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What Keeps Them Together? Insights into Sex Offender Couples Using Qualitative Content Analyses

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Research on sex offenders' relationships is scarce. The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate sex offenders' relationships as well as their female partners' adjustment strategies by means of interview analysis. Both partners profit from the relationship in terms of mutual support and acceptance. The sexual offense is a taboo subject, and the female partners were found to demonstrate cognitive distortions. The imbalance of power found in the sex offenders' relationships is discussed, as is the finding that those sexual offenders interviewed live out their need for dominance and sometimes their aggression. The women interviewed were found to cling to their partners as a result of their insecure attachment style. We discuss couples counseling and therapy as possibilities for addressing the imbalance of power and casting light upon the sexual aspect of the relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships between men and women have been the object of particular interest in attachment research (Bond & Bond, 2004; Collins & Read, 1990; Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin, 2001). The study of male sexual offenders, men who force sex and intimacy upon their victims, is a likewise well-researched academic field, for example within the realm of evolutionary psychology (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000), but also with a very practical focus, especially with regard to recidivism and relapse prevention. The combination of these two areas of research (romantic relationships and sexual offending) is rare. Previous research into convicted, imprisoned, and (later) released sexual offenders focuses primarily on recidivism rates, and the

strategies adopted by convicted sexual offenders in order to make a new start in life after imprisonment have barely received any attention. The topic of sexual offenders' intimate relationships is therefore a much neglected field of research. At the same time, clinical experience in working with released sexual offenders in an outpatient setting reveals that numerous patients exist who are shown to maintain stable intimate relationships with women who are aware of their conviction.

Our systematic review of the literature revealed little research into the topic of "sex offender couples" (SOCs). In his work on the attachment styles of sexual offenders, Marshall (1989) mentioned that sexual offenders encountered in his therapeutic work "rush into live-in relationships with women without giving much thought to their actual compatibility with their partner" (p. 497). The offenders seemed to have "apparently effective" if superficial marriages. Their female partners were regarded more as acquaintances than as intimate and supportive companions. Marshall (1989) discussed insecure parental attachment on the part of the offenders as leading to low self-confidence as well as to empathy and intimacy deficits, hindering the offenders in "fully shar[ing] the emotional issues relevant to their partners" (p. 497). The consequence was frustration on both sides of the relationship, and hence dissatisfied couples.

In one of the rare empirical studies on SOCs, Lang and colleagues (1990) did indeed find significantly more marital disharmony in a group of 92 married incest offenders in comparison with a control group of noncriminal married men. The incest offenders reported significantly more distrust, a lack of mutual friends, and less time spent together. The offenders also reported emotional instability as well as significantly more marital problems resulting from their supposed insincerity and untruthfulness. The sexual offenders also stated that they were less satisfied with the quality of their "sexual outlets": Only a third of them reported sexual gratification with their spouses compared to 94% of the noncriminal married men. Lang et al. argued that these difficulties reflect fundamental problems in relation to intimacy in the marriages of incest offenders.

Metz and Dwyer (1993) also conducted a study on SOCs and found that they were distressed and conflicted. On comparing 30 patients with sexual dysfunction, 25 sexual offender couples, and 26 satisfied couples by means of standardized self-report instruments, they found the SOCs to be significantly less content with their marriages (all of the participating couples had been in a relationship before the sexual offense occurred; only child molesters and "hands-off" sexual offenders were included in this study). The wives of sexual offenders were least satisfied with the level of relationship affection, and in the conflict management scales the sexual offender couples reported the highest frequency of conflicts. The SOCs' style of dealing with disagreements and conflicts was the least constructive. Both the sexual offenders as well as their wives scored significantly higher on the behavioral subscales "global aggression," "verbal aggression," and "physical aggression." The authors described the sexual offenders as having an "engage-avoid" conflict style that was described as pessimistic, cognitively hostile (aggressive), and acquiescing (submissive). The conflict style of the sexual offenders' wives was classified by the authors as being equally avoidant: "Partners of sexual offender men [...] are deficient in constructive assertion to resolve conflict, and variously act acutely hostile, and withdraw. They attribute blame for conflict to the male partner, whom they experience as variously hostile, withdrawn, and denying of relationship conflict" (Metz & Dwyer, 1993, p. 117). The authors discuss whether the wives' pattern of blaming their partners might not represent a specific reaction to the sexual

offense: The wives "had not left the relationship over the crime, but remain and express their pain hostilely" (Metz & Dwyer, 1993, p. 118).

In 1997, Ward, Hudson, Marshall, and Siegert investigated 55 child molesters, 30 rapists, 32 violent nonsexual offenders, and 30 nonviolent, nonsexual offenders with a semi-structured interview with regard to their perceptions of their romantic relationships. At the time of the investigation, all the participants were incarcerated and had not yet been treated. Both heterosexual and homosexual offenders were included in the study. The interviews were summarized and then analyzed using inductive qualitative content analysis in order to develop descriptive categories concerning the offenders' perceptions of their intimate relationships. Afterward, the participants' statements were rated on a 5-point Likert scale as to how well the answers fit the previously developed categories. Ward et al. (1997) found that the two sexual offending groups (rapists and child molesters) differed in most of these categories from the nonviolent, nonsexual group, but rarely from the violent nonsexual group. No difference was found between the sexual offenders and the other offenders regarding intimacy. The sexual offenders and the violent offenders scored significantly lower than the nonsexual, nonviolent group in the following categories: self-disclosure, expression of affection, sexual satisfaction, support received, support given, mutual empathy, and conflict resolution in intimate relationships. The categories "relational sexual satisfaction" and "sensitivity to rejection" also revealed a significant difference between the two sexual offender groups: The child molesters reported being less satisfied with the sexuality in their relationships than the rapists, and more sensitive toward rejection from their partners. The authors linked these results to the child molesters' mostly preoccupied attachment style. Furthermore, the child molesters described themselves as being more committed in their relationships as well as evaluating their partners more positively than the rapists. Ward et al. (1997) concluded that the sexual offender groups appear to have a number of deficits that are likely to be associated with low levels of intimacy in their romantic relationships (which is, however, not something that is specific to sexual offenders).

Research into sexual offenders' female partners has been equally neglected and is mostly outdated. Garrett and Wright (1975), for instance, interviewed 11 wives of rapists and seven of incest offenders in a maximum-security state hospital. The women appeared to derive "considerable satisfaction" from being a "martyred wife" (p. 151). They emphasized their determination to stand by their mates, "their goodwill towards them, and a sanguine belief that their futures looked so rosy" (Garrett & Wright, 1975, p. 156). The women further stated that their husbands seemed much improved with regard to reduced aggression as a result of their stay in the institution. In terms of their marital sexual relationship, the wives of the rapists were less positive in their evaluation of their prehospitalization sexuality than the wives of the incest offenders. Almost all of the 18 wives stated that the marriage had not suffered from the sexual offense committed, but had instead been strengthened. "Expressions of guilt or shame in regard to their husbands' behaviour were well-hidden, if they were present at all, among the wives of the rape offenders" (Garrett & Wright, 1975, p. 155). According to the authors, most of the rapists' wives did not blame themselves for their husbands' sexual offense, but instead offered such explanations for it as "the girls not being properly dressed" or "teasing" their husbands by hitchhiking (p. 155). These accusations were absent amongst the wives of the incest offenders. The authors interpreted the sexual offense as offering the wives "particularly useful levers to build or reinforce the position of social and moral dominance" (Garrett & Wright, 1975, p. 157), which, according to the authors, reversed the proportion of power found to be underlying the marriages at the outset. Cahalane,

Parker, and Duff (2013) analyzed letters written by the female partners of child molesters in which they describe their feelings about their partner's offense. Of the nine female participants, five were still in a relationship with their partner (and three of the remaining women seemed to be in the process of a reunification). Offense characteristics were unknown to the authors, although no intrafamilial offenses were present. The letters were analyzed qualitatively by means of thematic analysis. The analyses revealed some minimization of the offense with regard to impact on the victims. Attempts made to separate the partners from their offending behavior became apparent. The authors discuss the finding that the "externalizing language the women used when describing their partners' offenses might have served a protective function by enabling them to maintain their existing view of their partner rather than identifying him as a sexual offender" (Cahalane et al., 2013, p. 734).

The existing empirical studies mainly focus on sexual offender characteristics in terms of intimacy or attachment deficits. Only Metz and Dwyer (1993) included both offenders and their female partners in their study and chose to evaluate the relationship using standardized self-report questionnaires. However, it is possible that participants might not be aware of their beliefs or their underlying feelings and may therefore answer in a misleading (or socially desirable) manner. This is one disadvantage of a method that only uses self-report information. Qualitative explorations may be able to provide a more differentiated and accurate picture of individuals' perceptions and feelings with regard to intimate relationships. Although some studies already offer portraits of the female partners of incest offenders (Cahalane et al., 2013; Garrett & Wright, 1975; Hitchens, 1972; Palm & Abrahamsen, 1954; Weiss & Cipro, 1996), they concentrated their investigations on the time of discovery of the offense and its impact on the women. The female partners of extrafamilial offenders or rapists were on the other hand hardly evaluated. To our knowledge, no empirical studies exist that examine the adaptation strategies of those sexual offenders' partners who proceed with the relationship. The exploration of relationship dynamics in SOCs after the offender has been released from incarceration is rare. Existing literature mentions multiple deficits found in sexual offenders and their partners, including malfunctioning conflict management, empathy deficits, intimacy deficits, and a low level of affection expression. However, current research has not evaluated those factors that strengthen the relationships of SOCs or the potential coping strategies of offenders and their partners. The aim of this exploratory qualitative pilot study was therefore to investigate sexual offenders' intimate relationships as well as their female partners' adjustment strategies with regard to the sexual offense. A focus was further placed on factors that strengthen the relationship. The results were then evaluated with regard to their potential implications for therapeutic strategies in sexual offender treatment.

METHOD

The interviews with the SOCs were part of a larger study that used both qualitative and quantitative assessment methods (for details on the quantitative results, see Iffland, Berner, & Briken, 2014). The survey included convicted male sexual offenders and their current female intimate partners. Sexual offenders with hands-on and hands-off offenses were included. We excluded homosexual couples and offenders who had offended against their current spouse for reasons of increased homogeneity in the sample. In order to maximize the sample, no further selection criteria were used. Participants were invited by their therapist to participate in the study. Sexual offenders

from five different outpatient treatment centers in Germany¹ were investigated, along with their partners. We encountered in patients a high level of reluctance to participate, which was, however, not assessed more closely (neither data about the number of sexual offenders with or without partnerships in the five institutions nor data relating to the refusal rate of offenders and/or their partners were obtained systematically). A total of 17 couples gave informed consent. If the patient was interested in participating in the study, he received a standardized information page with further details regarding the study, as well as information about confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection, and contact details for the first author, who coordinated the study and carried out the interviews. It was emphasized that study participation would not have any influence on further therapy. The patients were asked to inform their partners about the study and discuss participation with them. If both partners agreed to participate, they contacted the study coordinator. The couples received a participation fee of 20 euros.

The couples were interviewed at home. This method was chosen in order to secure a relaxed atmosphere and gain an impression of how both partners interacted with each other during the introduction situation in which the couple got the opportunity to ask questions. Unfortunately, the somewhat improvised nature of the recording setup led to some unintelligible recordings: Nine interviews had to be excluded from the analyses. The interviews could not be repeated because of the participants' refusal to be interviewed again as well as the risk of distorting the results in comparison to the other interviews that were not repeated.

After the introduction phase, both partners were then interviewed separately. While one partner was interviewed, the other partner stayed in a different room and filled out self-report questionnaires (for the results of this quantitative assessment, see Iffland et al., 2014). The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured manual that was developed on the basis of the findings from the literature review as well as the authors' own clinical experience. The interviews' mean duration was 34.09 minutes (range: 9.23 to 63.23 minutes). The interview opened with a short biographical evaluation and questions about the participants' relationship history. The couples were asked to describe their first encounter as well as how the relationship developed afterward. As regards the current relationship, the interview included items such as "Describe your partner's three best/worst characteristics," "Which topics are frequently the subject of conflicts?" or "Describe your and your partner's conflict style." The participants were asked in detail about the sexual offenders' disclosure and their reactions and feelings, as well as questions about the sexual offenses' impact on the present-day relationship. The female partners were questioned about their knowledge of offense details and were asked questions such as "What are your thoughts about the offense?" The women were further asked about any experience of sexual victimization. In addition, any social support for the female partners' possible burdening through the sexual offense was assessed. The manual left enough room to explore additional matters of concern that may have emerged during the interview. The local ethics committee approved the study.

Sample Characteristics

Of the 34 participants involved in this study, 25 completed interviews that were included in the qualitative analyses. Nine interviews (26%) were excluded due to invalid recordings. The

¹Institute for Sex Research and Forensic Psychiatry in Hamburg, "Packhaus" Kiel, and outpatient treatment centers affiliated with the forensic hospitals in Bremen, Berlin, and Cologne-Langenfeld.

sample comprised 12 SOCs and one solo woman whose partner's interview was excluded. The participants' mean age was 42.8 ($SD = 11.8$ years). The median relationship duration was 4 years (range = 1.2 to 40 years). In five couples the sexual offense occurred during the relationship, and seven couples, including the single woman and her partner (who was not included), met after the men's incarceration. In eight of the 12 participating couples, the men were incarcerated, and the remaining four men as well as the solo woman's partner were institutionalized in forensic psychiatric institutions. Three offenders were intrafamilial child abusers, one was a rapist, one was an exhibitionist, one had committed rape and child abuse, and five were extrafamilial child molesters. The partner of the lone woman had also committed extrafamilial child abuse.

Data Analyses

Psychology students doing internships at the author's institution transcribed the interviews. The interviews were analyzed using inductive qualitative content analysis, in accordance with Mayring's approach (2000, 2014). Mayring (2000) defines content analysis as "an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytic rules and step by step models [. . .]" (p. 2). Its main goal is to "reduce the material in such a way that the essential contents remain, in order to create through abstraction a comprehensive overview of the base material which is nevertheless still an image of it" (Mayring, 2014, p. 64). The analysis was carried out in two distinct steps. The first step was to develop a comprehensive category system inductively from the data. This step was performed by the first author using the software ATLAS.ti (Version 5; Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2005). During the coding process, meaningful phrases and words were identified and organized into codes (i.e., categories). The codes were then clustered thematically into supercodes (or themes) at a higher conceptual level. The authors' expertise in working with the population along with the first author's impressions in the interview situation contributed to the analyses. When no new codes or supercodes were found (after working through about 30% of the material), the category system was finally revised. The second step consisted of the complete material being coded again deductively using the category system developed beforehand. An overview of the category system can be found in Table 1. The following results are organized in accordance with the supercodes derived from the data.

RESULTS

Qualitative Analyses

The following supercodes were developed from the topics mentioned by the participants: insecure attachment style, minimization of the offense, ignoring the offense, the offenders' striving to dominate, aggression, help and guidance received, imbalance of the offenders' self-esteem, experience of acceptance, getting through a difficult time together, the women's social isolation, and the negative impact of the offense on the relationship (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Category System

Supercodes	Included codes
Insecure attachment style	Idealization of the relationship and the partner; modest demands on a potential partner; discouraging personality features.
Minimization of the offense	—
Ignoring the offense	—
Offenders' striving to dominate	Partner: is too stubborn; shy (positive); doesn't admit to being wrong; doesn't understand things; doesn't do what he wants; doesn't listen to him; feels treated like a child. Offender: likes being dominant; likes younger women; is jealous; shows patronizing behavior.
Aggression	Verbal aggression; physical aggression; impulsivity; frequent conflicts; mutual annoying behavior; partner is moody.
Help and guidance received and given	Partner: supports him; prevents him from recidivating; needs him because she doesn't understand things. Offender: helps her with things; profits from her help; is helpful.
Imbalance of the sex offenders' self-esteem	Partner proposed; relationship in spite of partner's bad looks; partner approached offender; partner strengthens offender's ego; is good-looking; is a status symbol; was won over by the offender.
Experiences of acceptance	Offender deserves second chance; Partner is true to him; understands him; stands by him; is patient; knows his good sides; cheers him up; is friendly; is motherly; offense doesn't fit the man.
Getting through a difficult time together	Bumpy relationship; relationship is strengthened though the offense; relationships has grown through the offense.
The women's social isolation	Partner feels socially isolated; no one knows of the offense; female partner is forced to maintain composure.
The negative impact of the offense on the relationship	Partner makes guilty conscience; negative emotions due to the revelation; thoughts of separation by the women; fear of the women separating.

Insecure Attachment Style

The supercode "insecure attachment style" was developed from the codes "idealization of the relationship and the partner," "modest demands on a potential partner," and "discouraging personality features." Additionally, the insecure attachment style was openly evident in some of the women's reports:

Partner: I tried to give my daughter everything, everything possible, because I realized that she was always approaching me, but I couldn't or didn't want to give it to her, because as a little child I didn't receive it from my mother either . . . that was really difficult for me.

In another case an offender explained:

Offender: With me she can be sure of my love . . . that gives her the security she needs.

The code "idealization of the relationship and the partner" included in the supercode "insecure attachment style" arose from a number of different statements. Many participants described their first encounter as "fateful," and very often the phrase "love at first sight" was used. A kind of positive instinct about their spouses at the moment of their first encounter was mentioned by some women with a number of variations, including labeling their partners "perfect" or "an angel," and denying their having any negative personality traits at all. One woman, while in tears, described her husband as follows:

Partner: . . . he gives me everything that I never had and I'm so grateful that I met him because he gives me the love that I never had in my life [. . .] he is the most wonderful person in my life [. . .] I sometimes stay awake at night and watch him, and every time I thank God that I have him because now my life is so wonderful.

Also included in the code "idealization of the relationship and the partner" were participants' statements about their compatibility and the harmony in their relationships. The phrase "we get on well with each other" was frequently used. Many participants denied conflicts in the relationship, and most women made it clear that they had no intention of separating from their partner as a consequence of the offense.

When asked about their partner's best qualities, both men and women repeatedly used the words "loving" or "affectionate." Participants emphasized the love that they received in the relationship:

Partner: . . . there is something cheerful and loveable about him . . . he radiates something positive so that you just feel safe.

Offender: . . . she is so affectionate when she takes me in her arms . . . and yes, yet again, she is affectionate.

The code "modest demands on a potential partner" was created mostly from the participants' naming of their partners' three best characteristics. After labeling their partners as "loving" or "affectionate," participants stated that they most valued such fundamental qualities as "listening," being "good to talk to," "friendly," "reliable," "true," "patient," "honest," or "faithful." Most sexual offenders and their partners answered that their spouses' best quality was to "be there for me." Hardly any specific personality traits were listed.

Partner: When I feel down, he takes me in his arms.

Offender: That I can depend on her . . . that she is there for me in bad times.

After valuing their partner to be "there for me" many women added: "I'm not easy to be with myself."

The code “discouraging personality features” includes different aspects of the personality of the sexual offenders and their partners that might lead to a decreased sense of self-worth, and therefore has a strong connection to the abovementioned code “modest demands on a potential partner.” These personality features include intellectual limitations, psychiatric challenges (including borderline personality disorder, depression, suicide attempts, and epileptic disorder), and other physical conditions (e.g., stunted growth). These aspects were not explicitly assessed by the interviewer, but rather were mentioned by the participants themselves. One woman put it like this:

Partner: Me with my psychiatric disorder, we can share our experiences with each other. He has his offense, and I’m mentally ill. We are a match in this way.

The women in our sample seemed in part to try to defend the relationship by emphasizing their own problems to which their partner had to adapt. Their disabilities, disorders, or diseases also serve another function, as can be seen below in “help and guidance received/given.” The offenders on the other hand brought up their female partners’ difficulties in a further context (see below “offenders strive for dominance”).

Other facets included in the code “discouraging personality features” were “difficult experiences in former relationships” (including assault and battery, and former partners’ alcoholism or infidelity), “no/little previous romantic experience,” and “sexual victimization” (on the part of both sexual offenders and their partners).

Minimization of the Offense

Minimization of the offense occurred in many of the interviews in correspondence with the insecure attachment styles of the offenders’ partners. This supercode includes aspects of victim-blaming, belief in the partners’ innocence, and emphasis on the offenders’ difficult childhood or their being intoxicated during the offense.

Partner 1: I think both are to blame. He was an adult, but the daughter [his stepdaughter] thought “fourteen, grown up . . . let’s approach an older man” . . . this is how it is with young girls nowadays . . . short skirt and dressed up to pick up older men, and then they are surprised when they get raped!

Partner 2: My husband is not to blame . . . she was way out of order.

Partner 3: Now I see things differently, because I love him. He explained everything. To some extent I can understand it.

As expected, some offenders also trivialized their offense, although most of them were keen to remove the topic of the offense from the interview:

Offender: I have my own thoughts about the offense so I told her what happened from my point of view.

Ignoring the Offense

In addition to minimizing the offense, it became evident in the interviews that most of the couples chose not to deal with the sexual offense at all. Most women stated that their partner is “a human being” and “deserves a second chance.” Hardly any of them had witnessed the trial or read the verdict. The sexual offense is not a topic of discussion in their day-to-day life. Many women further emphasized that the offense didn’t seem to fit their partners:

Partner 1: From his appearance I would never believe him capable of that [the offense].

Partner 2: I don’t believe that of my husband!

Partner 3: Yes, I love him and know who he is and how he is with me and that he is not . . . that he was probably a different person then.

Of the three intrafamilial sexual offender couples, two couples chose to remove their daughter (the victim) from their life.

Partner 1: I’m not in contact with her [daughter/victim]. I don’t want to be. I can’t handle it.

Partner 2: My daughter is one thing, and my marriage and my husband whom I love are the other. I love my daughter too, but I chose to stand by him!

The partners of the rapists, however, also answered:

Partner: I try to avoid thinking about the victim because then one would have a connection with the victim.

Offenders’ Striving to Dominate

It was possible to develop the supercode “offenders’ striving to dominate” from many different statements. The offenders’ striving to dominate seems to be present in different variations amongst all of the couples. This dominance mainly became apparent in the offenders’ answers about their partners’ worst characteristics. Answers frequently included “She is stubborn,” “She doesn’t listen [to me],” or “She always denies being wrong.” One woman described her partner as follows:

Partner: He says that he is right . . . in the relationship . . . I’m always the scapegoat!

Many offenders claimed to value their female partners being “reserved and shy” or stated that they liked younger, inexperienced women. Some offenders directly admitted to wanting to be the dominant and leading person in a relationship. The female partners often declared the offenders’ high level of jealousy as a problematic feature in the relationship.

One larger code that was included in the supercode “offenders’ striving to dominate” was “patronizing behavior.” In this category we summarized different behaviors on the part of the offenders that were mentioned in almost all of the interviews and that indicate that the offenders treat their female partners like a child. Here are some examples:

Partner 1: He doesn’t want me to eat a lot of chocolate . . . he is angry about that.

Partner 2: He says I have to keep an eye on my money . . . be thrifter.

Partner 3: On Sunday I was allowed to record Howard Carpendale [a German singer] on the VCR!

Offender 1: She has to be more active! I tell her to go running or walking . . . she does a lot of what I tell her to do!

Offender 2: I give her some freedom . . . when she drives to visit her siblings, that's OK, she's allowed to do that!

Aggression

Besides the offenders' striving to dominate, some of them also seemed to demonstrate their aggressiveness within the relationship. Aggression in different forms appeared in some (but not all) of the participating couples. What was mentioned most by the couples was verbal aggression in conflict situations:

Offender 1: Sometimes I get loud, I am trying to reduce this . . . yes, I become angry and act rashly.

Offender 2: I can go through the roof . . . yes, I get loud and slam doors shut.

Offender 3: I can be very hurtful!

Partner 1: I could wreck everything . . . I'm very aggressive.

Partner 2: He says the most terrible words to me!

Partner 3: We fight a lot!

Partner 4: He always thinks that I want to provoke him! But sometimes I don't want to provoke him at all!

Physical aggression was mentioned in just a few of the interviews:

Partner 1: One time there was a lot of alcohol involved . . . on both sides . . . then he hit me (*laughs*).

Partner 2: One time I hit him!

Also included in this supercode were statements of impulsiveness, mention of frequent relational conflicts and mutually "annoying behavior," and participants' labeling their partner as "moody."

Partner 1: I stay calm in these situations. It's no good getting annoyed, he only gets even more worked up.

Partner 2: He is a very moody person (*laughs*) [. . .] it doesn't happen very often, but when you annoy him, he gets very angry.

Partner 3: He can get steamed up in no time at all, and can be quick-tempered (*laughs*).

Partner 4: Well, he can be a little quick-tempered sometimes but he calms down quickly!

Partner 5: We fight when I don't listen to him.

Evidently many women try to make light of their partners' behavior by laughing about it.

Help and Guidance Received and Given

Both offenders and their female partners alike emphasized the value of the help they receive from their spouse:

Offender 1: Because of my wife's help! That gave me the necessary boost to once again become what I am today!

Offender 2: She helped me a lot!

Offender 3: It would have been a catastrophe if I hadn't had her [after the imprisonment].

Partner 1: He knows stuff and helps me with things.

Partner 2: He repairs stuff at home, things I can't, and that's enough for me!

When asked about their partners' best characteristics, many women listed "helpful" first. In particular those women with certain disabilities valued this helpfulness in day-to-day life. Some offenders valued the support they receive from their spouse in terms of recidivism prevention:

Offender 1: My marriage is stable, my wife gives me support . . . I'm sexually more balanced now!

Offender 2: She is a help . . . sometimes things seem to be normal but at second glance unnatural . . . she keeps an eye on how I interact with my surroundings.

Offender 3: She gives me the feeling that she protects me from reoffending.

Apart from receiving help, many participants emphasized their own helpful and encouraging behavior toward their partner:

Offender 1: She used to live in a women's refuge and that didn't work out [. . .] so I brought her here and took her in!

Offender 2: I do a lot for her!

Partner: I support him! I help him in every way I can.

Offenders' Unstable Self-Esteem

In many of the offenders' statements it became evident that their current relationship serves as a stabilizing factor for their unstable self-esteem. There were differences, however, in how they regarded their female partner. Some offenders stressed their partner's social status and boasted about how they won her over:

Offender 1: I saw her a couple of times and told myself that she is a 10 [on a scale from 1 to 10], unreachable for me.

Offender 2: I went to great lengths to get her . . . it took a long time but . . . (*smiles*).

Other couples reported reversed dynamics—the women went after the offenders and they seemed almost to lower themselves in relation to their partners:

Offender 1: She ran after me!

Offender 2: I used to think [a woman had to be] slim, good-looking, to be representative. [. . .] and P. wasn't the kind of person that is super slim or the prettiest [. . .] but I found out that corpulent women also deserve to be taken the way they are, as a person!

Offender 3: For her it was love at first sight. And she always thought, yes, well, he is good-looking, attractive, I'll never get near him.

These participants seem to feel flattered by their partners' efforts.

Experience of Acceptance

In the offenders' interviews we were able to extract the supercode of experienced acceptance from their female partners in spite of their conviction. Offenders praised their partners for "stay[ing] with me."

Offender 1: That I can depend on her in every situation . . . that luckily she is there for me in bad times.

Offender 2: She is understanding . . . with regard to the offense, not everyone could do that.

Offender 3: That's what calms me down, after I go out a bit [after a conflict], she comes to the door and takes me in her arms and cries.

Offender 4: She doesn't want to know about it [the offense]. She said it's all right, it's forgotten, you did your time.

Getting Through a Difficult Time Together

Some participants said that the offense and the time afterward strengthened their relationship:

Partner: One learns from the other and because of this interchange one gets closer to each other. I think that unites us and strengthens our relationship.

Offender: I had the feeling that she lacked trust . . . and this insecurity . . . but we pulled ourselves together and it developed into a very good relationship [. . .] all in all it was even strengthened.

The Women's Social Isolation

The female partners were asked whether any person in their social environment knows of their partners' crimes. In most cases either no one or only one person knew:

Partner 1: From the beginning up to the present. I'm all alone.

Partner 2: Only the family [knows], no one else. We don't want it to be shouted out. No, we don't want that for him. No.

Partner 3: He asked me to keep silent about it [the offense], my family doesn't know, it really does me in that there is such a big topic that I'm not allowed to talk about! [. . .] I was drawn into isolation, completely unintentionally!

The Negative Impact of the Offense on the Relationship

It became apparent that the offenders' revelation concerning the sexual offense had a negative impact on the relationship at first, although at the time of the interview most couples denied any lasting problems for the relationship. The women described reactions such as shock, anger, or sadness when confronted with their partners' sexual offense:

Partner 1: More than anything I would have liked to scream and cry.

Partner 2: The shock, no one can describe it, so bad, really bad [*Sadness? Anger?*] Everything. Everything at the same time.

Most offenders described an immense fear of their partner abandoning them as a reaction to learning about the offense:

Offender 1: You don't know how she'd react or if, how she would decide. Will she feel as much for me, how she will react when she finds out?

Offender 2: At that time [around the disclosure] I was absolutely down.

Also included in this supercode are complaints mentioned by two offenders that their female partners still make them feel guilty about their sexual offense:

Offender 1: That's a point that still weighs heavily on me, that in some situations it [the offense] is used against me.

Offender 2: At least once a week I get it [the offense] rubbed in my face, what I did, that I am a pig.

Sexuality

The supercode "sexuality" is not included in the major content analyses described above. The reason for this is a high reluctance on the part of the couples to talk about that facet of their relationship. Although the interview included a question about sexual satisfaction in the relationship as well as questions about sexual dysfunction, many couples denied any problems and/or quickly changed the subject. Some women, however, mentioned problems:

Partner 1: Of course at first it [the offense] cast a shadow over it [the sexuality]. I had to cope with it, we just took our time.

Partner 2: I had bad thoughts in my head [. . .] that he committed his crime. [. . .] At first I had inhibitions.

Partner 3: At a certain point he pushes me away . . . he says I cling too much . . . but I say you're the one that needs caresses, sexuality and all that stuff, so how am I supposed to deal with my feelings?

DISCUSSION

Our results show important differences from earlier research (Lang et al., 1990; Metz & Dwyer, 1993; Ward et al., 1997), which portrayed SOCs as being only conflicted, hostile, and shallow. For both partners in the couples included in our study, however, the relationship seems to serve an important function: In the case of the insecurely attached and partly disabled woman, the offender is there for her and accepts her. Her partner helps her in everyday life and gives her support. She might derive certain pleasure in terms of moral self-worth from being the only one who gives her partner a second chance. The sexual offender, on the other hand, had found himself a partner who accepts him in spite of his offense and whom he can still dominate (which seems to be an important benefit for him). By acting out his need for dominance and control in the relationship, he might be able to stabilize his self-esteem, which maybe also prevents him from relapsing. The offenders themselves stated that their female partners helped prevent them from having a potential relapse.

The interviews demonstrate a relative degree of stability in the relationships. Most couples exhibited an effusive level of unity in the interview situation, and emphasized their happiness and compatibility while denying any relationship problems. Any aggression mentioned in the interviews was mostly not perceived as problematic and was sometimes made fun of.

The couples reported a kind of positive instinct about each other and/or experienced "love at first sight." They might have perceived a measure of equality or compatibility with their future partner: Many women felt that they don't have much to offer themselves (because of various psychological or physical disadvantages) and therefore might be glad to have a (any) partner at their side. Romantic feelings were present amongst most couples, although especially the women demonstrated an idealized perspective on their partner who they claimed did not have any negative personality traits at all. This idealization might correlate with an insecure attachment style. In accordance with our quantitative results (Iffland et al., 2014), this insecure attachment style can be best classified as "preoccupied." Fraley and Shaver (2000) describe the preoccupied attached person as having low thresholds for detecting cues of rejection. These people are concerned about their own worthiness to be loved. The preoccupied person feels comfortable with intimacy, seeks contact with his or her partner, and tends to prefer the affectionate aspects of intimacy rather than having sex. This preoccupied attachment style might be one reason for low expectations with regard to a potential partner. Most of the participants stated that they above all valued the love and affection they receive from their partner. Hardly any concrete personality traits relating to their partner were mentioned. This might indicate the kind of superficial relationship mentioned by Marshall (1989). The relationships of sexual offenders and their female partners might above all serve as a regulating function for self-esteem. The female partners in particular seem to be satisfied with even the smallest relationship offer they receive and therefore choose to ignore their partners' conviction: Both partners seemed to have come to a mutual decision not to discuss the topic of the offense.

All in all, the women chose not to think about the offense or their partners' victims, and adopted their partners' cognitive distortions and denial. This finding partially corresponds with Garrett and Wright's (1975) research, as well as Cahalane et al.'s (2013) findings in which equal amounts of denial and victim-blaming were found amongst the sexual offenders' partners. The wives of two incest offenders even abandoned their victimized daughter and claimed to value the relationship to their partner more than the relationship to their daughter. This again might be related to their preoccupied attachment style (and their fear of otherwise being left alone). Denial might enable the women to restart their life after being confronted with the sexual offense. This is supported further by an attitude of viewing the partner as "changed", "only human" (and therefore allowed to make mistakes), or a "different man." This finding also corresponds to those of Cahalane et al. (2013) who found that the partners of sexual offenders seemed to distinguish between the offender and their husband. Nevertheless, the data show that in most relationships the sexual offense had an impact on both partners. Both men and women reported significant distress in the context of the exposure, whether the offense happened during the relationship or beforehand. Many offenders reported a fear of their partner leaving them, and in this context gratitude for their acceptance and faith. Maybe they therefore claimed to value such qualities in their female partners as being "there for me" or "understanding."

In most relationships, both spouses seem to give each other a lot of support and guidance and live in a state of mutual dependence: The women help the offenders through their acceptance as well as their trust, while the offenders seem to help them in more practical ways with organizing their life. However, this type of relationship or even dependence does not seem to be perceived as problematic by the couples. On the contrary, the sexual offenders seem to derive pleasure from their partners' dependence. This might indicate that for the offenders in our sample the relationship satisfies some needs for control and dominance, which might have contributed to offending in the first place. Even in the process of starting the relationship, the offenders' need to stabilize their self-esteem becomes evident. Either the woman is viewed as some kind of trophy, or in other couples the women persistently approached the offenders until they finally gave in. In these couples, a misogynistic attitude on the part of the offenders was noticeable. In addition, the offenders demonstrate a high need for dominance in the current relationship. They tell their partners what to do, how to eat, and allow them to visit their siblings or record their favorite TV program. When asked about their female partners' negative personality traits, many offenders stated "stubbornness." Further questioning revealed that the offenders feel angry when their partners don't do what they want or refuse to take the blame for conflicts. Maybe as a result of this need for dominance there was a noticeable imbalance in power at the expense of the women. Some women might react defensively in the form of aggressive behavior or reproach for the sexual offense as a reaction to this imbalance, with the purpose of evening out the balance of power (in correspondence with the findings of Garrett and Wright, 1975).

The couples withheld detailed information about sexuality in the relationship. Some answered in a socially desirable manner, maybe because of the sexual nature of the offense. Some denied having any problems, while others claimed to be very happy. One (older) couple have no sexual interaction at all. One woman wished for more initiative from her partner, and in another case the woman reported ambivalent feelings with regard to their relational sexuality. Many offenders stated a wish for a higher frequency of sexual outlets. All in all, a very diverse picture of sexuality in the relationships emerged that might reflect the couples' strong reluctance to reveal detailed information. One explanation for this may be the aforementioned characteristic of

insecure attachment, where affection is much more important than sexual gratification—in some cases a sort of mutual exclusiveness between affection and sexual attraction may even exist.

The relationships evaluated in our small sample persist mainly on the basis of mutual dependence and regulation of self-esteem. However, the imbalance of power within the couples could destabilize the relationship if the female partners chose to revolt. In the case of some couples, the women even confronted their partners with the offense in conflict situations, which the offenders then reported as distressing. Also potentially problematic is the high number of cognitive distortions evident in both partners, but especially amongst the women. This denial might help to increase their sense of closeness and unity and enable the women in our sample to proceed with the relationship by separating the offender from their spouse and thereby reject their partners' (sexually) violent facets. Although denial in sexual offenders does not necessarily increase an offender's risk of recidivating (Harkins, Howard, Barnett, Wakeling, & Miles, 2015), Eher, Frühwald, and Gutierrez (1997) suggested that a decrease in minimizations and denial amongst sexual offenders' relatives (and especially female partners) and an increase in the realistic view with regard to the offenders' recidivism risk might result in the adaptation of concrete strategies in potential risk situations. Cahalane et al. (2013) also recommended providing the sexual offenders' partners with certain pieces of information about the sexual offense in order to "increase women's recognition of the need to assume enhanced monitoring and protective responsibilities within their family" (p. 736). However, clinically we often see that even this form of forced information may be denied after a short time, resulting in "not wanting to know all the details."

This study has significant limitations: Since participation was voluntary, perhaps only those couples who were satisfied and wanted to demonstrate their happiness took part. Nevertheless, the results match our clinical experience with other SOCs (for example, when interviewing sexual offenders' female partners for risk assessment). Our sample was rather small, and the high percentage of invalid recordings made it even smaller. The high refusal rate regarding participation in this study might be explained by a reluctance of the SOCs to be confronted again with the sexual offense they ignore in day-to-day life.

The implications of our findings for therapeutic work—in unison with earlier research—are that sexual offenders' partners should be involved more closely in counseling and therapy. Unfortunately, there are few options available for counseling and therapy amongst this clientele, even though in our clinical work they frequently ask for it. Nevertheless, couples counseling or therapy could help the women involved to escape from their feelings of social isolation, handle possible ambivalent feelings toward their partner (also in terms of sexuality), and address the imbalance of power in these relationships. For the offenders, couples counseling or therapy that focuses primarily on relationship dynamics and in a setting that is not monitored by official institutions might encourage them to discuss (and work on) their need for dominance. In addition, both partners might feel more comfortable in such a setting revealing information about sexuality in the relationship without any fear of the possibly biased perception of a specialized forensic psychologist or psychotherapist.

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