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2018 ATSA Conference | Friday October 19 | 10:30 AM – 12:00 PM

F-01

Gender-Specific Risk Assessment Among Females

Symposium Chair: Holly A. Miller, PhD
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Although females represent a smaller proportion of the sex offender population, they are subject to the same community protection laws, including registries and mandated treatment, as males. The available risk assessment research has almost exclusively assessed males. Additionally, risk assessment tools have been validated with male sex offenders only, with authors stating clearly that the measures should not be used with females who have sexually offended. This leaves criminal justice and mental health treatment professionals with little empirical information to base their risk and treatment assessments for female sex offenders. In recent years, researchers have begun to inform risk assessment with this population. This information includes prevalence of sex offending, sexual recidivism rates, and variables that are significantly related to general, violent, and sexual recidivism among female sex offenders. It has become clear that a gender-specific risk assessment model among female sex offenders is warranted.

This symposium includes three presentations that provide the latest information and data on risk assessment with females who have sexually offended. The initial presentation provides one of the first assessments of the Static-99R with a large female sex offender sample. The results validate the Static-99R author's statement in the manual that this measure is not a valid risk assessment tool for females who have sexually offended. The second presentation includes an analysis of several gender-neutral and -specific factors in relation to sexual and non-sexual recidivism with a sample of 225 incarcerated female sex offenders. Results of this study further demonstrate the need for a gender-specific approach with females who sexually offend. Finally, the third presentation is the summation of the current literature on assessment of female sex offenders. The findings from this investigation provide an empirical basis for improved practices in the gender-specific risk assessment of females who sexually offend.

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Reliability and Validity of the Static-99R in a Sample of Female Sex Offenders

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To date, all validated risk factors and risk instruments designed to assess the likelihood of sexual recidivism have been developed and validated with male samples. One such risk tool is the Static-99 (Hanson & Thornton, 2000). While it is the most widely researched and implemented risk tool for assessing the risk of sexual recidivism among sexual offenders (Boccaccini, Rice, Helmus, Murrie, & Harris, 2017), the reliability and validity of this tool has yet to be examined in a sample of female sexual offenders. In fact, the authors clearly state that the Static-99, Static-99R, and the Static-2002 are not to be used with females. Additionally, researchers have suggested that risk assessment tools that were validated with male samples will likely overestimate risk for female sex offenders (Cortoni, 2013; 2018)

The current study will seek to address this gap in the research by examining the reliability and predictive validity of the Static-99R (Helmus, Hanson, & Thornton, 2009) in a sample of approximately 650 female sexual offenders. Females in the sample recidivated at the following rates: 50% generally, 10% violently, and 4.5% sexually. Results of this study provide several important findings for the use of the Static-99R (Helmus et al., 2009) with female sexual offenders. First, the Static-99R (Helmus et al., 2009) demonstrated poor internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.25$). Second, the instrument, in the 10-item format, failed to significantly predict sexual recidivism. Some individual items on the instrument, however, were significantly related to the odds of sexual recidivism. Furthermore, results of the analysis did indicate that the Static-99R (Helmus et al., 2009) was significantly related to the odds of violent recidivism, as well as any kind of recidivism. Implications for the use of the Static-99R (Helmus et al., 2009) and risk assessment for female sexual offenders will be discussed.

Learning Goals:

- To examine the reliability and predictive validity of the Static-99R (Helmus et al., 2009) in a sample of female sexual offenders. As yet, no researchers have examined the reliability or predictive validity of the Static-99R (Helmus et al., 2009) with females who have sexually offended. Researchers have indicated that utilizing risk assessment measures developed with male samples may overestimate risk for females (Cortoni, 2013; 2018). Because of this, it is important to examine whether

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the Static-99R (Helmus et al., 2009) is a reliable and valid measure for use with female sexual offenders.

- To examine the individual items contained in the Static-99R (Helmus et al., 2009). This will accomplish two goals. First, while total scores on the Static 99-R (Helmus et al., 2009) may not be significantly related to sexual recidivism, it is still possible that items comprising the instrument may be demonstrative of risk in female sexual offenders. Second, an examination of these individual items will contribute to the body of knowledge examining potential risk variables among female sexual offenders.
- To provide suggestions for the improvement of risk assessment practices for female sexual offenders.

Examining Gender-Specific and -Neutral Risk Factors Among Female Sex Offenders

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In the last decade, researchers have begun to explore factors that are predictive of recidivism for female sexual offenders (Bader, Welsh, & Scalora, 2010; Freeman & Sandler, 2008; Miller & Marshall, 2018; Muskens, Bogaerts, Casteren, & Labrijn, 2011; Sandler & Freeman, 2009). However, research on risk factors for this offender population has been stymied by small samples, even smaller rates of re-offending, and the inability to use risk assessment tools developed for males (Cortoni, 2018; Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2010; Miller & Marshall, 2017; Muskens et al., 2010). While some researchers have used larger samples (Freeman & Sandler, 2008; Sandler & Freeman, 2009), these studies face limitations in the variables available for examination. Particularly, these studies focus on static risk factors, such as criminal history, and fail to account for many of the dynamic and gender-specific factors that comprise criminogenic needs for female offenders (Cortoni, 2018; Geraghty & Woodhams, 2015). Additionally, researchers have consistently found very low base rates of sexual recidivism among female sex offenders (Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2010). For example, Cortoni, et al. (2010) reported sexual recidivism rates from one to three percent for this group of offenders. Between small sample sizes and even smaller rates of sexual recidivism, it is extremely difficult to effectively predict this low base-rate phenomenon.

The current study contributed to this body of literature in two ways. First, using a sample of 225 incarcerated female sexual offenders, variables found to be predictive of recidivism in previous studies, such as offense, offender, and victim characteristics, were examined to see whether these findings could be further validated. Second, factors accounting for the unique criminogenic needs for female offenders, such as levels of pathology, history of victimization, as well as drug and alcohol abuse, were included.

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Results demonstrate that the gender-specific factors, such as solo offending and psychopathology symptoms, were better predictors of sexual and non-sexual recidivism. Results of this study provide additional knowledge to aid in formulating an evidence-based response to the assessment of risk and treatment need with females who have sexually offended.

Learning Goals:

- To examine the most recent risk research among female sex offenders, with specific focus on the gender-specific and –neutral factors that have been related to recidivism.
- To determine whether several gender-neutral and –specific factors predict sexual and non-sexual recidivism in a large sample of females who have sexually offended.
- To provide suggestions for the use of a gender-specific model in the risk assessment practices for female sex offenders.

Assessing Risk Among Females: An Updated Gender-Specific Model

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Just like with male sexual offenders, the assessment of women who have committed sexual offences is predominantly driven by the need to establish the likelihood of future offending behaviour, identify problematic issues related to their offending, and outline interventions that would reduce their risk of recidivism. Women are also subjected to the same sanctions as males in the criminal justice system, including social control policies such as Sexually Violent Predator laws (U.S.) or Dangerous Offender Status (Canada). As such, it is crucial that their assessment of risk and treatment needs be based on empirically validated approaches.

The assessment of risk among female sexual offenders remains a difficult endeavor. The low prevalence (relative to males) of female sexual offenders and their low base rates of sexual recidivism are the main reasons as to why there is currently no valid instrument for the assessment of risk among these women. However, while women consistently show low base rates of sexual recidivism, they do demonstrate much higher rates of other types of recidivism, thereby permitting the empirical investigations of potential risk factors for violent or general recidivism among female sexual offenders. The findings from these investigations provide an empirical basis for improved practices in the risk assessment of female sexual offenders. As such, this presentation will incorporate current findings on the factors related to criminality among female sexual offenders into an updated model of gender-specific model for the assessment of among female sexual offenders.

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Learning Goals:

- To learn why the assessment of risk is so difficult with females who sexually offend.
- To examine the research on the prediction of general, violent, and sexual recidivism among female sex offenders.
- To provide an updated model of gender-specific risk assessment for female sex offenders.

Ethan A. Marshall, MA, is a doctoral student at Sam Houston State University who is currently pursuing his PhD in Criminal Justice and Criminology. His research interests include scale development and sexual deviance, specifically pertaining to female sexual offenders and the relationship between pornography and sexual coercion. During his graduate career, he has presented at the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers conference, the American Society of Criminology conference, and the American Criminal Justice Society conference, as well as published research in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* and *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*.

Dr. Holly A. Miller is a professor and associate dean in the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University. She is also a licensed clinical psychologist and sex offender treatment provider. Dr. Miller conducts research, teaches, and practices in the areas of malingered mental illness, risk and treatment need, and sexual offenders. As a specialist in forensic assessment and offender evaluation, Dr. Miller has developed two published measures: *The Miller Forensic Assessment of Symptoms Test (M-FAST)* and *the Inventory of Offender Risk, Needs, and Strengths (IORNS)*.

Dr. Franca Cortoni, a clinical and forensic psychologist, is Professor at the School of Criminology of the Université de Montréal and Research Fellow at the International Centre of Comparative Criminology. She has published extensively and made numerous presentations at national and international conferences on male and female sexual offender issues. She is currently the President of ATSA.