

Community Support Dynamics for Sex Offender Families: A Factorial Design Analysis

Danielle J.S. Bailey

Department of Social Sciences, University of Texas at Tyler, USA. E-mail: d Bailey@uttyler.edu;

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2881-0721>

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Abstract: This study explored the impact of individual-level characteristics of individuals convicted of sexual offences (ICSOs) on community social support for ICSO spouses, an important component of public safety given the role of family social support on sexual offence desistence. A 3x2x4 factorial design was used to identify how sex offence type, victim gender, and neutralisation strategies influence community members' willingness to support ICSO spouses. The survey was conducted among undergraduate students at three University of Texas academic institutions, with a final sample size of 394 participants. Results indicate that non-consensual contact offences significantly reduce community support, while the gender of the victim and neutralisation techniques do not have a significant impact. This suggests that crime type may be the predominant indicator of community support.

Keywords: social support, sexual offence, social distance

Introduction

Criminological theory supports the role of intimate family members such as spouses, parents, and children in reducing criminal activity and increasing public safety (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson, 1995; Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993). This support is not an easy process for most family members. Although they are not offenders themselves, association with a deviant individual influences family dynamics, creating strain and disrupting the normal patterns of the family unit. In their stress-strain-coping-support (SSCS) model, Oxford *et al.* (2010) illustrate

how stress from a deviant family member creates strain for the entire family. To deal with this strain, the family as a whole must utilise coping behaviours as its members attempt to minimise the strain and regain family stability. Essential to successful family coping is the provision of community support for affected family members, which facilitates coping and helps reduce family strain. Families who do not receive social support may be unable to cope with the strain of their loved one's deviance, potentially disrupting the supportive relationship between the deviant loved one and their family.

The SSCS cycle is particularly relevant for family members of convicted sexual offenders. Sex offenders are considered to be some of the most heinous offenders and are perceived as untreatable child predators who will likely reoffend (Levenson *et al.*, 2007; Sample & Kadleck, 2008). A multitude of formal, legislative restrictions have been introduced as a way to reduce sex offender risk, but researchers find these controls do little to reduce recidivism (Petrosino & Petrosino, 1999; Zevitz, 2006) and usually increase stress and strain on sex offenders and their families (Ackerman & Furman, 2012; Klein *et al.*, 2012; Levenson *et al.*, 2007; Mercado *et al.*, 2008; Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Zevitz, 2006). This increased strain, along with the intense stigmatisation of sex offenders and, by association, their family members (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Farkas & Miller, 2007), reduces the likelihood that sex offender family members will receive social support from the community as they attempt to cope with the strains created by their sex offender loved one.

Although prior research has examined community perceptions of convicted sex offenders (Levenson *et al.*, 2007), little is known about community perceptions and the availability of social support for sex offender family members. Bailey (2015) found variation in social support between sex offender family members, but to date, there is little understanding about the cause of this variation. The current study is intended to fill this gap by examining how individual-level characteristics of sex offender families affect the availability of community support. Differences in sex offence perception may be one source of variation. The term "sex offender" contains a wide variety of crimes apart from the stereotypical violent, contact offence against a child (Sample & Kadleck, 2008), and it is possible that non-traditional sex crimes may be perceived as less severe, and therefore less stigmatised, by community members. Additionally, male victims are perceived as being more responsible for and less affected by sexual

victimisation (Judson *et al.*, 2013), so sexual offences with male victims may be perceived as less severe than offences with female victims. Family members' characterisation of the offence may also create variation, as researchers have found that relatives of sex offenders use Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralisation to minimise the blameworthiness of the offender and reduce the perceived severity of the offence (Bailey, 2015). The current study employs a $3 \times 2 \times 4$ factorial design to examine how sex offence characteristics and neutralisation techniques influence community members' willingness to support the spouses of sex offenders.

Background

Family members play an important role in promoting public safety and reducing criminal behaviour in several criminological theories. Social control theory describes how offenders who form pro-social bonds with non-criminal people are deterred from future offending due to their fear of losing the attachment (Hirschi, 1969). Research suggests that informal, pro-social relationships, or those with spouses and other related persons, are more capable of decreasing criminal offending than formal, less intimate relationships with pro-social individuals (Kruttschnitt *et al.*, 2000; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Felson's (1995) expansion of routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) also highlights the importance of intimate social bonds. Felson (1995) identifies three types of individuals who can reduce criminal offending: guardians protect potential victims, managers protect vulnerable locations, and handlers control potential offenders. He noted that family members, who had the most intimate relationship with the offender, were the strongest handlers. Both of these theories, then, confirm the importance of intimate family relationships as a means of crime deterrence and public safety.

The challenge for offenders' families is that supporting a convicted offender is not easy. In order to handle the increased stress and maintain support for the offender, the entire family as a whole must cope and adapt. This process is described by Oxford *et al.* (2010) as the stress-strain-coping-support (SSCS) model. Examining substance abusers, Oxford *et al.* (2010) illustrated how a single deviant family member creates stress for the entire family as a whole. This places strain on all family members, requiring them to adapt their behaviour in order to cope with the situation.

Families begin with short-term adjustment behaviours, during which family members attempt to process the strain on their lives, and eventually transition

into adaptation behaviours, through which families reestablish stability, unity, and harmony between family members (McCubbin, 1995). The final component of Oxford *et al.*'s (2010) SSCS model, support, highlights the importance of community support during the coping stages of adjustment and adaptation. Community members provide support through emotional, instrumental, or referral processes (Unger & Powell, 1989). Support may come from informal networks, such as other family members, close friends, or other societal interactions, as well as formal networks such as counselling or therapy groups. The overall goal of community support is to assist family members through the adjustment phase into long-term adaptation.

Although originally developed for deviant behaviours such as alcohol or drug abuse (Oxford *et al.*, 2010), the SSCS model can be applied to situations where the deviant behaviour is illegal and results in criminal charges. Regardless of crime type, family members of convicted offenders experience stress as a result of their continued support, including increased financial strain, stress, and anxiety (Naser & Visher, 2006). This initiates the SSCS pathway, through which offenders' families attempt to maintain family unity. However, researchers examining convicted offender populations find that social support is often withheld from family members due to the stigma of the offence and the belief that family members knowingly participated in or actively supported the offenders' illegal activity (Arditti, 2005; Clear *et al.*, 2001; Jones & Beck, 2006). If social support is not provided to the family, family members may struggle to cope with the strain of supporting the offender and could potentially withdraw from the relationship. This removal of family support would threaten public safety by reducing familial control and influence over the offender's actions.

Why Sex Offender's Family Member Support is Important

One particular crime type where family support is essential is the sex offender population. Sex offenders are one of the most stigmatised offender populations. Perceived as sexual predators who rape and murder children (Sample & Kadleck, 2008) and who recidivate at high levels (Levenson *et al.*, 2007), sexual offenders are subject to a multitude of post-conviction restrictions that attempt to apply enhanced formal control beyond that received by non-sexual offenders (Terry & Ackerman, 2009). There is little to no empirical support for these policies in

reducing reoffending (Petrosino & Petrosino, 1999; Zevitz, 2006), but researchers find that these policies have resulted in numerous unintended consequences for sex offenders, including harassment, isolation, employment and housing difficulties, and an overall inability to create socially supportive relationships (Ackerman & Furman, 2012; Hepburn & Griffin, 2004; Klein *et al.*, 2012; Lasher & McGrath, 2012; Levenson *et al.*, 2007; Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). These consequences have been shown to actually increase recidivism risk (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson *et al.*, 2007; Mercado *et al.*, 2008; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007; Zevitz, 2006), thereby decreasing public safety. We must therefore ensure that strong counter measures are in place to help reduce sex offender risk and improve public safety.

Although family members may be the most capable of reducing sex offender risk, they themselves experience an enhanced “courtesy stigma” (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Farkas & Miller, 2007) as a result of their association with a stigmatised offender population. Similar to the “secondary prisonisation” experience of incarcerated offenders’ visitors (Comfort, 2008), sex offender family members face a change in their own lives as a result of the various restrictions placed on sex offender loved ones. Researchers examining sex offender family member populations have identified instances of harassment, emotional problems such as shame and anger, loss of relationships, and family member isolation (Bailey, 2015; Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). Relationship loss and isolation are a particular concern, as these suggest that family members are not receiving social support as they navigate through the SSCS model. If family members, lacking support, withdraw from relationships with their sex offender loved ones, the informal controls placed on offenders’ behaviour weaken and offenders’ recidivism risk increases.

Variation in Social Support for Sex Offender Families

Prior research suggests that there is variation in social support, with some family members maintaining a high level of community support while others receive little or no community support (Bailey, 2015), but to date, there is little understanding about the cause of this variation. This gap is significant due to the role that sex offender family members play in the desistance process from criminal offending. If we can identify the factors that improve or reduce sex offender family members’

community support, we would be able to identify at-risk family members and provide additional support from formal social service agencies. These interventions would presumably help family members maintain informal control over their sex offender loved ones, thus improving public safety.

One potential source of variation in family member support stems from the variation in community members' perceptions of the sex offence itself. Although often perceived as a homogenous group, the sex offender label is applied to a heterogeneous mix of offenders involving a diverse range of offence types and offender populations (Fuselier *et al.*, 2002; Sample & Bray, 2006). The stereotypical sex offences that sex offender legislation is intended to address are crimes involving violent, hands-on contact with a minor victim, and are classified legally as rape or sexual assault (Sample & Kadleck, 2008). However, the sex offender label also includes consensual activities (statutory rape) and virtual offences (possession of child pornography), which differ from the stereotypical offence and may therefore be perceived less negatively. Victim gender may also influence the perception of the crime. Researchers have identified a significant victim gender influence on sex offence perceptions (Gerber *et al.*, 2004; Ford *et al.*, 1998; Judson *et al.*, 2013) as well as interaction effects between respondent and victim gender (Mitchell *et al.*, 2009). Crimes against a female victim may be perceived as more serious than crimes against male victims because male sexual victimisation is often downplayed or even denied entirely (Donnelly & Kenyon, 1996).

Sex offender family member support may also be influenced by the way the sexual offence is presented to the community. Sykes & Matza (1957) defined what they called techniques of neutralisation, or statements intended to lessen a person's blameworthiness. Sykes & Matza (1957) describe five different type of neutralisation techniques: denial of responsibility, where the blame is attributed to an outside source or event; denial of injury, where the "wrongness" of the crime itself is denied; denial of victim, where the victims' credibility and/or responsibility for the offence are questioned; condemnation of the condemners, where offenders redirect attention onto accusers; and appeal to higher authority, where the offence is justified as for the good of a particular group or society. Researchers examining sex offenders and their family members find these populations sometimes use neutralisation techniques to explain the offence by emphasising consent (denial of injury), blaming age or prior abuse as a cause of the offence (denial of responsibility), or describing

the offence as common or “normal” behaviour (condemnation of the condemners) (Bailey, 2015; Mann, 2012). What is unknown is how these neutralisations impact family members in the community. If neutralisation techniques can successfully diminish offender blame, then sex offender family members may be able to decrease the stigma of their spouses’ offence and their own courtesy stigma. Community members may therefore be more willing to provide support to sex offender family members when the behaviour has been neutralised in some fashion.

Current Study

The current study uses a 3x2x4 factorial design to examine how sex offence type, victim gender, and family member neutralisations impact community members’ willingness to provide support for sex offender spouses, using the concept of social distance as a measurement of potential support. Social distance is a term that describes the level of familiarity and formality between individuals (Bailey & Sample, 2017). High levels of social distance mean increased formality, presumably leading to less support for sex offender spouses, whereas low social distance indicates respondents are willing to engage in a familiar, less formal relationship. The 3x2x4 factorial design will allow for the manipulation of sex offence type (statutory rape, possession of child pornography, sexual assault of a minor), victim gender (male victim, female victim), and family member neutralisation (denial of responsibility, denial of injury, condemnation of the condemners, no neutralisation). It is expected that community members will report lower levels of social distance for spouses of non-traditional offenders whose crimes involve male victims and spouses who utilise a neutralisation technique.

Methodology

Participants

The survey was emailed to undergraduate students enrolled at three University of Texas academic institutions. The emails were obtained via Freedom of Information Act requests from each university, and email invitations were sent to students’ email addresses, asking them to participate. In total, 616 participants completed the survey, but after manipulation checks were assessed, the final number of participants was 394. The average age of respondents was 24.75 (SD = 8.48). The most common demographics for respondents were Cisgender Female (67.7%), Hispanic (57.1%),

White (78.5%), Heterosexual (62.1%), and Suburban Hometowns (52.2%). Although more than half of the sample (58.3%) reported being either the victim or someone close to them being a victim of a crime, only 17% of respondents had been themselves or had someone close to them be convicted of a felony offence, including sexual crimes. About 20.8% of respondents reported being employed or having someone close to them employed as a law enforcement officer. For more detailed demographic information for respondents, see Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

<i>Demographic</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Hispanic	Yes	224	57.1%
	No	168	42.9%
Race	Native American / Alaskan	6	1.5%
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	0.3%
	Black/African American	25	6.4%
	Asian	14	3.6%
	White	307	78.5%
	Other	38	9.7%
Marital Status	Married	65	16.5%
	Living with a partner	40	10.2%
	Widowed	3	0.8%
	Divorced/Separated	20	5.1%
	Never been married	265	67.4%
Gender Identity	Cisgender Female / Woman	266	67.7%
	Cisgender Male / Man	83	21.1%
	Genderqueer, gender non-binary, or gender fluid	20	5.1%
	Transgender	9	2.3%
	Gender not listed	3	0.8%
	Prefer not to say	12	3.1%
Sexual Orientation	Asexual	23	5.9%
	Bisexual	65	16.5%
	Gay or lesbian	14	3.6%
	Heterosexual	244	62.1%
	Pansexual	22	5.6%
	Queer	8	2.0%
	Prefer not to say	17	4.3%
Hometown	Urban	104	26.5%
	Suburban	205	52.2%

<i>Demographic</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
	Rural	84	21.4%
Crime Victim	Yes	229	58.3%
	No	164	41.7%
Felony Conviction	Yes	67	17.0%
	No	327	83.0%
Law Enforcement Officer	Yes	82	20.8%
	No	312	79.2%

My name is Rheanna Dawson. I am a 45-year-old woman who recently moved into the area with my husband, Derek. I love to scrapbook and to go to the movies. I also crochet blankets and decorations and sell them on my own personal Etsy account. My husband is also 45-years-old. We were high school sweethearts, and we have been married for over 20 years. We originally planned to have children, but ended up not having children due to life circumstances. Once we moved, I got a job at the local craft store. Derek works in construction, but he hasn't found a job in the area yet.

We are hoping to make friends in the community, but I'm worried about whether people will accept us. My husband was convicted in 2010 of [Sex Offence Type]. The victim was a 13-year-old [Victim Gender]. This was a very hard time in our marriage, but Derek sought treatment after his conviction and continues with therapy today [Neutralisation Technique]. Derek mostly keeps to himself these days, and we spend a lot of time at home alone.

Sex Offence Type

1. Sexual assault on a minor
2. Indecent exposure
3. Possession of child pornography

Victim Gender

1. Female
2. Male

Neutralisation Technique

1. Derek takes full responsibility for his actions.
2. Derek was abused as a child, and it damaged him.
3. Derek didn't hurt anyone.
4. Derek's crime isn't as bad as they make it out to be.

Procedures

This study used a randomised online vignette survey design. The survey detailed a fictionalised description of a sex offender spouse, followed by a series of manipulation checks and questions relating to the dependent variable, social distance. Vignettes were written in an autobiographic style, using first person pronouns and providing a short description of the spouse's family and the sex offence conviction. A 3x2x4 factorial design was used to systematically manipulate the type of sex offence conviction, victim gender, and type of neutralisation used by the sex offender spouse in each vignette. In order to minimise differences between groups, participants were randomly assigned to each vignette using the random block assignment feature in Qualtrics.

Manipulated factor #1 (sex offence type)

Each vignette reported a sexually motivated crime against a child, but the nature of consent and victim-offender contact varied between crime types. Sexual assault on a minor involves non-consensual contact between the victim and offender and represents the stereotypical profile of a sex offender (Sample & Kadleck, 2008). Possession of child pornography involves non-consent but lacks victim-offender contact, and statutory rape includes consent and victim-offender contact.

Manipulated factor #2 (victim gender)

Prior research has identified an influence of victim gender on sex offence perception (Gerber *et al.*, 2004; Ford *et al.*, 1998; Judson *et al.*, 2013), so the vignettes varied whether the victim was male or female.

Manipulated factor #3 (neutralisation technique)

The factorial design allows for the systematic manipulation of both the presence/absence of a neutralising statement as well as the manipulation of the type of neutralising statement used by the sex offender spouse. Although Syke and Matza's (1957) research described five categories of neutralisations, prior research using sex offender (Mann, 2012) and sex offender family member (Bailey, 2015) samples has identified only three of the five: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, and condemnation of the condemners. Therefore, this manipulation only included

those three neutralisation techniques as well as a non-neutralised scenario in which the sex offender spouse acknowledges the crime and does not seek to minimise the offender's blame. Statements included in neutralised autobiographies varied between "He was abused as a child, and it damaged him" (denial of responsibility), "He didn't hurt anyone" (denial of injury), and "His crime isn't as bad as they make it out to be" (condemnation of the condemners).

Constant factors (family and victim characteristics)

Several factors remained constant between vignettes. Because a majority of sex offenders are heterosexual males (Ackerman *et al.*, 2011), each scenario involved an adult male sex offender and an adult female spouse. The spouse and the male sex offender were married for twenty years prior to the crime and had no children. Additionally, the victim in all scenarios was 13 years old, an appropriate age for each of the three crime types employed in the factorial design.

Dependent variable (social distance)

Social distance was measured using two summative scales developed according to the fashion of a Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1925), a technique used previously to measure community attitudes towards sex offender populations (Willis *et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, questions were structured so that respondents were asked about their willingness to interact with the individual(s) in a series of hypothetical social contexts that moved from a relatively distant to a relatively close context.

CoupleScale. The first scale measured the respondents' social distance with the ICSO and FM together by asking respondents to rate how comfortable they were with the couple in a series of increasingly close residential spaces: residents of their state, their city/town, their neighbourhood, their street, and their next-door neighbour. For each social context, respondents were asked to rate their comfort on a 4-point Likert scale of 1 "Very Comfortable," 2 "Comfortable," 3 "Somewhat Comfortable," and 4 "Not Comfortable at All." Due to the stigma associated with this population, a neutral option was not provided to eliminate potential response bias (Garland, 1991). In order to best capture the summative nature of the Social Distance Scale, responses were collapsed into a dichotomous Comfortable (1 – 3) or Not Comfortable (4) variable for analysis. The higher the CoupleScale total score,

the more willing the respondent was to interact with the couple in close residential spaces.

InviteScale. The second scale measured the respondents' social distance with the FM alone by asking respondents to rate how likely they were to invite the FM to a series of increasingly intimate social events: their church, their neighbourhood barbeque, a party at a friend's house, dinner at their house, and to stay overnight at their house. For each social event, respondents were asked to rate the likelihood on a 4-point Likert scale of 1 "Definitely," 2 "Maybe," 3 "Not Likely," and 4 "Definitely Not." Like the previous scale, a neutral option was not provided in order to eliminate potential response bias (Garland, 1991). Responses were collapsed into a dichotomous Yes (1-2) or No (3-4) variable for analysis. The higher the InviteScale total score, the more willing the respondent was to interact with the FM alone in intimate social events.

Manipulation Checks

Three manipulation check questions were included in the survey to ensure the respondent was paying attention to the information provided in the autobiography. Participants were asked to identify the total length of time the couple had been married (constant factor), the offence type (manipulated factor), and the victim's gender (manipulated factor). Respondents who answered any of these three questions incorrectly were dropped from the study.

Hypotheses

1. Scenarios describing non-consensual contact offences will create lower social distance scores (indicating less willingness to interact) with the respondent versus scenarios describing crimes involving consent and/or no victim-offender contact.
2. Scenarios where the ICSO's offence involved a male victim will create lower social distance scores (indicating less willingness to interact) with the respondent, versus scenarios involving female victims.
3. Scenarios where a neutralisation technique is not present will create lower social distance scores (indicating less willingness to interact) with the respondent, versus scenarios involving a neutralisation technique.

Analytic Methods

The data were analysed through a series of ANOVAs to determine 1) whether offence type, victim gender, and neutralisation technique impacted social distance between respondents and the sex offender's spouse and 2) whether there were interaction effects on social distance between offence type, victim gender, and neutralisation technique. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions were used to predict social distance for CoupleScale and InviteScale based on the respondents' characteristics.

Results

A series of one-way ANOVAs was conducted to compare the effect of each manipulated variable on the CoupleScale and InviteScale outcomes. The only significant variable on the CoupleScale results was Crime Type [$F(2, 382) = 4.732, p = 0.009$]. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test identified that Indecent Exposure had a significantly higher total score than Child Pornography ($p = 0.038$) and Sexual Assault of a Minor ($p = 0.013$). The average total score reported for Child Pornography and Sexual Assault for a Minor was not statistically significant.

The only significant variable on the InviteScale results was Crime Type [$F(2, 383) = 4.015, p = 0.019$]. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test identified that Indecent Exposure had a significantly higher total score than Child Pornography ($p = 0.017$) but was not significantly different from Sexual Assault for a Minor. Likewise, the average total score reported for Child Pornography and Sexual Assault for a Minor was not statistically significant.

OLS regression models were then used to predict the social distance scores for both CoupleScale and InviteScale using both the manipulated variables from the vignettes and the respondents' demographics. For CoupleScale, the overall model was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.116, F = 2.197, p = 0.004$), with age, cis-gender female, child pornography, and sexual assault of a minor being significant predictors of social distance levels. As respondents' age increased, their social distance score increased significantly ($B = 0.034, p = 0.019$), indicating an increased willingness to interact with the FM. Female respondents have a significantly lower social distance score than males ($B = [-0.493], p = 0.017$), indicating a reduced willingness to interact with the FM. Child pornography ($B = [-.537], p = 0.018$) and sexual assault of a minor ($B = [-0.698], p = 0.003$) offences were also significant predictors of lower social distance scores.

InviteScale was a borderline statistically significant model ($F=1.651, p=0.051$), with age and child pornography as significant predictors of social distance levels. As respondents' age increased, their social distance score increased significantly ($B=0.034, p=0.026$), indicating an increased willingness to interact with the FM. A child pornography offence was also a significant predictor of lower social distance scores ($B= [-0.632], p=0.008$), indicating a reduced willingness to interact with the FM.

Table 2: Linear regression models showing the effect of participant demographics on CoupleScale and InviteScale

Variable	CoupleScale (N=342)		InviteScale (N=343)	
	B	SE	B	SE
Hispanic	-0.385	0.199	-0.300	0.208
Age	0.034*	0.014	0.034*	0.015
White	-0.046	0.232	0.220	0.245
Married	0.268	0.252	0.045	0.265
Cis-Gendered Female	-0.493*	0.201	-0.111	0.215
Heterosexual	0.097	0.197	0.069	0.207
Urban	0.085	0.232	0.262	0.243
Rural	-0.254	0.239	0.014	0.251
Crime Victim	0.061	0.204	0.272	0.214
Convicted of Felony	-0.250	0.249	0.279	0.263
LEO	0.225	0.233	-0.064	0.244
Child Pornography	-0.537*	0.226	-0.623**	0.237
Sexual Assault of a Minor	-0.698**	0.236	-0.429	0.239
Female Victim	-0.180	0.189	-0.123	0.199
Denial of Injury	-0.236	0.262	0.034	0.275
Condemnation of Condemners	-0.012	0.269	0.251	0.283
Denial of Responsibility	0.014	0.267	0.260	0.282
R ²	.103		.079	

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore three hypotheses. The first hypothesis, that non-consensual contact offences would reduce the respondent's willingness to interact with the FM and the ICSO, was partially supported by the results. Results from the ANOVA tests revealed that indecent exposure, a non-contact offence, had a significantly higher CoupleScale and InviteScale score than sexual assault of a

minor, a contact offence. However, child pornography, also a non-contact offence, was not significantly different from sexual assault of a minor, indicating that this type of offence may be perceived as more serious regardless of the contact itself and thus make the respondent less willing to interact with both the FM and the ICSO themselves. The OLS results confirm this pattern, with a child pornography offence resulting in a significantly lower willingness to interact with both the FM individually and the couple together. The sexual assault of a minor offence resulted in a significantly lower willingness to interact with the couple together, but was not a statistically significant predictor of willingness to interact with the FM individually.

The second hypothesis, that offences involving a male victim would reduce the respondent's willingness to interact with the FM and the ICSO, was not supported by the results. Victim gender was not significant in either analysis. Similarly, hypothesis three, that neutralisations will increase the respondent's willingness to interact with the FM and the ICSO, was not supported by the results. None of the neutralisation techniques was statistically significant in either analysis. These results suggest that the way in which ICSO FMs are perceived is dependent on unchangeable factors such as the respondent's age and the offence their loved one was originally convicted of. This holds true no matter how the FM presents their story to broader society.

This study is not without limitations. While the current study suggests there is no significant impact of neutralisations and gender characteristics on the perception of an ICSO FM, the current study used a limited number of neutralisations, so it is possible that other, unused neutralisation techniques could be significant. Additionally, the use of non-random convenience sampling and the low percentage of completed surveys that passed the manipulation checks decreases the external validity of the current study, making it unknown how generalisable the findings of this study are to individuals outside of Texas and/or not attending an institute of higher education.

Conclusion

Research supports the vital role of family member support in sex offence desistance. However, supporting registered loved ones can be taxing for family members, given the social stigma and the collateral consequences of public registration and notification policies. The goal of this study was to identify the characteristics that

make community support for ICSO family members more or less likely, in the hope that criminal justice professionals can use this information to target interventions for the most at-risk family members so as to better support registered citizens and promote public safety. The results of this research study suggest that crime type does influence community support, with child pornography convictions significantly reducing the likelihood of community support for ICSOs and their significant others, individually and as a couple. Neutralisation techniques and victim gender did not significantly influence community support, suggesting that crime type alone may be the primary indicator of whether community members will support or stigmatise ICSOs and their loved ones. Future research that looks more in-depth at this crime type influence, and research into other potential significant variables, would further our understanding of this variability.

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