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PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUAL OFFENDING: INSIGHTS FROM POLITICAL DISCOURSE, PUBLIC OPINION, PROFESSIONAL PERCEPTIONS, AND INTIMATE PARTNERS' RESPONSES.

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Justice must always question itself, just as society can exist only by means of the work it does on itself and on its institutions.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984)

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ABSTRACT

Attitudes towards individuals with sexual convictions have been extensively studied in recent years within forensic psychology and criminology. While providing interesting insights, significant gaps persist in understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying perceptions of this population. This thesis aims to advance the literature in this realm by examining potential constructs influencing attitudes towards sex offenders, through a series of studies designed within validated theoretical paradigms and robust experimental methods. Chapter I delves into the impact of media portrayal on attitudes towards sexual perpetrators, revealing a predominantly negative and emotionally charged narrative through linguistic analysis of politicians' Tweets, and emphasising the need for more evidence-based communication and management strategies. Chapter II examines public perceptions of sexual offenders and the factors shaping them. Findings from a national survey reveal variations based on victim age, offender socio-economic status, and engagement in psychological treatment. Additionally, personal comfort with sexuality seems to be associated with these perceptions. Chapter III investigates how psychologists' expertise impacts on their evaluation of a forensic case upon learning of a sexual offence and the perpetrator's denial. Findings include that experienced psychologists show less willingness to be in favour of prison benefits, but are more likely to believe in the effectiveness of treatment, while greater hesitancy and delegation were observed among non-experts. Chapter IV focuses on the reactions of intimate partners when confronted with the reality of their loved ones being perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Analysis of 85 couples indicates higher separation rates when the victim is known, allegations are believed, and other forms of abuse are present. Short-term relationships are associated with increased separation likelihood. Overall, this work underlines the importance of examining attitudes to sexual offending from different perspectives, bridging the gap between institutions, the public, professionals and intimate partners.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is a significant international public health concern (Dworkin et al., 2021) with profound traumatic effects on victims (Condino et al., 2022; Elbers et al., 2020). In 2022, 3566 adult male inmates were detained in Italian prisons for having committed sexual crimes (ISTAT, 2022). In recent years, cases of sexual violence have frequently made the headlines of national and international newspapers, especially when well-known public figures (in film, business, politics or sport) have been involved in high-profile sexual allegations. Mass media coverage helps to spark public debate and spread the myth that harsher punishments are the response the public expects from the criminal courts, The public narrative that emerges in response to cases of sexual offending often contains arguments or explanations that are likely to be sexist, pointing to a societal perception of sexual and gender relations that supports 'rape culture' - an entrenched system in society that trivializes, normalizes and sometimes even promotes violence against women.

What surfaces from the widespread prevalence of deeply rooted prejudices and stereotypes against women, interestingly appears to be accompanied by a similar, intense hatred and punitive attitudes towards perpetrators. In both cases, persistent stereotypes about what "typical" victims and "typical" perpetrators should be, according to the social imaginary, contribute to these attitudes. For instance, victims who do not fit the societal image of an "ideal victim" (e.g., a modest, passive woman) might face skepticism or reprimand. Similarly, perpetrators who do not match the "monster" stereotype (e.g., well-respected individuals) might receive unexpected leniency.

This dichotomy can be understood through a complex interplay of cultural, social, and psychological factors, which together create an environment where victim-blaming coexists with a desire for severe punishment of perpetrators. To understand and hold these categories of thought together, one must recognise the deep-rooted cultural, psychological and social

influences at play. In order to look at sexual violence not only through the lens of crime news, psychopathology, social degradation and cultural backwardness, examining the psychological underpinnings of attitudes towards individuals convicted of sexual offences is an important and timely endeavor.

Thesis Aims and Structure

This thesis constitutes my submission for the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree at the University of Turin. This thesis primarily focuses on investigating the development and manifestation of attitudes and perceptions towards individuals who have committed sexual offences. It consists of four independent but interwoven parts, which are divided into four chapters. Chapter I examines how sex offending and sex offenders are portrayed by politicians in the media and concludes with an analysis of the responsibility that social communication has in promoting unbiased discussions about the treatment of individuals who have committed sex offences, given the influence politicians that have on decision-making and legislative processes. Chapter I advocates for a less emotionally charged, and a more evidence-based approach, to manage sex offending cases.

Chapter II opens with a discussion of attitudes towards sexual offenders' rehabilitation, accountability, and community management In particular, it emphasises the importance of understanding public attitudes in shaping community policy. Factors known to influence attitudes towards sexual offenders are outlined. Next, an examination of public perceptions of individuals who commit sexual offences in Italy is presented, reflecting global trends towards increasingly severe penalties for these crimes.

Chapter III introduces the theme of how professional experience influences psychologists' decision making when professionally dealing with individuals charged of sexual offences, and

three areas of judgments (*favourability towards prison benefits*, *malicious satisfaction*, and *avoidance*) are identified as having relevance in this field of research.

Transitioning from an institutional macro-level to the familial microcosm, chapter IV concludes the section on the empirical studies of the dissertation. In this section, the perspective of partners of individuals convicted of child sexual abuse was examined to understand the profound impact of such allegations on intimate relationships and to identify the key factors influencing the decision to separate.

These chapters draw on a range of analytical approaches that include linguistic analyses of social media coverage of sexual offending, large-scale surveys, and the reconstruction of forensic archive files. These approaches aim to shed light on the processes underlying different populations' judgments about sexual offending and its perpetrators.

Statement of Authorship

The empirical research results presented in the dissertation come from studies conducted, submitted and published during the duration of the PhD programme (2020-2024). Appendix A contains a comprehensive list of papers published and conference presentations given during this period.

The empirical results discussed in the individual chapters have been written in manuscript form and published in forensic psychology and criminology journals: European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research, Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology, Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice, and Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment. The articles have been co-authored by Prof. Georgia Zara, Prof. Pietro Cipresso or Dr. Marialaura Di Tella (all from the University of Turin).

INVESTIGATING SEX OFFENDING REPRESENTATION AMONG POLITICIANS THROUGH TWITTER

1.1. Introduction

Sex offending is one of the most socially alarming crimes because of its impact upon victims and for the strong punitive reaction against sexual perpetrators it arouses in the public (Rade et al., 2016). As DeLuca et al. (2017) suggest, political views and public politics are interconnected. Sex laws encompass assumptions and myths about individuals with sexual convictions through several policies that apply specifically to this group (e.g., community notification, registration, housing restrictions) and that legitimise the views that these offenders are more dangerous (Willis et al., 2010), are at a higher risk of reoffending (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007), are more untreatable and more unwilling to change (Katz-Schiavone et al., 2008; Zara et al., 2020) in comparison with other offenders.

Essentialism (Phelan, 2005) becomes then a strategy to attempt to reduce individuals who committed sexual offences to a homogeneous and discrete category (de Vel-Palumbo et al., 2019) that lead to strong negative reactions against them and their risk and untreatability (Zara et al., 2020) that is endorsed not only by laypeople, but also by forensic professionals (Jung et al., 2012; Quinn et al., 2004).

Decision-making about sexual perpetrators is an increasingly sensitive issue, and politicians are key players in this regard, as they are responsible both for legislation and public communication to millions of voters. In response to the increased public fear, and with the intent to reassure citizens, politicians have frequently embraced a 'tough on crime' language. Primarily, they do not

want to look weak in front of potential voters and want to gather consent; this is why politicians voice their stances to match the popular sentiment that requires and demands an increasingly severe responses to crime.

Researchers speak of the 'tough on crime rhetoric loop' that is at the basis of severe criminal laws over time (Gottlieb, 2017). Several Western Governments have in fact not only toughened sex laws and lengthened the convictions for such crimes, but also introduced community notification laws to monitor individuals convicted for sexual crimes after they have served their sentences (King & Roberts, 2017). For instance, in some European countries that focus on social reintegration, such as Italy, recent changes to criminal laws against domestic and gender violence were approved in 2019 by Law No. 69 of July 19.

However, they have been criticised for not addressing the root of the problem by funding and promoting specialised treatment programmes for perpetrators, but merely toughening the punishment for all sex crimes and identifying new types of sex offences (e.g., revenge porn).

The political narrative that inspires these punitive measures have serious consequences for limiting sexual perpetrators' opportunities for prosocial reintegration (e.g., maintaining family ties, establishing new meaningful relationships, finding employment or housing) (Tewksbury, 2012; Tovey et al., 2022).

Research findings show that these restrictions tend to be nonspecific (Cochran et al., 2021) and not inspired by scientific evidence (Zara et al., 2020), as they only take into account a particular type of individuals who committed sexual offences, responsible for sexual assaults against children and unknown victims (Bonnar-Kidd, 2010). However, politicians who see sexual offenders as loners and unwilling or incapable of controlling their sexual impulses tend to be particularly supportive of this type of regulations (Jung et al., 2020).

In this complex scenario, social media plays a central role in inflating news about sex offences (Harper & Hogue, 2015) and the haunting presence of these out-of-control predators in our

neighborhoods (DiBennardo, 2018; West, 2000). This view fosters the dynamics of a self-generating vicious cycle: social media reinforces structural myths, then structural myths drive policy, and then policy is disseminated through social media (Zatkin et al., 2022).

How politicians and policymakers feel about offenders and their thoughts about criminal justice issues has the potential to affect the course and content of their legislative actions (Sample & Kadleck, 2008). In one of the few studies involving this population, Meloy et al. (2012, 2013) observed that, during the interviews, lawmakers declared relying on newspapers and social media as the primary source of information on sexual crimes and frequently referred to high-profile victimization that did not occur in their country, suggesting that the coverage of sex crimes have a substantial influence on framing the news. Moreover, less than half of them considered treatment for individuals with sexual convictions a fundamental step for desistance from crime and had very limited knowledge of the ineffectiveness of the policies they contributed to enact (Meloy et al., 2012, 2013).

Despite representation of sex offending being the subject of a large literature among the general population (Kernsmith et al., 2009; Katz-Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009), and politicians being at the core of the criminal justice response, little body of research has given insight on their perception. From these premises, we conducted this study with the following aims: a) to go beyond previous research regarding politicians' views of crime specifically focusing on sexual violence; b) to evaluate the extent to which sex offending is a topic covered by a nationwide sample of state-level politicians active in the social media i.e., Twitter; c) to highlight possible differences based on political orientation.

1.2.   Method

1.2.1. Sources

To investigate the representation that politicians hold of sex offending, a content analysis of their Tweets was conducted. Through Twitter advanced search, we identified Tweets containing the words 'sexual violence' or 'molest*' or 'rap*' or 'paedophil*' posted by Italian politicians in their timeline up to June 15th, 2022 (the equivalent terms in Italian: 'violenza sessuale' or 'molest*' or 'violentator*' or 'stupr*' or 'pedofil*'). No limit was set on the date of the research start, which therefore included the entire time frame each user was on Twitter.

1.2.2. Inclusion criteria

To be considered eligible, politicians should be serving in the 18th legislature of the Italian Republic as members of the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate of the Republic in Parliament and have a publicly accessible Twitter profile (i.e. they have not limited views only to approved followers).

1.2.3. Sample

A final sample of 782 Italian politicians was found. At the time of the survey (June 2022), politicians had been active on Twitter for 8.52 years ($SD = 3.31$), with over 4 million Tweets and 21 million followers. Demographic characteristics and political orientation are shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Demographic and political characteristics.

	Total sample ($n = 782$)	
	n	M (SD) or %
Gender		
Male	496	63.4%
Female	286	36.6%
Age	782	50.71 (10.29)
Educational level[a]		
Middle-school	13	1.7%

High-school	198	26.0%
Degree	461	60.4%
Post-degree	91	11.9%
Parliamentary position		
Deputies	527	67.4%
Senators	255	32.6%
Political orientation		
Right	341	43.6%
Left	153	19.6%
Centre	59	7.5%
Five Star Movement[b]	195	24.9%
Mixed group[c]	34	4.3%

Note:[a] Data was missing for 19 cases.

[b] Anti-establishment, post-ideological movement.

[c] All minor political factions that have not obtained a sufficient number of Parliament members to form their own group and single politicians who choose not to join any political party.

1.2.4. Analyzing Tweets content

Since the way people communicate may reflect their psychological states (Pennebaker, 2011), we used one of the most reliable sentiment analysis software, *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count* (LIWC) (Agosti & Rellini, 2007; Boyd et al., 2022), to examine Tweets linguistic properties. LIWC is a text analysis application that uses prevalidated dictionaries to extract themes and psychological domains from texts. The LIWC processing module examines each target text and compares the language to the LIWC dictionary. LIWC has an internal semantic lexicon with various categories for assessing emotional, cognitive, and structural components in text corpora using a word-by-word approach. LIWC categories have been associated with a variety of psychosocial variables, including early symptoms of mental disorders (Spruit et al., 2022), suicidal ideation (Homan et al., 2022), or deception in conversations (Duran et al., 2010). For a more detailed overview of the LIWC dictionary, see the LIWC Software Manual (Boyd et al., 2022).

For the purposes of this study, the Italian version of LIWC (Agosti & Rellini, 2007) was used to conduct closed-vocabulary analyses of politicians' Tweets on emotion-related categories (both positive and negative) and their subcategories (i.e. anger, anxiety, and sadness). To reduce noise, we pre-processed each Tweet text by removing hashtags, mentions, and URLs. The LIWC categories were standardised by converting the percentages to z scores.

1.3. Results

In the timelines of Italian politicians, 1833 Tweets related to sexual offences were found. Thus, they accounted for .04% of all Tweets by these politicians. Compared to official crime statistics (Istat National Crime Statistics, 2020), according to which 4 people per 100,000 inhabitants are affected by sexual crimes in Italy (.004%), this result indicates a tenfold over representation of sexual crimes in the Tweets of the politicians studied.

When comparing the three major political coalitions (i.e. the Right, the Left and the Five Star Movement), there was no statistically significant difference in the frequency of occurrence of this topic.

1.3.1. Linguistic properties of politicians' Tweets on sex offending

Terms related to affective processes were found to prevail over terms referring to cognitive processes (5.48% vs. 3.64%). Particularly, words associated with negative emotions (e.g., hurt, ugly, nasty) made up 4.53% of the politicians' Tweets: sex offending and anger (e.g., hate, kill, pissed) were the most represented ones (3.28%), followed by sadness (e.g., grief, cry, sad) (0.42%) and anxiety (e.g., nervous, afraid, tense) (0.30%). Terms related to positive emotions (e.g., love, good, hope) accounted for only 0.25% of the total number of Tweets and were significantly fewer than the average content of 1000 individuals' Twitter posts analyzed by Boyd et al. (2022) in their LIWC validation study ($z = 4.85$, $p < .001$). No difference was found controlling for political

orientation. In Figure 1.1., the most influential words are shown larger on the graph, and those that occurred more frequently together are grouped in clusters with different colors; the graph also illustrates the density of connections between clusters (Paranyushkin, 2019).
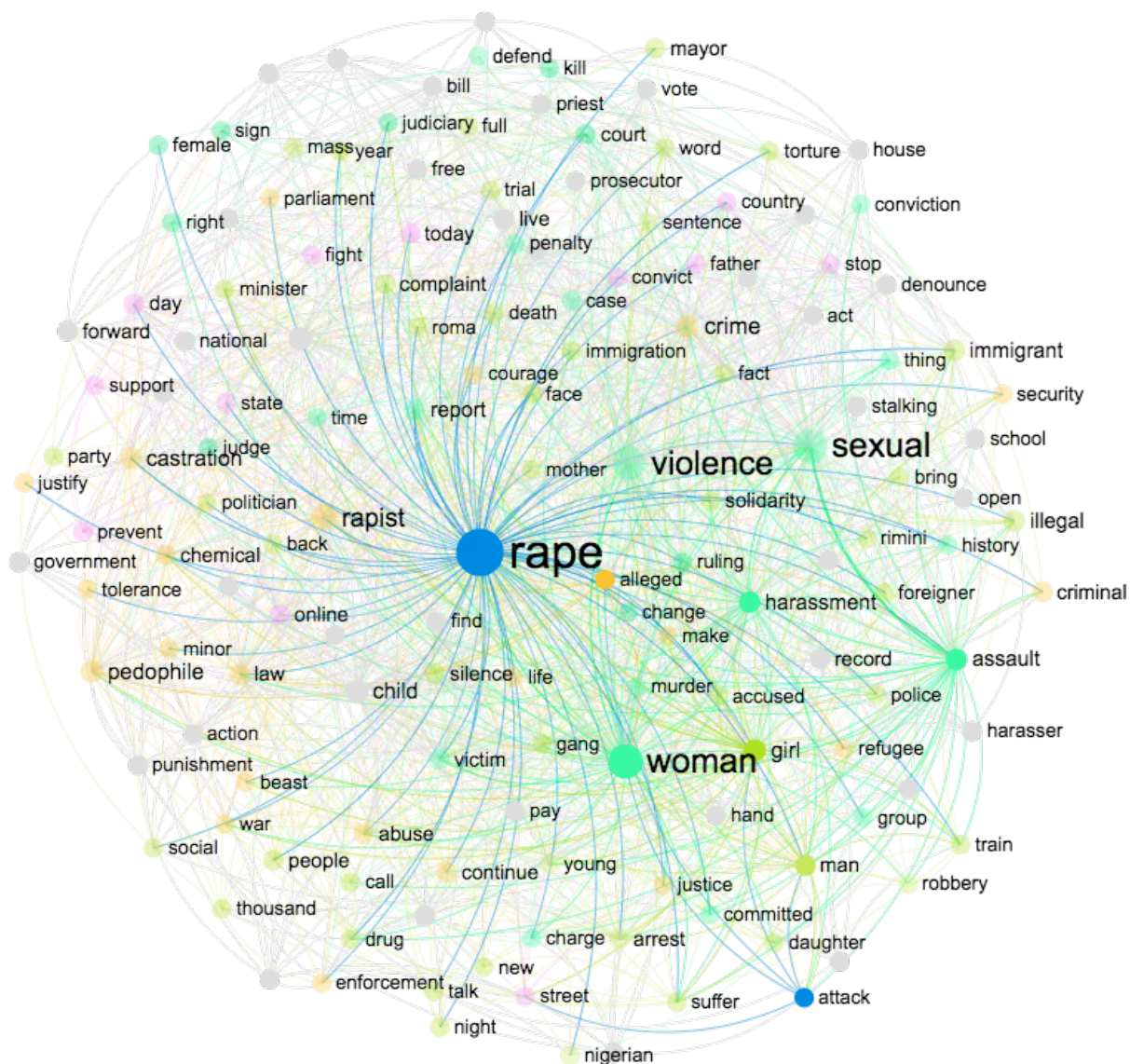
Figure 1.1. Graphical representation of politicians' words on sex offending and sexual perpetrators.

1.4. Discussion

This study analysed, for the first time, the content of Tweets on sex offending posted by Italian politicians. Findings suggest that sex crime is an over-represented topic in Tweets by politicians as already seen in the press (Harper & Hogue, 2015). The words used were predominantly related to emotions, mainly negative, rather than being associated with analytical cognitive aspects. We found no differences in the number of Tweets and in the linguistic tone expressed in them by the politicians belonging to different coalitions. Examples of these Tweets were: 'There can be no room for ogres. Zero tolerance for paedophiles, severe and certain penalties. And as far as I'm concerned also chemical castration!'; 'Security in Italy: every day a war bulletin. Today the news of the rape in Rome of a 75-year-old woman by a Senegalese. Situation out of control everywhere: we will restore security to those who live in this Nation'.

The present results call for some considerations. First, politicians tweeted extensively about sexual violence, although this is not supported by the relatively limited prevalence of sex crimes in comparison with other crimes. Zara et al. (2020) note that in Italy the proportion of offenders being reconvicted of another sex crime, over the whole convicted population, over a period of 10 years was 3.3% (Istat National Crime Statistics, 2000–2011). In England and Wales, the proportion of reconvictions for another sex offence was less than 10%, even amongst those who could be followed for up to six years (Hood et al., 2002). In the US the sexual recidivism rate, measured by arrests for a new sex crime, was 5.3% over a 3-year period (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; see Zara et al., 2020 for a more specific analysis on this topic). The representation of sex offending on Twitter by politicians may contribute to an overestimation of the magnitude of the phenomenon by the general population, as suggested in previous research (DiBennardo, 2018), and in the perpetuation of moral panic (Cornelli et al., 2020).

Second, contrary to expectations, a similarly negative representation of sex offending was shared by all political coalitions. This seems to suggest that negative perceptions of sex offending on a channel like Twitter are likely independent of political alignment and go beyond the usual political

divisions. Divergences in attitudes toward sexual perpetrators between conservative and liberal political leanings, as found in other studies (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017), were not replicated in this study, whose results show that the topic of sexual perpetrators likely gathers radical views in one direction. The finding that the most widespread representation is based on a sentiment of rage underlies the difficulty of addressing a public health issue as sex offending in a detached and empirically-based manner. While this is somehow expected from laypeople (Quinn et al., 2004), it is less so when looking at individuals involved in prominent professional roles from whom is expected great awareness and a more evidence-based approach to inspire their views that influence public policies. On the contrary, these findings confirm that political figures often make inflammatory speeches that produce conditions that might escalate into actual aggression against socially marginalised groups (Piazza, 2020), of which individuals convicted of sexual offences are a well-known category (Tewksbury, 2012). Discrimination against sexual offenders is not only detrimental to the psychological well-being of these offenders, but also to the public safety that it was intended to ensure, actually moving away from the implementation of rehabilitation and prevention programmes that scientific studies suggest as significant to prevent reoffending (Hanson et al., 2018). Gray et al. (2019) found that people have a propensity to fear mostly those crimes that were central to political debates in their youth, with an effect in influencing their attitude about crime into adulthood (e.g., the fear of property crimes for those who grew up in the 1980s). If this is so, it would be expected that sex crimes would become for the next generations those crimes to be most afraid of, unless well-informed campaigns propose an alternative narrative about sexual perpetrators. Researchers are called upon to make scientifically grounded outcomes more accessible to a non-academic audience, for a better dialogue between science and politics.

This study is not without limitations. First, as the number of words included in LIWC dictionaries varies by language, some terms were not recognised within the Italian dictionary. Further

expansion of the code may enrich future interpretations. Secondly, due to its exploratory nature, we adopted a tight focus that did not allow for additional comparisons within the sample (i.e. by gender or age), which should become an area for subsequent research to focus on.

1.5.   Chapter Summary

The study, described above, extends the investigation of attitudes towards individuals who have committed sexual offences, which has already been explored among lay people and forensic professionals (Jung et al., 2012), to politicians. It also sheds light on how more informed use of informal social media (e.g., Twitter) could promote fruitful public discussion.

The following chapter seeks to build on the insights gained from the study of politicians' attitudes towards individuals with sexual convictions by exploring the realm of public punitiveness, and examining the multiple factors that shape harsh or lenient sentences along with societal expectations regarding punishment and rehabilitation.

PUBLIC PUNITIVENESS TOWARDS INDIVIDUALS WITH SEXUAL

CONVICTIONS IN ITALY

2.1. Introduction

It has already emphasised in the previous chapter that sexual violence is a pervasive offence and a public health concern, as it is estimated that 26% of women and adolescent girls in the European region experience physical and/or sexual violence by any current or former partner, or non-partner sexual violence, or both during their lifetime (WHO, 2021). As Schnittker (2022) suggests, the profound harm caused by sexual violence stems from its sexual nature, as it undermines the victim's sense of identity, self-worth, and self-determination in ways that non-sexual physical violence does not. For most people, issues related to sex and sexual intercourses evoke strong feelings due to their intimate and extremely personal implications (Love & Farber, 2017). The added dimension of trauma, as is very likely in the case of sexual violence, can make such contents even more disturbing. Indeed, research on clinicians working with individuals with sexual convictions has shown that their comfort level with discussing sexuality or personal beliefs regarding what constitutes healthy sexuality may affect their willingness to broach the topic of sexual offending and their ability to show empathy towards the offender (Grady & Strom-Gottfried, 2011).

In recent years, extensive research has also been conducted on community perceptions and misconceptions about individuals who commit sex offending, as well as on interventions related to their management (Harper & Hicks, 2022; King, 2019). There is general consensus that individuals who commit sexual violence are among the most stigmatised offenders (Rade et al., 2016) and that public attitudes are influenced by individual, respondent-related factors, and by

characteristics of the offender, the offence, and the victim (Harper & Hogue, 2015; Levenson et al., 2007; Willis et al., 2013). However, findings on the mechanisms that underpin people's perception of sexual violence and of individuals with sexual convictions are not yet fully understood and are often mixed (Harper et al., 2017). Some studies, for instance, have shown that according to the general population, it is impossible to rehabilitate those who committed sexual crimes (Payne et al., 2010) or at least that it is much more difficult to rehabilitate them than other types of perpetrators (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). Other studies have shown an association between positive attitudes towards individuals with sexual convictions and the belief that they should receive treatment, despite some skepticism about its effectiveness (Church et al., 2011). Brown (1999), for example, found that individuals tended to support the inclusion of sexual offenders in treatment, but on two conditions: (1) that they would also receive some punishment under the law and (2) that treatment would not be provided in a center close to their own community. The belief that individuals with sexual convictions are likely to re-offend over time and prey on strangers rather than intra-family victims also increases the odds of not supporting treatment efforts, even when scientific evidence stated that it would be effective (Mancini & Budd, 2016). According to Rothwell et al. (2021), the public perception of rehabilitation for individuals who committed sexual offences is independent of the social perception people hold in general about them, which tends to be more negative towards child molesters than rapists (Socia et al., 2019). Another study by Rogers et al. (2011) found instead that people strongly believe that treatment should be mandatory for perpetrators who abused young victims. Other scholars have pointed out that there is a widespread idea that sexual offenders will reoffend even when involved in treatment, with child molesters considered particularly resistant to intervention (Geiger & Litwiller, 2014). If this was the case, the conclusion would be that therapy should be reserved for victims rather than perpetrators (Reynolds & Birkimer, 2002).

Given what emerges from the scientific literature described above, it seems consistent with Rosselli and Jeglic (2017) that negative perceptions of sexual offenders' rehabilitation are fostered by a lack of knowledge about them. It is worth noting that public judgments may also be influenced by poorly informative, extra-judicial factors (Hilinski-Rosick et al., 2014; O'Neal et al., 2015): there is, in fact, a propensity to rely on attributes with no direct predictive scientific value especially when facing moral evaluations (Zara et al., 2022).

Among these factors, the gender of perpetrators and victims seem to have an impact on public judgments: in cases of female-on-male offences, for example, consent for sex is more frequently assumed (Russell et al., 2011). Other studies found an effect of ethnicity (Klein & Copper, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2009) or of the homosexual orientation of the offender (Wiley & Bottoms, 2009). Moreover, the perceived intentionality of the abuse (Hogue & Peebles, 1997) and the lack of remorse (Kleinke et al., 1992) showed an effect in directing public judgments, as they led people to consider offenders more in need of punishment and to recommend tougher sentences. Pica et al. (2020) have contributed to broadening the study of background factors by suggesting the possible role of the social status of the offender; indeed, in their study, the victim was perceived to be more in control of the situation when the offender was depicted as a popular football star. Consistently, literature has identified the significant effect of the offenders' desirability in enhancing the credibility of their declarations of defense (Lynch et al., 2020) and of physical attractiveness in reducing the perceived harmfulness (Mackelprang & Becker, 2017).

Being aware of the influence of these factors is paramount to improving re-entry into society, as people who have committed sexual offences appear to face particularly high levels of hostility compared to other offenders, making it even more difficult to free themselves from the label as ex-offenders (Imhoff, 2015; Lowe & Willis, 2020). Unintended consequences such as isolation and lack of a support system may increment triggers for re-offending, by reducing perpetrators' chances for a post-conviction stable life (Bailey & Klein, 2018).

2.1.1. Beyond the Atlantic: Evidence for a European Case?

A key aspect of the discourse on public attitudes towards individuals with sexual convictions is that most studies are situated in Anglo-American countries, while much less information is available from European countries other than the UK. In Europe, as McAlinden's (2012) underlines, different laws and regulatory policies for the management of individuals with sexual convictions are in force (e.g., pre-trial detention, travel restrictions, and pre-employment vetting). Because government actions often reflect community responses (Cochran et al., 2021; Rice Lave, 2011), different societal perspectives may therefore underlie them.

Recent findings from a vast cross-sectional study (Höing et al., 2016) among nine European countries (i.e. Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, Ireland, France, Latvia, Netherlands, Spain, UK) highlighted that public attitudes towards people who sexually offend were not as extreme as observed in the USA, and the level of knowledge on issues related to sexual violence was generally accurate, even with some misconceptions still difficult to dispel (e.g., that child molesters are more likely to re-offend). Indeed, focusing on the perception of Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), the authors (2016) claimed that a relevant proportion of those interviewed would like to become volunteers themselves, and citizens from Bulgaria and Spain showed the strongest support for these community-based restorative initiatives (Höing et al., 2016). Although these results are encouraging, others concerning participants from the UK and the USA surprisingly show that UK citizens were less tolerant of individuals with sexual convictions living in their neighborhood and less confident that treating sexual perpetrators in prison would be beneficial in preventing their future reoffending (Cowan et al., 2021). Evidence from France also presented a rather negative scenario, with as much as 68% of people who considered chemical castration always justified for those who committed sexual violence and only 24% who had concerns about chemically castrating first-time offenders (Sedkaoui & Mullett, 2016).

Conversely, data from North-West England revealed a more positive attitude than expected by the authors (Brown et al., 2008), accompanied by the public's recognition of the complex balance between ensuring public safety and having to inevitably integrate offenders back into the community at some point. Nevertheless, many respondents reported feelings of anxiety about living near ex-offenders and expressed a willingness to receive information on their previous criminal records, if any (Brown et al., 2008). As Bergstrøm et al. warned (2017), even in northern European countries with a tradition of relative indulgent sanctioning, more punitive beliefs have spread in recent times among the general population. In Norway, indeed, public opinion seems dissatisfied with the sentences currently imposed, which are considered too soft, and called for incapacitation and a more retributive orientation, reflecting the belief that sexual offenders should get what they deserve (Bergstrøm et al., 2017).

In Germany, as far as the population's attitude towards punishment is concerned, data are still insufficient to state an increase in punitiveness, but from a legislative point of view, a trend is most clearly visible; in fact, in comparison to the 1970s, those who committed sexual violence have now to serve a greater amount of their sentence without early release (Kury et al., 2009).

In Italy, there are also signs of tightening laws on sexual violence. While the Italian Penal Code, in its original version of 1930, classified sexual offences as "crimes against morals and decency" therefore relying on the damage posed to the honor and ethics of society, Law No. 66 of February 15, 1996, recognizes sexual offences under the legal umbrella of "crimes against the person," thus emphasizing the centrality of the violation suffered by the person. A few years ago, Law No. 69/2019 (the so-called "Red Code") toughened the penalties: anyone who forces someone to perform sexual acts by force, threat, or abuse of authority is punishable by imprisonment for 6 to 12 years. The penalty is further increased if aggravating factors are present (e.g., if the crime is committed by relatives or with the use of drugs or weapons).

To date, however, no research has been conducted in Italy on how public opinion relates to individuals convicted of a sexual offence, their treatment, rehabilitation, punishment, and community management. The present study is the first to address these issues in this country, with a twofold purpose. Firstly, it aims to explore whether people's judgments towards a man who has committed sexual violence against a female victim are influenced by variations in (1) the perpetrator's socio-economic status (i.e. high vs. low); (2) the victim's age (i.e. woman vs. girl); and (3) the perpetrator's involvement in psychological treatment during incapacitation (i.e. yes vs. no). Secondly, it investigates the possible association between individuals' comfort with sexuality and their views on sexual offending. The following hypotheses were addressed:

(1) Invoking the involvement in psychological treatment and the high socio-economic status of the offender will improve public judgments, while the young age of the victim would have a worsening effect.

(2) The degree of comfort with one's own sexuality will influence the perception and judgment people have towards individuals who have acted out their deviant sexuality through violence.

2.2. Method

2.2.1. Participants

This research was advertised on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, and WhatsApp). Additionally, by employing a snowballing sampling technique, potential participants were invited to made use of their own personal networks to further share the web-based survey link. No compensation was offered for participation. The administration period was from October 18 to November 18, 2022. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old, to be Italian, or to live in Italy and be fluent in Italian. In total, 674 people started the study. After removing those who denied their consent to participate ($n = 2$), those who did not fully complete

the survey ($n = 152$), and those who failed the manipulation check after reading the experimental vignette ($n = 3$), a final sample of 517 participants was left (the completion rate was 76.7%). A total of 218 (42.2%) participants are identified as male, 287 (55.5%) identified as female, and 12 (2.3%) identified as nonbinary. Most of the sample fell in the 25-44 age group ($n = 330$; 63.8%). See Table 2.1. for more details on the sample characteristics.

Table 2.1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

	Sample ($n = 517$)	
	n	*%*
Gender		
Male	218	42.2
Female	287	55.5
Non-binary	12	2.3
Age range		
18-24	77	14.9
25-34	200	38.7
35-44	130	25.1
45-54	77	14.9
55-64	27	5.2
65-74	6	1.2
Educational level		
Middle-school	5	1.0
Technical-school	5	1.0
High-school	148	28.6
Degree/Post-degree	359	69.4
Relationship status		
Single	167	32.3
In a relationship	350	67.7
Parental status		
Being not a parent	388	75.0
Parent of children < 18 years old	100	19.3
Parent of children > 18 years old	29	5.6
Political orientation[a]		
Left	370	72.4
Centre	102	20.2
Right	39	7.4

Note:[a] Data was missing for 6 cases.

2.2.2. Design

We developed an online vignette study using a between-subjects factorial experimental design that involved the following three factors: offender's socio-economic profile (high vs. low), victim's age (woman vs. girl), and offender's psychological treatment (involved vs. not involved). Using random assignment, participants were allocated to one of eight conditions. We tested the effect of these manipulations on seven outcomes related to (1) perceived prematurity of the offender's release; (2) orientation towards the fundamental purpose of the criminal justice system; (3) estimate of risk of recidivism; (4) desire for social distancing; (5) support for mandatory psychological treatment; (6) perceived magnitude of the phenomenon of sex offending; and (7) attribution of responsibility. Except for the vignette, participants answered the same set of measures.

2.2.3. Instruments

Demographics

Participants were asked to respond to a range of demographic questions at the beginning of the study. These included questions about their gender, age, education, political orientation, current relationship status, and presence of children.

Multidimensional Measure of Comfort with Sexuality (Tromovitch, 2013)

The MMCS comprises 32 items measuring comfort with sexuality on a 6-point self-report scale (anchored from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree"). Four subscales are identified: "comfort discussing sexuality" (TS) (e.g., "I can freely discuss sexual topics in a small group of peers"; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$); "comfort with one's own sexual life" (AP) (e.g., "My sexual experiences and explorations are a positive, on-going part of who I am"; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$); "comfort with the sexual activities of others" (AO) (e.g., "I am completely comfortable knowing and interacting

with people whose sexual activities significantly differ from my own"; Cronbach's α = 0.67); comfort with the taboo sexual activities of others (AT) (e.g., "I could be comfortable interacting with a person who I thought might be having a sexual relationship with their sibling"; Cronbach's α = 0.64). A total score can be obtained by summing the TS, AP, AO subscales' scores, with higher scores indicating greater comfort with sexuality. The score on the AT subscale is considered independent, as it is obtained by a lower number of items, it is not directly related to the underlying construct of the other subscales, and it is affected by the widely changing definitions of taboo, which also varies greatly from a culture to another. To obtain an Italian version of the instrument, two authors (SV and GZ), native Italian speakers and well acquainted with the subject matter, independently translated the English version of the measure into Italian. In cases of disagreement in the wording, consensus was reached through discussion between the authors. Second, the revised Italian version was back-translated into English by an independent researcher who was not directly involved in the study. Finally, an independent bilingual expert checked the equivalence between the original and the back-translated version.

Punitivity Index (Armborst, 2017)

This 11-item scale was used in this study to assess baseline punitiveness, defined as the tendency to support tougher criminal policies concerning different topics of criminal justice (e.g., sanctioning, custodial conditions). Examples of the items include: "For grave offences, like sexual abuse of children, the death penalty would be appropriate". In the current sample, reliability was good (α = 0.85). In addition to the translation and back-translation process described above, another step was required to adjust two items that were specific to the German context in which the Punitivity Index was first published (i.e. "Prisoners in German prisons have it too good"; when immigrants become criminal, they should be deported, even if they have lived here for 10 years and own a German passport"). For these items, we replaced Germany with Italy.

Case vignettes

Eight hypothetical case vignettes were developed for the purpose of the current study as stimuli reflecting real-life forensic cases. Each scenario was kept identical except for the experimental manipulation. Vignettes were approximately of 150 words in length and introduced the participants to Paul, a 50-year-old man about to leave prison after serving a 5-year sentence for sexual violence. The specific vignette was worded as follows:

Paul is a 50-year-old [well-known business leader/workman]. In a few days he will be released after finishing serving a five-year sentence for sexual violence against Martha, a [*woman/girl*] aged [*35 years old/14 years old*] who had been attending his home for a few months as babysitter of his two children. During the criminal trial, it emerged that Paul had first sought a sexual approach with the [woman/girl], with flattery and the promise of a pay rise if she agreed to have sex with him. As time went on, he threatened to dismiss her if she did not agree to his demands and would force her to have sex on several occasions. Generally, all this took place in a more secluded room of the house, when Paul returned home in the late afternoon. During his period in custody, Paul [*participated/did not participate*] in [*a/any*] specific psychological treatment programme for the rehabilitation of individuals convicted of sex offences.

Dependent variables

Following the vignette, a preliminary control question (i.e. "What kind of relationship is there between Paul and Martha?") was presented to ensure that participants read and understood the content. Then, participants were asked to respond to a series of questions rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5), with a middle category of "Do not know." The dependent variables measured the respondent's views regarding individuals

convicted of sex offences by asking their judgments towards particular psycho-criminological domains that could apply to Paul according to the scientific literature (Burrell & Laskey, 2017; Church et al., 2008; DeLuca et al., 2018; Pickett et al., 2013). Specifically, they were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with the following conditions in which individuals like Paul could be involved with (1) the prematureness of letting him re-entry into the community; (2) his likelihood of sexual recidivism; (3) having issues with having him as a neighbor or acquaintance after completing the criminal sentence; (4) mandating psychological treatment for people like him not only in prison, but also when back into the community after release; (5) the perceived increase of offences similar to the one committed by Paul in the country; and (6) making people like him pay for their offence by depriving them of their rights and personal freedoms. A further question investigated the attribution of responsibility being "Exclusively of Paul" (1) to being "Exclusively of Martha" (5).

2.2.4. Procedure

An online survey hosted by SosciSurvey was developed to allow for remote access, and participants' privacy was completely protected by not collecting any traceable data (including IP addresses). Those who were interested in taking part were directed to the survey's first page, which gave information on the participants' right to withdraw at any time if they felt uncomfortable about answering any question and on the purpose of the research. There was no deception in this information, though the precise aims of the study were not disclosed to reduce demand characteristics. After reading the material presented, participants were required to give full consent by clicking a button that took them to the entire survey. Socio-demographic questions were then completed, followed by the Multidimensional Measure of Comfort with Sexuality (Tromovitch, 2013) and the Punitivity Index (Armborst, 2017). Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the eight vignette conditions and asked to rate their level of

agreement with seven statements specifically created for the purpose of this study, which covered topics related to criminal justice issues such as convictions and support for rehabilitation, the risk and escalation of the sexual violence, and the desire for endorsing social distancing from offenders. On average, the study took approximately 15 min to be completed.

2.2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was developed using descriptive statistics and a series of analyses of variances (ANOVAs) to compare the effect of the vignette to the dependent variables. We used the F Snedecor-Fisher statistics accounting for dependencies from repeated measures and correction in its related p values reported with the partial eta-squares. Analyses were performed with and without punitiveness as a covariate. Controlling for the baseline level of punitiveness did not affect the overall pattern of results, and we report only the controlled analyses here. Lastly, Pearson's correlational analyses were performed to assess the possible

association between comfort with sexuality and the public's view towards individuals with sexual convictions. A statistical threshold of $p < .050$ was considered statistically significant. All statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS software version 28 (IBM SPSS Statistics for Macintosh, Armonk, NY, USA: IBM Corp.).

2.3. Results

2.3.1. Randomization Check

Before running any analysis, we ensured that the randomization procedures produced conditions that contained participants with equal levels of general punitiveness by running the 2 (*Offender's socio-economic profile*) x 2 (*Offender's psychological treatment*) x 2 (*Victim's age*) ANOVA model on scores collected from the Punitivity Index. We found no effect of offender's socio-economic status $[F(1,509) = .106, p = .745, \eta_p^2 = .001]$, treatment involvement $[F(1,509) = 2.804, p = .095, \eta_p^2 =$

.005], or victim's age [$F(1,509) = .109$, $p = .742$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$], nor an interaction between these variables [$F(1,509) = 1.262$, $p = .262$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$]. As such, we concluded that randomization was successful as none of the individual experimental conditions contained participants who were excessively harsh on a general level.

2.3.2. Correlation between Punitivity Index and outcome questions

Pearson's correlation analyses revealed that the Punitivity Index was significantly associated with all the dependent variables, particularly with the belief that the main purpose of the criminal justice system is to make people with sex convictions pay for their offence by depriving them of their rights and freedoms ($r = .49$, $p < .001$), that sex offences are on the rise ($r = .33$, $p < .001$), and that the release of offenders like Paul is premature ($r = .33$, $p < .001$). Given its correlation with each judgmental response, the Punitivity Index score was entered as a covariate into the subsequent analyses so that any differences between conditions were not due to pre-existing beliefs (Hartley & Bartels, 2022). We then used a series of between-subjects two ways analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to examine the public's view towards individuals with sexual convictions. In the first analysis, we ran a 2 (*Offender's socio-economic profile*) x 2 (*Offender's psychological treatment*) x 2 (*Victim's age*) ANOVA on the judgement for which it is premature to release to freedom a person like Paul. We then run the same 2x2x2 ANOVA separately for the other dependent variables. Table 2.2 describes participants' levels of agreement or disagreement towards different domains related to individuals with sexual convictions.

Table 2.2. Distribution of outcome variables.

	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Do not know		Agree		Strongly agree	
	F	*%*	*F*	*%*	*F*	*%*	*F*	*%*	*F*	*%*
(1) Is it premature to release a person like Paul?	18	3.5	65	12.6	219	42.4	140	27.1	75	14.5
(2) Is a person like Paul likely to commit other sex offences?	6	1.2	19	3.7	228	44.1	188	36.4	76	14.7
(3) Would you have issues having someone like Paul as an acquaintance or neighbor now that he is getting out of prison?	130	25.1	196	37.9	139	26.9	48	9.3	4	.08
(4) Should psychological treatment be made mandatory for all people like Paul, not only inside the prison	7	1.4	9	1.7	30	5.8	152	29.4	319	61.7

	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
but also outside after release?										
(5) Are offences like Paul's increasingly frequent in Italy?	6	1.2	37	7.2	216	41.8	153	29.6	105	20.3
(6) Should the main purpose of our Criminal Justice System be to make people like Paul pay for their crime by depriving them of their rights and personal freedoms?	171	33.1	211	40.8	67	13.0	54	10.4	14	2.7

	Exclusively Paul		Predominantly Paul, but also Martha		Both Paul's and Martha's equally		Predominantly Martha, but also Paul		Exclusively Martha	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
(7) Who is responsible for what happened?	480	92.8	36	7.0	-	-	-	-	1	0.2

Note: *n* = 517

2.3.3. Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs)

Is it premature to release a person like Paul?

In relation to the perceived prematurity to release from custody a person like Paul, analyses shown a significant main effect of treatment [$F(1,508) = 96.296$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .159$]: independently of the other conditions, when the offender was described as having been involved in a specific psychological treatment for rehabilitating individuals with sexual convictions, participants disagreed more with the statement that it was premature to release him. In other words, support for re-entry into society was higher in the treatment condition compared to the lack-of-treatment one.

Is a person like Paul likely to commit other sex offences?

When asked about the perceived likelihood of Paul committing future sex offences, a significant main effect of psychological treatment was found [$F(1,508) = 44.650$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .081$]: when Paul was presented as a person who received treatment, the perception that he was likely to commit future sex offences tended to decrease.

Would you have issues having someone like Paul as an acquaintance or neighbor now that he is getting out of prison?

Regarding the idea of Paul being an acquaintance or a neighbor, findings showed significant mean differences between participants who were assigned to the treatment condition and those who were assigned to the no-treatment one [$F(1,508) = 28.239$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .053$]. In fact, the vignette displaying Paul as involved in psychological treatment elicited a significantly higher acceptance of him as an acquaintance or a neighbor. Furthermore, results indicated a main effect of "offender's socio-economic profile" [$F(1,508) = 5.273$, $p = .022$, $\eta_p^2 = .010$], whereby

participants stated that having Paul as an acquaintance or a neighbor would be less problematic for them when Paul was presented as from a high socio-economic status. Nonetheless, no significant interaction effect was obtained [$F(1,508) = 1.776, p = .183, \eta_p^2 = .003$].

Should psychological treatment be made mandatory for all people like Paul, not only inside the prison but also outside after release?

Regarding the willingness to make psychological treatment mandatory both in prison and after release, no main effect for "treatment" [$F(1,508) = .824; p = .364; \eta^2 = .002$], "victim's age" [$F(1,508) = .237; p = .627; \eta_p^2 = .001$] or "offender's socio-economic status" [$F(1,508) = .002; p = .961; \eta_p^2 = .001$] was found, nor interaction significant effect occurred between these variables [$F(1,508) = .126; p = .723; \eta_p^2 = .001$], suggesting that characteristics related to the victim and offenders did not influence the participants' support for mandatory treatment.

Are offences like Paul's increasingly frequent in Italy?

Results indicated a significant main effect of the victim's age: the young age of the victim led to a significant increase in the perception that sex offending is on the rise [$F(1,508) = 6.060, p = .014, \eta_p^2 = .012$].

Should the main purpose of our Criminal Justice System be to make people like Paul pay for their crime by depriving them of their rights and personal freedoms?

There were no statistically significant differences between group means as determined by one-way ANOVA with regard to the treatment condition [$F(1,508) = .110, p = .740, \eta_p^2 = .001$], the victim's age [$F(1,508) = 0.202, p = .653, \eta_p^2 = .001$], or the offender's socio-economic profile [$F(1,508) = 2.062, p = .152, \eta_p^2 = .004$], that is respondents disagreed with a repressive system

regardless of the age of the victim, the socio-economic status of the offender and his involvement in treatment.

Who is responsible for what happened?

When examining the perceived responsibility for the offence, a significant main effect of the victim's age emerged [$F(1,508) = 4.253$, $p = .040$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$]. In fact, when the victim's young age was made salient (e.g., a 14-years old girl rather than a 35-years old woman), a significantly greater responsibility was attribute to the offender.

2.3.4. Effect of comfort with sexuality on public's judgements towards individual with sexual convictions

To investigate the possible relationships between the public's judgements towards individuals with sexual convictions and the level of comfort with sexuality, a correlational analysis was performed. Significant inverse correlation was found between the Multidimensional Measure of Comfort with Sexuality total score and the item 5 (i.e. the belief of sexual offences on the rise) ($r = -.10$, $p = .031$); also, it was positively correlated with item 6 (i.e. the endorsement for a repressive system) ($r = .16$, $p < .001$) and 7 (i.e. the attribution of responsibility) ($r = .12$, $p = .007$).

2.4. Discussion

This study sought to contribute to the understanding of public perceptions on individuals involved in sex offending by broadening the investigation of factors that may influence public judgments. Additionally, it examined whether comfort with sexuality has a relationship with those judgments. In line with the first hypothesis, psychological treatment emerged as a key condition in affecting several areas of judgment of respondents: when treatment was present, respondents become more supportive of releasing the offender after a 5-year sentence. Treatment seems, also,

to mitigate the perception of recidivism risk. In the present study, participants believed that psychological treatment should be made compulsory, both inside prison and, thereafter, on re-entry into the community, in either case of the victim being a minor or an adult; in either case of the offender being of high or low socio-economic status, and whether or not he had already participated in a psychological treatment programme during imprisonment. Furthermore, having received psychological treatment elicited a significantly higher tolerance towards having an individual with a sexual conviction nearby upon release. The fact that people tend not to question the value of psychological intervention for individuals who committed sexual crimes should be interpreted in conjunction with a second major finding from this study, that is, the absence of the public support for a repressive criminal justice system, which was observed in prior studies (Levenson et al., 2007; Katz-Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009).

Taken together, these findings suggest some confidence in the effectiveness of psychological interventions and in a more rehabilitative approach that includes psychological treatment beyond punishment and after release into society. Victim's age also appeared to be a relevant variable in affecting judgments towards individuals with sexual convictions over two domains: first, the younger age of the victim the higher the likelihood of overestimating the frequency of sex offences in the country; secondly, when the victim was an adult woman, it was more likely that she was considered in part responsible for the sex offence.

Previous studies (DiBennardo, 2018; Socia et al., 2019) have already suggested that when victims of sexual violence are women, there is a tendency to also blame them for the violence and downplay their trauma relative to child victims' cases. Instead, when victims are children, there is a tendency to have stronger emotional reactions that recommend harsher punishment (Reynolds & Birkimer, 2002). No differences were found in judgments as a function of the offender's socio-economic status, with the only exception of accepting him more favourably as a neighbour or acquaintance after release. This result emphasizes the double standard in the social

tolerance of an offender, which adds up to prior work by Mackelprang and Becker (2017) on the halo effect of pleasantness and the ease with which people are impressed by an individual's positive qualities when making judgments about, for example, dangerousness. Unexpectedly, the status of the offender had no influence on the participants' assessment of the risk of recidivism. This is a remarkable result, as it stands in contrast to other studies (Hilton et al., 2015; Kamorowski et al., 2022; Varela et al., 2014) by suggesting that the perception of risk differs as a function of potentially biasing factors and risk-irrelevant contextual information on the offender, such as his socio-economic profile in the current study.

Finally, concerning the role of comfort with sexuality in expressing opinions on individuals who committed sexual violence, the hypothesis was partially confirmed for some areas of judgment. Higher levels of comfort with sexuality were associated with ascribing that some responsibility for the sexual violence could be also attributed to how the victim behaved. Moreover, being comfortable with sexual topics was related to a lower adherence to the misbelief that sexual offences were on the rise. On the other hand, more comfort with sexuality led to a stronger support for a retributive criminal justice system and the desire to punish sexual offenders more. Some limitations of the present study are worth mentioning. One important limitation concerns imbalanced data, because the recruitment strategy resulted in an underrepresented population of individuals who are older or have a low level of education. Further studies on this topic should aim to achieve greater sample diversity. Another potential limitation is that the vignettes used in the study represented offence situations that had to be identical for adult and child victims, which necessarily limited the study of aspects that were specific to one type of victim or another (e.g., the use of child pornography in cases of violence against children). Varied situations, focusing only on adults or children as victims, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of what leads to judgments when the age variable is controlled.

2.5. Chapter Summary

This chapter examined how the public reacts to individuals convicted of sexual offences and found that it differs depending on the age of the victim (woman vs. girl), the socioeconomic profile of the offender (high vs. low) and, most importantly, participation in a psychological treatment programme (yes vs. no). Specifically, individuals who committed sexual violence and took part in a rehabilitative intervention during imprisonment were perceived as less at risk of re-offending, less in need of additional time to spend in prison, and more accepted in the community as potential neighbors or acquaintances (especially if of high socio-economic profile). If the victim was a young girl, however, the perception of the offender's total responsibility increases and led to a general overestimation of the frequency of sex offences in the whole country. This indicates that, when dealing with sex offenders, it is important to account for a public sentiment that does not endorse a punitive criminal justice system, but a re-educative approach respectful of individuals' rights and focused on psychological treatment, nevertheless compulsory, that starts in prison and continues also once the offender is released into society. In other words, the current study suggests a good level of trust in psychological sciences on the part of the general community in Italy, which stakeholders should take into account, and ideally promote, when planning strategies to prevent sexual violence.

The following chapter examines these attitudes in more detail, both in terms of the underlying issues and the interactions between them and the processing of case-specific information about sexual offending in a sample of expert and non-expert psychologists.

UNVEILING THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: HOW DO PSYCHOLOGISTS PERCEIVE INDIVIDUALS CONVICTED OF SEXUAL OFFENCES?

3.1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the barriers encountered by individuals with criminal convictions as they strive to reintegrate into society after being in the "space of temporary removal" (Ievins, 2023a) that is prison. The multifaceted nature of these barriers is not limited to the consequences of condemnation and takes the form of socially imposed obstacles that reinforce inequalities in social and economic well-being (e.g., lack of access to employment opportunities, housing discrimination and limited social support networks) and hinder successful transition into prosocial societal roles (Edgemon & Clay-Warner, 2019; Levenson, 2016).

Successful rehabilitation is particularly challenging for individuals who have been arrested, convicted, and incarcerated for a sexual offence, as this type of offence appears to uniquely reshape their identities and disrupt interpersonal relationships (Condry et al., 2016; Veggi & Zara, 2023). Several studies have highlighted the presence of a framework of moral condemnation surrounding sex offending (Ievins, 2023b; Salerno & Peter-Hagene, 2013; Ward & Moreton, 2008) and the presence of collateral (or unintended) consequences which goes beyond having received a criminal conviction for the offence (Hamilton, 2022). Notably, substantial obstacles arise from societal perceptions, legal constraints, and deeply ingrained stigmas that hinder the path towards securing employment, stable housing, and reacceptance within the community (Porter et al., 2023; Sandbukt, 2023).

An essential facet of the reintegration process involves the interplay between individual rehabilitation and the broader socio-professional environment. Navigating the dual realms of legal and social reintegration necessitates a nuanced understanding of the interconnecting factors that influence a post-conviction individual trajectory. Legal systems often prescribe the terms of re-entry, encompassing parole conditions, probationary periods, and eventual restrictions on civic participation (Bonnar-Kidd, 2010). Simultaneously, public attitudes seem to advocate for harsher sentencing and heightened monitoring for individuals convicted of sexual offences, significantly impacting the day-to-day realities of individuals seeking to rebuild their lives (Socia et al., 2019). The intersection of these legal and social dimensions forms a critical juncture where professional attitudes play a pivotal role, as professionals across diverse fields become gatekeepers in shaping the opportunities available for individuals in the criminal justice system, influencing their potential for successful rehabilitation or continued marginalisation. In this regard, Craig (2005) found that residential hostel workers and probation officers have a more punitive attitude towards people who have committed sexual offences than towards people who have committed other offences. However, there is consistent evidence indicating that forensic staff (e.g., mental health professionals, counsellors, attorneys, etc.) exhibit more positive attitudes towards individuals involved in sexual crimes in comparison to laypersons and students (Ferguson & Ireland, 2006; Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Nelson et al., 2002). Particularly, as demonstrated by Socia and colleagues (2020) on North Carolina stakeholders, those with a professional experience with people charged of sexual violence exhibited significantly less belief in the efficacy of containment-based policies and a stronger preference for assistance-based interventions than those with a law and policy-focused background. In this vein, a study conducted by Malesky and Keim (2001) of 133 mental health professionals working with individuals who have committed sexual offences found that nearly 70% of them felt that publicly listing perpetrators on community notification registries would create a false sense of security among citizens, expose offenders to vigilante

justice, and would not act as a deterrent. Furthermore, there was observed to be greater confidence among professionals working with those who committed sexual offences in their assessment of risk levels and post-prison dispositions (Calobrisi & Knight, 2022; Fortney et al., 2009). Unfortunately, a range of critical issues are encountered by social workers providing treatment, including heightened anxiety, suspicion, feelings of loathing towards their job and loneliness due to the impossibility to fully share their experiences with their relatives (Shrim & Baum, 2022). In this contex, DiCiro and colleagues (2023) use the term "moral injury" to encompass situations in which treatment providers adopt a punitive stance toward their clients with sexual allegations, which directly conflicts with professional and ethical values of caring and non-harming, as well as situations where they assist a population that society tends to deplore.

Among professionals, the role of psychologists emerges as particularly influential as they have the deeper therapeutic contact with individuals who committed sexual offences (Harper & Hicks, 2022). However, the characteristics of either clients or psychologists are not static and isolated factors; rather, they promote cognitive processes and emotional responses that shape their relationship and significantly impact on engagement, satisfaction, and treatment compliance (Watson et al., 2017). This interplay becomes crucial when discussing delicate ethical issues related to working with individuals convicted of sexual violence, such as the risk of conflicts of interest and biases (Ward & Salmon, 2011). Indeed, as Grady and Strom-Gottfried (2011) have noted, clinicians' emotions and personal judgments can detrimentally influence their professional evaluations and objectivity, potentially resulting in boundary violations.

Building on existing evidence of professionals' perspectives, which predominantly focuses on law enforcement officers, judges, community corrections personnel, parole board members, and prison wardens (Connor & Tewksbury, 2017), this study sought to expand current knowledge on psychologists. To address this gap, three main research questions were formulated, each with a related hypothesis informed by the current body of literature:

Research Question 1. How do psychologists' judgments in three domains (i.e., agreement to prison benefits; malicious satisfaction; case management avoidance) change when new information about the perpetrator and the offence is disclosed?

Hypothesis 1. Disclosure of a sexual offence within the criminal career, along with a denying attitude from the perpetrator, will lead to progressively more severe judgments in all domains.

Research Question 2. Are judgments affected depending on professional background?

Hypothesis 2. Psychologists who work (or have worked) with individuals convicted of sexual offences will be less affected in their judgements by new case information than psychologists working in other fields.

Research Question 3. Are personal and professional characteristics as well as attitudes towards the treatment of individuals convicted of sexual offences related to judgments on the entire real-case scenario?

Hypothesis 3. Certain personal and professional characteristics, and a more positive or negative attitude towards the treatment of individuals with sexual convictions, will be associated to judgments on the entire real-case scenario.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Participants and Procedure

Respondents participated in a factorial web-based survey experiment conducted from October 17th to November 17th 2023. Initially, 402 participants started the survey; however, 88 were excluded due to noncompletion, resulting in a final sample of 314 participants.

Data collection included multiple strategies. In order to target psychologists who had professional experience with individuals who committed sexual crimes, all 190 correctional facility administrations in Italy were contacted, requesting the dissemination of the survey among psychologists in their respective facility. Additionally, an email flier was distributed to violence prevention centers nationwide for men in need of support, inviting psychologists to participate. To recruit additional forensic psychologists and psychologists from different fields as a control group, the survey was promoted on business and employment-oriented social media platforms (e.g., LinkedIn). Moreover, researchers made use of their personal contacts to make a direct invitation of colleagues potentially interested by the research. No compensation was offered for participation. On average, the study took approximately 5 minutes to complete.

The sample size was determined based on an a priori power analysis, using the software G* Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009), with a medium effect size, power of over .80, and an alpha level of .05, to be appropriate for a mixed-model ANCOVA.

3.2.2. Measures

Demographic and Professional Information

To ensure anonymity, only minimal demographic information (e.g., gender and age) was collected for each participant. Information was collected on professional experience with individuals convicted of sexual violence and the length of time they had worked with these individuals. Psychologists who indicated that they did not have professional expertise in the field of sexual offending were asked about their experience with individuals convicted of other offences and their interest in working with people who have committed sexual offences. Those who had professional experience of working with people who had been involved with the criminal justice system (for either sexual or non-sexual offences) were additionally asked whether working with

forensic clients was their sole occupation. These responses were coded as either 'no' [1] or 'yes' [0].

Hypothetical Case Judgments

Psychologists were asked to imagine that they were in a custodial setting and professionally dealing with a forensic case, outlined in a brief progressive vignette created from actual forensic case files. This vignette comprised three stages, and subsequent to each segment, participants were invited to respond to an identical set of judgment questions. This strategy aimed to explore the impact of disclosing new details of the case on their decision-making. All respondents were provided with the same vignette, the content of which reads as follows:

[Stage 1 – General criminality]

Mr. Joseph Rocca is currently serving a custodial sentence of 9 years for a series of offences committed between 2003 and 2016. So far, he has exhibited a good adaptation to the prison environment, establishing respectful relationships with staff and other inmates, and maintaining conduct free from disciplinary incidents. During his time in prison, he attended school and has attained a secondary school diploma. According to the social worker who met his family, his mother and brother are fond of him and expressed their intention to welcome him back home. Before entering prison, Mr. Rocca initiated a romantic relationship with Mrs. Monica Bianchi, whom he met through a social network, and to whom he reports being deeply attached. He expresses a desire to tie the knot with her upon his release. Before his arrest, Mr. Rocca worked for a construction company. His employer stated that he had known Mr. Rocca for a long time and was willing to hire him as soon as he was released from prison. On the clinical assessment received, there were no symptomatic disorders.

[Stage 2 – Sexual violence]

Among the committed offences, Mr. Joseph Rocca is accused of sexual assault against a woman who was attacked in a parking lot as she was getting into her car. According to the crime scene, the woman was pushed into the vehicle and forced to start the car, and then headed to an isolated location. There, faced with the woman's resistance as she opposed and attempted to open the vehicle door to exit, Mr. Rocca allegedly struck her in the face with his hand and forced her to have sexual intercourse with him before fleeing.

[Stage 3 – Denial]

During the interview, Mr. Rocca denies engaging in any violent conduct towards the woman, dismissing all evidence against him. He claims to be himself a victim of the criminal justice system, which, according to him, only protects the alleged victims, and asserts that the sexual intercourse was consensual.

At the end of each vignette stage, participants responded to the following questions in a standardised order:

1. I would be in favour of granting prison benefits, such as suspended prison sentences, community services or premium release on license (i.e. favouring prison benefits).

2. If I heard that he is experiencing abuse and mistreatment by other inmates in prison, I wouldn't feel too sorry about it at all (i.e. malicious satisfaction).

3. Given the option, I would prefer another colleague to handle the case in my place (i.e. professional avoidance).

Each statement was rated using a 100-point slider bar anchored from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree".

Attitudes Towards the Treatment of Sex Offenders (ATTSO)

The ATTSO (Wnuk et al., 2006) is a 15-item self-report scale to assess attitudes toward the treatment of individuals involved in sexual crimes. The items are divided into three subscales (i.e., Incapacitation, Treatment ineffectiveness, and Mandated treatment). Items include "Sex offenders should not be released back into the community", "Psychotherapy will not work with sex offenders" and "All sex offenders should go for treatment even if they don't want to". Participants answer each item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Disagree strongly*) to 5 (*Agree strongly*). The reliability for this study was found to be adequate, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.84, 0.69, and 0.68 for the Incapacitation, Treatment ineffectiveness, and Mandated treatment subscales, respectively.

3.2.3. Statistical Analyses

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science - Version 28 (SPSS-28; Armonk, NY, United States: IBM Corp.). First, independent samples *t*-test and Pearson's chi-square test (χ^2) were used to examine group differences in continuous and categorical variables, respectively. Effect size was determined by calculating Cohen's *d* values. Second, a series of mixed-model analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) was conducted to assess the effects of group (psychologists with vs. without sex offence treatment experience) and vignette stages (1 vs. 2 vs. 3), and the effect of vignette stage by group interaction, whilst controlling for the covariate "age". Particularly, separate analyses were conducted for each judgment question to examine whether specific details provided to participants oriented their opinions. In each test, the within-subjects independent variable was the stage of the vignette, with three levels (first stage: general criminality disclosure; second stage: sexual violence disclosure; third stage: denial disclosure), while the between-subjects independent variable was the type of professional group, with two levels (psychologists experienced with sex offending and psychologists with expertise in other fields).

Mauchly's test was used to assess violations of the sphericity assumption and the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied where necessary. When the sphericity violation is only slight (ε > 0.75) applying the Greenhouse-Geisser correction provides a conservative assessment of differences (Berkovits et al., 2000). Where significant effects were found, pairwise comparison were carried out applying the Bonferroni correction. The results of the post hoc comparisons were presented as mean differences (MD) with 95% confidence intervals (CI) and standard errors (SE). Finally, six hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to evaluate possible significant predictors of each of the three judgment questions at Stage 3, for experienced and non-experienced psychologists, separately considered. For each regression analysis, the following two models were tested: demographic (age and gender) and work-related variables were included in the first model, followed by the addition of the ATTSO subscales in the second model. Being favourable to grant prison benefits, expressing malicious satisfaction, and willingness to pass the case to other colleagues, were treated as outcome variables in the first, second, and third regression analysis, respectively. For all analyses, the minimum significance level was set at p < .05.

3.3. Results

3.3.1. Descriptive Statistics

The participants, aged between 24 and 72 years (M_{age} = 38.83 ± 9.88), included 74.2% females (n = 233). Among them, 53.8% (n = 169) were psychologists with professional experience with individuals with sexual convictions and 46.2% (n = 145) were psychologists without this specific expertise. Within the latter group, 45.5% (n = 66) indicated that they had experience working with individuals who had committed crimes, but not of a sexual nature. Overall, only a minority of psychologists working with individuals convicted of sexual offences (6.5%; n = 11) and none from the control group, stated that they had worked exclusively in the forensic field. Means,

standard deviations, and frequencies for demographics and professional information of the

experienced and non-experienced group of psychologists are provided in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Descriptive statistics for demographic, professional and attitudinal variables by professional groups.

	EP (N = 169)	NEP (N = 145)	Test (df)	*p*	Effect Size Cohen's *d*
Age, *M (SD)*	40.49 (10.24)	36.91 (9.11)	*t*(312) = 3.244	.001	.367
Gender, *N (%)*			$\chi 2(1) = .294$	.588	-
Female	75.7% (*n* = 128)	72.3% (*n* = 105)			
Male	24.3% (*n* = 41)	27.6% (*n* = 40)			
Exclusive forensic occupation, *N (%)*	6.5% (*n* = 11)	.0% (*n* = 0)	$\chi 2(1) = 3.287$	.070	-
Years of experience working with ICSOs, *M (SD)*	5.29 (5.66)	-	-	-	-
Experience working with other offenders, *N (%)*	-	45.5% (*n* = 66)	-	-	-
Willingness to work with ICSOs, *N (%)*	-	51.0% (*n* = 74)	-	-	-
ATTSO – Incapacitation, *M (SD)*	11.42 (3.021)	13.68 (3.977)	*t*(312) = -5.720	<.001	-.646
ATTSO – Mandated Treatment, *M (SD)*	12.18 (2.198)	12.54 (2.038)	*t*(312) = -1.502	.134	-.647

ATTSO – Treatment Ineffectiveness, *M (SD)*	7.38 (2.044)	8.70 (2.032)	*t*(312) = -5.711	<.001	-.170

Note: EP = Experienced psychologists

NEP = Non-experienced psychologists

ATTSO = Attitudes Towards the Treatment of Sex Offenders

ICSOs = Individuals Convicted of Sexual Offences

3.3.2. Mixed-model ANCOVAs: The effects of group and stage

Effects of disclosure of new case information on granting prison benefits

Results showed a significant main effect of the disclosure of new case information on the favour of granting prison benefits (see Table 3.2). There was a disclosure of new case information by group interaction, reflecting a diminished agreement for granting prison benefits among psychologists who worked with individuals with sexual crimes (Stage 1 vs. Stage 2: MD = 20.893, 95% CI [16.705, 25.081], SE = 2.128, $p < .001$; Stage 2 vs. Stage 3: MD = 11.966, 95% CI [8.270, 15.662], SE = 1.878, $p < .001$). For psychologists without experience with individuals who committed a sexual offence, the level of agreement on granting prison benefits decreased from Stage 1 to Stage 2 (MD = 30.193, 95% CI [25.666, 33.720], SE = 2.301, $p < .001$), while no significant difference emerged from Stage 2 to Stage 3 (MD = -2.071, 95% CI [-6.066, 1.924], SE = 2.030, $p = .309$). The ANCOVA also revealed a non-significant effect of age on the scores for granting prison benefits; $F (1, 312) = 0.872, p = .415, \eta_p^2 = .003$.

Effects of disclosure of new case information on malicious satisfaction

As reported in Table 3.2, the results demonstrated a significant main effect of group type on malicious satisfaction, with non-experienced psychologists displaying higher scores compared to experienced psychologists (MD = 5.673, 95% CI [2.364, 8.983], SE = 1.682, $p = < .001$). The ANCOVA also revealed a non-significant effect of age on the scores for malicious satisfaction; $F (1, 312) = 0.531, p = .584, \eta_p^2 = .002$.

Effects of disclosure of new case information on the willingness to pass the case to another colleague

The results also indicated a significant main effect of group type and the disclosure of new case information on the preference for passing the case to another colleague (see Table 3.2). Overall professional avoidance was higher in the non-experienced group than the experienced group (MD = 24.094, 95% CI [18.821, 29.363], SE = 2.680, p = < .001). There was also an overall increase in scores between Stage 1 and Stage 3 (MD = -5.083, 95% CI [-7.555, -2.611], SE = 1.256, p < 0.001), showing that both groups increased in professional avoidance. The ANCOVA also revealed a non-significant effect of age on the scores for avoidance; $F_{(1, 312)}$ = 0.531, p = .196, η_p^2 = .005.

Table 3.2. Mixed-model ANCOVAs on judgment outcomes at each stage of the vignette.

		Stage 1 General criminality	Stage 2 Sexual violence	Stage 3 Denial	F	p	η_p^2
Favouring Prison Benefits							
	EP	79.88 (20.59)	58.66 (26.57)	46.77 (29.95)	Stage: F(1,312) = 8.224	<.001	.026
	NEP	77.42 (22.61)	47.61 (30.89)	49.59 (28.67)	AxS: F(1,312) = 0.872	.415	.003
					Group: F(1,312) = 1.521	.218	.005
					SxG: F(1,312) = 10.584	<.001	.033
Malicious Satisfaction							
	EP	5.95 (14.66)	8.95 (18.69)	8.98 (18.10)	Stage: F(1,312) = 1.014	.362	.003
	NEP	10.08 (17.71)	17.41 (21.86)	14.61 (19.91)	AxS: F(1,312) = .531	.584	.002
					Group: F(1,312) = 11.377	<.001	.035
					SxG: F(1,312) = 1.801	.167	.006
Professional Avoidance							
	EP	8.86 (16.33)	12.61 (20.98)	11.59 (18.83)	Stage: F(1,312) = 4.700	.015	.015
	NEP	29.59 (29.26)	39.26 (35.36)	37.03 (33.16)	AxS: F(1,312) = 1.661	.196	.005
					Group: F(1,312) = 80.832	<.001	.206
					SxG: F(1,312) = 2.848	.071	.009

Note: EP = Experienced psychologists

NEP = Non-experienced psychologists

A = Age

3.3.3. Multiple regression analyses predicting overall judgements by psychologists

A series of three hierarchical linear regression analyses was carried out, one for each outcome, when all the progressive information of the three vignette stages were given, for psychologists with and without experience with individuals with convictions for sexual offences, respectively (for a total of six regressions). Full details of the standardised coefficients within the regression models are provided in Table 3.3 and Table 3.4. For psychologists with experience with sex offending, the final models (Model 2) explaining variance for granting prison benefits (adj. R^2 = .025, F (7, 137) = 1.617, p = .134) and malicious satisfaction (adj. R^2 = -.019, F (7, 161) = .541, p = .802) were not significant. Conversely, the final model for professional avoidance (adj. R^2 = .138, F (7, 161) = 4.833, p < .001) was statistically significant. Within this model, the only significant predictor was the Treatment Ineffectiveness subscale of the ATTSO (β = .358, p < .001): when expert psychologists believed in treatment ineffectiveness, they were more inclined to pass the case to a colleague.

Table 3.3. Hierarchical multiple regressions predicting judgment outcomes from demographics, professional information, and ATTSO scores among psychologists experienced with ICSOs.

Predictor variables	B	β	t	95% CI	Adj R²	F	ΔR²	ΔF
Favouring Prison benefits								
Model 1					.002	1.067	.025	1.067
Age	-.253	-.086	-.893	-.812;.306				
Gender	-8.504	-.122	-1.560	-19.268;2.260				
Exclusive forensic occupation	-1.083	-.009	-.116	-19.549;17.384				
Years of experience working with ICSOs	.650	.123	1.277	-.355;1.665				
Model 2					.025	1.617	.040	2.316
Age	-.178	-.061	-.623	-.744;.388				
Gender	-6.897	-.099	-1.252	-17.778;3.985				
Exclusive forensic occupation	-1.145	-.009	-.121	-19.776;17.486				
Years of experience working with ICSOs	.577	.109	1.136	-.426;1.580				
ATTSO – Incapacitation	.001	.000	.001	-1.867;1.869				
ATTSO – Treatment Ineffectiveness	-2.609	-.178	-1.861	-5.376;.159				
ATTSO – Mandated Treatment	-1.722	-.126	-1.609	-3.836;.392				
Malicious satisfaction								

Model 1					-.005	.807	.019	.807
Age	.030	.017	.174	-.309;.369				
Gender	3.961	.094	1.199	-2.564;10.486				
Exclusive forensic occupation	6.461	.088	1.140	-4.733;17.655				
Years of experience working with ICSOs	-.149	-.046	-.482	-.758;.461				
Model 2					-.019	.541	.004	.202
Age	.035	.020	.196	-.315;.384				
Gender	3.797	.090	1.115	-2.927;10.522				
Exclusive forensic occupation	6.305	.086	1.081	-5.208;17.819				
Years of experience working with ICSOs	-.148	-.046	-.471	-.767;.472				
ATTSO – Incapacitation	.137	.023	.234	-1.018;1.291				
ATTSO – Treatment Ineffectiveness	.119	.013	.137	-1.592;1.829				
ATTSO – Mandated Treatment	.440	.053	.665	-.867;1.746				
Professional Avoidance								
Model 1					-.001	.973	.023	.973
Age	.185	.101	1.037	-.289;.380				
Gender	-1.759	-.040	-.513	-9.228;3.643				
Exclusive forensic occupation	7.864	.103	1.336	-4.379;17.658				

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	B	β	t	95% CI				
Years of experience working with ICSOs	-.034	-.010	-.107	-.463;.723				
Model 2					.138	4.833***	.150	9.771***
Age	.046	.025	.270	-.289;.380				
Gender	-2.793	-.064	-.857	-9.228;3.643				
Exclusive forensic occupation	6.640	.087	1.190	-4.379;17.658				
Years of experience working with ICSOs	.130	.039	.434	-.463;.723				
ATTSO – Incapacitation	.387	.062	.692	-.718;1.492				
ATTSO – Treatment Ineffectiveness	3.295	.358	3.975***	1.658;4.932				
ATTSO – Mandated Treatment	.746	.087	1.178	-.504;1.996				

Note: ATTSO = Attitudes Towards the Treatment of Sex Offenders

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

When focusing on psychologists without experience who are dealing with individuals with a history of sex crimes, all three final models explained a significant proportion of the variance in granting prison benefits (adj. $R^2 = .180$, $F(7, 137) = 5.511$, $p < .001$), malicious satisfaction (adj. $R^2 = .141$, $F(7, 137) = 4.366$, $p < .001$) and professional avoidance (adj. $R^2 = .273$, $F(7, 137) = 8.724$, $p < .001$). Within the model for granting prison benefits, the only significant predictor of being favourable towards non-custodial measures or release on temporary license was the belief in the treatment's effectiveness ($\beta = -.294$, $p = .004$). Regarding malicious satisfaction, the absence of professional experience with individuals of any criminal background ($\beta = .213$, $p = .012$) and believing that those who have committed sexual offences should be incapacitated rather than treated ($\beta = .403$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors in the final model. Being unwilling to work with individuals involved in sexual crimes ($\beta = .357$, $p < .001$) and lacking professional experience with any type of crime ($\beta = .156$, $p = .044$) significantly predicted professional delegation of the case in the model for avoidance.

Table 3.4. Hierarchical multiple regressions predicting judgment outcomes from demographics, professional information, and ATTSO scores among psychologists without experience with ICSOs.

Predictor variables	B	β	t	95% CI	Adj R^2	F	ΔR^2	ΔF
Favouring Prison benefits								
Model 1					.055	3.081*	.081	3.081*
Age	.132	.042	.510	-.380;.644				
Gender	-8.277	-.129	-1.530	-18.972;2.418				
Experience working with other offenders	-5.646	-.098	-1.136	-15.466;4.176				
Willingness to work with ICSOs	-9.493	-.166	-1.931	-19.210;.224				
Model 2					.180	5.511***	.139	8.125***
Age	.106	.034	.425	-.389;.601				
Gender	-6.889	-.108	-1.347	-16.998;3.221				
Experience working with other offenders	-4.194	-.073	-.897	-13.444;5.057				
Willingness to work with ICSOs	-.719	-.013	-.144	-10.576;9.139				
ATTSO – Incapacitation	-.965	-.134	-1.290	-2.444;.514				
ATTSO – Treatment Ineffectiveness	-4.142	-.294	-2.890**	-6.976;-1.308				
ATTSO – Mandated Treatment	-1.560	-.111	-1.415	-3.741;.621				
Malicious satisfaction								

	B	β	t	CI	R²	F	R²	F
Model 1					.045	2.705*	.072	2.705*
Age	.000	.000	-.001	-.357;.357				
Gender	3.734	.084	.989	-3.731;11.198				
Experience working with other offenders	7.772	.195	2.242*	.918;14.626				
Willingness to work with ICSOs	3.328	084	.970	-3.454;10.110				
Model 2					.141	4.366***	.111	6.179***
Age	.138	.063	.773	-.214;.490				
Gender	4.357	.098	1.199	-2.830;11.544				
Experience working with other offenders	8.492	.213	2.553**	1.915;15.068				
Willingness to work with ICSOs	-2.265	-.057	-.639	-9.273;4.743				
ATTSO – Incapacitation	2.018	.403	3.794***	.966;3.070				
ATTSO – Treatment Ineffectiveness	-.694	-.071	-.681	-2.708;1.321				
ATTSO – Mandated Treatment	.055	.006	.071	-1.495;1.606				
Professional Avoidance								
Model 1					.248	12.878***	.269	12.878***
Age	-.230	-.063	-.862	-.758;.298				
Gender	7.056	.095	1.264	-3.977;18.089				
Experience working with other offenders	10.950	.165	2.137*	.819;21.081				

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	B	β	t	95% CI	R^2	F	ΔR^2	ΔF
Willingness to work with ICSOs	26.795	.405	5.285***	16.771;36.819				
Model 2					.273	8.724***	.039	2.597*
Age	-.342	-.094	-1.253	-.881;.198				
Gender	7.476	.101	1.343	-3.533;18.486				
Experience working with other offenders	10.340	.156	2.030*	.266;20.414				
Willingness to work with ICSOs	23.584	.357	4.344***	12.849;34.320				
ATTSO – Incapacitation	-.243	-.029	-.298	-1.854;1.368				
ATTSO – Treatment Ineffectiveness	3.266	.200	2.093*	.180;6.352				
ATTSO – Mandated Treatment	-1.471	-.090	-1.224	-3.846;.905				

Note: ATTSO = Attitudes Towards the Treatment of Sex Offenders

ICSOs = Individuals Convicted of Sexual Offences

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

3.4. Discussion

The present study examined how the progressive disclosure of information about a sexual offence affected psychologists' attitudes towards the appropriateness of granting prison benefits to the perpetrator, their levels of malicious satisfaction when learning that he endures mistreatment by other inmates, and their willingness to avoid treating him. A sample of 314 Italian professionals with and without expertise with individuals convicted of sexual offences was involved in the study. Results partially confirmed Hypotheses 1 and 2. For psychologists professionally dealing with people convicted of sexual offences, a decreasing trend in favourability towards granting prison benefits was observed in all of the three stages of the case vignette, while psychologists without specific expertise only exhibited a decrease upon the revelation of the sexual offence, but not in response to denial. For experienced psychologists, a defensive response to an offence is regarded as a more relevant factor when assessing the pros and cons to grant prison benefits. These findings support prior research suggesting that justifications, minimisations and rationalisations remain areas of concern for some professionals, especially in a context where engaging in treatment is likely to be moved by secondary interest rather than the recognition of being in need of help (Hardeberg Bach & Demuth, 2018; Zara et al., 2020). For example, a qualitative study by Freeman and colleagues (2010) on the impact that denial should have on the eligibility for parole indicated that, according to part of the practicing forensic psychologists interviewed, claims of innocence would require further scrutiny and could impact on their judgment of admissibility. This finding echoes the controversial debate regarding the role of denial in increasing the risk of sexual recidivism among individuals at high risk (Langton et al., 2008) and low risk (Nunes et al., 2007), and those who have committed child sexual abuse or sexual violence against women (Zara et al., 2020). More recently, the effect of remorse on sentencing preferences was emphasised in lay sentencing for assault cases: displays

of remorse were negatively associated with the perception that the individual who committed the offence in the first place, was immoral, that the offence was intentional and that a severe sanction was needed (Silver & Berryessa, 2023). Taken together, these findings raise concerns as denial seems to promote an aggressive and confrontational approach among psychologists, which may be perceived as challenging and demeaning by clients (Serran et al., 2003). This aspect deviates from the positive therapeutic style (e.g., empathic, warm, rewarding, and directive) that they should adopt to encourage responsiveness, maximize treatment benefits, and promote the collaborative development of a good-life plan (Marshall, 2005; Marshall et al., 2005).

As far as malicious satisfaction is involved, experienced psychologists did not exhibit any change in their level of malevolent gratification throughout the case description upon learning that the perpetrator could undergo mistreatment in prison. Even among psychologists without direct contact with individuals convicted of sexual violence, the salience of the sexual offence did not lead to an increase in malicious satisfaction, nor did the disclosure of the perpetrator's denial. However, non-experienced psychologists generally showed less sympathy towards the possibility of inmates experiencing abuse in prison. Furthermore, the absence of professional experience not only with individuals who have committed sexual offences, but with any type of offenders, and the belief that those who committed sexual violence should be merely incarcerated, contributed to growing malicious satisfaction. Recent research (de Vel-Palumbo & Berryessa, 2022; Yu et al., 2023) suggests that perceiving as morally bad someone who is suffering reduces the inclination to help and that people often fail to empathize with individuals within the criminal justice system – with a public indifference, or even joy (as if natural justice is taking its course) – at the incidental harm they experience. According to Hafer and Gosse (2010), *schadenfreude* (i.e. the feeling of pleasure or joy that comes from witnessing someone else's misfortune or failure) may serve as a strategy to uphold the belief in a just world. In our case, non-expert psychologists may derive gratuitous pleasure from the misfortune of detained individuals, possibly stemming

from a perceived sense of deservingness and blameworthiness. Conversely, a heightened compassion displayed by forensic psychologists may be due to a feeling of closeness derived from their therapeutic encounter with individuals who have engaged in criminal behaviour.

When we examined the characteristics of the case influenced psychologists' willingness to evaluate and treat the perpetrator, we found that psychologists without prior experience in sexual offences tended to avoid involvement in the case, by likely deferring it upon learning of the perpetrator's history of sexual crimes compared to experienced psychologists. The lack of previous professional experience with individuals who had engaged in criminal activities, and the resistance, when given the opportunity, to work with those who have committed sexual offences, further reinforced the preference for relinquishing the case. Notably, experienced psychologists also exhibited an overall decrease in willingness to handle such cases. These responses might be influenced by being in what Farrenkopf (1992) defined as "Phase Three" of working with individuals involved in sexual offences, characterised by anger, intolerance and the disheartening of idealism that begins after the initial phases of professional practice (5 years or more). Among psychologists experienced with sexual crimes, those who believed in the ineffectiveness of psychological treatment for people convicted of sexual offences were particularly prone to consider passing the case to a colleague. The denial of the perpetrator did not affect the response of either professional group. This is interesting when referring to psychologists working with clients who have been convicted of sexual crimes, as previous research (Blagden et al., 2011) highlighted the inherent frustration and apprehension in some psychologists to engage in treatment with deniers and, despite the recognition of the importance to provide them more resources, a widespread insecurity on how to intervene. These results are consistent with Hypothesis 3.

Some limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting the current findings, particularly as they inform directions for future research. Firstly, for as much as our sample aligns

with the fact that approximately 82.5% of psychologists in Italy are female, we have a limited representation of male individuals. This prevented us from making gender comparisons as previously done in other relevant research areas, such as the adverse effects of treating individuals with sexual criminal records in terms of burnout, vicarious traumatisation, and disruption of sexual life (Baum & Moyal, 2020). Secondly, the relatively short duration of the psychologists' experience with persons who have committed offences of a sexual nature, averaging approximately 5 years, precluded an evaluation of how the length of their professional practice might impact their attitudes towards them over time. Thirdly, due to difficulties in finding psychologists with experience with individuals convicted of sexual offences, it was not possible to differentiate between those who were currently working with them and those who have done so only in the past and have then switched their professional attention on other clients. Enhancing our understanding of professional differential experiences within the first and second subgroups would contribute to a more insightful interpretation of the results. For instance, premature termination of work with individuals who have committed sexual offences may be indicative of factors related to sex offending influencing such a decision. Similarly, only a minority of psychologists in this sample worked exclusively in a forensic setting. Thus, given that the diversification of work settings and clients is recognised as a coping strategy when dealing with people with a history of sex crimes (Scheela, 2001), future research should consider whether and to what extent the perceptions and attitudes of psychologists are influenced and guided by the type of clients, the professional time investment and the level of commitment in a specialised and highly demanding field. From a methodological perspective, our attempts to maintain the ecological validity of the scenarios presented to participants may have inadvertently introduced bias by providing information upon which participants in the two groups may have relied on differently (e.g., by recognizing the blitz-style attack to the unknown woman as an empirically validated recidivism risk factor, as described in, as described in Lehmann et al., 2018). Finally, it

is possible that some participants may have recognised the underlying purpose of the survey structure, resulting in potential adjustments to their responses in a manner deemed more socially acceptable.

3.5. Chapter Summary

The reintegration of people who have committed crimes is not only a question of personal reparation, but also a social imperative. In the tension between public safety and the reintegration of people who have served their sentences, professionals from different fields play a crucial role in communicating the narratives and opportunities for successful reintegration of ex-prisoners. Particularly, psychologists face the demanding task of managing intense emotional responses, including anxiety and disgust, when exposed to clients' traumatic material such as stories of perpetration and deviant fantasies or cognitive distortions, all while remaining helpful and supportive (Way et al., 2004). As individuals embedded within a broader societal context in which discrimination and prejudice against people who have committed sexual offences is implicitly established as the norm and tacitly exercised, the attitudes and experiences of those who work with this population inevitably shape their ability to build effective professional relationships and, as Lea and colleagues (1999) noted, ultimately separate the individual from the offence.

As outlined in this study, even forensic psychologists are affected by the reality of their clients' sexual convictions, keeping equal other conditions. The results from this study converge to support the view that comprehensive training programmes and ongoing peer supervision are imperative for equipping professionals not only with clinical and criminological skills, but also with effective coping strategies. From an integrated point of view, enhancing the therapeutic relationship between psychologists and clients, particularly in cases involving sexual offences, is crucial for fostering trust, alliance, and ultimately, positive treatment outcomes.

Addressing societal norms and prejudices through training initiatives is also of paramount importance, particularly in countries such as Italy where there is evidence that the public is not spared punitive attitudes, and recent legal amendments have tightened penalties for sexual offences (Veggi et al., 2023). Understanding the evolving legal landscape is essential for psychologists involved in treatment, as it shapes the institutional climate in which they operate. In this way, a more favourable environment could be created both for those seeking reintegration and for the dedicated professionals working to make this transition.

In the next and final chapter of this thesis, the investigation will delve deeply into the intimate relationships of individuals charged with sexual offences by examining the reactions of their partners when they learn of a conviction for child sexual abuse and the effect such court sentence has on the tightness of the couple.

CHAPTER IV

'TIL PRISON DO US PART!' UNCOVERING WOMEN'S REACTIONS TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PERPETRATED BY THEIR PARTNERS

4.1. Introduction

From mortality to substance use, from depression to employment, from offending to rehabilitation, research findings have widely shown that being involved in an intimate relationship is associated with wellbeing and positive turning points (Pilossoph & Wee, 2021; Robles et al., 2014; Sampson et al., 2006). Within the literature on criminal careers, studies have suggested that being involved with a prosocial partner is an important resource in the process of desistance from offending (Zara et al., 2020). Sharing a warm, stable, and constructive intimate relationship seems to foster a reduction of offending behavior, while offending, and especially persisting in it, has been observed to be followed by separation (Theobald & Farrington, 2013). Research shows that the desirable effects of intimacy are indeed compromised by the experience of being convicted of an offence, which is one of the main reasons for couple dissolution and breakdown.

4.1.1. The impact of offending upon intimate relationships

The probability for an intimate relationship ending is approximately three times higher among incarcerated men compared to non-incarcerated men (Lopoo & Western, 2005). The effect of detention on the likelihood of couple disruption is stronger upon entry into prison but tends to decrease if offenders and their partners have successfully managed the initial period of incarceration (Turney, 2015). Studies also indicate a greater risk of separation when the conviction of one's partner is for more serious offences than for convictions of less serious offences (Apel et al., 2010). Massoglia et al. (2011) cite reasons for collateral impairment of intimate relationships

due to a criminal conviction that include the woman's difficulty in transcending social judgments and stereotypes, and the lack of emotional interaction as a function of the amount of time she is physically separated from her partner.

Although some women try to overcome the obstacles posed by their partner's incarceration through coping strategies (e.g., by sharing details of daily life, planning for post-release, or sharing sexual fantasies to maintain intimacy) (Nickels, 2019), incarceration nonetheless represents a source of distress because of the shifts in the rewards and costs, and in more appealing alternatives to that relationship, which place the couple at increased risk of separation for several years after the man's release (Siennick et al., 2014).

Even for those couples who manage to get through the period of incarceration of one of the partners, incarceration itself has negative effects on post-release relationship satisfaction (Comfort et al., 2018). In this regard, the type of criminal convictions is likely to have a direct impact on whether the relationship is fostered or impaired: for example, individuals serving their sentence under electronic monitoring were 13.3% points at lower risk of the dissolution of their intimate relationship in comparison with matched offenders serving their sentence in prison (Fallesen & Andersen, 2017).

While issues related to the breakdown of intimate relationships are, by all means, not limited to those couples in which a partner receives a criminal conviction, as suggested in Eurostat data (2021), certainly the experience of imprisonment could put great strain upon any couple. Analyzing research on the factors that generally affect couple's separation, Eskafi Noghani et al. (2021) found that a prominent role was played by variables such as age and educational differences, infidelity, substance addiction, economic difficulties, and the interference of friends or relatives. Some recent studies have explored specifically the likelihood of separation when partners, forced to experience major life stressors, are nonaligned in how they appraise the severity of those stressors (Stephenson & DeLongis, 2019). Moreover, the great variability in

partners' psychological adjustment to separation depends on whether the critical event that led to separation was somehow anticipated or was an unexpected event for which at least one partner of the couple was not prepared for (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015).

Taken together, these findings open up the possibility that a stressful life event may challenge the stability of a relationship and possibly contribute to its end because the foundation for stability and trust between partners is dissolved. In the literature, child sexual abuse (CSA) is described not only as one of the most heinous crimes that causes extraordinary harm and trauma to victims (Reamer, 2007), but also as a crime that brings high levels of fear (Comartin et al., 2009) and revulsion to the community (Hartley & Bartels, 2022) such that any relationship with the perpetrator is undermined.

4.1.2. Ambiguous separation from a sexually abusive partner

Research on women whose partners are sexual offenders has pointed to the subjective conflictual emotions these women experience as a result of the discovery of the offence. On the one hand, they report difficulties in reconciling their previous positive image of their partner with his actual abusive behavior, and a dramatic sense of loss of a functional and satisfying family life (Cahalane & Duff, 2017). On the other hand, many women still feel responsible for the welfare of their partner, so they worry about causing him harm if they decided to leave him and separate (Duncan et al., 2022). These aspects put women in a very uncomfortable position, to such an extent that some react to the situation by denying the abuse or minimizing its seriousness.

Some couples decide together not to talk about the abuse as a coping mechanism (Iffland et al., 2016). From a societal perspective, the general punitive attitude toward child molesters in the community (Munk et al., 2013; Rade et al., 2016) appears to be accompanied by a public dislike of those women who remain in a relationship with their sexual offending partners, and by all the secondary consequences of being related to a child molester (e.g., loss of social networks,

economic strain, marginalization) (the so-called "courtesy stigma"; Jones & Giles, 2021). Evidence suggests that the effects of being in a relationship with a sexual offender are likely to be as strong as the social consequences experienced by the sexual offenders themselves (e.g., stigmatization, social exclusion) (Russell et al., 2021). Hostility toward women who are partners of a child molester and at the same time mothers of the abused child is reflected, for example, in the phenomenon of "mother blaming" (Toews et al., 2019). A situation that echoes a social and cultural dilemma: what should come first for a woman, "being a mother" or "being a partner"? In this context, Zagrodney and Cummings (2020) noted the widespread popular notion that if a partner turns out to be a child molester, the woman is responsible for the misplaced trust she had placed in him. This is the case even if she was not involved in the offence because it is expected that a woman should be insightful about her surrounding, thus being able to anticipate negative events within the family. Other researchers, who explored the role of women (as mothers and partners) in the social imaginary, have reported that women who are in a relationship with child molesters are perceived as responsible for what happened (the abuse of a child) for at least two reasons: for not placing the safety and needs of their child above those of their partners; for being incapable of preventing the man's offending behavior (Martens & Stewart, 2020). From this perspective, the image of the "bad" and neglectful mother, which contrasts with that of the "sufficiently good" mother, caring and protective of her child, can add a further sense of guilt and failure to the grief caused by her child being sexually abused. Indeed, 49% of mothers in Plummer's sample (Plummer, 2006) declared having had a sense that "something wasn't quite right with their child" before knowing about the abuse, thus leaving them entrapped in a prolonged, confusing and anguishing condition from the very beginning.

Another aspect that deserves special attention is the reactions of the child molester's partner once the CSA is revealed. Clinical and forensic data (Alaggia, 2002; Knott & Fabre, 2014; Pintello & Zuravin, 2001) show that mothers' reactions to the discovery that their child had been a victim

of sexual abuse vary. As summarised by Elliott and Carnes (2001), some researchers have observed a greater tendency for the mother to believe the child when the perpetrator was a close family member, while others have found the opposite, that is, a tendency to believe the victim's accusations more when they were made against someone outside the family or a stranger. Looking more closely at the intimate relationship with the perpetrator, research shows that mothers who were emotionally connected to the perpetrator had the greatest difficulty in believing either their child or their partner, being torn between conflicting emotions and responsibilities (Humphreys, 1992). In other words, when mothers were no longer in a relationship, they were more likely to believe the child, whereas they were more hesitant when they were still in an intimate relationship with the perpetrator, to whom they felt a sense of loyalty and emotional attachment and may have been economically dependent on him. Sometimes, it is the perpetrator himself who creates and reinforces the distance between mother and child, as a precise strategy to foster in the latter a sense of isolation and shame after the abuse, thus hindering disclosure (Lovett, 2004). These dynamics become even more complex when the woman is also a victim of sexual assault or intimate partner violence (IPV). Research evidence suggests that between 35% and 65% of mothers whose children were abused by their partners, were also victims of abuse themselves. In a similar vein there is a co-occurrence of IPV and CSA when the couple have children with a variation from 12% to 70% (Bidarra et al., 2016; Daignault et al., 2021). IPV victims may come to the decision to leave their abusive partner after a long period of time (Veggi et al., 2021) or not to leave him at all (Bell et al., 2007; Chang et al., 2006). Often, the final separation from the abusive partner occurs after a series of previous attempts, break ups and reconciliations, so that the separation from the abuser is anything but an unequivocal, immediate and definitive response (Scheffer Lindgren & Renck, 2008). Referring to these couples, Crabtree and Harris (2020) define as "ambiguous separation" the fluctuation between the intention to break up permanently and the idea of getting back together.

Very few studies have examined women's reactions when their partners are convicted of sex abuse of their own or another child. Their reactions have profound implications for the care and recovery of the child, but also for the risk of legitimizing and reinforcing such types of abusive behavior in the partner, as well as for the psychological adjustment and mental health of the women themselves.

Four empirical questions are at the basis of this study:

(1) Does the woman's discovery that her partner is involved in CSA necessarily lead to the end of the relationship?

(2) What are the factors that most likely facilitate the separation from a partner who is convicted for CSA?

(3) Are there any differences in characteristics between those women who are both partners of the perpetrator and mothers of the victim, and women who are partners of the perpetrators but not mothers of the victim?

(4) Is the women's belief or disbelief in the CSA related to the perpetrator's admission or denial of the CSA?

4.2. Method

4.2.1. Sample

Participants in this study were drawn from a broader sample of 303 adult men officially convicted for at least one sex offence and who were serving their sentence in a prison of Northern Italy. For the purpose of this study only those who have harmed children and who, at the time of the abuse, were involved in an intimate relationship, were selected. 85 child molesters fitted these criteria. Men involved in a same-sex relationship were excluded because of small numbers ($n = 2$; 2.3%). Information on the reactions that 85 women had toward their partners being convicted

for CSA were explored from the forensic, clinical and social services files gathered for the purpose of the study (see Procedure section).

The majority of perpetrators (n = 64; 75.3%) and their partners (n = 60; 73.2%) were Italians, with the first aged 28 to 76 years (M = 50.47; SD = 11.25) and the latter aged 26 to 65 years (M = 46.46; SD = 8.85). Their intimate relationships lasted on average 16.19 years (SD = 12.23).

4.2.2. Procedure

Data were collected from criminal records and forensic material provided by the criminal justice system, which included court sentences and descriptions of offenders' criminal careers. Psychosocial reports from clinicians, social workers, and correctional educators who assessed child molesters and all information, including all taped interviews, were provided for this study. To collect information on victims, permission was obtained from health departments and social service agencies to access victims' files. Variables on family relationships were collected from clinical and forensic files and from social services.

Data were anonymised to ensure confidentiality of the individuals involved and securely archived, with a password required for access. Only the research team has access to the data from this study.

All information was coded according to the following dimensions: age, nationality of perpetrators and partners, characteristics of the abuse (0 = hands-on vs. 1 = hands-off; possession and/or production and/or distribution of pedo-pornography = yes/no), duration of the sexual abuse, presence of other forms of abuse such as harsh discipline or physical injuries (yes/no), characteristics of the victim (e.g., gender, age), and the criminal career of the perpetrator (e.g., previous offences, yes/no; multiple victims, yes/no; use of alcohol or drugs, yes/no). From the forensic and clinical files, and from social services, it was possible to reconstruct the position the women had regarding the CSA that occurred while they were in the relationship with the

perpetrator as it was defined by the expert who was involved in the case (e.g., being themselves victims of IPV, yes/no; being aware of the CSA, yes/no; being involved in the abuse against the child, yes/no), the duration of the relationship with the perpetrator (1 = short term, ≤ 9 years vs. 0 = long term, ≥ 10 years), the type of relationship with the victims of CSA (1 = known vs. 0 = unknown; 1 = own child vs. 0 = extrafamilial), and finally their reactions to stay in the relationship with their partner or to separate from him (1= separation vs. 0 = non separation). For the purposes of this study, we considered "separation" to be the dissolution and separation of the couple that occurred, according to the psycho-forensic interviews and reports collected, between the time the women discovered the abuse by their partner and the time of the court hearing/judgment. Furthermore, two independent raters carried out the categorization of data into the assessment of whether the women believed or not the CSA allegations against of their partner (yes/no), and whether they contributed to the disclosure of CSA (yes/no). It was also possible to assess whether the perpetrators denied or admitted the CSA they were convicted for (yes/no).

Separate variables were created to indicate the presence (coded as 1) or absence (coded as 0) of assessed dimensions in each case. When a discrepancy emerged, the two independent raters discussed the case with the research group, and re-assessed it, until a better level of agreement was reached. The Cohen's Kappa statistic (Cohen, 1960) provides a quantitative measure of the magnitude of agreement between observers that is corrected for chance, and it is appropriate for this type of data. The levels of agreement for the category of women believing the CSA allegations against their partner (Cohen's K was 0.98, $p < .001$), and for contributing to the disclosure of the CSA (Cohen's K was 0.98, $p < .001$), and the level of agreement for the category of perpetrator denial of CSA (Cohen's K was 0.98, $p < .001$), suggest a substantial inter-rater agreement coefficient for all of these variables (McHugh, 2012; Viera & Garrett, 2005).

4.2.3. Analytic Strategy

Descriptive analyses with chi-squares and odds ratios (OR) were carried out to investigate which characteristics of the sample, and which of the relationships between victims and child molesters, were more likely to be associated with the women separating from the perpetrators. The OR is the best measure of strength of association between dichotomous variables, and it was chosen for this study. It is easily understandable as the increase in the odds (risk) of an outcome is associated with the presence of the risk factor under examination (Zara & Farrington, 2020). The OR provides information about the existence, direction, and strength of an association between dichotomous variables, which increases as the deviation from 1 increases (Farrington & Loeber, 2000).

A series of binary logistic regressions were performed. Logistic regression is a multivariate statistical technique which yields regression coefficients that indicate the probability of occurrence of a particular outcome variable of interest (e.g., separation from a partner who is a child molester) according to whether a predictor (e.g., type of relationship with the victim) is statistically important when other predictors are controlled for.

4.3. Results

Findings from this study show that the 85 child molesters were convicted for an Index Sex Crime that they had committed while they were involved in an intimate relationship. 42.4% of them (n = 36) had previous official criminal records.[1]

Specifically, 85 were the victims for whom the child molesters were currently in detention: victims were both girls (n = 71; 83.5%) and boys (n = 14; 16.5%) and of an average age of 10.36 years (SD = 3.87). The great majority of the victims knew the abuser (n = 73; 85.9%), and the abuse

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[1] Outside of their official criminal records, 41 offenders in this sample (48.2%) admitted to having sexually assaulted multiple victims previously and on various unrelated occasions. According to their narratives, there were a total of 203 victims. It is likely that this number is underestimated.

occurred within the family in 67.1% of cases ($n = 57$). In most cases the victims were children of the then couple ($n = 50$; 58.8%).

In 71.8% of the cases ($n = 61$) the sexual abuse involved direct contact with the victim (i.e., hands-on offence), which in some cases was combined with other forms of abuse (e.g., battering, use of force and physical punishment) ($n = 24$; 28.2%). The duration of the abuse lasted, on average, for over a year ($n = 64$; 75.3%) and also involved pedo-pornography in more than one in every three cases ($n = 31$; 36.5%). Overall, the CSA came to the attention of Authorities due to a direct criminal complaint made by the victim's family members, friends or professionals (e.g., teachers) ($n = 76$; 89.4%) rather than through independent police investigations ($n = 8$; 9.4%).

4.3.1. Women as partners of CSA perpetrators

When investigating the role of women in the CSA, it emerged that 54 of them (65.1%) were completely unaware of what was going on with their partners, while in some cases ($n = 29$; 34.9%) they knew about the CSA but they ignored it or belittled it, according to the forensic and social service files. In two cases data were missing.

In 78.0% ($n = 64$) of the cases, the women believed the victim's account of the abuse, were convinced that the abuse had occurred, and that their partner was responsible: this was true whether or not they were the victim's mother. However, in 22.0% of cases ($n = 18$), the women did not believe that the abuse had occurred which led 83.3% of these women ($n = 15$) to be convinced that their partner did not commit the abuse. Women's disbelief in CSA was significantly correlated with perpetrators' denial of CSA (rho $= .54$; $p = .001$).

Moreover, it should be noted that a small but not negligible percentage of women ($n = 10$; 11.8%) directly facilitated the maintenance of an unsafe environment at home by contributing to the abuse, as reported in the social services' records.

4.3.2. Women as mothers of victims

Fifty women were the mothers of the victims. In 32.7% of these cases ($n = 16$), the mothers openly and immediately believed that their own child was a victim of CSA, and in 36.7% of cases ($n = 18$), they played a key role in alerting authorities and cooperating with the investigation after their child confided the abuse to her. In one case, information on this aspect was missing. Women who were not the victim's mother were more likely to know about sexual abuse by their partners than mothers of the victim, who were less likely to know what was going on at home (OR = 5.57; 95% CI = 1.85–16.76). When the CSA occurred at home, it was less likely that the perpetrator used pedo-pornography (OR = .33; 95% CI = .13–.83), abused a boy (OR = .14; 95% CI = .04–.55), and performed hands-off abuse (OR = .23; 95% CI = .08–.62). Physical violence was more likely when the victim was their own child (OR = 7.72; 95% CI = 2.08–28.63).

4.3.3. Does a woman leave her partner when she discovered that he had sexually abused a child?

The results show that more than half of the women involved in the study ($n = 46$; 54.1%) decided to separate from their partner after the disclosure of the CSA; 36 of them were also mothers of the victims, while 39 (45.9%) women remained in the relationship even though their partner was convicted of the crime committed. In fourteen cases, these women were the mothers of the victims.

There were some differences in the women who separated from their CSA partners. While some women separated without ever doubting the victim's allegations ($n = 23$; 50.0%), others were skeptical of the abuse, and preferred «not to take sides» ($n = 15$; 32.6%), as described in the forensic files. In addition, some women decided to leave their partners even if they denied the offence ($n = 5$; 10.9%), while in other cases ($n = 3$; 6.5%), although some women acknowledged

their partners' responsibility and asked for separation, they remained affectionately attached to them and maintained contact.

The likelihood of separation was particularly high when the victim was their own child (OR = 6.43; 95% CI = 2.47–16.77). In those cases in which the woman was not the mother of the victim, separation was over four times higher when the victim was known (OR = 4.30; 95% CI = 1.07–17.22), and when the victim was a family member (OR = 6.50; 95% CI = 2.34–18.05). This suggests that the closer the emotional bond with the child, the higher the probability that the relationship with the perpetrator would end up in separation. Surprisingly, these differences were not affected by the age or gender of the child, nor by the duration of the abuse (see Table 4.1). In those situations, in which the sexual abuse was combined with other forms of abuse within the family (e.g., harsh discipline, neglect and physical punishment), the likelihood of separation was higher (OR = 3.54; 95% CI = 1.23–10.13).

Table 4.1. Risk factors associated with separation from a child molester partner.

	Yes separation (n = 46)		No separation (n = 39)		χ^2	Odds Ratios	95% CI
	F	%	F	%			
Victims							
Male victim	6	13.0	8	20.5	.40	.58	.18-1.85
Age of victim (< 11 years old)	26	56.5	23	59.0	.00	.90	.38-2.15
Known victim	43	93.5	30	76.9	3.50	4.30	1.07-17.22
Intrafamilial victim	39	84.8	18	46.2	12.56***	6.50	2.34-18.05
Own child being a victim	36	78.3	14	35.9	13.94***	6.43	2.47-16.77
Duration of Relationship							
Short term relationship (≤ 9 years)	23	51.1	9	24.3	5.05*	3.25	1.26-8.42
Types of CSA							
Length of abuse (> 12 months)	35	76.1	29	74.4	.00	1.10	.41-2.95
Hands-off offence	10	21.7	14	35.9	1.45	.50	.19-1.29
Multiple victims	23	50.0	18	46.2	.02	1.17	.50-2.74

Perpetrators

Use of alcohol/drugs	11	23.9	7	17.9	.16	1.44	.50-4.16
Previous offences	23	50.0	13	33.3	1.77	2.00	.83-4.83
Pedopornography	15	32.6	16	41.0	.33	.70	.29-1.69
Physical violence/Harsh discipline	18	39.1	6	15.4	4.76*	3.54	1.23-10.13

Partners of perpetrators

Partner being IPV victim	15	32.6	3	7.7	6.43**	5.81	1.54-21.94
Partner believing the CSA	41	89.1	23	63.9	6.11**	4.64	1.47-14.65
Partner being aware of the CSA	17	37.8	12	31.6	.13	1.32	.53-3.27
Partner contributing to CSA disclosure	18	39.1	2	5.3	11.36***	11.57	2.48-54.09

Note: Child sexual abuse (CSA). With partner is meant the woman involved in a relationship with the perpetrator (i.e., an individual convicted of child sexual abuse). Percentages exclude missing values. Data regarding some variables are missing. For instance, in two cases it was not possible to understand whether the woman knew about the abuse, while in three cases, it was not possible to unequivocally identify whether the woman believed the offence. * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001.

4.3.4. What are the factors that more likely contributed to the separation from the CSA perpetrator?

Twenty-one per cent (n = 18) of the women in this study were victims of IPV perpetrated by the same man who was convicted for CSA. Women who were victims of IPV were more likely to separate from their abusive partner when they discovered that he had committed CSA and was convicted for it (OR = 5.81; 95% CI = 1.54–21.94). The length of the relationship was significantly associated with separation, so that the likelihood of separation tripled in shorter relationships (9 years or shorter) (OR = 3.25; 95% CI = 1.26–8.42). When the women believed the allegations against their partner and believed the victim (OR = 4.64; 95% CI = 1.47–14.65), and when they actively collaborated with authorities, it was more likely that separation occurred (OR = 11.57; 95% CI = 2.48– 54.09).

A binary logistic regression was carried out to specifically identify those predictors that significantly and independently contributed to the women separating from their convicted partner. Those variables which were significant in the preliminary analysis were included in the model; "separation" was the dependent variable. The victim being the child of the couple (OR = 5.612, p = .002), the woman being a victim of IPV (OR = 6.121, p = .014), and the short duration of the relationship with the perpetrator (OR = 3.982, p = .013) were all significant predictors of separation. As shown in Table 4.2, the regression model was statistically significant, $\chi2$ (3) = 27.790, p < .001.

Table 4.2. Logistic regression predicting separation from a child molester partner.

Predictors	B	SE (B)	Wald	Exp (β)	95% C.I. for EX P(B)	
					Lower	Upper
Own child being victim	1.725**	.551	9.792	5.612	1.905	16.533
Short term relationship (≤ 9 years)	1.382**	.558	6.132	3.982	1.334	11.889
Partner being IPV victim	1.812**	.740	6.001	6.121	1.436	26.081
Constant		(.516)				
Nagelkerke R-Square	.384					
X^2 (df = 3) = 27.790, p < .001						

Note: Dependent variable: Separation (0 = No; 1 = Yes)

Variables which were not found significant in the predictive model were: partner contributing to CSA disclosure; partner believing the CSA; presence of physical violence/harsh discipline.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p = .001$

To check the assumption of no multicollinearity (*ill conditioning*) (Belsley et al., 2004), the variance inflation factor (VIF) and collinearity tolerance (CT) were calculated. Although there are no strict rules about what value of the VIF should cause concern, corresponding guidelines in Menard's text (1995) suggest that, if the average VIF is not substantially greater than 1, then there is no cause for concern, while tolerance below 0.2 indicates a potential problem (Menard, 1995). In this study, VIF values were as follows: Own child being victim = 1.06; Short term relationship = 1.04; Partner being IPV victim = 1.05. CT values were as follows: Own child being victim = 0.94; Short term relationship = 0.96; Partner being IPV victim = 0.95

4.4. Discussion

In this study, we examined women's reactions to CSA committed by the man with whom they were in an intimate relationship and sought to identify the various factors that influenced their decision to stay in or leave the relationship.

More than half of the women (54.1%) decided to separate from their partner after the offence was discovered and the man was convicted. This was more likely if the CSA victim was known and especially if the victim was their own child. These findings confirm the potentially destabilizing influence of criminal convictions on an intimate relationship that has been noted in other studies (Chui, 2016; Comfort et al., 2018; Theobald & Farrington, 2013).

Conversely, thirty-nine women (45.9%) chose not to end the relationship, and this was more likely when the relationship was of long duration (10 years or longer). A long-term relationship implies an extensive and stronger emotional investment, attachment, and commitment that is not easily resolved even in the face of a critical event such as a CSA offence, in the presence of young victims, and despite the level of social shame and prejudice society is likely to confront them with (Iffland et al., 2016; Massoglia et al., 2011). Interestingly, there was a significant relationship between the perpetrator's denial of CSA and the partner's disbelief in CSA; this suggests, in line with other studies (Zara & Farrington, 2016, 2020), that the process of denial (or admission) does not occur in a social vacuum and that it likely primarily takes the form of co-denial (or co-admission) in which the perpetrator's denial (or admission) likely reinforces the partner's disbelief (belief) that CSA ever occurred.

These results suggest that knowledge of CSA committed by their partner was not a significant predictor of separation for the women participating in this study. While fifty-four women (65.1%) in this study were unaware of the CSA and therefore unable to react until the abuse came to light, twenty-nine women (34.9%) were aware of the abuse: these were women who were more likely to be either complicit in the CSA or victims of IPV themselves. Those who were actively involved

in abuse were unsurprisingly silent, whereas a more complex pattern was observed among women who were victims of IPV. These women were aware of ongoing abuse of the child and resisted it by not leaving the child alone with the perpetrator, although they did not always report the abuse to the authorities. In more than half of the cases, the CSA was discovered even without their intervention, and yet almost all of the women ended the relationship with the abuser.

Separation from an abusive partner is to be expected based on previous literature highlighting that the presence of children is an important variable influencing women's coping with abusive relationships (Zink et al., 2003). Specifically, victims of IPV are more likely to leave an abusive relationship if they perceive that the level of violence is becoming more frequent and severe and that their children are becoming more exposed to that violence (Bell & Naugle, 2005).

Accordingly, it can be assumed that the discovery of CSA plays a central role in convincing the woman to separate from a partner who has been abusive not only to her but also to the child. As Bolen and Lamb (2004) noted, the woman's reactions to CSA are far from a midpoint on a single linear continuum from lesser to greater support for the victim. These reactions are better explained as an emotional tension between the child and the perpetrator characterised by vacillation and noncongruent actions (e.g., believing the crime yet remaining in the relationship with the perpetrator or disbelieving the allegations yet leaving him). Indeed, the process of leaving an abusive partner is multidimensional and variable: in some cases, the separation is gradual with a cognitive and emotional disengagement that may precede physical abandonment; in other cases, the separation is abrupt and cuts all ties, although some may regret it after the fact (Sani & Pereira, 2020).

Certainly, further studies, with a larger sample are necessary to explore the psychological and social processes behind the choice of either preserving their relationship with the partner or contributing to justice for the protection of the child. There was no evidence that the gender or age of the victim contributed to the making of the response to the CSA allegations and separation.

It could be that other social and cultural variables, such as the economic dependence of women on men and a patriarchal family structure, created a climate of silence to avoid social rejection and shame. However, it was not possible to examine these aspects directly because this type of data was not available.

These results are in line with some of previous studies (Everson et al., 1989; Heriot, 1996), while they differ from others which reported a tendency to ascribe greater credibility to younger (Rogers & Davies, 2007) and female child victims (Davies et al., 2009). Variables such as the perpetrator's consumption of alcohol and/or drugs, previous criminal records, the presence of multiple victims and the use of child pornography did not play a significant role in the likelihood of separation. This may suggest that many women, independently of the antisocial style of their partner, tried to maintain the family intact. While they were indecisive and cautious about breaking up their relationship with him when the victim was unknown or outside the family circle, they were likely to actively react when the protection of their own child was at stake, as shown in this study.

Some limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the results of this study. Although the analysis highlights the psychosocial complexity associated with intimate relationships in cases of CSA, the results cannot be generalised due to the relatively small sample of child molesters who were involved in an intimate relationship at the time of abuse.

A second limitation concerns the source of the data, which were collected from clinical and forensic files, and social services. Interviews with the women involved in the relationships with the child molesters were not possible, though such interviews would have contributed to a more complete understanding of the dynamic of the relationships and the context of the abuse. Because of the unavailability of these specific data, it was not possible to determine changes in women's attitude toward the abuse and the perpetrator over time. Future research in which interviews are conducted with women in a relationship with child molesters would make it possible to better investigate the heterogeneity of women's reactions and their role in the couple dynamics during

and after the child abuse. It would certainly be interesting to extend the analysis to same-sex intimate relationships, and to explore further those cases in which the child sexual abuse involved both partners. It is crucial that further research be conducted in Italy to ensure generalizability, but also to ensure that current issues are specifically addressed and tested to raise awareness of such a complex topic. This should also lead to consideration of the extent to which cultural aspects (e.g., patriarchal society) may influence the way women respond to abusive men. Similarly, it would have been interesting to examine the role of the possible economic dependence of women on their partner as a factor limiting the decision to end the relationship. However, in this study it was not possible to examine these aspects directly, but further studies should specifically examine women's response to CSA partners after controlling for cultural and economic aspects.

4.5. Chapter Summary

This study focused on how women reacted to CSA committed by the man with whom they were in an intimate relationship. Several women decided to end the relationship with the perpetrator, especially when the violence was directed against their own child, when they were victims of IPV by the same man, and when the relationship with him was of a short duration. In light of these findings, some important conclusions for interventions must be drawn regarding the psychological well-being of the women themselves and their role in a relationship with CSA men. From a social reintegration perspective, partner support can be an effective factor in facilitating the readiness for treatment and rehabilitating convicted sexual perpetrators, but at the same time it could also reinforce the belief that the abuse was acceptable, and that the victim did not suffer serious harm. Precisely because they are in a gray area between perpetrators and child victims, women's experiences and needs are likely to remain in the background, as invisible and unrecognised victims of secondary victimization. At worst, women run the risk of being accused of failing to protect the child or of being openly equated with their abusive partner. With this in

mind, it is critical to recognize that more attention should be paid to women who are in a relationship with a partner who sexually abuses children, both in clinical and forensic settings.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The overarching aim of this thesis was to advance the discourse on attitudes towards sexual offending in an empirical direction by employing theoretically validated conceptual frameworks and robust methodological procedures. Chapter I revealed that sexual offending is highly overrepresented in media accounts of politicians, with anger being the predominant emotion. Chapter II showed that both situational and dispositional factors can influence the public's punitiveness towards individuals convicted of sexual offending. Chapter III found that psychologists working in forensic and correctional settings also make negative judgments about this type of offenders. Chapter IV looked at the factors that influence the separation of couples where one partner has been convicted of child sexual abuse.

The outcomes of these four empirical investigations all support the notion that attitudes towards sexual offenders may originate from the visceral, emotional core within us that is deeply stirred by cases of sexual offences. At the macro level, media coverage and legislative debates on sexual crimes appear to be influenced by high-profile cases that attract public attention. At the micro level, individual responses to sexual offending appear to be affected by the extent to which these cases conform to an implicit stereotype of a "sexual offender".

These findings have significant implications for scientific research, social discussion and professional practice in relation to cases of sexual violence, particularly in sentencing and treatment. While this work sheds light on the nature of responses to sexual offending, further research is imperative to extend these data and develop effective strategies to mitigate the impact of such constructs on policy, professional, and social responses to sexual offenders.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

All studies involving human participants comply with the ethical guidelines outlined in the World Medical Association's Code of Ethics (Declaration of Helsinki) (2013), the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2018), and the code of human research ethics and conduct in psychology. Ethical approval was obtained from the Bioethics Committee of the University of Turin (Italy) (protocol no. 6494 and 0572992). Participants were explicitly informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and assured that their responses would remain anonymous. Only those who provided active consent were eligible to take part in the research.

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APPENDICES

This final section provides supplementary information about the empirical work that is contained within the thesis. The following documents are provided:

Appendix A PhD Research Dissemination

Appendix B Punitivity Index

Appendix C Multidimensional Measure of Comfort with Sexuality (MMCS)

Appendix D Attitudes Towards the Treatment of Sex Offenders (ATTSO)

Appendix E Summary of Results

APPENDIX A

PhD RESEARCH DISSEMINATION

The following "accepted", "under submission", and published papers and conference proceedings have been obtained/given during the PhD studentship (2020-2024) and the pre-doctoral period, and indicate original contributions.

(* denotes publication or conference proceeding directly linked to thesis content).

<u>Journal Papers</u>

Veggi, S., Benfante, A., Di Tella, M., Bergstrøm, H., Freilone, F., Castelli, L., & Zara, G. (*Under submission*). Dark Tetrad personality traits and attitudes supportive of vindictive rape: The mediating role of empathy.

Benfante, A., Di Tella, M., **Veggi, S.**, Freilone, F., Castelli, L., & Zara, G. (*Under review*). Love actually: Is relationship status associated with Dark Triad personality traits and attitudes towards love?

Di Tella, M., **Veggi, S.**, Benfante, A., Jolliffe, D., Farrington, D. P., Castelli, L., & Zara, G. (2024). Wandering in the darkness of personality: Empathy, alexithymia and their relationship to the Dark Tetrad. *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences, 7,* 100160. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crbeha.2024.100160

* **Veggi, S.**, Di Tella, M., & Zara, G. (2024). Unveiling the Elephant in the Room: How do Psychologists Perceive Individuals Convicted of Sexual Offenses? *Sexual Abuse* (online first). https://doi.org/10.1177/10790632241268457

Zara, G., Binik, O., Ginocchio, D., Merzagora, I., Giannini, A., Addabbo, T., Castelli, L., Cricenti, C., Ferrari, S., Di Tella, M., Freilone, F., Lausi, G., Rossetto, I., **Veggi, S.**, & De Fazio, L.

(2024). Looking for a preventive approach to sexual harassment in academia. A systematic review. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* (online first). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-024-09582-0

Veggi, S., Di Tella, M., Castelli, L., & Zara, G. (2024). Psychological preparedness of psychologists during the COVID-19 emergency: Are there any individual differences? *Behavioral Sciences, 14*, 168. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14030168

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* **Veggi, S.**, & Zara, G. (2023). 'Til prison do us part! Uncovering women's reactions to child sexual abuse perpetrated by their partners. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice* (Online first). https://doi.org/10.1080/24732850.2023.2249454

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* **Veggi, S.**, Cipresso, P., & Zara, G. (2023). Public Punitiveness Towards Individuals with Sexual Convictions in Italy: A Vignette Study. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* (Online first). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-023-09561-x

* **Veggi, S.**, & Zara, G. (2023). Investigating sex offending representation among politicians through Twitter. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology, 34*, 131–141. https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2022.2143396

Zara, G., Gino, S., **Veggi, S.**, & Freilone, F. (2022). Sexual femicide, non-sexual femicide and rape: Where do the differences lie? A continuum in a pattern of violence against women. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 957327. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.957327

Veggi, S., & Zara, G. (2022). Stalking al femminile. In: G. Zara & F. Freilone (Eds.), *Stalking Assessment Manual – SAM*. Firenze: Hogrefe Editore.

Zara, G., **Veggi, S.**, Ianì, F., & Bucciarelli, M. (2022). Looking at the moral judgments of offenders through new lenses. *Journal of Criminal Psychology, 12*, 90–110. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCP-04-2022-0010

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Zara, G., Settanni, M., Zuffranieri, M., **Veggi, S.**, & Castelli, L. (2021). The long psychological shadowof COVID-19 upon healthcare workers: A global concern for action. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 294*, 220– 226. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.07.056

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Benfante, A., Romeo, A., Di Tella, M., **Veggi, S.**, Zara, G., & Castelli, L. Gli effetti del
Covid-19: overview and insight con uno sguardo al futuro. XIV Congresso
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Veggi, S., & Zara, G. Quanto esplicito è il pensiero implicito? Distorsioni cognitive nei sex
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Nazionale Contras-Ti, Coordinamento Nazionale Trattamento e Ricerca
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Veggi, S., Benfante, A., Di Tella, M., Castelli, L., & Zara, G. Sympathy for the devil: Does empathy mediate the relationship between Dark Triad traits and vindictive rape? XVIII Congresso Nazionale dell'Associazione Italiana di Psicologia (sezione di Psicologia Sociale). Torino, September 5-7, 2024.

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Di Tella, M., **Veggi, S.**, Benfante, M., Freilone, F., Castelli, L., & Zara, G. Violence in thought is always violence. The psychological mechanisms that support vindictive rape. 23rd Annual Conference of the European Society of Criminology. Firenze, September 6-9, 2023.

Veggi S., Di Tella, M., Benfante, M., Castelli, L., & Zara, G. Intimate Partner Violence e Alessitimia: Quale ruolo per le emozioni? V Convegno Nazionale di Psicologia Giuridica. Milano, May 12-14, 2023.

Veggi S., Biondi, E., Freilone, F., Gino, S., & Zara, G. Intimate Partner Violence: come,

quando e perché si uccide. IV Convegno Nazionale di Psicologia Giuridica. Roma, November 7-9, 2019.

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APPENDIX B

PUNITIVITY INDEX

(Armborst, 2007)

Per ogni *item*, selezioni la casella che meglio rappresenta la Sua risposta.

1) In generale, le condanne inflitte per i reati sono complessivamente:

    Decisamente troppo elevate

    Troppo elevate

    Appropriate

    Troppo basse

    Decisamente troppo basse

2) I detenuti nelle carceri italiane se la passano troppo bene.

    Totalmente d'accordo

    In parte d'accordo

    In parte in disaccordo

    Totalmente in disaccordo

3) Per reati gravi, come l'abuso sessuale sui bambini, sarebbe appropriata la pena di morte.

    Totalmente d'accordo

    In parte d'accordo

    In parte in disaccordo

    Totalmente in disaccordo

4) I nomi, le foto e gli indirizzi degli autori di reati sessuali scarcerati dovrebbero essere resi pubblici, in modo che tutti possano tutelarsi.

Totalmente d'accordo

In parte d'accordo

In parte in disaccordo

Totalmente in disaccordo

5) Quando gli immigrati diventano criminali devono essere espulsi, anche se vivono qui da dieci anni e possiedono il passaporto italiano.

Totalmente d'accordo

In parte d'accordo

In parte in disaccordo

Totalmente in disaccordo

6) Se la polizia potesse essere dura contro la criminalità, ci sarebbe meno criminalità.

Totalmente d'accordo

In parte d'accordo

In parte in disaccordo

Totalmente in disaccordo

7) In generale, le condanne inflitte agli autori di reato minorenni sono:

Decisamente troppo elevate

Troppo elevate

Appropriate

Troppo basse

Decisamente troppo basse

8) Chi commette lo stesso reato per tre volte dovrebbe essere condannato all'ergastolo per default.

       Totalmente d'accordo

       In parte d'accordo

       In parte in disaccordo

       Totalmente in disaccordo

9) In generale, le condanne inflitte agli autori di reati sessuali sono:

       Decisamente troppo elevate

       Troppo elevate

       Appropriate

       Troppo basse

       Decisamente troppo basse

10) L'età minima per la responsabilità penale dovrebbe essere inferiore agli attuali 14 anni, in modo che i bambini possano essere puniti.

       Totalmente d'accordo

       In parte d'accordo

       In parte in disaccordo

       Totalmente in disaccordo

11) Anche gli autori di reati sessuali hanno il diritto di essere rilasciati dopo aver scontato la pena, purché il rischio di recidiva non sia elevato.

       Totalmente d'accordo

       In parte d'accordo

       In parte in disaccordo

       Totalmente in disaccordo

APPENDIX C

MULTIDIMENSIONAL MEASURE OF COMFORT WITH SEXUALITY

(MMCS)

(Tromovitch, 2000)

Per ogni *item*, selezioni la casella che meglio rappresenta la Sua risposta.

1) Sono completamente a mio agio nel conoscere e interagire con persone le cui attività sessuali differiscono significativamente dalle mie.

   Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

2) Sarei completamente a mio agio a parlare con un/a amico/a dei problemi sessuali che sto vivendo con il/la mio/a partner.

   Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

3) Ho vissuto la mia vita sessuale in modo coerente con le mie convinzioni morali.

   Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

4) Sarei a mio agio nel raccontare a un/a caro/a amico/a esperienze sessuali che considero al di fuori della norma.

   Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

5) Parlare dei dettagli delle mie esperienze sessuali sarebbe imbarazzante, anche

con gli/le amici/amiche.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

6) Potrei essere a mio agio nell'interagire con una persona che pensassi poter avere una relazione sessuale con il proprio fratello o sorella.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

7) Parlare delle mie opinioni sessuali personali è naturale quanto parlare di attualità.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

8) Mi fa piacere avere l'opportunità di condividere le mie opinioni personali sulla sessualità.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

9) Le mie esperienze e scoperte sessuali sono una parte positiva e integrante di ciò che sono.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

10) Sono a mio agio con le mie attività sessuali, sia passate che attuali.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

11) Mi farebbe sentire a disagio avere molti amici bisessuali sessualmente attivi.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

12) Mi vergogno del mio comportamento sessuale passato.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

13) Sono mio agio nel parlare delle mie opinioni sessuali, delle mie fantasie

sessuali e delle esperienze sessuali che ho avuto.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

14) Le mie esperienze e scoperte sessuali passate sono state molto soddisfacenti.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

15) Sarei a mio agio nel parlare delle mie fantasie sessuali in un piccolo gruppo.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

16) Mi disturba pensare alle mie esperienze sessuali passate.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

17) Sarei a mio agio ad avere un/a amico/a stretto/a che si coinvolgesse in

attività omosessuali.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

18) Potrei interagire tranquillamente con un/a adulto/a che ritengo possa aver avuto un rapporto sessuale con un/a dodicenne.

        Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

19) Sono a mio agio nel parlare delle mie opinioni sessuali con persone che non conosco bene.

        Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

20) Non manterrei mai un'amicizia con qualcuno che pratica attività sessuale con gli animali.

        Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

21) Le attività sessuali che ho praticato sono completamente e perfettamente naturali.

        Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

22) Sarei disgustato/a e inorridito/a se un/a amico/a di 21 anni mi dicesse che di recente ha fatto sesso orale con un/a 13enne.

        Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

23) Non mi darebbe fastidio se venissi a sapere che ad un/una caro/a amico/a piace la stimolazione anale durante la masturbazione.

        Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

24) Mi sento a mio agio nel parlare delle mie fantasie sessuali con gli/amici/amiche più stretti/e.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

25) Sarei perfettamente a mio agio a lavorare con una persona che so amare le sculacciate durante l'attività sessuale con il/la proprio/a partner sessuale.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

26) Una persona può essere un/a mio/a buon/a amico/a anche se ama il sadomasochismo con i/le suoi/sue partner sessuali.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

27) Posso discutere liberamente di tematiche sessuali in un piccolo gruppo di pari.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

28) Troverei imbarazzante sapere che l'attività sessuale preferita di un/a amico/a è il sesso anale.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

29) Se potessi rivivere la mia vita, rivivrei la maggior parte delle mie esperienze sessuali passate.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

30) Penso sia un bene per le persone sperimentare un'ampia varietà di pratiche sessuali.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

31) Parlare con un/a ricercatore/ricercatrice della mia storia sessuale sarebbe facile per me.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

32) Continuerei ad accettare un/a amico/a di 21 anni che ho scoperto essere coinvolto/a sessualmente con una persona anziana.

Fortemente in disaccordo   Fortemente d'accordo

ATTITUDES TOWARD SEX OFFENDER TREATMENT (ATTSO)

(Wnuk et al., 2006)

Le affermazioni riportate di seguito descrivono diversi atteggiamenti nei confronti del trattamento degli autori di reati sessuali. Non ci sono risposte giuste o sbagliate, ma solo opinioni. Le viene chiesto di esprimere il suo pensiero riguardo a ciascuna affermazione indicando se è (1) Fortemente in disaccordo; (2) In disaccordo; (3) Indecisa o Indeciso; (4) D'accordo; (5) Fortemente d'accordo.

1) Ritengo che gli autori di reati sessuali possano essere trattati.

       Fortemente in disaccordo

       In disaccordo

       Indecisa o Indeciso

       D'accordo

       Fortemente d'accordo

2) I programmi di trattamento per gli autori di reati sessuali sono efficaci.

       Fortemente in disaccordo

       In disaccordo

       Indecisa o Indeciso

       D'accordo

       Fortemente d'accordo

3) Le persone che vogliono lavorare con gli autori di reato sessuali sono fuori di testa.

    Fortemente in disaccordo

    In disaccordo

    Indecisa o Indeciso

    D'accordo

    Fortemente d'accordo

4) La psicoterapia non funziona con gli autori di reati sessuali.

    Fortemente in disaccordo

    In disaccordo

    Indecisa o Indeciso

    D'accordo

    Fortemente d'accordo

5) Indipendentemente dal trattamento, tutti gli autori di reati sessuali finiscono alla fine per recidivare.

    Fortemente in disaccordo

    In disaccordo

    Indecisa o Indeciso

    D'accordo

    Fortemente d'accordo

6) Gli autori di reati sessuali possono essere aiutati utilizzando le tecniche adeguate.

Fortemente in disaccordo

In disaccordo

Indecisa o Indeciso

D'accordo

Fortemente d'accordo

7) Il trattamento non funziona, gli autori di reati sessuali dovrebbero essere incarcerati a vita.

Fortemente in disaccordo

In disaccordo

Indecisa o Indeciso

D'accordo

Fortemente d'accordo

8) È importante che tutti gli autori di reati sessuali che vengono rimessi in libertà ricevano un trattamento.

Fortemente in disaccordo

In disaccordo

Indecisa o Indeciso

D'accordo

Fortemente d'accordo

9) Dobbiamo spingere i nostri politici a rendere obbligatorio il trattamento degli autori di reati sessuali.

Fortemente in disaccordo

In disaccordo

Indecisa o Indeciso

D'accordo

Fortemente d'accordo

10) Tutti gli autori di reati sessuali dovrebbero sottoporsi a un trattamento, anche se non vogliono farlo.

Fortemente in disaccordo

In disaccordo

Indecisa o Indeciso

D'accordo

Fortemente d'accordo

11) Gli autori di reati sessuali non meritano un'altra opportunità.

Fortemente in disaccordo

In disaccordo

Indecisa o Indeciso

D'accordo

Fortemente d'accordo

12) Agli autori di reati sessuali non serve un trattamento, dal momento che hanno scelto di commettere il reato (o i reati).

Fortemente in disaccordo

In disaccordo

Indecisa o Indeciso

D'accordo

Fortemente d'accordo

13) Gli autori di reati sessuali andrebbero giustiziati.

Fortemente in disaccordo

In disaccordo

Indecisa o Indeciso

D'accordo

Fortemente d'accordo

14) Gli autori di reati sessuali non dovrebbero mai rimessi in libertà.

Fortemente in disaccordo

In disaccordo

Indecisa o Indeciso

D'accordo

Fortemente d'accordo

15) Gli autori di reati sessuali non dovrebbero essere rilasciati nella comunità.

Fortemente in disaccordo

In disaccordo

Indecisa o Indeciso

D'accordo

Fortemente d'accordo

Study	Sample	Method(s)	Main findings
1	782 politicians, members of the Italian Chamber of Deputies or the Senate of the Republic in Parliament.	Tweets' linguistic properties analysed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software.	• 1833 Tweets related to sexual offences in the timelines of Italian politicians (0.04% of all Tweets). • Tenfold overrepresentation compared to official crime statistics (0.004%). • Affective process terms (5.48%) more prevalent than cognitive process terms (3.64%). • Anger-related words most represented (3.28%). • No difference in findings based on political orientation.
2	517 individuals from the Italian general population.	• Demographics. • Multidimensional Measure of Comfort with	• Significant main effect of perpetrator's treatment on perceived prematurity of release [$F(1,508) = 96.296$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .159$]: higher support for re-entry into society after treatment involvement.

		Sexuality (Tromovitch, 2013).	• Significant main effect of perpetrator's treatment on perceived likelihood of reoffending [$F(1,508) = 44.650$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .081$]: decreased perception of reoffending likelihood after treatment involvement.
		• Punitivity Index (Armborst, 2017).	• Significant differences in acceptance of the perpetrator as an acquaintance or neighbor based on treatment [$F(1,508) = 28.239$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .053$] and his socio-economic status [$F(1,508) = 5.273$, $p = .022$, $\eta_p^2 = .010$]: higher acceptance in presence of treatment and high socio-economic status.
		• Case vignettes followed by *ad hoc* constructed items to capture public opinions.	• No significant effect on support for mandatory psychological treatment based on previous treatment involvement, victim's age, or socio-economic status.
			• Significant main effect of victim's age on perception of increasing sex offences in Italy [$F(1,508) = 6.060$, $p = .014$, $\eta_p^2 = .012$]: increased perception of rising sex offences with younger victims.
			• No significant differences in support for a repressive criminal justice system based on treatment, victim's age, or socio-economic status.

			• Significant main effect of victim's age on perceived responsibility for the offence [$F(1,508) = 4.253$, $p = .040$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$]: greater responsibility attributed to the perpetrator with younger victims. • Significant inverse correlation between comfort with sexuality and the belief in rising sexual offences ($r = -.10$, $p = .031$). • Significant positive correlations between comfort with sexuality and endorsement of a retributive criminal justice system ($r = .16$, $p < .001$), and attribution of responsibility to the victim ($r = .12$, $p = .007$).
3	314 licensed psychologists (169 experienced with sexual offences and 145 non-experienced).	• Demographic and professional information. • Attitudes Towards the Treatment of Sex Offenders (Wnuk et al., 2006).	**Effects of disclosure of new case information on the favourability of granting prison benefits**: • Experienced psychologists showed decreased agreement following disclosure of a sexual offence (Stage 1 vs. Stage 2: MD = 20.893, $p < .001$), and after the perpetrator's denial (Stage 2 vs. Stage 3: MD = 11.966, $p < .001$). • Non-experienced psychologists decreased agreement upon discovering the sexual offence (MD = 30.193, p < .001), but

		• Case vignettes followed by *ad hoc* constructed items to capture professionals' evaluations.	did not show significant further change following the disclosure of the perpetrator's denial (MD = -2.071, p = .309). **Effects of disclosure of new case information on malicious satisfaction:** • Higher scores for non-experienced psychologists than experienced psychologists (MD = 5.673, p < .001). **Effects of disclosure of new case information on willingness to pass the case to another colleague:** • Overall increase in professional avoidance when transitioning from general crime to sexual offence (MD = -5.083, p < 0.001) for both experienced and non-experienced psychologists. • Higher professional avoidance among non-experienced psychologists (MD = 24.094, p = < .001). **Psychologists with experience with sex offending:**

			• Non-significant final models for granting prison benefits (adj. R^2 = .025, p = .134) and malicious satisfaction (adj. R^2 = -.019, p = .802). • Significant final model for professional avoidance (adj. R^2 = .138, p < .001), with Treatment Ineffectiveness (β = .358, p < .001) as a significant predictor. **Psychologists without experience with sex offending:** • Significant final models for granting prison benefits (adj. R^2 = .180, p < .001), with the belief in treatment effectiveness (β = -.294, p = .004) as a significant predictor. • Significant final models for malicious satisfaction (adj. R^2 = .141, p < .001), with the lack of professional experience with any type of crime (β = .213, p = .012) and the belief in incapacitation over treatment for sex offenders (β = .403, p < .001) as significant predictors. • Significant final model for professional avoidance (adj. R^2 = .273, p < .001), with the unwillingness to work with sex offenders (β = .357, p < .001) and the lack of professional

			experience with any type of crime ($\beta = .156$, $p = .044$) as significant predictors.
4	85 heterosexual couples in which the male partner was convicted of child sex offences.	Data sourced from criminal records, forensic materials, court sentences, psychosocial reports, taped interviews.	**Role of women**: • 65.1% of women did not know about their partner's abuse, while 34.9% knew but ignored or downplayed it. • 78.0% of women believed the victim's allegations and blamed the partner; 22.0% did not believe the abuse happened. • 11.8% of women contributed to an unsafe home environment. • 36.7% of victims' mothers played a key role in alerting the Authorities. **Separation from partner**: • 54.1% of women separated from their partners after the child sexual abuse emerged. • Separation was more likely when the victim was their own child (OR = 6.43).

			• The combination of sexual violence with other abuses increased the likelihood of separation (OR = 3.54). **Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) experience**: • 21% of women were also victims of IPV by their partner. • Women experiencing IPV were significantly more likely to separate from the partner after the child sexual abuse disclosure (OR = 5.81). **Relationship duration**: • Increased likelihood of separation (OR = 3.25) in shorter relationships (9 years or less). **Belief in allegations and collaboration with the Authorities**: • Belief in the victim's allegations against partner (OR = 4.64) and active collaboration with authorities (OR = 11.57) as predictors of separation.

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