

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Female Sex Offenders:
An examination into university student attitudes
regarding adult sexual behaviour towards children

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology at Massey University,

Albany, New Zealand

Julie Lynell Aitken

2009

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to examine university student attitudes regarding illegal sexual behaviour of women towards children. Attitudes toward sexual abuse are an undeveloped area of research, particularly when a woman perpetrates the abuse. Sexual offences committed by women are rare, although low estimates are speculated to be a result of the myths surrounding the sexual nature of women and the gender role prescribed for them by society. Victims are less likely to report abuse by a female, and authorities are less likely to believe victims of female perpetrated abuse. To examine whether these findings hold true within the New Zealand population, attitudes towards adult sexual behaviours were investigated, using vignettes and the attitudes regarding women's and men's sexualised behaviour towards children questionnaire. The Massey University students in the present study were found to hold different attitudes towards male and female sexual behaviour, following a similar pattern to a United Kingdom study of social workers and police officers. Female sexual behaviour was perceived as less serious and less harmful compared to male sexual behaviour. Effects on the victims of female-perpetrated abuse are discussed as well as future directions for the research of attitudes towards women who commit sexual abuse against children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Mei Williams, whose practical and astute knowledge enabled me to complete this work. I thank you for your time, perspective, and most notably, your patience in supporting and pushing me that bit further. I also would like to thank the crime lab attendees for making it to the meetings and sharing your difficulties and experience of postgraduate studies. We all shared thesis anxiety, and without you, my perspective on the why, how, and what of thesis completion would have been lost. I thank you for your support, thoughtful suggestions, and sense of humour. I would also like to thank Joy Oehlers, Jane Clarke, Fiona Alpass, Janet Mak, and Julie Bunnell for all of their support and administrative advice that has made my journey that bit easier.

I would like to thank my family, who never doubted my decision in embarking on this journey, and who have shown patience and immense support. Words of motivation and encouragement over dinners were a much required and appreciated part of this journey. I extend my heart to my friends and partner; I thank you for always asking how I was going and providing long distance support.

I would lastly like to thank the participants. The area of sexual offending is not an easy topic to discuss, and I thank you all for your time and the thought that went into your responses. I respect and admire that some of you may have brought personal experience into the study, whilst I also respect those who couldn't apologise enough for their lack of knowledge. It was the intent of this study to encompass such differences, and I hope that each of you took something useful away from this experience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Tables.....	viii
List of Figures.....	ix
CHAPTER 1:	
INTRODUCTION	
1.1 Women and Crime.....	1
1.2 Prevalence of Female Sex Offenders.....	2
1.3 Methodolical Issues in the Reporting of Child Sexual Abuse Crimes.....	3
1.4 Definition of Child Sexual Abuse.....	5
CHAPTER 2:	
PROFILE OF FEMALE SEX OFFENDERS	
2.1 Motivations and Typologies of Female Sex Offenders.....	11
2.2 Characteristics of Offenders and their Victims.....	16

CHAPTER 3:

THE UNDER-REPORTING PHENOMENON

3.1	Myths of Female Perpetrated Child Sex Abuse.....	20
3.2	Allen's Three Causal Factors for the Under-Reporting of Female Sexual Abuse.....	22
3.3	The Sexist Double Standard.....	24

CHAPTER 4:

ATTITUDES TOWARDS FEMALE SEX OFFENDERS

4.1	The Influence of the Media and the Current New Zealand Climate.....	27
4.2	Public Interest and Government Legislation.....	28
4.3	Attitudes towards Child Sex Abusers.....	30

CHAPTER 5:

THE PRESENT STUDY

5.1	Aims and Hypotheses.....	33
-----	--------------------------	----

CHAPTER 6:

METHOD

6.1	Research Design.....	35
6.2	Participants.....	35

	Page
6.3	Measures.....36
6.3.1	Vignette.....36
6.3.2	Attitudes regarding women’s sexualised behaviour towards children questionnaire.....38
6.3.3	Attitudes regarding men’s sexualised behaviour towards children questionnaire.....39
6.4	Procedure.....39
6.4.1	Pilot Study.....40
6.4.2	Recruitment of Participants.....41
6.4.3	Data Collection.....42

CHAPTER 7:

RESULTS

7.1	Data Screening.....44
7.2	Vignette45
7.3	Attitudes questionnaires.....51
7.4	The Interaction Effect57

CHAPTER 8:

DISCUSSION

8.1	Vignette-Influence of Gender of the Offender.....59
8.2	Student Attitudes regarding Male and Female sexual behaviour towards children.....60
8.3	The Effect of Participant Gender and Vignette Gender on Attitudes towards adult sexual behaviour.....61
8.4	Limitations and Future Directions of the Current Study.....62
8.5	Summary and Conclusion.....66

	Page
REFERENCES.....	67
APPENDIX A Copy of Vignette	81
APPENDIX B Attitudes regarding Women’s Sexualised Behaviour towards Children Questionnaire.....	84
APPENDIX C Attitudes regarding Men’s Sexualised Behaviour towards Children Questionnaire.....	87
APPENDIX D Recruitment Poster	90
APPENDIX E Participant Information Sheet.....	92
APPENDIX F Correlation Tables of Attitude Items.....	95

LIST OF TABLES

		Page
Table 1	Demographic Characteristics of the Sample.....	38
Table 2	Correlation between Vignette items	46
Table 3	Comparison of Mean Scores of Items on the Vignette Questionnaires.....	47
Table 4	Comparison of Mean total scores of five items between Vignettes.....	48
Table 5	Comparison of Mean Total Scores on Anna and Andrew Vignettes for all five items by Participant Gender.....	49
Table 6	Total Mean Scores obtained by Participants.....	50
Table 7	Varimax Rotation of Two-Factor Solution for Attitudes regarding women’s sexualised behaviour towards children questionnaire.....	53
Table 8	Varimax Rotation of Two-Factor Solution for Attitudes regarding Men’s sexualised behaviour towards children questionnaire.....	54
Table 9	Mean scores obtained from the Attitudes regarding women’s sexualised behaviour towards children questionnaire in Hetherington and Beardsall’s (1998) study.....	57

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Figure 1 Mean scores obtained on the two Attitude Questionnaires.....56