

# DISCOURSE AND POWER IN THE SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF INCARCERATED SOUTH AFRICAN FEMALE SEXUAL OFFENDERS

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## **ABSTRACT**

Female sexual offenders have recently become the subject of increased medical, legal and public attention. However, the medical and legal systems insist that female sex crimes are rare regardless of the fact that when sexual victimization experiences are surveyed, the incidence of female perpetrated sex crimes is often higher than expected. Additionally, lay discourses concerning female sexual perpetration remain charged with expressions of disbelief and the vast majority of attention on sexual crimes therefore remains focused on male offenders. As a result, female sexual offenders are understood and treated differently to their male counterparts in the media and medico-legal contexts. In light of the continued denial of female sexual perpetration, this research explored how such beliefs around female sexuality shape the self-knowledge of female sexual offenders. By doing so, this investigation aimed to illuminate how disciplinary power acts to produce self-knowledge that, in turn, leads to the discursive coordinates by which female sexual offenders come to define themselves. This was achieved by interviewing female sexual perpetrators and thereafter drawing on critical discourse analysis in order to interpret the transcriptions of these interviews.

The results demonstrated that the participants' subjective experiences as agents and non-agents in the perpetration of sex crimes relied on social constructions of men, women, motherhood, sexuality and religion. All of the offenders constructed themselves as characteristically female- maternal, passive, vulnerable, victimised and innately virtuous. Their responses drew discernibly on rationalising discourse, gendered discourse, inversions of their femaleness, perceptions of the legal and correctional systems, institutionalised discourse, discourse on rehabilitation and expressions of morality and docility. Most of these discursive patterns, as both instruments and effects of power, simultaneously replicate and reproduce broader social discursive practices that imply that women are harmless, nurturing

and incapable of female sexual perpetration. The availability of medical, academic and legal discourse on gender and sexuality allowed the participants to draw on victim discourse, histories of abuse and claims of psychological ailments to justify their crimes. These rationalisations also worked in conjunction with gendered discursive strategies that implied that men are aggressive perpetrators whilst women are harmless victims. As such, the perceived responsibility for the participants' crimes was most often displaced onto their male accomplices. In this way, the participants upheld their subjective innocence as well as assisted in the maintenance of the construction of the female sexual perpetrator as an unfathomable and impossible construct. This was further emphasised by the fact that not a single participant believed she was guilty of a crime. Such a belief is in line with gendered constructions of criminality as a predominantly male activity. As such, the participants' reproductions of traditional sexual scripts foreclosed alternative understandings of female sexual perpetration.

While dominant patriarchal structures utilise discourse as a means to transmit, produce and reinforce power, this study drew on discourse as a means to resist traditional gendered understandings of sexual offending and to create new configurations of knowledge power by offering counter-knowledge of sex crimes. In doing so, academics, policy makers and the general public have access to a different and novel understanding of female sexuality in light of sexual offending. This has practical implications for the acknowledgement and awareness of female sexual perpetration as well as for future preventative efforts.

**Keywords:** female sexual offenders, female sexuality, gender, power, discourse, self-knowledge, critical discourse analysis, South Africa