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The Myth of the Female Sex Offender

CHELSEA HORROCKS

More than 300,000 women and nearly 100,000 men were forcibly raped in 1995 (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). The National Violence Against Women (NVAW) Survey, the last nationwide survey on rape, which had 8,000 male and 8,000 female participants, found that one of every six women and one of every thirty-three men is raped at some point in their lifetime. Thirty-two percent of the women and sixteen percent of the men were injured during their rape. In another nationwide telephone survey, twenty-two percent of 3,000 adults reported being sexually abused (Vandiver, 2002).

As heinous as they are, sexual offenses are largely underreported. According to the NVAW Survey only one in five women reported their rape to the police. A study conducted in 1985 reported an even lower rate of disclosure. Of the 3,000 interviews and twenty-two percent of rape victims only three percent had reported it to the police (Vandiver, 2002). How much of this abuse is perpetrated by females is unknown, but it is becoming clear that females have more often been the perpetrator than was believed in the past. The NVAW reported that less than one percent of women in this survey were raped by a female. However, eighteen point two percent of men reported being raped by a female (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006).

The study of female sex offenders is relatively new and our understanding is just developing. The literature to date provides us with a framework in understanding how female and male sex offenders differ. Female sex offenders are most often in their late twenties or early thirties and the majority are Caucasian (Vandiver et al., 2008). Female offenders are significantly more likely than male offenders to victimize children under the age of twelve (Freeman & Sandler, 2008).

Some female offenders commit incestuous offenses, sometimes of their own volition, but often at the urging of a dominant third party male (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). The exact occurrence of co-offending is difficult to determine, but it is known that women more often offend with another person or in a group than men do (Vandiver et al., 2008). A common stereotype of sex offenders is that they offend against victims of the opposite sex. However, in some studies it has been suggested that the victims of female sex offenders are almost equally likely to be females as males. Vandiver and Kercher suggest...
that this could be caused by the increased likelihood that a woman is acting with a man, or at his urging (2004).

The phenomenon of female sex offending must be better understood. Without a nuanced understanding of these women and their motives, treatment will be limited and ineffective. There is no successful system in place for female sex offenders once they have been convicted. Sex offender treatment with males is inappropriate and practices such as chemical castration are not effective or appropriate for female offenders. In addition, law enforcement’s focus on males as the only sex offenders allows for the possibility that abuse by females will be overlooked, leaving their victims helpless.

Methodology
Using a qualitative approach, this research compared and contrasted female and male sex offenders. Specifically the study reviewed the existing typology of female sex offenders as developed by Vandiver (2002) and the typology of male sex offenders as articulated by Groth (1979). Applying them to two high profile cases involving female offenders. Case studies were used in this research to establish the applicability of two existing typologies to actual crimes.

Groth’s Typology
In 1979 A. Nicholas Groth created the first typology of male rapists. This typology was developed in order to assist with the understanding and treatment of sex offenders. His three categories for this typology were anger, power, and sadistic rapists (Groth & Birnbaum, 1979). These three categories are best described as “…(1) the anger rape, in which sexuality becomes a hostile act; (2) the power rape, in which sexuality becomes an expression of conquest; and (3) the sadistic rape, in which anger and power become eroticized ” (Groth & Birnbaum, 1979, p. 13).

Anger rapists are characterized by a complete loss of control before and during the rape. They express their anger and frustration by attacking a woman and treating her in the most degrading manner possible. The assault is not about the sexual gratification received from the rape, but about the degradation of women. The anger rapist rarely knows the woman he attacks. She is a representation of his anger and disdain for all women (Groth & Birnbaum, 1979).

Power rapists are generally less violent than anger rapists. They are more aware of the situation and will use violence to prove their manhood and their control of the situation, not because they have any specific desire to hurt the victim. The power rapist is attempting to satisfy feelings of inadequacy in relationships and life by becoming a dominant sexual being (Groth and Birnbaum, 1979).

Sadistic rapists are the most violent type of rapist. They set out to harm their victims. They gain pleasure from their victims’ pain. This is how they achieve arousal and in some cases sexual gratification without sexual activity. They often torture their victims and perform ritualistic behaviors such as cutting the hair or finger nails, or washing the body. They are the most likely to have a type, all of his victims will be similar in at least aspect such as appearance or occupation (Groth and Birnbaum, 1979). Sadistic rapists have high recidivism rates and it is not unusual for the sadistic rapist to kill his victim (Terry, 2006).

Groth’s typology was established after interviews with over five hundred male rapists. Only three interviews were conducted with female sex offenders and therefore the typology cannot be universally applied to sex offenders. Females offend for different reasons and motivations than male sex offenders (Groth and Birnbaum, 1979). This typology also assumes that the victim of a sexual offense is female. While the majority of victims of sexual assault are female, a significant portion of the victims are male.

Vandiver’s Typology
Given the paucity of research into female sex offenders, there is a clear need for typologies and an increased understanding. Vandiver and Kercher proposed a typology of female sexual offenders in 2004. Previous typologies were established using at most a population of ninety-three with the majority having fewer than twenty person samples.

Vandiver and Kercher’s study was performed using arrest data from 471 registered female sex offenders in Texas. From this information they established six categories for female sex offenders. Their categories include heterosexual nurturers, noncriminal homosexual offenders, female sexual predators, young adult child exploiters, homosexual criminals, and aggressive homosexual offenders (Vandiver and Kercher, 2004).

The first of the six categories, heterosexual nurturers was the largest of the six groups with offenders with an average age of thirty. These offenders were unlikely to be rearrested. The victims of this group were all male and had an average age of twelve. These offenders were frequently in a caretaking or mentoring role, such as a teacher, to their victim at the time of the offense. Many of the women in this category viewed the relationship as nonabusive (Vandiver and Kercher, 2004). The second category, noncriminal homosexual offenders were least likely to be rearrested for later offenses. The average age of the offenders was thirty-two. Nearly all of these offenders had female victims whose average age was thirteen. Although information on co-offenders was not available, it is thought that the high percentage of female victims may be accounted for
by the presence of a male co-offender (Vandiver and Kercher, 2004).

Female sexual predators were the third group and the most likely to be rearrested for a sexual assault. The average age of the offender was twenty-nine. The average age of the victims was eleven and slightly more than half were male. These offenders were most similar to non-sex offending female criminals in that they were more likely than other types of female sex offenders to have previous or future arrests for a crime other than a sex offense (Vandiver and Kercher, 2004).

The fourth group of female sexual offenders is young adult child exploiters. These offenders had the youngest average age at the time of arrest, twenty-eight. They also had the youngest victims at age seven with no apparent preference for male or female victims (Vandiver and Kercher, 2004).

The fifth type of sexual offender is the homosexual criminal. These offenders had an average age of thirty-two at the time of arrest. They are more likely to be motivated by economic considerations than to have a motivation based on sexual desire. They frequently force their victims into prostitution. The average age of the victims was eleven (Vandiver and Kercher, 2004).

The last cluster of offenders was the aggressive homosexual offenders. These offenders are most likely to victimize older women, their victims having an average age of thirty-one. These women were most likely to be arrested for sexual assault and were oldest at the time of their first arrest (Vandiver and Kercher, 2004).

A central flaw in this typology is the lack of motivational factors provided. One of the purposes of classifying offenders is to aid in treatment. Without motivational factors included, treatment and criminal justice providers have a reduced capacity to understand the offender and prevent re-offending.

As Vandiver and Kercher’s study was an attempt to create a more universal typology than those previously in existence by the use of a larger sample size than any past study had attempted, it was appropriate to test its applicability to selected case studies. Two high-profile case studies are presented to assess their applicability to both Groth’s and Vandiver’s typologies, subjectively evaluating their explanatory power. The cases of Karla Homolka from Canada and Debra LaFave (Florida) are discussed.

Case Study #1 - Debra LaFave

Debra Beasley LaFave was born August 28, 1980. She was raised in a strict Baptist home in Ruskin, Florida. In 2002 she graduated from the University of South Florida with a degree in English and the intention of becoming a teacher. She obtained a job teaching reading at Grecco Middle School in Temple Terrace Florida (Lafave and Simon, 2006).

By all accounts, LaFave was an excellent teacher, but it is in this arena, in 2004, that LaFave was first exposed to her future victim. His name was never officially disclosed in an effort by his mother and the prosecutors to protect his privacy and quality of life. He is subsequently referred to as M.M. He was a student at the school, but was not in any of her classes. She first met M.M. when she attended his football games to visit the coach who was a close friend. She was asked to chaperone a field trip to SeaWorld which the boy also attended. It was during this trip that she first became interested in the student (Lauer, 2006). He was fourteen years old and she was twenty-three.

After the first few passive meetings, LaFave began actively seeking his company, attending his basketball games. This behavior escalated to driving him home after each game and went further as she also began inviting him into her classroom in the morning before classes had started. She frequently spoke to him on the telephone, at least once in the presence of her husband (Lafave and Simon, 2006). Before the end of the school year, Debra and M.M. had kissed in her classroom. On June 3rd, shortly after school had let out, Debra drove to Ocala where M.M. was staying with his cousin. Debra let the cousin, who at this time was fifteen and had only a learner’s permit, drive illegally while she got into the back seat and had sex with M.M. (Lauer, 2006). He was fifteen and had only a learner’s permit, drive illegally while she got into the back seat and had sex with M.M. (Lauer, 2006).

On June 14, 2004 Debra asked M.M. to help her clean out her classroom. It was on this day, in her classroom on school property that they had sex for the first time. The next day, she picked him up from the recreation center where he was supposed to spend the day and drove him to Ocala where they met his cousin. Debra let the cousin, who at this time was fifteen and had only a learner’s permit, drive illegally while she got into the back seat and had sex with M.M. (Lauer, 2006).

The following day, Debra again drove to Ocala with M.M. where they met B.B. who at this time was fifteen and had only a learner’s permit, drive illegally while she got into the back seat and had sex with M.M. (Lauer, 2006).
It was at some point during this day that the B.B.’s mother saw him standing near Debra’s car. A series of phone calls between both boys and their mothers ensued. Several lies were told, one eventually involving LaFave. M.M.’s mother contacted LaFave who ignored the call planning to deal with it later (Carlton, 2006). When B.B. returned home that evening, his mother demanded the truth, not having believed his lies. It was then that the story came out. His mother called her sister, M.M.’s mother, to tell her what was happening. Before Debra had dropped M.M. off at the recreation center, his mother was aware of what had happened. By the time Debra returned the mother’s call with an explanation for having taken M.M. to Ocala, the police had been contacted (LaFave and Simon, 2006).

Debra was arrested by the Temple Terrace Police Department in Hillsborough County on two counts of lewd and lascivious battery on a person under the age of sixteen. She was kept overnight and released on bail the next morning. Because Debra had sex with M.M. when she drove him to Ocala, which is in a different county, on June 28th, she turned herself in to be arrested by the Marion County Sheriff’s Department on two counts of lewd and lascivious battery and one count of lewd and lascivious exhibition (Catanello et al., 2007).

LaFave hired John Fitzgibbons as her attorney. Fitzgibbons planned an insanity defense claiming that past trauma, namely her sister’s death, her alleged rape, and her bipolar disorder were factors. More than a year of postponements and preparation for the trial were completed before the final date was set in December 2005. Several plea deals had been offered between the prosecutor and the defense. The defense rejected them because of the inclusion of jail time for LaFave.

One week before the scheduled trial date, M.M.’s mother contacted the prosecutor indicating that neither she nor her son wanted him to testify (Rondeaux, 2005; Carlton, 2006). Until this time, the mother had made it clear that she wanted LaFave to receive jail time, but now, faced with the prospect of her son testifying in a court room full of people and television cameras, she expressed to the prosecutor her desire to avoid a trial even if it meant that LaFave would receive a less severe sentence. The prosecutor chose to honor the mother’s wishes and approached the defense with a plea deal that avoided a prison sentence.

On November 22, 2005 LaFave pled guilty to two counts of lewd and lascivious battery with a sentence, agreed upon by both the Hillsborough and Marion County prosecutors. Her sentence was three years house arrest followed by seven years of probation. This also included a curfew as well as housing and work restrictions as a sex offender (Rondeaux, 2005).

All that was left after this agreement was for the plea deal to be approved by Judge Stancil in Marion County. He requested more detailed information on the effect the trial process would have on the victims, both M.M. and B.B. are included as victims. This included testimony from an expert in child psychology who had interviewed M.M., a statement by the prosecutor and a letter written by the victim’s mother expressing the boy’s desire to end the process. Following this hearing he still felt that the deal was much too light a sentence were she in fact guilty of committing the crimes she had been accused of and decided to go to trial against the wishes of all parties. Judge Stancil set a date for the trial at which time the prosecutor chose to nole prosequi the case (LaFave and Simon, 2006).

Applicability of Typologies
Debra LaFave fits most closely into Vandiver and Kercher’s heterosexual nurturer category. LaFave was a teacher whose victim was a male. At fourteen his age was close to the Vandiver’s & Kercher’s study where the average victims’ age was twelve. LaFave viewed her offense as a relationship with the victim, not considering it to be harmful. She is substantially younger than the average age of offenders, but has not been rearrested for a similar offense.

LaFave does not fit into any of the three categories proposed by Groth. Anger rapists always exhibit some level of physical assault and generally do not know the victim. LaFave shares some characteristics in common with the power rapist, but does not fit the full profile. Her sexual encounters with the boy took place during date-like situations and she was fully in control each time. She may have been compensating for feelings of inadequacy in her life. Her assault did not take place at the first meeting and she viewed it as a relationship, therefore, presumably she would not have used violence against the boy had he rebuffed her advances. LaFave in no way fit into the sadistic type. She did not torture her victim and has not recidivated. Finally although Vandiver and Kercher’s typology does seem more appropriate, we still lack substantial information about both LaFave’s motivation and those of the heterosexual nurturer.

Case Study #2 - Karla Homolka
Karla Homolka was born May 4, 1970 in Ontario, Canada. During her childhood and into her early teen years, there were no apparent precursors to her future offenses (Williams, 1996). During high school, Karla attended a conference with two women from her work. While she was out with a friend, Karla met Paul Bernardo a twenty-three year old college student.
They dated through the rest of her high school years, got engaged and were eventually were married on June 29, 1991 (Williams, 1996).

In what became known as Canada’s worst crime, Karla Homolka would be actively involved in the abduction, rape and sexualized murder of three young women between 1990 and 1993. The first of these crimes would be committed against Karla’s younger sister, Tammy in 1990.

When Paul and Karla first married there are contradictory stories about whether she was aware that she was marrying a rapist who would one day become a murderer. One source implied that she was aware of Paul’s alternate persona as the Scarborough rapist, that she had even accompanied him on one occasion (Williams, 1996). Another depicts Karla as an entirely innocent victim, ignorant of his crimes (Pron, 1995).

There are however two events that there is no doubt that Karla knew about and was involved in prior to the marriage. The first was the death of her sister. Paul had expressed a sexual interest to Karla in her younger sister Tammy. After her initial refusal to allow or to take part in an assault on her younger sister, Karla agreed that they would drug Tammy in order for Paul to rape her.

On December 23, 1990, six months before their wedding, Paul was staying with the Homolkas for Christmas. Throughout the night, Karla had been progressively drugging her sister’s drink. Once the drugs had taken effect, Karla took a halothane soaked rag and placed it across Tammy’s nose and mouth to ensure that she would remain comatose throughout the process (Williams, 1996). One author and reportedly Paul himself, described Karla’s gift of Tammy in the form of an unconscious teenager, as a Christmas present (Pron, 1995).

Karla initially monitored her sister’s breathing and periodically added halothane to the cloth keeping Tammy asleep while Paul assaulted her. However at Paul’s instruction she participated in the brutalization of her little sister as he captured every detail on film. During the assault Tammy vomited and began to choke. Karla and Paul attempted to clear her airway, but Tammy had ceased breathing. Karla called the paramedics while Paul tried to revive her. Tammy was rushed to the hospital, but was pronounced dead on arrival. Although both Paul and Karla were taken to the police station and questioned about any drugs they may have been using, they both answered convincingly and coherently enough that they were released. By the following day, her death had been determined accidental and Tammy Lyn Homolka was buried December 27, 1990 just four days before her sixteenth birthday (Williams, 1996).

The second crime Karla was involved in prior to her marriage was that of the rape and murder of Leslie Mahaffy. Leslie Mahaffy was a troubled teen who had run away from home on numerous occasions. On June 14, 1991 Leslie stayed out past her curfew, returning home to find the door to her house locked and Paul Bernardo lurking in her backyard. He wrapped his shirt around her face as a blindfold and drove her to his home (Williams, 1996). By midnight the following night, Leslie had been raped, sodomized and forced to perform oral sex on both Paul and Karla, once again with Paul capturing the entire scene with his camera.

The next day Karla dosed Leslie with sleeping pills. After she was rendered unconscious by the drugs, Paul strangled her with an electrical cord. They hid her body in their cellar because it was Father’s Day and the Homolkas were coming for dinner that night. The following day Paul cut Leslie’s body into ten pieces, encasing them in eight cement boxes which would be thrown into Lake Gibson. Two weeks after this event, Paul and Karla were married. The same day, Leslie’s body was discovered by a tourist fishing on the lake (Pron, 1995).

The third sexualized murder was that of the Kristen French was walking home from Holy Cross High School on April 16, 1992 when she saw a car parked at Grace Lutheran Church. It was Paul and Karla in the car and they called to her asking for directions. When she was next to the car speaking to Karla, Paul got out of the car and put a knife to her throat, forcing her into the front seat. They drove her to their home and put a blindfold on her (Williams, 1996). Over the next three days, Kristen would be expected to actively participate in sexually degrading tasks interspersed between such seemingly normal occurrences as helping Karla to make dinner. After each brief respite, the sexual abuse was resumed, Paul with the camera relentlessly documenting the horrific treatment of the girl until three days after she had been kidnapped it was finally shut off for Paul to kill her (Pron, 1995).

On February 1, 1993 Paul Bernardo’s DNA, which he had given voluntarily as part of a previous investigation, was matched to three rape cases, proving that he was the man known as the Scarborough rapist. Both Paul and Karla were called in separately for questioning. Karla met with Paul Walker, a defense attorney, and told him everything (Williams, 1996). Karla was given what some considered to be a sweetheart deal.

In exchange for the testimony she gave against Bernardo as well...
as all of the information provided when she turned herself in and through the investigative phases, Karla was given a plea deal in which she would serve twelve years in prison and plead guilty to two counts of manslaughter (Williams, 1996).

September 1, 1995, Bernardo was found guilty of all nine charges, including two counts of first degree murder for Leslie Mahaffy and Kristen French. His sentence was life in prison without the possibility of parole for twenty-five years. In November of 1995, however, Bernardo was declared a dangerous offender meaning that he will spend the rest of his life in prison. Canada does not allow for the execution of offenders.

On July 4, 2005 Karla was released from prison after serving the full twelve years of her sentence. According to CBC News at the time she was released, public outrage had “barely cooled.” When Karla's deal was struck with prosecutors, she was thought to be solely a victim. Shortly after the tapes she and Paul had made were discovered and it became clear that victim or not, she was an active participant in each of the crimes. The media referred to the deal prosecutors had made with Karla as a “deal with the devil” (Timeline, 2008).

Applicability of Typologies
Karla Homolka appears to fit most closely into the noncriminal homosexual offender category of Vandiver's typology. She has a male co-offender and her victims were all female. The victims were all older than the average age which was thirteen, but they were within a margin of error as the oldest was seventeen years old. She has not been rearrested since her target offense and subsequent release from prison.

Despite these factors, the fit is imperfect. The biggest difference is that noncriminal homosexual offenders do not generally sexually assault their victims and the assault was central to Homolka's offenses. She shares no characteristics in common with the heterosexual nurturer, the female sexual predator, and homosexual criminals. The young adult child exploiters and aggressive homosexual offenders are the two most likely of the six categories to commit sexual assault, but none of the other factors are consistent with Homolka's offenses.

As for Groth's typology, Homolka does not fit into the anger rapists' category. Her participation in each of the rapes was planned and for the most part nonviolent. She did not seek to be in control of the situation which is a defining aspect of power rapists.

Homolka does not fully fit into the sadistic rapist type either. The victims were tortured extensively mentally in addition to the physical pain caused during the repeated rapes of each victim. Karla did not demand the ritualistic behaviors that Bernardo encouraged. Her classification as a sadistic rapist depends on whether she is classified based on the whole crime committed or her level of participation in the crime itself. If she and Paul are considered together, she arguably fits as a sadistic rapist.

Groth and Birnbaum's typology does not provide much information on the existence of co-offenders. As the typology was created from an almost entirely male sample and males are much more likely to offend alone, this is not unusual. However, this leads to a serious flaw in the application of this typology in the case of females.

Karla Homolka does not fit perfectly into any of the existing typologies. One downfall of Vandiver's typology is that it does not present a category of offenders likely to commit sexual homicide. This could stem from the fact that Vandiver and Kercher's typology was created using registered sex offenders from Texas. Sex offenders who committed sexual homicide are more likely to remain in prison and not necessarily be registered. Offenders who commit sexual homicide are likely to be charged only with the greater offense, homicide, and therefore not registered as sex offenders, despite the sexual nature of their crimes.

It is clear that while both Vandiver and Kercher's typology and Groth and Birnbaum's typology have at least limited applicability, more categories are necessary to account for all types of female sex offenders. The inclusion of motivational factors is crucial as well for the typology to fulfill its purpose as a treatment aid.

References


