Chapter 2
Interviewing the Wives and Girlfriends

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Abstract This chapter describes the interview approach, structure, and format utilized in the research reported in this book. This research was unique in that it was based on the intimate partner’s perspective of the child molesters’ familial interaction, attitudes, and deviant activities. Adding to the project’s uniqueness was the fact that these intimate adult partners were also the mothers of the molested children. The research looked at many aspects of the child molester’s history, and the roadmap for this journey was a detailed and penetrating set of lifestyle questions. Each facet of a child molester’s normal, and criminal, lifestyle was on the table for examination. It was the purpose of the interviews to explore the disturbing and destructive phenomena generally called “child molesting” from an insider’s perspective.

A similarly beneficial effort was based upon the interviews of wives and girlfriends of sexually sadistic offenders (Hazelwood, et al., Australian Family Physician 22:4, 1993; Warren and Hazelwood, Journal of Family Violence 17(1):75–89, 2002). That research made it clear, and this research confirmed, the true nature and self-image of the most heinous and vile behaviors of the offender is to remain hidden at all cost and he will willingly invest enormous effort to keep them in the dark. He literally constructs a parallel life for his “normal” or overt existence, while his true self is displayed only in his secret or “covert” life—a life which is filled with fantasies and paraphilic urges and desires and one which effectively destroys the lives of the victims (parent and child) for the molester’s deviant sexual pleasure. As with the sexual sadist, the repetitive child molester creates elaborate facades to hide his dark side. His vulnerability lies with those few intimates to whom he allows close and unprotected access. To the authors’ knowledge, inquiries of this nature have heretofore never been undertaken.

Introduction

The research interviews were the central feature of the research, with all other facets dependent on their success. The interviews were designed to capture details of the offender’s normal and molesting lifestyles, and in doing so they would become “the bow on the research package.” This chapter presents the reader with the interview
What Is a Child Molester?

An unvarnished and simple answer is that a child molester is anyone who molestes a child. A child is defined as an individual who has not reached a specific age as defined by the state in which the child resides.

As reported in Chap. 1, 34 children, ranging in age from 9 months to 13 years, were sexually molested by the men married to or dating the women in this study. The molestation included looking, touching, photographing or videotaping the child, cunnilingus, fellatio, and penetration of one or more of the child’s orifices.

From this point on, it becomes a little more complicated. A basic rule is that anyone who is a child is deemed to be incapable of giving consent. That seems simple enough, but it has become complicated as children have undergone maturity advancements in physical development, and our society has encouraged more mature appearance and dress of children in the last 50 or so years. Consequently, the true age of a child may be masked and his/her sexual maturity is not always reflected in chronological years. Because of this, the mindset of jurors may be adversely influenced by the fact that a 15-year-old victim may not fit their image of a “child.” Speaking bluntly, the appearance of youthfulness, defenselessness, and naivety may not be present, and the victim may be viewed as being capable of consent. In essence, the image of a child who could not legally give consent becomes blurred.

Through the pioneering work of Kenneth Lanning, Anna Salter, and others, a much clearer definition of a child molester has emerged. However, some still wrestle with the clinical term “pedophile” and incorrectly use that word to label anyone who sexually abuses a child. Lanning’s classification system (Lanning, 2001) is easily comprehended, as it divides child molesters into two simple categories (i.e., situational and preferential). Appendix is a diagram, inspired by Lanning’s categories of child molesters. The diagram represents the authors’ attempt to further simplify the molester classification through observable behaviors and attitudes of such offenders.

The Ringside Observer

As previously indicated, the offender’s intimate partners had a “ringside” view from which to observe him. Contrary to the belief held by many, what occurred between the molester and the children was not observed or even suspected contemporaneously by the mothers. The interviews revealed the offender’s betrayal of the mother’s trust, and the disturbing details that came to light with that discovery, was forever imprinted in their memory. The knowledge possessed by these women is a superior
source of confidential data that resides in no other place and yet is a source which is often overlooked by law enforcement, mental health, and social service professionals.

The intimate partner is in a position to observe the molester in his unguarded moments. Once the offenses are discovered, those women may provide investigators with invaluable insight into the molester’s hidden life. Simply stated, it is probable that no adult is better situated to report on the child molester.

A Painful Recall

It was recognized that the interview process was certain to create within the mother’s painful recall of missed opportunities to intervene and protect the child. Employing the age-old adage “forewarned is to be forearmed,” the reactions to potentially disturbing questions were anticipated, and appropriate responses by the interviewers were incorporated into the interview plan. It became clear during the process that the delicate handling of discussions of the most sensitive nature and coupled with the projected attitude of the interviewers generated a balance to the unpleasant recall of their children’s violation.

The Project’s Components

The distinct, yet equally important, components of this project included: (1) identification of the research goals, (2) selection and formation of the research team, (3) development and modification of the interview protocol, (4) identification and solicitation of interview participants, and (5) the interview itself.

The project, like research projects in general, was comprised of several dynamics which originated separately over a multiyear period but then came together at the critical point, the face-to-face interviews. The joining of these disparate elements was constructed so as to hopefully produce an increased understanding of a topic that many are content to distance themselves from because of its disturbing nature.

Research Goals

The overarching goal was to gather previously unknown information about the molester while simultaneously guarding the welfare and interests of the person being interviewed. Due in large measure to having an interdisciplinary team (i.e., mental health, law enforcement, forensic pediatrician), it is believed that important data were obtained, which provided insight for use in dealing with the victims (children and mothers), regardless of the interviewer’s needs. The information obtained
included the criminal, social, sexual, and familial history of the offender and his wife/girlfriend.

**Team Selection**

The skill of an interviewer determines the quality of the interview, which determines the value of the information obtained. Hence, it was understood from the beginning that properly staffing the interview teams would require especially talented individuals.

There is no getting around human nature. Some people simply do not mix well with others, often due to no fault of either party. It is also true that some people are better at the art of interviewing than are others. Therefore, one of the skills necessary for the team members was having an ability to interact well with a variety of personalities. It was anticipated that some mothers would be passive and withdrawn while others would be suspicious and possibly hostile toward the interviewers. Fortunately, none of the team members reported any hostility or anger on the part of the mothers.

When interviewing the mother of a molested child, a critical difference in skill level is in knowing how to navigate around delicate and sensitive issues such as sexuality, disciplinary matters, and family secrets. When proper demeanor, attitude, tact, and empathy are employed, an interview teetering on the precipice of failure may well be transformed into a genial and productive relationship. Such talent may turn issues that could destroy the goals and intent of the research into a productive and mutually satisfying experience for all parties. Successful interviewers know that it is often not what you say but how you say it that matters.

Each of the team members was experienced with child molestation and was able to mask any personal feelings and project a nonjudgmental attitude. One criterion that is frequently overlooked, but essential for interviews such as this, is patience. Some of these interviews lasted several hours, and impatience is not a desirable characteristic while maturity, empathy, and tactfulness are advantageous.

**Identifying Interview Participants**

The interviewees were selected from a pool of women meeting two criteria. First, they were the former wives or girlfriends of a child molester, and secondly, the molester’s offenses were known to the police. The women were informed that while their identity would be held in strict confidence, their experience with the men who victimized their children would be published and otherwise shared with professionals who deal in such matters.

As mentioned in Chap. 1, it was through our contacts with victim’s advocacy groups that former intimate partners of known child molesters were identified. The
advocacy counselors donated their time and effort to identify, contact, and recruit women who were amenable to discussing their personal, social, sexual, and marital histories with the research teams.

These mental health professionals were also present throughout the interviews, some of which exceeded 8 h in length, and their presence provided the women with a source of psychological comfort and reassurance.

If, during the research interview, a mother felt uncomfortable in sharing certain information, she was not pressured to divulge that information. Fortunately, this was rarely a problem, as the women were generally forthcoming in an unhesitating fashion.

Preparation for the Interview

A critical, but often overlooked feature of a successful interview is knowing in advance how an interview is going to be conducted. Unfortunately, many take the position, “I’ve done this before, so let’s go.” The interviews reported on in this book were meticulously planned and carried out by individuals experienced with the subject matter. The interview protocol (book of topics and questions) was the plan or road map designed to insure that each mother was asked the same questions, albeit in an unstructured manner. The protocol was developed by a team consisting of law enforcement, a forensic psychologist, and a forensic pediatrician. The 354 questions asked of the mothers were covered in five groupings:

1. Social, sexual, medical, criminal, and mental health history of the wife/girlfriend
2. Social, sexual, criminal, mental health history of the child molester
3. The nonsexual relationship of the mother and molester
4. The molester’s adult to adult sexuality as known by the mother
5. Molester to child sexuality as known by the mother

The interview team was comprised of a male law enforcement professional and a female mental health professional who, in the majority of cases, had been involved in the counseling of either the molested child or the mother of the child. With the mother’s knowledge and approval, the counselor provided valuable information prior to the interview. Working together, the team developed the interview plan. The plan included the time and setting of the interview, the seating arrangements, and, depending on the personality of the woman to be interviewed, whether the style would be formal or relaxed. The lead interviewer asked the questions and maintained eye contact with the mother, while the second member was primarily responsible for note-taking, asking “follow-up” questions and clarifying answers given by the mother. Following the interview, the team reviewed the interview protocol and, where necessary, reached agreement in its completion.

Interviewing is a combination of art form and process. Actually, it is more art form than process, but without appropriate structure and form, the art form will
often fail. The art is derived from the interviewer’s ability and willingness to finesse the process. This ability emanates from the interviewer’s talent to subtly and diplomatically converse on complicated and sometimes awkward topics. The process of interviewing consists of detailed preparations allowing for unpredictable developments that may occur during the conversation, while simultaneously melding divergent forms of human behavior and different personalities to obtain meaningful answers.

The interview plans for these women were “red teamed,” meaning they were reviewed by the entire team to ensure that all possible contingencies were considered, and plans to deal with them were included.

The Interview

As mentioned, the lead interviewers were law enforcement professionals who were well versed and experienced in conducting criminal inquiries, which often included confrontational interrogations. Unless the mother of the molested child is a codefendant, she should be interviewed as one would interview a witness to a crime. This necessitates an approach diametrically opposed to the interrogation process. The teams were reminded that the success of the interviews relies on the verbal product of the mothers—women who may be anxious, stressed, and possibly traumatized.

The mothers who were interviewed in the United States cohort were not aware of the questions or specific topics to be discussed. In keeping with the interview plan, time was allotted for rapport development, a feature recommended for anyone interviewing the mothers of molested children. Because none of the women were codefendants, they were dealt with as witnesses to a crime.

Having recognized that the mothers needed to have confidence in the ability of the interviewers and the interview process, the employment history and experience of the interviewers was discussed prior to any questions being asked. This seemed to reinforce the women’s willingness to participate in the research. The interviewers outlined the scope of the questions, why they were necessary, and the expected impact the research interviews would have on other women who were experiencing what they had been through.

Simultaneous with commencing the interviews and making several required formal declarations (i.e., issues of confidentiality, interview to be audio-recorded) and a brief introduction of sensitive topics, steps were taken to gradually desensitize the women to the concept of sharing intimate and previously protected information with a stranger (i.e., the law enforcement professional) through incrementally probing questions. This approach was designed to acquaint the women with how the open-ended questions would proceed. The following exchange between a mother and an interview team provides the reader with an example:
Mother (Mary): How long is this going to take?
Interviewer: We would like to spend as much time with you as you are willing to give us.
Mary: I have an appointment I have to go to (she didn’t).
Interviewer: That’s no problem. Just let us know when you have to leave and we can make another appointment with you.
Mary: Are you going to be asking me about sex things?
Interviewer: Yes we are, but if you are uncomfortable with a question, you don’t have to answer.
Mary: Well, what kind of sex things are you going to ask me about?
Interviewer: One of the things we’re going to talk to you about is your sexual history before meeting your husband. We will also ask you about the type of sex you engaged in with your husband before and during your marriage. But sex is just one topic we hope to discuss. Again, if you are uncomfortable with a question, just tell us and we will move to another area. Okay?
Mary: Can you give me an example?
Interviewer: Sure. One question might be, “Did your husband want to look at pornography before having sex with you?” (She then interrupted.)
Mary: He sure did!
Interviewer: And then we would ask you “What type of pornography?”
Mary: Okay. I guess we can go ahead.

As the first stage of the exchanges evolved, the mothers acquired a more comprehensive understanding as to how the next few hours would proceed, and they were given sufficient time to adjust psychologically. The probative questions were intended to pierce a carefully constructed veil shielding the most private aspects of the lives of these women and the men who molested their children.

Obstacles to Success

Having an exceptional interview protocol and good intentions are useless if the mother withdraws or becomes offended by the process. The nature of the inquiry presented a number of concerns and obstacles for the interviewers to overcome before and during the process. The cluster of obstacles that concerned the interviewers can be divided into two groups.

The first group included issues thought to be most threatening to the women (i.e., discussing sexual history), and the second set was unidentified but remained potential issues which may or may not arise (i.e., establishing trust). Within those categories, it would be difficult to rank the most likely impediments that could cause failure; however, we attempted to anticipate and plan for such issues in the interview plan.

The emotional or “charged” nature of the items in the first group included concerns that at the core of the probe were many personal questions. Fortunately, this turned out to be a nonissue with the reason being that the interviewers demonstrated
the proper attitude and demeanor, thus proving that correct deportment helps foster candid responses.

This concern was equally applicable to inquiries in other areas of the protocol. Where possible, we wanted to overcome any qualms the mothers might have about discussing details of their passivity and, therefore in their minds, complicity in the violation of their children. From our professional experience with child molestation, we knew that the prevailing attitude of many was that these women were viewed as having betrayed their first duty as a parent—protection of their children. The mothers themselves experienced guilt in this respect, and some of the women discussed the blame that their children projected onto them for their molestation.

Another concern included in the first group was anxiety over who would have access to their interviews and their identities and whether relatives and acquaintances would be able to link them to specific data. This was resolved by assurances that their personal identities would not be divulged and would be shrouded when discussing or publishing their accounts. The final issue in this category was an anticipated concern of the women that the interviewers would be judgmental of them, and this was again resolved through the professional manner of the interviewer teams.

The second area of concern included serious issues that could lead to reticence and a lack of candor. It was a very real concern that recounting the details of their partner’s betrayal, combined with their lingering guilt, would not only affect their willingness to cooperate but more importantly, might negatively impact on their psychological well-being. The continued willingness of the mothers to participate was testimony to the fact that the interviewers had not forgotten the multifaceted trauma these women had endured and which continued to persist.

Each of those challenges were recognized and dealt with through the interview techniques discussed in this chapter.

**Significant Findings**

It became clear that many of the women had been open to the opportunity, and even eager, to discuss their traumatic experience with understanding and nonjudgmental listeners. As has been previously stated, there are many programs and caregivers for children who are victims of sexual abuse, but little or no attention has been given to the mothers of those children.

Having concluded the question and answer portion of the interview, the women were afforded the opportunity to speak openly about the interviews and to provide topics and occurrences they considered important. It was noted that none of the women expressed negative comments, and many of them expressed feelings of gratitude to the interviewers for providing the opening to unburden themselves and to better understand what had happened to them and their children.

As mentioned, the interview teams were aware of the popularly held belief that these women must have been aware of, and therefore complicit, in the sexual
violence perpetrated on their children. The interviewers (experienced criminal investigators and mental health professionals) were convinced the mothers were unaware of their children’s sexual abuse until it was reported to them (see Chap. 1), and most then took rapid action involving the authorities. As to how the molesters were able to molest the children without the mother’s knowledge, it was noted that many of the molesters in this study were reported as having the ability to identify and exploit the weaknesses of their partner, thereby enabling them to control and manipulate the woman psychologically, physically, and sexually. During one interview, the following exchange was captured as an example of the women being psychologically abused in childhood and in the relationship with the molester.

**Case No. 1**

Phyllis reported that her father sexually molested her over a number of years and told her, “You were born to serve men.” He repeatedly said “I wish you were never born.” She married a man 14 years older than herself, and he immediately became the dominant person in her life. They were married for 32 years.

Her husband verbally humiliated her in front of his parents and consistently referred to women, other than his mother, as whores. During one argument, he placed the barrel of a shotgun in her mouth with his finger on the trigger. If she threatened divorce, he would tell her, “If we get a divorce you’ll have to be a prostitute to support yourself.”

He wanted Phyllis to dress like a teenager by wearing tight jeans and pigtails when out in the public together. Phyllis separated from him numerous times only to find herself submitting and returning to the relationship.

After the molestation of her child was discovered, she didn’t tell anyone for two years.

Several additional examples of similar experiences of these women came to light and illustrated the domineering and manipulative skills of the child molesters. A recurring theme in their involvement with men in their own developing years and later their adult lives was the “technique” of destroying the women’s self-confidence, self-esteem and worth, thereby making them dependent on the males and subservient to their desires. Compliance was the password of the day, every day, for these women.

Not only were the women continuing to struggle with the residual effects of their traumatic marital and mother-child relationships, they were also continuing in their efforts to place their personal and financial lives and familial relationships on a more normal plane. As stated, some of the women reported that their victimized children firmly believed their mothers had “real time” knowledge of the violations and participated passively in their victimization by remaining silent.

**Suggestions for Interviewers**

With the knowledge that criminal and social investigators will be tasked with interviewing the former or current wives and/or girlfriends of child molesters and in a desire to provide those men and women with practical and valuable suggestions, the authors have harvested the following for their consideration:
Prior to the Interview

1. Establish the intended goal. For example, is it to become better educated about child molestation, establish probable cause, or develop a court witness?
2. Prepare a list of issues that you feel must be addressed.
3. Determine if the interview format will be structured or unstructured.
4. Unless the woman is a codefendant, remember that it is a witness interview and not an interrogation.

Interview Team

1. Real-life experience with child molestation, offenders, and victims.
2. Ability to project a nonjudgmental attitude.
3. Ability to project empathy.
4. Ability to react professionally to a variety of emotions. Some mothers were guilt ridden, others were angry and hostile, some were passive, and still others were aggressive.
5. A patient personality. Such interviews may last several hours. The interviews must proceed at the mother’s pace and comfort and not the interviewer’s.
6. Psychologically mature and tactful.

The Interview

1. Designate one team member as the primary interviewer (i.e., minimal note-taking and maintenance of eye contact).
2. Allow the mother as much control as possible (i.e., what she desires to be called, timing of breaks, determine her comfort with setting and seating, etc.).
3. If time and circumstances permit and with the approval of the prosecutor, include a mental health professional (i.e., victim advocate) on the interview team and work together in developing the interview plan.
4. At the beginning of the interview, establish the credentials and experience of the interviewers.

Concluding the Interview

1. Ask the interviewee if she has any questions or comments.
2. Ask the woman if there are additional areas she believes needs to be addressed.
3. Provide her with a contact name and number.
Appendix

Child Molesters

Sexual Victimization

Situational Sex Offender

General

May molest once or many times. Criminal history targets people and property.

Motive

Basic sexual needs / desires (lust) and / or gain of power and / or release of anger.

Offender Traits

Tends to be lower socio-economic class and lower IQ. Lower verbal skill. More likely to be violent. Acts impulsively.

Modus Operandi

Relies on M.O. which changes with experience and exposure. Considers risks he is taking but makes stupid mistakes.

Fantasy / Ritual

Acts driven by simple thought, not complex fantasy. His thoughts focus on victim traits and control. Believes he is entitled to molest.

Victim Traits

Selects targets readily available /vulnerable. Pubescent teens at risk as are very young, elderly, disabled, etc. Sexual focus NOT on child; uses child when preferred adult partner unavailable.

Pornography

If possessed, adult type with themes of violence, power and anger content.

Preferential Sex Offender

Prior criminal history – primarily sex offenses. Offenses may occur once or over long term. Longer the term, more he fits into preferential class.

Motive

Child is preferred sex partner. He uses child in fulfilling deviant sexual needs.

Offender Traits

Tends to be higher socio-economic class with higher IQ, higher verbal skills, and uses less force.

Modus Operandi

Develops M.O. to ensure success and protect identity. Makes errors in rush to meet his child focused needs leading to discovery.

Fantasy / Ritual

Utilizes fantasy for arousal / satisfying behaviors. Fantasy focused on his needs, general victim traits, crime template (verbal, physical, sexual) and seduction / grooming rehearsal. Behaviors are compulsive and persistent. Risks given less consideration over time as needs are being met.

Victim Traits

May be male or female. Desired child victim's age is mixed.

Pornography

If possessed, will follow paraphilic themes enjoyed by offender.

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