 1999). As a result of the rewards and punishments instituted through social learning, gender-appropriate behaviors take on greater value for

the child and are exhibited with either greater or lesser frequency. In addition, Social Learning theorists posit that children are influenced more by society due to a “continued” reinforcement of appropriate gender and sexual behavior due to its repetitive nature. In essence, no matter what their individual same-gender parent demonstrates, society emanates the notion that women are not to be assertive (especially in sexual encounters with men) and that success in life is a rich, handsome husband that can “take care of her.” For men, society instructs them to be assertive in all aspects of life (especially concerning sexual behavior) and that success in life is a good job and a pretty wife who stays at home to maintain the children and household (Parsons 1983). In conclusion, social theorists emphasize that an individual’s sexual scripts and gender-role identity is a product of their experiences with rewards or punishments emitted by society and one’s role models.

The final major theory concerning sex scripts and gender roles is Social Cognitive Theory. Social Cognitive theorists criticize the over-emphasis on rewards and punishments and assert that children play an active role in their own socialization. According to this theory, children seek out information about gender roles and then monitor their own behavior so that it is consistent with the gender-role norms. Explicitly, that “children are motivated to learn gender roles because they want to master the demands of their own culture; that is, children want to become ‘good’ members of society” (Parsons 1983, p.33). For social cognitive theorists, rewards, punishments, and role models are assumed to be

important precisely because they help the child distinguish between appropriate or “good” behavior and inappropriate or “bad” behavior; however, these rewards and punishments can not be the sole explanation for gender-role socialization and identification of sex scripts (Parsons 1978, Piaget 1948).

Mass media plays a crucial role in the reinforcement and possible development of sex scripts and gender roles (McGuicki and Brown 2001; Meyers (1994; Surett 1998). The effects of mass media on crime, more specifically on women, will be examined in depth in the following chapter, however it is important to note at this point that the influences mass media has on public perceptions in relation to sex scripts and gender roles is tangible. One of the most pervasive forms of social control in society is the mass media, and sex scripts and gender roles represent some of the most compelling descriptions the media can present. Gender roles and sex scripts are engrained into society’s structure, and the media plays an invaluable role in the reinforcement of socially acceptable sexual behavior of men and women.

In sum, through the use of three major theories surrounding gender-role socialization and development of sex scripts one can determine that three primary factors are associated with the attainment of gender roles and sexual behaviors: (1) the behaviors of the individuals around the child; (2) the child’s interpretation of the behaviors of these individuals; and, (3) the reactions of these individuals and society to the child’s behavior. Although the named theories provide useful insight into the development of gender roles and sexual scripts, it

is clear that none paints a complete picture. Gender-specific roles, sex scripts, and the role of patriarchy are intertwined and are likely to directly influence criminal justice policy and what is reported in the mass media.

### **Media Sensationalization of Sex Offenders**

“Sex offending, especially against children, has acquired a significant public profile in recent years, in part through graphic media coverage of police investigations, conviction of perpetrators and release of the offenders” (McGuicki and Brown, 2001, p.47). Despite the recent surge in sex offender coverage by media outlets, popular media coverage of sexually based crimes against children is not a novel phenomenon.

In October 1989, 11-year-old Jacob Wetterling was abducted not far from his home in St. Joseph, Minnesota, as he and his brother rode their bikes home from the local video store. Law enforcement officers never found Jacob, or his abductor, but they did discover that a number of halfway houses in their county were boarding sex offenders from another county (Scholle 2000). The tragic loss of Jacob Wetterling shocked St. Joseph, Minnesota and touched millions others around the nation through extensive media coverage and publication. Jacob’s disappearance and the media’s coverage of the suspected link to a boarded sex offender nearby started the casual link between media portrayal of sex offenders and public policy.

As a part of the federal crime bill enacted by Congress in August 1994, the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act required released sex offenders to register with local law enforcement. Due in large part to public outcry at the lack of information and monitoring of sex offenders discovered by the mass media, policy outcomes were formulated to advance existing procedures surrounding tracking of sex offenders throughout the country.

In July 1994, 7-year-old Megan Kanka went to her neighbor's home to see their new puppy, but never returned home. On her way over to her neighbor's house Megan was abducted, raped, murdered, and dumped in a nearby park by twice-convicted sex offender Jesse Timmendequas who lived in a house across the street from Megan in Hamilton Township, New Jersey. Timmendequas was released earlier from Avenel, New Jersey prison after serving six years of a seven-and-a-half year term for compulsive, repetitive sex offenses. The mass media's coverage resulted in public outcry for justice on behalf of Megan, and once again concerns over existing public policy were brought to the forefront.

What is commonly known as "Megan's Law" is actually an expansion on the 1994 Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act. However, this statute provides a separate and equally important component to the fight against sexually based crimes and offenders. Megan's Law expands the Jacob Wetterling Act by "eliminating a general requirement that information collected under state registration programs

be treated as private data” (Department of Justice, 1997, p.1). This addition requires that states disclose information about registered sex offenders for public safety purposes. Megan’s provision allows for state legislators to have considerable discretion in determining the extent and manner of notification when warning the public about sex offenders living within the community (Matson and Lieb 1997). Megan’s Law also clarifies the Jacob Wetterling Act by “substituting mandatory language for previously permissive language concerning the release of relevant information that is necessary to protect the public concerning registered offenders” (Department of Justice, 1997, p.1).

These two prominent cases began the media’s obsession with adult sex offending against children in the United States. More specifically, female sex offenders became an increasingly popular subject with the media after the Mary Kay Letourneau case in which an adult female teacher had a sexual relationship (and 2 children) with her 12 year-old student. Media publications focused on the notion of women as perpetrators of sexual violence due to their inability to follow societal beliefs concerning appropriate sexual roles and patriarchal structure. Subsequently, popular media became the conduit in which adult sex offending came to the forefront of public attention and focus.

## CHAPTER 5

### MASS MEDIA AND WOMEN

In the previous chapters, the foundation has been set concerning female sex offenders and the current theories, research, and nature surrounding the criminal class. The effects of mass media on crime, more specifically on women, will be examined in order to demonstrate the influences the mass media have on public perceptions. One of the most pervasive forms of social control in society is the mass media, and crime information represents some of the most potent imagery the media can present. The mass media, in their various forms, represents a vital component of the examination of general crime and women offenders. Until recently, the mass media have been an underrepresented source of social science research (Carll 2003; Cole and Daniel 2005; Dietz 1998; Surette 1998).

#### **Media and Crime**

“People use the knowledge they obtain from the media to construct a picture of the world, an image of reality on which they base their actions” (Surett 1998 p.1). One major school of thought identifies the interaction between members of society and the role mass media plays on the construction of reality-- namely, social constructionism. According to social constructionism, people create reality-- the world they believe exists-- based on their individual

knowledge and knowledge gained from social interactions with others.

Applying social constructionism, one can clearly see that the media plays an important role in this process. "Mass media acts as an agent of socialization, in which, individuals learn cultural rules from the stories told in that culture.

Whereas, stories used to be told person-to-person within communities, but now the media is telling the stories; thus, individuals learn rules from the media" (Cole and Daniel 2005 p.116). Whether film, television, or print media, the mass media does not serve the function of representing the "real world" so much as it reveals, reinforces, and shapes the cultural beliefs, values, and myths held by members of society.

According to Surette (1998), the literature examining the media's role on the socialization of society presents five competing hypotheses as to the media's relationship with commonly held perceptions of crime:

1. Substitution- persons lacking alternative sources of knowledge substitute media information.
2. Resonance- persons with victim experience or knowledge focus on media information, which compounds preexisting perceptions.
3. Vulnerability- persons less able to prevent victimization are more influenced by media information and perceptions.
4. Affinity- persons who demographically resemble media victims are more influenced by media information.
5. Ceiling effects- persons who already have perceptions of crime, criminals, and victims are beyond media influence (p.119).

Through the hypotheses above, Surett (1998) is able to establish the process of criminalization in which the dynamics of the media establish or reinforce perceptions concerning crime and criminals held by society. In addition, Surette (1998) asserts that it is this dynamic relationship between media and society that criminalizes behavior much more than the inner workings of the criminal justice system (p.2).

The mass media's representations in the "information age" have become the most significant communication by which society members come to know the world outside their immediate experience. The problem, however, is that full or complete interpretations of reality do not present themselves in mass media outlets. In short, "reality" itself is not to be found in the information provided by the media concerning crime and justice.

Four major criticisms of crime news have been described by Surette (1998). First, the majority of crime coverage pertains to violent or sensational crimes and is disproportional to their appearance in official data. Second, implicit explanations are primarily from criminal justice system personnel and are nearly always simplistic and individualistic. Thirdly, the overemphasis on violent crimes and failure to adequately address personal risk and prevention techniques often leads society towards exaggerated fears of victimization. Finally, coverage tends to increase the perception of crime at the expense of escalating gender divisions of fear of crime.

In addition to creating or reinforcing perceptions, sometimes the media veers away from following social trends to actually creating them. With their ability to depict, define, and discount, the media serves as a powerful agent of gender and sexual socialization. Of the many themes to be found in the media, crime and justice is said to be the most revealing about society because it necessarily encompasses notions of good and evil, morality, social achievement, and social structure (Surette 1998). Mass media use can be associated with holding more stereotypical views about who the sexes are and what they typically do.

### **Women and Media**

“Content analysis studies have consistently indicated that the media present a distorted view of reality especially in regard to gender roles” (Oppliger, 2006, p. 200). Thus, the media not only reflects what is occurring in society but also reinforces stereotypes of how women are viewed, both as victims and perpetrators of violence. According to Meyers (1994), the media’s portrayal of women reflects cultural myths and patriarchal assumptions about the proper role and behavior of women. The media typically reports on women of lower status (in subordinate positions to men) or in some statistically uncommon negative role like mistress or prostitute, which are no less common in real life.

Pushed into subordinate roles of sex objects, wives, mothers, or crime victims, women have little opportunity to be portrayed as self-determining

individuals. When the mass media reports about any women, let alone a woman who has been victimized, the media outlet has an enormous burden of assumptions, habits, and clichés to carry the report (Cole and Daniel 2005). Not only are conventional images of women limited to submissive or subordinate roles, but our very language promotes those images. According to Surette (2005), when females are the subject in the news, the term most utilized is “victim.” It is not surprising therefore, that the mass media and society tend to combine the bias in our language and traditional images of women into a shared narrative about sexually based crimes.

In addition, Hooks (2000) argued that the fact that women may not commit violent acts as often as do men does not negate the reality of female violence. That is, what is clear is that aggression in females exists and it takes on a multitude of forms and varies in motivation, and the perpetrators themselves do not fit a neat profile. According to Boyle (2005), “violence and aggression are intrinsic to our conceptualization of masculinity. Femininity, however, is associated with nurturing and caring for others, with emotion, passivity and vulnerability. All of this is thrown into crisis when a woman chooses to hurt, attack or even kill another human being (or allows someone else to do so). Violent women are thus guilty both of breaking the criminal law and violating gender norms” (p. 95). In sum, when a woman is exposed as violating the sexual norms prescribed by patriarchal society the mass media inundates the general public with information concerning the violation.

The continuing disparity between the media's constructed realities of crime and justice and society's perception of crime and justice results in the public receiving an unnecessarily distorted image of women within mass media. Through patriarchal structure and reinforcement, female perpetrators are viewed quite differently than their male counterparts (Gitlin 1994). The consistent message is that crime is caused by predatory men who are inherently different from the rest of us. Women are not considered or portrayed as ruthless, greedy, violent, or sexually deviant. It is with this under-representation and under-recognition that leads to public discourse when female sex offenders are discovered and removed from their "cloak of invisibility."

With respect to female sex offending, these types of statistically rare and gruesome crimes are merged in the public mind with the crimes of fiction; and thus a distorted view of crime and justice is perpetuated by the agents of mass media. "The mass media's portrayals of these sex crimes generally reflect journalism's predominately male and white constituency, especially in relation to crime coverage; the still prevalent stereotypes associated with both rape and sex; the absence of any recognition or reference to patriarchy in society; and the tendency of the press to prefer individual to societal or cultural explanations of crime" (Barak 1995 p.26-27). These crimes are more likely to be selected for presentation by the mass media because they are considered novel and dramatic. Ordinary crimes, or crimes committed by those who society deems appropriate or acceptable to commit crimes, are perceived to be less influential by media

outlets, therefore, they do not present the opportunity to enhance or create perceptions concerning sexually based crimes (Chermak 1995; Surett 1995).

In conclusion, the news media does not cover systemically all forms and expressions of crime and victimization. It emphasizes some crimes and ignores others, sympathizes with some victims while shaming others, and the same time performs as an emphasize or creator of public perception. It is the influence of media, and its reflection of female crime, that aids this examination into female sexual offending. As previously stated, the perception of women as violating social norms and sex scripts when they commit sexually based crimes against children is grossly reinforced by mass media outlets. Too often, society is unaware of female sex offenders, or unwilling to accept such a vulgar notion, and it is with the media's presentation of female offenders that perceptions concerning the nature and frequency of female sex offending take shape.

## CHAPTER 6

### METHODOLOGY

The examination of social context, previous research, and social science theories clearly demonstrates the lack of attention towards sexually based crimes committed by women. As uncovered by feminist theories, current sex roles and societal stereotypes place women as sexually submissive and portrayed as the victims of sexually based crimes, not the offenders. The following exploratory study focuses on the media's portrayal of sex crimes committed by women against children and how these portrayals compare to their male counterparts. Measures of portrayal were developed based on what social science theory and research has identified as relevant attributes related to sex crimes perpetrated against children with the purpose of exploring whether the media tends to focus on attributes pertinent to causation (Table 1) or to sex role stereotypes related to violations of socially prescribed sex norms and values.

**Table 1: Theoretical Measures of Sex Offending**

<b>Disciple</b>	<b>Theory</b>	<b>Variables Tested</b>
Social Psychological	Strain	Socioeconomic Status Race Sexual Orientation Marital Status Substance Abuse History Mental Health History
	Cycle of Abuse	Prior Sexual Abuse
Criminology	Social Learning	Prior Sexual Abuse
	Self-Control	Relationship Between Offender and Victim
Feminist	Liberal	Criminal Charge Type of Sentence
	Cultural	Collusion With Another Perpetrator
	Radical	Level of Violence Portrayal of Perpetrator Overall Tone

### **Research Questions**

A review of the social science research shows that there are differences between official data and self-report studies on the amount of female sex offending. Although it is clear that men commit more sexually violent crimes against children than women, the research shows that women do indeed commit sex crimes against children. In addition, a social context structured by patriarchy tends to provide for greater tolerance for male sexual aggression than it does for female sex offenders. The literature on the portrayal of women in the mass media strongly suggests that the media reflects and reinforces cultural norms related to gendered behavior and sex role stereotypes. Based on this literature

the following research questions about the media's portrayal of female sex offenders emerge:

1. Do females who commit sex offenses against children receive more media coverage than their male counterparts when comparing to official reported data?
2. Do female sex offenders receive distinct media coverage based on the attributes of the sexual event portrayed by the mass media?
3. When examining the portrayal of the offender in the media publication, will cases involving female sex offenders reflect gendered stereotypes or theoretical measures of causation?

### **Quantitative Content Analysis**

Content analysis involves drawing representative samples of content and then utilizing the collected data to describe typical patterns or characteristics, or to identify important relationships among the content qualities explored (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005). Although there is no universal definition for content analysis, social science scholars tend to believe that it is the "systematic and replicable examination of symbols and communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption" (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005, p.25).

The use of content analysis for media messages gained momentum when historians traced early work by political scientists concerned with effects of propaganda and other persuasive messages (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod 2002). Content analysis is vital to the study of female sex offending due to the realization that “many of the symbols that show up in media messages at particular points in time (e.g., allusions to freedom, nationalism, or solidarity during a war effort) are consequences of the dominant culture; communication messages that contain particular images, ideas, or themes reflect the important--and clearly antecedent-- values of the culture or its leaders” (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005, p.11). As demonstrated in the earlier discussions, the current patriarchal societal context seems to be driving the public perceptions and misperceptions concerning female sexual offending.

The strengths associated with utilizing content analysis occur because it is a non-obtrusive, non-reactive measurement technique (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005). That is, the messages are separate from communicators and receivers creating an environment in which researchers can gain access to information through the use of theoretical frameworks without compromising the communicators. Secondly, because content often has an existence beyond its production and consumption, studies are possible using archived materials that explore historical communications, audiences, and events. Thirdly, quantification or measurement by coding permits information or data to be measured that would be otherwise logistically impossible for qualitative

analysis. Finally, the method is virtually unlimited in its application to a variety of disciplines due to the centrality of communication in human affairs (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005).

Despite the inherent strengths of using quantitative content analysis, the primary concern regarding the validity and reliability of content analysis rises from critics who argue that the method puts too much emphasis on comparative frequency of different symbols' appearance (Holsti 1969). Notwithstanding such validity and reliability concerns, such issues can be addressed with particular care when assigning a numerical value that is not merely based on counting. For example, the gender of the perpetrator will be assigned a numerical value of 1 or 2, the level of violence will be assigned a 1, 2, or 3 comparatively for Level I, II, and III offenders, and the overall tone of the publication will be assigned a numerical value based on target words used by the media source. In conclusion, the strengths associated with the use of quantitative content analysis allows a more in-depth examination of media coverage on female sex offending that has not been utilized by social science research.

*Operationalization of Sex Offending.* Sex offending is defined as a crime, such as rape, molestation, or sexual abuse, involving illegal or coerced sexual activity. For the purpose of this study, only crimes committed against children will be examined within the confines of sex offending.

*Sampling.* A convenience sample will be employed due to the under-researched nature of female sex offending. Convenience samples involve

utilizing content due to its availability and avoid reliability and validity concerns because the content was collected in a way not related to the study's purpose.

Although this examination requires investigation into popular media's publications on adult sex offending, the publications were previously published and not created specifically for this analysis. In addition, convenience sampling will be used since important relationships have yet to be tested adequately, making a sampling frame difficult to create or replicate (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005).

For this study, mass media outlets such as television, newspaper, and magazine articles will be used to gain a convenient sampling of exposure and documentation of female sex offending since 1994. Sex offending did not become wide-spread in news reports or within the criminal justice system until the creation of the Jacob Wetterling Act in 1994 and passage of Megan's Law in 1996. Since 1994 coverage of sexually based crimes has increased, as well as punishments and sanctions given to perpetrators by the justice system.

Due to the sheer number of media outlets over an extended period of time, the television shows will be limited to network shows that contain the most exposure to an extended population such as national news broadcasts consisting of CNN, Fox News, 60 minutes, Dateline, and 20/20. The abundance of local newspapers and magazines throughout the country pose a large obstacle in the location and codification of female sex offending reports, therefore only large national and regional newspapers and magazines with the highest distribution

numbers will be utilized for this exploratory study to ensure the most access by the general public. The newspapers and magazines include *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Times*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Seattle Times*, *Boston Globe*, *The Oregonian*, *Time Magazine*, and *Newsweek Magazine*.

*Research Sample.* The units of analysis are the events of sexual abuse committed by an adult against a child and the subsequent media coverage since 1994. The total number of media outlet coverage for each sexual event are collected and analyzed. Sex offender cases were identified through the following procedure.

First, the electronic archives for each of the media outlets used in this study were accessed. Second, within each archive a general search term of “sex offender” was used to locate articles or transcripts of adult sex offenders. Third, only articles including a crime against a child and a specific offender’s name were included in the study. Once an offender’s name was identified, the name was then used to search through each source’s archives.

A major limitation to this approach was using the term “sex offender” for the initial screen of the archived data. This methodology appears to have excluded most cases in which society is reluctant to call the perpetrator a sex offender such as religious clergy, high school coaches, and other members of society who are in trusted positions and not generally associated as deviant or criminal. Therefore, the following analyses are limited by this methodological

parameter. As will be discussed below, in spite of this limitation, over 1,800 articles were identified using this method.

In addition, only sensational cases of adult sex offending against minor children will be included in this exploratory study. A case is deemed “sensational” if the media exposure is contained within a national newspaper or magazine, or if the media exposure of a local sex offense is also exposed in another regional or national outlet.

*Level of Measurement.* After the study units have been determined, this study assigns numbers to be associated with each study unit. Nominal measures of analysis are employed in which numbers are assigned to categories of content. By applying nominal values to various types of content presented in media coverage of sexually based crimes, this exploratory study can determine if social science researchers can discern any level of bias that is inherent to communications made by mass media sources towards female perpetrators of sexual violence against children, the level of violence associated with the sexual event, and the overall tone of the publication.

*Research Measures.* A coding instrument was derived based on the attributes identified within the theoretical and social science literature on female sex offenders. The instrument focuses on 6 main areas: victim and offender data, incident-based data, criminal justice system-processing data, criminal justice system-disposition data, clinical concern data, and social context data. The

following are the categories for each coding scheme and the rationale for examining each of the variables.

*Offender and Victim Data.* Victim and offender data consists of specific information regarding the sex, age, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and relationship between offender and victim. The sex of the perpetrator is coded as male or female. The race of both the offender and victim are classified as either Caucasian, African American, Latino, Asian or Pacific Islander, or Native American. The socioeconomic status of the offender and victim is coded as lower income, middle income, and higher income. The sexual orientation of both the offender and victim encompasses straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered.

The relationship between the offender and victim is coded according to the relationship of the offender to the victim. Classification categories include father, mother, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, grandfather, grandmother, stepfather, stepmother, stepbrother, stepsister, teacher, coach, acquaintance of a religious nature, acquaintance as a neighbor, acquaintance through the community, and stranger. The marital status of the offender includes single, married, divorced, separated, and widower/widowed.

The variables socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, race, and marital status are analyzed to determine if media portrayal of sex offenders reflect theoretical concepts or attributes of Strain Theory. The relationship between the

offender and victim is explored to determine if Criminology's Self Control Theory is reflected in the mass media's portrayal of adult sex offenders.

*Incident-Based Data.* The level of violence associated with the crime and collusion with another perpetrator. To quantify the level of violence associated with the crime, this analysis assigns the level of violence present in accordance with Federal Guidelines established for Level I, II, and III sex offenders. Level I sex offenders are usually first-time offenders that commit crimes that the state considers to be non-violent; offenses such as possession of child pornography, flashing, statutory rape, voyeurism, peeping, and other non-violent offenses are grouped into this classification. Level I sex offenders are also considered to pose a low-risk of re-offending, and most knowledgeable persons believe that these people should not be considered a threat to the society at large (Matson and Lieb 1996a, 1996b; Schram and Milloy 1995). Cases coded as Level I sex offenders in this exploratory study were non-violent offenders who committed the crimes of lewd conduct with a child and statutory rape.

Level II sex offenders are usually characterized as posing an intermediate risk to society because they possess a moderate risk to re-offend. Level II sex offenders usually commit sex crimes that may include, but are not limited to, child molestation, rape, indecency with a child, incest, and assault with the attempt to commit rape (Matson and Lieb 1996a, 1996b; Schram and Milloy 1995). Level II sex offenders usually have a prior criminal history that may include both non-violent and violent sexual offenses. Occasionally, level II sex

offenders can also be first-time offenders like Level I offenders, however such cases are rare (Schram and Milloy 1995). For purposes of this analysis, cases coded as Level II sex offenders committed the crimes of rape and aggravated assault in conjunction with the rape of a child.

Finally, Level III sex offenders are the most dangerous individuals and are always classified as high-risk both for their tendency to re-offend and the nature of their crime(s). Level III sex offenders usually have multiple convictions, many being sexually based offenses, and usually commit violent and heinous crimes including, but not limited to, aggravated rape, torture, kidnapping, and murder (Schram and Milloy 1995). This classification of sex offenders includes the individuals whom the community and law enforcement officials fear most. They prey on society and generally have little or no regard for conventional morality. Cases coded as Level III sex offenders included individuals who tortured or murdered their victim.

Collusion with another perpetrator includes information on the accused being examined by the media, as well as the gender of the additional perpetrator. Information on the location and time of the sexual event was collected to ascertain if there is any media bias concerning the victim of the crime.

Information on the level of violence associated with the crime is analyzed in conjunction with the sex of the perpetrator to establish if there is any media bias on reporting sexual abuse against minor children. The information collected on collusion with another perpetrator is analyzed against Feminist thought that

women may commit sex crimes in conjunction with male perpetrators due to the patriarchal structure of society that prescribes them to be sexually submissive and passive.

*System-Processing Data.* System-processing data includes the criminal charge assigned to the offender for each sexual event. The criminal charge includes possession of child pornography, child endangerment, lewd conduct with a child, statutory rape, rape, kidnapping, torture, and murder. For purposes of this analysis, the most aggravated charge is the only charge coded. The variable concerning the criminal charge of the offender is examined to determine if the gender of the perpetrator has any effect on media publication and portrayal. Feminist theory suggests that because female sex offenders behave contrary to the patriarchal structure of society, a disparity will exist in their disposition through the criminal justice system.

*System-Disposition Data.* This data includes the type of sentence dispensed to the sex offender by the criminal justice system. The type of sentence received will consist of jail, prison, probation, community correctional program, assigned to a treatment facility, or the death penalty. Feminist theoretical concepts and attributes assert that a disparity will exist when the sex of the perpetrator is examined in connection with the type of sentence.

*Clinical Concern Data.* An offender's substance abuse, mental illness, and sexual abuse history was coded. Substance abuse history is coded if the offender has no history of substance abuse, a prior substance abuse problem, a current

substance abuse problem, or whether this information is unknown. Similarly, the offender's mental illness history is coded as no treatment for mental illness, prior treatment for mental illness, and current treatment for mental illness. The prior sexual abuse of an offender is examined to determine if there is any relationship between having been a victim of sexual abuse and becoming the perpetrator of sexual abuse.

Both substance abuse and mental health history are examined in relation to the theoretical concepts associated with Strain Theory as it pertains to sexually based crimes and media's portrayal reflecting theoretical explanations and measures of sex offenders. According to Strain Theory, the pressure associated with the existence of either substance abuse or mental history will place enough strain on the individual that a likely outlet will be the sexual victimization of children. In addition, the existence of prior sexual abuse of the offender is examined within Social Psychological's Cycle of Abuse and Criminology's Social Learning theoretical attributes in conjunction with media's reflection of theoretical explanations of measures of adult sex offenders. Both theories assert that behavior is learned through past experiences and individuals use those past experiences to build their foundation for norms and values. It has been shown in the research literature that the existence of prior victimization for a sex offender can help establish a pattern from past victimization to future perpetration.

*Social Context Data.* These data will consist of the offender and victim portrayal in the media source, as well as the overall "tone" of the article.

Offender portrayal will focus on target evocative words used in the media source such as virtuous, evil, passive, aggressive, dominating, submissive, predatory, controlling, nurturing, mother, father, heinous, emotional, calm, victim, perpetrator, in love, obsessed, in a relationship, isolated, outside, and loner. These target words will be utilized to establish any bias portrayed in trait ascription in the media based on the gender of the offender.

Target words for the victim includes provocative, homosexual, sexually active, older appearance, sexually aggressive, promiscuous (clothing), promiscuous (actions), innocent, wanting, active participant, in love, willing, young, naïve, and mature. The overall tone of the media source will be analyzed using the aforementioned target words for the offender and victim. The media report will be coded as neutral if there is no use of such target words; in these cases, the media outlet simply reports the sexual event and there is no bias towards the offender or victim. Contempt towards the offender is coded if the media source uses several of the negative target words associated with the offender, specifically *aggressive*, *predatory*, *evil*, and *heinous*, and specifically associates the word *innocent* or *victim* with the victim.

Contempt towards the victim is assigned to the media source if the report uses the negative connotations for the victim such as *provocative*, *sexually aggressive*, *promiscuous*, and *sexually active* and an absence of negative connotations for the offender. Any recurring negative mention of the criminal justice system or their failure to protect society from the offender is coded as

contempt for the criminal justice system. A privileged tone is assigned to media reports that focus on the disparities in socioeconomic status of the offender and victim. The mention of the sexual orientation of the offender or victim is coded as a sexual orientation tone of the media source. Finally, a code is assigned as a gendered tone for the media report if the source uses the target words of *nurturing, mother, emotional, in love, and in a relationship* for the offender in conjunction with the target words *wanting, active participant, in love, and willing* for the victim.

This study contains some inherent weakness that will need to be overcome in future research. For instance, the analysis only includes sensational cases worthy of national or cross-regional media coverage. As a consequence, the sample does not include local and “ordinary” cases of child sexual abuse committed by men and women. This study does, however, explore what is portrayed in cases that move beyond local reporting into the regional and national news media. Therefore, it does give insight into the types of cases that tend to get broader attention.

The type of media outlet used to expose the sex offender is not controlled. Print media publications were weighted the same as the visual portrayals. That is, the original visual presentation made by the media outlet was converted into print transcripts, and content analysis was conducted on the transcripts rather than the original visual presentations. It is unknown how portrayals of the cases between these different types of mediums may affect the outcomes.

There was also no control implemented for the number of publications issued for each individual sex offender. Due to the unit of analysis being the individual media publications rather than individual sex offenders, some offenders with high publication counts may skew the results. Although the statistical models were run without the outliers included and the results did not change, future research must control for how specific sensational cases may drive the interpretation of media portrayals of female sex offenders. What may still be learned from these data, however, is how repetitive media releases about individual sex offenders informs what case attributes and messages are worthy of being repeatedly highlighted and distributed to the public.

Inter-rater reliability concerns also arise due to the absence of a secondary coder. This project was initiated as a primary, original, unfunded, data collection project. Therefore, the collection and coding was conducted solely by the author, and no second coder was available to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Finally, in an effort to obtain a convenient sample the sole search term of “sex offender” resulted in the exclusion of cases and their subsequent media exposure. Terms including *molestation*, *rape*, *sexual abuse*, *teacher*, *coach*, and *stranger* were not used in locating sex offenders exposed by the various media outlets. Given that many perpetrators of sex crimes against children are in trusted positions of power, failing to identify other common language used to describe sex offenders in the search terms limited these data to only those that

lead to a label of “sex offender” by the media outlet. It is unknown how this limitation may have affected the results.

## CHAPTER 7

### RESULTS

The data collected for this exploratory examination presents a unique image of sex offending-- more specifically, the mass media's coverage of female sex offenders. Bivariate chi-square statistical analysis is utilized to determine the statistical significance of the relationship between sex offender gender and media reports on child sexual assault. In addition, multivariate logistic regression analysis is used to test whether selected bivariate relationships continue to have statistical significance when examining their effect on the overall tone of the media publication.

Exploration into the mass media's reflection concerning the prevalence of female sex offending and potential distinct media coverage is analyzed in the following section. The total number of media publications based on the sex of the perpetrator is used to determine if female sex offenders receive a disproportionate amount of media exposure when compared to case-report and self-report data.

#### **Media Portrayal of Prevalence**

After examination of the aforementioned media outlets, a total of 76 sex offenders were identified and reported between January 1994 and June 2009. A

total of 1,815 total media publications resulted from the 76 sex offenders covered by the media outlets (Appendix A). The unit of analysis is the media publications. Of the 76 media identified sex offenders, 37 were male and 39 were female; female sex offenders accounted for 51% of the number of sex offenders covered by the designated media outlets. However, when analyzing the study units of media publications, of the 1,815 total media publications, 996 were for male sex offenders and 819 were for female offenders. Female offenders comprised over half of the total number of sex offenders presented by the media but just under half (45%) of the total publications on adult sex offending against minor children.

Sex offender and sexual event attributes were collected and analyzed to determine if distinct media coverage exists for women who commit sexually based crimes against children. The following section contains chi-square analysis on the effect that the sex of the perpetrator has on the exposure of offender and event attributes published by the mass media.

### **Media Reflection of Offender and Sexual Event Attributes**

The level of violence associated with the crime produced significant difference between male and female offenders (Table 2). The data resulted in 73.7% of all female offender publications encompassing a low level of violence (Level I). In contrast, 77.5% of all male offender publications contained high levels of violence associated with the crime (Level III).

**Table 2: Level of Violence Associated with Sexual Event Reported by Media**

Variable	Male Offender % (n)	Female Offender % (n)	Chi Square Results	Cramer's V Results
<b>Level of Violence</b>			$\chi^2= 1007.3;$ $df=2; p<.001$	.745
Level I	2.5 (25)	73.7 (604)		
Level II	20.0 (199)	5.7 (47)		
Level III	77.5 (772)	20.5 (168)		

When examining the socioeconomic status of the sex offender in conjunction with sex of the perpetrator, there are statistically significant differences between male and female socioeconomic status as reported by the popular media (Table 3). The mass media consistently reported the socioeconomic status of female offenders (Lower SES= 21.1% and Middle SES= 63.9%), and generally did not report on male offender's socioeconomic status (Unknown= 78.3%). When the media did report male SES it was most likely to report middle class offenders (15.6%).

**Table 3: Socioeconomic Status of Offender Reported By Media**

Variable	Male Offender % (n)	Female Offender % (n)	Chi Square Results	Cramer's V Results
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>			$\chi^2= 825.3; df=3;$ $p<.001$	.641
Low	2.1 (21)	21.1 (173)		
Middle	15.6 (155)	63.9 (523)		
High	4.0 (40)	0.4 (3)		

Due to the large number of media publications analyzed for this study, chi-square revealed a statistically significant relationship when examining the race of the sex offender in conjunction with the sex of the perpetrator (Table 4). However, after further review of the data using Cramer's V to test the strength of the relationship between race and gender of the perpetrator, the relationship is weak and the significance is primarily driven by sample size. Cramer's V test for strength of chi-square significance desires a statistical outcome approximately .500 or higher to assert statistical significance beyond sample size influence.

Similarly, there was no statistical evidence presented for the relationship between media reporting on the sexual orientation of the offender, in that no single publication was found to contain sexual orientation offender information. The media did not report the sexual orientation of the offender, or was not provided the information by the criminal justice system. Nonetheless, the absence of information on the sexual orientation of male and female sex offenders suggests that a perpetrators sexual orientation was omitted or implied by the case.

**Table 4: Race of Offender Reported by Media**

Variable	Male Offender % (n)	Female Offender % (n)	Chi Square Results	Cramer's V Results
<b>Race</b>			$\chi^2= 65.2;$ $df=3; p<.001$	.189
Caucasian	74.4 (741)	86.9 (712)		
African American	2.1 (21)	0.0 (0)		
Latino	4.5 (45)	1.3 (11)		
Other	1.9 (19)	0.0 (0)		
Unknown	17.1 (170)	11.7 (96)		

There are significant differences between male and female sex offenders when examining the marital status of the perpetrator as published by the media outlets (Table 5). The data indicates that 70.1% of female offenders are reported to be married, whereas the marital status of male perpetrators was reported “unknown” for 66.7% of the media publications.

**Table 5: Marital Status of Offender Reported by Media**

Variable	Male Offender % (n)	Female Offender % (n)	Chi Square Results	Cramer's V Results
<b>Marital Status</b>			$\chi^2= 767.8;$ $df=2; p<.001$	.650
Single	25.8 (257)	10.1 (83)		
Married	7.5 (75)	70.1 (574)		
Other	66.7 (664)	19.8 (162)		

The substance abuse, mental health, and prior sexual abuse history of the offender was analyzed in relation to gender, and no statistically significant

findings could not be ascertained beyond the effects of a large sample size (Table 6). In each instance, the media overwhelmingly omitted or failed to report the substance abuse, mental health, and prior sexual abuse history of male and female offenders.

Both male and female offenders' substance abuse and mental health history was either unknown to the media, or the media failed to expose the information in their publication. Importantly, there were no documented publications in which the prior sexual abuse history of the offender was given. However, from previously discussed literature and empirical studies, we know that a large portion of sexual offenders were once victims of abuse themselves (Denov 2004, Elliot 1993, Faller 1987, Finkelhor 1984, and Johnson 2001). Yet, the media absolutely failed to report whether sex offenders, male or female, had an abuse history.

**Table 6: Substance Abuse and Mental Illness History of Offender Reported by Media**

Variable	Male Offender % (n)	Female Offender % (n)	Chi Square Results	Cramer's V Results
<b>Substance Abuse History</b>			$\chi^2= 344.2;$ $df=3; p<.001$	.435
No History	0.0 (0)	20.5 (168)		
Prior History	17.3 (172)	0.1 (1)		
Current	2.2 (22)	2.7 (22)		
Unknown	80.5 (802)	76.7 (628)		
<b>Mental Illness History</b>			$\chi^2= 368.5;$ $df=2; p<.001$	.451
Prior History	19.5 (194)	0.1 (1)		
Current	0.0 (0)	21.2 (174)		
Unknown	80.5 (802)	78.6 (644)		

The relationship between the offender and the victim was also examined in relation to the gender of the offender (Table 7). These data show statistically significant results between male and female offender and their relationship to their victims. It is reported that 71.1% portrayals of females were in a teaching capacity, whereas, male offenders were reported as being a stranger relationship in 49.4% of all media portrayals.

Prior research on female sex offenders report that women tend to commit crimes against children within their own home, and the victims tend to be very young in age (Adshed 1994; Allen 1991; Denov 2003; Denov 2004). However, the female offenders reported by the media were vastly committing a sexually deviant act outside the home, and to children that are not theirs. Although the media accurately reported on the type of relationship commonly found in male

and female sex offenders to their victims (stranger and known victims, respectively), the findings suggest support for the notion that distinct coverage exists. That is, the media somewhat accurately reflected male offending relationships, but drastically overrepresented female offender relationships as “teacher.” These findings must be interpreted with caution, however, do to the limitations described above concerning the search term “sex offender.” It may be that the term “sex offender” is more commonly used for perpetrators that commit their crimes outside of the home and against children who are not their own – especially for women.

**Table 7: Relationship Between Offender and Victim Reported by Media**

Variable	Male Offender % (n)	Female Offender % (n)	Chi Square Results	Cramer’s V Results
<b>Relationship Between Offender and Victim</b>			$\chi^2= 1200;$ $df=4; p<.001$	.813
Male Relative	6.8 (68)	0.0 (0)		
Teacher	0.0 (0)	71.1 (390)		
Acquaintance	38.8 (386)	27.2 (123)		
Stranger	49.4 (492)	0.0 (0)		
Other	5.0 (5)	1.7 (14)		

\*\* All media publications on Mary Kay Letourneau were removed due to validity concerns

Previous literature evaluation and empirical research has reported that women tend to commit less violent sexual acts, thus resulting in less severe criminal charges. In comparison, male offenders generally have a greater

propensity to commit violent sexual acts against children; therefore, higher rates of more severe charges follow typical assumptions. The criminal charge given to the offender resulted in statistically significant findings for male and female perpetrators of sexual violence against children (Table 8). Media outlets reported female offenders at higher rates for non-rape and rape charges (non-rape= 13.3% and rape= 55.1%), whereas male offenders received high media reporting for sex offenses involving murder (74.2%). These findings are consistent with what one would expect to find when comparing male and female offenders.

This is an important finding due to the fact that most male sex offenders do not murder their victims, thus only extreme male violence towards children is deemed worthy of media attention. In addition, any sexually based crime committed by women acting alone is similarly believed to be newsworthy. In sum, the findings suggest that a clear distinction exists about what is considered worthy of media attention when examining male and female sex offenders. Once again, however, these findings may be driven by the limitations posed by the search term “sex offender.”

**Table 8: Criminal Charge of Offender Reported by Media**

Variable	Male Offender % (n)	Female Offender % (n)	Chi Square Results	Cramer's V Results
<b>Criminal Charge</b>			$\chi^2= 480.1;$ $df=3; p<.001$	.514
Non-Rape	2.2 (22)	13.3 (109)		
Rape	21.6 (215)	55.1 (451)		
Kidnapping and Torture	2.0 (20)	8.4 (69)		
Murder	74.2 (739)	23.2 (190)		

The type of sentence given to the offender by the criminal justice system resulted in significant findings; however, upon further review using Cramer's V for the strength of the relationship the significance can be explained by the large sample size used in this analysis (Table 9). Nearly 37% percent of male offenders and 53.8% of female offenders did not have sentence information reported by the media outlets.

**Table 9: Type of Sentence Received Reported by Media**

Variable	Male Offender % (n)	Female Offender % (n)	Chi Square Results	Cramer's V Results
<b>Type of Sentence</b>			$\chi^2= 362.4;$ $df=5; p<.001$	.447
Jail	5.0 (50)	13.6 (111)		
Prison	33.1 (330)	21.6 (177)		
Probation	0.3 (3)	9.6 (79)		
Death	22.4 (223)	0.0 (0)		
Other	2.6 (26)	1.3 (11)		
Unknown	36.5 (364)	53.8 (441)		

Feminist theory asserts that female sex offenders will often commit sexually deviant acts in collusion with male perpetrator as part of the privilege, power, and difference struggles of a patriarchal society. Collusion with another perpetrator did not result in significant differences in relation to gender of the perpetrator and media reporting (Table 10). Male offenders were reported to have acted alone 85.1% of all sexual events, whereas female offenders acted alone 99.3% of the time.

**Table 10: Collusion with Another Perpetrator Reported by Media**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Male Offender % (n)</b>	<b>Female Offender % (n)</b>	<b>Chi Square Results</b>	<b>Cramer's V Results</b>
<b>Collusion</b>			$\chi^2= 115.5;$ $df=2; p<.001$	.252
Acted Alone	85.1 (848)	99.3 (813)		
Collusion	14.9 (148)	0.7 (6)		

Male and female sex offender attributes are analyzed in conjunction with gender stereotypes of appropriate sexual behavior to determine if the mass media reflects gendered stereotypes or theoretical measures of causation.

### **Media Portrayal and Gendered Stereotypes**

The portrayal of the perpetrator by the media source differed significantly between male and female sex offenders (Table 11). Male sex offenders were portrayed as evil in 24% of the total publication, whereas female offenders were similarly portrayed in negative terms in 4.5% of total media exposure. Twenty two percent of all male offenders were portrayed as predatory, whereas female

offenders were portrayed as predatory in only 2.1% of the total number of publications. Representation as the “perpetrator” of a sexually violent act comprised 46.4% and 11.4% of male and female offenders, respectively. Finally, significant difference was found in the overwhelming depiction of female offenders by the media. In 47.7% of all publications, the female offender was portrayed in a caregiving role to the victim, while there was not one reported publication portraying a male offender in a caregiving role. Female offenders were also more likely to be portrayed as “emotional” (10.9% vs. 2.1%) and “in love” with their victims (10.6% vs. 0.1%). Therefore, men were more likely to be portrayed as evil, predatory strangers while women were more likely to be portrayed as having emotional connection to their victims.

**Table 11: Portrayal of the Perpetrator Reported by Media**

Variable	Male Offender % (n)	Female Offender % (n)	Chi Square Results	Cramer’s V Results
<b>Portrayal of Perpetrator</b>			$\chi^2= 1117.8;$ $df=7; p<.001$	.785
Evil	24.0 (239)	4.5 (37)		
Aggressive	2.6 (26)	11.0 (90)		
Predatory	22.4 (223)	2.1 (17)		
Caregiver	0.0 (0)	47.7 (391)		
Emotional	2.1 (21)	10.9 (89)		
Perpetrator	46.4 (462)	11.4 (93)		
In Love	0.1 (1)	10.6 (87)		
Other	2.4 (24)	1.8 (15)		

Finally, the overall tone of the media publication was examined and resulted in significant difference between male and female offender presentation

to the general public (Table 12). Male sex offender publications possessed contempt for the perpetrator in 55.8% of the total number of media exposures, but female offenders displayed notions of contempt by the media in only 15.8% of total publications. More striking yet is the significance observed when examining the gendered nature of the media publication, whereby female offender publications carried a gendered tone in 77.8% of media publications and there was not a single occurrence of male gendered tone collected or analyzed.

**Table 12: Overall Tone of Media Publication**

Variable	Male Offender % (n)	Female Offender % (n)	Chi Square Results	Cramer's V Results
<b>Overall Tone</b>			$\chi^2= 1204.0;$ $df=4; p<.001$	.814
Neutral	19.6 (195)	3.5 (29)		
Contempt Towards Perpetrator	55.8 (556)	15.8 (129)		
Contempt Towards CJ System	22.5 (224)	2.2 (18)		
Gendered	0.0 (0)	77.8 (637)		
Other	2.1 (21)	0.7 (6)		

These descriptive data analyses show preliminary support for the research questions examining whether female sex offenders receive distinct media coverage based on the attributes of the sexual event portrayed by the mass media and whether when examining the portrayal of the offender in the media publication, cases involving female sex offenders reflect gendered stereotypes or

theoretical measures of causation. However, the bivariate analyses utilized to explore the research questions may not accurately reflect how portrayals of female sex offenders are affected by other related factors. Characteristics of the offense (i.e., the level of violence or uniqueness of the crime) can be an influence that drives the tone of media coverage and not necessarily the gender of the perpetrator. For instance, the gendered nature of the media reports may increase for sex crimes against children that are stranger related or more violent regardless of the sex of the offender. Therefore, the next set of multivariate analyses considers how multiple characteristics may affect the overall tone of media reports on sexual crimes against children.

### **Overall Tone of Media Publication**

Logistic regression is used to determine if selected bivariate relationships remained statistically significant when tested as predictors for the overall tone of the media. For purposes of logistic regression the overall tone of the media outlet was used as the dependent variable, and the independent predictor variables that provided statistical significance using chi-square were recoded into categorical variables for analysis. To perform logistic regression analysis, the independent variables were coded into dummy variables. Each dummy variable was placed into the logistic regression model and run in connection to the dependent variables of contemptful or gendered overall tone to the media publication.

The overall tone of the article was recoded into contemptful (Table 13) or gendered tone (Table 14) for analysis purposes. Due to the small numerical occurrences of neutral, privileged, and forgiving tones of the media publications, they were excluded from logistic regression. Unlike chi-square analysis, logistic regression did not result in widespread significance. Using the overall tone of the article as the dependent variable vastly changed the outcome. Socioeconomic status and the criminal charge provided no statistical evidence as a predictor or indicator for the overall tone of the media publication.

The marital status of the offender resulted in moderate significance for media publications with a contemptful tone. That is, if the offender is currently involved in a relationship at the time of the sexual event, their relationship status becomes a predictor of a contemptful tone. For media outlets, the results suggest that involvement in a relationship is a strong predictor as to the overall tone of the publication they present to the general public.

The relationship between the offender and the victim and a contemptful overall tone provides two statistically significant results. A teacher-student relationship between the offender and victim results in a strong significance of an overall contemptful tone published by the media outlet. However, a stranger relationship is the strongest predictor of a contemptful toned publication

The findings suggest that the level of violence associated with the crime is a significant predictor for contemptful toned publications. Level III sex offenses are the strongest predictor for media publications with a contemptful tone and

one would expect to find strong indications of contempt for sexual offenses with a high level of violence. In sum, the level of violence associated with the sexual act is overall a strong predictor for a contemptful tone of the media publication and.

No male sex offender publication were coded as gendered, thus gendered tone publications are a test of female sex offenders only. An offender involved in a relationship at the time of the sexual event resulted in high statistical significance for media publications with a gendered tone. Thus, media publication reflected gendered stereotypes for females who commit sexually deviant acts against children while in a relationship.

For gendered toned publications, the only statistically significant finding focusing on the relationship between the offender and victim resulted for sex offending teachers. Female sex offenders overwhelmingly committed sex crimes against children in which they had a teacher-student relationship. In sum, the findings suggest that the relationship between a student and teacher is a statistically significant predictor for the overall gendered tone of a media publication.

The level of violence associated with the crime was a significant predictor for an overall gendered tone for female sex offender publications. Due to the exclusive female sex offender test sample, one would expect to find Level I media publications to be associated with female sex offender reflections in mass media publications.

Despite the significant findings presented across the independent variables, the sex of the perpetrator still remains the strongest predictor for the overall tone of the media publication when including the aforementioned independent variables. Similar to chi-square analysis, the sex of the perpetrator resulted in strong statistical significance when using logistical analysis.

**Table 13: Logistic Regression Results for Contemptful Tone of Media Publication**

Independent Variables	B	SE	Wald	p
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>				
Low	26.73	20418.96	0.00	0.99
Middle	20.52	20000.68	0.00	0.98
Upper	25.44	23655.31	0.00	1.00
Unknown	21.53	23200.69	0.00	0.99
<b>Marital Status</b>				
Single	-24.64	4591.50	0.00	0.99
In A Relationship	-1.07	0.77	5.78	0.04
Unknown	-21.55	22360.26	0.00	0.99
<b>Level of Violence</b>				
Level I	-1.53	1.04	10.66	0.00
Level II	3.63	1.19	11.18	0.00
Level III	4.89	1.32	15.36	0.00
<b>Relationship</b>				
Male Relative	1.68	0.59	7.99	0.05
Teacher	-2.28	1.00	14.21	0.00
Acquaintance	-14.65	1956.23	0.00	0.99
Stranger	3.80	0.75	12.14	0.00
<b>Gender</b>	5.63	0.97	33.70	0.00
<b>Overall Chi-Square</b>	12.60			
<b>Nagelherke R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.67			

\* N=1815

\*\* Tests for multicollinearity were run and the variables within the model fit with the appropriate range.

**Table 14: Logistic Regression Results for Gendered Tone of Media Publication**

Independent Variables	B	SE	Wald	p
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>				
Low	-19.85	3922.82	0.00	0.99
Middle	-18.99	1099.32	0.00	0.98
Upper	-38.68	5066.95	0.00	0.99
Unknown	-15.62	943.29	0.00	0.98
<b>Marital Status</b>				
Single	37.09	2004.44	0.00	0.99
In A Relationship	-3.79	0.89	7.00	0.00
Unknown	14.66	974.21	0.00	0.98
<b>Level of Violence</b>				
Level I	-5.48	0.74	47.75	0.00
Level II	-2.52	0.55	21.00	0.00
Level III	-1.78	0.32	12.43	0.02
<b>Relationship</b>				
Male Relative	20.82	6185.44	0.00	0.99
Teacher	-1.61	10.09	2.44	0.02
Acquaintance	18.71	4801.97	0.00	0.99
Stranger	19.32	5239.11	0.00	0.98
<b>Gender</b>	-6.73	0.21	16.44	0.00
<b>Overall Chi-Square</b>	16.14			
<b>Nagelherke R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.83			

\* N=1815

\*\* Tests for multicollinearity were run and the variables within the model fit with the appropriate range.

Utilizing chi-square and logistic regression analysis shows that the level of violence associated with the sexual act and the sex of the perpetrator are statistically significant. In addition, the results suggest that the majority of criminal justice information “falls out” of the media publication, whereas the gendered information remains in the mass media’s portrayal of female sex

offenders. The importance of these findings to the existing literature on sex offenders and to how media portrayals of sex offenders may influence public policy is discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 8

### ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The data analyzed produced considerable findings in relation to the research questions presented at the beginning of this examination. The results suggest that mass media portrayals of male and female sex offenders contain inherent disparities.

#### **Media Portrayal of Prevalence**

According to official data, male sex offending occurs at a rate higher than female offending (Department of Justice 2002). Previously discussed case-report studies support the notion of low occurrence for female offenders; however, self-report studies conclude that female sex offending occurs at a higher rate than official statistical analysis can provide. Despite the disparity in the actual number of female sex offenders, it is evident that female offending occurs at a lower rate than that of their male counterparts.

The research question addressing the prevalence of female sex offending as reported by the mass media yielded statistically significant results. Through prior examination of case-report and self-report research conducted by social scientists, female sex offenders were shown to commit a very small number of sex offenses against children in comparison to men. However, based on the

convenient sample of sex offenders drawn from highly distributed mass media outlets, it is clear that the media publicizes female sexual offending at a higher rate than official statistics. Female sex offenders comprised 45% of the media publications analyzed in this study in comparison to the less than 10% reported by case-report research and between 20% and 40% for self-report studies. This extreme departure from previously conducted empirical research has significant repercussions on future female sex offending research.

The findings from this exploratory analysis suggest that future research needs to be conducted in the area of adult sexual of children, and more specifically, the mass media's portrayal of male and female sex offenders. As previously discussed, the media tends to sensationalize accounts of female sexual violence, thus potentially leading to misperceptions of prevalence held by the general public. In an attempt to remove the cloak of misrepresentation concerning female sex offenders, it is vital for social science researchers to re-examine official statistics in conjunction with mass media publications concerning female perpetrators of sexual violence against children.

The saturation of female sex offenders in mass media outlets demonstrates the media's propensity to reinforce patriarchal stereotypes and socially prescribed notions of the appropriate sexual behavior of women. Women are to be the nurturers and caretakers of society's children, so when a female refuses to conform to socially held traditional sex scripts, the mass media becomes the platform for public awareness and discourse focused on the female

perpetrator. Thus, the media becomes a vital conduit for information (or misinformation) concerning the prevalence of female sexual offending and the ramifications surrounding society's patriarchal structure.

### **Media Reflection of Offender and Sexual Event Attributes**

The research question asking whether female sex offenders receive distinct media coverage based on the attributes of the sexual event portrayed by the mass media resulted in significant findings for the level of violence associated with the sexual event, the socioeconomic status of the offender, the marital status of the offender, the relationship between the offender and victim, the portrayal of the perpetrator, and the overall tone of the media publication.

When examining the level of violence associated with the crime, male offenders received media attention after committing sexually based crimes with elevated levels of violence. In contrast, female sex offenders received media coverage after the commission of a sexual act with a low level of violence. Thus, statistically significant chi-square and logistic regression results were found for female offenders receiving distinct media coverage when comparing them to their male counterparts.

Social science research indicates that female offenders tend to commit crimes with lower levels of violence than their male counterparts, and the findings from this examination support those conclusions. It is clear that the

media accurately reflects previously held notions of female offending, and more specifically, the level of violence associated with female sexual offending.

Gender roles and sex scripts prescribe that women should be passive, therefore, one would expect low levels of violence to be associated with female sexual offending. However, gender roles and sex scripts also maintain that women are not to be sexually aggressive or commit crimes against children. Therefore, although the level of violence associated with the sexual event adheres to patriarchal norms for female behavior, the mere sex crime is in direct violation of socially held norms and values concerning appropriate female sexual behavior. In sum, the findings suggest that the mass media only publicizes the sensational cases involving extreme male violence, but is willing to report on any female departure from socially accepted norms and values.

The socioeconomic status of the offender portrayed by the media also resulted in significant chi-square findings concerning the differences between male and female sex offender presentation. The mass media overwhelmingly reported the middle socioeconomic status of female sex offenders, but failed to equally report the socioeconomic status of male perpetrators at a significant level. These data also suggest that the sexual assault of children committed by the poor are excluded from national and regional media. Previous social science research indicates that female sex offenders maintain a lower socioeconomic status than male offenders, thus the findings suggest that the mass media fails to accurately portray notions of offender attributes accurately.

However, the possibility exists that the portrayal of middle class women in the media is not flawed, but rather, that known social science research has not painted a full picture of female sex offender characteristics and attributes. Thus, future research is needed to determine if a disconnect exists between social science research on the socioeconomic status of female sex offenders and the mass media's reflection of this attribute. Despite the concerns surrounding the accurate media portrayal of sex offender attributes, it is clear that a disparity exists in the information exposed by the mass media.

Social science research asserts that most sex offenders are Caucasian, and the findings presented in this study demonstrate an accurate reflection in the media's presentation of the sex offender's attributes. Unlike other street crimes, sex offenses committed against a child are expected to be committed by a Caucasian perpetrator. The media reinforces social science notions of expected racial perpetration by primarily exposing Caucasian sex offenders in their publications.

The marital status of the offender was also examined and the findings suggest that the media disproportionately reports on the marital status of the female sex offender over the male offender. Overwhelmingly, the mass media reported that the female sex offender was in a relationship, however similarly, failed to report any information on the current state of the male sex offender's marital status.

These findings suggest support for known social science research concerning the characteristics usually embodied by female sex offender, however, once again these findings strongly suggest that newsworthy events related to women are most likely to be about the violation of gender and class stereotypes about being a “good middle-class wife” with men’s relationships remaining invisible and not being considered newsworthy. Thus, the findings presented here indicate a clear disparity in the presentation of male and female sex offender attributes.

The relationship between the offender and the victim provide insight into the portrayal of the sex offender by the mass media. Overwhelmingly, the media reported the relationship between a male sex offender and his victim as “stranger,” whereas female offenders were strongly portrayed as having a student-teacher relationship. Prior social science research proclaims that female sex offenders tend to commit crimes within the home and against young children that are often their own. However, the findings of this study did not find one occurrence of media exposure of a female sex offender that committed a sexually deviant act against their own child.

A clear rift exists between what social science presents are characteristics of female sex offenders, and mass media exposure and publication into female sex offending. This particular finding, however, must be interpreted with caution due to the narrowness of the “sex offender” search term used to identify cases. Future research may show that women are only exposed as “true” sex

offenders if they perpetrate against children in their care related to their professions in the public domain such as being a teacher or childcare provider. It is possible that for men and women who commit sex offenses against children through informal family network (versus their professional position) are referred to as “child molesters” or are identified as committing “incest.”

Attributes concerning gender roles and sex offending display a clear disparity in media’s reflection of the relationship between the offender and victim in that the mass media perpetuates the notion of stranger violence as the primary attribute of male sexual offending; whereas female sexual abuse of children reflects notions of the departure from care-giving roles to commit a crime that goes against socially held notions of appropriate gender roles.

The portrayal of the perpetrator in the media’s reflection of offender attributes suggests a disparity in mass media’s exposure of male and female sex offenders. Male sex offenders were consistently characterized as either *evil*, *predatory*, or *perpetrator* thus reinforcing the notions of male aggression in sexual events. However, female sex offenders were almost exclusively characterized as the *caregiver* to the victim thus reinforcing socially held notions of patriarchal structure and the offender’s deviation from accepted sex scripts.

Prior social science research supports the mass media’s reflection in the current study, in that male sexual deviance (while not condoned) is seen as an unfortunate outcome to their accepted male dominance and aggression. However, as previous research literature has demonstrated the media

consistently sensationalizes cases of female sexual violence, thus the current findings suggest an accurate portrayal of female sex offending based on the norms of media coverage of sensational cases involving female perpetrators.

The findings clearly suggest that the mass media reinforces norms and values associated with patriarchal structure by portraying male sex offenders as sexually aggressive and women as deviations from their required roles as the nurturers of children. In sum, a clear disparity exists in the portrayal of male and female sex offenders and the distinct coverage lends support to the notions of media endorsement of patriarchal structure and reinforcing appropriate sexual behavior of men and women.

Although the prior substance abuse, mental health, and prior sexual abuse history of the sex offenders were not statistically significant, their absence in the mass media's reflection on offender attributes is an important finding. The apparent rarity of cases of female offenders colluding with male perpetrators to commit sex crimes against children is also noticeably absent. The media consistently omits information on the personal aspects of the offender's history and focuses primarily on their current social status. Yet, the social science research literature proclaims that sex offenders are often victims of prior sexual abuse and female sex offenders often commit sexually deviant acts in collusion with another perpetrator, yet no information on these offender attributes were provided in the media publications. Two possibilities emerge: the media either did not have access to the offender's personal history or chose not to include the

information in their publication. Either way, the absence of personal offender attribute information is an important discovery in the accuracy of media reflections or disparities in offender and sexual event attributes.

### **Media Portrayal and Gendered Stereotypes**

The research question posed by this exploratory study focused on whether cases involving female sex offenders will reflect gendered stereotypes or theoretical measures of causation when examining the portrayal by the mass media. The findings suggest the overall tone of the media publication exhibits a clear distinction in cases involving female sex offenders as they predominately reflect gendered stereotypes rather than theoretical measures of causation.

Male sex offender publications were overwhelmingly characterized with a contemptful tone to the publication, where female sex offenders' publications were vastly exposed with a gendered tone to the publication. Once again, previous social science research indicates that the media's propensity to sensationalize criminal acts with extreme or novel undertones of sexual violence lends support to the findings presented in this study. Cases involving extreme male violence will be reflected in the media as sheer contempt for the sex offender and sexually deviant act committed against the child. However, cases involving a female perpetrator reflect gendered notion of nonconformity to socially prescribed acceptable female sexual behavior and gendered roles of caregiver and nurturer.

Logistical regression analysis was utilized to determine if variables other than gender are a significant predictor in the overall tone of the media publication. The findings indicate that the marital status of the offender, the level of violence associated with the crime, the relationship between the perpetrator and victim, and gender are the statistically significant predictors of the overall tone of the publication; however, gender still remains as the strongest predictor for a contemptful or gendered tone outcome.

These findings indicate that although support for reflections of theoretical measures of causation are contained within mass media's exposure of adult sex offending against children, the sex of the perpetrator and the reinforcement of patriarchal norms and values seem to be the primary objective of the mass media. This deviation away from reflecting theoretical measures of causation and accurately portraying social science research may be vital in relation to policy formulation and design.

### **Media Influence on Sex Offender Policy**

As demonstrated by prior literature review, women are not to be sexually aggressive or deviant, and are considered to be the caretakers of children. Thus, when a female commits a sexual act against a minor child, the popular mass media outlets ensure that the general public is aware of the crime and they provide a contemptful or gendered tone to their publication. By reinforcing

patriarchal notions of appropriate sexual behavior, the mass media can have a significant effect on sex offender policy creation or design.

The highly publicized cases involving Jacob Wetterling, Megan Kanka, and Mary Kay Letourneau led to sex offender specific policy involving registration, notification, and job restrictions for convicted offenders. Media proliferation of sex offenders led to substantial public demand for more regulations regarding the tracking and monitoring of sex offenders to ensure restrictions in their employment opportunities that deny them further access to children.

The sex offender policies derived primarily from public outcry are made after highly sensationalized reports were issued by media outlets. Such registration and notification policies were designed specifically for Level III (male) offenders who pose a significant risk of recidivism. Thus, media outlets reinforce the male-identified and male-centered notions surrounding appropriate sexual behavior and consequences resulting in sexually deviant acts committed against children.

In sum, media saturation of sex offender information and instances can lead to public unrest and demand for an appropriate criminal justice response. Thus, providing the general public with sex offender information in a contemptful or gendered nature can lead to a disconnect between the realities surrounding adult sex offending and the media's portrayal of prevalence, theoretical measures, and patriarchal structure.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

Through the use of quantitative content analysis this examination has uncovered disparities in the coverage of female sex offenders by various media outlets. Although no statistical evidence was uncovered in relation to media's reflection of Social Psychological and Criminological theories of causation for sexual offending against children, media reflection was discovered in relation to Feminist theories concerning female sex offenders.

Previous case-report and self-report research has given a convoluted view of the prevalence of female sex offending; however prior research reported here has demonstrated that female offending occurs at a higher rate than what was previously thought. Despite the uncertainty about the actual number of female offenders, this analysis has quantified the disparity that exists between research data and the perceptions and prevalence reported to the general public by popular media sources.

Female sex offending related media reports accounted for over half of the total number of sex offenses covered by various media outlets between January 1994 and June 2009. The sheer number of media publications on female sex offenders clearly demonstrates the media's propensity to cover this unique criminal class at an exaggerated rate. Through the examination of Feminist theory, mass media supports and reinforces the notions of patriarchy and

traditional sex scripts by publishing an over-abundance of reports on female sexual offenders who have violated societal norms related to their white, middle-class, marital and caretaking roles.

The level of violence associated with the crime also provided a unique view of media reporting of male and female sex offenders. Males who perpetrated the types of sexual offenses covered were predominately violent and sensational Level II and Level III crimes; in contrast, the female perpetrators covered were almost exclusively non-violent Level I crimes. In previous analyses on media reporting, sensational and violent crimes are considered the most news-worthy, thus coverage of male offenders supports communication literature and provides the platform for policy formulation. However, female offenders almost exclusively committed non-violent crimes yet their relatively minor crimes were sensationalized by the media outlets. These findings appear to give support to Feminist theory assertions that female sex offending is sensational only due to their breakage of the gendered social contract concerning appropriate sexual behavior and the multiple roles of child caretaking.

The portrayal of the perpetrator provided valuable information regarding the media's role in the reinforcement of norms and beliefs held by society. The examined media outlets overwhelmingly portrayed male offenders as evil, predatory, and perpetrators, delivering a vastly negative tone to the publication. Similarly, female offenders received negative media attention as well; however, their negative tone came in the form of the target word "mother." It became

clear that media outlets predominately used the term “mother” to describe the female offenders to project contempt for the female perpetrator who went against traditional gendered sex roles and committed a crime against a child that society deems her to be the protector of. In sum, female perpetrators of sexual violence against children were negatively portrayed by the mass media using a passive-aggressive method by demonstrating her deviance from traditional patriarchy structure concerning appropriate sexual behavior.

The overall tone of the media publication for male offenders was clearly contemptful for the offender and sexual event; however, the tone associated with female offender publications was drastically different. The tone associated with female offenders was overwhelmingly gendered in nature insofar as the media publications tended to portray the perpetrators as a “mother” and the victim (generally when male) as a wanting and willing participant. The disparity between media coverage on male and female sex offenders once again reflects Feminist theories concerning reinforcement of public perceptions concerning appropriate sexual roles of men and women.

Qualitative research is a useful form of analysis into media’s coverage of female sex offending in an attempt to further explore the possible causation of this type of criminal behavior. Also, qualitative research could be conducted in an attempt to discover the “tipping point” utilized by media sources to determine when a male-perpetrated crime is published versus a female perpetrated criminal act. Although Feminist literature and the current

examination both suggest a gendered patriarchal motive, further exploration would be beneficial to this under-researched topic.

Finally, no examination of political forces was explored in this analysis in connection to media publication and distribution to the general public. Media outlets were chosen based solely on their distribution capacity in order to ensure that the general public had equal access to the published information; however, no data were collected as to the liberal, moderate, or conservative motivation of the publication. Questions rising from the political nature of the publication and their willingness or hesitation to publish information concerning sexually based crimes committed by women would further enhance the emancipated state of female sex offending research.

The mass media's influence on the construction and enforcement of sex offending policy needs to be studied at greater length. The mass media provide the general public with information, or misinformation, concerning criminal justice matters and the media play a pivotal role in the public demand for "justice." Quantitative and qualitative research can be conducted focusing on the media's role into sex offending information and the subsequent policy ramifications. As seen with the Jacob Wetterling, Megan Kanka, and Mary Kay Letourneau cases, the media's saturation of sex offending information provided the catalyst for new public policy concerning sexual deviants.

Furthermore, this exploratory examination focused on the results of mass media portrayal of sex offenders and subsequent policy formulation and

implementation through the perceptions presented to the general public.

However, further research should be conducted into the direct influence of the mass media on criminal justice policy makers specifically concerning sex offender policy and procedures

In addition, future research can be conducted using official data on adult sex offenders in a specific geographic area as a baseline for comparison of media reporting on such offenders. Determinations focusing on the amount of media exclusion of perpetrator information and subsequent criminal justice responses can be more effectively determined. Also, exploration into the mass media's portrayal of female sex offenders can also be explored using official data as a comparison for media publications.

Although this research provides an in depth exploratory examination into the media's portrayal of female sex offending, further research and exploration is clearly necessary. Despite conflicting statistical evidence regarding the actual number of female sex offenders residing in the nation, it is clear that female perpetration does exist and that the mass media play a vital role in the transference of statistical information gathered by criminal justice personnel and the perceptions held by society concerning the current state of patriarchy and traditional sexual norms and values. This research provides a valuable platform for future research opportunities and fills an obvious void in social science research focusing on female sex offenders.

## APPENDIX A

**Table A: Offender Name and Total Media Publications**

		Gender of Perpetrator		Total
		Male	Female	
Name	Adamski	0	3	3
	Allison	0	10	10
	Aqui	12	0	12
	Balogh	0	10	10
	Barnhart	0	4	4
	Boicelli	0	7	7
	Burke	0	4	4
	Camp	0	1	1
	Carter	21	0	21
	Cash	46	0	46
	Clark	0	11	11
	Clickner	0	5	5
	Cooney	2	0	2
	Couey	68	0	68
	De Barraicua	0	5	5
	Diaz	8	0	8
	Dodd	12	0	12
	Doe	47	0	47
	Duncan	159	0	159
	Firkins	0	5	5
	Gaff	5	0	5
	Gajdusek	12	0	12
	Geisel	0	12	12
	Goldenflame	9	0	9
	Gonzales,B	0	6	6
	Gonzales,J	6	0	6
	Guier	1	0	1
	Hermann	0	1	1
	Hoddel	1	0	1
	Holt	0	1	1
	Huckaby	0	168	168
	Johnson	0	22	22
	Jon	19	0	19
	Jonah	13	0	13
	Kennedy	11	0	11
	Lafave	0	70	70
	Letourneau	0	292	292
	Linehan	7	0	7

Lux	0	5	5
Mann	3	0	3
Marinelli	0	8	8
McCandless	0	5	5
McElhenney	0	3	3
McKinney	0	6	6
McQuay	48	0	48
Meek	0	2	2
Morais	0	5	5
Noles	2	0	2
Peterson	0	69	69
Prowler	1	0	1
Ragusa	0	5	5
Rickmyer	5	0	5
Rodriguez	31	0	31
Rutherford	0	2	2
Schmitz	0	1	1
Schwartz	4	0	4
Schweikert	0	2	2
Shettles	1	0	1
Shriner	15	0	15
Siebers	4	0	4
Smart	0	22	22
Smith	5	0	5
Spack	0	13	13
Stellwag	0	2	2
Strohmeyer	95	0	95
Tapp	0	1	1
Tarkenton	0	2	2
Timmendequas, P	12	0	12
Timmendequas, J	207	0	207
Turner	0	20	20
Weaver	99	0	99
Weber	1	0	1
Whitaker	0	7	7
White	0	2	2
Wollschlager	2	0	2
Yockey	2	0	2
Total	996	819	1815

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