Chapter 6  General discussion

6.1  Summary

The aim of this study was to describe the characteristics of female sexual offenders and their offending careers. This thesis is the first to provide a description and analysis of all known (the entire population in a statistical sense) adult and juvenile female sexual offenders in the Netherlands. The sample was obtained using data from the prosecutor general’s office of the Netherlands from the beginning of the digitalizing of the prosecution registration system in 1993. For the samples of adult and juvenile offenders, individual criminal records were analyzed, containing all offenses since the age of 12. Court files were retrieved which contain detailed information about the sexual offenses from the criminal courts where the female sexual offenders had been prosecuted and/or convicted. Only hands-on offenses were included. Compared with international research, rich information for a relatively large group of female sexual offenders was collected.

In the first study the court files (N=111) of all adult female sexual offenders were studied to examine differences between solo-offenders and those offenders who had committed a sexual offense with one or more co-offenders (almost two thirds), and to investigate whether subtypes of female sexual offenders could be distinguished. The studied female sexual offenders appear heavily burdened in terms of family history (neglect, physical abuse and particularly sexual abuse) and psychosocial problems (violent partners, substance abuse, and prostitution). On average, they were judged as functioning at lower intellectual levels. The prevalence of mental disorders appears high with respect to norm scores. About 70% of the female sexual offenders had abused children.

Those who had offended with co-offenders had significantly more female and intra-familial victims, and had significant more often personality disorders than solo-offenders. Using homogeneity analysis, four ‘prototypical’ offender types were distinguished, that we labeled and described as follows: ‘the young assaulter’ and ‘the rapist’ are relatively young solo-offenders and abuse extra-familial victims. The other two prototypes, ‘the psychologically disturbed woman’ and ‘the passive mother’, are older women who co-offended in sexual abuse. These last two groups mostly abused their own children together with their male/intimate partner. These four ‘prototypes’ partly overlap with previous typologies. However, not present in the data was the ‘teacher-lover type’ reported on by others, a woman who abuses an adolescent but denies the abuse, and feels that she has a love affair with the victim. Some other previously found ‘subtypes’ were not identified in our data because they are mainly distinctive in criminal career aspects, which were not included in our analysis. While we were able to distinguish four ‘prototypes’ of female sexual offenders, it is not possible, because an explorative cluster analysis
was used, to assign female sexual offenders to certain prototypes based on their characteristics. Summing up, we conclude that adult female sexual offenders have varied backgrounds and commit sexual offenses in a variety of contexts, and that the prototypes in which these were clustered partly replicate those found in international research.

In the second study, all adult hands-on female sexual offenders (N=135) and their criminal career information as included in their criminal record was studied. The goal of this study was to investigate to what extent adult female sexual offenders specialize in sexual offending (committing only sexual offenses) and to what extent they can be characterized as generalists (committing other offenses next to sexual offenses). It was assumed that certain personal and offending characteristics would be associated with specialization and generalism.

Criminal careers were studied for on average 34 years, starting at age 12, which is the minimum age a person in the Netherlands can be prosecuted for a crime, and ending at the moment criminal record data were collected, on average at age 46. On average, adult female sexual offenders committed their sampling sexual offense when they were well into adulthood, at the age of 34. Sexual re-offending after the sampling offense (over a period of on average 10 years) was at 1.5% low, while more than a quarter of the women re-offended to other offenses like assault, drugs offenses, or theft.

Using latent class analysis a model with three classes was generated. One class consisted of women who had committed one sexual offense only. A relatively large number of women were classified as specialists, which means that the majority of them committed more than one sexual offense. Women who had co-offended with a male intimate partner were more often specialists. The third class consisted of generalists. They had all committed, besides the sexual offense, at least one serious offense such as manslaughter, serious assault or drugs offenses. In addition, many women in this class had also committed relatively minor offenses such as shoplifting, traffic offenses and fencing.

In the third study all hands-on juvenile female sexual offenders and their court files (N=66) were examined. Juvenile female sexual offenders were defined as juvenile females who were convicted for their sexual offense when they were between 12 and 18 years old. Juvenile female sexual offenders emerge as a group burdened with various problems, with 63% reporting problems in domains such as personal functioning, mental disorders, school and/or peers. About 37% of all juvenile females reported having been sexually abused. The prevalence of group sexual offending in this group of juvenile females (60%) appears high. Solo-offenders appeared more burdened in terms of trauma, and their offending also appeared less often as an once-only occurrence than for group offenders. Five subtypes were identified using content analysis of the crime descriptions: the
offense was committed because of group pressure, emotion regulation problems, for personal profit or gratification, as sexual experimentation or under the influence of a mental disorder. This study shows there is heterogeneity in the background and motives of juvenile female sexual offenders.

From this study it remained unclear what the function and role of the group was in these offenses. This was therefore the topic of the fourth study. In this fourth study, heterogeneity of juvenile female group sexual offenders was studied. The offenses, the aims of the group in committing the offense, and the motives of the juvenile female offenders for participating in the offense were studied. Qualitative analyses showed that a group could have three different aims for initiating the group sexual offense namely harassing the victim, sexual gratification, or taking revenge. The latter, taking revenge, was previously reported in studies on juvenile female sexual offenders and adult female sexual offenders. Two motives for committing a sexual offense in a group emerged: because of group dynamics and because of instrumental reasons. The first motive implies that group dynamics play a role, such as wanting to belong to the group or not being able to resist joining in the group behavior. Some of the juvenile females reported they felt forced by their romantic partner to join in the abuse, which is also regularly reported by adult female group sexual offenders. The instrumental motive implies that offenders choose each other to offend in a group because they are not or less well able to commit the offense alone. This may have however, two directions: the juvenile female offender uses a male offender to humiliate the victim, and in doing so the male co-offenders is selected by the female offender, or the male offender uses a female to get access to other females or to children.

6.2 Discussion

The most consistent findings and their theoretical implications are discussed in this section.

A first striking finding is that about 60% per cent of the female sexual offenders, adults as well as juveniles, had a (male) co-offender. Co-offending therefore appears to be a consistent characteristic of female sexual offending. That being said, the analyses suggested that aims and motives may be different for juvenile and adult female sexual offenders. Adult female group sexual offenders regularly reported that during the offense a (high) level of mental and/or physical coercion was exercised by their male co-offender. Women reported they were physically threatened and abused by their male co-offender. Similar findings were reported by Jones (2008) who interviewed 50 sentenced women (non-sexual offenders) about their (criminal) involvement with their co-offenders.

Juvenile female sexual offenders on the other hand often reported they had chosen their co-offenders themselves because they needed them to complete
the offense (the juvenile female was by herself physically not able to control the victim, or to complete the offense without any co-offenders). Sometimes the juvenile females mentioned they were dragged into the offense by their peers, but mostly they still emphasized their own culpability and responsibility within the offense instead of passing the responsibility to their co-offenders.

It appears therefore, while co-offending is high both in adult as well as in juvenile female sexual offenders, that the dynamics within juvenile group sexual offenses are different than the dynamics within the adult groups. The majority of the adult female sexual offenders committed their offense together with their romantic partner, while the juvenile female sexual offenders committed the offense mostly in the presence of more than one offender with whom they were not in a romantic relationship. In general, it is assumed that group dynamics differ between so-called ‘duo’s’ (groups with two members) and so-called ‘2+’ groups (groups with more than two members) (Da Silva et al, 2013), and it is likely that the group dynamics would also differ between offenders who are in a romantic relationship, and between offenders who are family members, or friends. It may be more difficult to resist the group pressure of four persons, than the group pressure of one person, and it easier to ignore an acquaintance who wants to commit an offense than a romantic partner with whom one is living in the same house.

One of the major and general problems in explaining co-offending, regardless of the kind of data, is that it is often not clear what happened during the offense. Especially during offenses when many offenders are involved, or when offenses are committed over a range of time, it is not easy to reconstruct what happened exactly and what each offender did during the offense. Also, in such co-offending cases, offenders may attempt to minimize their responsibility for the offense while claiming the other offenders are the instigators. There were more indications for such ‘shovelling off’ in the adult female sexual offending cases than in those of juvenile female sexual offenders: as we saw above, adult female sexual offenders more often claimed that they in some way were forced to participate in the abuse than juvenile female offenders. One reason for the adult female offenders to moderate their share in the offense may be that they have more at stake, such as losing custody of their children, losing their job and social ostracism when their social network finds out they have been convicted for sexual abuse. Adult female sexual offenders may therefore have more incentives to minimize their share in the offense than juvenile female sexual offenders, for whom stakes may be less prominent or less high. It may also be more difficult to deny one’s share in an offense when there are five co-offenders who may testify differently instead of just one romantic partner, and harder when the victim is not a young child.
The second finding concerns motives of female sexual offenders. Juvenile female sexual offenders’ motives were studied in chapters four and five. The analyses showed that juvenile females had a broad spectrum of offending motives, like emotional deregulation and group pressure. Sexual drive or sexual gratification was seldom the major drive for committing the abuse. While chapters two and three did not have the explicit goal of examining motives of adult female sexual offenders, from the analyses the following can be deduced. A number of adult female sexual offenders had stated that they committed their offense because of sexual experimentation in babysitting-situations, or had victimized an adult woman to take revenge. The other two distinguished groups victimized their own children; one group performed hands-on sexual acts on the victim, and for these women sexual motives may have played a role. The other group of women was often not present while the abuse occurred even though they knew it was occurring. For adult sexual offenders, sexual motives appear therefore not to be a prominent aim or motive either. It seems, all in all, that (adult and juvenile) female sexual offenders are more often motivated by non-sexual needs like power and/or control or are motivated by non-sexual needs such as fear for their co-offender(s).

The third consistent finding is the absence of paraphilic disorders. In our studies three women (2%) were officially diagnosed with a paraphilia: two women with pedophilia non-exclusive type and one woman with paraphilia NOS. For one juvenile female sexual offender there were suspicions of a paraphilia. These low rates are striking considering the large percentage of child victims (>70%) sexually abused by adult offenders, and the assumed connection between pedophilia and child sexual abuse. This means that it is not necessary for female sexual offenders to have a pedophilic interest to commit a sexual offense against a child, and that female sexual offenders have other motives not inspired by pedophilic preferences. It could however also be the case that their male co-offender has pedophilic preferences and that female offenders therefore end up as a co-offender against children. Thirdly, it could be so that it is difficult to recognize pedophilic preferences in women, or that women are not able, or unwilling, to recognize pedophilic interests in themselves and are therefore not able to report this to a clinician. According to the DSM-IV (TR) paraphilias are, except from sexual masochism, almost never diagnosed in women. However, it is assumed that this reflects more the inability of professionals to register these issues in women (Saradjian, 2010). Deviant sexual fantasies and sexual arousal have been observed in some female sexual offenders but the majority of these clinical studies were based on small numbers (< 20 offenders) so caution in generalizing these results is warranted (Rousseau & Cortoni, 2010). Also, it is unclear whether the nature of paraphilic preferences among females is the same as that of males. Seto (2008) has suggested that up to half of the child molesters are not pedophiles and according
to some Dutch studies—a minority of male child molesters commits their offense out of paraphilic preferences. Chivers, Rieger, Latty and Bailey (2004) showed that while men’s physiological sexual arousal actually reflects their sexual preferences, women’s arousal patterns are much more diversified and tend not to reflect their sexual preference. This suggests that sexual arousal patterns of men and women are different, and that more research is needed before we can infer the absence or presence of deviant sexual interests in female sexual offenders, or even incorporate this topic in treatment (Rousseau & Cortoni, 2010).

The fourth finding is that adult female sexual offenders exhibit a late onset (in their thirties) of their criminal career and that sexual re-offending is almost always absent. The majority of the offenders were classified as specialistic offenders who had mostly committed a series of sexual offenses with their romantic partner. This late onset is firstly contradictory with one of the widely accepted theoretical tenets in criminology that crime peaks in early adolescence and declines in adulthood, the so-called age-crime curve (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). The majority of the studies in life-course criminology analyzing this age-crime curve and (the development of) criminal careers focus on cohorts of offenders who have been followed from childhood until early adulthood (Piquero, 2008) and studies that follow offenders well into adulthood are scarce, even more so when it comes to the criminal career development of female offenders or adult sexual offenders. Although no trajectory analyses were conducted on the current group of female sexual offenders within this thesis, it seems justified to label these women as late-starters (Lussier et al, 2010), since the average age at which they started offending was 33. Theoretical explanations for adult-onset offending are still mainly absent, as this group of offenders has come to the attention of researchers only recently. Some scholars suggest that the start of offending of adult onset women is due to escalating lifestyle problems and a consequent exposure to negative social settings, such as domestic violence and unemployment rather than that they have a high crime propensity (Andersson & Torstensson Levander, 2013). Some suggest that these women’s social backgrounds during childhood and emerging adulthood may have provided sufficient social control to keep them out of crime, or that they differ from chronic offenders by not having externalizing personality traits (Andersson & Torstensson Levander, 2013). As co-offending is so prevalent in female sexual offending, another explanation may be that the co-offender was the trigger for the sexual abuse, and perhaps even the instigator for the criminal career of the female offender.

The criminal career characteristics of the adult female sexual offenders were analyzed by using their official criminal record, self-reported offenses were not included. Thus it may be the case that these women are in fact not true adult-onset offenders, but, for instance, low-rate offenders. Anderson and Levander
(2013) stated that female adult-onset offenders resemble high-chronic offenders in their characteristics. Perhaps these women simply did not come into contact with the criminal justice system and were not prosecuted for offenses they had committed (DeLisi, 2006). As we saw in the introduction, for many it is hard to believe that women are able to commit sexual offenses. It may therefore be possible that their sexual offending never came to the attention of criminal justice authorities, or their cases were not prosecuted. If that is the case, then our methodology was inadequate to detect their early offending. Secondly, in this study during a follow-up period of 11 years only two women re-offended to a sexual offense and one woman had been convicted for a sexual offense prior to the index sexual offense. Since sexual offending in these women’s adolescence is absent, and their age of onset for offending is in their thirties it is possible to conclude that juvenile sexual offending is no precondition for adult female sexual offending. It is possible that juvenile and adult female sexual offenders are in fact distinct groups that may need to be studied separately, and for whom separate explanatory models need to be developed. This has previously been concluded for adult and juvenile male sexual offenders (Lussier & Blokland, 2013; Lussier, Van Den Berg, Bijleveld, & Hendriks, 2012).

6.3 Limitations and strengths of the studies in this thesis

Limitations

With data on 135 adult female sexual offenders and 66 juvenile female sexual offenders we studied an in an absolute sense a small sample. This limited us in the types of analysis we could conduct. There were just enough adult offenders to conduct the cluster analysis in chapter two, employing the rule of thumb criterion that there should be at least ten times as many respondents as variables. There was not enough data on juvenile female sexual offenders to conduct a comparable analysis since there were only 66 juvenile females and conducting a cluster analysis with only six variables would be a fairly narrow base.

This study is based on cases that had been registered with the criminal justice authorities. The cases that are reported to law enforcement are likely to be the more serious, overt cases. These sexual offenses may be characterized by relatively more violence directed against the victim (Travin et al., 1990). When other forms of abuse by women are not identified as abusive and reported, they do not reach the legal system. As mentioned in chapter 1, the dark number in female sexual offending is possibly even higher than in male sexual offending, and this is probably reflected in our data. We could only analyze those cases in which the sexual abuse was reported to the police, registered and where the case proceeded to be prosecuted.
Only hands-on offenses are discussed in this thesis. However, a number of women in our sample who were convicted for a hands-on sexual offense, never had physical contact with their victim(s). These are mostly cases where a mother knew about the abuse of her child(ren), but did not intervene and thus allowed the abuse to take place. If the woman herself did not touch the victim or commit any sexual acts, she can still be held to have had criminal intent on the crime, and therefore held culpable as an accomplice or co-perpetrator. We chose to include these cases for two reasons: firstly because legally speaking these women still count as offenders (and appear as such in the statistics), and secondly because in other studies a similar approach has been used. However, in a behavioral sense, these women cannot be considered hands-on offenders. This also emerges in chapter 2. The results of the cluster-analysis showed that the group of co-offenders is quite mixed and consists of offenders who actively co-perpetrated the offense as well as offenders who were absent in the actual offense but did not intervene while they knew the abuse was occurring. Our approach also leads to incongruity with victim studies: if a victim has been sexually abused, he or she will probably only report the offender who physically committed the abuse, and not the offender who knew of the abuse but who was not present during the abuse.

The data in the court files are retrospective, which means that statements by offenders are recorded after they have committed the offense. This challenges the validity of their statements. Offenders may neutralize and minimize their criminal behaviour. It is also possible that the psychopathology as included in the validated reports is exaggerated by the female offenders as a possible cry for help, or as a way to explain or excuse their offending behaviour and elicit sympathy from the clinician (Miller, Turner, & Henderson, 2009). It is also possible that any psychopathology is outcome rather than precursor of the offense and the following judicial process: it is at times unclear if an offender was already depressed before the offense was reported to the authorities, or whether she became depressed as a result of being in prison and not being able to see her partner and her children and being unclear as to what the future will bring.

There was such a lack of knowledge on the topic of female sexual offending that we decided to first describe the characteristics of female sexual offenders and their offending by using criminal justice data. We chose not to conduct interviews with the offenders in our sample: it is possible that interviews could have provided us with more and especially in-depth information about the offense process, the group dynamics, the way the women got involved in it and the way the women see their role in the offense. It would have been interesting to attempt to detect psychological mechanisms, such as cognitive distortions, that may underlie the offending behavior of female sexual offenders.
Though it was not within the scope of the project and therefore not a research question of this thesis, it would also have been insightful if we had been able to conduct systematic comparisons between female sexual offenders and other groups such as female non-sexual offenders or male sexual offenders. It is difficult to interpret certain findings and to conclude whether certain outcomes such as experiences of victimization and the high level of co-offending are typical for female sexual offenders or whether certain characteristics are found in female offenders in general, or in comparable samples of male sexual offenders. Only when certain findings are a unique feature of female sexual offenders and not a feature of (violent) female offenders in general, is it possible to understand the onset of, and the mechanisms behind their sexual offending.

As with all recidivism studies, our re-offending rate based on official data is the lower limit of true re-offending. A small proportion of sexual offending is reported to the police, and not all suspects will be prosecuted and convicted. As discussed in the introduction, certain factors probably have an unique influence on the dark number for female sexual offending: victims who are ashamed of what had happened to them, police officers who are reluctant to believe victims. The same goes for our data on these women’s previous criminal career.

**Strengths**

In this thesis it was possible to overcome almost all of the important limitations of previous research that were discussed in the general introduction. Our sample comprised all women known by the criminal justice system to have committed a hands-on sexual offense, and is therefore possibly the most representative sample that can be compiled. We excluded suspects and hands-off offenders and included all offenders regardless of the age of their victim. We separately analysed adult female sexual offenders and juvenile female sexual offenders. These turned out to be two distinct groups with distinct characteristics and likely different motives for committing sexual offenses. By studying them separately we were able to show that for adult female sexual offending it is not necessary for sexual offenses to have been committed in childhood and adolescence. It is as yet unknown whether the reverse is true. The juvenile female sexual offenders we studied most probably will not be convicted in their thirties for sexual abuse. This however needs to be studied by following up their criminal career into adulthood.

Including all offenders regardless of the age of their victim(s) showed that whilst the majority of the adult female sexual offenders victimized child victims some of them also victimized peers. However, the majority of the juvenile female sexual offenders victimized primarily peers. If we had studied solely offenders with child victims we would have missed a significant number of offenders, and would have created an atypical image of ‘the female sexual offender’.
Compared with other studies conducted on female sexual offenders, we have a fairly large sample. By studying offenders’ entire criminal records, and combining these with data from court files on the hands-on sexual offenses they have committed and were convicted for by a criminal court, it was possible to create a sizeable and rich dataset on female sexual offenders. Combining these two sources is quite rare within the field of female sexual offenders.

### 6.4 Practical implications

In this section, in no particular order of importance, the implications for authorities that deal with female sexual offenders such as criminal justice authorities, treatment providers and clinicians, are discussed.

*Crime justice authorities and child welfare organizations*

As mentioned in the introduction, police and mental health professionals are reported to have scripts of sexual offending: men are perpetrators and women are victims. Denov (2004b) reported that police officers reacted with disbelief to allegations involving women, while minimizing the seriousness of the reports and viewing the female suspects as less dangerous and harmful than male sexual offenders. When investigators fail to recognize female sexual offenders or trivialize the offenses, female perpetrators may escape prosecution and treatment. It is assumed that sexual offenses come to the attention of the legal system more often when a male perpetrator is involved. The sexual acts as committed by the women are assumed to be less serious and to consist of fondling (Faller, 1995). Cases may therefore only be pursued against the male offender due to the perception that he was primarily responsible. Our analyses point to the need to intervene with regard to the female offender as well. Our data suggest that a sizeable proportion of female sexual offenders may have been ‘selected’ by their male co-perpetrator for their gullibility and the fact that they had ‘available’ children. Dealing only with the male perpetrator is no safeguard that history would not repeat itself - with a new partner.

Police officers need therefore to perceive male and female suspects, but also male and female victims, in the same way. They need to realize that it is possible for men to be sexually victimized by a woman, and that it is possible for a woman to sexually harm someone. If the sexual abuse was the result of a certain degree of male coercion rather than female deviance, the woman should initially be held accountable for her actions (Becker, Hall, & Stinson, 2001). This different way of thinking can be achieved by education and improving knowledge on female sexual offenders.

Peter (2009) questions how well professional organizations are addressing female perpetrated sexual abuse. She found that most referrals for male-
perpetrated sexual abuse came from professional services, such as child welfare organizations, and that nearly two thirds of female-perpetrated violence came from nonprofessional services. This questions how well child welfare organizations are actively addressing female-perpetrated sexual abuse, and questions also to what extent child welfare workers are sufficiently aware of female-perpetrated sexual abuse.

Assessment and treatment needs
Gender-specific assessment and treatment programs are likely needed because female sexual offenders have, as this thesis showed, a particular etiology and offending behavior and consequently, they may have different treatment needs as compared with male sexual offenders (Blanchette & Taylor, 2010).

As far as is known there are no assessment and treatment programs especially designed for female sexual offenders in the Netherlands (Korfage & De Hoop, 2006). In other countries they also appear scarce: gender-specific assessment and treatment programs are reported only by agencies in Canada, England and three American states (Texas, Colorado and New York).

This thesis has shown that there is heterogeneity in female sexual offenders. This heterogeneity is not only theoretically interesting but also relevant for clinical practice. The background of female sexual offenders, their type of sexual offense, the kind of victim and the setting in which the offense took place vary widely. Treatment should therefore be tailored. A substantial proportion of adult and juvenile female sex offenders are traumatized. Therefore treatment of these traumas and mental disorders is probably the best starting point, as in general dealing with traumas and mental disorders is necessary before starting with treatment that focuses on the sexual offense. Issues of suggestibility appear particularly warranted for the co-offenders who explicitly mentioned they were coerced to the offense. However, victimization experiences and influences by co-offending should not be over-emphasized within treatment as this could increase cognitive distortions and decrease taking responsibility for the offending behavior (Denov & Cortoni, 2006).

It is doubted whether treatment should focus on sexual re-offending prevention as is the case for males, because as we saw in the second study the level of sexual recidivism in female sexual offenders is very low - about 2%. In order to calculate the risk of an offender re-offending, evaluators consider individual characteristics of the offender which increase or decrease the probability of re-offending. A meta-analysis on male sexual offenders showed that deviant sexual preferences and antisocial orientation were the major predictors of sexual recidivism. Antisocial orientation was the major predictor of violent recidivism and
general recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). However, risk assessment tools developed for male sexual offenders are not necessarily valid for female sexual offenders. This is for two reasons: first, sexual reoffending in female offenders is much lower than in male offenders (Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2010), and second, the risk factors included in the scales for men may not be valid for women. It seems that static risk factors for general reoffending are to a certain degree the same in male and female sexual offenders (prior criminal history, younger age, history of substance abuse), but static and dynamic risk factors related to sexual reoffending in females remain unknown (Cortoni & Sandler, 2013). Because of very low sexual reoffending whether it is practically possible to develop a risk assessment tool for female sexual offenders is questionable (Wijkman & Bijleveld, 2013). Because violent and especially general reoffending is more of an issue in female sexual offenders it may be better to screen female sexual offenders with a more general assessment tool which targets general and violent reoffending.

6.5 Agenda for future research

Expanding data collection
As mentioned in the limitations section, the number of offenders studied in this thesis is small. However, it is not possible to enlarge the Dutch sample because we have already collected data on the whole population of known adult and juvenile female sexual offenders. To increase power in statistical analyses, using data from other countries appears to be the only recourse. By adding comparable data from other countries, it would be possible to increase the sample size. This is especially necessary for investigating the risk and protective factors for sexual reoffending. For extracting factors influencing reoffending risk it is essential to have a fairly large group of offenders who reoffend, as otherwise it is not possible to distinguish key risk factors for reoffending, and key protective factors for not reoffending.
Theoretical development – pathways to offending

The main aim of this study was to describe characteristics of and heterogeneity in hands-on female sexual offenders, their offenses and their criminal careers. This was the first step into the relatively unknown territory of female sexual offender research. The aim of this thesis was not to develop a theoretical model with which it would be possible to explain the onset and development of female sexual offending behavior. This would however be an obvious and important follow-up research theme.

As far as known only Gannon et al (2008) have developed a model outlining the offense process of female sexual offenders, called the Descriptive Model of Female Sexual Offending. This model explains the offense process and its parts, such as the planning process and particular offending styles. Incarcerated female sexual offenders in the United Kingdom (N=22) were interviewed and a model from the narrative experiences of these women drawn to build the model. The model distinguishes three phases, background factors, the pre-offense period and the offense period. It pays a lot of attention to how the offense occurs and what factors influence this process.

In a follow-up study, Gannon et al (2010) identified three distinct and stable pathways to female sexual offending, based on interviews with 18 female sexual offenders originating from the 2008-study. The majority of the offenders followed an ‘explicit approach’, which means they intended to offend, and explicitly planned their offense. Another pathway was ‘directed avoidant’: these offenders intended not to offend, but did so under the direction and coercion of a male accomplice. The third pathway was followed by offenders who were ‘implicitly disorganized’. They did not intend to offend, but offended impulsively following severe self-regulatory failure. These three pathways were also identified in a North-American replication study, in which no new pathways were identified (Gannon, Waugh, Taylor, Blanchette, O’Connor, Blake, & Ó Ciardha (2014)). Limitations of this pathways study were that all offenders had received a prison sentence, implying that their offenses were fairly serious. Furthermore, the offenders victimized mostly children, so there is little information about women who offended against adolescents, peers or adults. One of the limitations of using interviews as main data source is that respondents may be susceptible to memory distortions and impression management strategies. To overcome these limitations the pathways study needs to be replicated using a larger sample (including adult and peer victims and using data based on police reports and other statements which are taken immediately following the offense). The study by Gannon et al. (2008, 2010) should be replicated in the Netherlands, as well as other countries, to learn more about the planning of female sexual offending.
Furthermore, a considerable number of the female offenders have been (sexually) victimized in childhood and adolescence. The impact of these experiences on their offending behavior should be studied. It is generally accepted that most children who are (sexually) victimized do not become offenders (Salter et al., 2003), and this thesis has shown that not all sexual offenders have been (sexually) victimized. It needs to be studied which factors, together with the sexual abuse experiences, contribute to the onset of sexual offending behavior in female sexual offenders. Future studies focusing on all these aspects would increase our understanding of the etiology of female sexual offending, and the possible role of experiences of victimization and cognitive distortions on their offending process.

Group dynamics
This thesis has shown that the majority of the (juvenile) female sexual offenders commit their offenses in a group, and that they often choose their co-offenders or are chosen by their co-offender. However, controversy exists about whether ‘duos’, such as romantic couples, should be considered as a group, and therefore included in the group dynamics research (da Silva et al., 2013). It would be relevant to investigate whether there are differences between solo-offenders, duos and two+ groups. A study on multiple perpetrator rape conducted by da Silva et al. (2013) showed that groups of 2+ offenders were significantly younger than duos, who were in turn significant younger than solo offenders. The authors also found significant differences in offender ethnicity, sexual acts performed, and duration of the sexual acts.

Future studies should also focus in more qualitative detail on the role of the co-offender in the sexual offending of adult women, since much of these women’s (sexual) offending appears directly tied in with that of their (romantic) partners. In contrast with their juvenile counterparts, adult female sexual offenders appear often to have been chosen or selected by their co-offender(s). The model developed by Gannon et al. (2008) contained solo-offenders as well as co-offenders. However, their study did not pay much attention to the role of the co-offender other than questions about the coercion by the male partners (which may explain why much fewer women than expected on the basis of our Dutch findings were classified as ‘directed avoidant’). Questions about the intensity and nature of any coercion and about the moment that coercion started should be included, as well as questions on current domestic violence and previous violent partners.

Criminal careers of (juvenile) female sexual offenders
In this thesis we have not attempted to predict sexual re-offending. As far as we know, two studies have empirically analyzed predictors of sexual reoffending in female sexual offenders. Williams and Nicholaichuk (2001) stated that the only
factor that clearly differentiated the two sexual recidivists in their study from the other women (total sample size was 62) was that they were the only two offenders who had engaged exclusively in solo offending. Sandler and Freeman (2009) found that with regard to criminal history variables, those offenders who had a sexual re-arrest (N=32) were more likely than those with no sexual re-arrest to have had at least one prior misdemeanor conviction, at least one prior felony conviction, and at least one prior drug conviction (N=1,434). More studies on predictors of (sexual) re-offending seem warranted.

As far we are aware no studies have been conducted on re-offending patterns of juvenile female sexual offenders. It would be useful to study the role of the sexual offense in their criminal career and to examine whether this was a once-only act, or the start - or maybe the end - of a criminal career. Lussier and Blokland (2013) concluded that the majority of male juvenile sexual offenders desisted from sexual offending, but that as the frequency of general nonsexual offending increased during adolescence, so did the risk of becoming an adult sexual offender. By increasing the sample size for juvenile female sexual offenders as well, it may become possible to identify predictors for general, violent and sexual re-offending, as well as protective factors against re-offending.

Systematic comparisons with other offender groups
One of the limitations of this thesis is that it was not able to make a systematic comparison with other offender groups, such as female violent offenders and female general offenders (or even female non-offenders), or with male sexual offenders. Therefore it is unclear whether certain characteristics are typical for female sexual offenders or whether they are a feature of female offenders in general, and whether characteristics are typical for sexual offenders in general, or for female sexual offenders in particular. Such systematic comparisons could be carried out by selecting groups of offenders using a similar protocol as that used for this study.

What happens after the conviction?
It is unclear what happens to the families of the adult female sexual offenders who abused their children, and with their relationships. What happens to their children when both parents are convicted? Do female sexual offenders, for example, stay with their romantic partner after the conviction? Do couples receive the same sentences, and what factors influence this sentencing? Scholars have suggested that female sexual offenders tend to receive less severe sentences than male sexual offenders (Saradijan, 2010). Sandler and Freeman (2010) found that being a female sexual offender rather than a male sexual offender significantly increased the odds of receiving less restrictive sentences such as a fine or an (un) conditional release.
instead of incarceration. For studying this in the Netherlands, it is advisable to use a group of male sexual offenders who have been selected the same way as the female sexual offenders.

The follow-up period for studying criminal career characteristics in this study was quite long, more than 11 years. If, even over such a long period, sexual reoffending is so low, it is unlikely that the reoffending rates will increase if longer periods are employed. However, future research should examine this.

As illustrated with the quotes at the start of this thesis, police officers tend to minimize the seriousness of the sexual abuse as committed by female offenders and view female suspects as less dangerous and harmful than male sexual offenders. When the results of this thesis seem to suggest that female sexual offenders may indeed be less harmful than male sexual offenders: in many cases it is questionable whether these women would have committed their offenses without a male co-offender. However, it is precisely this seeming innocence what may make these offenders, in the presence of their co-offenders, even more harmful than the typical male sexual offender who abuses his children. When solely a man abuses his children, there may be ways for the victims to escape the sexual abuse, as they can report the sexual abuse to their mother. However, when the mother is also involved in the sexual abuse it becomes almost impossible for the victims to escape the cycle of abuse.

This thesis has shown that the motives of female sexual offenders for committing their offense are often not sexual, and, because a sizeable proportion of the offenders are victims of (sexual) abuse themselves, it might be tempting to label these women not as sexual offenders, but predominantly as victims. As we saw in the introduction there is, especially in feminist criminology, a certain unwillingness to acknowledge that women's acts of violence are not always a product of previous victimization experiences (Kruttschnitt & Carbone-Lopez, 2006). In this context it has also been said that traditional societies have the need to abnormalize violence in women, because seeing female violence as something normal would threaten our traditional scripts about women and their respective gender roles (Gilbert, 2002). However, in doing this we deny the possibility that women involved in violent crimes act as active, rational human subjects (Kruttschnitt & Carbone-Lopez, 2006), for which they can be held accountable.

All in all we should be careful with our tendency to minimize the role of women in sexual offenses, and we should not be tempted to see female sexual offenders solely as weak, victimized persons who cannot be held (fully) responsible for their acts. This thesis has shown that female sexual offenders exist: some women sometimes commit sexual offenses. These sexual offenses are often committed in the presence of a co-offender, and the role of this co-offender
probably differs between adult female sexual offenders and juvenile female sexual offenders. Women's motives for committing a sexual offense vary, but appear generally not to be sexually motivated. It seems that many offenses are influenced by contextual factors such as peer-pressure, but more in-depth research is needed before we can make definitive statements about the onset and development of women's sexual offending behavior.