

# A Comparison of the general public's, forensic professionals' and students' attitudes towards female sex offenders

Gakhal, B.K. and Brown, S.J.

**Author post-print (accepted) deposited in CURVE March 2013**

**Original citation & hyperlink:**

Gakhal, B.K. and Brown, S.J. (2011) A Comparison of the general public's, forensic professionals' and students' attitudes towards female sex offenders. *Journal of sexual aggression*, volume 17 (1): 105-116  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2010.540678>

**Publisher statement:** This is an electronic version of an article published in the Journal of sexual aggression, 17 (1), pp. 105-116. The Journal of sexual aggression is available online at:  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2010.540678>.

**Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.**

**This document is the author's post-print of the journal article. Some differences between the published version and this version may remain and you are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it.**

**CURVE is the Institutional Repository for Coventry University**

<http://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open>

## **Abstract**

Research investigating attitudes toward sex offenders has failed to specify the gender of the 'sex offenders'. Given that most participants are unlikely to think of women as sex offenders, it is likely that reported attitudes relate to male sex offenders. This study investigated the attitudes towards female sex offenders of 92 members of staff employed by a UK chain store (public sample), 20 probation officers employed by a Regional Sex Offender Unit (forensic professional sample) and 64 undergraduate psychology students (student sample). Participants completed the Attitudes Toward Female Sex Offenders Scale adapted from the Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders Scale. Forensic professionals held significantly more positive attitudes than both the students and public. Comparisons between the responses in this study with those of previous studies revealed that the forensic professionals in this study held significantly more positive attitudes towards female sex offenders than professionals in previous studies did towards 'sex offenders'.

**Keywords: female sex offenders, attitudes to sex offenders, attitudes to female sex offenders, Attitudes to Sex Offenders Scale, attitudes of professionals working with sex offenders, attitudes to crime**

## **Introduction**

The negative portrayal of sex offenders by the media has not only increased the public's awareness of sexual offences but has also contributed to

concerns about the incidence of such offences, particularly as the media appear to be the prime source of information about sex offenders for both the public (Brown, Deakin & Spencer, 2008) and politicians (or at least US politicians: see Sample & Kadleck, 2008). Research consistently reveals that the media presents a stereotypical and biased portrayal of sex offenders (for example, see Cheit, 2003, Ducat, Thomas & Blood, 2009; Frei, 2008) focusing on less common but violent/serious crimes and portraying sex offenders as evil ‘perverts’, ‘predators’ and ‘monsters’ who, beyond redemption and rehabilitation, are very likely to repeatedly re-offend. The picture of sex offenders painted by such reporting and the negative attitudes that result, or are at least reinforced, make it increasingly difficult for this group of offenders to be effectively reintegrated back into the community following incarceration, or to remain in the community once identified as a sex offender.

More importantly, as Willis, Levenson & Ward (2010) suggest, a refusal to “actively help sex offenders re-enter and establish themselves within the community” (p.552) could actually have the detrimental effect of increasing the levels of risk that these individuals pose to society. Furthermore, as theories of desistance focus specifically on social control and agency (Willis et al., 2010), it is imperative that the public provide sex offenders with the opportunity to reintegrate back into social situations with a view to

encouraging desistance from offending. Therefore, it is fundamentally important that public attitudes are researched and addressed in order to facilitate the successful reintegration of these offenders back into the community not only in attempts to reduce their risk of recidivism but also to encourage legislation that supports this reintegration as opposed to legislative developments that are based on the distorted picture of sexual offending presented by the media (see Sample & Kadleck, 2008).

Public attitudes towards sex offenders have been largely overlooked by researchers and the published empirical literature in this area is relatively sparse. Brown's (1999) survey (of people living in Cardiff, UK) was one of the first studies to be published that investigated *public* attitudes to sex offenders and remained alone until a recent resurgence in interest in this topic with at least six studies published between 2007 and 2009 (Brown et al., 2008; Craun & Theriot, 2009; Kernsmith, Craun, & Foster, 2009; Levenson, D'Amora & Hearn, 2007; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney & Baker, 2007, McAlinden, 2007). It is perhaps of interest, given the rapid development of increasingly restrictive legislation aimed to address sexual offending in the USA, that most (with the exception of Brown et al.'s (2008) English, UK and McAlinden's (2007) Northern Irish, UK research) of these recent studies have been conducted in the USA. Many also consider attitudes to legislation alongside attitudes to offenders and are supported by

a similar recent interest in studies investigating the attitudes of this country's public (for example, see Brannon, Levenson, Fortney & Baker, 2007; Lieb & Nunlist, 2008; Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009) and professionals (see Levenson, Fortney & Baker, 2010) towards its sex offender legislation. The specific questions/questionnaires used in these studies make it difficult to closely compare the results of them (see Willis et al., 2010 for a more detailed review); however, they tend to reveal that the public hold stereotypical views of offenders, tend to think that rehabilitative efforts are unlikely to be effective (whilst they may be supportive of using rehabilitative measures), that sex offenders present a danger to the community and have high recidivism rates, and that the public are unlikely to provide support (e.g. by providing employment or accommodation, or living nearby) to known sex offenders in the community. These studies also reveal that the views of the US and UK public are comparable and that attitudes have not improved, and if anything have become more negative towards sex offenders since 1999, despite the increased legislative restrictions and rehabilitative efforts introduced in both countries during this time period.

There is considerably more research looking at the attitudes of professionals towards sex offenders (see Brown, 2008 and Willis et al. 2010 for reviews). This is understandable as such attitudes may influence judgments and

ratings of the offender (Ajzen, 2001; Hogue, 1995), which has a significant impact on whether offenders receive the appropriate treatment in prison and in the community. In a study looking at therapist characteristics and treatment-induced change in sex offender treatment programmes, Marshall et al. (2003) reported that therapist features such as empathy and warmth produced beneficial treatment-induced changes, compared to therapists that employed confrontational styles, where fewer treatment changes were produced. Research investigating the attitudes of professionals has focused on different types of professionals (e.g. counsellors, advanced practice nurses) and professionals with varying levels of experience (e.g. experienced or inexperienced) and have most often used the Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders Scale (ATS) adapted by Hogue (1993) from the Attitudes Toward Prisoners Scale (ATP; Melving, Gramling & Gardner, 1985).

In Hogue's (1993) original study to develop and validate the ATS, he observed that different groups of professionals held different attitudes to sex offenders, with the Probation/Psychologist group showing the statistically significantly most favourable attitudes, than prison officers with treatment experience, and in turn the prison officers without treatment experience. Police officers demonstrated the least positive views. Hogue and Peebles (1997) supported these findings as British police officers had significantly

less favourable attitudes compared to other British professionals, including mental health workers, social workers, probation or parole officers. Similarly, Radley (2001) found that a group of 20 non-discipline prison staff (i.e. probation officers and psychologists) had significantly more favourable attitudes towards sex offenders than a group of 20 discipline staff (prison officers). Using a qualitative methodology, Lea, Auburn and Kibblewhite (1999) interviewed 23 professional and paraprofessionals whose work involved contact with sex offenders. In line with the findings reported by Rash and Winton (2007), they observed that both positive and negative views towards sex offenders could be held simultaneously; however, quantitative findings from other studies were confirmed as the most stereotypical views were held by police officers, especially those with less experience of working with sex offenders, or who had no specialist training in this work.

Studies comparing the attitudes of the general public and professional groups are rare. Johnson, Hughes and Ireland (2007) found that the public held more negative ATS attitudes than probationary police officers and Ferguson and Ireland (2006) found that their student sample held more negative ATS attitudes than their professional group. To our knowledge, to date no published study has compared the attitudes of professionals who work with sex offenders, the public and students.

Professionals have been found to hold more negative attitudes towards sex offenders than other, or general types of offenders (Craig, 2005; Harnett, 1997; Hogue, 1993; Weekes, Pelletier & Beaudette, 1995); however in virtually all of the studies mentioned above (including those that have investigated the public's attitudes) attitudes have been assessed in relation to 'sex offenders', perhaps implying that sex offenders are a homogenous group. Usually in these studies participants are asked to give their responses to the 'sex offender' group as a whole and 'sex offender' is often not defined. Taking a different approach, however, Ferguson and Ireland (2006) asked participants to give their ATS responses in relation to a vignette that varied according to offender type (stranger rapist, acquaintance rapist, stranger victim paedophile, or familial victim paedophile). No differences in attitudes towards different types of sex offenders were observed. In the USA, Kernsmith et al. (2009) asked Michigan community members how afraid they were of the prospect of sex offenders living in their community and varied the type of offender (incest, statutory rape, marital rape, pedophilia, date rape, historical offenses). Paedophiles and incest offenders were most feared, and statutory rapists were least feared; however all types of offenders elicited fear. Sanghara and Wilson (2006) varied the vignettes describing the sex offenders in their study according to the level of endorsements of sex offender stereotypes and found that those



who had the least knowledge about child abuse, were more likely to endorse sex offender stereotypes.

Although studies have specifically investigated attitudes towards juvenile offenders (Sahlstrom & Jeglic, 2008) and legislation aimed at juvenile offenders (Salerno et al., 2010), to our knowledge none have investigated attitudes towards female offenders. The studies conducted thus far have failed to specify the gender of the offenders in question and it is likely that participants assumed the offenders to be male due to the higher known incidence of male sex offenders as opposed to female sex offenders.

It is currently unknown whether female-perpetrated sexual abuse is uncommon or under-reported. Several barriers exist to reporting such abuse such as the common perception that sexual abuse perpetrated by females is harmless in comparison to male-perpetrated sexual abuse, the glorification by society of sexual activity involving adult females and underage males, the greater taboo surrounding female-perpetrated sexual abuse and traditional sexual scripts that portray females as sexually passive and innocent (Oliver, 2007). Despite its taboo status, the reality remains that some females do perpetrate sexual abuse. Recent research suggests that the ratio of male to female sex offenders is approximately 20:1 and that females account for around 5% of all sexual abuse (Cortoni, Hanson & Coache

2010). Such prevalence rates indicate that there are still a substantial number of victims and offenders in need of clinical attention (Gannon & Cortoni, 2010).

The influence of gender on the perceptions and treatment of offenders is evident from previous research that has found that males are not only treated more harshly than females (Godfrey, Farrall & Karstedt, 2005; Wilczynski, 1997) but are also more readily criminalised (Pollack, 1961) than women who receive more lenient sentences (Farrington & Morris, 1983; Nagel, 1981). However, this goes against research that has shown females who commit counter-stereotype offences are viewed more negatively (Viki, Massey, & Masser, 2005) with such women being described as displaying 'double deviance' (Heidensohn, 1987, p. 20). This refers to women who are not only considered rare and abnormal for defying social rules but who are also labelled as being unfeminine for opposing their conventional roles (ibid). This contrast was highlighted by two cases receiving media attention in the latter part of 2009 in the UK where a female teacher, Helen Goddard, was "jailed for lesbian affair with pupil" (The Times, September 2009) and a nursery assistant, Vanessa George, was "spat at by parents at a court appearance" (Telegraph, June 2009). In these instances, it would appear that Helen Goddard was treated and discussed more leniently than a male offender committing similar acts. The rhetoric surrounding Vanessa George

and her crimes, however, was particularly extreme and vitriolic and is perhaps a good example of a 'double deviance' case.

Despite the clear need for research in this area, the literature on female sex offenders is considerably limited and no study to date has specifically examined the attitudes that are held towards this group of offenders. In addition, up until now, research has focused on the attitudes of professionals with a considerable lack of research conducted on public and student samples. As no study to date has compared both student and public samples with professional samples, this study will employ an adapted version of the ATS replacing 'sex offenders' with 'female sex offenders' to investigate the attitudes to female sex offenders of the general public, forensic professionals (probation officers) and undergraduate psychology students. Based on previous studies, it is hypothesised that professionals will hold more positive attitudes towards female sex offenders than both the general public and students. However, the absence of research comparing student populations with the general public means it is not possible to predict the attitudes that will be held by these two groups. In addition, the attitudes from the adapted Attitudes to Female Sex Offenders Scale (AFSO) will be compared with published ATS studies to compare attitudes to female offenders with male offenders. Given the conflicting theories surrounding attitudes and responses to female offenders, it is not possible to predict at

this stage whether views will be more favourable, or more negative towards female sex offenders compared to previous studies investigating attitudes to 'sex offenders'.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

In order to investigate attitudes towards female sex offenders, a sample was drawn from three populations: the general public, forensic professionals and undergraduate psychology students. A total of 176 participants took part in the study. Of this group, the public subset was represented by 92 members of staff employed by a UK chain store (Boots the Chemists). Twenty probation officers employed by the Regional Sex Offender Unit in Staffordshire represented the professional subset and a total of 64 undergraduate psychology students were recruited to form the student subset. All students participated in exchange for course credit, whilst all other participants were not rewarded for their participation.

### *Design*

A quasi-experimental between-groups design with one independent variable (sample type - public, professional and student) and one dependant variable (ATFS score) was employed. In addition, one-sample t-tests were performed to compare the mean scores in this study with those of previous studies

where it is assumed that participants responded with male offenders in mind.

### *Materials*

This study employed an adaptation of the Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders Scale (ATS; Hogue, 1993) which was, in turn, adapted from the Attitudes Toward Prisoners Scale (ATP; Melvin, Gramling & Gardner, 1985) by Hogue. In order to ensure that participants applied the scale specifically to female sex offenders, and with Hogue's permission (personal communication, 2007) the word 'female' was inserted before the words 'sex offender' for each of the 36 items on the scale resulting in a parallel version of the ATS concerning attitudes towards female sex offenders (ATFS). The 36-item questionnaire employs a 5-point Likert scale, with responses of 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*undecided*), 4 (*agree*) and 5 (*strongly agree*). Nineteen of the 36 items represent negative attitudes (e.g. "female sex offenders never change") while 17 represent positive attitudes (e.g. "If female sex offenders do well in prison/hospital, they should be let out on parole"). To score the scale, negative items are reversed after which, scores on each of the 36 items were summed. As per Hogue's (1993) scoring method, a constant of 36 is then subtracted from each raw score to produce a score range of 0-144, with a higher total score indicating more positive attitudes towards female sex offenders and a lower total score indicating

more negative attitudes towards female sex offenders. The ATS has demonstrated a good level of reliability with a Cronbach  $\alpha$  of .92 (Nelson et al., 2002) and a test-retest reliability after two weeks of  $r = .82$  (Ferguson & Ireland, 2006). The construct validity of the ATS was established by Hogue (1993).

### *Procedure*

Following ethical approval from Coventry University's Ethics Committee, students contacted the researcher if they wished to participate in the study via an online advert that was placed on the university website. Probation officers and Boots employees were approached individually and asked if they would like to take part in a study examining attitudes towards female sex offenders. The nature of the study was briefly explained to all participants after which, they were provided with a participant information sheet, a consent form and the Attitudes Toward Female Sex Offenders Scale in an envelope. Once participants had given their consent and completed the scale, it was handed back to the researcher in the original envelope which they were asked to seal beforehand and they were then given a debrief form detailing the researchers contact details if they wished to withdraw their data at a later date. The questionnaires were filled out in a confidential manner and the only method of identifying an individual's data once all the

questionnaires had been pooled was through the unique participant code allocated to them on the debrief forms.

### **Results**

All questionnaires were completed adequately and were included in the analysis. The data were checked for normal distribution, skewness, homogeneity of variance and outliers. All parametric assumptions were met and there were no outliers in the dependent variable. Statistical analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 15.0.

A Chronbach's Alpha was calculated based on the responses from the entire sample (n=176) and all 36 items of the Attitudes towards Female Sex Offenders Scale. The Scale demonstrated a good level of internal consistency with an  $\alpha$  of 0.88, which is only slightly lower than the Chronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.92 reported (Nelson et al., 2002) for the Attitudes to Sex Offender Scale.

The mean scores and standard deviations for the three groups revealed that the professionals held more positive attitudes towards female sex offenders (M=99.55, SD=9.45) than both students (M=70.63, SD=14.07) and the general public (M=64.47, SD=14.92). To place the mean scores in context,

it is useful to note that if an individual scored 3 (undecided) on each item of the scale, they would obtain a mean score of 72 (which is in line with the mean student response), a 4 (agree) on all responses, a score of 108 and 2 (disagree), a score of 36. The mean scores for the samples would suggest that on average the forensic professionals held positive views of these offenders, though it should be remembered that the mean suggests that they 'agreed', rather than 'strongly agreed' with most statements. The student sample mean would suggest an 'undecided' view overall. The public mean (64) would suggest that whilst they hold more negative attitudes than the students they are closer to an 'undecided' average (72) than a consistent 'disagree' response (36). The standard deviations indicate that students and the general public had similarly higher levels of variability in their ATFS scores compared to the professional subset, demonstrating professionals to hold more consistent views than the other two groups.

A one-way analysis of variance indicated that there was a significant difference between the groups ( $F [2,173] = 50.82, p < .001, \omega = 0.6$ ). Analysis of differences between the means using a Hochberg procedure revealed that professionals held significantly more positive attitudes than both students and the general public while students demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes towards female sex offenders than the general public.



To assess whether there were any differences in attitudes towards ‘female sex offenders’ and ‘sex offenders’ assessed by the ATS in previous studies, one-sample t-tests were performed. From the published literature, two studies were identified where it could be established that Hogue’s scoring method (including the removal of the constant of 36) had been followed (Hogue, 1993 and Craig, 2005) and the published means were used to compare the different groups of the published studies (note that due to the lack of post-training differences in attitudes, only the pre-training attitudes from Craig’s study were included in these analyses) with the participant groups in this study (see Table 1 for a summary of this data).

[Please put Table 1. about here]

As can be seen from Table 1, the professional sample (probation officers) in the current study was found to have significantly more positive attitudes than all of the professional groups (police officers, prison officers (treatment and no-treatment), probation officers/ psychologists) employed by Hogue and the professional sample (pre and post training) that participated in Craig’s study. Interestingly, there was no significant difference between the attitudes of the professionals in this study and the sex offender sample

employed by Hogue, reflected by the mean scores of the two groups (99.55 and 99.1, respectively).

Conversely, the public sample in the current study was found to display significantly more negative attitudes towards female sex offenders than nearly all of Hogue's and Craig's samples did towards 'sex offenders'. Of note, there were no differences in attitudes between the public sample in this study and the police officer sample in Hogue's study. Differences in attitudes between the students in this study with the samples employed by Hogue and Craig were more complex. Professionals in Craig's study (both pre and post training) and the probation officers/psychologists, prison officers (with treatment) and sex offenders in Hogue's study all held significantly more positive attitudes towards 'sex offenders' than the students in this study held towards female sex offenders. However, students had significantly more positive attitudes to female sex offenders than the police officer sample employed by Hogue had to 'sex offenders' but there were no differences between students' attitudes to female sex offenders and prison officers (no treatment) attitudes towards 'sex offenders'.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study revealed that forensic professionals hold positive attitudes to female sex offenders that are perhaps more positive than towards

male sex offenders. This would suggest that in line with the findings of Marshall et al. (2003), therapists working with female offenders would find it comparatively easy to display features such as empathy and warmth, which should have a beneficial impact on intervention work with this group of offenders. Furthermore, whilst the results of this study revealed that students held more negative views of female sex offenders than forensic professionals and that the public held the least favourable views, the views of these samples would be best characterised as 'undecided' rather than negative. This would suggest that in comparison to male sex offenders, female sex offenders might experience fewer difficulties in reintegrating in communities following rehabilitation.

The results of this study, that forensic professionals held more positive attitudes towards female sex offenders than undergraduate psychology students, and in turn members of the public, are in line with previous research (e.g. Hogue, 1993; Lea et al., 1999; Nelson et al., 2002; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006; Taylor, Keddie & Lee, 2003). Taken together this research shows that individuals who work with, or have more experience of, and more confidence in work with sex offenders have more positive attitudes to this group, although previous research has not assessed attitudes towards female sex offenders specifically. The findings also support those of Ferguson and Ireland (2006) who found forensic staff to hold more positive

attitudes towards sex offenders than students. It is unclear, however, why these differences in attitudes exist. A contact hypothesis, i.e. those that have contact with offenders have more positive attitudes towards this group, is not supported by the findings in this study, as although the professional group have contact with sex offenders and have more positive attitudes than the other two groups, the student group had more favourable attitudes than the public group and it is unlikely that most, if any, of the students in the sample would have had contact with sex offenders. At least the student level of contact with sex offenders would be unlikely to be different from that of the public group. Why such differences in attitudes exist has important implications for the rehabilitation of sex offenders and further research is needed to investigate this issue such that the reasons for the differences can be determined and in turn steps taken to improve attitudes that are negative and/or hampering rehabilitation efforts.

Brown (1999) observed that those with higher socio-economic status held more positive attitudes to sex offenders and this may provide an explanation for the findings of this study, as it is likely that the groups differ in socio-economic status. However, it is also likely that the student and professional groups would share similar socio-economic groups of origin and so this variable need further investigation to establish its link to attitudes towards this group of offenders. Further, it is probable that socio-economic status as

a variable is confounded/linked to many other variables, such as education level, types of media viewed, residential neighbourhoods etc. Brown (1999) noted that participants in her study who read broadsheet newspapers as opposed to tabloid papers (that traditionally portray more negative, extreme and stereotypical views of sex offenders) held more positive attitudes towards sex offenders. As discussed by Willis et al. (2010), it could be that attitudes are influenced/mediated by the type of media that individuals watch/read and it is possible that the different groups who participated in this study rely on different media sources for their information about female sex offenders. This may explain their differences in attitudes towards this group, although more research is needed to determine the nature of the link between the use of different media sources and attitudes to this group of offenders. It could also be the case that individuals with more positive attitudes to offenders/sex offenders are more likely to choose to study psychology and those with the most positive attitudes gravitate towards occupations that involve contact with this group. From the current literature, it is not possible to provide support for this hypothesis and longitudinal research would be required to test this hypothesis further and to establish what factors are associated with and/or lead to such positive attitudes.

Interestingly, the student group in this study held attitudes that were within the mid-range on the adapted ATS, which may be indicative of a broadly 'undecided' opinion about this group of offenders. Furthermore, whilst the public sample held more negative attitudes than the other two groups, their mean response would suggest their overall opinion was closer to being 'undecided' than negative. Such undecided attitudes may be easier to change than positive or negative attitudes as strong attitudes tend to be relatively stable over time and resistant to persuasion (Ajzen, 2001). This is an important point to consider in studies using attitude scales, as it is perhaps commonly assumed that groups who hold the least positive attitudes hold 'negative' attitudes to the group/item in question when this may not necessarily be the case. That training/education could be used to promote a change in attitudes towards sex offenders is challenged by Craig's (2005) study, where professionals with attitudes similar in range to those of the students in this study demonstrated no change in attitudes following training. Craig suggested that the type of training may have been responsible for this lack of change. As discussed in more detail by Willis et al. (2010) there is a dearth of research that has investigated how attitudes can be changed and what factors, if any, lead to such change and this is an important area that requires future investigation if sex offenders are to be successfully rehabilitated and reintegrated into communities.

Comparisons between the attitudes of the participants in this study who responded in relation to female sex offenders and those of the groups in Hogue (1993) and Craig's (2005) study who responded in relation to sex offenders, show that the professionals in this study hold significantly more positive attitudes. This may suggest that attitudes to female sex offenders are more favourable than attitudes to 'sex offenders' which it is assumed would be viewed as a group of male sex offenders. Although this is in line with previous research that suggests females to be viewed and treated more favourably than males (Godfrey, Farrall & Karstedt, 2005; Wilczynski, 1997), it goes against research that suggests women are viewed more negatively if they commit counter-stereotype offences (Viki, Massey, & Masser, 2005). Although the method employed in this study enabled comparisons to be made between attitudes to female sex offenders and sex offenders, it should be noted that there was no direct comparison between attitudes towards male and female sex offenders. Further, Hogue's (1993) study is rather dated now and took place when the use of treatment programmes for sex offenders was new in the UK and when female sex offenders were even more 'unseen' than they are at the current time. A study that directly compares the attitudes towards male and female sex offenders across different groups of professionals, students and members of the public would be helpful in investigating this issue further. Studies investigating how the gender of the perpetrator interacts with the type of

offence committed (e.g. adding gender to the Ferguson and Ireland, 2006 and Kernsmith et al., 2009 studies) would also be illuminative.

If further research confirms that more positive attitudes are held towards female sex offenders than male sex offenders, then such differences could be used to develop a better understanding of attitudes towards this group of offenders, how they are formed and more importantly from a practice and sex offender community rehabilitation point of view, where attention could be focussed to promote change in attitudes. As discussed previously, Craig (2005) suggested that the training he used may not have been appropriate to improve attitudes to sex offenders, however it is currently difficult to know what such training or education should include, or how it should be delivered/approached. Sanghara and Wilson (2006) found that their participants with the least accurate knowledge about child sexual abuse tended to be more stereotypical in their responses and Kernsmith et al. (2009) established that 'paedophiles' and 'incest offenders' were the most feared groups of offenders. Since the term 'paedophile' tends to be used in relation to men and that stereotypes around sexual offending tend not to include female offenders, differences in attitudes towards male and female sex offenders may be related to such issues, which would suggest that education/training should focus on countering inaccurate stereotypes.



To our knowledge this is the first study to assess attitudes to female sex offenders and the first to compare attitudes towards 'sex offenders' across professional, public and student samples. The study does have some limitation, however, that should be noted. Although comparable with many of the published studies in this area, the professional sample is a relatively small sample and since it comes from a single location/occupational group, the attitudes of this group might not be generalisable to a broader population of forensic professionals, particularly in non-UK populations. Furthermore, although chosen as a population to represent the public, employees in a chain store are a sub-section of the broader UK population and as a result the views of the 'public' participants in this study may not be representative of the UK public, or of public opinion in other countries. Many psychology studies employ psychology undergraduate students for ease of access reasons, yet clearly the views of students who choose to study psychology may not be representative of the broader student undergraduate population and are unlikely to represent the full population of students at other levels of study. Finally, in line with much previous research, a definition of 'sex offender' or 'female sex offender' was not provided in this study. This led to some confusion, perhaps more so than would be the case in 'sex offender' studies, as some respondents were not aware that females committed sexual offences; for example, one of the participants from the public subset commented that she was unaware that female sex offenders existed and

assumed that it was a crime purely perpetrated by males. It should also be noted that in line with most previous studies (with the exception of Ferguson & Ireland, 2006 and Kernsmith et al., 2009) the responses in this study were directed to *all* female sex offenders, or at least what the respondent would think of with this label in mind. Brillon (1988) argued that when completing these types of studies, respondents tend to think of the most severe types of crime. In addition, it is likely that participants less familiar with the range of sex offences (in this study this would apply to the student and public groups) would have the most serious offences in mind, which may account for the more positive responses of the professional group, although it would account less well for the difference between the student and public groups.

In this study, Hogue's (1993) Attitudes to Sex Offenders Scale was adapted by inserting the word 'female' before 'sex offender' in each of the scale's items to assess attitudes to female sex offenders and to compare the attitudes of a group of forensic professionals, undergraduate psychology students and a group of chain store employees, as representatives of the public. In line with previous research in relation to attitudes towards 'sex offenders' this study found that the attitudes of professionals were more positive towards 'sex offenders' than students. Further, the study demonstrated that undergraduate students had more favourable attitudes than the chain store

employees. To our knowledge, no other published study has compared the attitudes of students and the public to any group of sex offenders.

Comparisons with published studies using the 'sex offender' ATS, revealed that the professionals in this study had more positive attitudes, perhaps indicating that attitudes to female sex offenders are more positive than towards 'sex offenders' believed to be viewed largely as male offenders.

From this study, it is not possible to ascertain why the differences exist and a range of hypotheses are considered, all of which require further research.

Despite the fact that public attitudes to sex offenders are frequently cited in the development and implementation of legislation in relation to this group of offenders, and that rehabilitation requires public support (see Willis et al., 2010 for a more detailed discussion), research investigating attitudes towards this group is still relatively scarce. Although there has been a recent resurgence in interest, particular research investigating how attitudes are developed and changed is lacking and yet, much needed.

## References

- Ajzen, I. (2001). Nature and operation of attitudes. *Annual Review of Psychology*, **52**, 27-58.
- Brannon, Y. N., Levenson, J. S., Fortney, T., & Baker, J. N. (2007). Attitudes about community notification: A comparison of sexual offenders and the non-offending public. *Sexual Abuse: Journal of Research and Treatment*, *19*, 369-379.
- Brillon, Y. (1988). Punitiveness, Status and Ideology in three Canadian Provinces. In Walker, N. & Hough, M. (Eds.) *Public Attitudes to Sentencing: Surveys From Five Countries*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Gower.
- Brown, S. (1999). Public attitudes toward the treatment of sex offenders. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, **4**, 239-252.
- Brown, S. J. (2008) Attitudes Towards Sexual Offenders and their Rehabilitation: A Special Case? In Wood, J. & Gannon, T. A. (Eds) *Public Opinion on Criminal Justice*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan. Pp. 187-213.
- Brown, S., Deakin, J. & Spencer, J. (2008). What people think about the management of sex offenders in the community. *The Howard Journal*, **47**(3), 259-274.
- Cheit, R. E. (2003). What hysteria? A systematic study of newspaper coverage of accused child molesters. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *27*, 607-623.

- Cortoni, F., Hanson, R. K., & Coache, M. E. (2010). The recidivism rates of female sexual offenders: A meta-analysis. Gannon, T. A., & Cortoni, F. (Eds). *Female Sexual Offenders: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment*. [London](#): Wiley-Blackwell.
- Craig, L. (2005). The impact of training on attitudes towards sex offenders. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, **11**(2), 197-207.
- Craun, S. W., & Theriot, M. T. (2009). Misperceptions of sex offender perpetration: Considering the impact of sex offender registration. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *24*, 2057-2072.
- Ducat, L., Thomas, S. & Blood, W. (2009) Sensationalising sex offenders and sexual recidivism: Impact of the Serious Sex Offender Monitoring Act 2005 on media reportage. *Australian Psychologist*, *44* (3), 156-165.
- Farrington, D. & Morris, A. (1983). Sex, sentencing and reconviction. *British Journal of Criminology*, *23*, 229-248.
- Ferguson, K. & Ireland, C. A. (2006). Attitudes towards sex offenders and the influence of offence type: A comparison of staff working in a forensic setting and students. *The British Journal of Forensic Practice*, **8**(2), 10-19.
- Frei, A. (2008) Media consideration of sex offenders: How community response shapes a gendered perspective. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *52* (5), 495-498.

- Gannon, T. A., & Cortoni, F. (2010) (Eds). *Female Sexual Offenders: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment*. [London](#): Wiley-Blackwell.
- Godfrey, B. S., Farrall, S. & Karstedt, S. (2005). Explaining gendered sentencing patterns for violent men and women in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period. *British Journal of Criminology*, **45**, 696-720.
- Harnett, P. H. (1997). The attitudes of female and male residential care-workers to the perpetrators of sexual and physical assault. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, **21**(9), 861-868.
- Heidensohn, F. (1987). Women and crime: Questions for criminology. In Carlen, P. & Worrall, A. (Eds). *Gender, Crime and Justice*. Suffolk: Open University Press, pp 16-28.
- Hogue, T. E. (1993). Attitudes towards prisoners and sexual offenders. *Issues in Criminological and Legal Psychology*, **9**, 27-32.
- Hogue, T. E. (1995). Training multi-disciplinary teams to work with sex offenders: Effects on staff attitudes. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, **1**, 227-235.
- Hogue, T. E. & Peebles, J. (1997). The influence of remorse, intent and attitudes toward sex offenders on judgments of a rapist. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, **3**(4), 249-259.
- Johnson, H., Hughes, J. G., & Ireland, J. L. (2007). Attitudes towards sex offenders and the role of empathy, locus of control and training: A

comparison between a probationer police and general public sample.

*The Police Journal*, 80, 28-54.

Kernsmith, P. D., Craun, S. W., & Foster, J. (2009). Public attitudes toward sexual offenders and sex offender registration. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 18, 290-301.

Lea, S., Auburn, T. & Kibblewhite, K. (1999). Working with sex offenders: The perceptions and experiences of professionals and paraprofessionals. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 43(1), 103-119.

Lieb, R., & Nunlist, C. (2008). *Community Notification as Viewed by Washington's Citizens: A Ten-year Follow-up* (No. 08-03-1101). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

Levenson, J. S., D'Amora, D. A., & Hern, A. L. (2007). Megan's Law and its impact on community re-entry for sex offenders. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 25, 587-602.

Levenson, J. S., Brannon, Y. N., Fortney, T., & Baker, J. (2007). Public perceptions about sex offenders and community protection policies. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy (ASAP)*, 7, 137-161.

Levenson, J. S., Fortney, T., & Baker, J. N. (2010). Views of Sexual Abuse Professionals About Sex Offender Notification Policies. *Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 54(2), 150-168.

Marshall, W. L., Serran, G. A., Fernandez, Y. M., Mulloy, R., Mann, R. E.

- & Thornton, D. (2003). Therapist characteristics in the treatment of sexual offenders: Tentative data on their relationship with indices of behaviour change. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 9, 25-30.
- McAlinden, A-M. (2007). *Public attitudes towards sex offenders in Northern Ireland*. Research and Statistical Bulletin 6, Belfast: Northern Ireland. Retrieved February 15, 2008, from <http://www.nio.gov.uk>.
- Melvin, K. B., Gramling, L. K., & Gardner, W. M. (1985). A scale to measure attitudes toward prisoners. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 12, 241-253.
- Nagel, I. (1981). Sex differences in the processing of criminal defendants. In Carlen, P. & Worrall, A. (1987) (Eds). *Gender, Crime and Justice*. Suffolk: Open University Press.
- Nelson, M., Herlihy, B. & Oescher, J. (2002). A survey of counsellor attitudes towards sex offenders. *Journal of Mental Health Counselling*, 24(1), 51-67.
- Oliver, B. E. (2007). Preventing female-perpetrated sexual abuse. *Trauma Violence Abuse*, 8(1), 19-32.
- Pollack, O. (1961). *The Criminality of Women*. New York: AS Barnes
- Radley, L. (2001). Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders, *Forensic Update*, 66 July 2001, 5-9.
- Rash, E. & Winton, M. A. (2007). Advanced practice nurse attitudes toward



- sex offender patients. *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners*, **19**, 328-331.
- Sample, L. L., & Kadleck, C. (2008). Sex Offender Laws: Legislators' Accounts of the Need for Policy. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, **19**(1), 40-62.
- Sanghara, K. & Wilson, C. (2006). Stereotypes and attitudes about child sexual abusers: A comparison of experienced and inexperienced professionals in sex offender treatment. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, **11**, 229-244.
- Schiavone, S. K., & Jeglic, E. L. (2009). Public perception of sex offender social policies and the impact on sex offenders. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, **53**, 679-695.
- Sahlstrom, K. J., & Jeglic, E. L. (2008). Factors affecting attitudes toward juvenile sex offenders. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, **17**, 180-196.
- Salerno, J. M., Najdowski, C. J., Stevenson, M. C., Wiley, T. R. A., Bottoms, B. L., Vaca, R., et al. (2010). Psychological mechanisms underlying support for juvenile sex offender registry laws: Prototypes, moral outrage, and perceived threat. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, **28**, 58-83.
- Taylor, J. L., Keddie, T. & Lee, S. (2003). Working with sex offenders with

intellectual disability: Evaluation of an introductory workshop for direct care staff. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, **47**(3), 203-209.

Viki, G. T., Massey, K. & Masser, B. (2005). When chivalry backfires: Benevolent sexism and attitudes towards Myra Hindley. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, **10**, 109-120.

Weekes, J. R., Pelletier, G. & Beaudette, D. (1995). Correctional Officers: How Do They Perceive Sex Offenders? *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, **39**(1), 55-61.

Wilczynski, A. (1997). Mad or Bad? Child-killers, gender and the courts. *British Journal of Criminology*, **37**(3), 419-436.

Willis, G. M., Levenson, J. S. & Ward, T. (2010) Desistance and Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders: Facilitation or Hindrance? *Journal of Family Violence*, **25**(6), 545-556.

Table 1. A comparison of the mean ATFS scores in the present study with the mean ATS scores in Hogue (1993) and Craig (2005).

Participant Group	Published Comparison Group	Mean (SD)	t	p
Professionals M=99.55 SD=9.45	Sex Offenders <sup>^</sup>	99.1 (20.42)	0.213	0.834
	Probation officers/ Psychologists <sup>^</sup>	90.7 (11.64)	4.190	p<0.001
	Prison officers with treatment experience <sup>^</sup>	80.0 (13.13)	9.257	p<0.001
	Professionals pre- training <sup>^^</sup>	76.44 (12.95)	10.942	p<0.001
	Prison officers with no treatment experience <sup>^</sup>	71.5 (17.34)	13.281	p<0.001
	Police officers <sup>^</sup>	62.6 (17.47)	17.496	p<0.001
Students M= 70.63 SD=14.07	Sex Offenders <sup>^</sup>	99.1 (20.42)	-16.196	p<0.001
	Probation officers/ Psychologists <sup>^</sup>	90.7 (11.64)	-11.418	p<0.001
	Prison officers with treatment experience <sup>^</sup>	80.0 (13.13)	-5.332	p<0.001
	Professionals pre- training <sup>^^</sup>	76.44 (12.95)	-3.307	p<0.01
	Prison officers with no treatment experience <sup>^</sup>	71.5 (17.34)	-0.498	0.620
	Police officers <sup>^</sup>	62.6 (17.47)	4.565	p<0.001
Public M=64.47 SD=14.92	Sex Offenders <sup>^</sup>	99.1 (20.42)	-22.262	p<0.001
	Probation officers/ Psychologists <sup>^</sup>	90.7 (11.64)	-16.863	p<0.001
	Prison officers with treatment experience <sup>^</sup>	80.0 (13.13)	-9.985	p<0.001
	Professionals pre- training <sup>^^</sup>	76.44 (12.95)	-7.696	p<0.001
	Prison officers with no treatment experience <sup>^</sup>	71.5 (17.34)	-4.521	p<0.001
	Police officers <sup>^</sup>	62.6 (17.47)	1.200	0.233

<sup>^</sup> Data from Hogue (1993) <sup>^^</sup> Data from Craig (2005)