Stereotypes of Sex Offenders’ Romantic Partners Predict Intent to Discriminate

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Registered sex offenders’ family members perceive themselves to be the direct targets of public scrutiny, ostracism, harassment, and employment discrimination. Study 1 offers a preliminary exploration of the stereotypes of registered sex offenders’ romantic partners. Participants’ open-ended responses were coded and subjected to inter-rater reliability, using a coding scheme that was both exploratory in nature, while also informed by theory and research. Partially supporting our hypotheses, participants primarily perceived sex offenders’ romantic partners as fearful, vulnerable, deviant, and mentally ill, but also as good, forgiving people who want to help reform the offender. In Study 2, we developed an attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners scale, designed to measure participants’ endorsement of stereotypes about offenders’ partners. As predicted, endorsement of negative stereotypes about offenders’ romantic partners (i.e., that they are deviant and predatory, as well as fearful and vulnerable) predicted greater support for sex offender legislation and less support for hiring offenders’ partners across a variety of employment contexts. Moreover, political conservatives were more likely than liberals to discriminate against offenders’ partners in job hiring contexts—an effect statistically explained by conservatives’ endorsement of negative stereotypes about offenders’ partners.

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Registered sex offenders are among the most stigmatized of all criminal offenders (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006), and so it is not surprising that, in the United States, widely implemented sex offender registration, notification, and residence restriction laws have provided citizens with mechanisms for distancing themselves from potentially dangerous convicted sex offenders (Zevitz, 2006). For example, sex offender registration laws require the maintenance of publicly accessible online sex offender registries, complete with recent photographs of offenders, their addresses, aliases, and information about their crimes (Windlesham, 1998; Zevitz, 2006). Residence restriction laws forbid many registered sex offenders from living within 1,000–2,500 feet of locations frequented by children (Meloy, Miller, & Curtis, 2008; Levenson & Hern, 2007). Despite overwhelming public support for the registration of both adult (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Proctor, Badzinski, & Johnson, 2002) and juvenile sex offenders (Kernsmith, Craun, & Foster, 2009; see also Salerno et al., 2010), there is no evidence that sex offender laws have achieved their well-intended goal of protecting the public from predatory, recidivistic, chronic offenders (e.g., Ackerman, Sacks, & Greenberg, 2012; Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Lave & McCrary, 2012; Letourneau & Armstrong, 2008). Rather, sex offender laws might ironically increase offender recidivism by perpetuating the poverty, instability, psychosocial stressors, and stigma known to contribute to criminal recidivism (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2007; Prescott & Rockoff, 2008).

Moreover, preliminary evidence reveals that the presumably law-abiding family members of registered sex offenders are similarly victimized by sex offender laws (e.g., Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009), especially when family members reside with the offender in a home listed on the registry (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). In particular, registered sex offenders’ family members likely experience courtesy stigma, a process of stigmatization whereby individuals acquire the stigma of those with whom they associate (Goffman, 2009). Indeed, registered sex offenders’ family members report experiencing public scrutiny, ostracism, harassment (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009), and employment discrimination (e.g., Women Against Registry, 2013).

Yet, no research that we are aware of has examined societal perceptions of registered sex offenders’ romantic partners or the stereotypes about offenders’ partners that potentially drive life-altering discrimination. In the present research, we explore the possibility that courtesy stigma might facilitate stereotypes and intent to discriminate against the romantic partners (i.e., wives and girlfriends) of registered sex offenders across a series of 2 studies. Specifically, in Study 1, the stereotype of offenders’ partners is examined, as a first step toward understanding its potentially stigmatizing consequences. In Study 2, a reliable scale is developed to assess endorsement of the stereotype of offenders’ partners. We also explore individual differences as predictors of stereotype endorsement, as well as the
possibility that stereotype endorsement translates into intent to discriminate against offenders’ partners in job hiring contexts.

**Collateral Consequences Experienced by Adult Registered Sex Offenders**

Incarcerated individuals recognize that they will likely experience stigma and discrimination upon reentry (Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney, 2013). Indeed, those with criminal histories experience a multitude of collateral consequences in the areas of employment and economic opportunity (see O’Connell, 2014). Yet, only convicted sex offenders bear the unique burdens of public registration, making sex offenders, as compared to other criminal groups, uniquely identifiable within their communities. In turn, emerging research has begun to highlight the experiences of convicted sex offenders, specifically. Recent studies suggest that sex offender laws might perpetuate the very risk factors known to be responsible for recidivism within criminal populations, including job loss, transience, housing disruption, property damage, harassment, stress, loss of hope, and impaired quality of relationships (Duwe, Donnay, & Tewksbury, 2008; Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Meloy et al., 2008; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009)—factors that are also among the best predictors of sex offending recidivism specifically. (e.g., Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998). For instance, a survey of over 200 registered sex offenders revealed that a significant minority (21%) reported harassment and job loss as a direct result of community notification (Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2007). Moreover, 46% of respondents reported fear for personal safety, with 18% experiencing property damage, and 10% being forced from their homes.

Similarly, residence restriction laws commonly force registered sex offenders into neighborhoods marked by socioeconomic hardships and crime, decrease their housing stability, and decrease their access to jobs, mental health services, and loved ones (Duwe et al., 2008; Levenson, 2008; Meloy et al., 2008; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). Indeed, most all residences fall within standard restriction limits (1,000–2,500 feet) around forbidden locations (i.e., locations frequented by children; Levenson, 2008).

**Collateral Consequences Experienced by Adult Family Members of Registered Sex Offenders**

Because there are approximately 820,000 sex offenders currently registered in the United States (Records and Access Unit, 2014), their family members likely represent a similarly sizable population. Further, family members are a crucial source of stability and support, upon whom many offenders are almost completely reliant (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). Yet, emerging research appears to suggest that registered sex offenders’ family members
experience a variety of deleterious consequences as a result of sex offender laws. For example, Farkas and Miller (2007) interviewed 72 family members from 28 families of registered sex offenders across the United States, noting several recurring themes. Family members struggled to adapt to the psychological and social repercussions of supporting a registered sex offender. Many reported fear that their sex-offending loved one would recidivate, and that the economic, emotional, and legal burdens associated with sex offender registration were overwhelming (e.g., unstable employment and housing, unannounced parole officer visits, prohibition of computers in the home). For families in poverty, registration exacerbated their financial hardships.

Survey research has echoed Farkas and Miller’s (2007) findings. Levenson and Tewksbury (2009) explored registered sex offenders’ family members’ self-reports of hardship, harassment, and discrimination. Eighty-two percent of the 584 participants reported that their sex-offending family member was unable to gain employment, while others reported that their offending family member lost his or her job after a boss or co-worker discovered their listing on the online offender registry (53%). Forty-four percent of participants reported being threatened or harassed by a neighbor, 7% were assaulted or injured by a neighbor, and 27% had their property damaged. Others felt pressured to move out of a residence they rented (17%) or owned (12%). Understandably, registered sex offenders’ family members also experience notable stress (Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). Specifically, higher levels of self-reported stress among registered sex offenders’ family members were predicted by low income, feelings of isolation, fear for one’s own safety, shame interfering with social activities, and having to move.

**Hypotheses Regarding Stereotypes About Sex Offenders’ Partners**

Importantly, research suggests that registered sex offenders’ family members experience more than just vicarious discrimination, harassment, and distress. Family members report feeling as though they, too, were convicted of a sexual offense (Farkas & Miller, 2007). Family members perceive that they are judged by community members and that they are under scrutiny, as if being watched. Social sanctions are also placed on family members by their own friends, neighbors, and relatives in the form of ostracism. Thus, Farkas and Miller (2007) concluded that registered sex offenders’ family members experience courtesy or associative stigma, a process of stigmatization by which individuals acquire the stigma of those with whom they associate (Goffman, 2009). Courtesy stigma, in this context, may be facilitated by the publicly accessible sex offender registry, given that each listing contains information such as the offender’s name, home address, and photograph (Windlesham, 1998; Zevitz, 2006).

Given that the family members of registered sex offenders report being the targets of vigilantism and general societal backlash (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009),
in Study 1 and 2, we explore the characteristics of the stereotype of registered sex offenders’ female romantic partners (i.e., their wives and girlfriends). We expect that people would endorse two subtypes of the stereotype of sex offenders’ partners, to varying degrees (Hypothesis 1). In line with courtesy stigma (Goffman, 2009), we expect to uncover evidence of a “deviant and predatory” stereotype subtype (Hypothesis 1a), which will closely resemble the stereotype of offenders themselves: that they are dangerous, immoral, unpredictable, and predatory (Weekes, Pelletier, & Beaudette, 1995). In contrast, we also expected that participants will indicate endorsement of a “fearful and vulnerable” subtype (Hypothesis 1b), because it seems likely that people might perceive partners of sex offenders as similar to battered wives, who are perceived as passive, socially isolated (Blackman, 1990), or as having been victims of child neglect (Frank & Golden, 1992).

Consistent with previous research (Brigham, 1971; Devine, 1989), we also expected that participants would be knowledgeable about the content of the two hypothesized stereotype subtypes of sex offenders’ partners, regardless of their personal endorsement of said stereotypes. Yet, possibly in part due to social desirability concerns (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987), we anticipated that participants would report that others endorse negative stereotypes against sex offenders’ partners (e.g., that they are deviant and predatory) more than they, themselves do (Hypothesis 3). Finally, because this research represents a preliminary, first step in exploring stereotypes of sex offenders’ partners, our exploration is both theory driven, but also data-driven. That is, we remain open to the possibility that participants’ responses may reflect additional subtypes beyond our a priori hypotheses.

Further, we explore the relationship between participants’ attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners and their attitudes toward sex offender registration, notification, and residence restriction laws (i.e., sex offender policy). These policies appear to have emerged from utilitarian goals to protect society, given that many falsely believe that sex offenders often murder their victims, victimize children and strangers, and are highly recidivistic (see Sample & Kadreck, 2008). Importantly, these beliefs, although largely inaccurate (Francis & Soothill, 2000; Quinsey, Khanna, & Malcolm, 1998; Sample & Evans, 2009), are consistent with many of

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Although sex offenders are not exclusively male or heterosexual, we explored perceptions of female partners exclusively, because they are, by far, more common than male partners. We base this assertion on gender base rates within the sex offender community and on sexual orientation base rates among adults in the United States. Specifically, women account for only 5% of adults arrested for sexual crimes (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005). Further, only 1.8% of adult men identify as gay and 0.4% identify as bisexual (Ward, Dahlhamer, Galinsky, & Joestl, 2014), suggesting that partners of sex offenders are far more likely to be female than male. Even so, future research should explore perceptions of female partners of female sex offenders, as well as male partners of male (or female) sex offenders, particularly because biases against homosexuals might exacerbate negative stigma and discrimination experienced by partners of sex offenders.
the beliefs and attitudes encompassed by our hypothesized “deviant and predatory” and “fearful and vulnerable” stereotype subtypes. Thus, we predicted that an increase in agreement with the fearful and vulnerable and deviant and predatory stereotype subtypes might predict an increase in support for sex offender registration, notification, and residence restriction policy (*Hypothesis 4*).

**Hypotheses Regarding Discrimination Against Sex Offenders’ Partners**

Any scientific exploration of negative stereotypes, while theoretically relevant, has arguably limited value unless it translates into discrimination. Thus, we test the hypothesis that endorsement of negative stereotypes of sex offenders’ partners (that they are deviant and predatory and fearful and vulnerable) predicts intent to discriminate in hiring contexts (*Hypothesis 5*). Although there are likely myriad negative consequences associated with endorsement of negative stereotypes of sex offenders’ partners, we have chosen to examine hiring discrimination due to the cascading psychological, economic, and societal implications of discrimination in this context. Sex offenders are often forced to rely on their partners for income because they experience significant discrimination in hiring contexts and, in turn, experience high unemployment rates (i.e., Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Economic hardship, homelessness, and criminal recidivism, in turn, are exacerbated to the extent that offenders’ partners are less able to secure employment because of their partners’ sex offender status. Understanding the stereotypes underlying these experiences has implications for combating criminal recidivism within the sex offender community, by highlighting the need for policy modifications that minimize, rather than exacerbate, existing stigma.

Moreover, studying the relationship between stereotype endorsement and hiring discrimination represents an ecologically valid research question: A Harris Poll revealed that 45% of employers admitted using internet search engines (i.e., Google) to find information about a prospective hire (Grasz, 2014). Of those surveyed, 20% reported using internet search engines to research potential hires frequently or always. Importantly, 22% reported that discovering a job candidate was linked to criminal behavior was among the most common reason they passed on a job applicant. It stands to reason that sex offenders’ partners are at substantial risk for experiencing unfair discrimination in hiring contexts. Sex offenders’ partners are easily discoverable because registration policy requires that offenders’ identifying information be posted on the internet. Given the frequency with which employers conduct internet searches on job applicants, it is important to examine the possibility that endorsing negative stereotypes about partners of sex offenders translates into intent to discriminate in hiring practices. Refusing to hire partners of sex offenders represents the disenfranchisement of people who have committed no crime.
Hypothesized Individual Differences as Predictors of Stereotype Endorsement and Discrimination

A final goal of this research is to explore possible individual difference predictors of endorsement of stereotypes about sex offenders’ partners and intent to discriminate against sex offenders’ partners. Identifying predictors of stereotype endorsement and intent to discriminate not only enhances our theoretical understanding of the psychological underpinnings of stereotyping and discrimination, but also reflects a first step toward the reduction of prejudice and discrimination. Next, we turn to literature on political orientation, gender, education, and age, which represent individual difference factors that might predict participants’ attitudes and behavior toward sex offenders’ partners.

**Political orientation.** We took attribution theory into account when considering the potential relationship between participant political orientation and stereotype endorsement. Specifically, political orientation emerges as a predictor of the fundamental attribution error: the tendency to blame the individual instead of the situation (Jones & Harris, 1967). Although both liberals and conservatives make the fundamental attribution error, conservatives are less likely than liberals to correct their initial internal attributions by accounting for the situation (Carroll, Perkowitz, Lurigio & Weaver, 1987; Pellegrini, Querolo, Monarrez, & Valenzuela, 1997; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Thus, we predicted that political conservatives would endorse negative stereotypes of sex offenders’ partners more than liberals (**Hypothesis 6a**). Further, we intend to explore the possibility that negative stereotype endorsement might mediate the effect of political orientation on intent to discriminate (**Hypothesis 6b**), such that political conservatives will be less likely than liberals to recommend hiring sex offenders’ partners, because of their endorsement of negative, disparaging stereotypes about offenders’ partners (i.e., that they are “fearful and vulnerable” and “deviant and predatory”).

**Gender.** Gender might also predict attitudes toward and support for hiring sex offenders’ romantic partners. On the one hand, women generally evaluate sex offenders more negatively than men (e.g., Bottoms, 1993), are more prosecution than men in cases involving sexual crimes against children (for a review, see Bottoms, Golding, Stevenson, Wiley, & Yowziak, 2007), and are more supportive of sex offender registration policies than men (e.g., Redlich, 2002). Women, thus, might be more likely than men to endorse negative, stereotypical beliefs about sex offenders’ romantic partners, and they might also be more likely than men to oppose hiring offenders’ partners (**Hypothesis 7a**). On the other hand, many participants might believe that sex offenders’ romantic partners are “fearful and vulnerable,” like victims of domestic abuse (i.e., battered wives). Women might find it easier than men to take the perspective of offenders’ female
partners and imagine why a woman might be in a relationship with a potentially dangerous criminal. It is possible, therefore, that women might endorse fewer negative stereotypes about offenders’ partners and, in turn, be less likely to oppose hiring partners than men (Hypothesis 7b).

**Education.** Participants with lower levels of education might be more likely to endorse negative stereotypes about sex offenders’ partners and to discriminate against them in hiring contexts, as compared to those with more education (Hypothesis 8). Sex offenders are an extremely heterogeneous group, and their crimes are similarly diverse (e.g., Abel & Rouleau, 1990). While some offenders commit truly heinous crimes, others commit arguably less serious offenses, including statutory offenses or public urination (Bonnar-Kidd, 2010). Yet, many fail to recognize this diversity, instead considering all sex offenders to be dangerous and predatory (Marshall, 1996). It is possible that educated individuals, however, might be more likely to recognize sex offenders’ diversity and, thus, conclude that sex offenders’ partners are not universally abnormal or dangerous. In support, Stevenson, Smith, Sekely, and Farnum (2013) found that as participant education level increased, support for registering a juvenile sex offender decreased.

**Age.** Although Bornstein (1999) revealed that mock jury case judgments obtained from undergraduate samples do not typically differ from community member samples, we explore the possible effects of participant age on stereotype endorsement and hiring decisions. We have no reason to anticipate effects of age, yet these analyses provide important implications for the ecological validity of related research in the psychology and law field with respect to appropriate sample type, because a great deal of research includes convenience samples of undergraduate participants (see Bornstein et al., 2015).

**Study 1 Overview**

Study 1 represents an exploratory first step in the examination of the stereotype of registered sex offenders’ female romantic partners (i.e., their wives and girlfriends). Specifically, we document and code participants’ open-ended responses detailing their beliefs about sex offenders’ partners.

**Study 1 Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 166 U.S. citizens (66% female, 34% male, mean age = 36.5) who were recruited through Mechanical Turk, an online workforce of over 100,000 people who participate in surveys for monetary compensation.
(Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). The sample was 84% White, 4% Black, 5% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 2% indicated “other.” The sample was also predominately heterosexual (89%) and well educated, with 50% reporting college or graduate degrees. Forty percent of participants identified as Christian, but a substantial minority identified as agnostic (18%) and atheist (22%), with the sample generally scoring low on religiosity (54% never attend church). Participants were more liberal (50%) than conservative (26%) or moderate (24%). Finally, only 15 participants knew a family member, friend, or close acquaintance who was a registered sex offender (9%), and no participants were, or ever had been, a registered sex offender, themselves.

Materials

**Stereotype content.** To assess the components of the stereotype of sex offenders’ partners, participants were asked to provide open-ended responses to a series of four questions. Specifically, participants were asked to detail their personal beliefs regarding the characteristics of sex offenders’ partners, by responding to the following open-ended item:

We are interested in people’s knowledge of characteristics of different social groups. Specifically, we are interested in your beliefs about PARTNERS (i.e., spouses, girlfriends) of registered sex offenders (i.e., convicted sex offenders). Please write everything you think about PARTNERS of registered sex offenders. Your thoughts may include traits, behaviors, or beliefs of such PARTNERS. Please list all the thoughts that occur to you. You may take as much time as you need to complete listing your thoughts.

Participants were next asked to detail their knowledge of the general public’s beliefs regarding the characteristics of sex offenders’ partners, by responding to the following item:

Regardless of your personal beliefs, what do you think the general public believes about PARTNERS (i.e., spouses, girlfriends) of registered sex offenders? In other words, what do you think is the public’s stereotype about PARTNERS of registered sex offenders? Your response should reflect what people, in general, believe about PARTNERS of registered sex offenders, regardless of your personal beliefs. Please write everything that comes to mind, including traits, behaviors, or beliefs.

These items were modeled after those used by Devine (1989) and Haegerich (2002), and the methodological approach was adapted from Devine’s (1989) research. Assessing both personal beliefs about sex offenders’ partners and participants’ knowledge of the public’s beliefs about sex offenders’ partners is an established method for measuring stereotype content (Devine, 1989).

**Stereotype endorsement.** Participants provided yes or no responses to two items assessing whether participants “think of partners of sex offenders as ‘deviant and predatory’/‘fearful and vulnerable.’”
Demographics. Demographic characteristics were assessed, including participant age, gender, religion, political orientation, educational attainment, and ethnicity. Participants were also asked to provide relevant information about their relationships with registered sex offenders, by responding to the following items: “Has any friend, family member, or close acquaintance revealed to you that he or she is a registered sex offender?” “If yes, how was this person related to you? That is, was this person your friend, coworker, father, partner, etc.?” Finally, respondents were asked to respond either yes or no to the question, “Are you, or have you ever been, a registered sex offender?”

Procedure

Participants were recruited through Mechanical Turk, an online workforce of over 100,000 people who complete tasks in exchange for monetary compensation (Pontin, 2007). After clicking on the study’s link, all participants read a cover letter that briefly addressed the nature of the study, including that they would be provided monetary compensation for their participation. By clicking next, participants provided their informed consent and began the survey.

First, participants completed open-ended items designed to measure the content of the stereotype of registered sex offenders’ partners, followed by the two direct close-ended questions assessing personal stereotype endorsement, and finally a series of demographic questions. After completing the study, participants were debriefed, financially compensated, and thanked for their participation. Participants took approximately 25 minutes to complete the study, and data collection occurred over 3 weeks.

Coding Scheme Development

Following data collection, participants’ open-ended responses were coded and subjected to inter-rater reliability, using a theoretically driven coding scheme. The codes were in part informed by this study’s hypothesis regarding courtesy stigma (e.g., “deviant and predatory”; Goffman, 2009), but also a review of literature concerning battered wives (e.g., “fearful and vulnerable”; Blackman, 1990; Frank & Golden, 1992), reviewed earlier. Yet, we approached data coding with flexibility, allowing for the data to inform the codes developed. In so doing, we uncovered enough participant statements pertaining to the partner as good and forgiving, as a healer and reformer, or as mentally ill that we developed three additional codes designed to measure such statements. Two researchers coded all statements separately and inter-rater reliability was achieved on all five codes (intercoder agreement ≥ 81%). Finally, the codes are not mutually exclusive. That is, a statement could receive only one or multiple codes simultaneously, depending on its content. To account for nonmutually exclusive codes, reliability was calculated
with the following formula: The denominator reflects the sum of the total instances in which coder 1 and coder 2 used a given code and the numerator reflects the sum of the total instances in which coder 1 and coder 2 simultaneously used the code multiplied by 2.

**Code 1: Fearful and vulnerable.** Statements that portrayed registered sex offenders’ partners as similar to the stereotype of “battered wives” (i.e., women who feel trapped in abusive relationships) received the “fearful and vulnerable” code. This code was applied to descriptions of offenders’ partners as weak, vulnerable, gullible, naive, or stupid. We also applied this code to responses that more broadly captured beliefs about offenders’ partners being similar to “battered wives” and long-time victims of domestic abuse, such as statements insinuating the continued victimization of partners by their sex-offending partners or statements suggesting that partners have an unhealthy need to be loved.

**Code 2: Deviant and predatory.** The “deviant and predatory” code applied to statements indicating that sex offenders’ partners are sexually deviant, immoral, or dangerous. For example, participants sometimes stated that offenders’ partners are also sex offenders or that they assist in the sexually deviant acts of their partners (e.g., they lure children into their home for the purposes of sexually abusing them). Statements such as “they are irresponsible, vile, and immoral” fit into this coding category, as do statements suggesting that offenders’ partners are masochistic, sadistic, or sexually perverse.

**Code 3: Good and forgiving.** The “good and forgiving” code was applied to statements in which partners of registered sex offenders were portrayed as generally good, relatively normal people with very forgiving personalities who have a great deal of compassion. Statements along these lines did not portray partners as delusional for being forgiving, but rather the partners were described as good and caring.

**Code 4: Healers and reformers.** The “healers and reformers” code applied to statements that described sex offenders’ partners as thinking they can reform the offender, heal him, or otherwise correct his behavior. These statements indicate that the partner believes her sex-offending loved one’s sexually deviant tendencies can be left in the past if they simply provide him with needed structure, love, or support.

**Code 5: Mentally ill.** Some participants referred to sex offenders’ partners as delusional, insane, crazy, mentally ill, or they otherwise portrayed offenders’ partners as possessing problematic psychological issues. All such statements received the “mentally ill” code. Similarly, statements such as “they are psychopaths” or
Table 1. Participants’ Open-Ended Responses Assessing Self-Reported Personal and Public Beliefs About Sex Offenders’ Partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code categories</th>
<th>Proportion of self-reported personal beliefs regarding sex offenders’ partners</th>
<th>Proportion of self-reported public beliefs regarding sex offenders’ partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fearful and vulnerable</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviant and predatory</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good and forgiving</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healers and reformers</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentally Ill</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“they are sociopaths” received this code, and these statements almost always also received a “deviant and predatory” code, because although psychopathy and sociopathy are mental illnesses, many of their definitional characteristics also fall under the “deviant and predatory” code.

Study 1 Results

When asked to detail their personal beliefs regarding sex offenders’ partners, 67.5% of participants mentioned “fearful and vulnerable” characteristics, 19.3% mentioned “deviant and predatory” characteristics, 18.1% mentioned “good and forgiving” characteristics, 10.2% described partners as “healers and reformers,” and 5.4% mentioned “mentally ill” characteristics (see Table 1). See Appendix A for representative examples of participants’ coded statements.

When asked to indicate the public’s stereotype about sex offenders’ partners, 51.2% of participants mentioned that the public believes sex offenders’ partners have “fearful and vulnerable” characteristics, 41.6% mentioned “deviant and predatory” characteristics, 15.1% mentioned “mentally ill” characteristics, 1.3% described “healers and reformers,” and 1.3% mentioned “good and forgiving” characteristics (see Table 1). Notably, “deviant and predatory” characteristics were more frequently mentioned as others’ beliefs about sex offenders’ partners (41.6%) than when participants had described their personal beliefs about sex offenders’ partners (19.3%). Indeed, although many participants (63%) reported that their beliefs are the same as the public’s regarding deviant characteristics, when participants’ attitudes differed from the public’s, they were significantly more likely to believe that the public endorses the “deviant and predatory” subtype, but that they do not (30%), rather than vice versa (7%), $\chi^2 = 79.24$, $p = .001$.

When asked directly, significantly fewer participants endorsed the belief that partners of sex offenders are “deviant and predatory” (20.4%) than did not (79.6%), $\chi^2 = 55.09$, $p = .001$. In addition, significantly more participants directly endorsed
the belief that partners of sex offenders are “fearful and vulnerable” (65.6%) than did not (34.4%), $\chi^2 = 15.29, p = .001$.

**Study 1 Discussion**

Partially supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2, we revealed preliminary evidence that the stereotype of sex offenders’ partners consists of distinct subtypes, including the originally predicted “fearful and vulnerable” and “deviant and predatory” subtypes. Many participants elaborated on the content of these stereotype subtypes, even when they claimed not to personally endorse them. Responses also appear to support Hypothesis 3 that participants might censor their own, personal beliefs concerning the partners of registered sex offenders, perhaps due to a desire to appear socially acceptable and appropriate. That is, open-ended responses regarding the general public’s beliefs contained more references to sex offenders’ partners being “deviant and predatory” and “mentally ill,” and fewer references to sex offenders’ partners being “healers and reformers” or “good and forgiving.” Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, it is possible that these results may represent a phenomenon akin to pluralistic ignorance: believing that one’s private thoughts are different from those of others’, even when actual attitudes are identical (Miller & McFarland, 1991). This possibility deserves empirical attention, because pluralistic ignorance has been identified as a barrier to the elimination of stigmatizing and discriminatory policies throughout history (e.g., segregation; O’Gorman, 1975, 1979; O’Gorman & Garry, 1976).

Moreover, we found evidence of three unanticipated potential subtypes, including the belief that sex offenders’ partners are good and forgiving, that they think of themselves as healers and reformers, and that they are mentally ill. Indeed, the frequency with which participants’ personal beliefs about partners of sex offenders referenced positive characteristics (i.e., “healers and reformers” or “good and forgiving”) was unexpected. For example, one participant stated “they tend to be more intelligent, less judgmental, and more responsible than average individuals.” These results may suggest that some people recognize the diversity of registered sex offenders, as a group, and perceive sex offenders’ partners’ traits as being independent from those of their sex-offending partners. Importantly, our overall results appear to reflect the complexity of participants’ beliefs about partners of sex offenders. In support, participants rarely made statements that received the “healers and reformers” or “good and forgiving” codes alone (only 7.23% of participants made solely such statements when describing their personal beliefs). That is, participants typically discussed sex offenders’ partners in terms of both positive and negative characteristics, rarely describing sex offenders’ partners as possessing only positive or loyal characteristics. Specifically, of the participants who made “healers and reformers” or “good and forgiving” statements, 18.6% of those participants also made “deviant and predatory” or “mentally ill”
statements, and 51.16% also made “fearful and vulnerable” statements. This tendency is exemplified in the following response:

They are understanding and patient, but they may be self-destructive. Being with someone who is a sex offender may be a challenge that someone who likes conflict can put into their lives.

Because the vast majority (92.77%) of participants’ statements included negative beliefs about partners of sex offenders and only a small minority of participants (7.23%) made exclusively positive statements about partners of sex offenders, these data lend tentative support to sex offenders’ partners’ anecdotal accounts of perceived stigma, discrimination, and harassment (e.g., Women Against Registry, 2013). For example, partners of sex offenders claim to be ostracized from family, friends, community, and professional circles. Indeed, many participants personally endorsed the belief that sex offenders’ partners share many of the same, negative characteristics as sex offenders themselves. Given the common occurrence of statements such as “[partners of sex offenders] get off on seeing other people suffer, and [they] actually go out seeking the suffering of others” and “[sex offenders] may use [their] female partner to lure young girls,” it is likely that registered sex offenders’ wives and girlfriends face courtesy stigma.

Study 2

Previous research (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009) and anecdotal accounts (Women Against Registry, 2013) indicate that sex offenders’ family members are often the targets of vigilantism, general societal backlash, and overwhelming stigma. Indeed, the results of Study 1 lend credence to the latter; sex offenders’ wives and girlfriends are viewed in much the same way as offenders, themselves (e.g., deviant, predatory, mentally ill). Even so, many participants’ self-reported negative beliefs about partners of sex offenders were simultaneously accompanied by positive beliefs (e.g., that they are good and forgiving). Thus, many questions remain unanswered. In particular, do negative stereotypes of sex offenders’ partners translate into discrimination? Our first step in addressing this question in Study 2 was to develop a reliable scale to directly assess attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners, developed from the results of open-ended stereotype endorsement items from Study 1. One fundamental goal of Study 2 was to identify subscales within our new scale that reflect stereotype subtypes, employing factor analysis techniques. Because this research represents a preliminary exploration of stereotype content, we conduct exploratory factor analysis, yet we tentatively expect to find 5 dominant factors that correspond with the 5 stereotype subtypes identified in Study 1: “fearful and vulnerable,” “deviant and predatory,” “good and forgiving,” “healers and reformers,” and “mentally ill.”
Importantly, the development of reliable subscales allows us to test hypotheses regarding the relationship between stereotype endorsement and intent to discriminate toward sex offenders’ partners in hiring contexts. Because sex offender legislation was at least partially motivated by utilitarian concerns, it seems logical that as agreement with the fearful and vulnerable, deviant and predatory, and mentally ill subscales increases, participants’ support for hiring a sex offender’s partner might decrease (Hypothesis 5a). After all, these stereotype subtypes consist of almost exclusively negative beliefs about sex offenders’ partners’ characteristics, including beliefs that sex offenders’ partners are sex offenders, themselves. Thus, participants might be reluctant to recommend hiring individuals whom they perceive to be psychologically weak, or dangerous, unpredictable, and sexually perverse. In contrast, higher scores on the “good and forgiving” and “healers and reformers” subscales might correspond with greater support for hiring sex offenders’ partners, generally (i.e., less discriminatory attitudes). That is, participants who score high on subscales measuring positive beliefs about sex offenders’ partners (i.e., their strength and compassion) might be more likely to recommend hiring sex offenders’ partners (Hypothesis 5b).

The development of stereotype subscales within Study 2 also permits us to test hypotheses regarding the relationship between stereotype endorsement and attitudes toward sex offender registration, notification, and residence restriction laws (i.e., sex offender policy), described earlier (Hypothesis 4). Finally, as detailed earlier (Hypotheses 6–8), we explore individual differences in both attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners and intent to discriminate against sex offenders’ partners, including political orientation, gender, education, and age. Understanding predictors of stereotype endorsement helps elucidate the parameters and contexts in which sex offenders’ partners are most likely to be discriminated against.

**Study 2 Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 168 U.S. citizens (51% male, mean age = 33) recruited using the same procedures as Study 1. The sample was 80% White, 6% Black, 6% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and 1% indicated “Other.” The sample was also predominately heterosexual (93%) and 39% reported college or graduate degrees. Thirty-six percent of participants identified as Christian, but a substantial minority identified as agnostic (20%) and atheist (33%), with the sample generally scoring low on religiosity (61% never attend church). Finally, the sample was more liberal (58%) than conservative (16%) or moderate (26%).
Materials

*Attitudes toward sex offender policy.* Prior to assessing participants’ attitudes toward sex offender registration, notification, and residence restriction laws, participants were asked to read the following text designed to inform participants about sex offender policy:

Adults found guilty of a sex offense must be listed on a public sex offender registry. In various states, this registry includes information such as name, social security number, age, race, gender, birth date, physical description, address, place of employment, details about the offense(s), fingerprints, a photo, a blood sample, and a hair sample. This information is available to the public upon request, sometimes by being posted on the Internet. In some cases, the police directly notify the people who live in the same area as the registered sex offender (i.e., they post fliers, notify neighbors door-to-door, send out automated telephone calls). Sex offenders are required to register anywhere from a few years to their entire life, depending on the state.

Afterward, attitudes toward registration laws were assessed using the item “Indicate the extent to which you believe that registration is an appropriate outcome for adult convicted sex offenders.” Response options were on a 6-point Likert scale: 1 (*Strongly Disagree*), 2 (*Disagree*), 3 (*Somewhat Disagree*), 4 (*Somewhat Agree*), 5 (*Agree*), and 6 (*Strongly Agree*). Using the same scale, participants completed seven items designed to assess their attitudes toward notification laws. These items were as follows: “Indicate the extent to which you believe that public notification is an appropriate outcome for adult convicted sex offenders,” “Residents should be notified via posted fliers,” “Residents should be notified door-to-door,” “Residents should be notified via automated telephone calls,” “Notification letters should be sent home with school children,” “Residents should be notified via public meetings,” and “Residents should be notified via the newspaper.” These seven items formed a reliable scale (Chronbach’s $\alpha = .86$) measuring support for notification policy.

We then provided participants with a brief description of residence restriction laws (“Some registered sex offenders are restricted from residing near schools, parks, bus stops, and other places that children frequent. Residency restriction distances vary from state to state.”) and asked “Which of the following options best reflects your attitude toward residency restriction laws?” Participants then responded to the following options, ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 represented a lack of support for residence restrictions and 5 represented support for the full application of residence restrictions: 1 (*Registered sex offenders should not have their housing options restricted*), 2 (*Registered sex offenders should be required to live at least 500 feet from places frequented by children*), 3 (*Registered sex offenders should be required to live at least 1,000 feet from places frequented by children*), 4 (*Registered sex offenders should be required to live at least 1,500 feet from places frequented by children*), and 5 (*Registered sex offenders should be required to live at least 2,000 feet from places frequented by children*).
Attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners. Participants responded to a 51-item attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners scale, which we developed by modeling the items after the five stereotype subtypes identified in the open-ended responses of Study 1: “fearful and vulnerable,” “deviant and predatory,” “good and forgiving,” “healers and reformers,” and “mentally ill.” Existing attitudes toward sex offenders scales were evaluated for their relevancy to our scale and informed the development of our items (Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, & Fun, 2006; Hogue, 1993). The item development techniques employed are consistent with methodology typically used to develop novel scales (e.g., Wnuk, Chapman, & Jeglic, 2006). Agreement with these items was measured on a 6-point Likert scale: 1 (Strongly Disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Somewhat Disagree), 4 (Somewhat Agree), 5 (Agree), and 6 (Strongly Agree). These items were subjected to exploratory factor analysis (see results). Table 2 reflects the final scale.

Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners. To determine participants’ support for hiring sex offenders’ partners, participants first read the following:

Imagine that you are in a position of authority to make the following hiring decisions. For each job scenario, imagine that you have just discovered that the applicant is married to a registered sex offender. Please, indicate the extent to which finding out that the applicant is married to a registered sex offender would affect your decision to hire the applicant for the following positions.

Participants then responded 1 (I would refuse to hire the applicant), 2 (I would be much less likely to hire the applicant), 3 (I would be less likely to hire the applicant), 4 (I would be somewhat less likely to hire the applicant), or 5 (I would be no more or less likely to hire the applicant—my hiring decision would be unaffected by this knowledge) for each of the following positions: “A childcare position (e.g., a daycare employee);” “A factory position (e.g., inventory, stock, or assembly line positions);” “A school bus driver;” “A healthcare position (e.g., a technician, nurse, or physician);” “A librarian;” “A school coach;” “A food service position (e.g., a waitress or cook);” and “A nonelected government position (e.g., human resources employees, parks and recreation department employees, state mental health workers).” We purposely used unbalanced response options for this question because evenly balanced response options (i.e., “I would be much more likely to hire the applicant after discovering her spouse is a sex offender”) seem likely to produce nonnormally distributed data produced from a ceiling effect.

Demographics. Participants provided the same demographic information as in Study 1.
Table 2. Results of Final, Forced 3-Factor Factor Analysis of Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders’ Partners Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale items</th>
<th>Final, forced 3-factor solution</th>
<th>Factor 1: Deviant and predatory</th>
<th>Factor 2: Vulnerable and fearful</th>
<th>Factor 3: Loyal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are probably manipulative</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex offenders’ partners are immoral</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners tend to prey on the weak</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are empathic and emotionally understanding</td>
<td>−.43</td>
<td>−.17</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are probably also sex offenders themselves</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>−.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners probably help their partners commit sexual crimes</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are probably psychopaths or sociopaths</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are predatory and tend to prey on the weak</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>−.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are the scum of the earth</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are dangerous</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are kind</td>
<td>−.63</td>
<td>−.26</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners probably lack empathy for others</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>−.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are probably sexually deviant</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>−.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are probably crazy</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are probably evil</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are vulnerable</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners have dependent personalities</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are easily manipulated</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners lack self-respect</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are weak-willed</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>−.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex offenders’ partners are resilient and strong-natured</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>−.65</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners need psychiatric help</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners have low self-esteem</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are too trusting</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are psychologically damaged</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are delusional</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners probably want to leave, but are financially dependent on their sex-offending partner</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are naïve and gullible</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners probably want to leave, but are too afraid</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners have been brainwashed</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are probably desperate for love</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Most sex offenders’ partners tend to be submissive.

Most sex offenders’ partners are supportive of their partner’s recovery.

Most sex offenders’ partners probably full-heartedly believe in their sex-offending partners’ innocence.

Most sex offenders’ partners are probably very nonjudgmental and open-minded people.

Most sex offenders’ partners probably genuinely care for their sex-offending partner, despite their past.

Most sex offenders’ partners are faithful and devoted to their partners.

Most sex offenders’ partners are naturally forgiving.

Most sex offenders’ partners are very loyal to their sex-offending partner.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale items</th>
<th>Factor 1: Deviant and predatory</th>
<th>Factor 2: Vulnerable and fearful</th>
<th>Factor 3: Loyal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners tend to be submissive</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are supportive of their partner’s recovery</td>
<td>−.21</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners probably full-heartedly believe in their sex-offending partners’ innocence</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are probably very nonjudgmental and open-minded people</td>
<td>−.17</td>
<td>−.34</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners probably genuinely care for their sex-offending partner, despite their past</td>
<td>−.44</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are faithful and devoted to their partners</td>
<td>−.30</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are naturally forgiving</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most sex offenders’ partners are very loyal to their sex-offending partner</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Factor loadings equal to or greater than 0.35 appear in italics. Factor loading values in boldface indicate that the item was included in that factor’s corresponding scale.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through Mechanical Turk using the same recruitment procedures as in Study 1. First, participants read information about sex offender registration policy and subsequently completed a series of questions to assess their attitudes toward such laws. Respondents then completed our newly developed attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners scale and subsequently indicated their support for hiring a sex offender’s partner for a variety of positions. This item order was utilized purposely because considering one’s attitudes toward sex offenders prior to considering one’s attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners should promote greater attitudinal accuracy in participants’ self-reported attitudes about sex offenders’ partners. Finally, participants completed demographic questions, read a debriefing statement, received their monetary incentive, and were thanked for their participation.

Study 2 Results

Factor Analyses

We subjected our attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners scale to a maximum likelihood factor analysis, employing varimax rotation (see Table 2). Inspection of a scree plot and eigenvalue criteria (>1) revealed evidence of eight factors.
that accounted for 75.75% of the covariance among the scales. Inspection of the rotated factor loadings revealed that four items had cross-loadings greater than 0.5, indicating poor discriminant validity (i.e., “Most sex offenders’ partners are psychologically unstable,” “Most sex offenders’ partners are mentally ill,” “Most sex offenders’ partners were probably abused as children,” and “Most sex offenders’ partners aren’t good parents and neglect their children”). Finally, one item (“Most sex offenders’ partners probably suffer from PTSD”) loaded highest (0.63) on a factor that included only two items, and according to Costello and Osborne (2005), scales require at least three items. Therefore, all five items were excluded. Factors 6 and 7 included no items that loaded above 0.4, and factors 4, 5, and 8 had only one item that loaded above 0.4, but all such items loaded more highly on another factor. Thus, according to Costello and Osborne, factors 4–8 were weak. Moreover, factors 4–8 accounted for only 12.16% of the variance. That is, the first three factors accounted for a majority (63.6%) of the variance (49.28% for factor 1, 9.72% for factor 2, and 4.61% for factor 3). For these reasons, we subsequently conducted a factor analysis forcing a 3-factor solution.

A forced 3-factor solution, employing varimax rotation, revealed that the first three factors similarly accounted for 63.05% of the covariance. Yet, five items had poor discriminant validity (their factor loadings on two different factors did not differ by more than 0.20): “Most sex offenders’ partners are probably abused by their sex offending partner,” “Most sex offenders’ partners are probably damaged goods,” “Most sex offenders’ partners probably have no friends,” “Most sex offenders’ partners are probably masochistic,” “Most sex offenders’ partners are probably low-income.” These items likely had poor discriminant validity because they generally appear to reflect both sympathetic attitudes and negative attitudes, resulting in the items being pulled between the two more dominant factors that reflect more positive versus negative attitudes. Thus, we conducted a third forced 3-factor solution, excluding those five items.

Results of the third forced 3-factor solution revealed that the first three factors accounted for 63.57% of the covariance among the scales. Yet, one item (“Most sex offenders’ partners probably have Stockholm Syndrome”) had poor discriminant validity (its factor loadings did not differ by more than 0.20). Thus, we conducted a final, fourth forced 3-factor solution, excluding this single item.

Results of our final 39-item, forced 3-factor solution, employing varimax rotation, revealed that the first three factors accounted for 63.76% of the covariance among the scales. The first factor accounted for the majority of the variance (45.58%), the second factor accounted for 12.14% of the variance, and the third factor accounted for 6.05% of the variance. Factor loadings were considered noteworthy if they loaded at 0.35 or greater on our extracted rotation (see Table 2). The first factor was primarily composed of items related to the “deviant and predatory” subtype. The second factor included items related to the “fearful and vulnerable” subtype. The third factor included items related to both the “good and
forgiving” subtype, as well as the “healers and reformers” subtype. Thus, we have labeled the third factor the “loyal” subtype, reflecting the beliefs that partners of sex offenders are loyal to their spouses (i.e., forgiving, compassionate, and motivated to help them recover).

**Reliability of Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders’ Partners Subscales**

Relying on the results of the forced 3-factor solution from our final factor analysis, we developed 3 reliable scales designed to measure participants’ attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners. The first factor became the basis of our deviant and predatory scale. Similarly, the second factor became the fearful and vulnerable scale, and the third factor became the loyal scale. That is, we used only those items that achieved factor loadings of 0.35 or higher in a given factor to create that factor’s corresponding scale. See all scale items in Table 2.

Our deviant and predatory scale consisted of 15 items. Two items (“Most sex offenders’ partners are kind” and “Most sex offenders’ partners are empathic and emotionally understanding”) were reverse-scored. The deviant and predatory scale had high internal reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$). Our fearful and vulnerable scale consisted of 17 items and also had high internal reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$). One item (“Most sex offenders’ partners are resilient and strong-natured”) was reverse-scored. Finally, our loyal scale consisted of seven items and was internally valid (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .75$).

**Main Effects of the Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders’ Partners Scales**

We conducted a series of correlations between the three subtypes of the attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners scale and support for sex offender policy items, as well as support for hiring a sex offenders’ partner for various jobs. In line with hypotheses, as endorsement of the fearful and vulnerable and deviant and predatory subtype scales increased, support for registering adult sex offenders significantly increased, as did support for notification laws, and residence restriction laws (see Table 3 for correlations). Further, as agreement with the fearful and vulnerable and deviant and predatory subtype scales increased, participants were less supportive of hiring a sex offenders’ partner for all types of positions. In contrast, higher scores on the loyal attitude scale significantly predicted greater support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for a factory position, a healthcare position, a food service position, a nonelected government position, or as a librarian. No other relations reached statistical significance.
Table 3. Correlation Matrix Illustrating Relations Between Endorsement of Stereotypes About Sex Offenders’ Partners and Support for Registration Laws, Public Notification Laws, Specific Notification Techniques, Residence Restriction Laws, and Hiring Sex Offenders’ Partners for a Variety of Positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex offender policy attitudes</th>
<th>Deviant and predatory scale</th>
<th>Fearful and vulnerable scale</th>
<th>Loyal scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support for registration laws</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for public notification laws</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for residence restriction laws</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for childcare positions</td>
<td>−.42**</td>
<td>−.48**</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for factory positions</td>
<td>−.56**</td>
<td>−.35**</td>
<td>.24”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners as school bus drivers</td>
<td>−.45**</td>
<td>−.51**</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for healthcare positions</td>
<td>−.54**</td>
<td>−.50**</td>
<td>.19’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners as librarians</td>
<td>−.53”</td>
<td>−.43”</td>
<td>.18’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners as school coaches</td>
<td>−.38”</td>
<td>−.46”</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for nonelected government positions</td>
<td>−.57”</td>
<td>−.40”</td>
<td>.24”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for food service positions</td>
<td>−.51**</td>
<td>−.46”</td>
<td>.18’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Greater values for all scales and items indicated greater support and agreement. †p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01.

Main Effects of Individual Difference Variables

Next, we conducted a series of correlations between key demographic variables and the three subtypes of the attitudes toward sex offenders’ partners scale (see Table 4 for correlations). In line with hypotheses, political conservatives were significantly more likely than political liberals to endorse the fearful and vulnerable stereotype and the deviant and predatory stereotype. Also, there was a marginally significant correlation between education and stereotype endorsement, such that those with lower levels of education were marginally more likely to endorse the fearful and vulnerable and deviant and predatory stereotypes. Participant gender and age did not predict stereotype endorsement.

Next, we tested whether the same demographic variables might predict support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for various jobs. Political liberals were significantly less likely than conservatives to indicate intent to discriminate against sex offenders’ partners for factory and nonelected government positions, and they
SEX OFFENDERS’ PARTNERS

Table 4. Correlation Matrix Illustrating Relations Between Political Orientation, Education, Gender, Age, Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders’ Partners, and Hiring Sex Offenders’ Partners for a Variety of Positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Political orientation</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex offenders’ partners are “deviant and predatory”</td>
<td>−.24**</td>
<td>−.14*</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>−.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex offenders’ partners are “fearful and vulnerable”</td>
<td>−.23**</td>
<td>−.14*</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex offenders’ partners are “loyal”</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>−.08</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>−.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for childcare positions</td>
<td>.15†</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>−.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for factory positions</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>−.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners as school bus drivers</td>
<td>.14†</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for healthcare positions</td>
<td>.14†</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>−.15†</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners as librarians</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>−.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners as school coaches</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>−.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for food service positions</td>
<td>.14†</td>
<td>.19†</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>−.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for hiring sex offenders’ partners for nonelected government positions</td>
<td>.17†</td>
<td>.17†</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Males were coded as 1 and females as 0. Greater values indicated greater politically liberal scores. †p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01.

were marginally less likely to do so for childcare, food service, school bus driver, and healthcare positions. Further, those with higher levels of education, compared to those with lower levels of education, were significantly less likely to indicate intent to discriminate against partners for all positions but factory positions. Participant gender and age did not predict hiring recommendations (see Table 4 for all correlations). No other relations reached statistical significance.

Stereotypes as Mediators of Political Orientation Effects on Intent to Discriminate

Next, because political orientation significantly predicted greater intent to discriminate in hiring contexts, we explored the possibility that the fearful and vulnerable and deviant and predatory subtype scales might mediate the effects of political orientation on hiring recommendations.

First, to control for a type 1 error, we created a reliable scale (Chronbach’s \( \alpha = .90 \)) out of the six hiring items that were significantly or marginally significantly predicted by political orientation (i.e., childcare, factory, school bus driver,
healthcare, food service, and nonelected government positions) to use as a single dependent variable representing intent to discriminate in hiring. We then included both the fearful and vulnerable and deviant and predatory subtype scales as potential mediators in a multiple mediation model, with political orientation as the independent variable and intent to discriminate in hiring as our dependent variable. We employed nonparametric bootstrapping analyses to test our meditational model (see Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). According to Preacher and Hayes (2004), for mediation to be significant, the 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence intervals for the indirect effects (IE) must not include 0. Results based on 5,000 bootstrapped samples revealed that the total effect (TE) of political orientation on hiring recommendations was significant ($TE = 0.13, SE = 0.05, z = 2.49, p = .01$) and the direct effect (DE) was not ($DE = 0.02, SE = 0.04, z = .46, ns$). Endorsement of the fearful and vulnerable attitude scale (IE lower 95% CI = 0.01, upper 95% CI = 0.08) significantly mediated the relationship between political orientation and hiring decisions, as did endorsement of the deviant and predatory attitude scale (IE lower 95% CI = 0.03, upper 95% CI = 0.14). Thus, political liberals were less likely than conservatives to indicate intent to discriminate against sex offenders’ partners in hiring contexts, because they were less likely than conservatives to endorse the stereotypes that sex offenders’ partners are “fearful and vulnerable” and “deviant and predatory.”

**Study 2 Discussion**

Our exploratory factor analyses revealed evidence of stereotype subtypes that were fairly consistent with participants’ open-ended responses in Study 1. Specifically, three stereotype subtypes of sex offenders’ partners emerged: (a) “fearful and vulnerable,” (b) “deviant and predatory,” and (c) “loyal.” However, it should be noted that the mentally ill subscale did not emerge as a dominant factor, which may, in part, be because few participants spontaneously mentioned endorsing this stereotype in Study 1 (5.4%). Moreover, in Study 2, many of our “mentally ill” items loaded most strongly within the two most dominant factors: “deviant and predatory” and “fearful and vulnerable.” Why? Stereotypes and assumptions about mental illness are highly nuanced, ranging from beliefs that the mentally ill are dangerous and unpredictable (Romer & Bock, 2008) to beliefs that some mental illnesses, such as depression, are characterized by laziness (Aromaa, Tolvanen, Tuulari, & Wahlbeck, 2010), weakness, and sensitivity (Aromaa, Tolvanen, Tuulari, & Wahlbeck, 2011). Thus, some “mentally ill” items, though clearly containing references to mental illness, actually loaded better on the “deviant and predatory” factor and “fearful and vulnerable” factor than they did in a single, shared “mentally ill” factor.

In addition to developing reliable scales assessing attitudes toward offenders’ partners, we also established scale predictive validity: Agreement with the fearful
and vulnerable and deviant and predatory subscales was significantly related to increased support for the application of sex offender registration, notification, and residence restriction laws. Agreement with these subscales was also predictive of participants’ self-reported reluctance to hire sex offenders’ partners for all job types (both related and unrelated to children), perhaps because these subscales represent clusters of characteristics that are generally undesirable. Endorsement of the deviant and predatory and fearful and vulnerable subscales might also be cognitively related to a belief that hiring a sex offenders’ partner would put consumers in danger. Future research should examine this and related possibilities.

Political conservatives were significantly more likely than political liberals to perceive sex offenders’ partners as “deviant and predatory” and “fearful and vulnerable,” whereas political liberals were significantly more likely than political conservatives to perceive sex offenders’ partners as “loyal.” Moreover, conservatives were more likely than liberals to recommend against hiring sex offenders’ partners. Finally, endorsement of the “fearful and vulnerable” and “deviant and predatory” stereotype subtypes significantly mediated the effect of political orientation on intent to discriminate in hiring. Why? Political conservatives are more likely than political liberals to blame individuals, rather than the situation (Carroll et al., 1987; Pellegrini et al., 1997; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Thus, when seeking to explain why some women are in relationships with sex offenders, political conservatives might focus on the partner’s potential inherent weaknesses (e.g., she is insane)—traits that reflect poor potential for success in various jobs. In contrast, political liberals might focus on more complicated characteristics of the relationship itself (e.g., her husband has always treated her well, despite his mistakes, and she loves him).

Although participant education did not significantly predict stereotype endorsement, increased education was marginally associated with diminished beliefs that offenders’ partners are “fearful and vulnerable” and “deviant and predatory,” perhaps reflecting educated individuals’ greater awareness of the diversity of sex offenders. Moreover, increased education was associated with less intent to discriminate in hiring contexts. These effects are consistent with previous research illustrating a link between increased education levels and diminished support for juvenile sex offender registration (Stevenson et al., 2013).

Finally, we found no significant effects of gender or age on attitudes toward, or intent to discriminate against, spouses of registered sex offenders. It is not entirely surprising that age effects did not emerge, particularly because Bornstein (1999) has demonstrated that legally relevant attitudes are quite comparable among college-aged samples and older community sample. Yet, it is theoretically interesting that participant gender did not emerge as a predictor given that women are generally more punitive toward child sex offenders than men (see Bottoms et al., 2007 for a review). Perhaps gender effects do not extend to attitudes toward spouses of sex offenders, who did not directly harm children.
There are a number of implications stemming from these results that warrant consideration. Support for sex offender legislation stems from utilitarian goals to protect society. Society needs to be protected from sex offenders, many might reason, because of the dangerous qualities they are perceived to possess (e.g., Sample & Kadleck, 2008). Yet, our findings indicate that support for sex offender legislation can also be predicted by beliefs about sex offenders’ partners, which lends credence to the primary conclusion of our first study—sex offenders’ partners are viewed in much the same way as sex offenders themselves. In fact, the association between sex offenders and their partners appears to be so strong that, when participants perceived sex offenders’ partners negatively, they openly admitted that they would refuse to hire the applicant for every listed position. This suggests that, where sex offenders’ partners are concerned, prejudiced individuals might feel justified in discriminating against women who, to them, are essentially as bad as sex offenders, themselves.

**General Discussion**

Anecdotal evidence from online support groups for registered sex offenders’ partners (e.g., Women Against Registry, 2013) indicates that the stigma sex offenders’ partners face has dire consequences in terms of employment, general psychological well-being, and vigilantism. Specifically, sex offenders’ partners state that, when their coworkers or employers discover that they are married to a registered sex offender, they often lose their jobs (Women Against Registry, 2013). Similarly, these women claim that, if their sex-offending partner’s status is discovered during the hiring process, they are promptly removed from consideration (Women Against Registry, 2013).

The results of our research lend tentative support to these possibilities. We have uncovered evidence of the existence of various stereotypes about partners of registered sex offenders, including that they are deviant and predatory, fearful and vulnerable, but also loyal and compassionate people who are committed to their partners. Moreover, we found that participants vary in their endorsement of these stereotypes and that endorsement of the deviant and predatory and fearful and vulnerable subtypes predicts intent to discriminate in job hiring contexts. We also found that political conservatives (versus liberals) are more likely to endorse the deviant and predatory and fearful and vulnerable stereotypes, and that endorsement of such negative stereotypes translates into greater intent to discriminate against sex offenders’ partners in employment contexts. Finally, as education level increased endorsement of the deviant and predatory and fearful and vulnerable stereotypes marginally decreased, and intent to discriminate in hiring contexts significantly decreased.

A number of theoretical and practical implications relevant to public policy are highlighted by these results. First and foremost, our findings partially support
courtesy stigma as a theoretical construct with the potential to predict attitudes and behavior toward associates of the heavily stigmatized. An alternative theoretical account for intent to discriminate against hiring partners of sex offenders, however, could be discrimination as a means of maintaining social distance. That is, an employer might choose not to hire a sex offender’s wife as a means of avoiding or preventing contact with her sex-offending partner. Yet, a social distance account for such discrimination does not sufficiently explain our results because participants not only indicated intent to discriminate against sex offenders’ partners, but they also believed them to possess many of the same qualities and characteristics of actual sex offenders, themselves. Moreover, the more people believed that partners of sex offenders share the same deviant and predatory characteristics of sex offenders themselves, the more likely they were to refuse to hire them for all job types, including positions that both did and did not involve contact with children or people generally.

As a result, our studies suggest that sex offenders’ partners not only have to grapple with considerable societal backlash toward their sex-offending partners, but they also have to struggle with the reality that many people believe they possess the same negative qualities as sex offenders themselves. However, we are aware of no evidence or theoretical rationale to support the notion that registered sex offenders’ female romantic partners are any more likely to be offenders than women at large. Sex offenders are a diverse population, and the crimes that earned them their convictions are similarly diverse, ranging from the truly heinous to the arguably minor. Further, convicted sex offenders are almost exclusively male; based on population base-rates, only a very small proportion of sex offenders’ partners (1–6%) are likely to be sexually deviant themselves (CSOM, 2007; FBI, 2006).

It is of particular importance that this topic receive continued empirical attention, however, because our research suggests that the publicly accessible sex offender registry has the potential to facilitate stigmatization against innocent, nonoffending family members of sex offenders. Unlike some mental or physical disabilities, an individual’s sex offender status is not visually apparent. Indeed, it is for this reason, among others, that publicly accessible online sex offender registries are now available nationwide. Yet, few politicians likely anticipated that publicly identifying sex offenders’ residences and places of employment would make sex offenders’ family members easily identifiable, paving the way for courtesy stigma. Not only is negative stigma an unfair burden on offenders’ family members who are law-abiding citizens, but the resulting psychological and economic effects seem likely to negatively affect delicate family support networks and, by extension, sex offender recidivism. How? Although no research has directly explored the family unit’s role in reducing sex offender recidivism, it is well documented that sex offenders commonly experience many risk factors associated with criminal recidivism, including homelessness, joblessness, and stress.
(Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2007). If their family members experience stigmatization as well, it is conceivable that their family support network might be compromised, further exacerbating offenders’ life stressors and increasing recidivism.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Future research should include a more nationally representative sample of community members to increase the generalizability of the present research. Indeed, some evidence suggests that there are differences between MTurk and non-MTurk samples (e.g., attitudes toward money, self-esteem, extraversion; Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013). On the other hand, there are also many similarities between MTurk and non-MTurk samples (Goodman et al., 2013). Moreover, evidence suggests that MTurk provides more nationally representative samples than typical college samples, with at least equal reliability (Buhrmester et al., 2011).

Although our findings suggest that sex offenders’ romantic partners might experience discrimination in hiring contexts, Study 2’s correlational design prevented us from drawing causal conclusions. Thus, future research should utilize an experimental design by directly manipulating the sex offender status of a job applicant’s husband and measuring participant hiring recommendations, in a way that minimizes demand characteristics. In addition, we provided little contextual information regarding the job applicant in the materials, thus limiting ecological validity and implications for discrimination. Moreover, future research is necessary to fully explore various other contexts in which sex offenders’ partners experience discrimination. Our newly developed scale can be applied in such future studies exploring discrimination in different contexts, as well as discrimination toward other family members of sex offenders (i.e., same sex partners of sex offenders or sex offenders’ children). Finally, an obvious extension of this line of inquiry is that researchers should interview registered sex offenders’ family members to develop a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences with discrimination and stigma. Doing so might help researchers and policy-makers identify whether certain aspects of existing legislation might require revision or whether new, more explicit antidiscrimination protections via policy might be worth pursuing.

**Conclusion**

Sex offenders’ family members may facilitate sex offenders’ successful reintegration into society, by providing them with financial and emotional support (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). However, living with a registered sex offender—in a residence-restricted home that is publicly listed on the registry—stigmatizes not only the offender, but his non-sex-offending family members as well. As a result, sex offenders’ family members are nearly as likely to experience psychosocial
distress as sex offenders themselves (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009), including significant negative stigma and, based on the results of the present research, possible discrimination. To reduce sex offending recidivism, researchers and policy-makers must re-evaluate current sex offender policy and develop empirically supported programs and policies designed to reduce stigma and discrimination experienced by family members of sex offenders.

References


Center for Sex Offender Management, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. (2007). Female Sex Offenders.


### Appendix: Representative Examples of Participants’ Statements for Each Code Category

**Fearful and vulnerable:**

- “They are probably meek, mild, dependent types of people who have low self-esteem and think they don’t have a lot of choices, or [they’re] the type who likes to bury their head in the sand and pretend that problems don’t exist.”
- “They are dependent on that person. They don’t believe they can do better. They are scared. It is a pattern. They have nowhere else to go. Dumb.”
• “I think most partners of registered sex offenders would be pretty submissive. They might not have the self-confidence it would take to believe that they deserve better. Or, maybe they’re just too trusting and believe whatever their partners say. I think a majority of them are uneducated, as well.”

Deviant and predatory:

• “Some are abusers who share the mindset of the offender and don’t care; they are sexual offenders as well. They may harass and bully their partner’s victims.”
• “The partners of sex offenders are scum bags who probably assist their partner in finding victims.”
• “They are drug addicts of some kind and they like the bad boys or the ones who have been locked up in prison. They believe that nothing is wrong with having sex with a minor.”

Good and forgiving:

• “They are probably very forgiving people.”
• “They are understanding and patient.”
• “They must be more caring, forgiving, and understanding than most.”

Healers and reformers:

• “They believe that they can change their partner.”
• “Feels that she can change the sex offender into a better person.”
• “The second category are reformers, partners who think they can change the sex offender.”

Mentally Ill:

• “The partner is abnormal or [has] some serious psychiatric problems.”
• “Partners are crazy and delusional.”
• “I think there must be something inherently psychologically skewed about anyone who would choose to be in such a relationship.”

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