



Journal of Sexual Aggression

An international, interdisciplinary forum for research, theory and practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tjsa20>

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To cite this article: Katie Duncan, Andrea Wakeham, Belinda Winder, Nicholas Blagden & Rachel Armitage (2022): “Grieving someone who’s still alive, that’s hard”: the experiences of non-offending partners of individuals who have sexually offended – an IPA study, *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, DOI: [10.1080/13552600.2021.2024611](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2021.2024611)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2021.2024611>



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Published online: 13 Jan 2022.



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“Grieving someone who’s still alive, that’s hard”: the experiences of non-offending partners of individuals who have sexually offended – an IPA study

Katie Duncan ^a, Andrea Wakeham^a, Belinda Winder ^a, Nicholas Blagden ^a and Rachel Armitage ^b

^aSexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit, Department of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK; ^bApplied Criminology and Policing Centre, Ramsden Building, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

ABSTRACT

The non-offending partners (NOPs) of individuals who have committed sexual offences face significant repercussions following the discovery of their partner’s crimes. However, NOPs support needs have typically been overlooked, with priority instead placed on equipping NOPs with the skills to monitor their partner’s behaviour and/or protect their children from sexual abuse. The present study used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to qualitatively explore the accounts of women whose partners had committed a sexual offence ($n = 9$). Results highlighted that NOPs experience multiple losses, trauma, and dramatic shifts in their identities and cognitions following the discovery of their partner’s crimes via a “knock on the door” from the police. The findings highlight NOPs post-discovery support needs and have implications for professionals and agencies working with NOPs.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 February 2021
Revised 16 December 2021
Accepted 22 December 2021

KEYWORDS

Sexual offence; NOP; non-offending partner; internet offending; interpretive phenomenological analysis; IPA

Practice impact statement

These findings indicate that the non-offending partners (NOPs) of those who sexually offend experience disenfranchised grief, trauma symptomology, social isolation, and shifts in identity and cognition following the discovery of their partner’s offence. NOPs are a population in need of clinical intervention, and a greater provision of support services are urgently needed to help NOPs cope with the ongoing devastation discovery wreaks on their lives. We hope this research bolsters understanding of NOPs experiences and contributes to a shift in conceptualising NOPs as secondary victims of their partner’s crimes, who are deserving of support and compassion.

Introduction

The non-offending partners (NOPs) of individuals who commit sexual offences experience significant repercussions following the discovery of their partner’s crimes (Serin, 2018). However, there is a scarcity of research investigating NOPs’ experiences (Rapp, 2011). As highlighted by Cahalane and Duff (2018), initial research surrounding NOPs focused on mothers whose children had been abused in

CONTACT Katie Duncan  katie.duncan2018@my.ntu.ac.uk  Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit, Department of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, 50 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham NG1 4FQ, UK; Belinda Winder  belinda.winder@ntu.ac.uk  Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit, Department of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, 50 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham NG1 4FQ, UK

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cases of father-daughter incest and frequently held NOPs responsible for their partner's sexual transgressions, despite a lack of evidence supporting mothers' complicity in incest (Crawford, 1999). These early mother-blaming narratives permeated public discourse (Azzopardi et al., 2018) and negatively influenced professional attitudes towards NOPs (McLaren, 2012). Research suggests that professionals within Social Services attribute blame to NOPs for not protecting their children from sexual abuse (Wolfeich & Cline, 2013), and NOPs consistently report feeling criticised by child protection and criminal justice agencies following the discovery of their partner's offence (Cahalane et al., 2013; Plummer & Eastin, 2007).

Paradoxically, such agencies rely on NOPs performing a protective role in safeguarding victims (Shannon et al., 2013); especially if they remain in a relationship with the perpetrator (Brogden & Harkin, 2000). There has been a shift in literature, policy, and practice towards conceptualising NOPs as protective tools (Duff et al., 2017), whose responsibilities include protecting their children from sexual harm, monitoring their partner's online and offline behaviour, and supervising contact between their partner and their children (Galloway & Hogg, 2008; Levenson & Morin, 2000). However, this preoccupation with utilising NOPs as a protective resource has been deemed "exploitative" (Wager et al., 2015, p. 358), as the burden of reducing sexual reoffending risk is displaced onto the NOP by child protection and criminal justice agencies (Wager et al., 2015). Additionally, Thompson (2017) argues that the fixation on NOPs' protective role has resulted in their individual support needs being overlooked, as professional intervention focuses on protecting victims and reducing perpetrators' risk of sexual re-offending. Indeed, a narrative review of NOPs research revealed that NOPs' needs are rarely considered independently of their interactions with abused children or perpetrators (Serin, 2018).

The disregard surrounding NOPs' support requirements is concerning considering the repercussions they experience following the discovery of their partner's offence. Farkas and Miller (2007) reported that the families and partners of those with sexual convictions face "courtesy stigma" (Goffman, 1963, p. 134); a stigma similarly experienced by professionals who work with those who sexually offend (Lea et al., 1999). Through courtesy stigmatisation, NOPs' identities are tainted by affiliation, resulting in the loss of support networks (Farkas & Miller, 2007). Family members of those registered under Sexual Offence and Notification (SORN) laws in the US report facing harassment, discrimination, and rejection from their communities (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009), with evidence suggesting that even vicarious association with the registry can create social isolation for NOPs and family members (Bailey & Klein, 2018). The generalisability of US findings to the UK can be questioned as, unlike in the UK, SORN laws in the US mandate that registrants' personal information is publicly accessible, increasing the likelihood of community backlash (Bonnar-Kidd, 2010). However, perpetrators' personal details can be equivalently exposed via news coverage or trial by social media in the UK, and UK-based studies similarly find that the families of individuals with sexual convictions are ostracised by society (Brown, 2017; Condry, 2007). The negative treatment that NOPs and families face arguably represents a public health issue, as it threatens the stability of social support systems that play a vital role in the rehabilitation of those with sexual convictions (Farmer, 2017). Indeed, Bailey and Sample (2017) reported that social isolation could impact a NOP's decision to end or withdraw from their supportive relationship with their offending partner, increasing recidivism risk.

Alongside receiving negative treatment, research consistently reports that NOPs exhibit increased levels of depression, anxiety, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress following the discovery of intra-familial abuse (Green et al., 1995; Kim et al., 2007). In addition, NOPs typically suffer a multitude of losses post-discovery, including the loss of their financial security and support networks (Cahalane et al., 2013), which can elicit bereavement-style responses (Dwyer & Miller, 1996). Qualitative evaluations involving NOPs whose partners committed internet and extrafamilial offences similarly outline that NOPs experience trauma and loss post-discovery (Cahalane & Duff, 2018; Liddell & Taylor, 2015), suggesting a commonality in response regardless of offence category.

The wide-ranging negative ramifications NOPs face as a result of their partner's offending are comparable to the consequences suffered by victims of crime (Spalek, 2016). The impacts of criminal

victimisation include a perceived loss of control, self-blame, symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD, and a loss of financial security (Spalek, 2016); all of which align with NOPs post-discovery experiences (Pretorius et al., 2011; Thompson, 2017). The victimhood of NOPs and relatives of those with serious convictions is rarely publicly accepted due to their affiliation with the perpetrator (Condry, 2010); however, the commonality in experience between direct victims of crime and NOPs necessitates that NOPs be viewed as secondary victims of their partner's offending (Stitt, 2007).

NOPs require clinical intervention (Shannon et al., 2013), but their support needs are typically overshadowed by the needs of direct victims and perpetrators (Pretorius et al., 2011). Several organisations in the UK deliver group-based interventions for NOPs; however, such interventions typically focus on equipping NOPs with the protective skills necessary to prevent sexual abuse (Galloway & Hogg, 2008). Whilst this is a vital aim, it is not clear that these interventions meet NOPs' therapeutic needs. Cahalane and Duff (2018) evaluated a psychoeducational group for NOPs in the UK and reported that the intervention improved NOPs' insight into risk management but did not alleviate their emotional distress, providing support for the argument that interventions prioritise enhancing NOPs' protective skills over addressing their therapeutic needs. A study by Hernandez et al. (2009) in the US evaluated an intervention for NOPs which combined trauma-centred CBT and psycho-educational modules about sexual abuse. The results revealed that NOPs' symptoms of distress and PTSD were reduced following the intervention, whilst their understanding of sexual offending increased. Whilst this provides a promising example of how NOPs' therapeutic needs can be addressed alongside education, the lack of a control group used within the study limits the ability to attribute post-treatment changes to the intervention. There remains a distinct lack of research assessing the outcomes of interventions designed for NOPs (Cahalane et al., 2013), and more evaluation studies are sorely needed to strengthen conclusions in this area.

The current research aims to gain greater insight into how NOPs' lives are impacted by the discovery of their partner's sexual offence. This study will qualitatively explore the accounts of NOPs whose partners have committed a contact, non-contact, or internet sexual offence in the UK, with a view to better understanding the experiences of these largely overlooked populations (Cahalane et al., 2013). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) will be utilised to analyse participant accounts, as it is an appropriate method for understanding the complex nature of lived experience (Smith, 1996). In conformity with previous research, the term NOPs is used throughout the current research to help identify which partner is being referred to. However, it has been argued that the term NOP reproduces the assumption that the partners of those who commit sexual offences are blameworthy, unless explicitly labelled as "non-offending" (McCallum, 2001).

Method

Participants

The participants were nine female NOPs who discovered their male partners had committed a sexual offence via a "knock on the door" from the police. Participants were White British ($n = 8$), and White Non-British ($n = 1$), and their ages ranged from 32 to 68 years ($M = 46.5$). The inclusion criteria stated that participants must have been in a relationship with the perpetrator when they discovered they had committed a sexual offence. All offences were committed against children or adolescents. All but one of the participants remained in a relationship with the offending partner. Additional participant and offence information is provided in Table 1.

Data collection

The research was advertised on social media and participants were recruited via snowball sampling, with one participant advertising the research on an online forum for NOPs. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or remotely. The interview schedule asked participants

Table 1. Participant information.

P	Age	Current relationship with offending (ex)partner	Nature of sexual offence committed by (ex)partner	Nature of sentence received by (ex)partner
P1	62	Remained married	Extrafamilial contact offence	Custodial sentence
P2	32	Remained in a relationship	Internet offence	Awaiting sentence
P3	68	Remained married	Intrafamilial contact offence	Custodial sentence
P4	34	Remained married	Internet offence and non-contact offence	Suspended sentence
P5	39	Remained married	Extrafamilial contact offence and internet offence	Custodial sentence
P6	41	Unsure if continuing relationship	Intrafamilial contact offence	Custodial sentence
P7	47	Remained in a relationship	Extrafamilial contact offence	Custodial sentence
P8	40	Remained married	Internet offence	Previous community sentence/under new investigation
P9	56	Divorce instigated	Internet offence	Suspended sentence

about their experiences surrounding the discovery of their partner's offence via a "knock on the door" from the police. Interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. The sample size ($n = 9$) is appropriate for idiographic research utilising IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Ethics

Ethics approval was received from Nottingham Trent University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants via a signed consent form. To uphold confidentiality, participants were given an ID number, and identifiable details were removed from interview transcripts.

Data analytical procedure

This study used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to qualitatively analyse participants' accounts. IPA is an idiographic approach concerned with exploring individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences (Smith & Eatough, 2007). The analytical procedure entails a double hermeneutic; with the researcher "trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51). Interview transcripts were read multiple times to allow the researcher to immerse themselves in the data (Smith & Osborn, 2003), and descriptive, conceptual, and linguistic coding was utilised in a process where recurring patterns of meaning within the data were developed into subordinate themes and clustered under broader superordinate theme headings. The final themes were representative of the sample. A form of inter-coder agreement was used as a verification procedure to check coding of qualitative data (see De Wet & Erasmus, 2005; Smith, 2015). In qualitative research this occurs when two or more researchers code the exact same data independently and check for consistency across coders (De Wet & Erasmus, 2005). The authors of this paper independently analysed transcripts and then shared coding and themes in data analysis sessions to ensure that similar codes and themes were emerging from the data. The researchers met and discussed emerging themes and codes from the data, as well as both similarities and differences in data analysis. Where any differences existed, the authors discussed the different interpretations to come to a consensus regarding the interpretation of the data. As De Wet and Erasmus (2005) argue this dialogical process can help to produce safeguards against bias and, in this study, it assisted the researchers towards inter-coder agreement.

Results

Results revealed two¹ superordinate themes and their respective subordinate themes, outlined in Table 2. Participants will be referred to as P1, P2, etc.

Table 2. Superordinate and subordinate themes.

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
1: The devastation of discovery	1:1 Not my world 1:2 Mourning your life 1:3 Tainted identities: "you are not him"
2: Cognitive gymnastics	2:1 Seeing "shades of grey" 2:2 Square peg, round hole: reconciling the man with the action

Superordinate theme 1: The devastation of discovery

This superordinate theme reflects the recurrent narrative in participants’ accounts that, upon discovering their partner’s offence, their lives were permanently changed. Participants experienced multiple losses, whilst struggling to come to terms with their new realities. All participants expressed experiencing a shift in their identities, fuelled by negative changes in how others perceived them.

Subordinate theme 1:1 – Not my world

Participants felt that discovery of their partner’s offence marked a dramatic turning point whereby their previous life was replaced with a strange new reality, which some struggled to accept as their own.

Extract 1

never in my wildest imaginations or nightmares did I think I would be in this situation ever ... and it’s like entering a different world, it’s like being catapulted to outer space, but you, you just feel as though there’s just no help anyway ... you feel so ... you’ve got your hands tied behind your back and you’re in a darkened room because this isn’t my world, this has never been my world.

(P3, lines 11–16)

Extract 1 highlights how, upon discovering their partner’s offence, participants experienced such shifts in their lives that their realities were rendered unrecognisable. Individuals navigate their lives with a sense of invulnerability due to internal working models that perceive the world as predictable and safe (Janoff-Bulman & Berger, 2000). However, these core assumptions are shattered by the experience of victimisation and trauma, which fundamentally change our perception of the world and reduce feelings of psychological safety and control (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). P3 conveys her sense of powerlessness using imagery which portrays her as a hostage to her new reality, with little control over her world. For NOPs who have no knowledge of their partner’s offending prior to their arrest, discovery could be construed as a traumatic event that shatters their worldview (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), provoking feelings of bewilderment, insecurity, and a loss of control; all of which are common responses to trauma (Rosenbloom & Williams, 2010) and victimisation (Spalek, 2016).

Extract 2

I thought I’d been in an accident the night before ... and I was in a car, but that’s what it felt like, like the first couple of months, because it was so alien. I honestly thought I’d hit my head somewhere or accidentally taken too many pills and was in hospital ... because it’s so far from ... the ordinary. And like, I cut myself off from watching the news and still don’t watch the news now really. I’ll let other people tell me what’s going on. But I won’t watch it out of fear I’ll see something about what is now my world.

(P2, lines 598–604)

Extract 2 conveys participants’ sense of detachment and depersonalisation following discovery, as they struggled to accept their new circumstances were real. This experience of depersonalisation is echoed by P6 during interview, who asked “is this going to go away? was ... it real? Is it a

dream?" (P6, lines 13–15). Dissociative experiences, such as detachment and depersonalisation, are psychological defence mechanisms employed to mitigate incapacitating negative affect during and after experiences of trauma and victimisation (Holmes et al., 2005). P2 states she stopped watching the news due to fear of seeing stories surrounding sexual offending. The avoidance of trauma-related stimuli is commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (Weathers et al., 2014), and represents a form of avoidant coping which, if sustained, can stifle post-traumatic growth (Brooks et al., 2019). Such avoidant behaviours are similarly exhibited by victims of crime following a victimising event (Spalek, 2016).

Subordinate theme 1:2 – Mourning your life

The current subordinate theme reflects the pervasive experience of loss expressed by all participants. The discovery of their partner's sexual offending was perceived to have caused complete devastation to participants' previous way of life, eliciting feelings of grief.

Extract 3

it's like a bomb that goes off, when you have no clue, no idea and then this bomb goes off, it's like a grenade and everything, everything you've ever known, goes up in the air and then it just takes all this time coming floating down and it, it never gets put, you can't put those pieces back together again, that's how it is ... we've always had ... you know every family has some problems but overall we were a very very very close family that looked after each other, we've gone from that to be just so far removed ... so far removed from that you just wouldn't recognise it.

(P3, lines 119–126)

P3 compares the discovery of her partner's offence to a bomb going off; an analogy commonly used by the participants to convey the sudden and irreversible destruction that discovery wreaked on their old lives. The image of everything going "up in the air" reflects the persistent uncertainty NOPs face post-discovery; as they experience "ongoing and unpredictable ramifications for years" (Hooper, 1989, p. 23). Bereavement-type responses are common amongst NOPs, who experience multiple losses after discovery (Cahalane et al., 2013; Humphreys, 1992), including the potential loss of their family relationships (Willingham, 2007). P3 reflects on the loss of her close family unit, which has been rendered unrecognisable due to the breakdown of previously supportive relationships. This is consistent with Willingham's (2007) finding that families are psychologically and physically divided following the discovery of sexual abuse perpetrated by a relative.

Extract 4

I couldn't believe it, it was disbelief as well as grief, a mixture of the two. It's hard to describe. Yeah ... If my husband had died I would have had so much support, you know neighbours friends, would have crowded around, looked after me. But this was like the most enormous loss, without support. The day after, I mean the night of the sentencing when I came home to the empty house, I felt so incredibly alone. And hated, really ... It seemed intolerable. It seemed impossible.

(P1, lines 585–591)

The breakdown of participants' supportive relationships similarly occurred outside the family unit. P1 states that support from her friends and the community was withheld due to the socially unacceptable circumstances surrounding the loss of her husband, supporting previous evidence that suggests NOPs experience "disenfranchised grief" (Doka, 1989) following the physical loss of their partner through imprisonment (Bailey, 2017). The image of P1 returning to an "empty house" illustrates the felt absence of her partner and conveys her sense of loneliness and loss. In addition, P1 is unable to connect with others due to her vilified status, compounding her solitude. The lack of empathy from others can result in those suffering disenfranchised grief becoming socially isolated (Attig, 1996), depriving them of the social support necessary to process their emotions (Lenhardt,

1997). Social isolation can additionally be self-imposed through fear of judgement (Bailey, 2017), minimising support opportunities and prolonging negative affect.

Extract 5

It feels like he's died. It feels like he's died, though that's lessening now, but ... a lot of this I think has been grieving the person I thought I knew. And grieving for the future I was looking, well that we were looking forward to having. Ermm that's really hard, very hard. And doubting the person I thought and think he is.

But yeah it's that grief, that's a killer. That is. Grieving someone who's still alive, that's hard.

(P2, lines 1312–1315; 1332–1333)

In addition to experiencing grief over the physical loss of their partner through imprisonment, most participants expressed grief over the “psychosocial death” of their partner (Doka & Aber, 1989). Doka and Aber (1989) highlight how the grieving process can be triggered by the psychosocial death of a loved one, which occurs when an individual's image is altered so dramatically that their old persona is considered deceased; though, they are physically alive. Bailey (2017) reported that the spouses of individuals with sexual convictions experience a psychosocial loss when their partners' previous identity is replaced with a deviant “master status” (Goffman, 1963) post-discovery, which is evident in P2's account of “grieving someone who's still alive”. P2 additionally mourns the life she had planned with her partner. The loss of planned futures may be especially pertinent for the NOPs of individuals with sexual convictions, as such crimes provoke strict monitoring, which can limit life choices for years (Bonnar-Kidd, 2010).

Subordinate theme 1:3 – Tainted identities: “you are not him”

This theme captures the participants' shared narrative about how their identities shifted following the discovery of their partner's sexual offence. NOPs are subject to stigma by association, which is exacerbated by the often adversarial approach of intervening agencies and the criminal justice process (Clow et al., 2012; Kotova, 2017). When the NOP is both partner of the offender and a mother, she can experience feelings of being doubly stigmatised and blamed (Kotova, 2017).

Extract 6

I had to prove to them [social services] that I'm fit to be a mother and protect my children, and you know all my life, I mean we we delayed having our first child until we we knew we could provide for her a good life ... I'm not confident or anything but I know I'm a good mum to [daughter's name] and all I've done since she was born I've done everything to be a good mum to her, and then to be questioned almost and having to prove you are a good mum, it was really difficult for me ...

(P4, lines 1047–1057)

Extract 6 highlights how involvement with intervening agencies can challenge core aspects of a NOP's identity. The repetition of “good mum” suggests the social role of mother is of exceptional significance to P4's identity, representing a master status through which she derives meaning (Hunt, 2007). This status is perceived to be contested by the involvement of Social Services in P4's life. When faced with potential invalidation of a core aspect of one's identity, individuals endeavour to protect their threatened self-constructions (Alicke & Sedikides, 2011). This is reflected in P4's portrayal of being a consistent and capable parent and the declarative statement “I know I'm a good mum”. Experiencing scrutiny was difficult for the participants, who struggled with how they perceived others to view them and the impact of stigmatisation on their identities.

Extract 7

I assume everyone must think, “oh she's a sex offender's wife”, you know.. a bit like you have on your forehead, a bit like, mmm, you've got a label attached to you in some ways, that stigma, you sort of literally physically carry around with you and it can be seen, mmm, and you know people at work, for instance ... you don't know if the

reason they didn't hold the door open for you ... you know, is it because, is it because they really know, and that's why, you know ... the automatic assumption is "they must know, it must be me", and I struggle with that.

(P5, lines 748–759)

Extract 7 highlights how stigma was experienced as visible and physical, akin to a form of branding. This is evident in P5's assumption that others view her as a "sex offender's wife", which additionally exemplifies the effect stigma had on participants' interactions with others. Goffman (1963) emphasised that the issue for the stigmatised individual is how they manage their "tainted" or spoilt identity in interactional and interpersonal contexts. Experiencing stigma may motivate the negotiation of a more desirable identity (Scott & Lyman, 1968); however, this negotiation is difficult for NOPs due to the ascription (or perceived ascription) of a deviant label to them, as they are considered guilty by association for their partner's crimes (Codd, 1998; Tewksbury, 2005).

Extract 8

I had to get in touch with [organiser] and say look I need you to take your caring hat off and put your business head on and think that ... if what [partner's name] has done comes out in the public, will you get you errr you know come back and fall out because you have let me go and hang out with a load of children? You're letting the partner of a convicted sex offender hang out with children and she has chosen to stay with him. And that and then, it gets me thinking well am I a danger to children? Do I need to stop this and this and this and this? He's there going "No. You are not him".

(P2, lines 969–975)

Extract 8 further highlights how perceived labelling impacts on NOPs social interactions. For P2, this led to self-questioning, self-stigma and ambivalence when interacting with others. When labelled, an individual's actions are redefined and the treatment they receive aligns with the deviance suspected of them, which can result in the individual assuming the ascribed deviant identity (Lofland, 1969). P2's questioning of whether she should "hang out with children" suggests her self-image has been altered by the deviant status attributed to her. The emphasis P2 places on her decision to stay with "a convicted sex offender" is indicative of guilt, which is associated with the criticism of one's own behaviour and repair-action tendencies (Cohen et al., 2011); possibly explaining P2's desire to protect others from the "fall out" they may receive through associating with her.

Superordinate theme 2: Cognitive gymnastics

This superordinate theme reflects the cognitive adjustments that were undertaken by participants to maintain a positive view of their partner after discovery. Participants described gaining new perspectives on those who commit sexual offences, which helped justify their decision to support their partner. All participants struggled to reconcile the partner they knew and his offending behaviour, culminating in psychological conflict.

Subordinate theme 2:1 – Seeing "shades of grey"

All participants expressed that their perceptions of people who commit sexual offences had become more nuanced due to their personal experience. For some, cognitive shifts were sufficient to accommodate their partner's crimes, but not other categories of sexual offences; suggesting cognitive flexibility was necessary only to the extent it facilitated the continuance of participants' relationships.

Extract 9

We talk about black and white, things are black and white, you know I can now see more, there's more shades of grey on my colour palette, then there was ever before, because now I realised things aren't just quite as they seem, and it also made me more forgiving because, actually, if there was mo-, if there was more forgiveness and understanding in this world, things would be better.

(P5, lines 549–554)

Extract 9 conveys the participants' sense that they had gained new insights surrounding those who sexually offend. P5 states she no longer sees things in "black and white", reflecting her transition from rigid construing to a more nuanced view of sexual offending that includes "shades of grey". This type of cognitive flexibility occurs when new situations necessitate a shift in previously held beliefs (Scott, 1962). As P5's previously held views would have demonised her partner, a shift in her perceptions was necessary to maintain a positive view of the man she chose to support. P5 suggests that her lived experience has provided her with unique insight into those who sexually offend. This focus on insight could represent a form of impression management; with P5 citing her deeper understanding to justify her decision to support her partner and protect her threatened social image (Leary, 2001). P5's desire for more "forgiveness and understanding" is reflected in the wider qualitative literature, which suggests that NOPs disagree with the vilification of their partner in the media and public discourse (Vaz, 2015); a stance that Rapp (2011) argues helps neutralise the stigma surrounding their relationship with their partner.

Extract 10

It wouldn't phase me to sit opposite somebody that was accused or convicted of erm of of a viewing non-contact offense. I don't know how I would feel sitting in a room with a contact offender, I kind of put that into a different bracket ... Certainly for the people who have viewed this I could sit with someone and listen to them, find out what what they wanted to tell me and not feel like, God you know if you'd asked me six months ago I wouldn't sit with them, I'm not sitting in a room with them, why would I? You know, they're just no good. So, it has changed it's made me more open-minded to try and understand ...

(P8, lines 657–666)

In Extract 10, P8 describes how she has become more open to trying to understand those convicted of non-contact sexual offences, reflecting a substantial change in her level of acceptance post-discovery. It is interesting that P8's shift in perception accommodates her partner's non-contact offending but does not extend to those who commit contact offences, who she places in a "different bracket". Rapp (2011) reported that the spouses of men with sexual convictions conceptualised their partner's offences on a continuum, comparing the injury caused by their partner's crimes to that of other sexual offences. In doing this, NOPs differentiated their partners from those who they deemed to have committed more serious sexual offences, enabling them to rationalise their decision to remain in the relationship. This hierarchy of sexual offences is mirrored within prisons housing those with sexual convictions, where prisoners seek to gain moral superiority over others based on offence specifics (McNaughton Nicholls & Webster, 2018).

Subordinate theme 2:2 – Square peg, round hole: reconciling the man with the action

Participants expressed difficulties reconciling the man they knew with his offending behaviour, which they described as completely out of character. Participants acknowledged their partners' crimes, but were reluctant to perceive their partners negatively, representing a source of psychological conflict. To resolve psychological discomfort, participants sought to separate their partner from the offending action or minimise his culpability.

Extract 11

From my perspective the person that was written about in the newspapers wasn't the person that I knew, that I got to know, it didn't, the two didn't equate at all for me. It just didn't sit right ... you know these newspaper reports are making him out to be a sexual predator, a a monster, somebody who has intentionally hurt a child and that, I couldn't sit comfortably with that, because it wasn't who I knew, it wasn't who I'd got to know even after I found out about his offence.

(P7, lines 384–390)

In Extract 11, P7 conveys her struggle in reconciling her partner with his new deviant status. Research reports that the spouses of men with sexual convictions distinguish between the person who

committed the offence and their husband; a tactic which allows them to reject their husband's offending characteristic and maintain their relationship after discovery (Iffland et al., 2016). P7's puzzlement surrounding the thought of her partner intentionally hurting a child is indicative of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), which necessitates that beliefs are adjusted to mitigate psychological distress and restore balance (Festinger, 1957). P7 resolves her psychological conflict by denying her partner did anything intentionally harmful, allowing her to preserve her positive image of him. Such "deviance disavowal" (McCaghy, 1968) may additionally allow P7 to maintain a viable identity for herself, as distinguishing her partner from "predators" that intentionally hurt children serves to relinquish her association with the stigma surrounding such acts.

Extract 12

I was conflicted because the [partner's name] I knew was a really lovely man, a man of principles, loving, caring responsible as all the things I said you know ... I was like I can't believe he would have done it viciously, and he loves children, he's a very sensitive man ... so it just didn't sit well in a way, so that's why I just could not forget the man I knew.

(P4, lines 255–266)

Extract 12 exemplifies the internal conflict experienced by participants when trying to make sense of their partner's actions. Cahalane et al. (2013) reported that the positive image NOPs held of their partners pre-discovery compounded the difficulties they faced when trying to assimilate their partner's offence into their existing perception of him. This can be seen in Extract 12, with P4 expressing disbelief that the "loving, caring" man she knew could have committed his offences "viciously". This narrative is consistent with Iffland et al.'s (2016) findings that NOPs exhibit a high number of cognitive distortions surrounding their partner's sexual offending. Minimisation of offending behaviour has been reported to serve a protective function for men with sexual convictions, helping them to maintain a positive self-concept and alleviate shame (Blagden et al., 2014; Maruna & Mann, 2006). Minimisations may serve a similar function for NOPs, enabling them to maintain a pro-social image of their partner and attenuate psychological conflict surrounding their relationship (Action for Prisoners' Families, 2013).

Discussion

The current study contributes to knowledge surrounding NOPs experiences post-discovery and highlights the specific support needs of a population whose victim status has traditionally been overlooked. Analysis revealed that discovery had a devastating impact on participants' lives, eliciting trauma and bereavement-type responses, and provoking dramatic shifts in their identities. To protect their relationships, participants undertook significant cognitive shifts surrounding their perspectives on sexual offending and utilised a range of techniques to maintain a positive view of their partners post-discovery.

Results revealed that NOPs lives were significantly altered following the discovery of their partner's offence. Traumagenic symptomology was evident across all accounts, supporting previous research surrounding the impact of discovery on NOPs in cases of intrafamilial, extrafamilial, and internet-based sexual abuse (Cahalane et al., 2013; Green et al., 1995; Liddell & Taylor, 2015). Stop it Now! anecdotally assert that the secretive nature of sexual offending, and especially internet-based offending, means most NOPs have no knowledge of their partner's offending prior to their arrest (Stop it Now! n.d.). In this context, discovery can be characterised as a traumatic event that exposes NOPs to information that is incompatible with their worldview, provoking a stress response (Horowitz, 1986). Psychological defence mechanisms are employed to mitigate the debilitating impact of trauma (Horowitz, 1986), and the use of techniques such as avoidance was evident in participants' accounts.

In addition to trauma, all participants expressed a deep sense of loss surrounding the former image of their partner, strained family relationships, and disrupted futures. The socially unacceptable

circumstances surrounding the participants' loss resulted in most receiving a lack of support from friends and family, aligning with previous research demonstrating that NOPs experience disenfranchised grief and social isolation (Bailey, 2017). Participants further experienced shifts in their own identities, as their self-conceptions were challenged by intervening agencies and the negative perceptions of others. All participants reported facing stigmatisation due to their affiliation with their partner; supporting earlier findings that the family members of individuals with sexual convictions face courtesy stigma (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Goffman, 1963). This stigmatisation was internalised by the participants, who exhibited self-blame, guilt, and shame.

In addition, the analysis highlighted that the participants made cognitive adjustments to maintain a positive view of their partner after discovery. For some, shifts towards becoming more accepting of those with sexual convictions were sufficient to accommodate their partner's crimes, but not other sexual offences; exemplifying how cognitive flexibility was necessary to the extent it facilitated continuance of the participants' relationships. All participants experienced cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) stemming from a conflict between the image of the partner they knew and their offending behaviour. For most, this conflict was alleviated through separating their partner from their offence or minimising their partner's culpability, supporting previous findings that NOPs exhibit a high number of cognitive distortions surrounding their partner's offending (Iffland et al., 2016).

It is of note that the participant in the current study who had instigated divorce proceedings against her partner did not exhibit such distortions. It could be that this participant did not make the cognitive adjustments necessary to retain a positive view of her partner, possibly contributing to her decision to divorce him. Alternatively, it could be that protective minimisations were not necessary to maintain the relationship, as the participant had already decided to get divorced. The decision surrounding whether to maintain a relationship will be determined by a complex array of factors; however, future research should determine whether NOPs who maintain relationships with their partners post-discovery exhibit more cognitive distortions than those who do not, as this would provide clearer insight into the protective nature of distortions. This is of interest as interventions designed to make NOPs more protective typically seek to address distortions (Cahallane & Duff, 2018); yet, it is possible that minimisation and denial are normal responses to discovery (Chaffin, 1996), as opposed to evidence of a lack of protective capabilities. Minimisation and denial have been reported to perform an adaptive function for those with sexual convictions, insulating them from the negative effects of labelling and shame (Blagden et al., 2014; Maruna & Mann, 2006). In addition, as maintaining a relationship can reduce the risk of sexual re-offending (de Vries Robbé et al., 2015), and NOPs protective distortions likely help facilitate the maintenance of such relationships; it may be counter-intuitive to focus on dismantling distortions in the absence of evidence that they reduce protectiveness, especially if they enable NOPs to move on with their lives.

The results of the current study suggest that NOPs are population in need of support and, alongside honing their protective capabilities, it is vital that interventions assist NOPs in managing the stigmatisation, trauma, and loss they experience due to their partner's offence (Shannon et al., 2013). Sample et al. (2018) observed a peer-support intervention in Nebraska called "Fearless", which aims to provide NOPs and their offending partners with a safe space to share frustrations, overcome loneliness, and develop "collective narratives" (p. 4270) that assist with the management of stigma and the construction of positive self-identities. Though evaluation utilising pre and post-group outcomes measures is needed to strengthen the evidence surrounding the effectiveness of this intervention, it provides a cautiously optimistic example of an intervention that emphasises support whilst addressing some of NOPs' specific needs.

A shift towards viewing NOPs as secondary victims is necessary to provoke a greater provision of services that help NOPs cope with the ongoing devastation of discovery, which will in turn enhance their ability to perform the protective role prescribed to them (Serin, 2018). A key barrier to NOPs accessing the limited support currently available to them is cost, as access to specialist therapists, counsellors, and groups are dependent on NOPs having the means to pay for these services. The

provision of free to access services is sorely needed to ensure that NOPs with limited finances are not excluded from gaining support. Professionals working with NOPs should understand the negative ramifications that NOPs suffer due to their partner's offence, and police should be conscious of the potentially traumatising impact of discovery via the "knock on the door", ensuring NOPs are treated with compassion. In addition, recognition that minimisations and denial may be adaptive responses to a traumatising experience (Action for Prisoners' Families, 2013), rather than evidence of a lack of protectiveness, may have a positive impact on relationships between NOPs and intervening agencies; which research suggests are strained (Cahalane et al., 2013; Plummer & Eastin, 2007).

This research represents the accounts of nine participants who were motivated to talk about the impact that discovery of their partner's sexual offence had on their lives.

A limitation of this research is that most participants were recruited from one online support forum for NOPs, potentially skewing the data towards a group who had actively sought online support and opportunities to discuss their experiences. As P9 was the only participant to have ended the relationship with her partner, the homogeneity of the sample used could be questioned; though, P9's experiences aligned with other participants' accounts in all areas but minimisation. It is important to note that this research reflects the experiences of NOPs who found out about their partners offending via a "knock on the door" from police, overlooking the experiences of NOPs who discovered their partner's offending via other means. Future studies should seek to illuminate the experiences of NOPs who discovered their partner's offending via different circumstances, to explore how the mode of discovery may impact NOPs subsequent responses, if at all. In addition, future research should investigate the experiences of NOPs who decided not to remain in a relationship with the perpetrator, as the accounts of this overlooked group could provide an interesting comparison against those who continue their relationship. Finally, the participants in this study were all at different stages of their post-discovery journey, and future research should consider following NOPs journeys longitudinally to determine how their responses and understanding of their experiences change over time, and the various stages at which different types of intervention may be appropriate.

Conclusion

This study bolsters psychological understanding of the issues NOPs face following the discovery of their partner's sexual offence and builds upon research investigating NOPs whose partners have committed internet and extrafamilial sexual offences. Analysis revealed that NOPs experience the discovery of their partner's offence as a traumatic event, which invokes feelings of loss and dramatic shifts in their identities. In addition, the analysis revealed some of the cognitive adjustments NOPs undertake to maintain a relationship with their partner post-discovery, which were not apparent in the account of the participant who had instigated a divorce. It is hoped these findings will bolster evidence surrounding the support needs of NOPs as secondary victims and increase the therapeutic utility of interventions designed for NOPs, ultimately reducing the level of emotional harm they experience.

Note

1. A third theme reflecting NOPs experiences with intervening agencies was identified but has been excluded from analysis in this paper. The excluded theme will be fully explored in a subsequent paper focusing specifically on the relationship between NOPs and agencies. Superordinate themes 1 and 2 in the current paper were chosen for analysis as they were particularly salient across all participant accounts.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the participants for their time and involvement in the research, and their bravery for speaking to us about their experiences.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Katie Duncan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8408-6654>

Belinda Winder  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9118-679X>

Nicholas Blagden  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4037-0984>

Rachel Armitage  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9106-4119>

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