

## ***BLENDING VOICES. STRENGTHENING LIVES.***

2020 ATSA Conference | Friday October 23 | POSTER

### **Looking For Personal Rehabilitation? How Women Talk About Their Sexual Offenses**

Marion Desfachelles, PhD Candidate

Franca Cortoni, PhD, CPsych

Frederic Ouellet, PhD

University of Montréal

Not surprisingly, women, like their male counterparts, tend to under acknowledge, if at all, their sexual offending behaviour. Allen (1991) first reported that male sexual offenders (MSO) are more likely to take responsibility for their offending behavior than female sexual offenders (FSO). More recently, Johansson-Love and Fremouw (2009), comparing FSO and MSO on several aspects, also observed that a larger proportion of FSO do not acknowledge their sexual crimes compared to MSO. Yet, no one has specifically investigated why this may be the case. While acknowledgment of offending behavior is not a predictor for sexual reoffending, at least in males (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005), it appears to play an important role in treatment success (Endres & Breuer, 2012; Saradjian, 1996). Hence, a better understanding of women's views of their offending behavior would not only help improve our understanding of women who sexually offend, but also improve their treatment.

The goals of the current study were to examine the nature of the explanations offender by women of their sexually offending behavior, and whether they are gender-neutral (i.e., like those of men found in the literature), gender-specific, or a combination of both. Participants were 32 women incarcerated in France for sexual offenses, 28 of whom had assaulted children. Sentences varied from two and a half years to life. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews and file reviews. The interviews were conducted using life map calendar techniques, and covered various aspects of the participants' lives during a specified period based on a life course perspective. The initial instructions to the participants were open-ended ("What is the biggest event that took place in this period, positive or negative?"). When necessary, specific themes were suggested ("How did you feel about that (event)?"). A thematic analysis of the interview results was conducted to identify the themes found in the women's explanations for their offending behavior.

Preliminary results suggest three gender-neutral levels of acknowledgement of offending behavior by women: recognition that the abuse occurred; recognition of their involvement in the abuse; and recognition of their personal agency in the offending behavior. Not surprisingly, most of the women interviewed (30/32) demonstrated at least one of these themes in their discourse. The analysis revealed two additional themes underlying these explanations. The first theme, called "Positive me", tend to create a positive self-concept of woman as if that compensated, at least partly, for their offending behavior. For example, one sub-theme was gender-specific in that it emphasized the woman's qualities as a mother, wife or woman. The second theme, called "*Victim Me*", emphasized how the woman viewed herself as the victim of external causes. Given the similarity with explanations provided by men, this second theme appeared to be gender-neutral. These findings suggest that, just like many other findings with women who sexually offend, both gender-specific and gender-neutral elements are at play when women talk about their sexual offenses. Implications for interventions and future research will be discussed.

## ***BLENDING VOICES. STRENGTHENING LIVES.***

2020 ATSA Conference | Friday October 23 | POSTER

### REFERENCES

- Allen, C. M. (1991). *Women and men who sexually abuse children: A comparative analysis*. Orwell, VT: Safer Society Press.
- Endres, J., & Breuer, M. (2012, September 7). *Denial of the sexual offence as the central factor for treatment non participation*. IATSO. Berlin, Germany.
- Hanson, R. K., & Morton-Bourgon, K. E. (2005). The characteristics of persistent sexual offenders: a meta-analysis of recidivism studies. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology, 73*(6), 1154.
- Johansson-Love, J., & Fremouw, W. (2009). Female sex offenders: A controlled comparison of offender and victim/crime characteristics. *Journal of Family Violence, 24*, 367-376.
- Saradjian, J. (1996). *Women who sexually abuse children: From research to clinical practice*. London, UK: Wiley.

**Marion DESFACHELLES, M.Sc.** Criminology, is a doctoral student in criminology at the University of Montréal. She completed her master thesis with Franca CORTONI on the subject of female sexual co-offenders. Her research focuses on female offending and on sexual crimes and more specifically on the criminal trajectories of female sexual offenders. This project is supervised by Frederic OUELLET and Franca CORTONI.

**Franca CORTONI**, a clinical and forensic psychologist, is a Full Professor at the School of Criminology of the University of Montréal and Research Fellow at the International Centre of Comparative Criminology. Since 1989, she has worked with and conducted research on male and female sexual offenders. She worked for several years within the Correctional Service of Canada before joining University of Montréal. Dr. Cortoni has published extensively and made numerous presentations at national and international conferences on male and female sexual offender issues.

**Frederic OUELLET** is an Associate Professor at the School of Criminology, University of Montréal and Research Fellow at the International Centre of Comparative Criminology. His work specializes in criminal career dimensions. His research interests include understanding turning points in criminal career trajectories. His recent works appeared in *Justice Quarterly*, the *Canadian Journal of Criminology* and *Criminal Justice and Global Crime*.