
A Qualitative Assessment of Registered Female Sex Offenders

Judicial Processing Experiences and Perceived Effects of a Public Registry

Donna M. Vandiver

Texas State University, San Marcos

Kelly Cheeseman Dial

The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg

Robert M. Worley

University of Texas of the Permian Basin, Odessa

In this study, the effect that the sex offender registry has had on female sex offenders in two states is explored. In-depth personal interviews were conducted with nine registered female sex offenders from Illinois and Texas. Questions were asked about the arrest that led to registration and the effect that sex offender registration statutes have had on their lives. Braithwaite's crime, shame, and reintegration theory was relied on to assess the extent to which the processes described in his theory occurred in this sample. The focus of many of the questions included whether the women were able to reintegrate into their communities or if they were stigmatized. It was found that every respondent reported at least one negative effect on her life as a result of being identified on the public registry. Also, many of the stigmatization processes described by Braithwaite were applicable to the interviewed women.

Keywords: *registered female sex offenders; Braithwaite's crime, shame, and reintegration theory; interview*

Recently, lawmakers have focused on the dangerousness of sex offenders, which has led to increased sanctions, including (but not limited to) sex offender registration laws (Sample & Bray, 2003). Megan's Law (2001) was passed in 1996 and amended the Jacob Wetterling Act (2003). The Wetterling Act requires law enforcement officials to maintain a sex offender registry, and Megan's Law allows for that registry to be made public. This Act was passed on the presumption that if people know that a sex offender lives in their neighborhood, they will be more alert and, therefore, avoid victimization. Crime control advocates contend that such laws assist in the investigation of ongoing sex crimes and empower parents by allowing them to know the whereabouts of convicted sex offenders (Denning, 2005).

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Others, however, label such efforts as “feel-good legislation.” Some scholars presume that sex offender registration statutes were passed to console victims’ families and do not prevent additional criminal activity (Freeman-Longo, 2002). It has also been suggested that public registries can lead to the victimization of those required to register. As noted by Tewksbury (2004), many of the sentencing and policy guidelines have far-reaching effects, beyond just that of the victim, the offender, and the community. Studies specifically geared toward the unintended consequences of a public registry are lacking.

Freeman-Longo (2002) argues that being female and a registered sex offender poses unique problems. During his research, he encountered one woman who refused to release any information about her case due to the profound negative effect the registration laws had on her life. Few studies have specifically focused on women who sexually offend. Although women made up only 7% of the approximately 74,000 arrests for rape and other sexual offenses in 2004, the number of (adult) women arrested for sexual offenses increased by 11% from 1995 to 2004 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005b). Moreover, the number of juvenile girls arrested for a sex offense increased by 51% in a recent 10-year span, whereas the overall rate of sexual offense arrests has decreased (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005b). Several researchers have found that sexual abuse, in general, is highly underreported (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; U.S. Department of Justice, 2005a). Many victims may simply not disclose the abuse, and the problem is further compounded when the offender is female (Denov, 2004). The effect that the registry has on these women is unknown. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to explore the experiences of women processed as sex offenders in the criminal justice system and to describe the effects of a public sex offender registry. More specifically, their experiences are assessed in terms of their ability to successfully reintegrate themselves into society. Key areas of focus include their ability to obtain housing and employment along with maintaining key interpersonal relationships with friends and family members.

Literature Review

Female Sex Offenders

Empirical research on female sex offenders began to appear in the 1980s (Tewksbury, 2004) and has increased in recent years; thus, attention and knowledge about this group of offenders are growing. The typical female sex offender is relatively young, in her 20s or 30s (Faller, 1987; Farrell, 1988; Lewis & Stanley, 2000; Nathan & Ward, 2002; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004; Vandiver & Walker, 2002), and Caucasian (Faller, 1987, 1995; Rosencrans, 1997; Vandiver, 2006; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004; Vandiver & Walker, 2002). Several researchers have also found a moderate degree of mental retardation, borderline cognition function, or brain damage in this population (Faller, 1987, 1988; Lewis & Stanley, 2000; Rowan, Rowan, & Langelier, 1990). Drug and alcohol abuse are also commonly reported (Faller, 1987, 1995; Rosencrans, 1997). In addition, many female sex offenders, through self-reports, have indicated that they were physically and/or sexually abused as children (Lewis & Stanley, 2000; Miccio-Fonseca, 2000; Rosencrans, 1997). Some of these findings, however, may be an artifact of the data, given that many researchers have relied on a clinical sample.

In addition, some researchers (Mathews, 1987; Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; Mayer, 1992; McCarty, 1981, 1986; Nathan & Ward, 2002; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004) have developed a typology of women who sexually offend, which provides a more detailed description of the characteristics of female sex offenders. Several common categories have emerged from various classification schemes. For example, many researchers (Mathews et al., 1989; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004) have identified a category of women, nurturers, who engage in a sexual relationship with a younger male with whom they have some type of caretaking role (i.e., teacher, mentor, babysitter). Two researchers, using the largest sample of female sex offenders ($N = 471$; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004), reported that the majority of female sex offenders fit in this category.

In addition to nurturers, there are other types of female sex offenders. Co-offenders include women who sexually abuse with another person, typically a romantic male partner (Mathews et al., 1989; Mayer, 1992; McCarty, 1986; Nathan & Ward, 2001; Syed & Williams, 1996; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). These offenders' levels of participation are speculated to range from passive to active (Vandiver, 2006). In a national sample of 227 women arrested for a sexual offense, approximately half of the women acted with at least one other person (Vandiver, 2006). Thus, in preliminary studies, nurturers and co-offenders appear to make up a substantial portion of women who sexually offend. Nevertheless, the research indicates that there are other types of female sex offenders. Some women, for instance, engage in incestuous sexual relationships with their sons or daughters (Mathews et al., 1989; Mayer, 1992; McCarty, 1986; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). In these cases, it is not uncommon for sexual abuse to be prominent throughout the entire family.

In addition to women who engage in incestuous behaviors, there are those offenders who commit adult-on-adult offenses. These acts involve women who sexually assault other adult men or women (Mayer, 1992; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Syed & Williams, 1996; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Some have described this situation as a role reversal where a woman overtly rapes a man (Sarrel & Masters, 1982). Other types of female sex offenders include criminal (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004), psychologically impaired (McCarty, 1986), and homosexual molesters (Mayer, 1992). These classifications can overlap with other categories but also exhibit one of the following dominant characteristics: lengthy criminal history, mental illness, or homosexuality.

The majority of women who sexually offend know or are related to their victims. In a recent study, Vandiver and Kercher (2004) found that 83% of 471 female sex offenders knew or were related to their victims. This is consistent with Rudin, Zalewski, and Bodmer-Turner (1995), who found very similar results, although with a smaller sample size. Other scholars include reports of at least three quarters of the women in their samples being related to the victims (Faller, 1995; Syed & Williams, 1996; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Given that many female offenders sexually abuse those they know and usually those they are related to, having access to a public registry may not be of much use, given that it was developed (at least partly) on the assumption that victims-to-be could avoid the offenders as a precaution.

Prior research has shown that women who sexually offend differ substantially from their male counterparts (Faller, 1987). For example, several studies have illustrated that women are more likely to be arrested in conjunction with another person—usually a man; however, very few male offenders are arrested with someone (Vandiver, 2006). It has also been suggested that many women are coerced to take part in the abuse (Mathews, Hunter, & Vuz, 1997).

In a comparison of 18 female sex offenders with 332 male sex offenders, women were found to be significantly younger than male offenders and were more likely to have attempted suicide (Miccio-Fonseca, 2000). The women were also more likely than men to have been the victims of incest and rape. Women were more likely to have been sexually abused at an early age; 54% of the women (compared with 33% of men) were sexually abused by age 6. With regard to the response of criminal justice officials, Denov (2004) notes that many aspects of the system are set up to respond only to men who victimize women, which leads to the underreporting of female offender instances.

Laws Regulating Sex Offenders

Laws established to manage sex offenders are all-inclusive; therefore, they affect all cases, not just a small portion of sex offenders. Whereas the majority of statutes affecting those who commit crimes fall under state jurisdiction (which allows for variation among states), many laws affecting sex offenders fall under federal jurisdiction. The Wetterling Act and Megan's Law led to a public sex offender registry. In 2005, a national sex offender public registry was developed (Schofield, 2006). In *Kansas v. Hendricks* (1997), the U.S. Supreme Court allowed sex offenders to be maintained indefinitely through a civil commitment. At least 20 other states followed suit by developing similar laws (Winick, 1998).

Whereas many people accused of crimes have the opportunity to circumvent criminal justice proceedings through the use of plea bargains and evidentiary hearings requiring a modicum of evidence to proceed, sex offenders have fewer opportunities. For example, several states, including Texas, require even those who receive deferred adjudication to register as sex offenders (Hampton, 2001).

Many states and cities limit where sex offenders can live; Hamilton Township in New Jersey was the first to restrict sex offenders from living near schools, and many other states have made similar restrictions (Gentile, 2005). Florida and Missouri require lifetime monitoring for some sex offenders through global positioning systems (GPS), and it is likely that other states will follow suit. Furthermore, many states have included draconian measures that affect practically every aspect of the sex offender's life. For instance, chemical castration is a possible sanction for repeat offenders on parole in several states (i.e., California, Florida, Georgia, Colorado, Wisconsin, and Montana; Logan, 1999).

Effects of Public Sex Offender Registries

Despite media accounts of physical assaults on those publicly identified through a sex offender registry, only three studies have specifically examined the attitudes of registered sex offenders and the effects of their registration. One study included an anonymous survey of 183 male sex offenders recruited from outpatient treatment programs in Tampa and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). In this study, 15% reported losing jobs because of the sex offender registry. Eleven percent of these respondents reported that they had to change residences due to their status as a sex offender. Eighteen percent reported that their neighbors had harassed them. Only 3% reported that they had been physically assaulted or injured by someone who discovered that they were registered as a sex offender; yet, 10% reported that they had been threatened, harassed, assaulted, injured, or suffered

property damage as a result of being identified on the sex offender registry. Finally, 28% of these respondents reported that they had lost a close friend due to the public nature of the registry.

In another study, Tewksbury (2004) specifically assessed the attitudes of women who were registered sex offenders. In 2004, 227 women were registered in Kentucky and Indiana, with 204 women having deliverable addresses. The sample included 40 women who were contacted through a mail survey (Tewksbury, 2004), resulting in a response rate of approximately 20%. Approximately one third of the women reported losing a job (42.1%), being denied a place to live (31.6%), losing a friend (39.5%), experiencing in-person harassment (34.2%), or being treated rudely in public (31.6%) due to the registration.

Fewer women reported other adverse consequences of the registration, including denial of a promotion at work (10.5%), assault (10.5%), harassment/threats via telephone (10.5%) or mail (15.8%), or were asked to leave a business (2.6%) (Tewksbury, 2004). In addition, the overwhelming majority of the women reported that most of their friends, family, and coworkers were aware that they were registered sex offenders. Thus, this research indicates that the public sex offender registry can lead to harassment and interpersonal conflicts. It is not known, however, whether or not these findings generalize to other women who are registered sex offenders.

Theoretical Framework: Shaming With a Lack of Reintegration

Although this research is not designed to test Braithwaite's (1989) crime, shame, and reintegration theory, it will assess the extent to which the processes described in his theory occur after the implementation of sex offender registration laws. To the authors' knowledge, there is no evidence suggesting that either shaming or reintegration was part of the logic in proposing sex offender laws. Evidence shows, however, that many shaming mechanisms occur in the process of becoming a registered sex offender (see Tewksbury, 2004). In addition, there is no formal process of reintegrating sex offenders in the community. In fact, many jurisdictions are amending laws to restrict the movement of sex offenders for as long as possible—in many cases, for the rest of their lives.

Reintegrative shaming occurs when the members of a community take strong measures to integrate offenders back into the community following their conviction and punishment (Braithwaite, 1989). In essence, once offenders complete their sentences, they are given a "clean slate." Given the best of circumstances, these offenders will receive the support of their community and will be forgiven for their criminal acts. As Braithwaite contends, individuals who commit crimes in societies that use reintegrative shaming techniques are still able to find legitimate employment opportunities, have meaningful relationships, and lead productive lives, despite having had negative contact with the criminal justice system.

Braithwaite (1989) notes that stigmatization occurs when no effort is made to forgive the offender or acknowledge their character as "good." The offender then becomes an outcast and resorts to relying strictly on a criminal subculture; deviance becomes part of their personality. Their self-esteem is negatively affected, and they are "cut off from other interdependencies (with family, neighbors, church, etc.)" (p. 102). It is possible that the offender is blocked from legitimate opportunities to earn money; thus, the offender's livelihood is threatened. Braithwaite also acknowledges that this can occur on a systemic level; all members of a

particular group (e.g., Black slum dwellers) can be denied legitimate opportunities to earn money. A crucial component of Braithwaite's theory is that micro- and macro-level factors are included. He notes that the relationship between the individual and his or her community is key to understanding how offenders resort to committing subsequent crimes. Specifically, Braithwaite states,

The theory of reintegrative shaming is about how certain macro variables . . . and micro variables . . . affect choices to engage in various forms of purposive social action (shaming, stigmatizing, reintegrating) and how these affect other micro choices (to participate in a sub-culture, to engage in crime, to reintegrate oneself). (p. 110)

Key components of Braithwaite's (1989) theory include (a) interaction with government officials, (b) support provided by family, friends, and so on, (c) ability to obtain and maintain employment and housing, and (d) the effect of stigmatization on an actor's self-esteem.

Although the theory of reintegrative shaming has many important implications, some crimes may be more difficult to forgive than others. For example, sex crimes, especially those committed against children, are often viewed as unforgivable. This is evidenced by the ever-increasing laws that limit and monitor sex offenders for extended periods of time—in some instances, the rest of their lives. Essentially, most sex offenders are forced to wear a “scarlet letter,” even after serving long sentences in correctional facilities or completing their community supervision requirements.

Some have suggested that by focusing on such ancillary efforts (i.e., labeling the offender), the resources that could potentially result in positive benefits, such as mental health treatment, are sacrificed (Powers, 2003-2004). The stigma itself can lead to recidivism, especially given that such offenders often have low self-esteem, function in isolation from the community, and have insufficient communication skills (Freeman-Longo, 2002). Also, sex offenders often experience shaming in obtaining housing and employment as a result of being identified on public registries (Powers, 2003-2004).

Due to the public nature of sex offender registries, the stigma extends far beyond governmental entities (police, courts, probation/parole agencies) and involves family, communities, and society in general. Sex offenders, therefore, are stigmatized on both micro and macro levels, from their personal relationships to their functional levels within society (i.e., establishing a residence and gaining employment). No other offender is subjected to such public and systematic stigmatization, which affects every aspect of life from being recognized at a local grocery store to obtaining housing and employment. The effects of successive shaming with virtually no reintegration efforts need to be examined. The purpose of this study is to conduct in-depth interviews to provide more details about the effects of the registry.

With regard to assessing any theory, Braithwaite (1989) notes that an important component is to “observe and talk to actors who routinely deal with the phenomena addressed in the theory” (p. 108). In this study, women who are registered sex offenders are asked in-depth questions about their experiences after they were processed through the criminal justice system. Also, they are questioned about their personal relationships with family members and their attempt to gain employment and establish a residence after they have registered on a public sex offender registry. These are essential areas to examine. The potential effects they will have on the offender's family, friends, and authority figures representing society

(i.e., judge, attorney, correctional officers/probation officers) may have a profound effect on the successful or unsuccessful reintegration of the offender. In addition, being able to establish a residence and have a job are identified as key indicators of the extent to which the individual has been able to reintegrate into society or whether he or she has been stigmatized (Braithwaite, 1989). Thus, the purpose of this study is to describe the characteristics and experiences of female registered sex offenders and compare these with prior findings.

A key issue also addressed in this article is the examination of respondents' interactions with the justice system. This includes respondents' perceptions of attorney interactions, plea negotiations or trials, sentencing, and the carrying out of their sentences (including interactions with probation/parole officers and the prison experience). Consideration of typologies of female sexual offenders will also be addressed in this article (Mathews et al., 1989; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). In addition, it will assess the level of reintegration and/or stigmatization that is experienced by women who are registered as sex offenders. This research will build on prior research. Rather than analyzing aggregate cases, this study will provide detailed accounts of the personal experiences of women who have been placed on the sex offender registry.

Method

In this study, we conducted in-depth interviews with 9 female sex offenders in the central Illinois and east Texas region. The names of the female sex offenders were obtained through the Illinois and Texas Department of Public Safety's sex offender registries via the Internet. In central Illinois, 43 women were listed on the Web site as of January 7, 2003, in 11 different counties. Women made up less than 1% of the registered sex offenders in these 11 counties. In east Texas, 12 women were listed on the Web site as of July 15, 2005, within 4 counties. These respondents made up approximately 6% of the registered sex offenders within these 4 counties.

An initial letter was mailed to each woman listed on the registry. The letter explained that the purpose of the research was to conduct in-depth interviews of female sex offenders who lived in the area and asked for voluntary participation. A self-addressed stamped envelope was enclosed with an information sheet asking each potential respondent to include her phone number and preferred times to be reached if she was interested in being contacted for an interview. Nine women (five in Illinois and four in Texas) agreed to be interviewed in person. The interviews were conducted from March through May 2003 and from July through September 2005 in the respondents' homes. Each interview lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Female researchers conducted the interviews.¹

In Illinois, a 12% response rate was obtained, and in Texas, a 33% response rate was obtained. Those represented in this study were based on a convenience sample; only respondents who lived near the researchers and volunteered for an interview were included. Given the paucity of information that exists with regard to the effects of sex offender registries, the aim is not to generalize the results of this research to all registrants but rather to simply provide a baseline of information about a small group of registrants. Although research has been conducted on a larger sample (e.g., Tewksbury, 2004), only aggregate data have been examined.

The data collected in this project will establish preliminary information about the experiences of these women; thus, further research can be guided by the findings from this study. To date, there has been no other study where researchers have interviewed female sex offenders about their experiences associated with a public registry. This information will shed light on the unintended consequences of a registry and the extent that reintegration or stigmatization has occurred. More specifically, this study involves an assessment of information concerning the respondents' judicial processing characteristics (experiences with their attorneys and the sentences imposed) and the effect that the registry has had on their lives in terms of obtaining and maintaining employment, housing, and interpersonal relationships.

Instrument and Analysis

Each of the nine respondents participated in a semistructured interview with closed- and open-ended questions. The interview was semistandardized (see Berg, 2007) in that a modicum of structure was incorporated for the purpose of including standardized questions for comparison purposes, yet allowing for flexibility (i.e., follow-up questions). The questions focused on their demographics (date of birth and race), other background information (marital status, education level, and number of children/stepchildren), information about the arrest that led to registration, and the perceived effect that the sex offender registration has had on their lives (i.e., effect on obtaining and maintaining housing and employment and on personal relationships with friends, family members, and neighbors).

Questions concerning the type of legal representation acquired (public defender or hired attorney) and the offender's satisfaction level with the attorney were also asked. Other judicial processing questions were asked, such as whether a plea bargain was reached, the choice in taking or rejecting a proposed plea bargain, the sentence that was received, and the time that was actually served. In addition, questions about the actual offense were asked. These included queries concerning each respondent's offense of arrest, events surrounding the arrest, and sexual offense that led to the arrest. Also, respondents were asked about any type of harassment or other negative effects that they encountered as a result of the registration process. In addition to the baseline questions, if a respondent introduced a unique situation, she was asked additional follow-up questions. For example, one woman indicated that she was harassed extensively; follow-up questions concerning the extent and effects of the harassment were discussed through an informal conversation interview technique (see Patton, 2001).

During the interview, notes were taken; after the interview, the researcher included additional information for each of the interviews (see Maxfield & Babbie, 2006). A coding sheet was used during the interview and many of the answers to the closed-ended questions were simply recorded during the interview. In addition, a handheld computer (with a foldable keyboard) was used during most of the interviews; this allowed the interviewer to capture quotes and key phrases used by the interviewee.

Given the qualitative nature of the data collected, content analysis was employed. To develop interview categories, inductive and deductive measures were applied. Deductive categories, derived from an existing theoretical framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), were used from Braithwaite's (1989) crime, shame, and reintegration theory and Tewksbury's

(2004) research showing hardships in housing, employment, and interpersonal relationships among registered female sex offenders. After the interviews were conducted, these areas were coded by hand. Given the relatively small sample size ($n = 9$), the researchers did not feel compelled to use any computer software to aid in the coding process. In addition, inductive methods of deriving categories were used by reading through each interview and coding the category as they arose (see Abrahamson, 1983). Three primary categories were identified with several subcategories: (a) description of the offense (offense arrest, circumstances surrounding sexual offense, denial or acceptance of wrongdoing); (b) judicial processing characteristics (hired or appointed attorney, satisfaction with attorney, plea bargain, prison or mandated sex offender treatment); (c) consequences of registration (employment, housing, interpersonal relationships, attitude toward registration).

Unique confidentiality issues that are embedded in the nature of the project have affected the type of reporting or analysis that is possible. Due to the fact that each registrant's arrest and demographic information is posted on the Internet, it would be possible to track who the respondents are if details of each registrant's responses were presented in conjunction with her demographic information. Thus, reporting the information case by case is not a possibility. Instead, the results are organized by categories.

Respondents

Nine women who were registered as sex offenders in east Texas and central Illinois completed interviews. The women ranged in age from 31 to 64, with an average age of 44. All were Caucasian. Only one woman had no children; the other women had one to three biological children. With regard to educational level, four respondents had obtained either a high school diploma or GED, and one had a ninth-grade education. Also, four respondents had achieved a level of education beyond high school. Of those, one had an associate's degree and three had taken some college courses.

A slight majority of the women ($n = 5$) were employed at the time of the interview. Their jobs included that of a business owner, insurance agent, secretary, retail clerk, and service employee. Another woman was not currently working but felt confident about receiving a job offer to work at a gas station. The other three women were either receiving or applying for financial assistance from the state. Three women reported having a mental illness; two had depression, yet only one was taking medication for it. Another woman was diagnosed with the mental illness of bipolar disorder and was also taking medication.

Results

Offense Description

The respondents' offenses of arrest included aggravated criminal sexual abuse ($n = 5$), possession of child pornography ($n = 2$), permitting the sexual abuse of a child ($n = 1$), indecency with a child—sexual contact ($n = 1$), and indecency with a child—exposure ($n = 1$).² The circumstances surrounding the cases varied. For example, two women were accused of molesting either their children or stepchildren; both were in conjunction with a custody

dispute over the children. In the typology of female sex offenders that was discussed earlier, both of these respondents would meet the criteria for engaging in incestuous behaviors. When asked to describe the circumstances of her offense, one of these respondents stated, "I got railroaded by my ex-husband. That bastard coached my son into lying on me. They said I molested [him], but that is a lie! I got 10 years of probation for something I didn't even do." According to some studies, it is yet to be determined whether or not women who prey on their children are more likely to work individually or with a male partner (Mathews et al., 1989; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004).

Two other women were accused of having a sexual relationship with a young male; one denied the sexual component of the relationship, but the other fully acknowledged the relationship. She described the relationship:

[The victim] was 14 years old and he was very charming and respectful towards me. When we first started fooling around, I was 40 and had just gotten a divorce from my husband who was heavily involved with crack cocaine. . . I know it's not right to be with a 14-year-old boy, but at the time it felt very natural. . . He didn't feel wanted at home, and I felt very connected and drawn to him.

The above respondent was employed in the snack bar of a local youth facility and met her victim while at work. She reported having a sexual relationship with the young boy over a 6-month period. They had intercourse approximately seven times. This type of behavior is indicative of the female sexual offender who has been identified in the literature as a nurturer (Mathews et al., 1989; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Vandiver & Kercher, 2002). As mentioned previously, these women are most likely to engage in relationships with adolescent males, perceive their relationships as nonabusive, and often assume the role of a caretaker or teacher with the underage victim (Nathan & Ward, 2002).

Most female sex offenders tend to be nurturers, which proved to also be the case in this study. The nurturer in the above example indicated that she knew the relationship was not "right." Nevertheless, when probed, the respondent indicated that she did not believe that her actions constituted abuse. This is consistent with Vandiver and Kercher (2004), who contend that nurturers may not be likely to perceive their actions as criminal. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the law, these actions are criminal and nurturers are subject to experiencing a high level of stigmatization as described by Braithwaite (1989).

In this study, another woman was coerced by her husband to sexually molest their own daughter. This respondent, who best fits the description of a co-offender, stated,

My husband manipulated me into this. He was an alcoholic but sometimes he was too drunk to even get an erection. He made me suck on my daughter's nipples, and then he and his friend had sex with her during a strip poker game. My husband was in a gang that he'd hooked up with in prison. He constantly used that to control me. He didn't even allow me to wear underwear, and if it were up to him I would've walked around naked all the time.

In the above example, the offender explained that she was forced into having a sexual relationship with her own daughter. According to the respondent, her husband was more to blame, and she reported a lengthy history of physical and sexual abuse. As previously mentioned,

the above respondent meets the criteria of being a co-offender (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Co-offenders are thought to act with a male accomplice or be coerced or forced by a male perpetrator. It is noteworthy that the respondent expressed a considerable amount of remorse and was even granted permission to have supervised visits with her child-victim. At the time of the interview, the respondent said that she was in the process of attempting to gain custody of her three children. This offender stated that she had lost her parental rights as a result of her arrest and incarceration. The respondent also felt that she had been treated unfairly by Child Protective Services (CPS). For example,

I had a 4-year-old son who I was still breast-feeding. I don't think that nursing is bad at all. It wasn't at all sexual, but the caseworkers still tried to use this against me. That was wrong! Now every 6 months I have to go to a hearing to try and get my kids back. We're on judge number four.

The above example points to the harsh reality of the shame and stigma associated with being labeled as a sex offender. The woman above noted feelings of stigmatization by CPS and the court system. The respondent's experiences are consistent with the processes described by Braithwaite (1989) in his discussion of shaming. Braithwaite (1989) contends that individuals with criminal labels tend to have interactions with justice agencies that are very negative. These negative interactions may cause further stigmatization, thereby decreasing the offender's chances of successfully reintegrating back into society.

Two respondents were accused of possessing child pornography; one involved a husband and wife who allegedly took sexually explicit pictures of an 11-year-old girl who they were babysitting. The other woman was a travel agent who was arrested for receiving child pornography via e-mail. Neither one of these respondents can be classified in the typology of female sex offenders that was discussed earlier. Both women employed neutralization strategies that enabled them to deny any wrongdoing. This is consistent with findings by scholars, such as Scully and Marolla (1984), who contend that it is not uncommon for male sexual offenders to use justifications and rationalizations in an attempt to excuse their criminal acts. The first of these respondents, for example, rationalized her behavior when she made the following statement:

It was stupidity. We were horsing around, and [the victim] just got out of the bathtub and had a towel around her. I had a camera, and I took a picture. [The victim] dropped the towel. . . . [The victim] was a family friend of my husband, and he had been around her since she was a baby. We never touched her or did anything else that was inappropriate.

The second respondent who was found with child pornography on her personal computer minimized her degree of criminal involvement in a similar manner:

Someone sent kiddy porn to my computer. I own my own travel agency, so I get lots of e-mails from people I don't know. Anyway, it crashed my computer. I took it to get it fixed and the computer service people turned me in to the police. They arrested my husband and two boys. I didn't want to mess up their lives, so I took a plea bargain and agreed to 8 years probation. The rest of the charges against my family were dropped.

Judicial Processing Characteristics

Working With an Attorney

A slight majority of the respondents ($n = 5$) worked with a public defender. None of these respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the legal assistance that they had received. Four of the five women who had public defenders indicated having a lack of resources to hire their own attorneys. The fifth woman, however, claimed she did have the money but felt it was in “God’s hands.” This respondent did not feel the need to hire an attorney because of her religious convictions. She also fully acknowledged what she had done. One of the women who had a public defender indicated that her attorney had never tried a case before and felt that his lack of experience affected her case negatively. Another respondent stated that her attorney did not want to hear the details of her situation. Finally, one of these respondents stated that her attorney provided no assistance in actually defending the charges.

Two of the women with public defenders were also charged with their spouses, and both felt that they did not receive adequate legal representation. One of the respondents stated that she wanted her husband’s case handled separately, however, her attorney either would not or could not separate the cases. She stated,

The lawyer didn’t want to do any work . . . and never came up with any type of defense, so I got stuck with 11 months [in prison] and I have to wear this damn bracelet [electronic monitoring device] ‘cause my lawyer didn’t want to do his job.

The respondent’s husband accepted an extensively lengthier prison sentence than she did; she and her husband felt that this was their best opportunity to minimize her time in prison. The other woman indicated that she had spent only about 10 hours total with the attorney, but her husband received substantially more time. This offender also indicated that she felt her attorney did not want to hear the details of her situation.

Four of the women hired their own attorneys. One indicated that she was satisfied and another stated that she was somewhat satisfied with her attorney. The other two women claimed they were not satisfied with their attorneys. One of these respondents stated that she felt the judge did not like her attorney and she speculated that this hindered her case. The other respondent indicated a general dissatisfaction with the legal advice she received.

It is clear that the intricacies of stigmatization and sex offenders are multifaceted. The frustration that most of the respondents encountered with their attorneys is another example of a type of negative interaction that they experienced as a result of being labeled by the criminal justice system. It is ironic that, in these cases, the negative contacts occurred with the attorneys who were supposed to be advocates of the respondents. Still, these negative experiences are consistent with Braithwaite (1989), who argues that labeled individuals tend to have hostile relationships with criminal justice officials.

Plea Bargain

Seven of the nine women accepted a plea bargain. All of these respondents indicated that they were advised by their attorneys to take a plea bargain. One stated that her attorney said the plea bargain was a “slap on the wrist,” and therefore, she felt it was in her best interest to accept it. Other reasons were also provided for accepting a plea bargain. For example, one

Table 1
Description of Sentence Received

	Prison		Probation	Other
	Sentenced Time	Time Served		
Case 1	8 years	4 years		some jail time
Case 2	2 years	6 months	10 years	
Case 3	1-3 years	11 months		electronic monitoring
Case 4			10 years	probation was revoked: sentenced to 2.5 years in prison
Case 5			8 years	approx. 150 hours of community service and \$6,000 fine
Case 6			3 years	\$500 fine
Case 7			2.5 years	some jail time
Case 8			2 years	
Case 9			1 year (intensive)	

woman stated, "If it went to trial, there was a good chance I would go to prison for 3½ to 7 years." Thus, she felt the plea bargain was her best opportunity to avoid a lengthy prison sentence. Another respondent claimed to feel remorseful about the harm that she caused and said that she "did not want [the victim] to have to go through a trial." Another woman indicated that she wanted to save her family from the embarrassment of a long trial. The remaining two women did not take a plea bargain; one indicated that she was innocent, and the other stated that she thought it was not in her best interest to accept the plea bargain.

Sentence Received

As noted in Table 1, three women received prison sentences of between 1 and 8 years, yet they served only a portion of their sentences. The majority of the women ($n = 7$) served a probation sentence either as a stand-alone punishment or in conjunction with prison or another intermediate sanction. Three of the women felt the sentence they received was fair; two indicated that they could have received a much more severe sentence. Four women stated that their sentence was not fair. Of these respondents, one purported that she had no intent of harm (child pornography was found on her computer from an unsolicited e-mail); thus, she denied any wrongdoing. A second respondent also maintained her innocence and felt that the 2-year prison sentence she received was entirely unjustified. This respondent used her religious convictions to justify her harsh punishment. For example, she stated throughout the interview, "God was testing me," when referring to the severity of her sentence. One woman said the judge "made an example of me," and another felt that the charge should have been a misdemeanor instead of a felony. It is interesting that although the two women who maintained their innocence felt that their sentences were fair, they both conceded that the punishments they received would have been reasonable had they committed these offenses.

Mandated Sex Offender Treatment

Several findings were unexpected from this research. For example, three women reported that they were mandated to sex offender treatment, which is not an unusual sentence for

someone convicted of a sex offense. However, it resulted in unintended circumstances: a sole woman in group therapy among men. One woman described the situation in the following way:

Everyone sits in a group and describes kids they could have abused but didn't and described how it takes less than three minutes of being alone with a child before he could sexually abuse that child. The men would spend time talking about their preferred child [age and sex].

Another woman described a similar situation, stating, "Treatment is not geared for women; women offend for different reasons." One respondent claimed that she did not get anything out of the treatment. In fact, this respondent indicated a sense of disgust from listening to the men; she "threw up" after going to treatment.

Two of the women refused to attend treatment. One woman stated that after her probation officer filed a petition to revoke her probation, she had to explain to the judge how uncomfortable she was in attending a male-dominated sex offender group therapy session. The judge, who also believed this to be inappropriate, allowed the respondent to cease attending sex offender therapy. The other woman who refused to go to treatment had her probation revoked and was sentenced to prison for 2½ years.

Prison Experience

Of the nine female offenders who were interviewed, four of these respondents served prison time. Three respondents were initially sent to prison as part of their punishments, and one respondent was incarcerated for violating her probation. It is interesting that all three of the respondents who were initially sentenced to prison reported having somewhat positive experiences. For example,

The state prison system is much better than the county jails. County jails are much rougher. Also, the guards in the prison treat you like a human being. I didn't have no problems in prison, and some of the older female inmates made sure that nobody messed with me.

Another respondent stated,

I felt safe in jail. That was the safest place I had ever been. He [respondent's male accomplice] couldn't hurt me, hit me, or sexually abuse me. Nobody tried to bother me. I had roommates who would protect me. I felt safe in jail. That was the safest place I had ever been. Prison felt safe. It felt like a vacation.

When asked to elaborate on her prison experiences, this respondent stated that she took a great deal of pride in her prison job:

I made CO [correctional officer] uniforms. Also, I got to wear a different uniform than the other inmates. It was a vest that was really cute.

Although the three women who were sentenced to prison reported their prison experiences as rather positive, one respondent, who had her probation revoked, stated that she hated prison and was not treated well by staff members or other inmates. This offender made the following statement:

Prison is brutal for sex offenders. I was put in a cell with a big Black woman, and she always tried to get at me. The prison is prejudiced against Whites and it's run by the Black inmates.

Attitude Toward Sex Offender Registry

All of the respondents were asked how they felt about the public sex offender registry, and the majority indicated that they felt the registry should exist. One woman explained that the information would be helpful to law enforcement officials whenever a child is abducted. Another respondent stated, "Yes, people should have to register. . . . People have a right to know this information." None of the women, however, felt that *they* should have to register. Common responses that were given included, "Pedophiles and serious offenders should have to register, not people like me." Another woman explained, "I feel having to register for 10 more years is wrong. I think it is against my civil rights and legal rights. If my crime warrants registering for 10 years, so should murderers and nonviolent criminals." She also thought it was a privacy violation.

Effects of Sex Offender Registration

All of the women interviewed indicated that the sex offender registry had caused them substantial hardships in at least one way. Respondents were specifically asked about harassment. In addition, they were asked about their ability to obtain a job, a house, and personal relationships. The most substantially affected area was their personal relationships. Only a few women indicated they were harassed, and that was typically in association with their job or in their effort to obtain and maintain a residence.

Personal Relationships: Family, Friends, and Church

Eight of the nine women reported that the sex offender registry had a negative effect on their relationships with other people. In fact, three of the respondents claimed to have lost custody of their children as a result of their conviction. One respondent also reported that she could not have any contact with her grandchildren after she was convicted of a sex offense. Another interviewee stated that she could no longer see her stepchildren. Although this respondent maintained her innocence, she was convicted of molesting them. It was also common for many of these offenders to claim that their family members distanced themselves after they were convicted of sex offenses.

One respondent even stated that she was ostracized by her church after pleading guilty to having a sexual relationship with a teenage male. She said,

The entire church disowned me and my children. It bothered me that they disowned my children. Both of my kids are strong Christians, and I wish [the Church] would have left them alone. Now I have a very small group of friends.

All of the women indicated that being a registered sex offender affected their friendships on some level. One respondent, for example, stated that she had a really good friend who wrote her a letter that she found distressing. Disheartened, this respondent opted to cease all communications with her friend after receiving the letter. Another woman stated that someone she knew called her roommate to inform her that she was living with a registered

sex offender. Incidentally, the respondent said that her roommate already knew about her status. Many of the women noted that they had a very small circle of friends because they were registered sex offenders. This is troubling, especially because Braithwaite (1989) contends that successful reintegration is made possible with the support of family and friends. If sex offenders, whether male or female, lack support from their families, friends, and community, it is not surprising that shame will increase. This is troubling because a lack of personal support may hinder the availability of resources that could prevent an offender from recidivating (Braithwaite, 1989).

Employment and Housing

Four of the women in this study claimed to have experienced some level of hardship in obtaining and/or maintaining a job. One respondent stated that she was fired from her job when her employer became aware of her arrest. When she applied for another job, she avoided answering any questions on the application that related to her felony arrest. Instead, this respondent personally explained her arrest to the employer and was subsequently hired. She said it was a family-owned store, and they were “very understanding.” Another woman indicated that she lost her job and her professional license and had to fight for it to be reinstated. Two other registrants said that they felt it was harder to obtain a job due to having a felony record. As one of these respondents explained, many employers conduct background checks.

Five respondents stated that their registration status did not affect their ability to find work. Two of these respondents indicated that they relied on people they knew for work, rather than obtaining a job through a formal application process. In addition, one woman said that she had an excellent work history at a temporary agency and she was able to obtain a job immediately through the same agency. Thus, the women with established contacts or friends were able to diminish the negative effects of the public registry. It is clear that having friends and contacts lessened the negative effects associated with placement on the sex offender registry coinciding with literature on shame and reintegration (Braithwaite, 1989; Powers, 2003-2004). The remaining two respondents did not work; however, they indicated that this was their own choice. Of these respondents who did not work, one was recently injured and the other received a monthly disability check.

With regard to obtaining housing, two women indicated substantial hardship. One of the respondents was initially forced to move in with her parents as a result of being placed on the public sex offender registry. According to this respondent, apartment managers were very reluctant to rent to her because of her status as a sex offender. Eventually, she and her husband were able to move into an apartment. To do this, the apartment was registered under her spouse’s name.

Another woman stated that soon after she rented an apartment, she received a letter stating that she lived within 500 feet of a school, and she had to vacate her residence within 2 days.³ The respondent claimed that she lived more than 500 feet away, yet she was still forced to change residences. As this respondent said,

If the distance was measured from my front door, it was more than 500 feet. If it was measured from my lawn edge to the lawn edge of the school, it was right at 500 feet. It just depended on how you measured it.

Two respondents reported they were harassed as a result of being registered as a sex offender. One respondent, for example, stated that she was harassed by her landlord:

She [landlord] harassed me 24-7. She was an alcoholic and tried to ram her car into my car every time I left. One day, she rammed her car right into mine. It dented up the front of my car pretty good. She blocked me in and there was nowhere for me to go. She threw a brick on my window with a note on it that said "sex offender." Even after I moved out, she still harassed me. I had to get a restraining order to get her to stop.

Although the above respondent indicated that she had been harassed incessantly by her landlord, it appeared that they had personal animosity toward each other aside from the sex offender registration.

Housing and employment are critical factors in successful reintegration (Braithwaite, 1989). Sex offenders are especially challenged due to legal restrictions on housing and employment as well as the notion that employers and landlords are unwilling or reluctant to employ or house sex offenders (Denning, 2005).

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite many of the women denying any wrongdoing, the dynamics of each alleged offense appear to corroborate previous descriptions (through proposed typologies) of female sex offenders. For example, previous researchers identified many women in this study who met the criteria for nurturers (Mathews et al., 1989; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Three of the women in this study described forming an intimate relationship with a teenage male, which is similar to the nurturers category (Mathews et al., 1989; Mayer, 1992; McCarty, 1986; Nathan & Ward, 2001; Syed & Williams, 1996; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004).⁴ Two of the women interviewed had similar characteristics to those identified as having an incestuous relationship (Mathews et al., 1989; Mayer, 1992; McCarty, 1986; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004); these women were accused of molesting their children or stepchildren. Yet, both of these respondents were accused of such offenses during custody disputes, something not explored in previous research efforts. This dynamic has also been found in the male sex offender literature (i.e., false accounts of sexual abuse occurring during custody disputes; see Gardner, 1999). Although this does not necessarily indicate that these women are innocent, it should be further explored in future research. In addition, one woman met the criteria for both being a co-offender and participating in an incestuous relationship; thus, it is possible that women can fit into more than one category.

Three women could not be classified in a category previously identified. One respondent was accused of having child pornography on her computer, a criterion not identified in previous literature. Another respondent provided details of her offense that did not match the offense of arrest (the arrest charge was not identified until after the interview). And finally, one respondent indicated that her babysitter and children saw both her and her husband naked in the hot tub and that no real sexual offense occurred.

As public sex offender registration statutes have been passed, some scholars have not been quick to accept that these laws will lead to positive results (Freeman-Longo, 2002).

The information that is posted on the Internet, for example, may lead to acts of vigilantism. However, others note that supplying the community with such information is helpful (Denning, 2005). The interviews conducted in this research show that the women who are required to register as sex offenders are affected negatively in at least one area. Many of these women were cynical and socially isolated as a result of being registered sex offenders. This is consistent with Braithwaite (1989), who contends that stigmatization can lead to further harm by isolating offenders to the point that they do not rely on mainstream society.

Overall, being a registered sex offender appears to have affected these women in the areas of housing and interpersonal relationships, more so than in the areas of employment and harassment. The effects reported in terms of employment, for example, stemmed more from having a felony on their record rather than being a registered sex offender. The women noted problems obtaining a job because the application forms specifically asked whether they had committed a felony. Two women reported being terminated from their jobs after failing to report such information on their applications. Even so, women may be more insulated with regard to employment and general harassment than men; Braithwaite (1989) specifically notes that men are more at risk for stigmatization. Further research would have to include both male and female samples to explore this possibility.

Some women reported their plea bargaining decision was highly dependent on their family situation. Many respondents contended that they did not want to be subjected to further scrutiny by the criminal justice system (i.e., exposing themselves and their family to a trial). In addition, the women appeared to be affected by the registry on an emotional level. Several indicated that they felt bad about themselves, to the point where they isolated themselves as much as possible. A key component of Braithwaite's (1989) theory is how one defines himself or herself in light of the negative experience. These women's accounts illustrate that they were not comfortable integrating themselves back into their communities.

Braithwaite (1989) also notes that offenders' interactions with criminal justice agencies are usually negative. However, this research found one exception: Some women reported positive experiences during their incarceration, in particular those who had been in abusive relationships. This finding may be salient to the respondents in this study because they had a lack of resources and were themselves victims of abuse. To these individuals, prison appeared to be a safe haven that protected them from further victimization.

Additional implications of this study illustrate that stigmatization does in fact occur, specifically with regard to obtaining and maintaining housing and also on an interpersonal level. First, housing for registered sex offenders poses a unique problem: People do not want a sex offender living next to their families and schools, and at the same time, sex offenders must live somewhere. Scrutiny in the area of housing is essential. Allowing sex offenders to live in target-rich environments (i.e., access to children) should be avoided, in particular for those who were involved in molesting a child whom they accessed through such means (i.e., met at a local park; Denning, 2005). At the same time, however, policies should be flexible, allowing the treatment team to have input in where offenders live after they have extensively evaluated offenders and determined their risk levels and current status in treatment.

The second area affected, interpersonal relationships, is difficult to address because it represents not only how someone views himself or herself but also the end result of being consistently stigmatized—by their friends, family members, and officials representing the

views of society (i.e., judges, attorneys, correctional officials, etc.). Many of the women in this study indicated that the public nature of the sex offender registry added strain to their personal relationships. As noted, the purpose of the registry is to allow the public to know if a sex offender lives in their neighborhood; however, it is not known whether this actually reduces sexual victimization. The registry has assisted law enforcement in apprehending sex offenders who recidivate (Denning, 2005); thus, the question that comes to mind is whether the registry should be made public or simply used as a tool for law enforcement only. Subsequent research is needed to better understand the intricacies of female sexual offending and the effect of their placement on the sex offender registry. Policies that have been developed on the basis of addressing fears alone should be questioned with regard to their effectiveness.

With regard to reintegration, only one woman indicated positive effects from treatment. This was only after she refused group therapy. Another woman who was in an abusive relationship stated that being confined in prison helped to end an abusive marriage. Other than these two examples, most women outlined experiences that were shaming (i.e., "I felt bad about myself") and not reintegrative. As noted earlier, some crimes are difficult, if not impossible, to forgive; yet, programs established to assist offenders to manage themselves outside of prison would be helpful. It should be noted that the majority of convicted sex offenders are, in fact, in the community (Terry, 2006). One of the more popular approaches to handling sex offenders in the community is the containment model, which advocates maintaining these individuals with the goal of no recidivism (English, Jones, Patrick, Pasini-Hill, & Cooley-Towell, 2000).

Even though this study provides detailed information about women who are registered as sex offenders, it is not without its limitations. First, this study uses a very small sample size ($n = 9$) and can in no way be generalized to all registered female sex offenders. Second, it is highly likely that there are significant differences between women who agreed to be interviewed and those who did not wish to participate. At this point, we can only speculate about the differences between respondents and nonrespondents. It is possible, however, that some of the women who chose to participate may very well have had a hidden agenda. At the very least, some of these respondents may have attempted to use the study as a vehicle to voice their discontent with the registration process.

Another difference between respondents and nonrespondents may be that the women who did not agree to be interviewed were more likely to fear retaliation. They may, for example, have felt that the interview was a "set-up" or ruse by law enforcement officials to gain information against them. Women who opted not to participate may have also had extremely limited resources compared to those individuals who agreed to be interviewed. For instance, they may have had very modest living arrangements and were unwilling to allow researchers into their homes. There is also a problem with regard to selection bias because only Caucasian offenders participated in this study. This is especially troubling given that Hispanics and African Americans make up a significant portion of female sex offenders (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004).

An additional limitation of this study is that by conducting face-to-face interviews, social desirability likely occurred. Social desirability is a problem faced by many researchers, and it occurs whenever a respondent misleads the researcher in an attempt to present himself or herself in a favorable light (Maxfield & Babbie, 2006). We discovered

one example of social desirability in this study when a respondent indicated that she committed a “hands-off” offense when, in fact, information that was posted on the Internet conveyed otherwise. Some of the other respondents may have outright lied or at least been deceptive.

A final caveat of this study is that it only analyzes female registered sex offenders from two states. More problematic is the fact that both of these states were chosen primarily out of convenience and necessity. It could very well be that some of the patterns that were detected may have been due to differences in state laws. Also, sex offender experiences may differ greatly between the southern and midwest regions. This study, however, made little attempt to assess these differences.

Although the above limitations are serious concerns, these do not in any way invalidate the results of this study. This article is exploratory in nature and is meant to generate hypotheses and provide a baseline of information about a small group of offenders. Still, if this project is to be replicated in the future, we highly recommend that researchers employ strong measures to avoid the limitations that are inherent in this study. This would include collecting data in only one state, using a larger sample size, and employing lie scales or similar measures to determine whether or not respondents are being deceptive. Additional research is needed to confirm the results from this study and also to gain additional information with regard to the experiences of men and women who are registered sex offenders.

Notes

1. As suggested by Hagan (2006), the interviewers should have similar characteristics to the interviewee; it was assumed the women would be more likely to participate if a woman conducted the interview. Two of the interviewees indicated that they would not have participated if they had been contacted or interviewed by a man.

2. One woman was arrested for two offenses; thus, the number of charges equals 10. In addition, at the time the interviews were conducted in Illinois, the offense was not listed on the sex offender registry; however, after the interviews were conducted, the information was posted. In each of the cases, the reported arrest offense was identical to what was reported online. In Texas, the offense was listed on the registry.

3. The interviewee provided the interviewer with a copy of the letter.

4. The descriptions of these women’s accounts are matched with previous descriptions of typologies only on available information provided; no empirical tests were conducted to assess whether they met all of the criteria for each category. The purpose of this discussion is only to verify what has already been identified in the literature and to include additional details, as some of the previous proposed typologies do not include anecdotal evidence.

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Donna M. Vandiver, PhD, is an associate professor in the criminal justice department at Texas State University, San Marcos. Her research interests include sex offender classification, female sex offenders, and juvenile sex offenders. She has published articles in *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, *Criminal Justice Review*, *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, and *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

Kelly Cheeseman Dial, PhD, is an assistant professor at The University of Southern Mississippi. She has published articles in *Corrections Management Quarterly*, *Southwestern Journal of Criminal Justice*, and *Criminal Law Bulletin and Deviant Behavior*. Her current research interests include sex offender registration, prison deviance, institutional corrections, the death penalty, and deviant behavior.

Robert M. Worley, PhD, is an assistant professor of criminology at the University of Texas of the Permian Basin. He has published articles in journals such as *Deviant Behavior*, *Criminal Law Bulletin*, *Justice Policy Journal*, and *International Journal of Crime, Criminal Justice and Law*. His research interests include inmate-guard inappropriate relationships, sexual offending, prison gangs, white-collar crime, and legal issues in criminal justice. He is a former correctional officer with 7 years of employment with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.