

# Conceptualisation of a criminological theoretical framework to elucidate female youth sex offending

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*In this article, the significance of the role of theory to the research process as a prime objective of the social sciences is focused upon. Theories offer insight and strategies for the helping professions and help researchers to gain insight into and explain empirical observations, such as why people commit crimes or some commit more crime than others. It is common cause for the helping professions to integrate interdisciplinary knowledge to provide meaning and understanding to empirical data. In the current study the ecological systems theory is used as a platform to induce a criminologically relevant theoretical framework to explain female youth sex offending. Ecological systems theory is advocated as a result of the fact that the environmental circumstances in which the young female sex offender finds herself are dynamic and necessitate continuous adaptation to an ever-changing environment, which is best explained within the context of an ecological approach. The research was conducted at the "Teddy Bear Clinic" in the Parktown North and Soweto Offices in Gauteng, South Africa. The research participants were diverted to the Support Programme for Abuse Reactive Children offered by the Teddy Bear Clinic where purposive sampling was used to select a convenience sample of eight young female sexual offenders between the ages of 12 and 18 years. Semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview schedule, were conducted to collect data. The collated data was evaluated in terms of the ecological systems theory and supportive propositions, to conceive a theoretical framework that aims to explain female youth sex offending. The purpose of this framework is to guide future research, and inform interventions and policy development.*

**Keywords:** female youth sex offender; youth sex offending; female youth offender; ecological systems theory; Teddy Bear clinic

## THE ROLE OF THEORY IN RESEARCH

In this article, the role of theory in the research process is deliberated. Theory is described by Bachman and Schutt (2014: 31) as "a logically interrelated set of propositions about empirical reality". Schmalleger (2012: 92) refers to theory as "a series of interrelated propositions that attempt to describe, explain, predict and ultimately control some class of events. In addition, a theory gains explanatory power from inherent logical consistency and is tested by how well it describes and predicts reality". Bachman and Schutt (2014: 31) reiterate that the building and evaluating of theory is one of the most important objectives of a social science and explain the significance of theories to the field of criminology as follows:

- They can help us explain and understand things like why people commit crimes or some people commit more crime than others.
- They help us make predictions about the criminological world.
- They help us organise and make sense of empirical findings in a discipline.
- They help us guide future research.
- They help us guide public policy.

Bachman and Schutt (2014: 31) observe that researchers should be attentive to the fact that most research is guided by theory, even if the researchers are not fully aware of it. According to Sheafor and Horejsi (2012: 62-63), the helping professions integrate knowledge and methods from different disciplines to provide meaning to observations and to provide a relative understanding thereof (*cf.* Schmalleger, 2012: 92). In the current study the ecological systems theory is used as a platform to induce a criminologically relevant theoretical framework to explain female youth sex offending.

A youth sex offender is considered as “a person below the age of 18 years who commits a sexual act with a person of any age against the victim’s will without consent or in a threatening, aggressive and exploitive way” (Harris & Bezuidenhout, 2010: 28). Campher (2006: 25) points out that sexual offending is inclusive of both contact and non-contact activities. Contact activities include the following: “sexualised kissing, fondling, masturbation, digital and/or object penetration of the vagina and/or anus, as well as oral-genital, genital-genital and anal-genital contact”. On the other hand, non-contact activities comprise of exhibitionism, inappropriate observation of a child and the production or viewing of pornography (Campher, 2006: 25). For the purpose of this research, sexual activities will refer to any sexually related activity whether contact or non-contact activities.

## **CURRENT STUDY**

Although international studies have been conducted for the past 30 years (Moore et al, 2005: 12) regarding youth who sexually offend, little research has been done on female youth who sexually offend, especially in South Africa. The fact that research over the years has only concentrated on male youth sex offenders leaves a gap in the research and creates a costly shortage of relevant information with regard to assisting female youth sex offenders. In a recent study, the contexts and reasons why eight female youth sex offenders engaged in sexual offending was explored (*cf.* Da Costa, 2014).

The female youth sex offender and her circumstances in the environment are never static and they are constantly adapting to an ever-changing environment. Thus, the authors advocate the principles of the ecological approach. This being said, the authors also acknowledge that as female youth sex offending is a complex phenomenon, it cannot be explained by a single theory, albeit a theory looking at human behaviour holistically. This necessitates the integration of other theories, such as criminological theories to provide a comprehensive understanding of female youth sex offending.

## **Research objectives**

The objectives of the particular study are the following:

- To demonstrate the applicability of the ecological systems theory as a basis to explain female youth sex offending.
- To infuse criminology theories eclectically within the ecological perspective to elucidate female youth sex offending.

## **Research participants and setting**

This research study was conducted at the “Teddy Bear Clinic” (*cf.* <http://ttbc.org.za/>) in the Parktown North and Soweto Offices in Gauteng, South Africa. The research participants were diverted to the Support Programme for Abuse Reactive Children offered by the Teddy Bear Clinic, which is a diversion programme that aims to empower a range of low to medium risk child sexual offenders. The programme allows them to understand the consequences of their behaviour and equip them with the skills and psychosocial resources to change it. By intervening with youth who exhibit sexually offensive or inappropriate behaviour in their early childhood, the programme actively works towards breaking the cycle of abuse, by preventing these children from future offending (*cf.* <http://ttbc.org.za/>).

A non-probability sampling technique known as purposive sampling was applied in the current study. According to Neuman (2006: 219, 222) the purposive sampling method refers to the researcher finding participants that fit the sampling criteria, which in this case were the following:

- The participants were between the ages of 12 and 18 years.
- All the participants were female.
- The participants committed a sexual offence.
- The participants were diverted to the Teddy Bear Clinic for therapeutic intervention.

Eight participants fitting the sampling criteria were selected as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1 reflects the ages of each participant at the time of the offence and at the time of the interview. All the participants were female. All participants were Black, with the exclusion of one Indian.

## **Procedure**

Semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview schedule, were conducted (Greeff, 2011: 351-353). Permission was obtained from the parents and participants to make an audio recording of each session.

Exploratory questions were used to discover what the perceptions of female youth sex offenders were regarding the factors that contributed to their offending.

**Table 1: Demographic information of participants**

Participants	Age at time of offence	Age at time of interview	Gender	Race
Participant A	13 years	14 years	Female	Black
Participant B	13 years	14 years	Female	Black
Participant C	16 years	17 years	Female	Black
Participant D	15 years	18 years	Female	Black
Participant E	15 years	17 years	Female	Black
Participant F	15 years	16 years	Female	Black
Participant G	12 years	14 years	Female	Black
Participant H	17 years	20 years	Female	Indian

### Data analysis

With regard to the data analysis, the interviews were transcribed from a digital voice recording. The transcribed interviews were analysed and emerging themes and sub-themes were identified. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants. The collated data was evaluated in terms of the ecological systems theory and supportive propositions to conceive a theoretical framework to explain female youth sex offending which aims to guide future research, and inform interventions and policy development.

### THE ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Ecological research with crime and deviance as its focus is interrelated to community structures and processes that are associated with social disorganisation (Sampson & Groves, 1989: 777). A criminological theoretical paradigm pertaining to communities and the influence that a neighbourhood can have on the occurrence of crime, emerged in the form of “the Chicago school” (Williams & McShane, 2010: 50). Subsequently, Robert Ezra Park (1864-1944), Ernest Watson Burgess (1886-1966), Louis Wirth (1897-1952) and their colleagues in the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago, in the early twentieth century developed a theoretical perspective that focussed on the influence of neighbourhood conditions in the committing of crime. They specifically emphasised aspects such as poverty and a lack of social fabric and control in social institutions such as the school and the family, which gave rise to contemporary social structure (Williams & McShane, 2010: 50). Social structure theorists believe that criminal behaviour is a result of the social environment (Siegel, 2005: 8).

Various theories resort under the social structure theories. One of these theories is the social disorganisation theory that focusses on institutions of social control such as the family, as well as neighbourhood and community variables (Williams & McShane, 2010: 50). In addition, poverty, deteriorating infrastructures and how these factors give rise to antisocial behaviour as a result of feelings of conflict and despair, are aspects emphasised in this theory (Siegel, 2005: 130).

Another theory is the cultural deviance theory, which focusses on the development of a unique lower-class subculture in disorganised neighbourhoods. These subcultures maintain a unique set of values and beliefs that are in direct contrast with conventional social norms (Joubert & Bezuidenhout, 2013: 115; Siegel, 2005: 131). It is important to note that these subcultural values and beliefs are passed on from one generation to another in a process called cultural transmission (Siegel, 2005: 131). When applying this to youth misbehaviour, and in this case, specifically female youth sex offending, one will see that youths growing up in a disadvantaged and overcrowded environment where violence and poverty are rife, struggle to develop acceptable pro-social behaviour (De Wet, 2003: 3; McClinton, 2004: 27). It is argued that this perspective can be linked to the prevalence of youth sex offending, as a youth might adjust his or her perceptions and moral views to be compliant with the values of their peer group, in order to ensure acceptance by them. Thus, if the peer group adheres to certain violent or intimidating ways of gaining sexual compliance, the youth within this peer group might follow suit (Harris, 2008: 55; Symboluk, 1999: 69).

Shaw and McKay (Sampson & Groves, 1989: 74, 775) argue that three structural factors, namely low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity and residential mobility are responsible for the disruption of social organisation. Shaw and McKay (Sampson & Groves, 1989: 774, 777) view social disorganisation as

“the inability of a community structure to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls”.

The helping professions place a high value on the individual. One of the characteristics of ecosystems is that they are never static and that the species within the ecosystem are constantly adapting to different conditions (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2012: 62). The ecological systems theory is a holistic approach that views people in the context of their environments and emphasises the continuous interactions and reciprocal influence with their environments (Maguire, 2002: 90). The ecological theory refers to a child as a developing individual within a complex system of relationships, while at the same time being affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment (Berk, 2009: 26; Bender & Emslie, 2010: 197).

Kruger and Spies (2006: 160) emphasise that one of the benefits for helping professionals is that such a theory enables them to view individuals in the widest possible social contexts. When applying the theory to youth sex offending, the interaction between female youth sex offenders and their environment is a synergistic cycle of influence between the changing individual and the changing environment. Newman and Newman (1997: 131) confirm that the youth is viewed as a holistic entity, made up of a complex system including physical, cognitive, emotional, social and self-subsystems. In addition, the youth is also a part of a family, school, sport team and the like. Newman and Newman (1997: 131-132) argue that development is affected directly by the interactions that take place within a single microsystem, for example in a family, and by similarities and differences in patterns of interaction that manifests across the systems, such as mesosystems amongst others. Although the youth is a complete individual system, the youth is simultaneously a component of a larger system. For this reason, researchers need to approach the study of youth development from different perspectives, highlighting the critical resources, which support an adaptive process of reorganisation and growth (Newman & Newman, 1997: 132).

### **Systems within the ecological perspective**

Bender and Emslie (2010: 175) explain that the ecological perspective contains four interlocking systems that mould developmental growth. Interlocking systems are referred to as systems that range from immediate, such as family or peers, to other contexts in which the youth are not directly involved in, such as technological changes or ideological beliefs. The systems are described as follows (Benokraitis, 2011: 35):

- The microsystem consists of the interconnected behaviour, roles and relationships that influence the youth’s daily life (for example their parents and peers).
- The mesosystem comprises of the relationships existing in different settings (for example the home and school).
- The exosystem is made up of settings or events that the youth does not experience directly, but that can affect their development (for example a parent’s employment).
- The macrosystem consists of the broader society and culture that embraces all other systems.

The youth’s characteristics link with the environmental factors at multiple levels to mould development in different and unique ways (Berk, 2009: 31).

#### **Microsystem**

The microsystem is the innermost level of the environment comprising of interaction and activity patterns in the youth’s immediate surroundings. At this level all relationships are reciprocal, for example the adults affect the youth’s behaviour and at the same time the youth’s characteristics, physical attributes and personality also affect the adult’s behaviour towards the youth. Simultaneously third parties, which include other individuals in the microsystem, also influence the quality of the two-person relationship (Benokraitis, 2011: 35-36; Berk, 2009: 27). When these relationships are supportive, the interaction is enhanced and when the relationships are strained, the interaction is worsened or even severed.

#### **Mesosystem**

The mesosystem is made up of connections between the microsystems such as the home, schools and neighbourhoods (Benokraitis, 2011: 35-36; Berk, 2009: 27). For example, the youth’s academic performance is not just affected by the classroom but also by the involvement of the parent in the youth’s studies and the resources, the youth has access to after school. Research found that family-neighbourhood connections are especially important for economically disadvantaged youth (Benokraitis, 2011: 35-36; Berk, 2009: 28).

### **Exosystem**

The exosystem consists of the social settings that involve the parents, such as formal organisations like their places of employment, health and welfare services, and/or religious institutions. These organisations indirectly affect the youth. For instance, when a parent experiences problems at work, is retrenched or his/her services are terminated, these aspects have an influence on their child or children (Berk, 2009: 27).

### **Macrosystem**

The macrosystem includes the cultural values, laws, customs and resources that the youth has access to in the country. The environment is not a static force, but an ever-changing system, which affects children (Benokraitis, 2011: 35-36; Berk, 2009: 29).

### **Characteristics of the ecological systems perspective**

This study demonstrates the application of the characteristics of the ecological systems theory to female youth sex offending, and renders insight into the participants' struggles with developmental challenges within complex systems, which is important for professionals dealing with young offenders. Germain and Gitterman (in Maguire, 2002: 91-93) identifies seven characteristics that epitomises the ecological approach.

### **Person-environment exchange**

This refers to the fluid and multidirectional interactions between the individual's, personality, behaviour and the demands of their environment as well as interpersonal problems, needs in families, communication processes and dysfunctional relationship patterns. A good fit will result in positive growth in the individual and meaningful relationships in the community, while a poor fit will result in impaired functioning and an environment that stifles growth.

In relation to this study, the female youth sex offender's interactions between herself and her environment will only be able to result in a good fit if she experiences positive growth and sufficient resources from the community. An example of a poor fit within the environment of one of the research participants:

*No, I felt very unsafe... and then my dad and mom used to fight and stuff... then my dad got arrested... I then lived in a flat with my dad and my stepmother... the flat was somewhere in Joburg... then my stepmom and dad never got along, constant fighting, not stable home. My dad got arrested cause they found drugs in his truck. Then obviously that's when social workers and people were involved with the story of the house, cause they had to find out if there was a child involved. Then I could not stay with my mom alone I need to get a stable place to stay. Then they asked me if I want to go to another place, home of safety. From that home my dad was out of jail, he got arrested. I don't know what year, but he came to fetch me from that home in 2006. He came to fetch me with the social worker from the home, then we went back to the court and the court said I could not stay with them and I went to the Children's home.*

The environment exchange characteristic links well with Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory, which resorts under the social process theories that focus on the interactions between offenders and their victims and/or the environment (*cf.* Bartol & Bartol, 2014: 6). Proponents of the social process theories emphasise that everyone, regardless of their gender, race or socio-economic status, have the potential to commit crime. Even though they do acknowledge that members of lower socio-economic statuses may have added burdens such as poverty and disrupted family lives, they opine that these risk factors can be counteracted by positive mentors, peers or a supportive family, for instance. Conversely, they explain that life experiences can influence affluent members of society in such adverse ways, that they may turn to deviant behaviour (Siegel, 2005: 156). The differential association theory postulates that criminal behaviour occurs as a result of a learning or socialisation process. Thus, criminal behaviour occurs due to the fact that the behaviour is learnt while interacting with others (Bartol & Bartol, 2014: 6; Siegel, 2005: 160; Williams & McShane, 2010: 63). The contemporary version of this theory is the social learning theory, which in its essence is a reformulation of the differential association theory. The social learning theory complements the differential association theory by providing a more in-depth explanation regarding the ways in which social interaction can give rise to deviant behaviour (Henry & Lanier, 2006: 89).

This study confirmed that factors such as family instability, criminality and violence were found to be prevalent in female youth sex offenders lives. Various studies (*cf.* Booyens, Beukman, & Bezuidenhout,

2013: 41; Hendriks & Bijleveld, 2006: 35; Tardif, Auclair, Jacob & Carpentier, 2005: 162) confirmed that the families of female youth sex offenders were more likely to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds, unstable and unable to protect their children. In this regards, Research participant E reported that there were violent fights between her father and mother and some of her family members were in trouble with the law.

*My dad used to beat up my mom so badly in front of us... once in a while... but that doesn't happen anymore... cause it's just mind your own...*

She confirmed that other family members had been in trouble with the law as well.

*My two uncles... actually three... they were arrested and they spent time in prison... although I was little by then... they would say let us go to Sun City to visit your uncles... but they out of prison now... but I know the uncle from my father's side used to beat up people... my other uncle for attempted murder.*

Participant E's responses illustrate that factors such as family instability, criminality and violence were prevalent in female youth sex offenders' lives.

Siegel (2005: 162) is of the opinion that several notable studies have supported the fundamental principles of the differential association theory. Associations have been established between family relations and criminality, as it has been found that children whose parents are involved in criminal behaviour are more likely to become involved in deviant behaviour as well. Furthermore, it has been found that children who engage with deviant peers tend to act defiantly as well (Siegel, 2005: 162).

Specific factors related to the person-environment exchange of the female youth sex offender, are aspects such as basic care and safety of the youth, the socio-economic status of the youth, their family structure, stability in their family, their parents' capacity, certain family dynamics and history of family criminality, as well as the quality of relationships with family members (Da Costa, 2014: 67).

Researchers conclude that youth are exposed to various forms of emotional violence and neglect, with one study confirming that 35 to 45% of youth witnessed domestic violence (Seedat, Van Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla & Ratele, 2009: 1013). When Participant A was asked if there had ever been a violent fight at home, she responded as follows:

*Well, there has been with my mother and father but that was in 2004... my brother was born in 2004... the police was called in... my father was arrested just for the night... she was pregnant... he came back home drunk, he hit her.*

Several research findings have confirmed the fact that female youth sex offenders' families were more likely to be unstable, were more likely from lower socio-economic backgrounds and their parents were more likely to be unable to protect them (see Booyens, Beukman, & Bezuidenhout, 2013: 41; Hendriks & Bijleveld, 2006: 35; Tardif, Auclair, Jacob & Carpentier, 2005: 162). In this regard, participant A mentioned the following:

*During 2010 our family went through poverty... My mother and my father lost their jobs.*

An ecological model helps focus on maladaptive interpersonal problems, needs in families, communication processes and dysfunctional relationship patterns (Zastrow, 2003: 19). With regard to family and environmental factors, one should view the interaction between the subsystem, interpersonal and physical environments that ultimately will affect the youth. One evidently sees the interaction between the youth sex offender and the family, also known as the microsystem.

### **Varied levels of fit**

The ecological approach proclaims that individuals should find the most appropriate fit in their environments through the premise of *adaptedness*. According to Maguire (2002: 91-93), *adaptedness* occurs when sufficient environmental resources are available to promote the individual's optimum functioning. *Adaptation* transpires once the individual has transitioned successfully and has improved the level of fit in their environment (Maguire, 2002: 91-93).

In order to probe the different levels of fit when describing the *adaptedness* and the *adaptation* of the female youth sex offenders in this particular study, the participants were asked if they were well cared for, to which one of the research participants reported the following:

*I would say I had good support from my parents, but now I feel that I am on my own. From 2011 downwards I would say they cared for me. I am cared for, but not financially. I am feeling left alone. I have a shelter and I have something to eat, no moral support now.*

When probing further about her safety at home, her response was as follows:

*Mmmm... No, to be quite honest no, when something happens outside I can't open up to my parents, cause they don't believe me, or cause its of my pride. I don't know... Ya that's how I got beaten up badly outside. In the past I would tell my dad and my dad would fight, but now...*

Another participant reported:

*There is a bit of poverty... not that much...*

It emerged, however, that the participant only had food at certain times and when asked if she ever went to bed hungry, she replied:

*...my mother has tried harder and harder for us to sleep with something to eat... other relatives from other families help.*

From the above, it is evident that the research participants confirmed a lack of emotional support by parents, poverty and violent victimisation as factors that influence their adaptation.

There are specific factors that inhibit the adaptedness of the female youth sex offenders into her environment. Previous researchers established that youth sex offenders display behavioural problems and that they have considerable deficits in social competence, such as inadequate social skills, shyness, poor peer relationships, social isolation and experienced fewer peer attachments (Righthand & Welch, 2005: 21). The female youth sex offender is often viewed as a person with a lack of health and self-care skills, which obviously hamper the developmental needs and emotional status of the youth (Benokraitis, 2011: 393; Hunter, Becker & Lexier, 2006: 153-155). It was confirmed by the research participants that factors such as health and self-care skills, self-esteem and identity, as well as assertion skills and social presentation, most likely played a role in contributing to female youth sex offending.

In this regard, Participant C reported a low self-esteem and recounted the following:

*Self-esteem? I don't know... I give up easily sometimes... maybe sometimes when I'm sad I just give up... Nothing else... I just feel sometimes I'm small, the way people treat me sometimes... Sometimes my friends, my enemies, school mates.*

### **Life stressors that threaten fit and coping**

This concept refers to the external life stressors that fabricate negative exchanges in the level of fit. How the individual views, and the meaning that they assign to the life stressor will affect the person. Life stressors such as separations, significant stress, abuse, neglect, and cognitive distortions are evident in the youth sex offender's life course (*cf.* Benokraitis, 2011: 393-393; Da Costa, 2014; Hunter et al, 2006: 151; Righthand & Welch, 2005: 20-22).

Some of the participants had parents who were disengaged and physically or emotionally inaccessible. Parents were often unable to provide the basic care and emotional warmth. Life stressors such as teenage pregnancy, illegal abortion, murder and the death of a parent, as well as the separations from family were stressors that threatened the fit and coping strategies of the research participants and most likely contributed to their offending. According to participant E, her life history explains how life stressors such as death in the female youth sex offender's family, abuse, and/or family violence were possible stressors that threatened the fit and coping strategies of the female youth sex offender. The participant's father was arrested for drugs and her stepmother was unable to care for her. The literature review corroborates the participant's responses, as female sex offenders' families tend to be chaotic and dysfunctional (Hendriks & Bijleveld, 2006: 35).

Participant B referred to her family life as being "chaotic". The following is a recount of her experience:

*I don't think I will describe them as my family... chaotic... ya... yes... and... sad to be born into that family... yes... angry...When I was young and I seen all the commotion going on... there is like chaos going on... I had this anger in me... but when I think back... ya... it was like a dream... a journey for me... I had to travel and go through it and I got to a stage in order for me to go on in life I need to forgive my family and I know that the Lord has a plan for me... Hmmm.... and so... I just thought that I had to forgive them and let go, as they say you can't choose your family as you choose your friends, and not to keep that anger and grudge in me... when all this was going on and when I got to Grade 2 my teachers had a problem with me and said I was bullying. I used to take my anger out on other people.*

The abovementioned confirms that aggressive and violent behaviour in girls are most probably linked to family and social factors and that these factors might contribute to female youth sex offending (see Artz & Nicholson, 2009: 2-3; Righthand & Welch, 2005: 19).

In the present study, some of the youth had parents who were disengaged and physically or emotionally inaccessible and they were often unable to provide the basic care and emotional warmth they needed (Da Costa, 2014). Life stressors such as separations, significant stress, abuse, neglect, and

cognitive distortions are evident in the youth sex offender's life trajectory (Benokraitis, 2011: 393-393; Hunter et al., 2006:151; Righthand & Welch, 2005: 20-22). Life stressors such as teenage pregnancy in Participant D and H's lives, the subsequent illegal abortion that Participant H experienced, the murder of Participant H's father, the early death of Participant G's mother, as well as the separations from family for Participants A, B F and C were possible stressors that threatened the fit and coping strategies of these female youth sex offenders and most likely contributed to their offending (Da Costa, 2014).

### ***Human relatedness, competence, self-esteem, and self-direction***

These constructs refer to the outcome of past and present experiences in relation to the environment. Relatedness, also known as attachment, is necessary for the survival of the individual. As indicated by Benokraitis (2011: 397) as well as Righthand and Welch (2005: 20-21), female youth sex offenders often struggle with productive attachment to significant others and this hampers their competence and self-esteem.

According to the research participants, factors relating to family dysfunction, a lack of emotional support within the family, separation and poverty contributed to their sex offending. The participants also experienced on-going stress and were less able to form positive attachments and relationships. Participant D had to move in with her sister and the sister's husband in order to attend a good school, because it was far from her mother's home. She also reported that there was some poverty at her mother's home. Participant D explains their relationship as follows:

*It used to be on and off I think... ah ah... I just felt okay, but then sometimes I felt... I don't know... like... cause when I used to do some wrong things she couldn't sit down with me and tell me this was wrong, she would just call my mother and tell her I did this and this... hmmm... it's not good... I think it's not good, because I'm no more comfortable around her and I no more trust her...*

Several other participants confirmed that issues relating to family dysfunction and a lack of emotional support within the family, in their views contributed to their sex offending (Da Costa, 2014). Furthermore, it was confirmed that these female sex offenders experience on-going stress and were less able to form positive attachments and relationships. Participant E's example clearly indicates that she did not receive emotional support from her family and this contributed to her experiencing on-going stress. She was also unable to form positive attachments and relationships.

Becroft (2009: 6) emphasises that antisocial youth are not islands in time or in space but grew up parented or cared for, by particular people in specific traditions, and in communities where some attitudes were discouraged while other attitudes were promoted. Thus, if a child raised in a family where antisocial behaviour is encouraged, the youth will probably follow suit. This correlates with Travis Hirschi's social control theory (Bartol & Bartol, 2014: 6). It is suggested that although all individuals have the potential to offend, those who are subjected to social control and the rules of society, are less inclined to do so, based on the notion that offending behaviour will damage their relationships with family members, friends, teachers, employers or other community members (Williams & McShane, 2010: 155). He divides the social bonds that people maintain in society into four main elements, namely (cf. Joubert & Bezuidenhout, 2013: 118; Siegel, 2005: 167; Williams & McShane, 2010: 155):

- Attachment which refers to relationships that an individual maintains with parents, peers or social institutions such as the school.
- Involvement which deals with participation in conventional activities. If an individual is involved in constructive recreational activities, idleness is reduced and it leaves little time for offending behaviour.
- Commitment which refers to the time, energy as well as the effort spent on conventional activities. This will reduce the likelihood of involvement in offending behaviour.
- Belief which alludes to people's belief in the reasonableness of boundaries placed on them. In addition, people in the same social settings often share the same moral beliefs. If these beliefs are weakened or do not exist, individuals are more prone to involvement in illegal behaviour.

According to Siegel (2005: 168), deviant youths often lack attachment and commitment to their family, peer group and/or school. In Travis Hirschi's social control theory, the importance of attachment with parents, peers or social institutions such as the school, is emphasised (Siegel, 2005: 167; Williams & McShane, 2010: 155). This is of importance, as children who have not experienced empathy from a primary caregiver during their early childhood may not have the capacity to express empathy towards others (Owen & Fox, 2011: 553; Regehr & Glancy, 2001: 147).



Furthermore, Siegel (2005: 168), who is an authority on criminological theory, Hirschi's version of social control theory can be viewed as the dominant version of control theories and his theory has been corroborated by numerous studies indicating that deviant youths often lack attachment and commitment to their family, peer group and/or school. However, opposing views pertaining to this theory do exist. Examples include contentions regarding the view that youth offenders lack attachment to their peers, as various studies found that youth offenders have similar friendship patterns as non-offending youth. This argument is countered by Hirschi (Siegel, 2005: 168), by maintaining that even though offending youths do have friends, their friendships are relationships of convenience, instead of true friendship. Furthermore, youths who are committed to conventional activities and strive for success, are law-abiding youths.

### ***Vulnerability to oppression, abuse and social/technological pollution***

This characteristic refers to people being victims of oppression and abuse. When applying this characteristic to female youth sex offending, one will see that being a victim of abuse could possibly be a contributing factor to subsequent sexual offending. Severe and extensive sexual victimisation histories were more prevalent in female, than male sex offenders (Giguere & Bumby, 2007: 7; Hendriks & Bijleveld, 2006: 35). Research findings also confirmed that 39% of young females reported that they suffered some form of sexual violence, such as forced sex or unwanted touching before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday (Kubik & Hecker, 2005: 45; Seedat et al, 2009: 1013).

Consequently, female sexual abuse most likely contributed to female youth sex offending. In a study conducted on clients' experiences of services with regard to child sex abuse, Nicolaidis (2012: 100) reported that one of the findings was that clients present with various factors such as developmental and cognitive difficulties, childhood trauma and the like.

Although the female youth sex offenders in the current study (see Da Costa, 2014) were diverted to the Teddy Bear Clinic for therapeutical intervention, it was established that the research participants not only presented with the sex offending behaviour, but also presented with factors such as developmental and cognitive problems, childhood trauma, poverty, and language difficulty. It is likely that these factors contributed to the participants' offending behaviour.

### ***Healthy and unhealthy habitats and niches***

The habitat of a person, is the physical environment that the individual lives in, while the niche refers to the status a person has in that specific environment. Unhealthy habitats and niches might have contributed to the female youth sex offender's behaviour, such as a history of child abuse, physical and emotional neglect, poverty, learning difficulties, adjusting to puberty, identity confusion, harbouring feelings of shame, guilt and mistrust, and the like (Hunter et al, 2006: 149-153; Moore, Franey, & Geffner, 2005: 7-9; Righthand & Welch, 2005: 18-25).

The following example illustrates how conflictual relationships might contribute to problematic behaviour. The constant arguments between Participant H and her uncle and aunt, and the unhealthy competition between her and her cousin can be seen in her following responses:

*I don't know why they don't like me... what is their problem with me... When I was in school and her son was in the same school as me... but I don't know... he decided to take the wrong turn and then we ended up being in the same grade and cause actually I am smaller than him, so because I actually caught up with him they got angry. He fell back and I completed school... and I don't know it just seems to them like its irritating... I'm moving up and he's not... I don't know why my father's family don't like me... it's maybe cause I did better than the son... my uncle used to call meetings with my mother, my granny and my aunty and say that I had no respect for them and wouldn't greet them and the reason why is cause I am on drugs... and even specifically said what drug I am on. He said I am on methanol. I don't even know what methanol is and if I was on drugs I wouldn't have been looking like I am looking... so they would gossip about me and my mom would just say I must go to my room, but I would hear how they are gossiping about me... so when I had the fight with my aunty I also confronted her about them saying I was on drugs, but she denied it.*

It is evident that the research participants have been exposed to significant forms of family dysfunction and may have been cut off from possible sources of emotional support and/or financial support (cf. Hendriks & Bijleveld, 2006: 35; Righthand & Welch, 2005: 20-21). These youths may experience on-going stress and may be less able to form positive attachments and relationships. Violent behaviour and aggression in girls are linked to family and social factors such as chaotic and dysfunctional families; social and financial deprivation; harsh and inconsistent parenting; parents having marital problems; physical and sexual abuse; alcoholism; drug dependency; and poor attachment to significant others (Artz & Nicholson, 2009: 2; Hendriks & Bijleveld, 2006: 35; Righthand & Welch, 2005: 20-21).

Some of the risk factors considered when trying to elucidate the prevalence of female youth sex offending are aspects such as school performance, the availability of resources within the youth's community, relationships with peers, the availability of constructive role models and involvement in extramural activities. Female youth sex offenders often struggle with attachment to significant others and this hampers their competence and self-esteem (Benokraitis, 2011: 397; Gouws & Kruger, 1994: 22; Righthand & Welch, 2005: 20-21). Furthermore, it is the authors' opinion that social isolation and poor peer relationships could have contributed to female youth sex offending. In the current study, Participant H indicated that she did not have any best friends and explained as follows:

*Because that time that I was in that school, I didn't really speak about my personal life. I only spoke to my boyfriend, he is my best friend, he listens to me. He always advise me on the right thing... yes.*

The same participant also mentioned that she did not have any favourite teachers and articulated the following:

*They were normal teachers, they always had their favourites, there were always young teachers in that school.*

Her response regarding her role models is worth mentioning:

*Yes! My mom and my dad... My mom, although people put her down she always gets up and goes on and she knows how to save money. Now with me, I like to spend, she teaches me how to save my money. My dad... My dad he always used to teach me, like when I did something wrong in school, he would advise me to sit with my books. I used to make up questions for myself when it comes to exams, then I will give it to him and he would give good advice and he would never refuse to help me with my work. It was difficult for parents to understand the school work then, but even if he didn't understand the work, he would make the effort to help me.*

Artz and Nicholson (2009: 2-3) as well as Righthand and Welch (2005: 19) refer to boredom as one of the factors related to sex offending. As far as the current study is concerned, a limited number of the research participants used the library and the parks, but most of them did not make use of the recreational centres or other opportunities such as participating in sport. Only one participant took part in drama after school and another participant was involved in her church choir after school on Fridays. Thus, the fact that most of the participants are not involved in any constructive or structured extramural activities, could have led to boredom (Vásquez & Zimmerman, 2014: 247). Thus, based on the verbalisations of the research participants, it is the authors' opinion that social isolation, poor peer relationships and boredom have contributed to their sex offending.

### **Life course**

The final characteristic of the ecological systems approach is grounded in the life course construct, which refers to the unique developmental pathways of individuals (Maguire, 2002: 18).

Many varied human experiences, cultures, histories and the like lead to differing understandings of the environment. From an individualist perspective, Maguire (2002: 18) is of the opinion that a considerable amount of youth sex offenders experience transitional problems and needs as they move from one life stage to another, such as adjusting to puberty, entering high school or graduating from school.

The following extract reflects the trauma and other experiences that contributed to the particular research participant's offending behaviour:

*I failed so it was my second year in grade 10, my second year in grade 10 that's when I was pregnant. They actually thought I was going to fail, but I pulled myself up and I did pass and the next year in Grade 11 and 12 I went to another school. I completed my matric. My academic performance, it wasn't so good because of my family, but in my second year of grade 10 when I was pregnant my marks were actually good and then Grade 11 to 12 I was average and passed my matric. I would go outside and study cause I was still living with them, like with that family.*

In the current study, most, if not all of the participants were from low socio-economic and disadvantaged backgrounds. Disadvantaged and poverty stricken families and neighbourhoods were breeding grounds for exposure to all forms of sexual abuse and wrong or inappropriate sex (Righthand & Welch, 2005: 20). Righthand and Welch (2005: 20) report that childhood experiences of sexual abuse were associated with persistent sexual offending from childhood into adolescence and it was found that the abused youth offenders began their sex offending while they were very young. While positive parental guidance is required to guide constructive health and educational outcomes, inadequate sex and health education by the parents of the participants was the norm amongst the participants. It is reiterated by Lannen and Ziswiler (2014) that family environments are significant factors, which influence the cognitive, and socioemotional abilities of children and young people, as well as related criminogenic

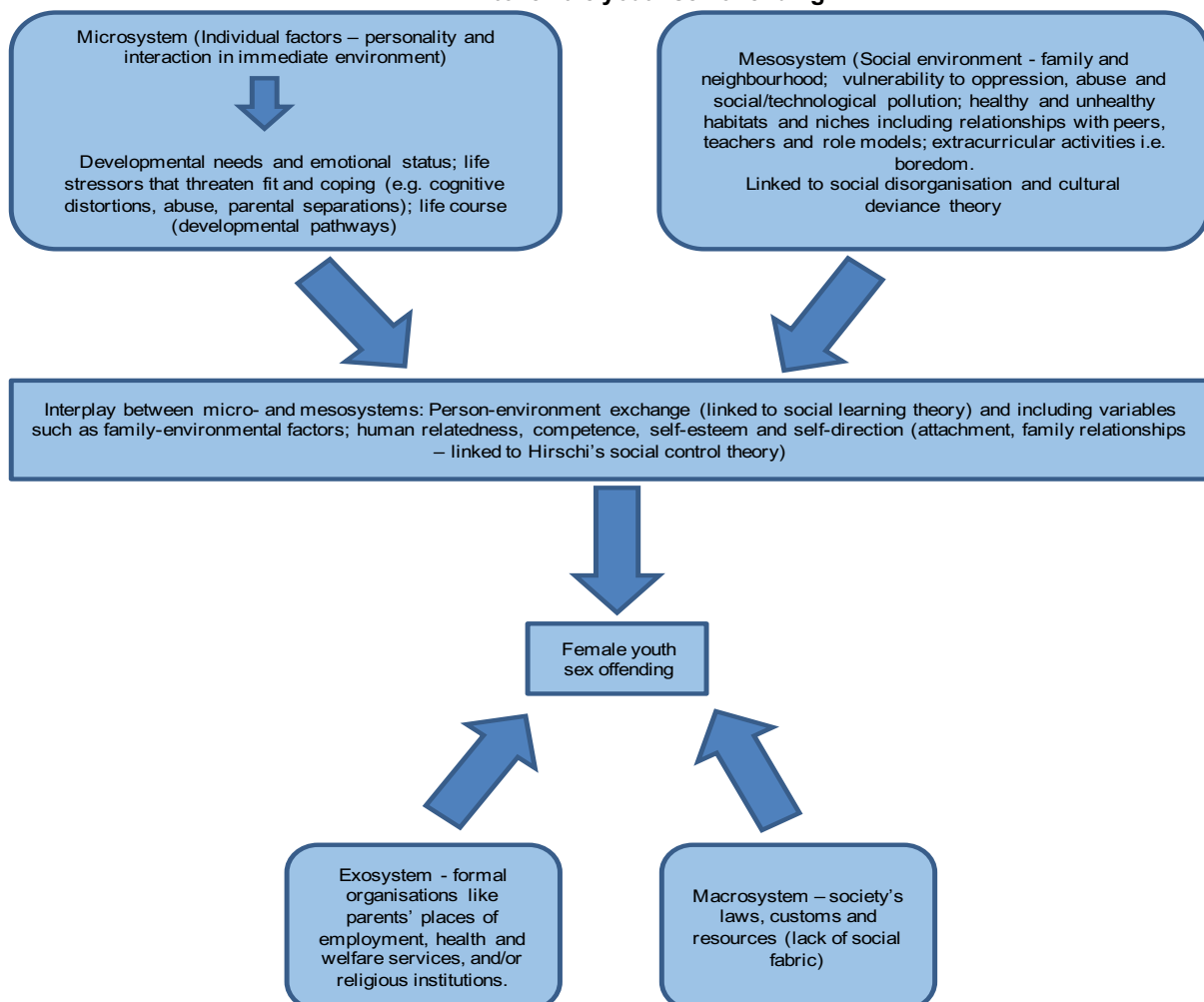
consequences such as crime and health. Positive parental guidance is therefore required in the constructive health and education outcomes for children and youths.

**An integrative ecological perspective explaining female youth sex offending**

Rather than following particularistic approach, the ecological systems theory is utilised as a general holistic approach to explain the dynamic, yet complex developmental contexts of the female youth sex offender and the reciprocal influence and continuous environmental interactions. From a criminological approach, with crime and deviance as the focus, ecological research is interrelated to community structures and processes that are associated with social disorganisation. Social disorganisation is associated with cultural deviance, which focusses on the development of a unique lower-class subculture in disorganised neighbourhoods in which subcultural values and beliefs are passed on through cultural transmission and personal disorganisation. These theoretical stances highlight the interaction between the female youth sex offender and her environment in a synergistic cycle of interactions between the developing individual and dynamic multidimensional social contexts.

The young female sex offender as a being is equally viewed as a holistic entity, made up of a complex system composing of physical, cognitive, emotional, social and self-subsystems (Newman & Newman, 1997: 131). In addition, the young female sex offender, is similarly part of a social entity such as her family, school, sport team and the like, which affects her development within a single microsystem, for example in a family, and by similarities and differences in patterns of interaction that manifests across mesosystems (Newman & Newman, 1997: 131-132). This serves as the validation of this endeavour to apply the the ecological systems theory as a basis to an approach to the study of the development of female youth sex offenders from different perspectives. The following flow chart provides a graphical depiction of how these systems interact and how different risk factors contribute to female youth sex offending:

**Figure 1: A graphical depiction of systems interaction and how different risk factors contribute to female youth sex offending**



## CONCLUSION

This article focuses on the significance of the role of theory to the research process as a prime objective of the social sciences. Theories aid and guide an understanding of offending behaviour in the widest social contexts, guide future research and public policy and inform strategies available to the helping professions. Glanz (Sine Anno: 1) proposes that social science theories should be considered as models that apply to a limited range of settings. However, although qualitative findings cannot be generalised in the same way as quantitative findings – through statistical inference from the study sample to the population that it represents – they can be generalised across similar contexts, which generalisability is referred to as the “transferability” of observations (Forman, Creswell, Damschroder, Kowalski, Krein, Michigan & Nebraska, 2008: 769).

This article demonstrated the applicability of the ecological systems theory as a basis to explain female youth sex offending, and how selective criminological theories assisted to construct an ecological perspective that supported the explanation of female youth sex offending.

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