THESIS

MOTHERS IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH SEX OFFENDERS: UNDERSTANDING LIFE EXPERIENCES

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

MOTHERS IN RELTIONSHIPS WITH SEX OFFENDERS:

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This thesis examines the experiences of mothers in relationships with sex offenders. The research draws on data gathered through interviews with eighteen mothers. Seven of the participants had entered into their relationships prior to their partner becoming a registered sex offender; the other 11 women had entered into their relationships with men who were already registered as sex offenders. This study explores stresses experienced in seven life spheres—employment, housing, peer and family relationships, relationship with their partner, their children's lives and self-perception—as a result of their relationship with a sex offender. In addition, this study identified the strategies used to cope and the support relied on to mediate the effects of those stresses. Further, I map the respondents' stress trajectories, integrating their stressors and coping strategies. I conclude with recommendations to assist mothers in relationships with sex offenders in the future.

DEDICATION

For Alea Ranae Dawson, my daughter, who provides me with the motivation to always move forward. You are a breath of fresh air that continues to inspire me. I love you.

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First, I would like to thank all of the women who participated in my study. I greatly appreciate your time and that you shared such personal experiences. I am humbled by your honesty and immense resiliency and perseverance.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rebecca is a 35-year-old white woman whose husband, Chris, became a registered sex offender in 2010. At that time, they had been married for 13 years, and they were still together. They had two children together, who were 10 and 8, when their father was convicted.

Due to Chris' status as a sex offender, he lost his employment and, consequently, the family's main source of income. Rebecca had to switch from part time to full time employment, as she described: "I worked in the lab and it was on-call so I was actually able to go full time but as on-call. I didn't have any benefits but I was getting forty hours a week. So we lost his career, and of course our health insurance." She not only became the sole breadwinner for her family, but the only source of funds for her husband's registration costs. Rebecca and her family also lost their housing due to Chris' offender status. The family found it difficult to find a new home because of his housing restrictions as a registered sex offender. "The only places to live to rent were places where other felony sex offenders were allowed to be, which of course we have two young boys and I come home late at night. So that didn't really appeal to us." The trouble with finding secure housing led the family to move to a different state to live with Rebecca's parents.

Following the move, Rebecca gained the support of her family being nearby but lost her close friends. She also had to find work so that she could continue to support her family as the primary earner. Although trying to start a new life, Rebecca struggled as she watched her children lose their former peers, as well as beloved pets, as they were unable to handle the move. Her children also had to change schools and lost the freedom they had in their own home. "To me, that's the hardest part, not being able to give them what I feel [my children] need emotionally, apart from myself and there's nothing I can do about it because it's not my house."

This thesis is about mothers in relationships with sex offenders. It draws on 18 interviews with women who had children with a sex offender or who had children from a previous relationship but were currently in a relationship with a sex offender. This thesis includes a description of the impact of the man's registry status on these women's employment, their housing situations, their peer and family relationships, their relationship with their partner, their relationships with their children and the other effects on their children's lives, and on their own self-perception.

Sex Offender Legislation within the United States

There are currently over 747,000 registered sex offenders in the United States; men represent about 99% of all these registered offenders (National Center for Missing and Exploited

Children 2012). In 1997, at the beginning of a wave of sex offender legislation, there were about 234,000 registered sex offenders in the United States (Greenfeld 1997). In 2008, the number of registered sex offenders was over 636,000 in the United States (Velazquez 2008). That means the number of people convicted as registered sex offenders in the United States multiplied by 2.6 times in about a ten year period. In the past four years, 2008-2012, the number of sex offenders has multiplied by 1.17. Figure 1.1 illustrates this dramatic change in the number of registered sex offenders in the United States over the past 15 year

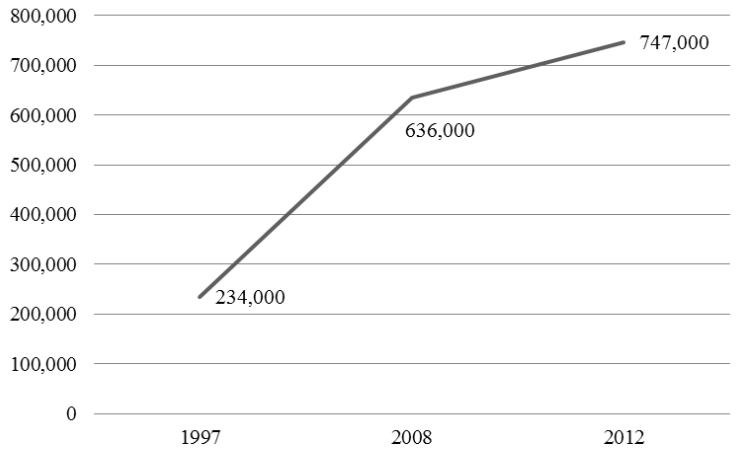

Figure 1.1 Number of Sex Offenders in the United States

Anyone can be registered as a sex offender: they can be male or female; young or old; have different levels of education; be married or single; have strong or weak family ties; and may or may not have a criminal record (Center for Sex Offender Management 2008). With that said, and as noted above, the vast majority of registered sex offenders are male.

Table 1.1 shows the number of sex offenders, by state, in 2008. As indicated in the table, California, Michigan, and Texas have the highest total number of registered sex offenders and Alaska, Michigan and Montana have the highest percent in the statewide population. Rhode Island, Minnesota and Wyoming have the lowest total number of registered sex offenders and Minnesota, Rhode Island and New Jersey have the lowest percent in their statewide population.

Table 1.1 State Sex Offender Registry Statistics*

State	Population	Total # of Registry Offenders	Population/Registry Offender %	State	Population	Total # of Registry Offenders	Population/Registry Offender %
Alabama	4,557,808	5,297	0.12%	Nebraska	1,758,787	2,494	0.14%
Alaska	663,661	4,149	0.63%	Nevada	2,414,807	6,048	0.25%
Arizona	5,939,292	13,964	0.24%	New Hampshire	1,309,940	1,366	0.10%
Arkansas	2,779,154	2,371	0.09%	New Jersey	8,717,925	2,149	0.02%
California	36,132,147	63,000	0.17%	New Mexico	1,928,384	1,740	0.09%
Colorado	4,665,177	5,642	0.12%	New York	19,254,630	24,328	0.13%
Connecticut	3,510,297	4,287	0.12%	North Carolina	8,683,242	7,177	0.08%
Delaware	843,524	1,941	0.23%	North Dakota	636,677	291	0.05%
Florida	17,789,864	39,525	0.22%	Ohio	11,464,042	15,369	0.13%
Georgia	9,072,576	10,983	0.12%	Oklahoma	3,547,884	5,283	0.15%
Hawaii	1,275,194	1,559	0.12%	Oregon	3,641,056	13,440	0.37%
Idaho	1,429,096	2,152	0.15%	Pennsylvania	12,429,616	8,814	0.07%
Illinois	12,763,371	12,516	0.10%	Rhode Island	1,076,189	90	0.01%
Indiana	6,271,973	9,829	0.16%	South Carolina	4,255,083	10,239	0.24%
Iowa	2,966,334	6,098	0.21%	South Dakota	775,933	2,269	0.29%
Kansas	2,744,687	3,678	0.13%	Tennessee	5,962,959	4,511	0.08%
Kentucky	4,173,405	8,875	0.21%	Texas	22,859,968	47,814	0.21%
Louisiana	4,523,628	6,881	0.15%	Utah	2,469,585	5,410	0.22%
Maine	1,321,505	1,512	0.11%	Vermont	623,050	310	0.05%
Maryland	5,600,388	4,578	0.08%	Virginia	7,567,465	13,330	0.18%
Massachusetts	6,398,743	2,556	0.03%	Washington	6,287,759	19,421	0.31%
Michigan	10,120,860	39,945	0.40%	Washington DC	550,521	659	0.12%
Minnesota	5,132,799	102	0.00%	West Virginia	1,816,856	2,476	0.14%
Mississippi	2,921,088	4,349	0.15%	Wisconsin	5,536,201	9,208	0.17%
Missouri	5,800,310	10,745	0.19%	Wyoming	509,294	145	0.03%
Montana	935,670	3,670	0.39%				

*Most registries are updated daily. Because these numbers constantly change, they should be considered estimates.

Source: Fowers 2009

The first official sex offender laws were passed in 1947 in California (Velazquez 2008). This was during the first wave of U.S. sex offender laws, lasting from 1937 to 1955; the year 1937 is when the topic of sex offenders began to heavily enter legislative discourse. Since that

time, the rate and type of crimes for which a person can be classified as a sex offender have increased (Palermo 2012). While many registered sex offenders are classified as those who have committed some form of sexual assault, there are also sex offenders who are classified as those who have, for example, solicited prostitution, possessed child pornography, or engaged in voyeurism or indecent exposure (including public urination) (Bonnar-Kidd 2010).

The second wave of sex offender laws began in 1989 and continues to date. The federal and state legislation passed over the prior 25 years has "expanded the scope of crimes that qualify as sex offenses, more than doubled the number of people required to register as sex offenders, increased sentences for people found guilty of sex offenses, and established strategies designed to manage convicted sex offenders after their incarceration" (Velazquez 2008:iii).

Following several high profile sexual offender cases in the mid-1990s, law enforcement officials and local communities have focused greater attention and concern to sex based crimes, which has contributed to the latest wave of legislation and harsher penalties for offenders (Palermo 2012). With sexual offenses gaining so much attention, the National Conference of State Legislatures has consistently listed sex offenders as one of the leading policy issues on state legislative agendas (National Conference of State Legislatures 2009; Harris and Lurigio 2010).

In an effort to decrease the incidence of sexual assault, federal and state legislators have passed regulatory laws aimed at reducing recidivism among convicted sexual offenders and to allay the fears and anxieties of families and neighborhoods (Bonnar-Kidd 2010; Palermo 2012). Table 1.2 highlights the number of bills introduced and enacted on sex offender legislation in 2007-2008 in the United States. The table demonstrates that all 50 states passed at least one law

focused on sex offenders in this time period. Forty-seven of the 50 states passed laws in expanding sex offender registration information.

Table 1.2 State Legislation Focusing on Sex Offenders, by Policy Area, 2007-2008

Topic	States	Bills Introduced	Laws Enacted
Registration Information Expanded	47	350	62
Sentencing	46	269	53
Victims' Rights	35	113	27
Work and Volunteering Restrictions	36	136	26
Residency Restrictions	44	214	22
Internet/Electronic Crime	26	47	15
Civil Commitment	23	71	14
Electronic Monitoring	31	109	14
Juveniles	30	80	12
Internet Access Restrictions	15	23	9
ID Cards/License Plates	14	24	6
People	15	28	5
Child Custody and Visitation	14	24	5
Erectile/Sexual Dysfunction Drugs	5	10	3
Death Penalty	6	7	2
Total	**50**	**1,505**	**275**

Source: Council of State Governments 2010

At the federal level, numerous acts have been passed that have prompted a rise in associated state-level sex offender legislation. In 1994, for example, federal legislators passed the *Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act*. This law mandated that sex offenders register their names and current place of residence with the local police department in their communities (Office of Justice Programs 2012; Palermo 2012). In 1996, federal legislators passed the *Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act*, also known as "*Megan's Law*." This law provided for the public dissemination of information from states' sex offender registries. The data were available in police stations, on the Internet, and even via leaflets distributed to community residents (Office of Justice Programs 2012; Palermo 2012). *Megan's Law* was intended to reduce the chance of recidivism and to give non-offending

community members notice of risk and the ability to protect themselves (Palermo and Farkas, 2001).

In 2006, federal legislators passed the *Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act.* This act created a new baseline standard for jurisdictions to implement regarding sex offender registration and notification. It also created the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering and Tracking (SMART) within the Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs (Office of Justice Programs 2012). Sex-offender recidivism continued after these laws were passed and studies show that the public has become increasingly anxious and fearful regarding the threat of sexual offenders (Brannon, Levenson, Fortney and Baker 2007). Indeed, with the increased focus, sexual offenders have become defined as public enemies and a threat to the health and well-being of children and women alike (Palermo 2012; see SMART http://www.smart.gov/legislation.htm for full list of sex offender related mandates).

State-level sex offender legislation varies across each state yet is generally concentrated within, although not constricted to, seven types of initiatives: (1) sex offender registries, (2) community notification, (3) residence restrictions, (4) civil commitment, (5) lifetime supervision, (6) driver's license notation, and (7) chemical castration (Mancini, Barnes and Mears 2013). The first two types of initiatives, sex offender registries and community notification, are federally mandated under the *Jacob Wetterling Act* (1994) and *Megan's Law* (1996). All states are required to develop public registries that provide information on all released sex offenders. Failure to maintain registries puts states at risk of losing criminal justice funding (Center for Sex Offender Management 1999). The length of registration varies by state, however (Tewksbury 2005). Community notification is when communities are notified that a person in their community has been placed on the sex offender registry or someone already on the registry has

moved into their community (Tewksbury 2005). The way in which communities are notified and what types of sex offenders requires notification varies from state to state (Beck and Travis 2005).

The other five primary types of state-level initiatives, including residence restrictions, civil commitment, lifetime supervision, driver's license notation, and chemical castration are not federally mandated; therefore, those measures are not employed in all states. Residence restrictions are generally used to disallow sex offenders from living near schools, school bus stops, daycare centers, and other locations (Mercado, Alvarez and Levenson 2008). Again, because residence restrictions are not federally mandated, the use of such restrictions and the range of potential boundaries vary from state to state (Zgoba 2011). Residency restrictions across states vary between requiring that a sex offender keep a distance of 500 to 2,500 feet between their home and a restricted location such as a school or childcare center (Norman-Eady 2007). Civil commitment is a measure that some states have employed that requires high-risk offenders to undergo psychiatric evaluation. If those offenders are committed, they stay in confinement until a clinician determines they are no longer a threat to the community (Levenson 2004). Some states have also implemented lifetime supervision laws that require high-risk sex offenders be monitored for their entire lives (Armstrong and Freeman 2011; Nieto 2004). Other states have enacted driver's license notation requirements, which identify sex offenders in attempt to assist monitoring of sex offenders who move counties or states (Bonnar-Kidd 2010). A limited number of states have begun using the new, and highly controversial, experimental practice of chemical castration to prevent sex crimes. This is where sex offenders are injected with synthetic hormones to reduce sexual arousal (Scott and del Busto 2009).

In their study on sex crime laws state-level variation, Mancini, Barnes and Mears (2013) compiled a summary of sex offender legislation in all 50 states as of 2008. That summary is reproduced in Table 1.3 below. Several items are of note. First, all 50 states currently have at least two of the seven categories of state-level legislation identified above, the federal registration and notification. Five states only enforce those two mandates, while the remainder have additional enforcement categories. Second, residency restrictions are the most common of the five types that are not federally mandated, followed by civil commitment. Thirty-three states enforce residency restrictions, whereas nineteen enforce civil commitment. States in the South have passed the largest number of sex offender laws, with an average of sixty-five sex offender laws within each state.

Table 1.3 Regional and State-Level Variation on Sex Offender Legislation, 2010

	Registry	Notification	Residency Restrictions	Commitment	Lifetime Supervision	Driver's License	Castration	No. of Laws (average)
Northeast								26 (2.9)
Connecticut	x	x			X			3
Maine	x	x						2
Massachusetts	x	x		X	X			4
New Hampshire	x	x		X				3
New Jersey	x	x		X				3
New York	x	x		X				3
Pennsylvania	x	x						2
Rhode Island	x	x			X			3
Vermont	x	x			X			3
South								65 (4.1)
Alabama	x	x	X			x		4
Arkansas	x	x	X					3
Delaware	x	x	X			x		4
Florida	x	x	X	X		x	x	6
Georgia	x	x	X				x	4
Kentucky	x	x	X					3
Louisiana	x	x	X			x	x	5
Maryland	x	x	X					3
Mississippi	x	x	X			x		4
North Carolina	x	x	X					3
Oklahoma	x	x	X					3
South Carolina	x	x	X	X				4
Tennessee	x	x	X		X			4
Texas	x	x	X	X		x	x	6
Virginia	x	x	X	x				4
West Virginia	x	x	X		X	x		5
Midwest								47 (3.9)
Illinois	x	x	X	x	X			5
Indiana	x	x	X			x		4
Iowa	x	x	X	x				4
Kansas	x	x		x		x		4
Michigan	x	x	X			x		4
Minnesota	x	x	X	x				4
Missouri	x	x	X	x				4
Nebraska	x	x	X	x				4
North Dakota	x	x		x				3
Ohio	x	x	X					3
South Dakota	x	x	X					3
Wisconsin	x	x		x	X		x	5
West								47 (3.6)
Alaska	x	x						2
Arizona	x	x	X	x	X	x		6
California	x	x	X	x			x	5
Colorado	x	x			X			3
Hawaii	x	x						2
Idaho	x	x	X					3
Montana	x	x	X				x	4
Nevada	x	x	X		X			4
New Mexico	x	x			X			3
Oregon	x	x	X		X		x	5
Utah	x	x	X		X			4
Washington	x	x	X	x				4
Wyoming	x	x						2
N (%)	50 (100)	50 (100)	33 (66)	19 (38)	14 (28)	11 (22)	8 (16)	

Source: Mancini, Barnes and Mears 2013

Experiences of Sex Offenders and their Family Members

The vast number of sex offender laws has created distinctive experiences for sex offenders in the United States. Therefore, it is important to understand the effects of those policies, in order to understand the experiences of sex offenders and those closest to them. The level of public disclosure to which sex offenders are subjected is unprecedented in U.S. history, compared to that demanded of other types of criminal offenders (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009). Persons convicted of specific sex crimes must register as sex offenders with a local law enforcement agency. Depending on the state a sex offender resides in and that state's statutes on sex offenders' notification, a sex offender may be subject to public disclosure of his registration; this could include, but is not limited to, the disclosure of identities and locations on publicly accessed websites. Registration and notification may induce compliance from sex offenders, but they may also negatively affect the offenders and the community and their families (Zevitz, 2003; Palermo 2012).

A growing number of studies have looked at the myriad consequences of being labeled a sex offender. For example, Tewksbury and Lees (2006) delve into the experiences of publicly identified sex offenders. They individually interviewed 22 sex offenders listed as residing in Jefferson County, Kentucky. Their study was focused on how registered sex offenders perceive the social, emotional, and practical consequences of their status as registered sex offenders. Their findings showed four primary areas in which sex offenders struggle: employment difficulties—both in obtaining and maintaining employment; relationship difficulties—in the arena of attempting to overcome or cope with rejection by others; harassment—fear of harassment led many to severely limit their interactions with others and activities away from home; and stigmatization and persistent feelings of vulnerability—all participants reported feeling publicly

labeled, obvious to observers, and generally despised by the general public. Registered sex offenders face many additional integration barriers as a result of their designation, for example, limited access to housing, and education, as well as community segregation and harassment, (Bonnar-Kidd 2010).

Bonnar-Kidd (2010) has also identified vigilantism, ostracism and public segregation as additional consequences of the public fear and stigma associated with sex offenders. Community members may embrace vigilantism, acting in an abusive or even criminal way toward offenders and even their families (Farkas and Miller 2007; Palermo 2012). For example, in Helenwood, Tennessee, in September 2007, two people set their neighbor's house on fire after he was arrested for possession of child pornography; his wife died in the fire (Bonnar-Kidd 2010). In another example, in 2012, two men were murdered in Washington for their names being on the sex offender registry. One of the victims had raped two children, landing himself on the sex offender registry, but the other had to register for having sex with a high school freshman when he was an 18-year-old high school senior (Bartkewicz 2012). It was their label as a sex offender, not their crimes, which led to their death. Levenson and Cotter (2005) conducted a study on the effects of *Megan's Law* on sex offender reintegration. Their sample consisted of male adult convicted sex offenders (n=183). They found that one third of their survey respondents had experienced physical threats, and most reported negative effects of community notification including ''stress, isolation, loss of relationships, fear, shame, embarrassment, and hopelessness'' (Levenson and Cotter 2005:49; also see Bonnar-Kidd 2010).

Brannon, Levenson, Fortney and Baker (2007) conducted a similar study that compared perceptions of community notification between the sex offenders and the non-offending public. Their sample included 125 adult sex offenders and 193 adult members of the non-offending

public. Each sample group completed a set of closed-ended survey questions. The researchers found that the non-offending public perceived the notification laws as “fair” and “effective,” whereas the offenders did less so. The non-offending public also thought there to be less vigilantism against sex offenders than was reported in actuality by the offenders. Brannon et al. (2007) attribute this to sex offenders under-reporting to avoid drawing more attention to themselves and attempting to avoid worsened feelings of stigmatization.

Most sex offenders have families—parents, siblings, relatives, romantic partners, and children—that are also impacted by the offender’s release from prison (Bonnar-Kidd 2010; Levenson and Tewksbury 2009). There is limited research on how sex offender’s families are impacted by their association with a sex offender; however, existing research on the topic has produced insightful data on the population. Families of sex offenders experience many obstacles upon the offender’s release, including “publicity concerning the sex offender’s release and stigmatization due to the nature of the sex offense” (Farkas and Miller 2007:88). Registered sex offenders’ family members also suffer the consequences of registration, community notification, and residency restrictions (Bonnar-Kidd 2010). The public demand for harsh punishments and disclosure of information of registered sex offenders is unique in the degree to which invisible sanctions are unintentionally placed upon and experienced by the family members of offenders (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009). In the previously described study on sex offender reintegration, Levenson and Cotter (2005) found that 67% of registered sex offenders in their study (n = 183) reported that their families suffered emotional distress as a result of community notification (Bonnar-Kidd 2010).

Levenson and Tewksbury (2009) conducted a survey of 584 family members of registered sex offenders—including parents, siblings, relatives, romantic partners and children —

and found that sex offender registration notification caused noticeable stress in their lives. Family members, even those who do not live with the sex offender, reported that they often experienced harassment, threats, violence, economic hardships, difficulties with housing, and psychological stresses due solely to their relation to a sex offender (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009). The most commonly reported personal loss for this sample was feelings of loneliness and shame, followed by avoidance of social activities due to shame and embarrassment. This finding was true for both immediate and extended family members in the sample, and regardless of if they chose to stay in contact with the offender.

Many sex offenders have children of their own, and these children are also impacted by their parent's, generally father's, status as a sex offender (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009). Indeed, Levenson and Tewskbury (2009) emphasize it is important to consider the impact of a conviction on the children of sex offenders; the stigmatization that they encounter could impact their psychosocial development, their interpersonal relationships, and their sense of self. The necessity for such research is evident as the number of imprisoned parents has increased: Between 1991 and 2007, the number of incarcerated parents increased nearly 80 percent to 357,300, affecting an estimated 1,706,600 children (Glaze and Maruschak 2008; Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012). The Levenson and Tewksbury (2009) study revealed that over half (58%) of those who were the parent or caretaker of the child of a sex offender reported that the child was treated differently by children at their school and 78% said the friendships of the child were negatively affected in some way. To date, there are no available studies that focus exclusively on the experiences of mothers who are in relationships with sex offenders, or of their children.

Research Questions

This thesis aims to address a gap in literature by exploring the experiences of mothers in relationships with sex offenders. Through in-depth interviews with mothers who are in relationships with sex offenders, either entering the relationship prior to or after the offender's registration, I examine the stress these women describe within the primary spheres of their lives: their employment, their housing situations, their peer and family relationships, their relationships with their partner, their children's lives and their self-perception. I am also interested in what coping strategies these women utilized, as well as the social support available to them throughout this experience. I address the following research questions in this study:

Research Question 1: How are the primary spheres of these mothers' lives – including their relationships, housing situations, employment, perceptions of self, and their children's lives – impacted by the labeling of a partner as a sex offender?

Research Question 2: How do these women cope with these experiences, and what forms of personal and/or social support do they rely on?

Research Question 3: How do mothers who are in relationships with sex offenders describe their own stress trajectories associated with this experience?

Overview

The second chapter of this thesis provides an overview of the literature on the relationship investment model, experiences of stigmatized individuals, the transactional model of stress and coping, and the family stress theory. The third chapter describes the research design, including a description of methods of data collection and analysis, and my sample population, as well as discussion of the methodological challenges that I encountered. Chapters four and five provide analysis of the my sample's experience in the seven life spheres—their employment, their housing situations, their peer and family relationships, their relationships with their partner, their children's lives and their self-perception. Chapter six illuminates the coping strategies that these women utilized in order to compensate for the strain experienced in those life spheres. I

then conclude this thesis with a discussion of how these women's experiences have influenced their stress trajectories and overall familial well-being. I end with a discussion of potential avenues in moving forward to help women in this population.

The goal of this study is to provide a "thick description" of the experiences of these women (Geertz 1973). Addressing this gap in the literature will, hopefully, prompt future research to address what can be done to help these women in their coping process and/or to assist with their recovery within their stress trajectories. Although the primary goal of this research is to contribute to the scholarly literature, there is still potential for policy contributions or further research regarding the need for policy action. In particular, what is learned about whom these women rely on for social support and what coping strategies they use could be utilized to promote social policy that could aid the identified areas of need. This research will also illuminate further gaps in literature; for example, the need for research to be done on the children of sex offenders themselves.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis explores how mothers in relationships with sex offenders are impacted by this relationship. To date, no research has been done that focuses on the mothers in relationships with sex offenders and how their lives—and the lives of their children—are influenced by being associated with a sex offender and the sex offender registry.

In this chapter, I review the investment model developed by Caryl Rusbult (1980), illustrating why these women may not leave the sex offender or do not disassociate with the offender. I provide literature on sex offenders and their families as stigmatized individuals. I then review the Transaction Model of Stress and Coping. I conclude with Burr and Klein's (1994) Family Stress theory as my theoretical foundation. I argue in this chapter that these women have committed to these relationships and have experienced stress and stigma due to this commitment, requiring the use of coping strategies.

Investment Model

The decision to stay or leave a relationship is a complex phenomenon. Rusbult's (1980) Investment Model has been shown to be especially powerful in understanding and predicting commitment and persistence across many types of romantic relationships (e.g. marital relationships, lesbian and gay relationships, etc.). As shown in Figure 2.1, and described in greater depth below, there are several components to the model which help explain the level of dependence in a relationship.

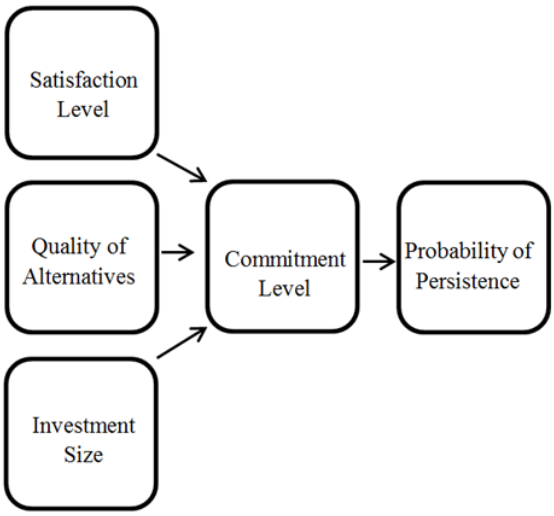

Figure 2.1 Investment Model of Commitment Processes
(Rusbult, Martz and Agnew 1998)

Again, the Rusbult (1980) model is primarily focused on dependence when trying to understand persistence within a relationship. *Level of dependence* refers to the extent to which an individual "needs" a given relationship, or relies uniquely on the relationship for attaining desired outcomes (Rusbult, Martz and Agnew 1998). There are three factors outlined in this model that influence dependence: (1) satisfaction level, (2) quality of alternatives, and (3) investment size.

Satisfaction level refers to the positive versus negative affect experienced in a relationship. Satisfaction is influenced by the extent to which a partner fulfills the individual's most important needs (Rusbult et al. 1998). Common needs within a relationship include intellectual stimulation, sexual gratification and companionship. However, this list is not exhaustive and every individual determines which particular needs are most important in a relationship. For example, many of the women in this study identified satisfaction in the emotional support they receive from their partners.

Quality of alternatives refers to the perceived desirability of the best available alternative to a relationship. Quality of alternatives is based on the extent to which the individual's most important needs could effectively be fulfilled "outside" of the current relationship—by other eligible romantic interests, by friends and family members, or on one's own (Rusbult et al. 1998). Since the women in this study focused on the emotional needs met within their current relationship with a sex offender, based on this model, any alternatives to these relationships would have to provide equal or greater level of satisfaction in that area.

Investment size refers to the magnitude and importance of the resources that are attached to a relationship; these resources would decline in value or be lost if the relationship were to end (Rusbult et al. 1998). As a relationship develops, partners invest many resources directly into their relationship with the hope that doing so will improve it; examples include money and time. Some investments are indirect; resources such as mutual friends, personal identity, children, or shared material possessions may become attached to a relationship increasing the investment size (Rusbult et al. 1998). Intuitively, invested resources may enhance commitment because the investment of resources increases the costs of ending a relationship, serving as a powerful psychological inducement to persist (Rusbult et al. 1998). For the women in this study, a major investment they have made in their relationships is standing up for their right to choose with who they are in a relationship, despite opposition from family, friends and society. For some, their children act as an indirect invested resource in their relationship as well. The Investment Model suggests that feelings of commitment emerge as a consequence of increasing dependence (see Figure 2.1).

The three factors described above—satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size—influence *commitment level* in a relationship, which is defined as the intent to

persist in a relationship (Rusbult et al. 1998). Dependence differs from commitment in that commitment can be understood as a sense of allegiance that is established based off one's dependence. "Commitment is the most direct and powerful predictor of relationship persistence, partially or whether, mediating the effects of satisfaction, alternatives, and investments on decisions to remain in versus end a relationship" (Rusbult et al. 1998:360). Persistence often requires persons in a relationship to engage in interdependence to solve situations that are harmful to the relationship, interdependence often demanding loss of certain self-interested behaviors (Rusbult et al. 1998). On one hand, some individuals act on their own self-interest and behave in ways that harm their relationships; for example, in a situation that may involve financial strain in a relationship, one person may refuse to use his or her own money to help remedy the problem. On the other hand, individuals may sacrifice their self-interest to engage in pro-relationship behaviors, such as working more hours or spending their own money to alleviate financial strain in the relationship (Rusbult et al. 1998).

The process by which direct self-interest is abandoned by individuals for the good of a relationship is termed *transformation of motivation* (Rusbult et al. 1998). Commitment appears to play a key role in inducing this transformation towards the persistence of a relationship. Indeed, strong commitment has been shown to promote a variety of relationship maintenance behaviors, including (1) tendencies to accommodate rather than retaliate when a partner behaves badly, (2) willingness to sacrifice otherwise desirable activities when partners' preferences are non-correspondent, (3) inclinations to derogate tempting alternative partners, and (4) inclinations to perceive one's relationship as both better than and not as bad as other relationships (Rusbult et al. 1998).

The Rusbult Investment Model demonstrates that the decision to leave or stay within a relationship is complicated. As I demonstrate in the subsequent data chapters, the women in my study have negotiated these elements of the model—satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size—determining their decision on whether to stay committed to the offender. This thesis delves into the consequences these women face as a result of their decision to stay in or to enter in—to commit—to a relationship with a registered sex offender.

Sex Offenders and Their Families as Stigmatized Individuals

Stigma is experienced when an individual's social identity is dominated by a negatively viewed aspect of their life (May 2000). This negatively valued aspect becomes a social label that operates as a master status, eliminating other dimensions of social identity, at least within interaction with others. Consequently, people who experience stigma are regarded as lesser persons and discounted as "tainted" (Goffman 1963:12; May 2000). This is particularly true in regards to how society views criminal offenders. "The general public tends to demonize offenders as dangerous, dishonest, or otherwise disreputable" (Hirschfield and Piquero 2010:28). Therefore, the label of 'ex-con' or 'sex offender' is highly stigmatized (Harding 2003; LeBel 2008). Goffman (1963:127) states that the central issue concerning such stigmatized groups is "their place in the social structure; the contingencies these persons encounter in face-to-face interaction is only one part of the problem, and something that cannot itself be fully understood without reference to the history, the political development, and the current policies of the group." Sex offenders are continuously viewed as a threat within the social structure, and they are routinely rejected (Palermo 2012).

Those within stigmatized groups, such as sex offenders, are fully aware of "normality" and "deviance" and what it means to achieve membership in either category (Birenbaum 1992; May 2000). Consequently, "it is generally easy to convince stigmatized persons that they are

shameful precisely because most stigmatized persons hold the same beliefs about identity that 'normals' hold" (Barton 1988:91). Sex offenders are more likely to be excluded from conventional economic and social activities if employers, co-workers, and neighbors hold negative attitudes about their label as a sex offender (Clear 2007; Pager 2003; Wildeman et al. 2012). Subsequently, sex offenders often do not challenge this exclusion due to their acceptance of this "normalcy" (May 2000:202). Those within formally stigmatized groups, such as sex offenders, can engage in a range of strategies to manage this stigma and cope with the realities as a stigmatized group (May 2000).

As described in the prior chapter, intimidating attitudes toward sex offenders may help stigmatize and disadvantage not only individual sex offenders, but also their families and neighborhoods (Braman 2007; Hirschfield and Piquero 2010). Family members of offenders may endure stigmatization because they do not view the offender as society may view him. Families of a stigmatized group are less likely to typify the group as dangerous and to distance themselves socially (Corrigan et al. 2001; see LeBel 2008 for a review; Hirschfield and Piquero 2010). Thus, family members become deviant by association. Yet, similarly to other newly stigmatized groups (Arluke 1993), family members of a stigmatized group have no stigma management skills when their relatives are first convicted (May 2000). For example, when a person is first convicted of a sex offender, their family may become immediately stigmatized with undeveloped stigma management skills. This experience of stigma by family members of formally stigmatized groups leads to immense experiences of stress (May 2000).

Romantic partners of sex offenders may also be at special risk of being stigmatized and ostracized as a result of their association with sex offenders. Tewksbury and Lees (2006) found that the stigma attached to a sex offender is accompanied by what the sociologist Erving

Goffman (1963) referred to as "courtesy stigma." This means that stigma becomes associated with all persons that are affiliated with the offender, particularly children and partners. Considerable research suggests that having an incarcerated father adversely affects children's mental health, which might redouble back to mothers. "Women form a bridge between incarcerated men and their children, potentially blunting or accentuating any negative effects on children" (Braman 2004; Nurse 2002; Wildeman et al. 2012:218).

When discussing stigma attached to an identity, Goffman (1963:54) wrote, "while one parent in a family may share a dark secret about, and with, the other, children of the house may be considered not only unsafe receptacles for the information but also of such tender natures as to be seriously damaged by the knowledge." It is likely that the children of the women in this study do not know, at least entirely, the circumstances surrounding their fathers or stepfathers' crime and/or punishment. Their mothers must then simultaneously experience stigma and help their children through stigma, all of which was placed upon them due to their choice to persist in a relationship with a socially stigmatized individual.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping is a framework for evaluating coping strategies following stressful events. Stressful experiences are viewed as transactions between a person and their environment, in which the impact is mediated by two types of appraisals, primary and secondary (Lazarus and Cohen 1977; Cohen 1984). According to this model, primary appraisals evaluate levels of personal risk and threat severity, prompting efforts to cope with the stressor. Primary appraisals can act to minimize the significance of threats, particularly when the threat is ambiguous or uncertain. However, if the primary appraisal results in a heightened perception of risk, distress can emerge (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Secondary appraisal is an assessment of a person's resources and options available during the coping

process (Cohen 1984). While the primary appraisals focus on the severity of stressful situations, secondary appraisals focus on what one can do to mediate the situation. Secondary appraisals may include assessment of self-efficacy, perceived ability to manage one's emotional reactions to the threat, and belief in the effectiveness of one's coping resources. According to the Transactional Model, coping strategies mediate the effects of primary and secondary appraisals (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). This means regardless of how one appraises the situation, the strategies used after the appraisals heavily influences the outcome.

A basic use of the model conceptualizes coping efforts along two dimensions: problem management and emotional regulation (Glanz and Schwartz 2008). Problem management strategies are focused at changing the stressful situation. Examples of problem management coping include active coping, problem solving, and information seeking. By contrast, emotional regulation coping is directed at changing the way one thinks or feels about a stressful situation. These strategies include seeking social support and venting feelings as well as denial and avoidance. The model predicts that problem management coping strategies will be most adaptive for stressors that are changeable, whereas emotional regulation strategies are most adaptive when the stressor is unchangeable (Glanz and Schwartz 2008). Often times these two dimensions of coping strategies are used simultaneously.

An individual may engage or disengage with a stressor through the use of coping strategies (Carver et al. 1993). When a stressor is perceived as highly threatening and uncontrollable, a person may be more likely to use disengaging coping strategies (Taylor et al. 1992). Disengaging strategies shift attention away from the stressor. The attention shift provided by these disengaging strategies may allow individuals to minimize their initial distress by avoiding thoughts and feelings about the stressor (Suls and Fletcher 1985). Examples of

disengaging coping strategies include distancing, avoidance, distraction and denial. However, in the end, avoidance or denial may lead to increased distress over time by allowing intrusive thoughts to generate (Carver et al. 1993; Schwartz et al. 1995). This increased distress can keep people from developing healthier coping strategies. Conversely, when a stressor is appraised as controllable and a person believes in their self-efficacy, that person is more likely to use engaging coping strategies. Examples of engaging coping strategies include active coping, planning problem solving, information seeking and making use of social support (Glanz and Schwartz 2008).

Primary and secondary appraisals, followed by coping strategies, result in a person's adaption to a stressor. In the Transactional Model, this adaptation is referred to as coping outcomes. Three main categories of outcomes are emotional well-being, functional status (or health status, disease progression, etc.) and health behaviors (Glanz and Schwartz 2008). These outcomes may also interact with one another. Several studies provide evidence for the psychological benefits of active coping strategies and acceptance/reappraisal over avoidant and disengaging strategies (see Carver et al. 1993; Taylor et al. 1992). More recent studies have reinforced the significant association between use of avoidant coping and higher levels of psychological distress (Baider et al. 1997), poorer quality of life (Trask et al. 2001), and risky health behavior (Glanz and Schwartz 2008).

Family Stress Theory

This study is also informed by Burr and Klein's family stress theory (1994). Family stress is defined as pressure or tension in the family system—a disturbance in the steady state of the family (Boss 2002). Although stress is expected within families, family stress may become a family crisis when an event of considerable size occurs (Fothergill 2004; Morrow 1997), such as a post-disaster displacement (Peek, Morrissey, and Marlatt 2011) or the incarceration of a family

member. A family crisis involves a disturbance to the family system that is so overwhelming it incapacitates the system (Boss 2002).

Burr and Klein (1994) conducted qualitative and quantitative assessments with 50 households that had experienced one of the following major crises or highly stressful situations: bankruptcy (n=7), infertility (n=10), a difficult teenager (n=4), muscular dystrophy (n=11), displaced homemaker (n=9), or a child who was sufficiently disabled that it required institutionalization (n=9). Their sample included 32 adult males and 46 adult females. The average number of children in the household was three. Ten households reported no children currently living at home. Eighty percent of the households listed Latter Day Saints (Mormon) as their religious preference, 17% listed "other" and less than 3% listed "none." All of the respondents were White. Burr and Klein chose not to include children in their sample to develop a broader cross section of families in general.

Based off of qualitative and quantitative assessments of these 50 families who experienced a major crisis, Burr and Klein (1994) built on earlier works in the family stress literature (Boss 1987; Hansen and Hill 1964; Hill 1949; Koos 1946) to develop five potential stress trajectory models to family crisis. Burr and Klein developed these models by having their participants map their own stress trajectories, and Burr and Klein then analyzed and inductively categorized them into the five models, shown in Figure 2.2.

The *roller coaster model (1)* entails a plunge into crisis after a highly stressful event. This is followed by improving levels of post-crisis family functioning. This model assumes recovery but recovery status may produce a level of functioning that could be higher, lower or equal to pre-crisis levels of functioning. The roller coaster model has been regarded in family stress literature as the universal process in which families respond to stress (Burr and Klein 1994). Burr

and Klein, however, argued that this only represents some families' experiences, but that families may also experience other recovery processes. Indeed, only 51% of Burr and Klein's respondents who mapped their stress trajectories followed the classic roller coaster model (1994). While this may have represented the slim majority of their respondents, it was clear the roller coaster model did not represent the entire sample.

The *mixed model (2)* involves an increase in functioning immediately after a crisis followed by a decline, usually followed by a recovery. Burr and Klein recognized that the mixed model is very similar to the roller coaster model. However, they believed the initial incline in the mixed model following the stressful event was fundamentally significant and could not be categorized within the roller coaster model. Eleven percent of the respondents in their study identified the mixed model as representative of their experiences (Burr and Klein 1994).

The *increase model (3)* demonstrates family functioning that only increases after a crisis. Although there were some minor ups and downs identified by Burr and Klein's respondents who fell within the increase recovery model, there was a clear increase in these families' experiences. About 18.3% of the respondents drew this model as representative of the change in their family functioning following the stressful event. Burr and Klein identified a strong reserve of strength in these families (1994).

In contrast, the *decrease model (4)* entails a steady decline in family functioning after a crisis. This model represented no recovery in family functioning following a stressful event. Only 4.9% of the respondents that mapped their stress trajectories identified no recovery process. However, Burr and Klein argue that most of these families were in the early stages following the stressful event and could still experience recovery in the near future. Only one of the respondents

expressed “total disintegration,” including divorce, bankruptcy and loneliness (Burr and Klein 1994:76).

The fifth *no change model (5)* involves neither significant increase nor decrease in family functioning after a crisis. This lack of significant change clearly distinguishes this model from the others. About 14.6% of the respondents mapped this model as representative of their family functioning following the stressful event. Similar to those who identified the increase model, Burr and Klein suggested these respondents also demonstrated high reservation of strength, leading to no significant changes in their family functioning (Burr and Klein 1994).

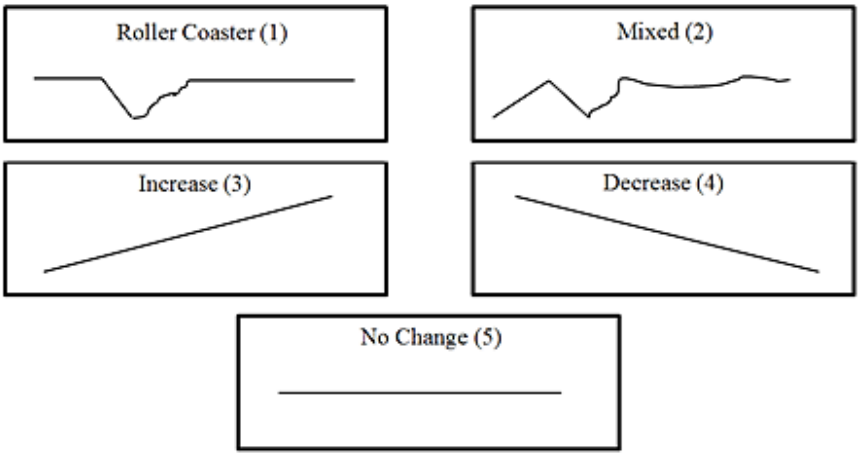

Figure 2.2 Burr and Klein (1994) Stress Trajectory

When assessing family stress, it is vital to acknowledge that the stress level of the whole is qualitatively different from the sum of the stress levels of individual family members (Boss 2002). This is especially important to remember when conducting research on families of sex offenders because each member experiences that situation differently. Much of the research available on sex offender registration is focused on the effects it has on the sex offender; most research that does examine the partners and children of sex offenders is from the offenders’ perspective (Tewksbury and Lees 2006). Thus, research on the stress of families of sex offenders

is needed, especially focusing on the subjective experiences of mothers in relationships with sex offenders, also including their children's experiences.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The goal of this thesis is to examine the experiences of mothers in relationships with sex offenders. In October 2011, I began writing a research proposal and formulating a research protocol that included an approach focused on both document analysis and in-depth interviewing. In addition, I drafted consent forms, recruitment speeches, interview guides, and other materials to submit to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Colorado State University. After completing two revisions of the IRB protocol, which went to the full board for review, in July of 2012, the IRB accepted the proposal and granted me permission to begin the research process.

From July through September 2012, I conducted my document analysis on discussion board support groups geared at family members of registered sex offenders. I also began disseminating the call for interview participants that I had developed. From September 2012 through April 2013, I conducted 18 in-depth interviews with mothers in relationships with sex offenders. Although I had planned to interview women who only share biological children of a sex offender, the hidden nature of this population caused me to expand my participant search to women in relationships with sex offenders with children from previous relationships as well. Since I had to use a convenience sample given the hidden population (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), these women come from several different states across the United States. My sample consisted of Caucasian women only; this was not intentional, but was a consequence of a self-selected sample.

In this chapter, I describe the events leading up to this project, explain my interest in the topic, and present my research questions. Next, I outline my research design, including

description of data collection and analysis, as well as my sample population. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the methodological challenges and limitations that I faced in the course of this research.

Background and Research Interests

Before entering the graduate program at Colorado State University, I was an undergraduate in the Sociology Department at the university and Dr. Lori Peek was my advisor. From the summer of 2009 to the spring semester of 2010 of my junior year, my boyfriend at the time, and father of my daughter, was investigated and convicted for sexual crimes against a minor. Consequently, he was required to register as a sex offender for 10 years. His conviction was reported extensively in the local and regional media, and it was a highly difficult time for me personally. In addition to my own sadness and feelings of personal loss, I lost my home and my employment as a result of his conviction and registration. Yet, I was unable to disassociate myself from what he had done or end all contact with him because I have a daughter with him. This further amplified all of my other struggles. Dr. Peek was a crucial support for me during that period, as well as through my subsequent break-up with him and to today.

When I entered into the graduate program, with Dr. Peek still acting as my advisor, we began to brainstorm ideas for a thesis topic. Knowing what I had been through and witnessing my struggles—and also recognizing that one of the cardinal rules of qualitative research is to "start where you are at" (Lofland, Snow, Anderson and Lofland 2006:9)—she asked me if I had ever considered researching women who had been through similar situations: partners and ex-partners of sex offenders. Up to that point, I had never thought of researching this topic as I knew no one else who had gone through what I had. I had also never considered how I might find others in similar situations.

Intrigued, but also cautious, I decided to do some preliminary research on this topic before committing to study this for my thesis. My search revealed that there have been numerous articles published on the effects of sex offender registration on the offender himself, as well as a few articles on the impact the registration has on the children of sex offenders and family members in general. None of the scholarly literature that I found, however, focused on the mothers of those children, women like me. This gap in the literature, combined with my own experiences, made me feel more personally invested in this topic and determined to make a contribution in the area. I wrote a first draft of a research proposal in a comprehensive research methods seminar taught by Dr. Jennifer Cross. Then I enrolled in Dr. Peek's graduate qualitative methods course, which allowed me to delve more deeply into the approach and strategies that I would use for this thesis. In the end, I decided to focus on mothers in relationships with registered sex offenders in an effort to contribute to the literature on this important and seriously understudied topic.

Research Questions

Based on my personal history, research interests, and knowledge of the literature, I developed a research plan focusing on the experiences of mothers who are in a relationship with a sex offender. This thesis explores the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How are the primary spheres of these mothers' lives – including their relationships, housing situations, employment, perceptions of self, and their children's lives – impacted by the labeling of a partner as a sex offender?

Research Question 2: How do these women cope with these experiences, and what forms of personal and/or social support do they rely on?

Research Question 3: How do mothers who are in relationships with sex offenders describe their own stress trajectories associated with this experience?

In the subsequent chapters of this thesis, as I work to answer these research questions, I consider variance in the women's situations related to their relationship status, socioeconomic status, family structure, and other key aspects of their lives that influence these outcomes of interest.

Research Design: Qualitative Methods

This thesis is based on a qualitative study that examines how being a mother in a relationship with a sex offender affects primary life spheres (employment, housing situations, relationships, children's lives, and self-perception), how these women cope with those experiences, and what sources of social support they rely on. The purpose of this study is primarily descriptive, which is well-suited for the use of qualitative methods (Phillips 2002). Similar to most qualitative research, the goal of my study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of a small group of research participants rather than a breadth of knowledge that can only be attained through large, representative samples (Ambert, Adler, Adler, and Detzner 1995). In this section, I describe the two primary qualitative methods I used to collect data: document analysis and in-depth interviews. Figure 3.1 provides a graphic timeline of my data collection process to illustrate the process outlined in this chapter.

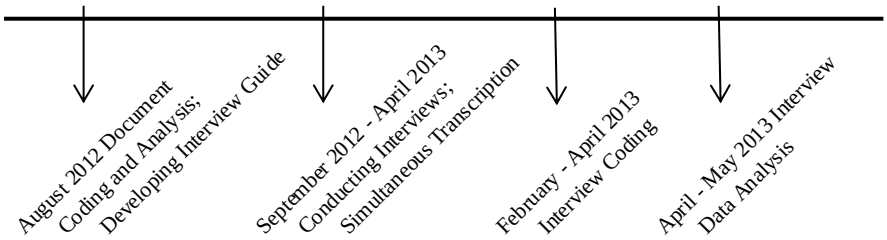

Figure 3.1 Graphic Timeline of Data Collection Process

Document Analysis

To begin my study, I conducted document analysis on threads from online discussion boards. I utilized document analysis in this study only as a means to inform and develop my interview guides, and not as a source of data for systematic analysis. Altheide (1996:2) defines

document analysis as “an integrated and conceptually informed method, procedure, and technique for locating, identifying, retrieving, and analyzing documents for their relevance, significance, and meaning.” Babbie (2010:333) notes that analysis of such “recorded human communications” can enhance the overall depth of research projects. Indeed, the advantages of content analysis include economy, safety, and the ability to study processes occurring over a long time, limited to recorded communication (Babbie 2010).

Due to the stigmatized nature of being associated with a sex offender, I assumed that women may be more open and willing to share about their situations in anonymous forums like online discussion boards. Indeed, online discussion boards provide the opportunity for stigmatized populations to connect with other people in similar circumstances anonymously (Cummings, Sproull and Kiesler 2002). Online discussion boards that are geared towards providing support to specific populations are particularly beneficial for populations that lack the opportunity to join support groups in person (Cummings et al. 2002).

Moreover, given the dearth of research in this area, I felt it was important to collect data from a variety of sources to see how women frame their experiences of being associated with sex offenders. Discussion boards “contain archival and graphically-organized conversations which can be participated in or merely observed” (Steinmetz 2012:27). I made a methodological decision to only observe—and not participate in—the active conversations on the discussion boards.

Secondary Data Collection

To begin the data collection process for the documents, I identified one website that serves as a primary source for online support for families of sex offenders: dailystrength.org/groups/families-of-sex offenders. The website is publicly accessible but can

only be utilized by registered members of the associated support group. Registered members may include anyone who identifies as a family member of a sex offender. This site generally serves predominantly women, including mothers, sisters, and partners and ex-partners of sex offenders. The goal of this website is to provide people with a non-judgmental space for people with similar challenges to share their stories, express their struggles, and seek advice and support from other members.

This website provokes the types of discussion threads that are relevant to my study—those posted by mothers in relationships with sex offenders. These threads are structured so that one person creates an original post—writing as much as they want on any topic; once it is posted, any registered member is able to comment on the post, creating a thread. Many posts include numerous comments, creating long threads that are generally comprised of at least ten to twenty posts each, contributing to the data to needed to inform the interview guides for this study.

After browsing this website, I decided to conduct a content analysis on twenty threads from August 2008 to August 2012, analyzing five threads from each year. I chose this time frame because the site was established in 2008, so I was able to choose threads that demonstrate some of the challenges these women have faced since the site's inception. Given the length of some of the threads, analyzing twenty threads allowed me to reach saturation without an impossible work load. I focused on each individual thread rather than the discussion board as a whole to "treat these discussions as if they were happening in their own place in time" (Steinmetz 2012:30).

I used purposive sampling to obtain the threads I analyzed. I selected threads based on those that were most related to my study goals (Babbie 2010). Specifically, I based my judgment off of the following life spheres: employment, housing, children, and relationships with family

and peers. If the thread concerned any of those topics, with the original post written by a mother in a relationship with a sex offender, then that thread was selected for analysis.

I found all of the threads within each year that fit these criteria, then narrowed the count to five per year based on the number of comments attached to that thread, choosing the longer threads with more comments, due to the greater amount of content. Gaining consent of each user of the discussion board was not necessary as their posts are considered open public letters/presentations (Sveningsson 2004; Steinmetz 2012). Moreover, I could not be sure of the identities of those posting due to the nature of the discussion board itself. When addressing issues of identity of those creating discussion posts, researchers in this area have argued that it is best to study their digitally projected identities and how their identities are negotiated and authenticated on the discussion board (Hine 2000); however, "to dwell on the idea that the researcher can never really know who is on the other side of the screen unless they are met in the physical world is to 'risk paralysis in the research process'" (Markham 2005:800).

Data Analysis

Content analysis is particularly well suited to the study of communications and to answering the classic question of communication research: "who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?" (Babbie 2010:333). Researchers can use this method to study not only communication processes, but other aspects of social behavior as well (Babbie 2010). Each thread provided a rich source of data because not only does the discussion post offer insight into the struggles of the original person who posted, but many of the comments attached to the discussion thread are from other women in the same position. Since this is a secondary source, the data was already present within the content of the boards ready for analysis.

Using content analysis, I identified themes that emerged within the threads (Charmaz 2006). I aligned these themes with the spheres of the women's lives that I intended to address in the interviews. I then used this data to develop a thorough guide for my in-depth interviews. The data from the discussion threads allowed me to identify what the women I interviewed may have been struggling with themselves. The use of documents allows me to prepare and construct my interview guide based on existing data (Marshall and Rossman 2011).

In order to gain the information I needed from the discussion threads to inform my interview guides, I completed a content analysis on the threads using the qualitative computer software Atlas.ti. I copied my chosen threads into word documents and then uploaded them into Atlas.ti. This allowed me to use the coding capabilities of Atlas.ti to instantaneously build my codes and memos as I reviewed the documents. This software also allowed me to easily apply multiple codes to one segment of data. I had already created my conceptual framework, using the spheres of the women's lives: employment, housing, peers, family, partners, children, and self-perception. When I began my content analysis on the discussion threads, I used open coding, looking for the spheres as themes and taking note of any other applicable themes that I had not considered as well (Neuman 2006).

When I conducted my *open coding*, I used both manifest coding (analysis of the concrete terms), and latent coding (analysis of the underlying meaning) (Babbie 2010). For example, in the category of housing, I recorded both how many times the participants mentioned housing, as well as the implied stress, if any, to each mention of housing. I followed my open coding with *axial coding* in order to examine my initial codes and identify any key concepts (Neuman 2006). Once I completed axial coding, I conducted a rudimentary *selective coding* on the threads, in order to develop basic major themes that I wanted to be aware of in my interviews (Neuman

2006). I developed a codebook for this analysis process, as well as engaged in memo writing to flesh out the data I was discovering. By analyzing the threads using this process, I was prepared for some of the themes to expect in my interviews, while also prepared for emergent themes.

Preliminary Findings

Within my analysis of the twenty discussion threads, I found data that corresponded to each initial sphere I chose to look at—employment, housing, peers, family, partner, children and self-perception. It is important to keep in mind that not all of the people who posted on these threads fit within my interview sample criteria. Therefore, in this section, I refer to those who posted on my chose threads as "family members" to the sex offenders, including partners, children, parents and siblings. Nevertheless, this data allowed me to develop more detailed ideas of what I should be addressing within my interviews.

In terms of employment, within the discussion threads, I found nine references to employment loss; loss of the offender's employment or the family members'. I also found 11 references to financial struggles, which I included in the employment themes, as those struggles were often described as resulting from employment loss. I found 10 references to housing; this included housing loss, trouble with residency restrictions and having to relocate. In the discussion threads, I identified 32 references to peer and family relationships. Eighteen of those were descriptions of a loss of those relationships; whereas the other 14 descriptions characterized support from and dependence on peer and family relationships.

In relation to data on partner relationships, the partner being the sex offender, I found 58 references. All of those who posted these references were actually women in relationships with the offender, although they may not have had children in the relationship. I used three codes to categorize what each woman described in terms of their partner relationships: (1) RSO

(registered sex offender) separation, (2) RSO responsibility, and (3) RSO advocacy. All of these mentions of their partner relationships involved descriptions of being separated from the offender, either from jail time, probation terms or separate household; feeling responsible for the sex offender's successful adherence to sex offender restrictions; and efforts by the women to engage in advocacy and better treatment of sex offenders within the justice system.

When coding data related to children's lives, I found 34 references. For this theme, I included mention of the children's well-being as well as discussion of struggles and concerns regarding mothering or parenting in general. I found ten references that involved strain on the child's emotional well-being, as well as difficulties making friends as a result of being tied to a sex offender. The other 24 references included mothers' fears of her children being hurt emotionally or physically, struggles with disclosing the man's sex offender status to the children, mention of being providers to the children in the absence of the offender, and mothers being separated from their children.

Within the discussion threads, I found 57 references which I coded as self-perception. Under this area, I identified six sub themes: conflict, coping, emotion, physical, stigma, and provider. Quotes coded as conflict included all mentions of internalized conflict over the family member's circumstances, how they came to be in that situation and if they should try to leave the relationship. Quotes coded as coping included any mechanisms an individual listed as helping navigate their stressors. Quotes coded as emotional, physical and/or stigma included all references to experiences of stigma, real or perceived, that resulted from stigma and stress experienced in other life spheres. It also included any reference to physical manifestations of that stress, such as eating disorders, weight gain, or binge drinking.

I also discovered an interesting theme that I had not considered: the daily routine of women in relationships with sex offenders and the potential disruption as a result of the offender's status and related consequences. I coded 34 references to the family members' routine. These included interaction with authority figures, change, fear, loss, normalcy and restrictions. These codes involved reference to any of those disruptions occurring in their daily routine. I chose not to include this as a separate sphere of study in this thesis because I felt as though each code was also related to another sphere. For example, loss of routine commonly seemed to result from housing and employment struggles, strain with partner's restrictions or stigma experiences. Therefore, I did not explicitly use daily routine as a life sphere of interest in this study. I did, however, consider this notion of impacts on the daily routine when asking about each life sphere in my interview. (See Appendix D for the interview guide informed by this data.)

In-Depth Interviews

The primary data collection method for my study was in-depth qualitative interviews. Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006) identify the interview process as the interweaving of observation, ordinary conversation, listening, and the use of an interview guide consisting of open ended questions. The qualitative interview process utilized in this study involved interaction between me, the interviewer, and a respondent, requiring that the interview design be flexible, iterative, and continuous, allowing for a "guided conversation" (Babbie 2010:318). My interview guide served as just that: a guide intended to provide direction for the interview. It allowed for in-depth discussion from the respondent rather than closed ended responses from structured interviews (Babbie 2010).

Data Collection

In this section, I explain my process of collecting interview data for this study. I begin with a discussion of how I gained entrée to my population, how I recruited the participants, and how I collected the data. I also position myself in the setting. I then provide a detailed description of my data analysis process and sample population.

Gaining Entrée. Due to the stigma associated with this population, the women I intended to interview are considered a hidden population (Neuman 2006). As such, I could not generate a random sample of potential respondents, as no such systematic lists are available. Therefore, in order to find women who fit my sampling criteria, I was forced to use convenience sampling (Marshall 1996). This means that I cast a broad net and tried to find as many women who fit my sampling criteria as possible. The women could have come from anywhere in the United States. Subjects were recruited through postings on public online discussion boards, posts through Facebook, online registered sex offender advocacy and support groups, and listserves (see Appendix F).

Given the population of interest and the extreme sensitivity of the subject matter, I needed to ensure that I build a rapport with the potential respondents from the start (Creswell 2007). To begin this process, I identified myself as a woman who was previously in a relationship with a registered sex offender in my recruitment material. I also ensured that the participants understand their right to confidentiality, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell 2007).

Research Locations. Given that I lived in Fort Collins, Colorado at the time I conducted this research, I initially planned to recruit heavily in Colorado. This was because I had hoped to conduct face-to-face interviews with respondents. However, since my original call for

participants yielded no responses in Colorado, I had to expand my call to include anyone living in the United States. In the end, my respondents came from thirteen different states.

Data Collection. Because all of my respondents ended up being from out-of-state, I conducted telephone interviews with them; one respondent I had to conduct an interview over Yahoo! Messenger due to her limited cell phone minutes and lack of a landline. Rubin and Rubin wrote that "when researching sensitive topics, telephone interviewing aids in reaching scattered populations and gaining sensitive information" (2012:177). Given that my population is located in many diverse geographic areas and that my topic is sensitive, I am confident in my use of telephone interviewing for this project. The hidden nature of this population caused me to interview whomever I could, whenever I could, through convenience sampling (Marshall 1996).

Once I recruited the participants, I scheduled and conducted the telephone interviews between September 2012 and April 2013. The interviews ranged from 20 minutes to nearly two hours; I only interviewed each woman one time. Prior to the interviews, I had the women read a consent cover letter (see Appendix A). I also emailed a facesheet and demographic questionnaire to each respondent and asked her to return it to me before our scheduled call. Receiving this information in advance allowed me to prepare for each individual interview (see Appendix B and C). Indeed, obtaining the demographic information prior to the interview was essential since each woman's circumstance was different. Because the women in this study were talking about a difficult time in their lives, I understood that there was the potential for them to become emotionally upset during the interviews. As such, I prepared a handout with resources to email to the women at the close of the interview (see Appendix E).

The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder with an external microphone in order to capture everything said during the interview. This also allowed me to take sparse

notes on topics addressed and informal communication in order to keep account of the progress of the interview (Lofland et al. 2006). Since the interviews were recorded, I was able to focus on the participant, as well as take jottings on what they were saying to reference later in the interview for follow-up questions (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011).

I created a protocol-style interview guide for this study, but utilized a non-schedule standardized interview approach (see Appendix D). I chose this approach because I wanted to gather the same type of information from my participants. I changed the phrasing and ordering of my questions, however, for each participant (Denzin 1989:105). The individual interviews produced data on: 1) the ways that their partners' sex offender identity affected these women's employment, housing, peer, family and partner relationships, their children's lives and their self-perception; 3) what coping strategies these women used to adapt to their circumstances; and 3) the stress trajectories associated to being a part of the sample population. During the interviews, I gathered data on each individual experience, highlighting the factors that the women discussed as most stressful or most impactful on their lives.

Toward the close of each interview, I described the five stress trajectory models provided by Burr and Klein (1994) to the interviewee and explained the context behind each model (see chapter two for a more thorough discussion of the models). I then asked the participant to tell me which of these models they thought symbolized their own stress trajectories, based off the story they had just shared. If they did not think that their experience was represented within any of those models, I asked them to describe how they perceived their own experience.

My Role in the Setting. It is important to acknowledge my role in the setting and my "insider status." After completing the data collection, I am confident that my role as an insider

influenced others to participate in this study. Indeed, many of the women seemed more willing to talk to me because they felt a personal connection (see Curtis et al. 2000).

It is important to underscore, however, that I did not conduct this research to validate my own experiences. Rather, I was and remain deeply invested in understanding what women in similar situations experience. I want to learn what can be done to help both women already in those circumstances, as well as women who may enter into those circumstances later on. Still, I acknowledge that my personal relation to the population may very well have influenced the course of the interviews (Adler and Adler 1987). For example, some of the participants would glaze over some topics, using phrases such as "well you know how it goes," assuming that I knew what they meant being in a similar situation myself. To reconcile this issue, I would use probing questions at those times, purposefully letting the women know that I did not intuitively know what they meant simply given my experience.

I think the most important implication of my role in the setting was in wrapping up the interview. I wanted my interviews to be cathartic for the women who agreed to participate. I acknowledged that the respondents were likely going to ask me about my personal situation since I had referred to it in my recruitment materials (Warren et al. 2003). Additionally, I did not feel right asking them about their social support systems, possibly hearing about their lack of support, and then denying them the chance to ask me questions (Warren et al. 2003). Therefore, I prepared for post-interview questions. At the same time, I also needed to be prepared to redirect questions if they were well outside the scope of what I could provide in terms of social support or what they should be asking of me in terms of level of personal detail (Guillemin and Gillman 2004).

Data Analysis

Because I audio recorded each interview, I had them transcribed either professionally or by undergraduate research assistants as I completed the interview, or transcribed the interview myself if it was of a particularly sensitive nature. During the transcription and data analysis stage, the audio files were secured on my personal computer and in my office within the Sociology Department. The only identifying markers for my participants are on the audio files; the women's names were not used in the transcripts to protect confidentiality (Rubin and Rubin 2012). I immediately assigned a pseudonym to each woman, and used that on the transcripts. I kept the women's names and pseudonyms in a password protected file on my computer, and once the research was complete, the files were erased.

My approach to analyzing the interview data was similar to the approach that I used, and described above, for the document threads. I uploaded my 18 interview transcripts into Atlas.ti, in order to instantaneously file my codes (Drisko 2004). This allowed me to "retrieve, recode, refile and enumerate coded items and relate them to one another in a much more consistent and rapid fashion" (Lofland et al. 2006:203). This permitted for efficient coding and recoding that I needed to complete in order to produce my final thesis. Specifically, I analyzed each individual interview in order to assess the similarities and contrasts across interviews. However, when coding the transcripts, the selective coding process was much more vigorous, contributing to the greater part of my thesis, the analysis of these women's experiences in the seven life spheres. As coding progressed, I was able to notice clusters of data and then subclusters (Marshall and Rossman 2011).

I also relied heavily on analytic memo writing as I analyzed the transcripts. This allowed me to develop my theoretical contributions (Charmaz 2006; Neuman 2006). In particular, I used the memos to critically think about how the women described their experiences during the

interview in contrast to how they drew their stress trajectory at the end; these narratives were not always aligned and as such, I needed to make a judgment on how I would theoretically use that information. At that time, I was aware of reoccurring themes that I had encountered throughout my entire data analysis process, but was also prepared for new themes that may have emerged that I had not previously considered.

Sample Population

During the course of my research, I interviewed 18 mothers in relationships with sex offenders. Seven of the women began their relationship with the sex offender prior to his registration. Three of the women who were with the men previous to his registration had separated or were seriously considering separating from their partners. Eleven of the women began their relationship with the sex offender after he had become a registered sex offender. All 18 of the women were white, again, a methodological consequence of self-selected participants. The women I identified and interviewed ranged in age from 22 to 49. They each had at least one dependent child under the age of 18. The dependent children of the participants ranged in age from 9 months to 16 years old. Seven of the women only had children from previous relationships; the other 11 shared at least one biological child with the sex offender. Table 3.1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample in terms of education, housing, employment status, and income level. These demographics were self-identified by the participants on the demographic questionnaire.

Table 3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Education		Housing Type		Employment Status		Income Level	
Some College	8	Renter	3	Full Time	8	Low	7
College Degree	7	Home Owner	9	Part Time	4	Medium	10
Graduate Degree	3	Lives with Parent	6	Stay Home Mom	6	High	1
Total	18		18		18		18

In the following paragraphs, I provide additional background information on the 18 mothers in this study, including: age, length of her relationship, time of her partner's registration, and the age of her children as well as location, housing type, education and occupation. It is important to include this additional information so that the reader can get a sense of the commonalities within and diversity across my sample. For the privacy of my participants, I have chosen not to connect the details for the circumstances leading to the men's sex offender registration to each individual participant. Out of fear of being identified, some of my participants did not even disclose their partner's crimes when discussing how his registration impacted their lives. It is vital to underscore, however, that the experiences analyzed in this thesis are almost all a result of the man's presence of the sex offender registry, and not in reaction to the specific crime. In fact, in most of the situations that cause strain in my participants' lives, the details of the crime are not known to those involved.

I do provide a discussion of the variability of the crimes and sentences within the sample. There was an array of types of convictions that led to my participants' partners becoming registered sex offenders. However, the sentences and sex offender restrictions for each man were much more similar, despite variations in convictions. For example, one man was convicted for raping his own child over a period of time, the most severe crime of all the partners in this study. He had to register as a sex offender for life. In contrast, another man, who at the time of the conviction was in his mid-twenties, was convicted of endangering the welfare of a child and sodomy after engaging in oral sex with a girl who he believed to be 19, when she was actually 15. He was also serving a lifetime registration as a sex offender.

A few of the participants believed their partner was wrongly convicted in the first place. One respondent stated her husband was convicted by a jury for groping the butt of a teenage girl,

though she states they had video footage proving otherwise. He had to register as a sex offender for ten years. Two of the women state their partners were wrongly accused of sexual acts out of retaliation from a third party. One of the men's ex-wife was reported as accusing him of molesting their daughters in attempt to ensure full custody; the other man was an aide to a disabled male and, according to my participant, the patient's mother accused my participant's husband of attempted sexual misconduct in order to disguise her theft of her son's pills. Each of those men had to register as a sex offender for life.

Two participants reported their partners as not having to register as sex offenders immediately following their conviction. One of the original crimes was characterized as a "Romeo and Juliet" scenario in which the female was a in her early teens and the man turned 18 during their relationship. After a fall out in the relationship, he was reported as having sex with a minor. The other crime involved the man, in his early thirties at the time of the conviction, as having sex with a minor at a party. My participant, his wife, stated that this occurred in a rural area and parties like that occurred frequently with great amounts of alcohol and all types of people. After extended periods of time following these two men's conviction, they were required to register as sex offenders due to enacted retroactive laws that redefined their original crimes as necessitating lifetime sex offender registration.

Other crimes that were reported as leading to a partner's sex offender registration were alleged groping of a teenage girl's butt in a public place, leading to ten year sex offender registration, and hoarding of sexual internet material illegal in the United States and sexual molestation of a minor, which both required lifetime registration. There is, clearly, a dramatic range of crimes represented within this sample of the partners of my participants. Yet, almost all of them resulted in lifetime registration as a sex offender. Recalling chapter one, the laws and

restrictions attached to sex offenders in the United States vary by state. Therefore, despite having different crimes and similar registration lengths, each of the men, as well as their families, are subjected to similar consequences. The subsequent chapters illustrate that despite the fact that my participants' experiences were different in many ways, the impact of sex offender registration on their lives is clear in all of their stories.

Women who entered their relationship prior to registration. **Rebecca** is a 35-year-old white woman whose husband is a registered sex offender. Her husband became a registered sex offender in 2010. They have been married for 15 years. They have two children together, ages 12 and 10. She and her family live in Mississippi with her parents. However, her husband's crime occurred in a different state. Rebecca has a college degree and is employed full time as a medical technologist.

Ashley is a 22-year-old white woman with a two-year-old child. The father of her child became a registered sex offender in 2011. Ashley was in a relationship with her child's father for three and a half years before his registration and a year after. She is currently undecided about their relationship status, due in part to his status as a sex offender. Ashley and her child live with her parents in Texas. She has a college degree and is employed full time as a webmaster.

Laura is a 27-year-old white woman whose husband is soon to be registered as a sex offender. They have been married for six years. Laura and her husband have two children together, ages three years and 16 months old. Laura is also unsure about the status of her relationship because she is unsure she can handle the stigma attached to his label. She and her children live with her mother in Arkansas. She is a stay-at-home mom, but is trying to find a job as she has become the primary financial provider for her family.

Rachel is a 40-year-old white woman who has been married to her husband for 14 years. He became a registered sex offender in 2007. Rachel and her husband have three children together, ages 13, 11 and 8. She and her husband own a home in Michigan. She has some college experience and works part time as an administrative assistant.

Jennifer is a 40-year-old white woman who has known her husband for over 20 years. He became a registered sex offender in 1998. They have two children together, ages 16 and 7. Their oldest child was two years old at the time of the offense. Jennifer's husband originally had to register for five years, then the state law changed to ten years and then to life time registration. Jennifer and her husband own a home in New York. She has a graduate degree and works full time as a nurse.

Beverly is a 37-year-old white woman whose ex-husband is a registered sex offender. They were together for ten years and divorced in 2009. He became a sex offender in 2010. They have two children together, ages 4 and 8. She also has two children from a previous relationship, ages 14 and 17. She rents a home for her and her children in Texas. She has a college degree in finance but has recently become unemployed and is searching for new income.

Amber is a 44-year-old white woman who has been with her husband for 29 years. He became a registered sex offender in 2000. They have two children together, ages 5 and 2. Amber and her husband own a home in Florida. She has a graduate degree and works full time as a teacher.

Women who entered the relationship after registration. **Sara** is a 26-year-old white woman who is married to a registered sex offender. Sara and her husband started a relationship shortly after her husband became a registered sex offender in 2004. They now have two children

together, ages three years and nine month old. She and her husband own a home in Michigan. She has a graduate degree and works full time as a therapist.

Beth is a 49-year-old white woman who has been married to a registered sex offender for 11 years. His offense occurred in 1998 before she met him. They have one child together, who is 10 years old; Beth also has two children from a previous relationship, ages 21 and 23, respectively. Beth and her husband's relationship began as a friendship when she moved near her family after leaving a bad marriage. Her husband did not have to register as a sex offender until 2002, after they were in a relationship, due to a retroactive state law enacted, reclassifying his crime in 1998 as requiring sex offender registration. Beth and her husband own a home in Arkansas. She has a college degree and works full time as a graphic designer.

Eliza is a 46-year-old white woman who has been with her husband for 12 years. He became a registered sex offender in 1999, prior to meeting Eliza at a church fellowship group shortly after his release from prison. They have three children together, ages 8, 6 and 4. Eliza has a child from a previous relationship, age 22. Eliza and her husband own a home in North Carolina. She has a college degree and works part time at a small business.

Phoebe is a 25-year-old white woman who has been married to her husband for five years. He became a registered sex offender in 2005; he and Phoebe met shortly after his release from prison. They have two children together, ages four years and 21 months old; Phoebe also has a child from a previous relationship, age 8, who considers her husband as the child's own father. Phoebe and her husband own a home in Illinois. She has college degree but works as a stay-at-home mom making her husband the sole breadwinner for her family.

Rose is a 34-year-old white woman who has been with husband since 2003; they got married in 2009. Her husband became a registered sex offender in 2002, shortly before meeting

Rose. Rose has one child from a previous relationship, age 16. Rose's husband is currently in prison on a parole violation. She expressed that she is unable to see or visit him yet since his entrance into prison. Rose and her child live with her mother in Pennsylvania, but she is searching for her own home. She is currently unemployed, but she is working towards a college degree.

Isabella is a 37-year-old white woman who has been with her fiancé for two years. He became a registered sex offender in 2003. They do not have any children together but each entered the relationship with two children, ages 18, 18, 15, and 13, although none of them live with her. Shortly after their relationship began, Isabella's fiancé was placed in prison on a parole violation. He is currently serving that time and returns home in September of 2013. Isabella currently lives with her fiancé's mother in Illinois. She has some college experience and works full time in customer service.

Courtney is a 30-year-old white woman who has been with her fiancé for three and a half years. He became a registered sex offender in 1996 and is due to be removed from the registry in 2014. Courtney has three kids from previous relationships, ages 6, 4, and 2. Courtney has lost custody of all three of her children due to her association with a sex offender. Courtney and her fiancé live on her fiancé's mother's property. She has some college experience and works full time as a nurse's aide.

Heather is a 32-year-old white woman who has been with her husband for four years. Heather has known him since she was fifteen. He became a registered sex offender in 2005. Heather and her husband have no children together. Heather does have four children from a previous relationship, ages 12, 9, 7 and 6. She and her husband rent a home in Indiana. Heather

has some college experience and typically is employed as a CNA. Currently, she is a stay-at-home mom.

Deborah is a 45-year-old woman who has been with her boyfriend for four years. He became a registered sex offender in 1990. They have no children together; Deborah has two children from a previous relationship, ages 13 and 11. Deborah knew her boyfriend in high school and reconnected with him when she was going through a divorce with her abusive ex-husband. She found solace in him and a romantic relationship ensued. Deborah rents a home for her and her daughter in Missouri, separate from her boyfriend. She is currently unemployed. However, she does have a college degree and is usually employed as a registered nurse.

Brooke is a 33-year-old white woman who has been with her husband for two and a half years. He became a registered sex offender in 2006. They have no children together; Brooke has three children from a previous relationship, ages 13, 9 and 6, which she and her partner are now raising together. She and her husband own a home in Illinois. She has some college experience and works full time as a teaching assistant.

Eileen is a 29-year-old white woman who has been with her husband for one year. He became a registered sex offender in 2003. They have no children together; Eileen has three children from a previous relationship, ages 8, 6 and 4. At the time of our interview, Eileen had custody of her two younger children, who visited their father every other weekend. Her ex-husband had full custody of their daughter and kept Eileen from their daughter because of her husband's status. However, since our interview, Eileen has lost custody of her other two children as well. She and her husband own a home in Missouri. She has some college experience and works part time in a post office.

Methodological Challenges and Limitations

During the course of my research, I encountered various methodological challenges and limitations—some of which I anticipated, others which were unexpected. In this section, I discuss the challenges and limitations I experienced as they pertain to the research methods and approach, sampling, ethical balances and the emotional issues I faced.

Research Methods and Approach

There are limitations to my methodological approach. The use of document analysis can be limiting to the amount and type of data gathered; however, using it as a supplement to inform interviews guides diminishes that issue (Marshall and Rossman 2011). Interviews as a method are potentially limiting in terms of the ability to analyze processes, elicit information interviewees are unwilling to talk about, and receiving distorted perspectives (Becker and Geer 1957). Conversely, since I am interested in these women's specific experiences, I feel as though they may be less compelled to misrepresent their experiences in attempts to save face.

Another limitation in my research approach is that I only interviewed each participant at one time in time. I found, however, that their challenges unfolded over time in complex ways. As such, future research should follow women in this population over time, allowing for greater understanding of their experiences.

Sampling

The population I studied is hidden and highly stigmatized. Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) note that some populations are difficult to locate and contact for interviewing purposes due to low social visibility. I found this to be true in my search for participants. There is no list, public or private, of mothers in relationships with sex offenders, nor is there any social program in place that provides services to these women or helps them connect to one another. Therefore, it was

difficult to find these women through institutions. Moreover, I found it difficult to not only locate and identify these women but to also encourage them to participate.

In the end, the sampling approach I used in this study has limitations and creates a potential for biased results. Participants were self-selected after being recruited via several internet sites, listserves, and blogs identified as advocacy and support resources for registered sex offenders and their families. Therefore, I am limited to the persons within these groups, excluding women who are not involved in these groups. However, given the low social visibility of my population, 18 participants, regardless of the source, is a tremendous step for research on this topic.

Lack of diversity within the sample, racial and ethnic diversity, as well as diversity of relationships statuses, is another limitation for this study. Future research should engage women who are racially and ethnically diverse, in attempts to understand differences of experiences in this population across racial lines. Studying women who are no longer in the relationship with a sex offender, alongside those who remained in the relationship, may also provide greater research on variance within this population. Hopefully, my research will reach women in similar situations in the future and allow for studies with more diverse samples in the future.

I only studied the women in relationships with sex offenders, but then asked them to expand on their relationships with, and the experiences of, their partner and children, also a limitation of this study. Future research could gain a more holistic understanding of the experiences of the family unit by including the partners and children of women in this population in the research process.

Ethical Balances

Being tied to a sex offender, or more directly a person, who has committed a sex crime, can be a sensitive topic. In particular, sex offenders are often immediately associated in society to either rape or crimes against a minor, despite whether that is truly their crime. Therefore, people who are tied to sex offenders, and in this study, in a romantic relationship with a sex offender, are wary of what they share about the crime and hyper aware of how people perceive them. One challenge I then had during the research process, consequently, was maintaining an ethical balance during the interview between probing for information and not badgering the participants about their partners' specific crimes. Having detailed accounts of each of the crimes may have allowed for greater detail in my data chapters as to why certain women were impacted in certain ways. However, a few of the participants chose not to disclose any information of the crimes to protect themselves and their families from potential retaliation and to save face in terms of not being associated with certain crimes. Many of the women in this study stated they did not condone what their partners did, but they did believe in repentance and change in their partners.

It was vital to ensure that my participants did not feel as though I judged them for their choices or that I associated their partners' previous crimes with the women's personal character. Therefore, on the topic of each of their partner's crimes, I chose to let the participants disclose as much or as little detail as they wanted. I, instead, focused on how being on the sex offender registry, not focusing on the specific crime, impacted the women's lives. Although this can be potentially limiting for the collection of data, I felt that in order to be the most ethical when interacting with this hidden and stigmatized population, I had to give the participants the choice to disclose, without feeling pressured.

Emotional Challenges

This was an emotionally challenging study for me to conduct, and I fully anticipated struggling with this topic. I believe that my personal connection to this topic caused a more emotional reaction at times than perhaps a researcher with less of a connection to the topic. I knew that listening to women describe in detail how multiple facets of their lives were devastated by a circumstance very similar to my own would be difficult. At least half of my participants cried at one point in their interviews. When talking to me about what they experienced, a number of them had a tone in their voice of pleading for help and support and acceptance. These dynamics in the interviews deepened my emotional attachment to the topic and these women. This tested my ability as a researcher to maintain a professional demeanor throughout the interview.

The most difficult emotional challenge was when my participants would describe an experience that I personally fear occurring in my own life. For example, one of the women discussed her daughter's suicidal ideation that resulted from being bullied at school after other students found out that her father was a registered sex offender. I personally fear my daughter being bullied when she is older due to her father's status as a registered sex offender. Therefore, I found it difficult to listen to a story in which a little girl was in fact bullied and it resulted in such devastating consequences. This occurred a few times throughout my interviews and hearing my own fears presented in the stories, coupled with these women crying when sharing that story, made the interview process quite emotionally taxing at times.

While I think my ability to relate to these women helped me connect with them, at the same time, I had to engage in intense emotion management throughout the interview and monitor my outward displays of emotion (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen and Liamputtong 2009);

especially during post-interview questions. In order to manage my emotions throughout my interview process, I chose to debrief and discuss my experiences with my advisor and other committee members, as well as a university counselor. In particular, I needed help digesting what I was hearing in my interviews and how that impacted my fears in my own life, having a child with a sex offender and what that could impact my life further in the future.

Even in light of these methodological limitations and challenges, this study is the first of its kind to focus on mothers in relationships with sex offenders. I may not have gained all possible information on the topic from the discussion threads and interviews. As Patton notes (2002:223) "there are no perfect research designs. There are always tradeoffs." No qualitative studies are generalizable, but they could be transferable (Marshall and Rossman 2011). My study should be able to contribute to the literature on this topic as well as help generate public discourse on the topic.

CHAPTER IV

LESS SEVERELY IMPACTED LIFE SPHERES

In chapters 4 and 5, I provide an in-depth analysis of how my participants' primary life spheres were affected due to their romantic relationship with a sex offender. The life spheres that I examine in this chapter and the next include: employment, housing, peer relationships, family relationships, relationships with their partners, their children's lives, and the participants' own perceptions of self. In chapter 4, I examine the life spheres that were less influenced by each woman's relationship with her partner, including experiences with employment, housing, peer relationships, and family relationships. In chapter 5, I describe the women's experiences in terms of the spheres of their lives that they reported were more affected, including their partner relationships, their children's lives, and their perceptions of self. Figure 4.1 illustrates how the least severely impacted spheres are the furthest away from the self and the most severely impacted spheres are closest to the self. Moreover, as each life sphere was affected, the impacts compounded over time to have the strongest influence on the woman's sense of self.

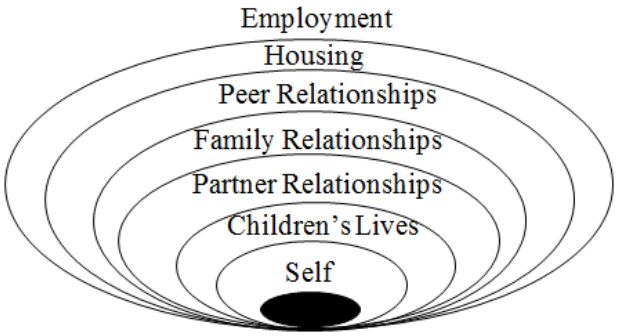

Figure 4.1 Life Spheres

Table 4.1 demonstrates how the women in my sample (n=18) reported the influence of their partners' sex offense on each of the life spheres that I explored in this study. The top row includes the number of women in the sample who described the registration of her partner as

having *no impact* on a life sphere. The middle row includes the number of women who characterized a *moderate impact* on a life sphere. For the purposes of this study, moderate impact means that the woman indicated that the particular life sphere was impacted slightly; in general, this meant that the respondent viewed the impact more as an annoyance or a minor disruption, rather than as fundamentally life-altering. The third row summarizes the number of women who identified a *severe very severe impact* on that particular life sphere. Severe to very severe impact means that the women identified the impact on a life sphere as completely altering her routine and seriously diminishing her life chances and/or emotional well-being.

Table 4.1 Effect of Registry on Life Spheres

	Employment	Housing	Peer Relationships	Family Relationships	Relationship with Partner	Children's Lives	Perception of Self
No Impact	5	3	1	0	0	0	0
Moderate	6	5	9	8	1	2	0
Severe to Very Severe	7	10	8	10	17	16	18

As shown in Table 4.1 above, about half of the women in the sample said that there was no impact or only a moderate impact on their employment (n=11), housing (n=8), peer relationships (n=10), and family relationships (n=8). Almost all of the women said that their relationships with their partner (n=17), their children's lives (n=16), and their perceptions of self (n=18) were severely impacted as a consequence of the partners' registration. While this sample is not representative, it is suggestive that certain spheres of the women's lives were, indeed, more severely affected by the partners' sex offense. As such, I draw on the qualitative data to describe the first four spheres in this chapter, then in chapter 5 move to a discussion of the more severely impacted spheres.

Employment

To begin, I discuss employment as one of the critical life spheres that was affected by the women's romantic relationship with a registered sex offender. Employment as a life sphere refers to these women's experience with obtaining and maintaining employment in order to financially provide for their families. For this study, this life sphere includes their partners' employment, as this also impacts the women's and her children's financial security.

Figure 4.2 shows the impact of the offense and registration according to the participants' descriptions in the interviews. As the reader can see, I have placed these experiences on a continuum. Five of the women identified their partners' registrations as having no impact on their employment. Six of the women reported that the offense had a moderate impact. And seven said that their partners' registrations led to severe or very severe impacts on their employment opportunities.

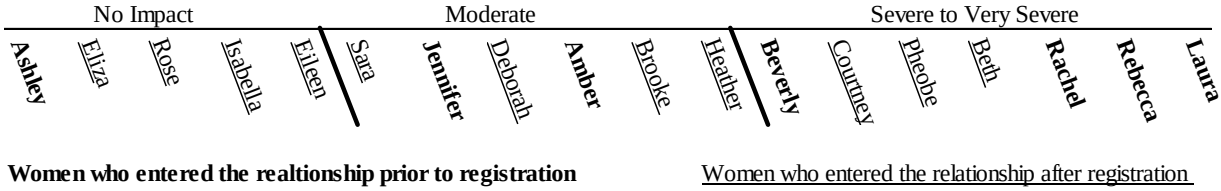

Figure 4.2 Employment Impact Continuum

No Impact

The five women who reported their partner's sex offender registration as having no impact on their employment attributed this to having stable employment in place prior to the registration and/or initiation of the relationship (n=4) or to being an unemployed college student (n=1). Eileen, who entered her relationship after her husband became a registered sex offender, worked in a post office and has close relationships with her coworkers; she said they knew of her husband's status and did not use that against her in the workplace. Eliza, Ashley and Isabella

were not open in their workplace about their partners' status. Isabella was the only one out of the three that said fear of backlash from her coworkers kept her from disclosing that information. Rose explained that as an unemployed student, she had yet to have to confront any potential employment issues that may result from her husband's status.

Moderate to Severe Impacts

The thirteen women who described either a moderate or severe impact on employment focused on how this life sphere was disrupted in terms of changes in personal employment, difficulties in maintaining partner employment, and financial instability for their household. Some of the women identified having to make changes in their employment, either a change to hours worked or entire career changes, typically in order to compensate for income lost due to their partner's lack of employment or incurred costs from probation and registration. The majority of the women attributed their partner's difficulty obtaining employment to his status as a sex offender, which deterred (or barred) potential employers from hiring the men. They also described their partners being 'stuck' in lesser paying or more strenuous jobs due to an inability to find better employment. These changes and struggles in employment led to financial troubles that then affected the entire household. Below, I elaborate upon each of these themes related to employment impacts.

Personal Employment Change

Ten of the women identified their own personal employment as affected by their partners' sex offense. This change ranged from an alteration in the number of hours the woman worked to a complete readjustment of the woman's career path. Participants who had entered into their relationships prior to the registration were more likely to describe a change in employment status than those women who entered the relationship following the partner's

registration. This finding is expected, as women, particularly those who entered the relationship prior to the registration, may be immediately forced into becoming sole breadwinners for their family since registration as a sex offender often results in the offender immediately losing employment (Tewksbury 2005). Conversely, the women who entered into the relationships after their partner had registered as a sex offender were more likely to be able to negotiate their role in the household finances prior to entering the relationship.

Women who were employed at the time of their partner's registration sometimes had to completely change their career paths in order to compensate for the effects of being associated with a sex offender. Beverly, who had been with her husband for 10 years prior to his registration, chose to change her career path following her husband's registration in order to provide an entirely new life for her children. She had previously been a business owner but was advised by peers and persons within the court system to abandon her business since it was intimately tied to her and therefore her husband. A "fresh start" would allow her and her children to escape the stigma surrounding her husband's status. She sold her own business, went back to school to complete a finance degree, and moved to a different state to search for employment to achieve that goal. She described how her transition from being an independent business owner to finding employment in the field of finance was affected by her partner's status:

> What's very hard with my degree is I have my finance degree and when you are working in finance they look into your own personal finances. They do a criminal check. They do a credit check because they feel like if you can't maintain your personal finances you can't help with company finances. And in our divorce and his conviction, we had our house foreclosed, we had two cars repossessed, so my credit looks like shit. So that weighs heavy on my degree so it's hard to find employment in that area because it's like if I'm not financially responsible on my own, I can't be responsible within a company and it makes it very hard to justify why because then that shuns me again employment wise.

Beverly felt that the stigma surrounding her association with a sex offender diminished her employment prospects and hence her ability to provide for her children.

Even if their partner's registration did not demand a career change, a few of the women still found themselves making changes in their current employment to compensate for their partner's job loss as well as incurred costs attached to being a registered sex offender. Indeed, many of these women found themselves and their families strapped with additional costs such as probationary fees and registration costs. Rebecca, who had been with her husband for 13 years prior to his registration, described her experience with having to change hours after her husband lost his career:

> I had a job as a medical technologist at work and I was on-call. It's kind of like a nurse but I worked in the lab and it was on-call so I was actually able to go full time but as on-call so I didn't have any benefits but I was getting forty hours a week. After that, I worked whatever shifts they would give me. Evening, nights, days, whatever they needed, I would just go in. I went to full time hours to be able to pay for the trial and pay for the appeal and then, of course, to pay for moving and all that kind of stuff.

The situation that Rebecca described was common among many women in the study. This change of course not only influenced these women's personal lives, it also altered their time available to care for their children. Having to add additional hours to make more money came at a cost of losing time they had previously spent in the home with their children.

None of the women who identified a change in their employment after their partner's registration as a sex offender noted that this change was desired or that it came without a financial or emotional cost. Rachel, for example, who had been with her husband for 12 years prior to his registration, reported her change to full-time employment following his registration and job loss as stressful and stated that she was not happy with her employment until it had returned to part-time and she was with her children more often.

Difficulties with Partner Employment

In addition to struggles with their own employment situation, many of the women in this study also reported that their partners found it challenging to maintain consistent employment due to their status as a sex offender. These difficulties may have resulted from employment loss immediately following the registration, extended periods of time without employment, and stagnancy within poor quality jobs. Problems experienced by sex offenders in the labor market has been studied by other scholars, and much of this research focuses on job loss and the inability to find new employment in the aftermath of registration as a sex offender (see Tewksbury 2005; Levenson and Cotter 2005). Although the problems that the offenders faced have been well documented, we know much less regarding how this affects his family members. Levenson and Tewksbury (2009:9) wrote that "employment problems for RSOs [registered sex offenders] resulted in financial hardships for the rest of the family." They did not, however, expand upon those hardships. In this section, I highlight the obstacles that the participants reported related to their partners' employment and earning capacity.

Heather, who entered into a relationship with her partner after he became a registered sex offender, described the general experience for her husband on the job market:

> There are people who will not even look at your application if you mark the check "Yes" for "were you ever convicted of a felon crime?" That's it. It goes in the garbage. And the jobs that he has had since he's been out of prison have been because friends, like one of the guys that used to go to our church had a business and he worked for him, you know, driving back and forth going to these facilities, doing quality control, things like that because businesses where they don't know you, they're not going to hire you. Plain and simple. They won't.

Heather's husband was eventually able to find consistent employment through friends, which helped them to attain some financial stability and allowed Heather to continue working as a stay-

at-home mom. Even so, the stress of initially being unable to find a job and then depending solely on friends for employment took a significant toll on the family.

Phoebe, who also entered her relationship after her partner was already a registered sex offender, echoed Heather's description of the challenges her partner faced in entering the workforce. What differentiated their stories, though, was that Phoebe and her husband of five years had no friends to turn to for support. Phoebe explained how her husband's status as a sex offender influenced his experiences in the workforce:

> He went for two years without a job just simply because he was a felon. He has skills. He went to school while he was inside. He can't utilize any of them because no one will hire him because he's a felon. There are a lot of trucking companies that would pay better or he would be home more but nobody will take him because he is a felon. There is so much stigma behind being a sex offender that nobody wants to. I have heard that nobody wants to take the responsibility.

During our interview, Phoebe said she was thankful that she was able to remain a stay-at-home mom after her husband finally did find work as a truck driver. But since this is the only job he was able to secure, given his status, he was often away from home, leaving Phoebe "feeling like a single parent."

Like Phoebe's husband, Beth's husband, whom she met after he had become a registered sex offender, also went for a period of time without finding a job because of his status as a sex offender. Beth, who has been with her husband for 11 years, elaborated on how this impacted her family's financial well-being during this time:

> It wasn't until 2003, when he had to get another job because he hurt his back, he started to look for work, and it took him two years to find a job. Two years. That was a really down time for our relationship as well as the family relationship and everything because I'm trying to manage our finances on what little I make. I'm just an artist who works at home. You can only imagine. They don't say "starving artist" for nothin'. There's some real truth to that. It's a difficult time financially.

Financial Instability

The women I interviewed as well as their partners faced many challenges in finding stable employment. As a result, the women spoke often of the resultant financial instability that they and their families experienced and of the stress this caused. The instability these women reported resulted from severe financial difficulties due to employment loss and an inability to financially recover after the sex offender registration. Some of the women described the lengths to which their economic well-being had been impacted by their partners' registration. Amber, who had been married to her husband for 16 years before he became a registered sex offender, underscored what a difficult time this was for her family:

> He quit his job. He resigned without telling them why. He knew that he couldn't have a felony record with his position and so it was just a huge adjustment of losing the job and the income and then we subsequently filed for bankruptcy.

Amber was not alone in reporting these financial woes. A few of the other women whom I interviewed also identified similar circumstances and financial hardships. For instance, Rachel, who had been with her husband for 12 years prior to his registration, described her family's experience as they attempted to cope with the loss of her husband's employment:

> When he was convicted, he lost his job. He was making six figures-plus, so that's a huge loss when you go from a hundred and some thousand down to maybe $15,000, $20,000 at the most. It was devastating. You work so hard to get to a certain level and then you lose it all. My husband couldn't find the employment that he thought he was going to, and my full-time job at the criminal defense attorney wasn't cutting it. I couldn't support the family. We had to file bankruptcy, lost our home.

Amber and Rachel had very similar experiences in terms of the loss of their husbands' employment and the resulting bankruptcy. These two women, and others in the study, were not in a position where they could compensate for the loss of their partners'

steady income. In many cases, this led to devastating financial effects including bankruptcy and ruined credit.

Housing

Housing was another life sphere that several of the women discussed as being affected by their partners' sex offender status. Housing refers to these women's experiences with having to obtain and maintain housing while being affected by their partners' sex offender restrictions. Housing is important because it is a "foundation of family life, without which all other activities are severely challenged or rendered impossible to carry out" (Bratt 2002:14).

Figure 4.3 shows what each participant reported in terms of the impact of the sex offender registration on her and her household. Specifically, three of the women identified their partners' registrations as having no impact on their housing, five said that the registration had a moderate impact, and ten said that this had a severe or very severe impact.

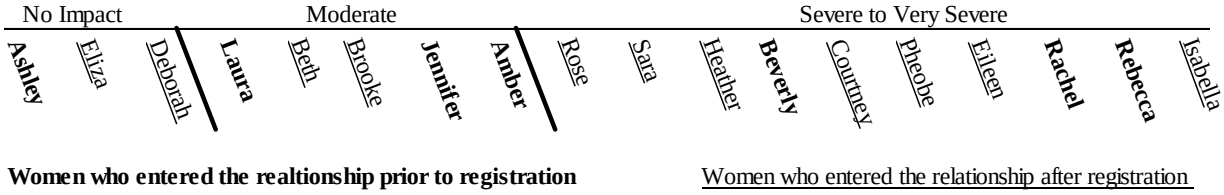

Figure 4.3 Housing Impact Continuum

No Impact

Of the three women who listed their partners' status as a sex offender as having no impact on their housing, two, Ashley and Deborah, lived separate from their boyfriends. Ashley lived with her parents and Deborah rented her own home. As a result, none of their partner's restrictions surrounding housing applied to the women's own housing situation. The third woman who identified no impact, Eliza, had her husband move into the home she owned after

they were married. He had no residency restrictions and since Eliza owned the home, she was not subject to potential discrimination from a landlord.

Moderate to Severe Impacts

Five of the participants reported moderate disruptions in their housing circumstances, while an additional ten described severe to very severe impacts. As the data presented below indicate, many of the women in this study faced substantial obstacles in securing stable housing and, in some cases, experienced a loss of control over their housing situations due to residency restrictions associated with their partners' sex offender status. In the most extreme cases, a few of the women were forced to begin maintaining two households in order to compensate for the residency restrictions and loss of choice.

Residency Restrictions

At least 33 states in the United States enforce residency restrictions for sex offenders (Mancini et al. 2011). Residency restrictions, with boundaries ranging from 500 to 2,000 feet, are generally used to disallow sex offenders from living near schools, school bus stops, daycare centers, and other locations where children and youth may congregate (Mercado, Alvarez and Levenson 2008; Norman-Eady 2007). Seven of the women in this study identified struggles with accommodating residency restrictions.

At the time I interviewed her, Rose and her daughter were living with Rose's mother. Although she appreciated the housing option, it was difficult for Rose because she said her mother "doesn't treat me and my daughter like we really belong there so, it's hard." As much as Rose wanted to move out on her own, she found it difficult to secure housing where her husband could live upon his release from prison. "It's hard because if the guidelines don't fit or the place

don't fit to their guidelines, he's not going to be able to come there, so it puts a lot more pressure on me to try to find something that's gonna be approved for him."

Although many people do not realize it, the residency restrictions placed on sex offenders can be quite challenging, given how many schools, school bus stops, child care centers, and so forth exist within communities. Some of the women identified the all-encompassing nature of the residency restrictions as quite daunting. When discussing her city's sex offender residency restrictions, Isabella explained:

> It's just everywhere you look. In fact the city that we live in, the whole park issue that you can't live 500 feet from a park, the city itself has a 2,000 foot residency restriction. They put up a park bench and a tree and they call that a park and they do that every so often so the whole city is you can't live here. It's just ridiculous.

Isabella's perception that the entire city is a place where you just "can't live" is not without some merit. For example, Miami Beach, Florida, is almost completely off limits to sex offenders since they enforced a 2,500 foot "buffer zone" around schools, child care centers, and parks; some sex offenders were reported living under a bridge due to an inability to find housing that fit Miami Beach residency restrictions (Dvorak 2005).

The nature of residency restrictions influenced the capacity of the women in this study to find housing in "good neighborhoods" and in places where they would actually want to "make a life," as Heather described:

> We can't be within 1,000 feet of a school or a park. We can't live any closer than that, so that poses to be a problem when we're looking for housing. We were going to buy our first house last year, found the perfect house, perfect price, perfect neighborhood, and it was 800 feet from a daycare, so it's like 200 more feet and we could have bought it. It gets frustrating. After a while you're constantly trying to make a life and make a home, have a place to live that's not outside of the bad areas of town, you know what I mean. It's a problem unless you want to live way, way out in the country somewhere.

Residency restrictions imposed on sex offenders prohibit the sex offenders from living in certain areas within a community, typically landing them in undesirable location and conditions. Consequently, these restrictions also place their families, partners and children, in undesirable locations and conditions. While residency restrictions may be an attempt to protect communities, it also disenfranchises certain community members, that is, the families of sex offenders, specifically those who live in the home with the sex offender and are subject to sex offender housing restrictions. As this study reveals, the partners and children of sex offenders did not commit a crime yet they are subject to potentially having to live in places that many would deem unfit for families.

Loss of Choice

The women in this study also described actual as well as perceived loss of choice. The women who entered their relationships prior to their partners' registrations reported loss of choice to stay in their housing immediately following the registration. Similar to employment loss, this may be expected as registration as a sex offender often results in the offender immediately losing housing often due to residency restrictions or unwelcoming landlords and neighbors suspicious of sex offenders (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009); if their partner was forced out of the home, the women who were in the relationships when their partner had to register were also forced from their home. During one of the interviews, Rachel talked about how she lost her home following her husband's conviction as a sex offender:

> Now we've lost our home. We had just built a half a million dollar dream home. We lived there for a year and that's when all that stuff happened, so we lost all that. All our things in life that we thought we needed. My husband was vice president of a company, made a ton of money, life was good. And then after all that happened, we lost our house, drive beater cars, and pretty much do stuff with just the five of us. We did sell our home. We made quite a bit of money off of that because it was beautiful.

Even if the women did not lose their home, they often experienced a loss of sense of freedom and choice as a consequence of their partners' conviction or registration. The women who entered the relationship after their partner became a registered sex offender identified a greater sense of loss of choice to move or choose a different neighborhood. For example, Beth, who entered her relationship with her husband after he became a registered sex offender, described why, although she would have preferred to move, she felt constrained to her home:

> I live in a three-bedroom mobile home. I'd like to actually have a real house. That's not gonna happen. We have heard now that mortgage lenders are not willing to lend to sex offenders, and we're like—I don't know if that would happen to us or not, but do we want to even risk it? Do we want to try putting our house up for sale and then get something nicer and not be approved because of the status? We can't move.

Beth's experiences with her fear of working with mortgage lenders is an example of how the women experienced either actual or perceived external constraints in terms of their ability to secure housing. Some women also described not only their fear of not being able to find another home but also their concerns about what would happen if they did move to a new home and neighborhood. In some cases, these fears were almost paralyzing, as Phoebe discussed:

> He's talked about moving before and I'm like "do you really want to go where people don't know us and don't know what your situation is." We've talked about moving for a better and job and that and it's like "well does the better money trump all these people thinking you're some kind of monster." You can't make any kind of decision without factoring that in. We haven't moved yet because I am scared to move near people who don't know him or what the situation was.

This loss of a sense of choice only further exacerbated the women's actual struggles with obtaining and maintaining housing. Even when able to find housing within a city's imposed sex offender residency restrictions, other factors such as mortgage lenders and fear of stigma and vigilantism, limited the women in this study in terms of their perceived housing options.

Maintaining Two Households

It is atypical for most couples to maintain two households. Yet, four of the women in this study—all of whom reported "severe" impacts of their partners' registration status—were forced to do just that as they attempted to provide for their children in one home while also maintaining a functional relationship with their partner in another. The "choice" to maintain two households was often in response to the couples attempting to accommodate legislative restrictions while managing the stigma associated with the man's sex offender status. This situation was only encountered by women who had entered into their relationship after their partner had become a registered sex offender with children from a previous relationship. This is likely because women who entered the relationship afterwards faced greater stigma for knowingly bringing children into a home with a sex offender or because their partner could not be around children, specifically non-biological children, as a probation term.

Heather's children were not able to live with her during the first three years of her relationship with her husband due to his probation restrictions. This included the first year of their marriage. Since her children could not live in her home, they stayed with their biological father, Heather's ex-husband. She explained:

> I was getting up every morning, going to [my ex-husband's] house, getting the kids ready for school, getting them off to school. I would go to school if I was enrolled in school, then I would come back home or go back to their house after school, be there when they got home from school, dinners, you know cleaning, laundry—all that kind of stuff.

For three years, Heather cried often when leaving her children each day and she described how exhausted she was when she would return each night to her husband. Heather's husband completed his probation in 2012, so her children had been back in their home for about a year when I conducted the interview.

Eileen had three children when she began her relationship with her partner. At the time I interviewed her, she had already lost custody of one of her children, her only daughter, due to her ex-husband gaining full custody through the courts to take the daughter out of the home of a sex offender. While Eileen's ex-husband did not demand custody of the other two children, who were boys, she was still at risk of losing them per court mandate if she did not end her relationship with her husband. In attempt to not lose either her husband or her children, Eileen chose to maintain two households.

> The judge we do have right now basically has said that my ex-husband will get custody of my kids as long as they're living here in my house with my husband. So me and my husband are in agreement that I will move in with my parents and that I will not bring the kids around him while I have them to prove to the court that I will keep them away from him. I will be living at my house when my kids are not with me, which is basically only every other weekend and then at school. In a day we have gone from having our own home to where the boys had a bedroom together and my daughter had her own room to living at my mom and dad's house and them all sharing one room.

A few weeks after our interview, Eileen contacted me to tell me about her custody hearing. She sadly reported that she had lost custody of her other two children because the state law where she was residing at the time mandated that a parent who is married to a sex offender cannot have custody of a minor child. Maintaining two households proved to be in vain for Eileen. She had not yet decided if she would return to her home with her husband.

Heather and Eileen's experiences are examples of severe impacts women who are married to sex offenders could face with their housing (and family situation) as caused by a partner's status as a sex offender. While Heather and Eileen experienced this struggle due to having children that were not biologically their partners, other women in my study had biological children with offenders and still faced significant issues. Phoebe, who entered the relationship

after her husband was already a sex offender, described her experience with having a child then being forced to maintain two households:

> So me and my husband got together while he was on parole, got married while he was on parole and had a baby while he was on parole. The parole officer wouldn't let him see any of his kids so he didn't even see his daughter until she was almost a year old. He was living with his parents and I was living in an apartment, a one-bedroom apartment with two kids.

The possibility of mothers in relationships with sex offenders having to maintain two households for their partner and children can occur under a myriad of circumstances. As seen in the data of this study, the need for two households can result regardless of whether the children are the sex offender's biological children or not; it can also stem from probation or parole restrictions as well as from pressure from the family court system.

Relationships with Peers

Another sphere of the women's lives that was impacted by their partners' status was their peer relationships, including friendships and relationships with co-workers and colleagues. Figure 4.4 summarizes the results from my interviews, illustrating the level of impact that each participant reported in terms of her partners' registrations and the impact on the personal relationships sphere. As shown in the figure, only one woman identified her partner's registration as having no impact on her peer relationships, while nine said the registration had a moderate impact, and eight said that it had a severe or very severe impact.

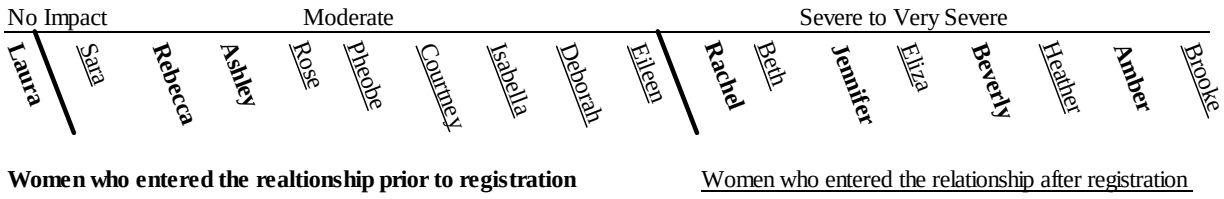

Figure 4.4 Peer Relationships Impact Continuum

No Impact

Laura was the only respondent who said her husband's sex offender registration did not impact her peer relationships. However, at the time of the interview, Laura's husband had just become a registered sex offender; he had not even completed all of his court proceedings yet. Therefore, Laura was in the very beginning of her experience as a mother in a relationship with a sex offender. She was not yet in a position to assess how her peer relationships would be impacted. If I had interviewed Laura a few months after our initial interview, her response on peer relationships could have been very different.

Moderate to Severe Impacts

The women in this study identified two major impacts on their peer relationships resulting from their romantic relationships with sex offenders: loss of contact with friends and co-workers and intentional nondisclosure to peers. The stigma that the women felt led to most of these reported instances of loss and nondisclosure.

Loss of Peer Relationships

A loss of peer relationships for this sample tended to either fall into two categories: loss due to differences in lifestyles or loss due to the stigma surrounding sex offenders. Some of the women discussed a loss of contact with peers due to the change in lifestyle—including shifts in employment or housing status—that followed all of the restrictions attached to a sex offender. For example, prior to her husband's sex offender registration, Rachel's family had a very "comfortable lifestyle." She listed her husband as making over a $100,000 a year; they owned a half a million dollar home, drove luxury cars and were able to engage in costly activities, such as expensive vacations. After her husband was registered, Rachel experienced a lifestyle change that included income below the poverty line, a cheaper home and cars and an inability to afford

non necessity expenses. Rachel explained how this lifestyle change altered her relationships with her peers, a change she viewed as a loss:

> I still talk to some of them on Facebook, but it's just different now. We just don't get that many requests to hang out. Well, plus we're not at their level any more, you could say. We used to go to Vegas and we'd go on trips for the weekend or the week. We can't do that stuff anymore. I guess I could say they think they're probably better than us now. They don't want to hang out with us. Who wants to hang out with a sex offender?

Stigmatized individuals, such as partners of sex offenders, often face social rejection, such as that described by Rachel (Wright, Gronfein and Owens 2000). Rachel attributed her 'social rejection' mostly to her lifestyle change. Beverly experienced a greater loss of friendships due to the stigma surrounding her husband's status. She elaborated on her experience dealing with that loss:

> It just kind of freaked them out and as a mother, I understand their fear. But it was hard. A lot of my friends told me "I want to be there to support you but my husband had told me to not have any contact with you because of what's going on and I have to respect my husband's wishes." I understood that. It was hard, but you learn your friends are quickly.

Many of the women had similar encounters to Beverly's and identified that "they weren't real friends" or "you know who your real friends are." These women's friends were exhibiting a common reaction in society to stigmatized groups: discomfort. Although this discomfort could possibly be alleviated by repeated contact with the stigmatized groups (Blascovich et al. 2001), these women's friends often did not engage in such contact, as exemplified in Beverly's experience. At a time when the women, such as those whom I interviewed, may need peer support the most, the stigma of their partners' status prohibits their relationships.

Nondisclosure in Peer Relationships

In anticipation of this rejection by peers due to their romantic relationships with sex offenders, some of the women chose not to disclose their partners' status as sex offenders. Prior

research has similarly found that the possibility of uncomfortable interactions with peers concerning stigmatized information or statuses may lead to decreased interaction and communication (Hebl, Tickle and Heatherton 2000).

Amber explained that her biggest struggle after her husband's registration was the associated stigma with the sex offender label. Due to this stigma, Amber decided not to disclose her husband's status as a sex offender, even to those closest to her. This deception was stressful, but she felt she had no choice: "I've had to lie. I've lied. It's just been my choice to lie, instead of having everything out in the open." This choice to lie led Amber to avoid developing stronger ties with friends and co-workers due to her fear that they would find out about her husband's status. Amber experienced more limited friendship circles, which in turn led to more limited social support networks.

Amber was the only woman in this study who chose to deceive others about her partners' status. Others in the study did not actively lie, but they did intentionally withhold information to try to protect their partners, their children, and/or themselves from the associated stigma. Indeed, most of the women who identified strain when choosing to not disclose information to their peers typically classified it as a hesitation of letting people into their lives out of fear of retaliation. Courtney explained her thought process when choosing whether or not to tell someone about her partner:

> It takes a lot for me to let somebody into my life because I feel threatened all the time. I feel like I constantly have to be aware of my surroundings and what's going to be around the corner. It's hard to sit there and tell somebody you have a registered sex offender as a fiancé, to sit there and decide whether or not they are going to continue talking to you or be like the majority of people who have that stigma that all registered sex offenders are unforgivable.

Courtney's fear of rejection is not unwarranted. In a survey conducted with families of registered sex offenders, including sex offenders' children, siblings, relatives and romantic partners, 44% of

the sample of 584 individuals reported being threatened or harassed, 7% reported being assaulted, and 27% reported property damage after disclosure of their family member's status as a sex offender (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009).

Like Courtney, Eliza also feared rejection and stigmatization resulting from her peers knowing about her husband's status. Therefore, she has chosen not to share that information with her friends and coworkers. Although Eliza reported having more people in her peer group, she identified the strain of maintaining those relationships while also not allowing those people to discover her husband's status. Eliza talked about the impact that hiding her husband's status has on the maintenance of her friendships:

> I feel like my relationships with my friends and coworkers aren't really very deep because I don't know them. I kind of live in fear of them finding out and not understanding that the common misconception is that these people can't change, they can never be rehabilitated. I have friends, like in the home-schooling group that we're in, that don't know about this, and it's like a regular friendship like I used to have before I knew him. That feels weird.

Rather than finding solace in their friends and colleagues, often the women in this study experienced additional stress regarding how much to disclose regarding their partners' status. Research shows that people who are going through major life changes, such as adjusting to being in a relationship with a sex offender, may experience less adverse health effects from the associated stress if they have a reliable social network (Heaney and Israel 2002). Therefore, although the women in this study claimed they were able to function without close peer relationships, they were missing out on great support systems that could buffer the effects that their association to a sex offender has on their perceptions of self (this is an issue that I consider more in chapter 5 and chapter 6 of the thesis).

Relationships with Family

The life sphere family relationships refers to the respondents' relationships with family members outside of their partners and children. Figure 4.5 demonstrates where each participant reported that she fell on the continuum. It is noteworthy that all of the respondents said that their relationships with family were impacted at least to some degree. Specifically, eight of the women identified their family relationships as being moderately impacted, while the remaining ten said these relationships were severely or very severely affected after the registration.

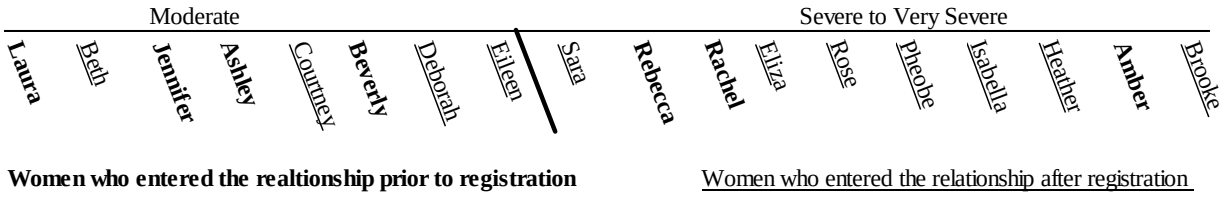

Figure 4.5 Family Relationships Impact Continuum

Moderate to Severe Impacts

The women in this study identified two major impacts on their family relationships: conflict and loss. Conflict refers to a prolonged struggle with their family members over these women's relationships with sex offenders. Loss refers to family members discontinuing contact over disagreement with the women's choices to enter into or remain in relationships with sex offenders.

Conflict in Family Relationships

The women in this study who had entered into their relationships after their partners had become sex offenders experienced greater amounts of conflict in their family relationships. Based off of their descriptions, this could likely be attributed to the fact that, unlike the women who were already in their relationships prior to registration, the families of those who entered afterwards did not know the men before their registration. They had no sense of these men's

lives, personalities and values prior to becoming a sex offender and therefore could not use those as a buffer to the stigma attached to them. Family members are not exempt from feeling uncomfortable around stigmatized groups and a number of the women in this study found that their family could not look past their partners' labels. Out of concern of what may happen if her family found out she was dating a sex offender, Sara initially avoided the topic, telling them only that he was in trouble with the law. Sara described what happened after she told her family that she was with someone who "had been in legal trouble":

> So they did some searching and found the charge, and actually they stopped talking to me for, like, six months, at least. They were not coming to the wedding, they were not gonna be involved at all. "You just need to leave him. What are you gonna do? What's it gonna be like? What happens if he does something?" Once they realized they couldn't push me and I wasn't gonna break up with him or stop the wedding, they became accepting. So that was a struggle.

Sara's story is an example of how easily conflict can arise within family relationships based on a woman's relationship with a sex offender. Sara was able to reconcile with her family after they refused to come to the wedding. Eliza also experienced family members refusing to come to her wedding with her partner who is a sex offender. However, unlike Sara, she was unable to overcome that rift within her family relationships entirely. She explained how she felt about that situation:

> My family did not accept him at first. Everyone in my family except my dad refused to come to our wedding. That's been a problem between me and my family, and still, I'm really not over that. The most important day of my life and they refused to come. If my decisions don't line up with what they think I should decide, they're not gonna stand with me. It's been difficult to work through for me.

In addition to the strain experienced in other life spheres, Eliza's experience with her family is an example of how family, while commonly a support system, can also exacerbate these women's struggles when in a relationship with a sex offender.

Sara and Eliza's stories exemplify an emotional struggle with maintaining family relationships when those relationships did not prove to be supportive in a stressful situation. Rose also described conflict within her relationships. She focused more on how her daily interactions with family members became strained and conflict-ridden due to her husband's status:

> My family has actually tore him down because of him being a sex offender, my family doesn't approve of it. I'll talk to my family but I don't really trust my family to that aspect with telling them everything with what's going on with him. I still feel like she resents me because I went against her wishes and married my husband, and just things she guess just, my relationship with my family has gone downhill. Cause my mother, they begged me before I married him, not to marry him because he's a sex offender but my relationship with them has really deteriorated over the years.

The women who reported these impacts faced conflicts in their family relationships specific to their romantic association with a sex offender. At a time in which their family members could be a support system to compensate for all of the other associated strain of being with a sex offender, this strain in other life spheres was actually aggravated by conflict with family members.

Loss of Family Relationships

When the conflict with family members became too great, some of the women in my sample ended up severing all ties with their family due to the stigma surrounding their partners' statuses as sex offenders. Brooke, for instance, had long fought with her ex-husband and former in-laws over her current husband's status: "[My ex-husband] used my husband's status as a registered sex offender, printing up his registry page to post it in different places, such as social media, Facebook, mass emails. He took it to my kids' schools, he took it to my church, he took it to my friends, he took it to my family. I had a lot of people that stopped communicating with me for quite a long time." Brooke's story is an extreme example of how family members can be

pushed away due to the sex offender status of a partner. Brooke also described how the dynamics of her relationship with her sister had dramatically changed since she married her husband:

> My sister stopped talking to me. I had a close knit family. We talked every day, I see them regularly. My kids went down to see my sister in Florida for six weeks. Really we had a very close relationship. Through all of this my sister has stopped communication with me completely.

Brooke's experience with her sister demonstrates that the stigma surrounding a sex offender can deteriorate even the seemingly strongest of family relationships. Interestingly, the women in this study who experienced conflict and loss in their family relationships identified this as upsetting and stressful, but not totally debilitating. Often times the women described this difficulty in their family relationships as bringing their relationships with their partners and children closer together.

Family is often a main support system for people who experience strains in their life. Family relationships have been identified as mental health predictors given the saliency of the emotions involved in those relationships (Walen and Lachman 2000). However, as with peer relationships, the women in this study are missing crucial opportunities to buffer the effects of being associated with a sex offender through family relationships due to the stigma surrounding sex offenders.

CHAPTER V

MOST SEVERELY IMPACTED LIFE SPHERES

In the previous chapter, I provided an analysis of how my participants' experiences within four life spheres—employment, housing, peer relationships, and family relationships—were affected due to their romantic relationships with sex offenders. In this chapter, I examine three additional life spheres, including their relationships with their partners, their children's lives, and their perceptions of self. When compared to the four life spheres addressed in the prior chapter, these three life spheres were much more severely impacted. Indeed, the effects on the life spheres that I discuss in this chapter were depicted by the women as fundamentally altered as a direct result of their romantic relationship with a sex offender.

Partner Relationship

All of the women in this study indicated that their relationships with their partners were moderately to seriously affected by their partner's sex offense. In the context of this research, partner relationship refers to the romantic affiliation with a sex offender, whether through dating (n=2), engagement (n=2), or marriage (n=14). The relationship between the women in the study and each respective partner is important for many reasons. The man that she is in a relationship is the father, or plays a father-like role, to her child or children. He is a potential source of financial and emotional support. And, among other things, and as described in greater depth below, the women saw the man in her life as a direct extension of, and reflection of, herself. As such, the sex offender label had a seriously disruptive impact on the relationship between the woman and the man. Figure 5.1 shows what each participant indicated regarding how severely their partner's status as a sex offender impacted their relationship.

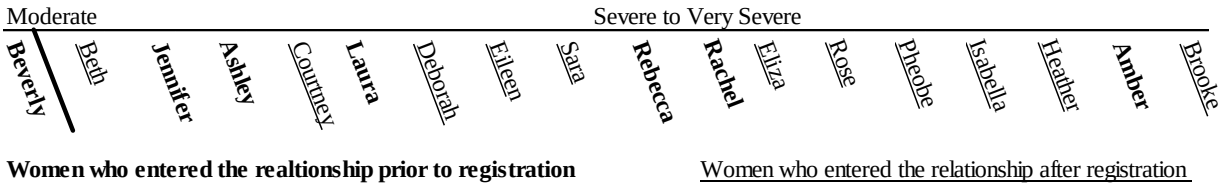

Figure 5.1 Partner Relationship Impact Continuum

Moderate to Severe Impacts

Seventeen of the 18 participants classified disruptions in their relationship with their partner as severe to very severe; the remaining respondent reported moderate impacts. Participants focused on how this life sphere was disrupted following the offense in terms of the impact on the division of labor in the household, the resultant conflict within the relationship, and the pressure that was perceived in terms of the responsibility to help the partner through his experience as a sex offender.

These three aforementioned themes were tightly interconnected. For example, most of the women in this study found that the distribution of labor—in particular regarding parental roles—was negatively altered due to legal restrictions and social stigma associated with the sex offender label. As a consequence of these and other strains, conflict increased in the relationships, especially as related to the feasibility of maintaining the relationship. Despite alteration of roles and conflict, most of the women also felt a strong sense of responsibility to help their partners through the turbulent times they were experiencing. Below, I elaborate upon each of these themes related to partner relationships.

Unequal Distribution of Labor

In a relationship involving children, mothers typically want to share parental duties and labor with their partner. Indeed, in today's society, parental labor and associated roles are increasingly being transformed, especially in terms of increased responsibilities being taken on

by men (Castelain-Meunier 2002). As commitment to fathering increases in the United States, men are performing more housework and family work (Sanchez and Thomson 1997).

Only four of the women in this study were stay at home mothers, thus purposefully assuming the vast majority of personal responsibility for the home and for the caretaking of children. The remaining 14 women in the sample split housework and child-rearing responsibilities somewhat more evenly with their partners, because the women worked outside the home as well. (The reader will recall from chapter four, however, many of these women ended up working more hours because they became the primary breadwinners or were forced to contribute more financially following the partners' registration.)

Even as these women who worked outside the home in the paid labor force took on more hours and more job-related tasks, they still found themselves at home also taking on more than a "fair share" of responsibilities due to their partners' restrictions. The unequal distribution of labor within the household was a common struggle for most of the women in this study. The women's partners often had probation terms, or restrictions to all sex offenders, that prohibited them from engaging in certain parental roles. Phoebe, the mother of three children, described how this impacted her relationship with her husband:

> I feel like a single parent because he doesn't get to go to the parks or the schools or anything so I am constantly always doing everything. He feels like he's not being a father. So you get the whole fight of I am doing everything and you are just going to work. So it tends to cause problems there but I mean we kind of work through it.

Phoebe's story touches on an important point related to the theme of the unequal distribution of labor: the perceived creation of a "single parent" dynamic within two-parent homes. The women in this study, like other women who are full-time single mothers, experienced both task and emotional overload (see Schor 1999). Although the women in this

study wanted their partners to be fully involved, most of my participants were forced into providing primary and, at times, exclusive care for their children.

Given that most of the women in this sample were living in households with their partners, but were engaging almost as single mothers, the women expressed that they felt they were playing split roles: as mother and as wife. Heather, for example, maintained two households for a period of time and was taking care of her four children in one home and her husband in the other. She expressed her emotions as she dealt with that reality:

> It was very frustrating that here I am married and I am expecting my husband to help me, but he can't because he's a sex offender. It had a strain on our relationship because I'm tired. I come home, I've been gone all day, you know, I've been taking care of these kids with no help from the ex, and my new husband can't help, so it was very frustrating, and so you know, there was some, I think there was some tension, and you know maybe some "Why" questions on my part, what did I sign up for.

These parental strains were more severe for women who entered their relationships after their partners' registration. These women often attributed this to the fact that they had entered the relationship with children that were not biologically their partners'. Therefore, despite being married, the non-biological children were often kept from the sex offender due to probation terms or legislation prohibiting that interaction. Often times, it was also the biological father of the children that would take the women to court and demand the children be separated from the partner. My participants did their best to provide for their family but were unable to receive much needed help from their spouses due to their status as sex offenders.

Relationship Conflict

All of the respondents reported some conflicts in their relationships, and much of this conflict stemmed from questions concerning the feasibility of maintaining that relationship. Jennifer, for example, was married to a man who was required to register as a sex offender for

five years. At the end of his five years, he was told that the law had been changed to a 10 year duration for the registration. At the end of his ten years, he was told the law had been changed to life. Jennifer recounted the impact: “That was a big—that was a big blow. A consensual act of oral sex turns into a lifetime of a prison sentence. He’s basically just serving it at home.” Unsure if she could handle a lifetime of marriage to someone so stigmatized—legally and socially—Jennifer eventually left her husband. After deciding she did not want to raise her children in a broken home, however, she resumed their relationship. While she was glad to be reunited with her partner, it also meant that she would continue to endure particular hardships associated with his status. Jennifer’s story illustrates how conflict would often arise in these women’s relationships as well as the complexity of the decision to stay or leave, as highlighted in Rusbult’s Investment Model of Commitment (See chapter two).

Interestingly, the conflict over whether it would be feasible for the woman to stay in a relationship did not always occur right at the beginning of the relationship or at the moment of the sex offender registration. Rather, the women who endured this conflict often indicated that some other major event precipitated the conflict. For example, at the time that I conducted my interview with Eileen, who had recently lost custody of one of her children, she had chosen to live apart from her husband, the sex offender, in order to keep custody of her other two children. She and her husband had agreed that separation was the most logical choice at the time, trusting that their relationship would endure the separation. However, in a follow-up email, Eileen revealed that she had lost custody of all of her children despite living apart from her husband (in this case, because of a state law that said a person married to a sex offender cannot have legal custody over minors). In that email, Eileen wrote: “I am beyond hurt and mad and am divided into divorcing my husband and taking my chances or fighting with everything I have to change

the laws that the sex offender laws is unconstitutional." Eileen's custody loss catapulted her into conflict over the sustainability of her relationship.

Although not all of the women in this study had such dramatic catalyzing moments, many did struggle with conflicting emotions around whether or not to stay in the relationship. Deborah, for example, was only dating her boyfriend, a sex offender, and they had no shared children. Thus, unlike most of the participants, she had the option to leave the relationship and all associated struggles without a divorce or custody battle. Despite the strain attached to being in a relationship with a sex offender, Deborah's feelings for her boyfriend stopped her from walking away from the situation. Deborah reflected on this emotional conflict:

> It's been a lot of turmoil for me and my boyfriend, and much more so than what I really expected, and sometimes I just feel like I want to give up and walk away from it, but it's hard to do because I love the man and I want to help him and I want to make his life better for him. I still feel emotionally attached to him.

Based on the data, the participants who entered the relationship after the registration recounted more severe conflicts related to the feasibility of their relationships. Entering the relationship after the registration diminished the emotional connection and invested time to these men prior to their registration as sex offenders. Therefore, they were only able to draw on their frequently strained experiences of being in relationships with sex offenders. For example, the participants who entered their relationship after their partner's registration commonly made statements such as "I didn't realize what all I had signed up for." Conversely, the women who entered the relationship with their partner prior to his registration, when discussing mediating their relationship conflict, often made comments such as "we made vows for better or worse and I wouldn't want him to leave me if something this big happened to me" or "we'd been married so long, I had to stay." They were able to pull on those investments they made prior to their

partners' registration, another component in Rusbult's commitment theory, whereas those who entered after could not.

Moreover, the data suggests the women who entered the relationship after their partners' registration more frequently reported a loss of support in their lives when friends and family members did not agree with my participants' choices to enter into a relationship with a sex offender. On the contrary, many of the women who entered their relationship prior to their partners' registration still had support in their lives because their friends and families knew the man's character prior to his crime and used that when processing what he had done. For example, Rebecca and Jennifer, both of whom had been with their husband prior to his registration, drew on support from peers and family who stood by and vouched for the man through the court and registration process. They each identified this support as imperative to their emotional well-being and belief in their relationship.

Another barrier in the lives of the women who entered their relationships after registration was the possibility of losing custody of their children that were not biologically the sex offenders. None of the women who were already in their relationships at the time of registration faced this struggle as their children were biologically the sex offenders. In fact, for the women who entered their relationship prior to registration, having children with the offender often acted as a buffer to the conflict, as the women expressed not wanting to split their family. While the majority of my participants expressed high levels of conflict over the feasibility of their relationship with a sex offender, those who entered their relationships after had to consider a greater number of factors.

Responsibility to Partner

Despite the uneven distribution of labor and the conflict and other issues that the women described in the interviews, almost all of the participants also reported feelings of responsibility to their partners. This perceived responsibility to their partners was felt by both women who had entered the relationship prior to as well as after the registration. As Rebecca phrased it, they were "fighting the same beast." Most of the women felt as though, even as they were struggling with their partners' restrictions related to his registration, their partners were struggling even more dealing with it directly. Sara explained:

> I try and be really supportive. I know the situation the way it is, and as stressful as it is for me, it's him, you know? He's the one who could go to jail if the police decided he was doing something wrong, so I just want to be supportive.

Sara's desire to be supportive of her partner in his struggles is representative of what others have called a woman's "wider net of concern" in taking on the struggles of those closest to her (Kessler, McLeod and Wethington 1985; Walen and Lachman 2000:26). Despite experiencing numerous obstacles and immense levels of stress in various life spheres, the women in this sample endured a second set of struggles by taking on the stress of their partners. Some of the tasks women took on for their partner included monitoring sex offender legislation to ensure the partner did not violate any new or changing laws; maintaining calendars and schedules of all registration and related dates to avoid violating any laws; and keeping all necessary community members abreast of their partner's situation to lessen the chance of confrontation or restriction violations. These responsibilities, added to all the other strains these women reported, only complicated the unique circumstances of the women in this sample.

In addition to feeling responsible out of general concern for their partners' successful adherence to sex offender laws, these women also had strong emotional attachments to their

partners that propelled them to commit themselves to this outcome. Isabella discussed her ongoing commitment even in the face of extreme adversity:

> This has been the worst two years of my life but at the same time it's also been the best. I will never ever condone what he did but people deserve second chances and he is a completely different person. I would go to hell and back for him. So as hard as this is, it's also made me stronger. And, it's like I told him I would rather fight with him than laugh with anyone else.

Isabella's story exemplifies the participants' choices to persist in these relationships regardless of the associated strain. These decisions were not made idly. The women engaged in complex emotional negotiations in their relationships and made sacrifices in their other life spheres to maintain their relationships. The only life spheres that they reported were more severely impacted than their partner relationship were their children's lives and their own perception of self. This is likely because the self was inescapable and their children a direct extension of themselves.

Children's Lives

Although often overlooked, the children's lives of the women in this sample were also deeply disrupted by the man's status as a sex offender. Children's lives, in this thesis, refer to the children's experiences, the mother's relationships with their children, as well as the mother's partner's role in the children's lives. The women in this study reported that they felt a strong sense of responsibility to support and protect their children, in the face of the registration. Figure 5.2 summarizes the data from my interviews in terms of the reported impact on children's lives. As shown in the table, two women reported a moderate impact while the remaining 16 women characterized their partners' registration as having severe to very severe impacts on their children's lives.

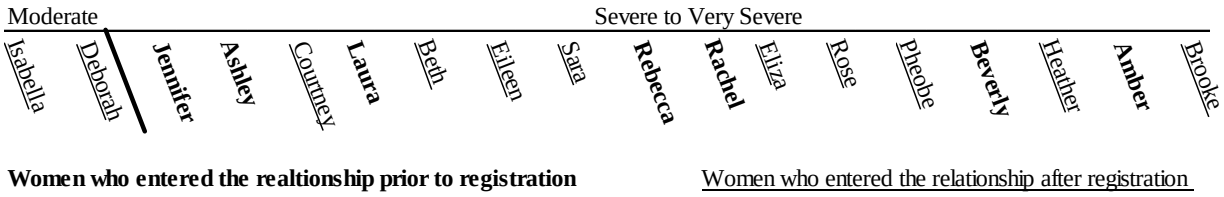

Figure 5.2 Children's Lives Impact Continuum

Moderate to Severe Impacts

The women in this study identified five major impacts on their children's lives: (1) separation of the mother from her child or children, (2) absence of a father figure, (3) disruption of routine with the child's friends, (4) real and anticipated bullying, and (5) stress over disclosure of the father's/man's status. These themes generally can be classified in two ways: strain on the children's relationships—mother, father and peer—and strain on the children's well-being—experiences with bullying as well as exposure to the partners' status.

Mother Separation from Child

Mothers create deep emotional bonds as they interact with their children that cause maternal and connected ways of thinking (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin 2005). All of the women in this study expressed these profound bonds with their children. Therefore, the seven women that described separation from their children as a result of their romantic relationship with a sex offender reported intense strain on their role as a mother. Here, separation refers to the women either being separated from their children as a result of lost custody or a separation from their children due to having to maintain two homes.

Heather maintained two households for a period of time as her husband finished probation because he was not allowed to live in the same home as minors. Heather's four children lived with their biological father for three years during that time. Every morning she

would go to her ex-husband's house and care for her children and then return to her husband, the sex offender, in the evenings. She shared her emotions as she dealt with that separation:

> There were times when I had to leave to come home from their house, and I would just cry all the way home. Why do I have to leave? Why can't I just stay? Or, this is dumb. This whole situation is just stupid. A lot of times it would feel like it's just never gonna work out, it's just never gonna happen.

Like Heather, a few of my participants lived apart from their children for a period of time. This temporary form of separation had negative impacts on the women's well-being. Therefore, my findings show that the women that were separated from their children suffered greater identity costs and were more dramatically impacted in terms of their emotional well-being.

Brooke, a mother of three children, explained that her husband's registration as a sex offender led to her separation from her three children. When Brooke's ex-husband discovered her current husband's sex offender status, he took Brooke to court in attempt to prove her an unfit mother given her relationship with a sex offender. "[My ex-husband] was able to obtain an order of protection and actually take the kids for three weeks with me having no contact. I had been a stay home mom my entire life and that was probably the lowest he could have hit me." Brooke lost custody of her children for three weeks until she demonstrated in court that her children were safe.

Courtney actually lost permanent custody of all three of her children as a result of her husband's status as a sex offender. Two of her children were taken by their fathers, as the courts immediately deemed the biological father's home safer than a home with a sex offender present. The custody of Courtney's third child, whose father was absent, was granted by the courts to Courtney's sister for the same reason as her first two. Despite having the Division of Child and Family Services advocate for her in court stating that Courtney's home with her husband was

safe for her children, Courtney was unable to maintain full or joint custody of her children. Courtney expounded upon dealing with this loss:

> There is nothing saying I am unfit or I am mentally unstable. It's all pertaining to the registry that he's on. Their fathers are trying to erase me. Everybody is trying to erase me like I never happened. Their stepparents are their mothers like they're the ones that raised them and taught them and gave birth to them. They want me completely out of the picture. It's hard when you spent three years of a child's life, and you helped raise them and helped mold them and now all of a sudden you are treated like a criminal. You can't see them unsupervised. I can't take them to a movie if I want to. I can't take them to a park if I want to. It's unfair. I did nothing wrong.

This separation of mother and child as a result of a woman's partner being registered as a sex offender altered family structure and depleted stability within the children's lives. The women in this study were not purposefully placing their children in harm's way. Government agencies were involved in a few of the participants' custody cases, arguing that the home, even with a registered sex offender present, was safe for the children. Yet, given the stigma and stereotypes attached to sex offenders in the United States, seven of the women in this study were separated from their children because of their association with sex offenders. This separation caused immense amounts of stress in the children's lives and their mothers'.

Absence of Father Figure

Even for the women who were not separated from their children, many of their children felt the absence of their father (or the man in their mother's lives), as a result of the restrictions associated with the man's offense. Most of the women in this study described how their partners were unable to attend many of the children's school and sporting functions or were otherwise unable to be fully engaged in the children's lives. This is similar to what Levenson and Tewksbury (2009) found in their study, in which 74% of the sample indicated that the parent

labeled as a sex offender was unable to participate in a number of the children's activities, particularly those in which children congregated.

The majority of the women who reported their partner as having to be absent in parts of the children's lives described their children as emotionally hurt due to this absence. Rachel, mother of three children, expanded upon the effects of her husband's absence from her children's athletics:

> My daughter's had volleyball and he's never seen her play. He used to be a coach all the time, too. Obviously that's pretty much done with forever. I think that hurts my kids too because their dad's a great athlete and he's great with kids when it comes to coaching and all those kinds of things.

Three of Eliza's children also struggled dealing with the absence of their father from sporting and school events; her fourth and oldest child was 22-years-old and out of the home. She explained that her children would become upset when their father was unable to attend these events and celebrate their accomplishments. Eliza said: "The football thing is really a bonding thing between father and son, and they watch football together all the time, so when it was explained that he couldn't go to the games, it was really hard on my son."

Despite the many negative stereotypes attached to all sex offenders, the majority of my participants' partners were also fathers or step-fathers whose children depended on them for emotional and social support. The children of my participants lost this crucial resource in some aspects of their lives because their fathers were sex offenders. As Phoebe, mother of three, described, "He can't make any memories with them and that sucks for them. We can't take them to the zoo. We can't take them to the aquarium. We can't do any of that." As a result, the women in this study not only had to take the place of the father at all of these events, they also had to help the children through their emotions of missing their father figure. The separation from mother or father can be difficult for a child. The women in this study found that their children

often faced one or the other, or both. The women then attempted to compensate for loss in their children's lives, but as described in the previous section, this also meant more labor for the women which caused added stress.

Disruption of Routine with Friends

Children need friends to help them through life struggles. The sex offender registration of a father or man in the mother's life, however, prohibited many of the participants' children from developing rich and meaningful relationships with their own peers. Several of the women in this study reported that their children had lost friendships or the ability to "hang out" with friends due to the child-parent association to a sex offender. The Levenson and Tewksbury (2009) study revealed that 56% of their sample reported that the children of the sex offenders were prohibited from playing at a friend's house by choice of the friend's parents; their work also indicated that 70% of the children of sex offenders had friends' parents who prohibited their children from coming to the home of the sex offender's child.

Nearly all of the women in this study acknowledged the possibility of their children experiencing disruption in their friendships, as a result of being a child of a sex offender. The women who had young children were most fearful of how that potential disruption may impact their children in the future. Sara, whose two children were still fairly young, described her fears for what this would mean in her children's future:

> As they get older, they won't have friends over unless I know the parents very well and the parents know the situation. We're very forthcoming when it comes to stuff like that, so I know that's going to be a struggle. There will never be sleepovers. Halloween, no candy, everything has to stay dark. I foresee a lot of struggle when they get older helping them understand the situation.

Sara's fears associated with her partner's status and the impact on her children's lives was still largely hypothetical because of the young age of her children. The majority of the

women in this sample had older children and thus had already witnessed the impact of the partner's stigma on their children's friendships. For example, Phoebe described her experience with her children not having friends over to play:

> Like the kids having friends over doesn't happen because I don't want any trouble there. Like what am I supposed to say "Oh by the way before you let your kids come over my husband is a sex offender." It effects them in a lot more ways than it really does us. I mean we get people that move in and are in my kids classes and they don't know and my son is like, "Oh, I want so and so over" and I'm like, "No, we can't do that" unless its summer and if my husband is at work and they can come over and play.

None of the women in this study made the decision to not allow other children in their home as a result of fear of their partners offending the children. Rather, they were afraid of how other parents, and potentially the wider community, would potentially react if they did allow children over. The women therefore prohibited children from coming over when the offender was present (as Phoebe described above) or at all (as many other women discussed) as a means to keep their family safe and as minimally stigmatized as possible. While these precautions made sense, they also had clear impacts on the children and their ability to develop meaningful friendships. Beth described her daughter's experience with a lack of friends and how she tried to compensate for her daughter's loneliness:

> This is such a huge issue because she wants so bad to have a social life outside of school, and she's not allowed to. It's just wrong. The registry is supposed to protect children, and all it's doing is putting targets on specific children and they don't deserve that. That's not fair. Her biggest problem is not being able to have parties here, not being able to have sleepovers. These are normal things. She lives a very isolated life outside of school. I'm just one person, and I try to do stuff with her when she's not in school, especially summer break. Summer break for her is just one long boring thing.

The children of these women were not to blame for the registration of the men who were their fathers or their mother's partners; yet, they were still greatly impacted. Their mothers must

then bear that burden for their children as well. Thus, the women in this study added the strain from this relationship with their children to the strain experienced in all other life spheres.

Real and Anticipated Bullying

Given that these women's children's ability to develop and maintain meaningful and secure friendships was severely impacted by their mother's partner's status as a sex offender, the possibility of bullying was also a prominent concern expressed by the respondents. Fear of children getting bullied at school was on the forefront of every mother's mind; and these fears were legitimate due to the extreme stigma surrounding an association with a sex offender. In fact, the Levenson and Tewksbury (2009) study indicated that the children of sex offenders regularly experienced bullying. This, in turn, led to serious psychological impacts of such as depression and suicidal ideation.

Beverly, mother of three, described her fear of her children being bullied in the future when having to answer any questions concerning their father: "The friends they may make in the future and they may feel like they can divulge that information and two weeks later they get in a fight and it blows up and the whole school knows and we have to move to get them out of school because they get picked on or beat up or whatever. That's my life."

Like Beverly, most of the other women in this study expressed fear of their children being bullied over their partner's status as a sex offender. Beth's fear was so significant that she chose to be proactive in preventing any potential bullying from occurring. She told her daughter's school administrators: "I really need you guys to watch and see. If she becomes a target, I want to know about it. I don't want anything to happen to her because of something her dad did 15 years ago." A key point of Beth's experience is that her husband's offense occurred

over a decade before her daughter was in school, yet she chose to still address the potential with the school.

Jennifer's husband's offense occurred 12 years prior to her oldest daughter entering high school. Unlike Beth, she chose not to tell her daughter about the offense or approach the topic of bullying, assuming that it would never come up given the amount of time since the offense. Jennifer's daughter ended up being bullied at school after a boy's grandmother showed Jennifer's husband to him on the internet registry, classification of the crime unavailable on the registry. Jennifer recounted the sequence of events after that boy found out and then cried as she described her daughter's resulting suicidal ideation:

> [This boy] then proceeded to go around and tell a bunch of her other friends, and everybody was walking by my daughter's locker giggling like a little girl, making little girl comments, and saying very inappropriate things. I had no idea. She did not come home from school and tell us about it. I started to notice as a couple of months went by that she was isolating herself in her room. She seemed to really grow away from everything. She didn't want to do anything. She just wanted to sit in her room. Her grades were plummeting in almost everything to an F. She became suicidal over it and we had to have her hospitalized because she had no idea. She was stunned, shocked. She had no idea. I threatened [the school] with a lawyer and told them if they didn't see to it that it stopped, that the shit was gonna hit the fan and I would go public about it. Kids do not need to be bullied.

Jennifer's story demonstrates that the women were correct in fearing for their children's safety at school, regardless of what the offense was or how long ago it occurred. However, more importantly, these examples of real and anticipated experiences with bullying illustrate how many of the children of the women in this study are not only deprived of common childhood activities due to their attachment to a sex offender. Rather, these children can also be in physical and emotional danger as a result of the social stigma surrounding the sex offender label.

Stress over Disclosure

The data revealed a clear impact in many of the participants' children's lives as a result of the women's partners being labeled as sex offenders. It would seem to make sense that a mother would want to prepare her child for any such impacts by disclosing the information on the partner's status as a sex offender. A few of the women in this study had chosen to do so, as seen in Beth's story as a means to prepare her child for stressors. However, the topics of sex, sex crimes, and sex offenders are so complex that it is difficult to decide when and how much you want to explain that to any child. This topic of disclosure may not impact the child directly as does losing family and friends; in particular, if the woman chose not to disclose her partner's status to her children, the child does not carry that added stress. However, the choice to disclose or not disclose the situation causes strain on the mother-child relationship. The tension may have been expressed through the mother experiencing higher levels of stress over not disclosing and that stress manifesting in their interactions or both the mother and child carried stress as the child tried to understand what it meant to be the child of a sex offender.

Since Sara's children were so young, she worried about how they would adjust growing up under the restrictions associated with their father. When asked about her biggest emotional challenge, Sara responded, "Anxiety, stress, making sure that the kids will be OK and get through this and understand when they can't necessarily have friends over, things like that." Sara's story is an example of the negotiations the women were forced to make when deciding when and how to tell their children about their fathers and/or step-fathers' registration as sex offenders.

At the time Jennifer's daughter was bullied at school, Jennifer had long before chosen not to tell her daughter because her husband's offense happened over a decade before. As described above, Jennifer's decision to not disclose his status caused severe emotional harm to Jennifer and

her daughter. This left Jennifer feeling unsure about how to address the issue with her youngest daughter. Phoebe expressed the same fears associated with how and when she would share the information with her son regarding her partner's status. She worried that her child may be confronted at school, as Jennifer's child was, and she may be forced to disclose her partner's information to her child before she felt he was ready to handle the information.

All of the women in this study had to negotiate whether they would disclose their partner's status as a sex offender to their children. Beth decided to tell her daughter about her husband's situation as soon as their relationship became serious. She said, "We decided she had to know, because now that our family is gonna be put on the registry, because it's not just him, the truth is we're all on it. And now that he's gonna be on there, our family is on there, our address is on there. She's a target now."

Perceptions of Self

The final sphere of the women's lives that was seriously impacted by their partners' status was their self-perception. This life sphere refers to the women's feelings about themselves and their overall emotional well-being. The data showed that this was the most severely impacted sphere because it was the one most central to the women's identities, to their very sense of self. Figure 5.2 demonstrates that all 18 of the women in this study noted that their sense of self was severely or very severely impacted as a consequence of their relationship with a sex offender.

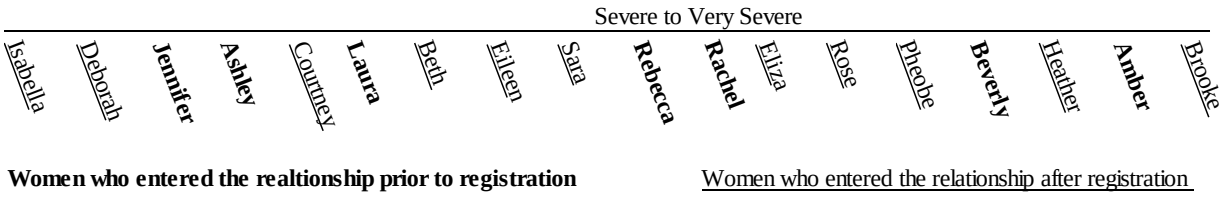

Figure 5.3 Perception of Self Impact Continuum

When describing the severe and very severe impacts on their self-perception, the women focused on: internalization of stigma and conflict, feelings of social isolation, and negative mental manifestations.

Internalization of Stigma and Conflict

The majority of the women in this study expressed immense feelings of real or anticipated stigmatization. "The central features of social stigma are devaluation and dehumanization by others" (Crocker and Quinn 2000:153). As seen in other life spheres, some of the women experienced social stigma and its associated effects in their employment, housing, their own friendships, and their family relationships. They also endured the stigma placed on their children. Feelings of devaluation and dehumanization are apparent throughout the interviews through statements such as: "When people think that he's a monster or whatever they think, they think that about me." Rose described how her attachment to her husband stigmatized her as well:

> They're not just stereotyping him but they're stereotyping me then too, if that makes any sense. If they can't accept him then they can't accept me either. He is part of me now and, I'm not looking at what he's done or his, or what he is, I'm looking at him as a person.

As exemplified in Rose's experience, stigmatized persons are often highly aware of the prejudice against people with similar social identities (Crocker and Quinn 2000). All of the women in this study who described an internalization of stigma were, indeed, acutely aware of that stigma, whether real or perceived. Eliza revealed her feelings after being stigmatized through her marriage to her husband:

> I've felt like an outcast. I'm with him one hundred percent, and how people look at him is how people look at me. Emotionally I've felt sort of rejected by society. I've felt misunderstood. It's just that feeling, a distrust, a keep-people-at-arm's-length type of life.

This real and perceived stigma prohibited many of the respondents from developing a stable conception of self-worth. Indeed, stigmatized individuals are often unable to develop self-worth as a consequence of being in a stigmatized population (Crocker and Quinn 2000). Phoebe elucidated how this stigma influenced her feelings of self-worth and its impacts on her emotions:

> People that don't know can look at you funny and say some pretty mean things. And all the stigma surrounding, you know if I get one crappy comment from somebody, I get down and stuff then it starts getting crappy around here. It's just something always hanging over your head and always on your shoulder and you can't really live life like that.

Managing stigma involves a complex series of negotiations for anybody and the stigma attached to a sex offender alone can be extreme. The participants in my study, mothers in relationships with sex offenders, had to negotiate stigma in two ways. They felt stigma attached to a sex offender, but also felt stigmatized for being in a relationship with a sex offender, as well as for allowing children in the home of a sex offender. The majority of my participants internalized that stigma, which developed into an internalized conflict over how to manage the stigma as well as over how they came to be in that situation in the first place. Jennifer explained her thought process when trying to cope with becoming attached to the sex offender label through her husband:

> I just remember thinkin' to myself, "I've got to get out of here. I need to divorce him. I can't—I just can't mentally deal with the stigma anymore." I hated it. We're labeled. When I called the criminal justice, the site for the actual registry and they told me it had been changed to life, I felt like I had just been told that my father died. I packed my shit and I left for a week.

This conflict over what these women should do to manage their stigma was present in most of the women's interviews. Despite glaring obstacles to maintaining a relationship with a sex offender, the decision to leave a relationship is nevertheless complex. This is represented in Rusbult's (1998) Investment Model of Commitment (see chapter two for description of

commitment model). The women in this study were forced to assess their satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size when deciding whether to leave their partners. Laura expressed a strong sense of satisfaction in her relationship prior to her husband's registration as a sex offender: "Part of me knew that he was still that same man, and I couldn't help but think of all the great things that he was, not fully comprehending that he could actually do something like that." This emotional attachment to her husband complicated Laura's choice to simply walk away from her husband.

Investment size, as presented in Rusbult's model (1980), is also a strong indicator of commitment to a relationship. According to the model, shared children in a relationship can act as an invested resource, a motivator towards continuing a relationship. Eleven of the women in this study had biological children with their partners. Sharing children, then, presumably enhanced commitment because the act of investment increases the costs of ending a relationship, serving as a powerful psychological inducement to persist (Rusbult et al. 1998). Ashley, mother of one, described how sharing a son with her partner created conflict in her decision to leave her relationship. "A part of me wants to stay with him because he's the only person I've ever been with and I want to be happy and I want Shawn to have his daddy." This is only one example of how the women's decision to stay in their relationships involved difficult decision-making processes. The resultant conflict that the women experienced was not always visible to others, but was sometimes debilitating to the woman's health and well-being.

Social Isolation

Stigmatized individuals often face social rejection (Wright, Gronfein and Owens 2000). This sense of rejection can diminish these individuals' desire to engage in intergroup activity and communication (Hebl, Tickle and Heatherton 2000). For some of the women in this study, this

stigma led to social isolation. Sara explained: “It’s easy to feel isolated in this situation, and you don’t want to feel isolated in this situation because when you find people that know what you’re going through, it feels so good.” Women in their situation did not want to be isolated from society. However, at times, this outcome felt inevitable because it seemed to be the only means of self-protection from social stigma and associated consequences.

In Levenson and Tewksbury’s (2009) study on the impact of sex offender registration on the offender’s family members, the most commonly reported effect for their sample was feelings of loneliness and shame, followed by avoidance of social activities due to shame and embarrassment. These outcomes were apparent in my study as well, regardless of if the woman chose to stay in contact with the offender. This feeling of loneliness and shame resulted in isolation for some of the women I interviewed. Eliza retreated from developing meaningful relationships with peers neighbors and coworkers out of fear of their reaction: “My biggest fear is losing [my children], having them taken away from me. I’m doing everything I can to make sure they’re safe, but I know that society thinks—there are many people that think I’m a bad mother for marrying him.” Eliza’s story illustrates the isolation these women experienced and the result of the stigma they endured in their life spheres. Similarly, Rachel shared that she developed feelings of isolation, even when she had friends nearby because they could not relate to her circumstances.

This isolation was often depicted by the women in this study as a necessity in protecting their families. There is some research that shows that sex offenders and their families are not only exposed to stigma but physical discrimination as well, such as physical assault and property damage (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009). The women in relationships with sex offenders, particularly those with children, must be wary of how their family may be affected. Courtney

explained why she became an isolated person through all of these experiences due to this potential harm:

> The point is when you become involved with a sex offender, it's very isolating. You have a very closed life. You shouldn't care what people think but when it comes to an issue like this and there is so much hatred towards a registered sex offender you have to be careful for your safety and for your family's safety. It's just very hard to let people in.

At a time when these women could have used support the most, they were experiencing extreme isolation from others aside from their partners and children.

Negative Mental Manifestations

This sense of stigma, feeling devalued and flawed in the eyes of society, often elicited negative emotional reactions. The majority of the women in this study explained how they often experienced feelings such as pity, anger, anxiety, and distrust due to their romantic relationship with a sex offender.

For the women who had entered into their relationships prior to their partners' registration, anger was a common emotion reported in their interviews, particularly immediately following the registration. Unlike those who entered after the registration, these participants were faced with a sudden change that they did not have a choice to engage in, whether they had stayed in the relationship or not. For example, Jennifer, who had been with her husband for five years at the time of his registration said, "I was so pissed off and angry. It was very unfair to me. I just didn't understand how he could make such stupid decisions." Rebecca, who was with her husband for 13 years at the time of registration, expressed having a lot of anger following her husband's sentencing because she felt her husband was wrongly accused and convicted. She also acknowledged, "My struggle has been not redirecting my anger toward other people who I'm not

really angry about." My participants who identified anger as a strong emotion had to engage in intense emotion management to disallow that anger from hurting their families' well-being.

Anxiety and stress were major emotions that were reported by nearly all of my participants. After having gone through so many struggles in their other life spheres, my participants began to expect more damaging events to happen that would hurt their family. This consistent waiting and expectation of strain often became internalized as constant anxiety. When asked to describe her emotions, Phoebe said, "I am on high alert for everything. Every knock on the door makes my stomach drop. Every time he has to register makes my stomach drop that they are going to try to find something to get him on. It's just a continuous state of nervousness." This fear impacted larger decisions Phoebe had to make for her family, such as moving to a better place with better jobs for her husband. "I'm afraid if we go to another city I'm going to end up with a mob in my front yard or something." Phoebe's experience is an example of how mentally taxed the women became given everything they were forced to consider in their lives.

In addition to mental anxiety and stress, some of the women in this study also identified depressive symptoms resulting from their experiences. Research on stigmatized women has actually shown an increased appearance of depression (Allison 1998). Ashley disclosed her bout with depression: "Being left alone with my thoughts from this entire situation. I've broken down crying. I was in a really, really deep depression for a while and just started coming out of it. Now I feel myself slipping back in some days." Rachel also admitted that she probably suffers from depression. "I've gone to the doctor, and they want me to be on all this medication. I'm like, 'I know what it is, people, I'm fine.' Probably just depressed and sad, in a way, for all the things I've lost." The culmination of the anxiety, stress and depression, as presented in the respondent's

interviews, sometimes resulted in destructive responses, such as eating disorders, specifically the denial of food, and binge drinking. I discuss these actions in the following chapter.

The women I interviewed went through intense experiences in each of their life spheres. In the next chapter, I will discuss the coping strategies that these women relied on to help get them through the challenges associated with their relationships with sex offenders.

CHAPTER VI

COPING STRATEGIES AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

My research clearly revealed high levels of stress in the women's most vital life spheres: employment, housing, peer relationships, family relationships, and partner relationships, as well as their children's lives and their sense of self and self-perception. Despite the accumulated stress across these spheres, the women whom I interviewed also were able to cope and continue to function effectively in the midst of this adversity.

In many ways, the women exhibited high levels of resilience in the aftermath of a serious crisis (Manyena 2006; Buckle 2006). One of the goals of my research, as such, was to explore what coping strategies and sources of social support thes women relied on, following their partners' registration as a sex offender. In this chapter, I explore the primary coping strategies and sources of social support.

Coping Strategies

I categorized the coping strategies that the participants utilized as "emotional regulation" or "problem management" strategies. Emotional regulation coping includes actions aimed to change the way one thinks or feels about a stressful situation; for example, the use of counseling services. Problem management coping includes active coping (i.e. actively addressing the stressor), problem solving, and information seeking (Glanz and Schwartz 2008). I used the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC) to help define and analyze the reported experiences of my respondents (see chapter two for a more in-depth discussion of TMSC).

When confronting a stressful situation, using either emotional regulation or problem management, a person may use coping strategies that either engage or disengage with the stressor (Carver et al. 1993). A person may be more likely to use disengaging coping strategies

when a stressor is viewed as highly threatening and uncontrollable because these strategies shift attention away from the stressor (Taylor et al.1992); examples include denial, distraction and distancing. These strategies, however, can lead to further distress and prevent the development of healthy coping strategies (Carver et al. 1993; Schwartz et al. 1995; Glanz and Schwartz 2008). In comparison, a person is more likely to use engaging coping strategies when a stressor is perceived as controllable and the person believes they can overcome the situation (Glanz and Schwartz 2008); examples include active coping, problem solving, and use of social support. The women in this study used both disengaging and engaging coping strategies when dealing with the stress encountered from being associated with a sex offender.

Emotional Regulation Coping Strategies

The respondents in my sample used emotional regulation as a primary form of coping. This was due, in large part, because dealing with the consequences of being in a relationship with a sex offender is a highly stressful situation and elicited a vast array of emotions, as illustrated in the previous data analysis chapters. My participants, then, engaged in emotional regulation as a means to personally cope with the situation, as well as have the emotional wherewithal to help their whole family through their experiences. When trying to regulate emotions from their stressful situations, these women used both disengaging and engaging coping strategies.

Disengaging Through Denial

One of the most prominent coping strategies that the women used involved denial. When using denial as a coping strategy, participants either pretended the stressor did not occur or engaged in identity talk to distance themselves and their partners from the stressor.

Some of the women attempted to deny the experience completely. Rachel said, “I try to ignore it, forget about it. I try to think, ‘You know what? We’re fine.’” Ashley echoed Rachel’s

sentiment, stating, “Sometimes it's just better to pretend it never happened and feel normal again.” None of the women, however, who denied the gravity of the situation, believed it was emotionally helpful. They often said that they used denial when they were feeling the most stressed and helpless. For them, denial was simply a strategy to endure the most difficult moments and periods associated with the partner’s offense.

Many of the women also employed identity talk as a strategy to deny the reality of their situation. Identity talk is “a discourse that reflects actors’ perceptions of a social order and is based on interpretations of current situations, themselves and others” (Hunt and Benford 1994:492). In their study on identity work amongst homeless persons, Snow and Anderson (1987) distinguished patterns of identity talk used by their participants to construct and maintain their desired social identities. The women who used identity talk in my study tended to use what Snow and Anderson defined as “associational distancing.” Associational distancing is when a person disassociates themselves from others with similar social identities, particularly when it is a negatively attributed identity (Snow and Anderson 1987). Associational distancing may come in the form of distancing from a general social category or from specific groups of within a negatively viewed social category.

The women in this study used identity talk as a means to negate their own realities, as well as their families’. For my participants, the partner’s sex offender status was clearly viewed negatively by many of the people in their lives as well as represented a highly stigmatized identity in society as a whole. Thus, many of them tried to distance themselves, their partners, and their children from other sex offenders through identity talk. Some of the women tried to dissociate themselves with the group entirely by defining themselves as “normal” or “no different” from everybody else. Amber characterized her reality as being “back to normal,”

meaning she perceived her family functioning as returning to how it was prior to her husband's registration as a sex offender. Jennifer described her family as "normal" but also acknowledged how emotionally taxing it is to maintain that reality for her family. Some of the women also dissociated themselves with certain groups of sex offenders, especially child molesters. Following the loss of her home, Rebecca explained why she refused to live in an apartment that allowed felons and other sex offenders. "I would have been coming home at midnight in an apartment complex that allows felons and other sex offenders, which my husband is a sex offender but it's not like he molested somebody like some other people maybe did." This dissociation through identity talk allows respondents to deny, even if only partially, the realities of their situation for themselves and their families.

Disengaging Through Nondisclosure

Most of the women in this study also utilized nondisclosure as a coping mechanism. This nondisclosure involved hiding an aspect of their identity, their relationship to a sex offender, as a means to avoid stigmatization and anticipated retaliation and the associated stress. As seen in the previous two data chapters, some of the respondents in this study chose to not disclose their partner's status to friends, family members, coworkers, neighbors, or their children school; often, they did not disclose the situation to most or all of these groups. For example, Isabella, as described in chapter two, primarily did not disclose her husband's status to her coworkers, one social category, in fear of retaliation, specifically hostile coworker relationships or a loss of employment. Amber attempted to maintain a sense of normalcy for her family by not disclosing her husband's sex offender status to friends, family, coworkers or her children's school, multiple social categories. While using nondisclosure as a coping mechanism aided the women in maintaining day-to-day relationships, research shows that "concealing personal information to

avoid stigma interferes with one's authentic self-presentation" (Clair, Beatty and Maclean 2005:79). Specifically, persons who hide key aspects of their identity can face difficulties in feeling as though they can maintain legitimacy and authenticity in social interactions. Based on this research, the women in this study who choose not to disclose their partner's status may experience a loss of self in routine exchanges.

Disengaging Through Distraction

Some of the women also used distraction as a coping strategy. This mostly manifested in my sample as physical destruction, particularly excessive alcohol drinking and developing eating disorders. When the women turned to alcohol to cope, it was often to "drown out" the hurtful feelings and the stress that they felt. This stress, of course, emerged on multiple fronts, ranging from the women's complicated feelings about their partners to their stressful life experiences associated with securing housing and employment. For example, Rachel, one of several women in the study who began drinking more heavily in response to her partners' sex offense, discussed how she used alcohol to cope:

> I think I was depressed. I probably drank more because I thought when I was drinking it didn't feel like I had all that pain. It was like it would go away, like I was back in the good old days when life was good and I didn't think about it. I probably suffer from depression.

Two of the women in the study, Ashley and Jennifer, reported developing unhealthy eating patterns as a method of coping with emotions. Jennifer said, "I myself was spiraling out of control over it. I ended up developing an eating disorder, severe depression, a lot of anxiety." Similarly, Ashley also denied herself access to food. During our interview, she explained her rationale for her behavior:

> I was in a really, really deep depression for a while and just started coming out of it. Now I feel myself slipping back in some days. I used to starve myself telling myself that I didn't have time to eat because I was too busy taking care of the baby and didn't have enough money for food, which is mostly true. I didn't want to take the time.

None of the women who used denial, nondisclosure, or distraction as a coping strategy identified it as helpful or efficient in the long run. At the time, these women viewed denial and distraction as the only thing they could do. This sense of helplessness demonstrates how deeply the women were impacted by the social consequences of being in a relationship with a sex offender.

Engaging Through Counseling

In addition to the more passive coping strategies identified above, including denial, non-disclosure, and distraction, counseling was another strategy that some of the women pursued to cope with and regulate their emotions. Counseling is often used to help those in stressful situations gain greater insight into their lives and to create and achieve personal goals (Burks and Stefflre 1979). For about a quarter of my respondents, counseling provided an avenue for purposefully coping with the emotions resulting from their relationship with a sex offender. Laura, for example, described her involvement with counseling through her church, which she initiated around the start of her husband's court case:

> I started to seek counseling with a counseling pastor at our church, and that helped a lot to work through a lot of my feelings and a lot of my thoughts. Now I'm taking a 12-week program that our church offers that I actually took before I got married, so I knew it would be a good tool to take now. We're halfway through that, and that's been a very enlightening experience in helping me heal emotionally. So now I'm pretty good emotionally. I still have some things to work through, but I've been pretty good.

The women who used counseling as a coping strategy for regulating their emotions classified it as helpful, and often necessary. Even so, the decision to take part in counseling was

not simple or straightforward. It was often difficult for the women to disclose, fully, the layers of emotions and complexity associated with her partner's sex offender registration. Indeed, for women like Jennifer, it took a long time to finally reach out and initiate counseling. Jennifer explained:

> I made the phone call myself and initiated the counseling, but I did not initiate the counseling for a couple of years, because it was very difficult for me to talk, and in the first several months that I met with the counselor, all I did was cry. I didn't want to take myself back through it. It was easier to just kind of keep that locked up. I just woke up one day and said, "I just can't do this anymore." And it's really hard to open up to a stranger, a strange counselor. You have to develop this relationship with them. It took a lot of time. I used to cry all the way to my appointments, and then I'd be glad when I would go. I would try to skip appointments. I really would. But I did it for my daughter's sake. You can only live in your own misery for so long.

Unlike denial, non-disclosure, and distraction, counseling helped the women to cope in what they perceived as a more "productive" or "healthy" manner. It allowed them to work with a professional to address their emotional needs, which in turn allowed them to be more available for their children and their partners.

Problem Management Coping Strategies

While coping strategies involving emotional regulation were crucial in the lives of participants, problem management coping strategies also proved to be pivotal in curbing the most devastating effects of their partner's registration. Here problem management strategies refer to active coping, problem solving, and information seeking (Glanz and Schwartz 2008). For this study, counseling did not fall under problem management coping because the participants who utilized counseling did so to lessen the effects of stress, not as a means to actively find solutions to their overarching problem, stigma and associated impacts attached to being in a relationship with a sex offender. The problem management strategies these women utilized involved: writing and telling their personal stories in attempt to inform others—both others outside the population

who do not know about their experiences or others inside the population who need help and guidance; utilization of online support groups that worked towards unifying women in this situation; and advocacy efforts towards sex offender law reform.

Writing and Telling Their Story

By writing and telling their stories, the women in this study benefited in two ways: expressing their emotions and informing others regarding the complexity of their situations. It is perhaps not surprising that the women found this effective, as others have observed that "written expression may fill an important need of providing a practical, concrete, and specific mechanism of emotional expression in circumstances where such expression can be difficult" (Soper and Von Bergen 2001:151). Indeed, when individuals express their emotional cataclysms in writing, their mental and physical health may improve (Soper and Von Bergen 2001).

Some of the women in this study found writing, or similar expressions of storytelling, to be particularly helpful in their coping process. Amber shared her experience with speaking her story into a voice recorder:

> I actually had a little recorder. I would be commuting to work and I would be talking in this tape recorder, just recording my thoughts and everything that had happened. And at the time I thought maybe I'll write a book. Well I have like a gallon size Ziploc full of micro cassettes and have done nothing with them but at the time it was like my own personal therapy.

Ashley also used telling her story as a coping strategy. She actually eventually turned her writing into a book-length manuscript. Although she had not published it, she said, "I wrote the entire story as a way to cope if you ever want to read it. Writing that book was the only way I could release my feelings." Like Ashley, Beth, under a penname, wrote about her experience as a wife of a sex offender. She was able to find a publisher so that her story could appear in print and be read by others. A few of the other women in this study reported reading Beth's book and

spoke of their appreciation for being able to identify with the author. Beth told me, "It's very therapeutic, I will say that. I tell people all the time, 'Tell your story. One way or another, tell your story.'"

A few of the women also shared their story as a way to help others through similar situations. Rachel commented on her experience sharing her story when working at her husband's lawyer's office after he had become a registered sex offender:

> Because the attorney that I was working for was his attorney, we dealt with a ton of sex offenders. I feel like I helped a lot of wives who came in and said, "You don't understand, you don't know what I'm going through." Finally I'd break down, too, and say, "I *do* know what you're going through," and it was just a relief to them, because, "Wow, this is awesome, you do know what I'm going through." And I could counsel the wives, talk to them.

While Rachel happened upon her chance to help others through their experiences, Eliza purposefully made attempts to reach out to others who would have to cope with their families' circumstances. She explained her role in helping other sex offenders prepare to being with their families and out in the communities while on the sex offender registry:

> I've had some other wives, we go back and speak to the—in North Carolina it's called SOAR program, the therapy that guys go through in prison, and we've been back and talked to the class before about what it's like to be on the streets. A lot of them are really afraid to get out of prison.

In addition to using their stories to support women with similar experiences, those women who wrote down or spoke publicly about their experiences also used this as an opportunity to educate "outsiders" about the experiences of being partnered with a registered sex offender. Several of the women in this study told their stories in order to educate those closest to them and their children—for example, school teachers, fellow soccer moms, etc. As these women shared their stories with others as a way to both cope with their experiences and inform

others, they described it as cathartic as well as giving them a sense of promise that their experiences will get better as their stories are heard more often.

Utilization of Online Support Groups

Online support groups can be used as a method of active coping as well as a source of resources to address certain consequences of being associated with a sex offender. Resources for women in relationships with sex offenders may refer to aid such as connections to information on sex offender legislation, connection to advocacy efforts for themselves and their partners, and advice on other methods of coping. The resource component takes the utilization of support groups away from only providing emotional regulation and allows problem management to occur as well through providing practical assistance. For the women in this study, employing online support groups is a crucial source of emotional support as well as a source of information and resources.

Research shows that most often new social ties—in this case ties to a support groups for families of sex offenders—are introduced in response to a major life transition or specific stressor. Sometimes new social ties are sought out to mitigate social isolation (Heller et al. 1991), such as that felt by some of the participants in this study. The search for a new network of support may occur when the existing network is unable to provide effective support or lacks the specialized knowledge about the specific stressor (Heaney and Israel 2002).

Online support groups "provide a new set of network ties" (Heaney and Israel 2002: 201). People come together in these groups often either due to facing a common stressor or trying to bring about similar changes at the individual or community level (Heaney and Israel 2002). The women in this study identified online support groups as helpful for both of these reasons. In these groups, the roles of support provider and support recipient are mutually shared

among members, entailing reciprocity. Such groups can be particularly effective for participants who cannot mobilize social support from their other social relationships (Heaney and Israel 2002). Beverly explained that her involvement in a Yahoo support group for families of sex offenders was "the first group that really has any kind of healing that I could relate to." Deborah discussed her feelings regarding being able to talk to women in similar situations:

> Somehow I got referred to a lady who started a group called The Offender's Wife. And it is just basically a group of ladies where they're in various stages of the label. And it's kind of good 'cause you talk with these ladies and they are not judgmental of you. They offer their advice sincerely in hopes of it helping you. I think this community of ladies has been very helpful in helping me stay on track, trying to stay positive. We all try to find the positive in our rants and events as we post, and I think, as I said I think that's the only thing that's been very helpful for me.

When unable to find an organization that she could relate to or acquire resources from at the beginning of her husband's registration, Amber started up her own support group that connected women and consistently provided information to address the other ways these women may need help. Amber described her experience forming this group:

> Creating the website was also very therapeutic for me because one way, since [my husband and I] weren't communicating very well, I would just do a lot of research. I couldn't find a lot for spouses. I would find some resources. I would find offender resources but I couldn't find anything for spouses. Somehow I got in contact with a few other wives and the word spread and we actually had an email list. And then when we got so many members, it almost became too cumbersome as an email list. That's when one of the members suggested going on yahoo and developing a group and after we were on the yahoo group, just before, that was when I made the website. And that help get the word out and get the women to the support group. It was very therapeutic to me.

In addition to providing a safe space to discuss common struggles, the use of online support groups can also provide an outlet for sharing and providing resources with persons in like situations. Courtney, who lost custody of all three of her children due to her association with

a sex offender, outlined how the use of an online support group had helped her address this struggle:

> I'm not financially capable of getting a lawyer and any lawyer I do talk to won't touch the case because it involves a registered sex offender and it's a custody case. It's very time consuming and expensive. I am working with a lot of other organizations right now like Women Against Registry. We are trying to come up with some actions to pay to help me fight for my kids and that's pretty much where I am right now.

The online forums and websites allowed the women a forum to speak up and speak out about their situations. In fact, I found the women for this study through such mediums, which further underscores their desire to find an outlet to share their stories. For instance, when explaining why she chose to speak to me, Sara said, "I wish people could see shades of gray in there. I hope that something like this will help, even in the social science community, because there's not a lot of stuff out there." Similarly, Isabella recounted how her activity in a support group led to our interview:

> I started out actually looking for support for just prison wife type support, and then that was okay but I wasn't finding the support I needed as a fiancé to a sex offender, that's just a whole different light on it and then, I found several groups throughout that process and the lady who runs Illinois voices, she's actually lives here in my hometown and so we kinda got together and we become pretty close. She passed along this opportunity and I thought it would give me a chance to shed light on the topic

Beth, who published the book on her experiences, was in several high-ranking leadership positions in some online groups. She also emphasized why she chose to speak with me:

> When these opportunities arise, I do it. It's not because I'm looking for fame or anything like that. I'm just trying to raise awareness. That's really where it's at. I think if we can do that, we can do anything. We can accomplish a lot to restore civil life to people who deserve it.

Sex Offender Advocacy Efforts

Most of the women in this study also participated in active advocacy efforts in sex offender reform law as a coping mechanism. For this study, advocacy is defined as practice through which people can make their voices heard; it is not specific to involvement with advocacy organizations or policy makers (Institute for Sustainable Communities 2013). Advocacy can be a tool used to enable, empower, and encourage citizens to become involved in public life. "When citizens advocate, they express their concerns and priorities, press for recognition of their rights, and insist on the importance of their voice in public policy" (Institute for Sustainable Communities 2013:1). Given the effect that the registry has had on her life, Beth became highly involved in advocacy. She advocated not only for sex offenders but for families of sex offenders. She wrote and published her book and is involved with sex offender reform groups, such as SOSEN, Sex Offender Solutions and Education Network.

> It's changed me. I'm such a different person now than I used to be. I really feel very energized by all this, because I know what I'm doing is right. That's the thing. I know I'm doing the right thing. It keeps me goin'. I can't see myself ever, ever stepping away from this advocacy. It's not gonna happen. Doesn't matter where I'm at with it. I'm at the point where I realize I'm not even doin' this for me and my family anymore, because I don't know that I'm ever gonna see any kind of results for us."

Out of all of the participants in this study, Beth was the most involved in advocacy efforts. However, other women also expressed similar passions towards advocating for change in their lives and the lives of people in similar situations.

In a study done on advocacy by parents of children with disabilities, also considered a stigmatized population, the researchers found that the parents viewed advocacy as a moral obligation and a means to improve services (Wang et al. 2004). The women in this study echoed these reasons. When justifying her reasons for advocacy, Deborah told me:

> I really truly believe that the registry is an abuse of powers towards the person that's being put under that label. And not only does it cause anxiety and mental anguish towards the person that has to live with that, but then it also affects their families, their loved ones, their children.

The women in this study engaged in an array of activities to advocate for their families and those like them. Within her support and advocacy group, Deborah was in charge of constantly scouring the internet and informing the groups of any changes in legislation or any upcoming opportunities to protest. Brooke told me that she and her husband were always collecting information and using it in letters to elected officials and other influential individuals. Sara was dedicated to knowing what the laws are and how they change as well as seizing opportunities to speak out against them. Isabella expressed, "I want to speak out and fight for change because, even if it doesn't help us, there are thousands and thousands of other people who will benefit from the laws being changed."

This involvement in advocacy also provided cathartic influence on these women's sense of self. After describing their perceptions of self as being dramatically impacted and damaged due to their partners' registration, their tone shifted when speaking about their attempts to change it. Advocacy bestowed these women with a sense of purpose and increased their sense of self-efficacy. The women felt they were capable of creating change and this helped counteract some of the detrimental impacts of sex offender legislation.

Social Support

In addition to their own coping strategies, the women in this sample also relied on social support from their family members and friends; friends may be persons whom they had relationships with prior to being involved with a sex offender, as well as friends whom they met afterwards, commonly through online support groups or advocacy efforts. Here social support is defined as relationships that are categorized by their supportive behavior, such as praising a

person for accomplishments or comforting them through sadness. Other research has found that family and friends often play an important role in social support systems as individuals turn to them in times for emotional support or instrumental support like financial assistance, personal care, household help, and any other assistance (Atchley and Barusch 2004).

The reliance on friends and family for social support varied significantly within the sample. Some women relied on this coping strategy the most in regulating emotions. However, since about half of the sample identified severe negative impacts in their peer and family relationships, the use of peers and family as social support was not an option as a coping strategy to all of the respondents.

Family as a Support System

Another engaging coping strategy that these women used was relying on family for various forms of support. The emotional reliability of family was pinpointed by some of the women in this study as the most helpful strategy in regulating emotion. Supportive relationships may enhance well-being and health, regardless of stress levels, by meeting basic human needs, such as companionship, intimacy, a sense of belonging, and reassurance of one's worth as a person (Berkman and Glass 2000). When women, such as those whom I interviewed, receive support from family and friends, it can help reduce uncertainty and produce more positive outcomes. In the end, this can lead to an heanced sense of personal control over critical life spheres (also see Cohen and Wills 1985; Thoits 1995).

In a study on the role of emotional support from friends and family on reducing stress, the researchers found that family support is more indicative of mental health (Serovich, Kimberly and Lewis 2001). The emotional salience of family relationships appears to be more directly tied to mental health (Serovich et al. 2001). The majority of the women studied by

Heaney and Israel (2002) who received emotional support from their families noted that they provided empathy, love, trust and caring. In light of the emotional strain the women whom I interviewed experienced due to their partners' sex offender registration, I expected in my findings they would seek emotional support elsewhere to compensate. And, indeed, this was true. Beth, for instance, described her husband's family as the foundation for her emotional well-being:

> His family is very, very close-knit, and always has been. I think that that's, honestly, a saving grace, because I don't think if it weren't for them that we would be as stable as we are. They're the rock, the foundation of this whole thing. They have been extremely supportive and extremely loving, not only toward him but toward me and our kids.

Although not all of the women had family support, those that did express receiving family support often described it as positive affecting their emotional well-being. Brooke's family originally did not support her relationship with her husband but they changed their opinions after they saw how happy she was in her relationship. The change in support from her family had impacted her emotions, in that she felt much more love and support. Their acceptance had also allowed her husband and children to go on holidays with her extended family, increasing the closeness in their relationship.

In addition to emotional support, a number of the women in this study also received instrumental support from family in the form of aid and services (Heaney and Israel 2002). The most frequent forms of instrumental support received by the women in this study were housing and employment assistance and child care. When Rebecca, her husband and their children were removed from their housing after his registration as a sex offender, she and the children had to live apart from her husband for a period of time while sorting out registration restrictions. During that time, Rebecca and her children lived with her parents, and her mom and sister helped care

for and homeschool Rebecca's two children while she was at work. When Rebecca was reunited with her husband, they continued to live at Rebecca's parents.

Laura was also unable to provide housing for her family on her own and depended on living with her mother. Laura described her mother's provision of child care in the midst of Laura's husband's court case as well as the provision of shelter for her and her children as crucial to her ability to heal. "My mom was there with me. She had those two days off of work, which was really good, so she was there to help me with the girls and to help me process through everything."

One of the largest forms of support Heather received from her family was being able to list her parents as emergency contact for her children. She specified the implications of that support:

> My children still are here with us, you know. They haven't been taken away, and there were two reports called. People telling he was living here, and registered somewhere else, just stupid crap, which is scary when you have someone knock on your door and say I have questions for you, or they ask you if there is anybody else besides you and their biological father that would be able to take your children if you have to leave your home, and for some women they may not have anybody else around, for me, I'm lucky. My parents live maybe 20 minutes away from here, so I put them down, but there are people in lots of different situations that do not have their children because they choose to be with a registered sex offender so we've been very lucky, and very watched over, I believe.

The ability to draw on resources, emotional and instrumental, from family allowed the women to compensate for some of the strain they experienced. While the support they received did not solve their overarching problems—the restrictions and stigma attached to being with a sex offender—it allowed the women to regulate how they handle their unique circumstances.

Friends as a Support System

Like with family, many of the participants in this study also relied on friends for forms of support, an engaging coping strategy to their life stressors. Friendships provided the same

emotional reliability for the women in this study as family, which also provided tremendous assistance in emotional regulation. Research on using social support to reduce emotional distress among HIV-positive women, a stigmatized and hidden population similar to my sample, has found that women perceive friends as more supportive than family; remembering, however, as stated above, that family is more indicative of mental health (Serovich et al. 2001). The researchers argued that friend support may be evaluated as stronger than family support due to individuals choosing who their friends are. The majority of the women in my research recounted receiving emotional support from friends, as they did from family.

Because of the stigma they experienced, participants admitted to having fewer friends than they would like. The women, often, were too scared to develop friendships out of fear or they were refused friendship due to the women's partners' statuses. Thus, the women in this study who did mention support from friends identified it as influencing crucial moments for their emotional well-being. Jennifer described how her friendship with her one close friend influenced how she handled her situation:

> The only person I would ever open up to about it and shared stuff that was going on obviously was my mother, and the day care provider. Her and I went all through high school together and she was our immediate neighbor and had watched our daughter for years. They're the only ones that I would ever—that saw me on my really bad, overwhelmed days, had my back in the community if somebody was talkin' smack at the local store or whatever. So I leaned on her a lot through all that. Probably if it hadn't of been for her, I probably would have wanted to shoot myself. She saw me at some pretty low points in my life, emotionally-wise.

Unlike Jennifer, a number of women did not find emotional support in preexisting friends but rather people they met after they became involved in a relationship with a sex offender. Many of these new friends were women in similar situations to whom they could relate without

feeling like an outcast. Beth explained how her friendship with a mother of a sex offender influenced her recovery:

> I do have one close friend now who lives in the next town over. We met because her son was going through something like this. She found me through our Arkansas group, and I feel closer to her right now than just about anybody, because we're in the same boat. Only thing is, she's a mom rather than the wife of a sex offender, otherwise she'd be talkin' to you, too. I'm so grateful for her, because at least there's somebody that I can talk to that's not just somebody on the computer or on the phone, it's a real person that I can maybe go have lunch with or somethin' like that.

A few of the women in this study also received instrumental support from friends. Although friends provided much less instrumental support for my sample than family, the aid and services they did provide were crucial to the women's well-being in some manner. For example, Heather's friends provided crucial forms of support by providing employment for her husband. "We're just lucky to be able to know people who know everything and are willing to give him employment, because people that do not know him do not. He has not had, he has not been employed by anybody or any business that does not know him personally." This provision of employment opportunities has allowed Heather to stay home with her children but still have the security of a stable income and financial security for her family.

While the women in this study faced extraordinary challenges in all seven life spheres that I examined—employment, housing, peer relationships, family relationships, and partner relationships, as well as their children's live and their own self-perception—they also expressed an extraordinary ability to overcome obstacles. The coping strategies outlined in this chapter clearly demonstrate the efficacy that these women have exhibited to take control of their emotions as well as take clear steps in trying to remedy their families' circumstances. In the conclusion of this thesis, I discuss how these women's struggles and coping strategies have influenced the stress trajectories that each have experienced.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have analyzed data from in-depth, qualitative interviews with 18 mothers in relationships with sex offenders. This data illuminated definite struggles in the participants' lives, resulting from their relationships with sex offenders. Each woman's life was not impacted the same way; however, there is a clear relationship between their experiences and their relationship with a sex offender.

As presented in chapters four and five, the seven life spheres that emerged as most relevant in the data—employment, housing, peer relationships, family relationships, their relationship with their partner, their children's lives, and their own self-perception—were impacted in a variety of ways and to a variety of different degrees ranging from no impact to moderate to very severe impacts. Within the life spheres employment and housing, the women in this study exhibited the full range of impacts from no impact to severe to very severe impacts. Whereas almost my entire sample's life spheres peer and family relationships experienced some form of impact, whether moderate or severe to very severe. The majority of the life spheres partner relationship and children's lives experienced severe to very severe impacts, with only a few participants listing only moderate impacts. The life sphere self-perception was severely impacted in each of the participant's lives.

One common theme across all the interviews was the prevalence of a sense of *loss* among the women. Some of the participants lost resources such as income and housing; some lost peer and family relationships. In their partner relationships and in their children's lives, there was a loss of security. In their relationship with their partner, many of the women felt that although they wanted to stand by their partner, there were times in which they did not feel their

relationship could survive the strain caused by his status as a sex offender. In their children's lives the loss of security presented itself in safety, whether from bullying or from more general rejection from others. In some of the most extreme cases, some of the women lost their children in custody battles, after the courts deemed the women "unfit" to mother due to their choice to commit to a relationship with a sex offender. In the end, this compounding of loss in the major life spheres damaged the women's sense of self. Feeling vulnerable and not in control of their own lives, many of the participants experienced high levels of emotional anguish, and a loss of belief in their self-efficacy.

Yet, despite the levels of loss and stress experienced in the women's lives, those in this study developed particular coping strategies and forms of social support to attempt to stabilize their own and their families' lives. As described in chapter six, the mothers engaged in a variety of strategies to cope with their circumstances. Some of those strategies focused on emotional regulation such as denial, nondisclosure, and distraction, which allowed them to disengage with the stressor, and counseling, an engaging strategy. The other strategies utilized concentrated on problem management, including sharing their stories, utilization of online support groups, and advocacy efforts. My participants were also able to rely on emotional and instrumental support from family and friends, which also facilitated coping. These coping strategies not only aided these women in regulating their emotions through this time, but also presented them opportunities to engage in purposeful action to try to manage their problems. This use of coping strategies mediated some of the negative impacts of the strain experienced in the seven life spheres.

In this concluding chapter, I trace the participants' stress trajectories, guided by the Burr and Klein models outlined in chapter two. In the three data chapters, I sought to understand the

respondents' stress, resulting from their romantic relationships with sex offenders, as well how they coped and who they turned to for support. After looking at each of these angles, stressors and coping strategies, I have tied them together to map their stress trajectories. I then offer recommendations, through literature and interview data, on potential avenues to help remedy women in this vulnerable population—mothers in relationships with sex offenders.

Stress Trajectories: Mothers in Relationships with Sex Offenders

After asking the women to share their experiences in the seven life spheres, I then inquired about how they coped with those experiences and who they relied on for social support. Near the close of the interview, I described the Burr and Klein (1994) models of family crisis (see chapter two for a full description; see Appendix D for interview guide). I then asked each participant to describe her family's functioning following the "stressful event" in her life. Of course, the "stressful event" for the women in this study was the act of being associated with a sex offender as a consequence of their romantic relationship. Seventeen of the 18 participants responded to this question. (Since Laura was only in the early stages of her relationship with an offender, I chose not to ask her the trajectory question, as by its very nature it requires a longer-term view.) In the subsequent sections, I discuss the participants' responses to this interview question and summarize where they fit (or did not fit) within the Burr and Klein trajectories. I then explain how the women's experiences challenge and expand this theoretical model.

The Roller Coaster Model

The *roller coaster model* entails a plunge into crisis after a highly stressful event. This is followed by improving levels of post-crisis family functioning event. This model assumes recovery following the plunge into crisis; however, the recovery status may produce a level of functioning that could be higher, lower, or equal to pre-crisis levels of functioning (Burr and

Klein 1994). For example, prior to the stressful event, a participant, in the Burr and Klein study, may have drawn their family functioning as beginning at “normal” and then plunging into “paralysis,” a Burr and Klein term, following the stressful event. It is possible the family’s functioning may have recovered from paralysis and then stopped at “slightly disrupted,” never returning to their “normal” stage. In my study, seven of the 17 respondents’ descriptions of their family’s functioning, following their stressful event, were most similar to the roller coaster model. Figure 8.1 provides an illustration of the roller coaster model, as well as lists the participants who most closely related to this model.

Brooke	Beverly
Deborah	Phoebe
Amber	Beth
Heather	

Figure 8.1 Roller Coaster Model

The seven respondents who fit the roller coaster model talked, first, about the major decline that they experienced following the crisis. The initial plunge into crisis associated with this model and described by these seven participants six participants tended to be a result of the initial loss immediately following the stressful event. The downward spiral continued in response, largely, to their uncertainty regarding how to account for that loss. For example, Brooke, who had been in a relationship for over two years with a sex offender, explained:

> When the divorce happened and I brought this man in that had this scarlet letter. It took us into a downward spiral definitely. My daughter hated me. I stood by my instinct as a person and as a mother and some of those things got better. It started functioning better. It continued. We had some bumps in the road and now as an everyday family, sometimes we don’t notice.

In Brooke’s case, she said her daughter “hated” her due to their strain caused and resultant loss of family relationships. Brooke then had to compensate for that struggle in order to start the recovery process. Once her family, particularly her daughter, was able to negotiate their

new realities, which includes lack of family support, they were able to leave the crisis state and begin to be “an everyday family.”

While a few of the women, such as Brooke, identified the recovery following the initial plunge into crisis as taking their family above pre-crisis levels, others expressed that they are still functioning below where they started. For example, Beth, whose husband of 11 years had to register as a sex offender from a retroactive law, also described an initial plunge, due to difficulties navigating sex offender restrictions. Her family was able to begin recovery once they became acclimated to their constraints. However, Lynn argued that, despite no longer being in a state of crisis, her family never returned to their family functioning levels prior to the stressful event because they had to “accept what most people would call a lower quality of life.”

The Mixed Model

The *mixed model* involves an increase in functioning immediately after a crisis followed by a decline, usually followed by a recovery (Burr and Klein 1994). Despite having a similar shape as the roller coaster model, Burr and Klein viewed the initial incline in the mixed model following the stressful event as fundamentally different and significant. Two of my 17 respondents’ descriptions of their experiences as mothers in relationships with sex offenders matched the definition of the mixed model. Figure 8.2 provides an image of the model and the two women whose stories related closest to it.

Jennifer
Ashley

Figure 8.2 Mixed Model

The two women, Jennifer and Ashley, who agreed that their experiences fit the mixed model, described the initial incline in their relationships after their partners were registered.

Jennifer explained that the incline happened in her relationship because an initial condition of his sentence, which required her husband to spend weekends in jail, was removed. Although the registration and associated consequences did add some strain, Jennifer said her life was generally on the incline.

After a period of time, however, Jennifer's family functioning plunged into crisis when state laws changed her husband's registration sentence from five years to ten years and then to life. "When I called the criminal justice system, the site for the actual registry in Albany and they told me it had been changed to life, I felt like I had just been told that my father died. I packed my shit and I left for a week." Jennifer described her family functioning as beginning to recover again but still has a way to go.

Ashley's mixed model experience, which also included an initial incline followed by a decline, emerged in response to her boyfriend's attentiveness to their child, which followed his registration. Ashley then experienced a subsequent plunge into crisis as she faced more and more struggles associated with her close attachment to a sex offender. Although Ashley described herself as "getting better" at the time of our interview, she said she often felt herself "slipping back" into emotional turmoil at times.

The Increase Model

The *increase model* captures family functioning that increases, and involves no substantial decline, after a stressful event (Burr and Klein 1994). As shown in Figure 8.3, three of the 17 respondents described their family functioning as following this model.

	Rachel Rebecca Sara

Figure 8.3 Increase Model

All three of the women who said their experiences fit the increase model attributed the positive upward movement to the fact that the crisis forced their families to bond closer together. Rebecca, for instance, who had been with her husband for 15 years, said that: “I would probably say, if I had to put ourselves into one of those categories, I would almost say an incline because we have really had to pull together to save our sanity shall we say. So I would say our relationship has been on an incline.” All three of the women noted that this family bonding occurred in response to the fact that they were “fighting the same beast.” In other words, they all recognized the social stigma attached to the sex offender label, and as such, their families had to become closer to stay together.

The Decrease Model

The *decrease model* entails a steady decline in family functioning after a crisis. This model represented no recovery in family functioning following a stressful event (Burr and Klein 1994). Four of the 17 respondents’ descriptions of their families’ functioning following the stressful event matched closest to this model, as illustrated in Figure 8.4.

	Eileen Isabella Courtney Rose
Figure 8.4 Decrease Model	

Eileen was one of the four women who said her experience fit the decrease model. At the time I interviewed her, Eileen initially indicated that her experiences were more aligned with the roller coaster model; soon after the interview, though, she contacted me to share that she actually lost custody of all three of her children. Any recovery she had thought she was experiencing was diminished and she plunged further into crisis.

Courtney was another woman who said she fit the decrease model. Like Eileen, she too had lost custody of her children as a result of her relationship with a sex offender. She explained, “My family’s function has totally down-spiraled. Of course I lost the kids. Every time I turn around something else is being taken away.”

Isabella and Rose did not lose their two children. Isabella, who had been with her fiancé for two years, and Rose, who had been with her husband for four years, described deteriorating family relationships due to their relationships with a sex offender. This, in conjunction with each of their partners returning to prison for parole violations, prohibiting their partners from being support systems in place of the women’s families, placed these two women on a decline.

While the four women who fell within this model could still experience recovery in the future, Eileen and Courtney are in a position to decline even further as they have lost custody of their children.

No Change Model

The *no change model* involves neither significant increase nor decrease in family functioning after a crisis (Burr and Klein 1994). Only one respondent, Eliza, said that her experience aligned most closely with this model (see Figure 8.5).

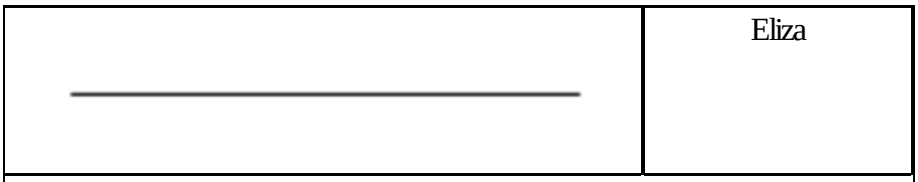

Figure 8.5 No Change Model

Eliza described minor strain impacting her family functioning, such as herself and children having difficulty forming relationships with neighbors. However, overall she said that she identified most with the no change model because: “I already knew about it when I met him or got really close into our friendship. I knew what I was gettin’ into.”

Challenges to and Application of the Burr and Klein (1994) Family Functioning Models

The 17 women who responded to my interview question about their families' recovery process fit generally within the Burr and Klein (1994) models. I discovered, however, that there was a key phenomenon that the women in my study reported, which is not addressed in Burr and Klein's five models.

Burr and Klein suggest a continuous incline in family functioning once a family begins to recover from crisis (this is encompassed in the roller coaster and the increase models). Yet, mothers in relationships with sex offenders did not report such an assured continuous incline. On the verge of beginning recovery, Eileen plummeted into crisis again at the loss of her children. Jennifer's family seemed to be on an incline for over ten years, but when her daughter was bullied and became suicidal, Jennifer's family also plunged into crisis again. As exemplified in Eileen and Jennifer's narratives, women in this population face the possibility of plunging into crisis multiple times, both shortly after the stressful event as well as following prolonged period of incline. Even though not all of the women experienced multiple plunges into crisis, some also experienced stagnancy in their family's recovery process. Beth explained: "Our future is what we have now. We can't ever hope for anything better as long as he's on this list." Phoebe echoed Beth's future projection, saying "The fact that he has to register for the rest of his life, you're never going to get out from under it. There is no end in sight to it." Therefore, given this possibility of multiple plunges into crisis and potential stagnancy in recovery, I suggest a call for future research which needs to follow women in highly stressful circumstances over longer periods of times, as the crisis may unfold over a period of years.

The Burr and Klein Models have provided a fundamental tool when trying to understand how a family recovers after a stressful event. The use of their five family functioning models has

aided me in describing and operationalizing my participants' experiences. However, the Burr and Klein (1994) theory could be expanded to incorporate potential processes of family functioning for other populations, as well as ways in which to better understand why a family may function a certain way. Nevertheless, for the women in this study, it is clear through this discussion of these women's recovery processes that despite the utilization of coping strategies, most of the women in this sample have not been able to fully recover following their stressful event, the act of becoming attached to the sex offender label through a romantic relationship.

A Way Forward

In this thesis, I have described the impacts on women's lives due to having a relationship with a sex offender. I have also discussed how these women have coped and used social support as a way to mediate those impacts on their lives and their family unit. I then described my participants' resulting stress trajectories. In this final section, I discuss some potential ways of moving forward for this vulnerable group. Some of this is provided by my own research of current literature, as well as from the women I have interviewed. I close this thesis by discussing two key areas that may help women in this population in the future.

Sex Offender Law Reform

Regardless if the women in this study believed their partner was innocent, believed the crime did not warrant sex offender registration, or they acknowledged his crime but believed he had changed, all three of which were represented in my sample, my participants almost unanimously said that sex offender law reform was the number one way in which their families' strenuous circumstances could be alleviated. In particular, they felt that changing laws that prohibit *all* sex offenders being in certain locations—houses, workplaces, parks, etc.—and laws

that provided tremendous amounts of personal information on sex offender registries would provide the most relief in their struggles.

The registration of sex offenders involves balancing the rights of the public to be protected from future harm with the rights of the offender to be protected from duress brought on by sanctions (Human Rights Watch 2007). Current U.S. registration laws have not adequately balanced these two domains (Human Rights Watch 2007). The root of many of these concerns is the broad and general nature of these requirements. Current requirements do not provide individualized assessments of risk that would create a realistic approach to limiting the rights of sex offenders. Rather, they are based upon the most serious of offenders who present a legitimate threat to the safety of those around them, and heavily restrict the rights of offenders without regard for the nature of the crime or the offender. U.S. Courts, however, have upheld requirements as reasonable limits on rights that increase the safety of the public enough to warrant their use (Human Rights Watch 2007).

Current requirements for registry, community notification, and residency restriction have been documented to cause a wide range of issues from humiliation to discrimination to physical harm (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009). The research presented in this thesis has shown that those harms extend to the families of sex offenders as well. Brooke commented that "In our state personally, murderers get treated better than a sex offender."

Multiple interviewees expressed frustration with the generality of current requirements, especially with regard to registry. These women have a deep understanding of the nuances involved in the labeling of a sex offense, and desire a system that accurately addresses each case to prevent additional unnecessary strain to their families. For Brooke, this translated to a desire for categories of offenders based on risk.

Eliza, who knew she and her family would experience the negative effects of these requirements for a total of 10 years, said "I understand the purpose that the registry serves, and that's good, but it's overused, and a lot of people that are not a risk are still on there." This was also mentioned within the context of protecting their children from other sex offenders. Because the women are aware of the broad nature of the sex offender label, they are wary of the registry as a tool for assessing risk. Phoebe expressed:

> They need to change the law so there's at least categories of sex offenders because like I said I can't even protect my children because I don't know who really hurt a kid and who's like my husband and who was dating their 17 year old girlfriend while they're 18 and somebody got mad.

Deborah noted that the current system for registering sex offenders is "very flawed, and needs to be more specific orientated, and based on evidence rather than, you know, emotion based information." These observations are supported by a comprehensive report by Human Rights Watch on legal restriction placed on sex offenders. This report lays out key recommendations to realign increases in safety with decreases in personal rights, most based on creating categories of sex offenders that face different sanctions based on the severity of their action, age, and propensity to reoffend (2007). Specifically, they recommend requiring registration only for those who exhibit a medium- or high-risk for re-offense, limiting community notification to need-to-know levels (which includes notification of victims and an assessment of reasonable notification based on individual and community context), and only requiring residency restrictions in individually-tailored situations (2007). Rather than a focus on legal sanctions for sex offenders, this report also suggests an increase in the use of treatment programs and community reintegration efforts. The closing recommendation is to expand the scope of the issue to include education and resources for offenders, their families, and communities as a whole (Human Rights Watch 2007).

In relation to my participants' experienced in their life spheres, the women viewed sex offender law reform as potentially able to alleviate those struggles in a variety of ways. If registration was only required for medium- or high-risk offenders, then the majority of my participants' partners, who were low-risk offenders, would not be subject to the stigma surrounding the sex offender label or all associated restrictions. This could prevent some the loss they experienced, such as loss of housing, loss of employment and financial security, and loss of personal relationships. Even if sex offender laws were only reformed to limit the level of information provided to the public, my participants felt as though this would diminish the stress they experienced when worrying about being shunned by peers and family, potential vigilantism, or anticipated bullying of their children. That is, if they felt as though they could send their children to school without another student finding out about their association with the sex offender registry, they would be less fearful of their child being bullied. In general, sex offender law reform could literally remove many of the barriers and strains the women in this sample faced in their lives.

Provision of Resources

In addition to sex offender law reform, many of the women in this study also identified a need for a provision of resources to help them through their experiences as they deal with current sex offender laws. There were three common resources recognized as a severe need by the participants: (1) a liaison to help navigate sex offender law requirements, (2) provision of or financial assistance for counseling services, and (3) in-person support groups for partners and children of sex offenders, or more generally families of sex offenders.

Many of the women felt as though their partners and their families were placed under restrictions with no skillset to navigate those policies. This led the women to wish there was

someone available through the legal system to help them through this process. The term “liaison” was used by Rebecca in her interview when asked what she hoped might have been available to her as she has gone through her experiences as a mother in a relationship with a sex offender. She responded, “I wish we had a sex offender liaison whose job it is to tell you what is expected of you so you do not screw up by accident so you do not end up getting in more hot water.” Phoebe similarly observed, “There’s nobody to call saying they’re doing this to us is that right. So just some kind of support or you know somebody that you can ask about the rules and what it actually covers and what you can and can’t do.”

Although while on parole or probation some of these women’s partners had to report to a probation or parole officer, the participants viewed those officers as unhelpful in providing information on how best to acclimate to all laws and social circumstances associated with the sex offender label. Therefore, a liaison specifically dedicated to aiding sex offenders and their families maneuver their new circumstances was viewed as a necessity by the participants in this study.

The presence of a liaison could potentially assuage stress in the lives of the women in this study by removing the burden of women and their families navigating sex offender restrictions alone. For example, many of the women struggled not only with having to abide by residency restrictions, but also with how to determine if they were following those restrictions correctly. If they had a formal connection with someone who could inform them on where they could or could not live and why, my participants suggested this would have taken away a portion of their stress related to housing. Such assistance from a liaison could be helpful in a variety of life spheres by taking away the severity of uncertainty.

In addition to requesting a liaison for help with the logistical needs of following sex offender laws, the women in this study also acknowledged a need for a provision of resources geared towards their emotional needs. Counseling services and in-person support groups were described as the two most helpful avenues for emotional need fulfillment. Many of the respondents felt as though these two resources were sometimes provided for their partners, at least during probationary periods, but never allocated to them or their children. Indeed, Amber stated "I wish that either his sex offender program or another treatment program was available for the spouse. I was kind of treated as the enemy from his offender program." Despite having her daughter become suicidal as a result of being bullied over her father's presence on the federally mandated sex offender registry, Jennifer was not offered any aid in recovery from the legal system. Jennifer explained:

> No one ever came to me and said, "Is there anything we can do for you? Would you like to see a counselor? What about you and your daughter, do you have any concerns about your safety?" There really should be more information in there that says, "If you have any questions, any concerns, you can contact this person or this department, or if your family needs assistance." There is no information. There's no resources for us. None.

Like Amber and Jennifer, counseling was viewed by some of the women as a necessary element to their recovery process. However, it was also often viewed as unobtainable, mostly due to the participants' inability to pay for counseling sessions out of pocket.

With self-perception reported as the most severely impacted life sphere by all of the women in this study, emotional regulation through counseling, as a means to diminish that strain on self-perception, was thus the most commonly stated need within the sample. Even if my participants were unable to ever receive aid in their other life spheres, having the ability to address their emotions when dealing with the strain in those life spheres was identified as a crucial need by the women. The implementation of formal counseling provisions to families of

sex offenders, whether through governmental or community agencies, may alleviate some of the strain experienced by this population.

Although I found many of my participants on active online support groups for sex offenders and their families, they still viewed an in-person support group as a much stronger tool for recovery. Ashley described her online support group as helpful, but that she still would rather meet face-to-face with others in her situations because "you can't just take the person when they're crying and give them a hug." Clearly, there is an emotional component gained by meeting in-person with people in like circumstances. Logically, some of the women in this study also believed that support groups for families in their situation should be provided in every community since sex offender registries are required in every community. Jennifer viewed this as unfair because there is no local support for "families dealing with long-term repercussions of the registry."

As with counseling services, the provision of local in-person support groups could be beneficial to the recovery of the women's self-perceptions. A local in-person support group, however, could also provide a new and positive social network for women in this population, which could ease the stress caused in their family and peer relationships. This new network could also provide the means to efficiently and collaboratively find other resources that could aid them through their struggles. All three of these needs—liaison, counseling, and support groups—were perceived by the women in my sample as necessary given that their logistical and emotional struggles stem from the current sex offender laws in the United States.

Mothers in relationships with sex offenders are exposed to unique social circumstances that can cause strain in various life spheres. While women in this population may engage in a wide array of coping strategies in attempts to mediate the experienced strain, it may not be

enough to help these women and their families recover. Therefore, more structural avenues of social support need to be considered when addressing how to help women in this population. This change in structure may be in the form of sex offender law reform or institutionalized provision of resources to circumnavigate sex offender law and consequences as they stand today. This research adds to literature on stress and coping among stigmatized groups, providing a look into the lives of mothers in relationships with sex offenders as they live under U.S. sex offender laws, and associated social consequences.

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APPENDIX A

[date]

Dear Participant,

My name is Alyssa Dawson and I am a researcher from Colorado State University in the Sociology department. We are conducting a research study on how women who are still in relationships with those who have been convicted as sex offenders, as well as those women no longer in those relationships, cope with this dynamic in their lives. The title of our project is *Partners and Ex-Partners of Sex Offenders: Understanding Life Experiences.* The Principal Investigator is Dr. Lori Peek, Department of Sociology, and the Co-Principal Investigator is Alyssa Dawson, Masters Student, Department of Sociology.

We would like you to take part in an interview that will include questions about your relationships—romantic, children, family peers, your occupation, and your housing. The interview will be either in person or over the telephone. Participation will take approximately 60-90 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be digitally recorded. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we make public, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records. You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court OR to tell authorities if we believe you or your spouse have abused a child, or you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on the effect of sex offender registration on the children of sex offenders and the mothers of those children, a highly under researched topic. We do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those met in day-to-day life. It is not possible to identify all possible risks in the research process, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

If you have any questions, please contact Alyssa Dawson at adawson@rams.colostate.edu or Lori Peek at 970-491-6777. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, at 970-491-1655.

Sincerely,

Lori Peek	Alyssa Dawson
Associate Professor	Masters Student
Department of Sociology	Department of Sociology

APPENDIX B

Interview Participant Facesheet

Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

Email Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

Please list days/times that would generally work for an interview:

APPENDIX C

QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: Please answer all of the items. On items that have more than one choice, please place a check mark next to your choice.

1. Age: _____

2. Race/Ethnicity (check all that apply):

   _____Black/African American
   _____ Asian American
   _____ Latina American
   _____ American Indian
   _____ White
   _____ Other *(please specify)*:

   _____

3. Marital Status:

   _____ Single
   _____ Married
   _____ Separated/Divorced
   _____ Widowed
   _____ Domestic Partner

4. When was your (ex) partner convicted of the crime:

   _____

5. How long have you been/were you with your (ex) partner:

   Before the offense: _____
   After the offense: _____

6. How many persons (including yourself) are in your immediate family?

   _____ Persons

7. Please list the ages of your children (please check the box if their father is the offender):

   _____
   _____ ☐
   _____ ☐
   _____ ☐
   _____ ☐
   _____ ☐

8. Please list family support you have in the area (Relationship to you):

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

9. Highest Level of Education (check one):

   _____ Some High School
   _____ High School
   _____ Some College
   _____College Degree
   _____ Some Graduate School
   _____ Graduate Degree

10. Employment Status:

    _____ Employed Full-Time
    _____ Employed Part-Time
    _____ Not Employed
    _____ Student
    _____ Other *(please specify):*

    _____

11. Occupation:

    _____
    _____

12. Income Level:

    _____ Low
    _____ Medium
    _____ High
    _____ Very High

13. Housing:

    _____ Home Owner
    _____ Renter
    _____ Other *(please specify):*

APPENDIX D

As outlined in the consent letter you received, with your permission, I would like to audio record this interview. It is not a problem if you would prefer not to be recorded. Do I have your permission to record our interview? (If she says yes, proceed with interview guide; if she says no, turn off recorder and take notes only.) ***Ask how she heard about study!***

First, I would like to hear about what happened with the sex offender registration. Will you share your story with me?

What happened immediately following his registration?

How would you describe your emotions during that time?

How did the registration impact your relationship with your (ex) partner?

How did this impact your relationship with your children?

How did this impact your relationship with your family?

How did this impact your relationship with your friends?

What effect, if any, did your (ex) partner's registration have on your job at the time?

What effect, if any, did your (ex) partner's registration have on your housing at the time?

Will you go into how your life has been affected by the registration to date? (Only ask if has not already been addressed through above questions)

Is there anything you wish had been available to you as you have gone through this time in your life?

Is there anything you would like to add to your story?

A part of my research is looking at how the presence of a crisis, in this case the sex offender registration, impacts family functioning. The theoretical model that I am using developed different models to demonstrate ways in which family functioning could be affected. One model demonstrates a plunge in family functioning immediately following the crisis, followed by a gradual incline. Another demonstrates only an incline in functioning. Another demonstrates an incline followed by a decline. There are five models all together. Based off of this information, could you, in your own words, describe how your family functioning was affected by your husband's registration?

APPENDIX E

Resources

For women associated to the sex offender registry through a romantic relationship with a sex offender and/or have children with a sex offender

Read *Consensual Consequences*: *Consensual Consequences: A True Story of Life with a "Registered Sex Offender"* was written by a woman who married a registered sex offender. It has been classified as "a powerful story of true love and heartache while living in fear of vigilantism and simultaneously battling a system that punishes their whole family endlessly." Women in similar situations to the author have found comfort in reading her story and feeling they are not alone. http://www.amazon.com/Consensual-Consequences-Story-Registered-Offender/dp/1934759503

Join dailystrength.org: This website provides free online support groups for various populations in need. They have a specific support groups for families of sex offenders, whether or not you are still with him. There are also other support groups available that may apply to what you are going through. http://www.dailystrength.org/groups/families-of-sex-offenders

Join Yahoo Group "Offender Solutions": "S.O.S. (Sex Offender Solutions) is a fellowship of individuals from every walk of life that are dedicated to the recovery of S*x Offenders, the reunification of their families, and the restoration of their Civil Rights." http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/Offendersolutions/

Join Citizens for Second Chance: This group is a Michigan based support group for families of individuals convicted of -or- charged with a sex offense. You do not have to be a resident of Michigan to find support within this group. Their website offers both support and information on laws related to registration. http://www.citizensforsecondchances.com/mission-statement

Join Womenagainstregistry.org (W.A.R.): "Women Against Registry brings much needed attention to national and state registries which are destroying American families and depriving them of the liberties and equal protection guaranteed to each and every American citizen. Women Against Registry gives a voice to the hundreds of thousands of innocent women and children who are being wrongly and unfairly punished because we have a family member who has been convicted of a sexual offense." Members of W.A.R. find support in women in similar situations as well as advocacy opportunities. http://womenagainstregistry.org/

Join Illinois Voices for Reform: This group is a Illinois based advocacy group for sex offenders and families of sex offenders. You do not have to be a resident of Illinois to find opportunities within this group. Their website offers information on advocacy efforts on laws related to registration. http://www.citizensforsecondchances.com/mission-statement

Join The Offenders Wife: This mission of this website is to support and empower women who find themselves labeled and stigmatized by their association to the sex offender registry through a partner. This may be a resource of support for women who find themselves stigmatized even if they are no longer in a romantic relationship with the offender. http://theoffenderswife.org/

Join USA FAIR: USA FAIR (Families Advocating an Intelligent Registry) is a not-for-profit corporation dedicated to educating the public on issues related to the sex offender registry. This may be a resource for those who wish to become actively involved in sex offender advocacy. http://www.usafair.org/about_us

Visit Shana Rowen's blog: Shana Rowen is the partner of a sex offender and Executive Director at USA FAIR (Families Advocating an Intelligent Registry). She upkeeps a personal blog discussing current legislation and advocacy efforts. This may be a resource for those who wish to be kept up to date on sex offender advocacy movements. http://iloveasexoffender.blogspot.com/

Visit SOSEN.org: "The mission of SOSEN (Sex Offender Support and Education Network) is to educate the public, the media, law-enforcement, and legislators regarding the facts, based on current research, of sexual abuse. We are striving to incorporate fact-based solutions thus helping to change the laws that affect former offenders, their loved ones, victims and the communities where they live. We seek to also provide support for victims, former offenders and their families." This site may be helpful for those in need of resources, advocacy opportunities, and personal support. http://sosen2.org/

Visit reformsexoffenderlaws.org: RSOL envisions effective, fact-based sexual offense laws and policies which promote public safety, safeguard civil liberties, honor human dignity, and offer holistic prevention, healing, and restoration. This website offers updates on RSO legislation as well as advocacy opportunities. It also list advocacy contacts by state. http://reformsexoffenderlaws.org/

Visit griefspeaks.com: This website provides lists of resources and national support groups for people that have experienced any form of grief in their life. You may find information here that speaks to that which you are struggling with the most. http://www.griefspeaks.com/id76.html

Call 2-1-1: 211 is the national abbreviated dialing code for free access to health and human services information and referral. You can call this number to find counseling services in your area.

Visit childcareresource.org: This website provides national resources for child care related needs and national support organizations. http://www.childcareresource.org/resources-for-providers/national-support

APPENDIX F

Partners and Ex-Partners of Sex Offenders
A study on understanding life experiences

Interview Recruitment Speech

Hello.

My name is Alyssa Dawson, and I am a graduate student as Colorado State University. My ex-partner is a registered sex offender, and I have a child with him. The consequences of this relationship have led me to be interested in studying women in a similar situation for my master's thesis. I am especially interested in understanding how women who are still in relationships with those who have been convicted as sex offenders, as well as those women no longer in those relationships, cope with this dynamic in their lives.

For my project, I would like to interview women about their experiences. Specifically, I am looking for women who have a child(ren) (under age 18) with a man who has been convicted as a sex offender and are still in the relationship with the man; and women who have a child(ren) (under age 18) with a man who has been convicted as a sex offender and are no longer in the relationship with the man.

The interview will last about 1-1 ½ hours, and I will meet you at a place of your choosing. You will not receive anything for participating in this study, but I hope that you find the experience of sharing your story in a safe environment therapeutic. I also hope that the findings will help other women who find themselves in similar situations.

If you would like to hear more about this study and are interested in possibly participating, then I would be happy to provide you more details about the research project and to discuss the possible risks and benefits.

Thank you for your consideration.