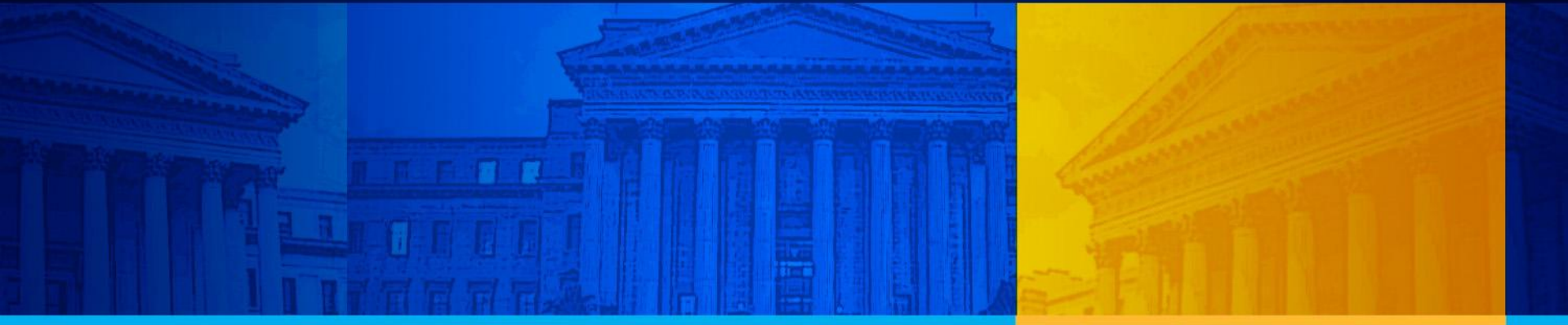




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'Truth', Gender and the Female Psyche: 'Confessions' from Female Sexual Offenders

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Research Aims

- **To examine the intersections between female sexual subjectivity and sexual offending in terms of the discourses female sexual offenders draw on to construct their identities**
- **Achieved by drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate how disciplinary power is enacted through the discursive practices of female sexual offenders and how this, in turn, produces the offenders' subject positions**
- **To account for the continued denial of female sexual perpetration (at the level of society AND the perpetrators themselves) and consequently to open up new possibilities for the expression of female sexuality**

Rationale

- **Previous studies focus on offence description rather than self-perceptions and self-productions**
 - **Previous studies demonstrate differences between male and female sexual offenders rather than investigating why these differences are structured in particular ways and come into existence in the first place**
 - **Female sexual offenders are silenced by 'expert' discourse that relies on gendered and sexualised social constructions**
 - **Practical significance: Increase awareness of female sexual offenders**
- **expose academics and the public to more accurate information**
- **increase possibilities in reporting systems**
- **assist policy makers in designing prevention programmes**

Definitions

- **Discourse**: historicised and institutionalised set of norms, rules and practices that locate subject positions for individuals by providing categories that produce and define self-knowledge (Wilbraham, 2004).
- **Disciplinary Power**: the circulation of institutionalised discursive practices which results in modern power relaying normative discourses onto all sites of existence (Foucault, 1978).

Female Sexual Offenders: An Overview

- **Discourses concerning sexual perpetration are rooted in constructions of the male sexual offender and the female victim**
 - **Female sexual offender prevalence rates:**
 - **scientific literature: 1-8%**
 - **self-reports: 58%**
 - **3 Groups:**
 - 1) Lover/Teacher Type**
 - 2) Predisposed Type**
 - 3) Male-Coerced Type**
- BUT: studies demonstrate that female sexual offenders are a heterogeneous group...**

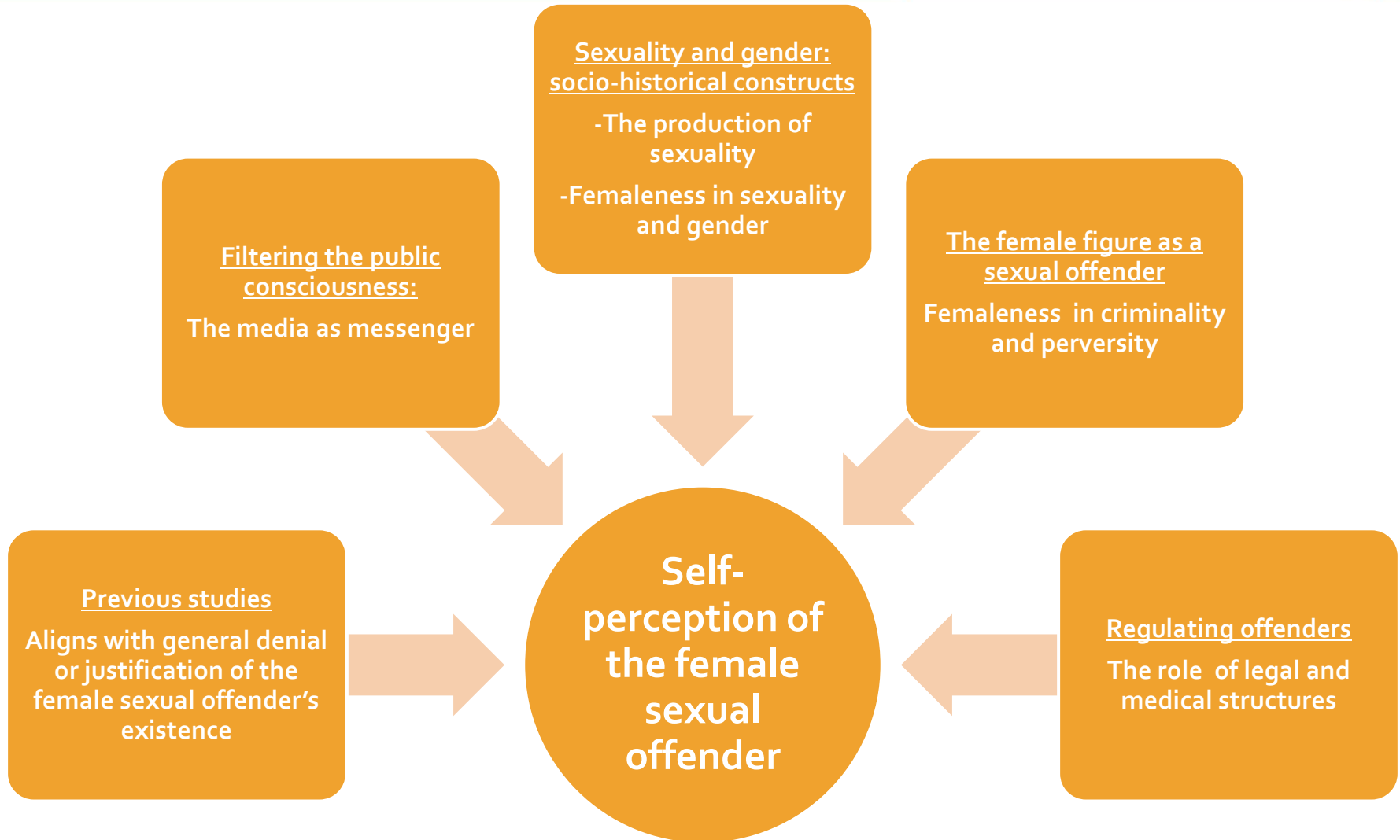


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The 'Truth' about Femaleness and Sexuality



The Invisible Perpetrator

- **Gender constructions override prevailing 'panic' discourses concerning sexual offenders → Female sexual perpetration is ignored, denied or rationalised in academia, law and psychiatry**
- **Entrenched and institutionalised discourses thus render female sexual perpetration unfathomable**
- **Consequently female sexual offenders' narratives are silenced by 'expert' discourses UNLESS the offender's narrative is constructed according to 'known truths' about women**
- **This closes the space within which new knowledge and discourse can be produced about female sexual offenders**
- **HOWEVER, instances of transgression, such as female sexual perpetration, most clearly demonstrate that an entrenched ontology of gender exists and that sexuality can and often does surpass naturalised norms and discursive practices**

Research Questions

- **What accounts for the continued denial of female sexual perpetration?**
- **How is disciplinary power enacted through sexual and gendered discursive practices?**
- **How does discourse on sexuality, gender, maternity, criminality and perversity shape the self-knowledge of incarcerated female sexual offenders?**
- **How do constructed beliefs about female sexuality, in turn, shape the self-knowledge of female sexual offenders?**
- **How is the 'natural' and the 'truth' embodied by the female sexual transgressor?**



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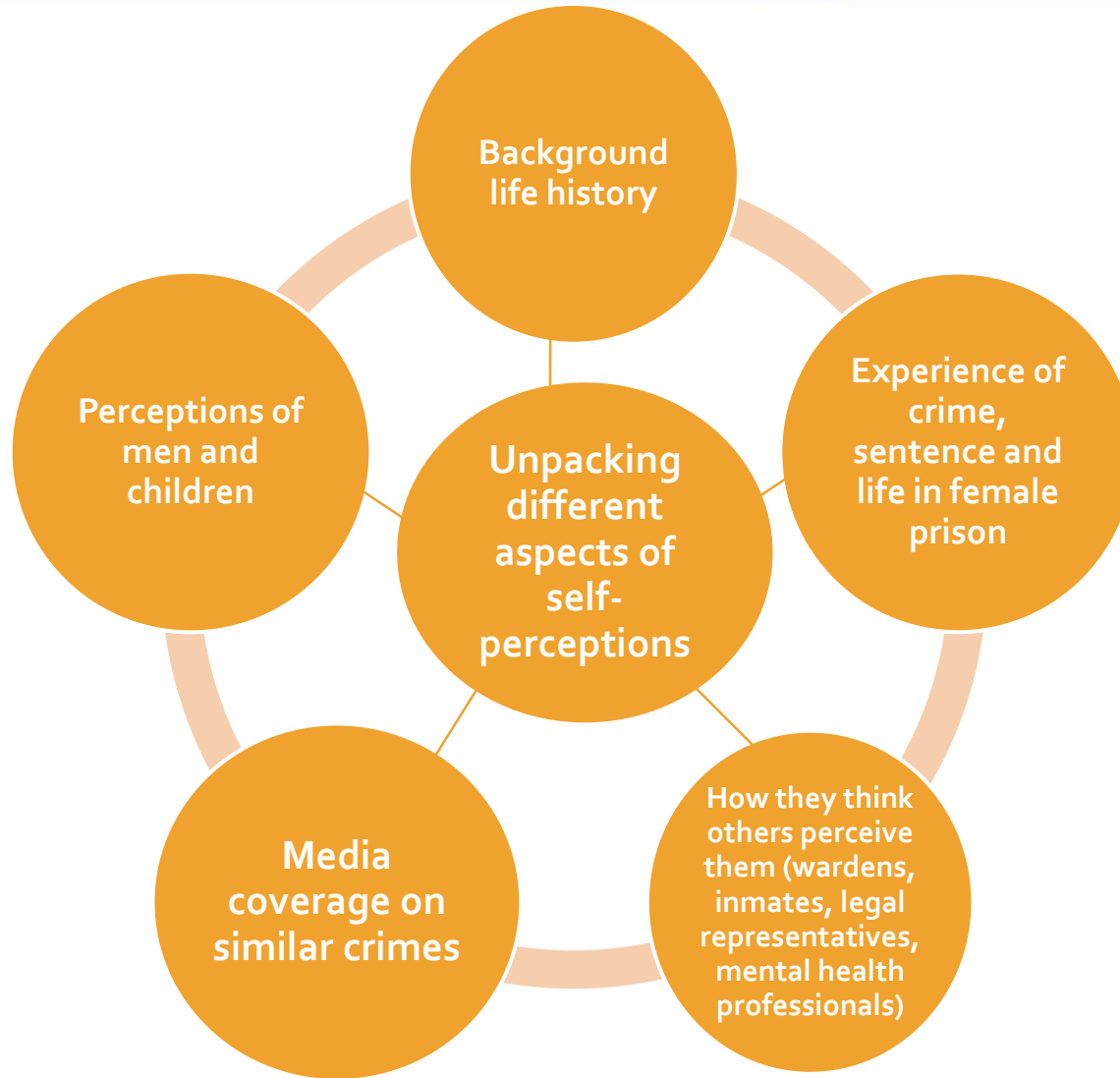


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Method

Participants and Data Gathering Procedure

- **Participants: 8 incarcerated female sexual offenders in Johannesburg and Pretoria Female Correction Centres**
- **Participant criteria: incarceration for charges of sexual offence (Sexual Offences Act, 2007)**
- **Semi-structured interview**



Data Analysis

- **Critical discourse analysis (CDA)**
- **Aim: to understand the relationship between text (micro level of language) and society (social discursive practices) and expose and interpret current prevailing discursive practices**
- **Focus: the way female sexual offenders draw on discourses on sexuality, gender, maternity, criminality and perversity in producing themselves as subjects**
- **Aims to challenge the prevailing discourses concerning gender and sexuality in order to shift understandings and articulate these constructs in new ways**
- **Researcher's ideological stance and value-systems form an integral part of the research process**
- **Research based on social constructionist perspective: emerging narratives are co-constructed by the participants and the researcher**



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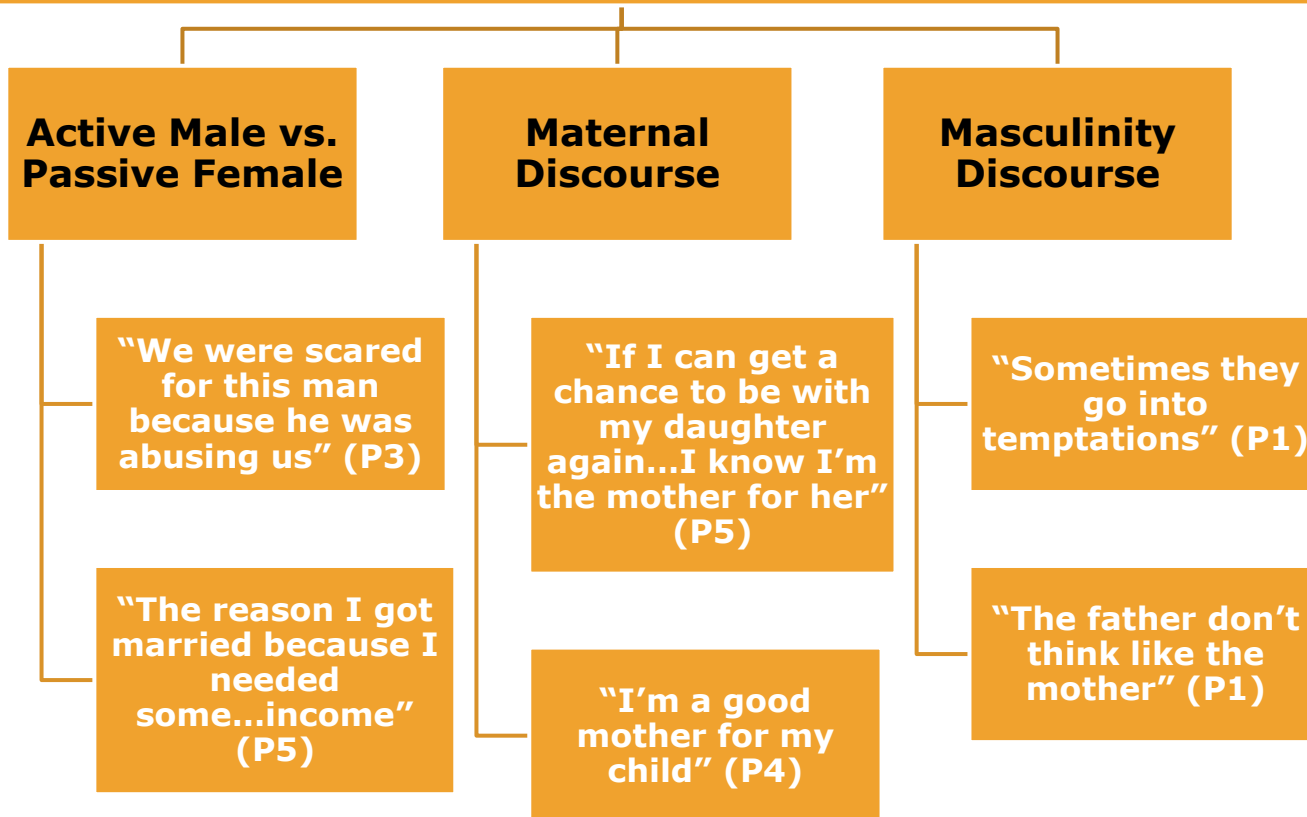
Research Findings

Descriptions of the Offenders

- **Range of different sexual offences including rape, grievous bodily harm, indecent assault, child pornography and child abuse**
- **Although many were incarcerated for the same offence, all the offenders had different sentences ranging from eight years to life (why is the legal system so inconsistent?)**
- **ALL the offences involved children (usually their own): aligns with gendered discourse**

The 'Impossible' Female:

Use of gendered discursive practices: insinuates impossibility of their statuses as sexual perpetrators



Rationalizing Discourse: Preserving the Female Psyche

Claims of Innocence: Resistance to the Confessional

"I don't know
why I'm
here" (P1)

"I am not
guilty" (P4)

Blaming Discourse

"No. I didn't
rape. It's my
son" (P2)

"My family,
they didn't
want to help
me" (P5)

Victim Discourse

"My father didn't
want me...I was
the black sheep
from the
family...my mom
was very sick"
(P3)

"My
husband...abused
us" (P6)

Illness Discourse

"I was on
drugs...I was
very very sick
that time" (P3)

"My mind's
too busy...I
get mad...I
think, kill
myself" (P2)

Conclusions

- **The participants had a proclivity to rely on social constructions of men, women, motherhood and sexuality → gendered and sexualized constructions continue to structure broader understandings of identity (gender is actively performed and demonstrated)**
- **Gendered and sexualized realities relayed through disciplinary power have powerful social and psychological effects: maintain social and individual 'truths'**
- **We do not have access to a language that can institutionally conceive of or concede to the existence of female sexual perpetration → makes it difficult to acknowledge the female sexual offender**
- **Patriarchal discourses and limited frames of reference for female sexual perpetration inadvertently protect female sexual offenders by not allowing them to exist within academic, legal and public spaces**
- **Discursive silences on female sexual perpetration → female sexual offenders cannot view themselves as sexual perpetrators → victim and perpetrator cannot deal with perpetration consequences**

Future Recommendations

- **Female sexual offenders need to be given narrative spaces that are not silenced by 'expert' discourse → the opening of new possibilities in knowledge and discourse for the expression of female sexuality**
- **Rearticulation of gender as dynamic and variable → new understanding of female sexual perpetration (no longer unfathomable) → victims able to report incidences and law takes incidences seriously**
- **PhD proposal: develop a treatment plan specific to female sexual perpetration and the unique gendered and sexualized complexities concerning such perpetration**



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