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Female Sex Offenders: Public Awareness and Attributions

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FEMALE SEX OFFENDERS: PUBLIC AWARENESS AND ATTRIBUTIONS

A Thesis

Presented to the

School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment
of Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

By

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July, 2013

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Abstract

FEMALE SEX OFFENDERS: PUBLIC AWARENESS AND ATTRIBUTIONS

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University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2013

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Researchers have suggested that there is a code of denial associated with sex offenders that are female. Sexual victimizations by women may go unnoticed or unreported if there is a general lack of awareness that females commit these crimes. This thesis used data from the 2012 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey to examine two primary questions. First, does the public think females are capable of sexually offending? Second, what are the causes attributed to female sex offenders by the public? Researchers, media, and politicians have primarily focused on male sex offenders and existing gender stereotypes held by the public introduce the possibility of sex differences in perceptions of female sex offenders. As a result, two secondary questions are also examined. Specifically, I tested for sex differences in both the public's perception of whether females can commit sex offenses and the explanations given for why females sexually offend. Public perceptions of sex offenders can affect recognition of offending and reporting, which limits our knowledge concerning the scope of childhood sexual abuse and the harm associated with victimization.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	ii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION & LIT REVIEW OF FEMALE SEX OFFENDERS....	1
Background.....	2
Female as Sex Offenders.....	3
Males as Victims of Sexual Abuse.....	6
Professional Biases for Sex Crimes.....	8
Media Influence on Stereotypes	9
Sex Differences in the Perception of Sex Crimes.....	11
CHAPTER II: DATA & METHODS.....	14
Sample Design.....	15
Demographics of Sample.....	16
Survey Instrument and Variables.....	16
CHAPTER III: RESULTS.....	19
Public Perceptions of Female Sex Offenders.....	19
Sex Differences in Perception of Female Sex Offenders.....	21
CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION AND FINAL THOUGHTS.....	23
Limitations.....	25
Implications.....	27
Directions for Future Research.....	28
REFERENCES.....	32
APPENDIX.....	42

CHAPTER I

Many people find it difficult to acknowledge that a female can be a sex offender (Denov, 2001, 2004; Sgroi & Sargent, 1993; Smith, Pine, & Hawley, 1988). Someone who sexually offends against another person, especially a child, is viewed as a predator. A book chapter titled, “What harm can be done without a penis?” (Mathis, 1972; Hislop, 2001) demonstrates the disbelief that women can be sexual perpetrators. Similarly, Denov (2004) noted that our society is not geared toward thinking a woman is physically capable of “rape” or any other type of sexual assault. She suggested there is a “culture of denial” in our society that refuses to acknowledge that women are capable of sexual offending. For example, women are perceived as the nurturers of children because they often take on the role of mothers and caregivers (Denov, 2004; Saradjian, 1996). The hesitation to acknowledge that rape or sexual assault can be perpetrated by women is perpetuated by traditional stereotypes of gender roles and sexual behavior considered appropriate for each sex.

Women make up a small percentage of sex offenders. Given the larger number of males involved in sexual offending and their perceived dangerousness, societal and scholarly focus has primarily been on male offenders. Crime statistics confirm that females are involved in at least 2-5 percent of all known sexual abuse cases against children and adults (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988; Nathan & Ward, 2002; Snyder & Sickmond, 2006; U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). All sex offenses are under-reported, and sex crimes perpetrated by females are even more likely to be under-reported if the public fails to recognize female sex offending. The goal of this thesis is to expand our

knowledge of what the public thinks about female sex offenders. While the definition of a sexual offense is gender neutral, stereotypes still exist such that people assume the offender is always male and the victim is usually female (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007). Given the media, political and academic focus on male sex offenders, the public's perception of female sex offenders may not be accurate.

This thesis examined perceptions of females as sex offenders using data from the 2012 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. I began with the question of whether individuals view females as being capable of sexual offending. I followed this up with an examination of the reasons given by the respondents to explain why females sexually offend. Finally, the stereotypes surrounding women as offenders introduce the possibility of sex differences in perceptions of female sex offenders. As a result, I tested for sex differences in both whether females can commit sex offenses and the explanations given for why females sexually offend. This thesis is the first study to examine the public's perception of female sex offenders and whether these views differ by sex. It is important because sexual victimizations by women may go unnoticed or unreported if there is a general lack of awareness that females commit these crimes and cause harm to their victims.

Background

Gender roles and sex scripts are embedded in a society's structure and help reinforce which sexual behaviors are socially acceptable for men and women (Chiotti, 2009). Traditional sex scripts depict males as controlling all sexual encounters and females as passive and submissive participants (Allen, 1991; Becker, Hall, & Stinson, 2001; Denov, 2004; Schwarts & Cellini, 1995). Our traditional sex scripts define women

as harmless, passive, non-sexual, and innocent (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Denov, 2004; Finkelhor & Russell, 1984; Lorber, 2001). The effect of these traditional sex scripts affect the perception of both females as capable sex offenders and males as capable of being sexually victimized. Below, I expand on the ways that stereotypes can affect perceptions of women as sex offenders, males as victims of sexual abuse, professional biases pertaining to sex crimes and media reporting of sex crimes. I conclude my review by discussing the possibility that stereotypes and gender roles could lead to differences in the way men and women view sex crimes.

Stereotypes Based on Sex

Females as Sex Offenders

Researchers have noted a denial on behalf of the public that women are capable of sexual offending since the 1970s (Denov, 2001, 2004; Hisop, 2001; Mathis, 1972; Sgroi & Sargent, 1993; Smith, Pine, & Hawley, 1988). Many people define rape in the traditional sense of forced penetration of the vagina by a penis and fail to recognize that this is only one way to sexually abuse another person. Women commit the same types of sexual crimes as men, including rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment and sexual stalking (Duncan, 2010). Research on victims has documented that female sex offenders have abused their victims with fondling, forced sexual intercourse, forced oral sex, bondage, routine insertion of enemas, anal and vaginal penetration with objects, forced sexual acts with animals, and forcing children to witness sexual acts (Sgroi & Sargent, 1993; Snyder, 2000). It is clear that victimization takes place by women without needing a traditional rape (i.e., penis-vagina) to occur.

Evidence suggests that women are capable of committing many different types of sexual offenses against a variety of victims. Female sex offenders have been identified as mothers and daycare workers who abuse children in their care, college-age women who commit acts of sexual aggression and coercion within dating relationships, teachers who exploit high school students and many other forms of sexual offending (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2007; Duncan, 2010). Female sex offenders are most often convicted of offenses against children (Faller, 1987; Lewis & Stanley, 2000; Rosencrans, 1997; Vandiver & Walker, 2002) or low-level felonies (other than rape). Women have also been documented as sexually abusing male and female adults in heterosexual relationships, homosexual relationships and against strangers (Gannon, Rose & Ward, 2008; Girshick, 2002; Sarrel & Masters, 1982). Like male sex offenders, women have also been known to commit sadistic and violent acts in the commission of their sexual offenses (Rosencrans, 1997). For example, Ferguson and Meehan's analysis of 279 convicted female sex offenders in Florida noted the rate of female violence "exceeded those observed in general male samples of child sexual abusers" (2005: 86).

To believe that a woman, especially a mother, could sexually abuse a child requires one to challenge long-held ideas about motherhood and female sex roles in society and relationships (Vandiver, 2006). When female sexual violence occurs, society looks for an underlying reason (e.g., childhood trauma, hormonal imbalance, male influence). If these causes are found, it reduces women's culpability and allays society's sense of profound unease (Denfield, 1997; Denov, 2003). When males commit sexual violence, it is not considered as an enigma that must be explained by prior victimization or hormonal imbalances. Chiotti (2009) suggested we more easily accept male sexual

violence because it is consistent with gender stereotypes, whereas female sexual violence is not.

Official statistics report that women comprise 1.2 percent of arrests for rape and 8 percent of arrests for all other sexual offenses (U.S. Department of Justice Statistics, 2002). Within the juvenile court system, adolescent girls are responsible for three percent of forcible rape cases and five percent of other violent sex offenses (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). In contrast to official statistics, self-report and child welfare studies reveal higher prevalence rates of women sexually abusing children, with 5 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys falling victims to sexual abuse perpetrated by women (Finkelhor & Russell, 1984; Peter, 2009).

Sex crimes are often under-reported to police, and female perpetrated sex crimes are even more likely to be under-reported due to widespread misconceptions and gender stereotypes (Berliner & Barbieri, 1984; Johnson & Shrier, 1987; Kilpatrick, 2004). Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey indicated that only 39 percent of sexual assault incidents were reported to law enforcement in 2003 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). Importantly for this thesis, several researchers have found that victims of female sexual crimes were less likely to report their experiences than victims of male offenders (Condy, Templer, Brown, & Veaco, 1987; Johnson & Shrier, 1987; Marvasti, 1986; Rosencrans, 1997). For example, Rosencrans' (1997) study of maternal-incest victims found that over 95 percent of female victims did not tell anyone about their abuse during childhood. Similarly, Johnson and Shrier (1987) found that none of the male victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse reported their experiences to a law enforcement or child welfare agency, even though they all reported being devastated by the violence.

Several scholars have noted that the long-term damage done to children abused by females can be made worse by societal views of the experience, such as the victim was lucky or they should have enjoyed it (Dube et al., 2005; Lisak, 1994; Munro, 2002). Although women commit similar offenses as men, the denial of female sexual aggressors has left sexual offenses perpetrated by women an underreported and understudied phenomenon (Anderson & Swainson, 2001; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, & Magley, 1997; Struckman-Johnston & Struckman-Johnston, 1994; Vaux, 1993; Welsh, 1999; Williams, 1997). Several researchers have suggested that women may be able to better disguise their sexual offending because of the nurturing roles they engage in during routine child-rearing activities (e.g., bathing or dressing) (Groth & Birnbaum, 1979; Kaufman, Wallace, Johnson, & Reeder, 1995). Although males make up the majority of sexual perpetrators, denying women's capacity to be sexually aggressive only succeeds in silencing victims' experiences of female sexual abuse (Peter, 2009). Gender stereotypes may serve to particularly devalue and silence male victimization by female offenders.

Males as Victims of Sexual Abuse

Research on sexual victimization has primarily focused on female victims, yet one in every ten rape victims in 2003 was male (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Three percent of males in America, or about 1 in 33, have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime (NIJ & Center for Disease Control & Prevention, 1998). Males can be victims of sexual abuse as children or adults. Three percent of boys in grades 5-8 and five percent of boys in grades 9-12 said they had been sexually abused (Schoen et al., 1997). Rudin, Zalewski, and Bodmer-Turner (1995) found that convicted

female sex offenders sexually abused boys 37 percent of the time, whereas males abused boys 24 percent of the time. Although statistics reveal that females are sexually victimized more than males, male sexual victimization is not uncommon.

Male gender roles can prevent society from accepting that males can be victims of sexual assault, especially by female perpetrators (Denov, 2004; Hislop, 2001). Society glorifies sexual activity involving adult females and underage males, perceiving it as a rite of passage or as a “lucky” encounter for the boy (Becker et al., 2001; CSOM, 2007; Denov, 2004; Hunter & Matthews, 1997). Traditional sex scripts create barriers to victims reporting female-perpetrated sexual abuse and to society perceiving females as capable of sexual aggression. Males sexually abused by another male may be embarrassed to report their abuse and struggle with confusion over their gender and sexual identity (Dimock, 1988; Johnson & Shrier, 1987; Lisak, 1994). Males who are sexually abused by a female may be reluctant to report the abuse because they feel emasculated and may worry about how others will perceive their masculinity (CSOM, 2007; Hislop, 2001).

There are only a few studies that have examined people’s perceptions of male victimizations when the offender is female. For example, a study of undergraduate students examining perceptions of child sexual abuse found that students believed male victims of female perpetrators would experience less harm than if the victim was female or if the perpetrator was male (Broussard, Wagner, & Kazelskis, 1991). Similarly, Finkelhor and Russell (1984) found that parents who were surveyed about the seriousness of different types of abuse believed sexually abusive actions perpetrated by females were less harmful to victims than the same actions perpetrated by males. These studies reveal

a perception of child sexual abuse that minimizes the harm done to male victims compared to female victims and the harm that female perpetrators do to victims compared to male perpetrators. Overall, there seems to be a double standard for male victims of abuse based on male gender norms. In particular, men should not be seen as the helpless object of another person's sexual gratification (Dimock, 1988; Lew, 1988; Nasjleti, 1980).

Professional Biases for Sex Crimes

Allen (1991) argued that researchers and professionals alike are guilty of believing traditional sex scripts because they have not addressed child sexual abuse committed by women. Researchers have found that lack of training for police and mental health professionals influences the informal, yet well-established way of perceiving sexual assault: males as perpetrators and females as victims (Denov, 2001, 2004; Saradjian, 2010). For example, researchers found that training on sex crimes for law enforcement officers is geared exclusively around men as the offenders and women as the victims (CSOM, 2007; Denov, 2004). When women do perpetrate sex crimes, professionals are quick to focus on the offender's past victimization, hormonal imbalances, male influence or psychopathy to explain her aggression in order to relieve their sense of discomfort (Denfeld, 1997; Denov, 2004; Pearson, 1997). Searching for reasons why a woman would sexually offend biases training, and affects the responses of law enforcement to female-perpetrated sex crimes.

Denov (2003) argued traditional sex scripts that portray women as incapable of committing sex crimes inhibit victims of female sex offenders from reporting their abuse.

Even if sex crimes committed by women are reported, they may not be pursued by police or child welfare agencies due to stereotypes associated with motherhood and female sexuality (Becker, Hall, & Stinson, 2001; Bumby & Bumby, 2004; Denov, 2004; Hisop, 2001). Professional bias also may be a source of under-reporting because research shows that police officers generally react with disbelief to allegations involving a female perpetrator, minimize the seriousness of the reports, and view the female suspects as less dangerous and harmful than male offenders (Denov, 2004). Similar gender biases and patterns of disbelief have been found in medical and mental health professionals (Becker et al., 2001; Denov, 2004; Denov & Cortoni, 2006; Hunter & Mathews, 1997). Professionals who believe these gender stereotypes and sex scripts could pose problems for victims of female offenders seeking services from them.

Media Influence on Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes about sex offending also are present in the general public, and are influenced by the mass media. Media plays a crucial role in the development and reinforcement of sex scripts and gender biases (McGuicki & Brown, 2001; Meyers, 1994; Surette, 2007). Until recently, the general public largely overlooked women who perpetrate sex offenses. But highly publicized cases involving inappropriate and illegal sexual contact between female high school teachers and their male students became a source of growing concern across the 2000s (CSOM, 2007; Female Sex Offenders, 2009; Frei, 2008). The media's partiality to report cases like this may give people the wrong impression that the majority of sex offenses committed by women occur in this type of context. Yet the existing literature suggests a majority of female sex offenders are

mothers and other women in caretaking roles who commit sexual offenses under their own volition and in the absence of male offenders (Duncan, 2010). Levenson and colleagues (2007) suggested the public believes several misconceptions about sex offenders that are perpetuated and reinforced by the media, rather than the facts based on empirical evidence.

The differential language used when reporting on a female versus male sex offender can also contribute to gendered stereotypes of sex offenders (Plumm, Nelson, & Terrance, 2012). Landor (2009) studied the language differences in Australian media reports of female and male sex offenders and noted that female offenders were often described as “lonely,” “depressed,” or “vulnerable.” These portrayals appear to shift the blame from the perpetrator. Similarly, Chiotti (2009) conducted a quantitative content analysis on 1,815 media reports of 76 sex offenders in newspapers, magazines and on television. She found that female offenders were more often portrayed as emotional and “in love” with their victims, while male offenders were more often portrayed as evil and predatory (Chiotti, 2009). This language difference could reinforce the public’s view that female sex offenders are less dangerous or less serious than males (Chiotti, 2009; Duncan, 2010).

Another language difference can be found in the language used to describe the relationship between the female offender and male victim. As previously noted, the majority of female sex offenses that receive coverage in the mainstream press are offenses that are perpetrated by schoolteachers against teenage boys (Female Sex Offenders, 2009; Frei, 2008). Importantly for the public understanding of these crimes based on the media’s framing, these news stories often include terms such as “sexual

affair” or “relationship,” rather than language like “sexual abuse” or “rape,” as is the case when the offender is male (Chiotti, 2009; Landor, 2009; Plumm, Nelson, & Terrance, 2012). Variation in how female sex offenders are presented in the media compared to males can affect society’s perception of sex offenders and reinforce the cultural denial of female sexual predators.

Sex Differences in the Perception of Sex Crimes

Haraway (1988) argued that knowledge is relative to our positions, demographics and experiences. This ‘situated knowledge’ equates knowledge with perception, making it impossible to be completely objective because all knowledge is influenced by one’s gender, race, socioeconomic status and so forth (Haraway, 1988). Science tries to be objective, yet it is impossible to be objective from a position of “above,” or looking into a situation. The concept of situated knowledge supports the argument that males do not perceive female sex offenders the same as females. Given that we still live in a patriarchal society and status is not evenly distributed across sexes, it is impossible for those positioned more highly in society (e.g., financially, professionally) to have the same perception and/or knowledge of those positioned below them (Haraway, 1988). Females are generally situated below males in society, thus it is likely their views vary from males.

It is possible that males and females attribute difference causes to female sex offenders based on their own gender roles. For example, men might not see a woman fondling a boy as abusive because of the notion that boys should want sex with older women. Researchers have argued that males are socialized to be flattered and

appreciative of sexual interest from a female (Anderson & Swainson, 2001; Smith et al., 1988; Struckman-Johnston & Struckman-Johnston, 1994). On the other hand, women might view another woman fondling a boy as completely inappropriate and as abusive. In summary, we cannot assume men and women view female sex offenders the same until research has examined this point.

Several studies have found significant sex differences in the perception of rape and sexual assault, particularly in their judgments about who is at fault. For example, males tended to minimize male-on-male rape and blame victims more than females do (Mitchell et al., 1999; Wakelin & Long, 2003; White & Yamawaki, 2009). Males also exhibited more punitive attitudes toward female rape victims than females (Jiminez & Abreu, 2003; Joohee, Pomeory, Seo-Koo, & Rheinboldt, 2005; Nagel, Matsuo, McIntyre, & Morrison, 2005; Pollard, 1992). Females were significantly more likely to encourage victims to seek police intervention, where males were more likely to blame the victim for their sexual assault (Frese et al., 2004, Kopper, 1996). Researchers have also found males do not acknowledge that males have been sexually victimized by female perpetrators (Davies, 2002; Davies & Rogers, 2006; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1996).

Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) argued that men are more likely to accept rape myths, which are attitudes that serve to deny, trivialize, or justify rape. For example, high school boys were more likely than girls to endorse 'token resistance' statements like, "girls who say no don't really mean it" (Geiger, Fischer, & Eshet, 2004). Token resistance beliefs minimize the responsibility males have when they coerce or force women into sex and effect perceptions of rape (Osman, 2003).

Sex differences in the perception of perpetrators of sex crimes also exist. Research has found that men are less punitive toward the perpetrator of forced sexual intercourse and date rape (Bell et al., 1994; Langley, et al., 1991; McDonald & Kline, 2004; Pollard, 1992; Ryckman et al., 1998). Females were more likely to judge a scenario of forced sexual intercourse between a dating couple as rape and as a crime than males were (Black & Gold, 2008; Foley, Evancic, Karnik, King, & Parks, 1995). Black and Gold (2008) found that female participants rated men who date raped a female as more responsible for their actions and deserving of punishment than males did. Overall research suggests that males are biased in favor of perpetrators and women are biased are in favor of victims.

To date, researchers have primarily focused on the attitudes of professionals toward sex offenders (e.g., correctional officers, police officers, psychologists). There is little research that examines the public's perception of female sex offenders. To address this gap in the literature, this thesis tested four questions. First, do people accept that females can be sex offenders? Second, what attributions are given for females who commit sex offenses? Third, are there sex differences in the perception that females can be sex offenders? Finally, are there sex differences in the perception of why females sexually offend? Society has primarily focused on men as sex offenders, and as a result, it is possible that and there are misconceptions about the diversity of sex offenders. This thesis will help us determine if there a general culture of denial as argued by some researchers. If the public acknowledges that women are capable of sexual offending it may help them recognize female offenders, reduce under-reporting, and build support for victims of female sex offenders.

CHAPTER II

Data and Methods

This study used survey data to examine the public's perception of female sex offenders. I am not testing a theory or the media's effect on public perception, thus survey research is the best method to collect information about the public's knowledge and opinion toward female sex offenders. Maxfield and Babbie (2005) noted that survey research is one of the most proficient and cost effective means to get information on demographics, attitudes, perceptions and the opinion of the general public. Ultimately, such information can contribute to understanding the public's awareness and attitudes toward female sex offenders. It is important to know whether the public acknowledges that women are capable of sexual offending. If they do not, it would be beneficial to better educate the public that sex offenders can be men or women. As noted previously, it is important to educate the public on realities of sex crimes because their opinion effects crime reporting.

Survey methodology has advantages and disadvantages, which are important to note. Advantages of survey methodology are that surveys can be administered relatively easy, they are fairly cheap, and they can offer generalizable conclusions if the sample is representative of the population of interest (Maxfield & Babbie, 2005). Surveys allow for flexibility and standardization in determining how the questions will be administered, which can be both an advantage and disadvantage. Standardized questions and responses may miss what is relevant to some respondents. Surveys be can viewed as rigid and inflexible because they do not allow for change throughout the data collection process.

Another disadvantage is that some participants may not be able to answer questions accurately or truthfully, due to a variety of issues with memory or embarrassment about a sensitive topic, which can create reliability issues (Maxfield & Babbie, 2005).

Sampling Design

I used the 2012 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS) from the Bureau of Sociological Research (BOSR) at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. The 2012 NASIS is a mail survey that was administered using a postal delivery sequence to 3,600 Nebraska household addresses that were randomly selected and purchased from Survey Sampling International. The survey captures basic demographic information, quality-of-life topics, general social indicators, and several specific topics (i.e., attitudes toward gun laws, taxes, and female sex offenders). These data were collected between June 14, 2012 and September 12, 2012.

Reminder post cards were sent to all non-responders three weeks after the initial mailing. A second survey was mailed to all non-responders four weeks after the first reminder post card. Additionally, a third survey packet was mailed to remaining non-responders three weeks later (August 6, 2012). A total of 954 completed surveys were received and processed by BOSR (27.2% response rate, which is consistent with mail survey expectations). Of the 3,600 addresses sampled, two cases were identified as ineligible households (e.g., nursing home, uninhabited house), 1.4 percent refused to answer (e.g., returned blank surveys; sent a letter, e-mail, or phone call stating refusal to participate), 8.0 percent were undeliverable addresses, and 61.8 percent (n=2,224) were unknown/non-responsive.

Demographics of Sample

The sample consisted mostly of White participants (90.9%) and participants who lived in a city or town (81.2%) versus those living in the open country (10.2%) or on a farm (8.6%). There were 34 cases missing from the first question of whether respondents thought females could commit sex crimes, which left 96.5 percent of the sample (n = 925). The final sample was weighted to reflect the demographic characteristics of the state of Nebraska. The first column of Table 1 shows the population age and sex characteristics for Nebraska based on census estimates. The second column shows the age and sex frequencies found in the NASIS data prior to weighting. The final column of Table 1 presents the frequencies after weighting the data. A comparison of column 1 and column 3 suggests that this is a representative sample of adults in Nebraska.

Table 1: *Representativeness of 2012 NASIS Sample by Age and Sex (Percentage Distribution in Age and Sex Categories)*

Category	2010 Census Estimate	NASIS Unweighted	NASIS Weighted
AGE			
19-44	46.4%	21.3%	47.0%
45-64	35.2%	44.2%	34.8%
65+	18.4%	34.5%	18.1%
SEX			
Male	49.6%	45.8%	49.1%
Female	50.4%	54.2%	50.9%

Survey Instrument and Variables

The purpose of the NASIS is to provide current and topical information about Nebraskans and monitor change in quality of life. The 2012 NASIS is 16 pages long and contains 105 questions (a total of 259 items). The survey primarily consisted of close-

ended questions that elicited information using forced choice categorical responses. A few questions had “other-specify” options in which participants could specify an open-ended response. The data collection instrument is designed to meet the needs of several researchers at the University of Nebraska and a variety of public agencies in Nebraska. There were 10 questions related to the public’s knowledge and attitudes toward female sex offenders included on the survey.

Independent variable. Given my interest in sex differences in the perception of female sex offenders, sex was the only independent variable examined in this thesis. While it would be interesting to look at other independent variables that may affect individual’s perceptions of sex offenders, the scope of my questions do not probe into further variables. Demographic information about the sample is presented in Table 1. Sex was coded to represent female (0 = men, 1 = women).

Dependent variables. The dependent variables examined were based on two questions concerning respondents’ knowledge of female sex offenders. The first question was a yes/no filter question that asked: Do you think females commit sex crimes? If respondents answered “no,” they were instructed to skip to the next section of questions. Respondents who answered yes were provided with eight multiple-choice options of why they believed females commit sex crimes, derived from previous research, (e.g., Gannon & Rose, 2008; Robertiello & Terry, 2007; Sandler & Freeman, 2007; Wijkman, Bijleveld & Hendriks, 2010). Seven dichotomous variables were created from the eight options. There were 68 respondents who did not respond and were coded missing for this question, leaving 801 respondents. Psychological disorders and mental health problems were combined into a single measure of psychological disorder/mental health problems

(coded 1). The remaining six options were coded 1 to represent each of the following causes: need affection, have low self esteem, have low self control, all of these reasons, other reasons, and do not know.

CHAPTER III

Results

Two types of analyses were used to answer my research questions. First, univariate statistics were used to address the two questions of whether females are perceived as capable sex offenders and the underlying reasons for committing their offenses. The second two questions regarding sex differences in the responses to the first two questions were examined through chi-squared tests. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 20.

Public Perceptions of Female Sex Offenders

To determine whether the respondents thought women were capable of committing a sex crime, I ran a simple frequency distribution. As can be seen in Table 2, the results suggest the majority of respondents believed females could commit sex crimes (93.9%). Only about six percent of respondents said that females could not commit sex crimes, which was expected to be higher based on notions of cultural denial.

Table 2. *Frequencies of whether respondents believe females can commit sex crimes.*

<u>Can females</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
<u>commit sex</u>	<u>YES</u>	56 (6.1%)
<u>crimes?</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	869 (93.9%)
		925 (100%)

To determine why the public thinks women commit sex crimes, I ran a simple frequency (see Table 3). The most common response was “all of these reasons,” with almost 64 percent of respondents selecting this option. The next most common response

was “don’t know,” with 19.3 percent of respondents selecting this option. The percentage difference between the first and second most selected options suggests that people overwhelmingly responded that all the choices were reasons for female sex offending.

Table 3. *Frequencies of perceptions why females sexually offend.*

Why females sexually offend:	(N= 801)
All of These Reasons	511 (63.8%)
Don’t Know	155 (19.3%)
Psychological Disorder/Mental Health Problems	68 (8.5%)
Lack Self-Control	25 (3.1%)
Need Affection	23 (2.9%)
Have Low Self Esteem	16 (2.0%)
Other reasons (specify)	3 (0.4%)

The remainder of the choices had single digit agreement and next most common choice selected was ‘have psychological disorder or mental health problems,’ with 8.5 percent selecting this option. The option ‘lack self-control’ was selected by 3.1 percent of respondents, followed by the option ‘need affection’ at 2.9 percent, and ‘have low self esteem’ at 2.0 percent. There were a few respondents who said females offended for ‘other reasons’ and specified their perception of other reason in an opened ended format. Two of these ‘other’ respondents said the female sex offenders were sinners and one said, ‘the female was probably sexually abused herself as a child.’ The majority of respondents either attributed the causes of female sex offending to everything or they did not know what caused it. Respondents were less willing to attribute a single cause to female sexual offending.

Sex Differences in Perception of Female Sex Offenders

To examine whether there were sex differences in the perception that women could be sex offenders, I conducted a chi-squared test. As can be seen in Table 4, there were no significant sex differences in the perception that females could be sex offenders. This finding means that men were just as likely as women to respond that females could commit sex crimes.

Table 4. Chi-Square test for sex difference in respondent's belief that females can commit sex crimes.

		<u>MALE</u>	<u>FEMALE</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
<u>Can females</u>	<u>NO</u>	29 (6.4%)	27 (5.7%)	56 (6.1%)
<u>commit sex</u>	<u>YES</u>	422 (93.6%)	447 (94.2%)	869 (93.9%)
<u>crimes?</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	451 (100%)	474 (100%)	925 (100%)

(Pearson Chi Square = .640)

For my final set of analyses, I conducted chi-squared tests to test for sex differences in the perception of reasons why women commit sex crimes. The results, presented in Table 5, suggested there were significant differences between men and women regarding the reasons for female sex offending. Specifically, men were significantly more likely than females to say that females sexually offended solely because they 'need affection,' ($\chi^2 = 5.704, p < .05$) 'have low self esteem,' ($\chi^2 = 9.647, p < .01$) or 'lack self-control' ($\chi^2 = 9.531, p < .01$). Women, on the other hand, were significantly more likely than men to say females sexually offend for all of given reasons ($\chi^2 = 7.190, p < .01$). In other words, men were more likely than women to believe that females commit sex crimes for exclusively emotional reasons.

Alternatively, men and women were equally likely to say female offenders had psychological disorders or mental health problems (8.3% and 8.9%; $\chi^2 = .090, p < .05$). Men and women were also equally likely to say they did not know why females commit

sex crimes ($\chi^2 = .000$, $p < .05$). Overall, while the findings indicated that there were no sex differences in the perception that females can be sex offenders, there were some significant sex differences in perceptions why females commit sex offenses. Respondents were less willing to attribute female sex offending to just one reason, and women were less likely than men to select a sole reason. In particular, men were more likely than women to respond in a way consistent with female stereotypes.

Table 5. Chi-Square tests for sex differences in perceptions of sex crimes.

<u>Why females sexually offend:</u>	<u>MEN</u> (N= 408)	<u>WOMEN</u> (N=393)	χ^2 VALUE
Psych. Disorder/Mental Health Problems	33 (8.1%)	35 (8.9%)	.090
Need Affection	18 (4.4%)	5 (1.3%)	5.704*
Have Low Self Esteem	14 (3.4%)	2 (0.5%)	9.637***
Lack Self-Control	21 (5.1%)	5 (1.3%)	9.531***
All of These Reasons	242 (59.3%)	269 (68.4%)	7.190**
Don't Know	79 (19.3%)	76 (19.3%)	.000
Other reasons (specify)	1 (0.2%)	2 (0.5%)	.134

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

CHAPTER IV

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate the public's knowledge of female sex offenders. Due to the low prevalence of female sex offenders, gender stereotypes and the distinctive way they are presented in the media, previous research indicated that many people deny that women can be sexual offenders (Denov, 2001, 2004; Duncan, 2010; Hisop, 2001; Mathis, 1972; Sgroi & Sargent, 1993; Smith, Pine, & Hawley, 1988). The results of my analysis, however, showed that almost 94 percent of respondents believed women were capable of committing a sex crime. There were no significant differences between men and women in their belief that females can be sex offenders.

The almost universal belief that females can be sex offenders may be an outcome of the increased media attention since the early 2000's on adult female teachers that have sex with underage boys. As discussed earlier, the majority of cases concerning female sex offenders that have received mainstream press involve a sexual relationship between a female teacher and an underage boy (Female Sex Offenders, 2009; Frei, 2008). Perhaps exposure to female sex offenders through the media has reduced cultural denial. At the very least, media exposure has expanded peoples' perception of sex offenders to also include females as perpetrators. Specific to my findings, Nebraska had a case in 2006 where a sixth grade math teacher was accused of having a sexual relationship with one of her 12-year-old male students in a town of 12,000 people. Kelsey Peterson, the 26-year-old teacher, fled to Mexico with the 13-year-old boy after school officials discovered their relationship in 2007. This led authorities on a weeklong search for the teacher and

youth. The Peterson case was covered extensively on national and local news from 2007 through 2009, when she finally plead guilty to felony sexual assault.

There was another case in Nebraska in April 2012 (two months before the survey data were collected), where a 35-year-old woman was accused of pimping out her 7 and 14-year-old daughters on Craigslist. Court documents noted that the mother watched while the 14-year-old daughter had sex at least twenty times with at least seven men (Lincoln Journal Star, June 2012). She also let at least three men have sex with her seven year old daughter. This case continued to be covered in local news throughout the time of the survey. These two local, but highly covered events may have artificially inflated the percentage of people who agreed that females could be sex offenders. Unlike other cases between a female adult and underage victim, the language used in the media made it clear that these women were sex offenders. More research is needed to determine whether this high level of awareness can be found in other states. Additionally, it would be interesting to examine whether there is any decay in the perceptions of females as sex offenders among residents of Nebraska as these cases fade from public memory.

The respondents in this study were given seven reasons why females commit sex offenses. The overwhelming majority of respondents in this study did not pick one of these reasons, but rather picked the option that reflected all of the reasons. Additional analyses showed that women were more likely than men to select the option that reflected all of the reasons, although both sexes chose this option more than any single option. Upon closer inspection, I found that men and women differed in attributing female sex offending to needing affection, having low self-esteem and having low self-control. In particular, men were significantly more likely than women to select one of these options.

In other words, men were more likely than females to believe that women commit sex crimes for reasons that are consistent with traditional stereotypes of women being needy, insecure and impulsive. Perhaps males are more likely to view female sex offenders as characteristic of traditional gender traits, although more research is needed to examine these differential attributions.

Alternatively, men and women were equally likely to say female sex offenders had psychological disorders or mental health problems. The perception of mental illness among female sex offenders is consistent with prior research on the opinions of treatment professionals (Christopher, Lutz-Zois, & Reinhardt, 2007; Green & Kaplan, 1994; Tardif et al, 2005). Future researchers should examine whether there are different attributions given to why males and females sexually offend. In particular, it would be interesting to determine whether respondents would say males sexually offend because they need affection or have low self-esteem.

Limitations

There are a few limitations of my study that warrant discussion. To begin, I presented simple statistics and more complicated analysis would further expand what we know about this topic. Future research would benefit from including characteristics that have been previously shown to affect citizen opinion, such as age, race, marital status and so forth (e.g., Anderson & Sample, 2008). Another limitation is that the findings of this thesis may not be generalizable to other states or the general population of the United States because the sample is drawn from Nebraska and weighted to represent the adult population of Nebraska. Despite these non-fatal limitations, information from this thesis

can be used to determine whether the public acknowledges that females can commit sex crimes and examine the attributes they contribute to female offenders.

Additionally, it is worth noting that there could be inherent bias in the questions and standardized responses given in the survey. Standardized responses force participants to choose a response that may not capture their exact opinion or attitude, resulting in decreased internal validity. Close-ended responses on surveys are, at best, an approximate indicator of the concept the researcher has in mind when they conceptualize a question (Maxfield & Babbie, 2005). Female sex offenders (and sex offenders in general) are a complex topic that may be difficult to gather information about people's perception in a close-ended format.

It is also worth noting that content validity could be a limitation in this study because a definition of "sex crimes" was not provided for the first question, which may have led to some confusion about what constitutes a sex crime. Brillon (1988) argued that participants tend to think of the most severe types of crimes when completing these types of studies. The language used in this survey left the definition of 'sex crimes' and inclusion or exclusion of sexual acts up to the participants. This limitation is not a fatal flaw because the lack of definition for sex crime or sex offender is in line with previous research (with the exception of Ferguson & Ireland, 2006; Kernsmith et al., 2009). On the other hand, this could be viewed as a strength of this study because the respondents' perceptions were not biased by providing them with a legal or psychological definition of sex crime. Future research would benefit from defining sex crime or asking participants more about their understanding of sex crimes.

Implications

Although this study found high levels of agreement that women are capable of committing sex crimes, we do not know what types of sex crimes the public acknowledges females are capable of committing. As previously noted, female sexual predators are most often convicted of sexual offenses against children (Faller, 1987; Lewis & Stanley, 2000; Rosencrans, 1997; Vandiver & Walker, 2002). Sex crimes against children committed by females may not be recognized as much as the stereotypical teacher-student relationship because it is more taboo (Harrison, 1993; Matthews, 1993; Peters, 2009). Child sexual abuse can affect victims throughout their lifetime with a wide range of mental and physical health problems, such as depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexually transmitted diseases, risky sexual behavior (Dube et al, 2005). Due to these possible affects, raising awareness and ensuring the public is accurately informed about female sex offenders is essential to prevent child abuse.

In order to accomplish this, gender stereotypes around female sex offenders and male victims of sexual abuse need to be addressed. Current sexual abuse education programs are geared exclusively around male offenders and female victims (CSOM, 2007; Denov, 2004; Saradjian, 2010). Education programs like these are often part of a curriculum to those in law enforcement, child protective services, and mental health fields. Existing programs on sexual assault and child sexual abuse could incorporate information on female offenders and male victims to help remedy gender stereotypes. Education programs that provide accurate, straightforward and gender-neutral information about sex offenders and their victims may help professionals who deal with

victims of child abuse.

Schools should also take an active role in promoting gender-neutral education about sexual abuse and sex offenders. Gender stereotypes about female sex offenders could be addressed in schools so that teachers and students recognize that sex crimes can be perpetrated by either gender. Education programs on human sexuality provided to schoolchildren of all levels are also necessary to prevent child sexual abuse and stereotypes around sex crimes. Teaching children about sexuality, appropriate boundaries, and the difference between consent and coercion will help them establish healthy sexual relationships and reduce the likelihood of their own victimization. Educating children that sex offenders can be male or female, old or young, strangers or people they know, may help them report abuse they experience. Gender-neutral programs that educate people on sex crimes will help them recognizing signs of sexual abuse, report suspicious behavior and prevent gender stereotypes around offending.

Directions for Future Research

Prior researchers have argued that sexual offenses committed by females are under-reported and viewed as less harmful to victims due to gender stereotypes (Byers, 1996; Jackson, 1978; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006; Koss and Harvey, 1991; Lorber, 2001). Gender stereotypes, sex scripts and the media's portrayal of female sex offenders was believed to create skepticism that women are capable of such acts (Denov, 2003, 2004). Analyses from this thesis, however, revealed that the public is informed that females are capable of committing sex crimes. What remains unknown is whether the public believes female sex offenders are the stereotypical teacher who has a sexual relationship with a student or whether the public is informed that offenders can be

mothers, daycare workers or college students who sexually assault other students.

Further research into the public's perception of female sex offender would be beneficial to determine how informed the public is on this issue. The more informed the public is, the more likely they are to recognize offenders and/or victims of sexual abuse.

Respondents were most likely to believe that females commit sexual offenses for all of the reasons they were provided with or they did not know why females commit sex crimes. Males were much more likely to hold views consistent with female stereotypes, such as attributing the behavior to being emotional. Further research is necessary to determine why males and females perceive female sex offenders and sex crimes in general differently. Perhaps a study that directly compares the public's attitude toward male versus female sex offenders would be helpful in investigating this area further. Given sex differences in the perception of rape and sexual assault based on the sex of the victim, perpetrator and the study participant, it would be interesting to investigate attitudes toward female sex offenders who victimize males and females, versus males who victimize males and females. Prior research on gendered perceptions of sex crimes has revealed a lot using vignette methodology (see Rogers, Hirst, & Davies, 2012 for review) and this type of methodology could be useful to exam the four combinations of offender's sex and the victim's sex.

Future research would also benefit from asking participants whether they have had any contact with a known sex offender and the nature of that contact. Situated knowledge suggests that our perceptions are relative to our positions, demographics and experiences (Haraway, 1988), thus it would also be important to look at individuals' past experiences (e.g., have they ever been sexually victimized, have they ever perpetrated a

sexual assault, do they know someone close to them that has suffered from sexual abuse). A history of sexual victimization, sexual aggression or working with sex offenders or victims (Gakhal & Brown, 2011) would likely affect one's perception of sex crimes.

Large-scale longitudinal studies of victims of sexual abuse by both males and females would also be helpful to compare the short-term and long-term damage done to victims. This would help our understanding of sexual abuse and enable treatment professionals to create effective treatment programs for victims. Previous research suggests that perpetrators of sex crimes were often victims themselves, especially males, who are less likely to report their abuse because of stereotypes (Hindman & Peters, 2001; Salter, 2003; Salter et al., 2003). It is important to note, however, that not all victims of sexual abuse become perpetrators (Salter et al., 2003) and not all sexual offenders have experienced sexual abuse in childhood (Simons, 2007). Males victimized by a female during childhood appear to be the most likely to become offenders, although larger sample studies are needed to confirm initial findings (Glasser et al., 2001). In sum, treating victims of sexual abuse may minimize future sexual abuse, thus it is important for victims of female perpetrators to be recognized so they can receive treatment.

In conclusion, the research presented in this thesis is important to policy makers, parents and researchers interested in sex offenders generally, and female sex offenders in particular. Sex offender policies are intended to give citizens the tools necessary to recognize, and by extension, report potential sex offenses. It is important that citizens do not differentially report sex crimes based on whether the offender is male or female. Additionally, the media can support public assessments of females as sex offenders through the language used in the media accounts of female perpetrated sex crimes.

Victims of sexual assault need to be confident that they will receive positive treatment from those that they disclose their abuse to, regardless of their gender, age, sexuality, or the gender of their perpetrator. The public plays a key role in recognizing, reporting and responding to victims who come forward to ensure that the victims receive the proper treatment and that the perpetrators are stopped from causing future harm.

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APPENDIX A – SURVEY

1.) Do you think females commit sex crimes?

- a. No → Go to Question #60
- b. Yes

2.) Female sex offenders commit sex offenses because they: (Multiple Choice)

- a. have psychological disorders
- b. need affection
- c. have low self-esteem
- d. have mental health problems
- e. lack self-control
- f. other reasons (specify)
- g. all of these reasons
- h. don't know