



Original communication

## Adult interpersonal features of subtypes of sexual offenders



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### ABSTRACT

Although the role of interpersonal factors on sexual offending is already recognized, there is a need for further investigation on the psychosocial correlates of pedophilic behavior. This study aimed to examine the relationship between adult interpersonal features and subtypes of sexual offending. The study involved the participation of a total of 164 male convicted offenders namely 50 rapists, 63 child molesters (20 pedophilic and 43 nonpedophilic), and 51 nonsexual offenders. All participants were assessed using the Adult Attachment Scale, the Interpersonal Behavior Survey, the Brief Symptom Inventory, and the Socially Desirable Response Set Measure. Results from sets of multinomial logistic regression analyses showed that pedophilic offenders were more likely to present anxiety in adult relationships compared to nonsex offenders. Likewise, nonpedophilic child molesters were less likely to be generally aggressive compared to rapists and nonsex offenders, as well as less generally assertive than rapists. Overall, findings indicated that certain interpersonal features characterized subtypes of offenders, thus providing some insight on their particular therapeutic needs. Further replications with larger samples particularly of pedophilic child molesters are required.

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## 1. Introduction

Insecure adult attachment style and interpersonal behavior problems have been proposed as important psychosocial risk factors for sexual offending.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, according to our knowledge, there is a lack of studies on this topic using samples of pedophilic child molesters. Indeed, while pedophilia refers to deviant sexual interest in prepubescent children that may or may not lead to sexual abuse of a child, child sexual abuse involves the perpetration of at least one sexual offense against a child that may or may not be due to pedophilia.<sup>2,3</sup> Accordingly, a scientific distinction between these two concepts is needed. In particular, given that pedophilia is a significant risk factor for sexual recidivism,<sup>3</sup> child molesters with pedophilic interests likely constitute one subtype of remarkable importance. We think that more research regarding this subtype of offenders is required in order to achieve a greater understanding on their specific therapeutic needs.

### 1.1. Adult attachment style in sex offenders

Based on early relational experiences, individuals develop “working models or internal representations of attachment”<sup>4</sup> which consist on a prototype for later interpersonal relationships. Specifically, working models may be positive or negative and are related to the individual perception of both the self (i.e., the self perceived as worthy of love and support, or not) and others (i.e., the others seen as trustworthy and available, or unreliable and rejecting).<sup>5</sup>

In the sexual offending field, it has been suggested that particular adult attachment patterns are associated with specific types of sexual offending.<sup>6,7</sup> Some studies showed that rapists present a dismissive attachment style, characterized by an interpersonal pattern that involves the perception of a positive self and negative others.<sup>7,8</sup> In turn, child molesters were found to present a more fearful (i.e., negative self/negative others) and/or preoccupied (i.e., negative self/positive others) attachment style.<sup>7–10</sup> Additionally, Stirpe, Abracen, Stermac, and Wilson<sup>11</sup> conducted a study with four comparative groups and found that extrafamilial child molesters were more likely to be preoccupied, whereas intrafamilial child molesters as well as rapists and violent offenders were more likely to be dismissing.

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Nevertheless, despite some trends, to date it is not clear whether some attachment styles are specific to particular subtypes of sex offenders. Indeed, some studies did not find significant differences between sex offenders' subtypes,<sup>6</sup> and about 30–40% of sex offenders reported a secure attachment pattern.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, we agree with Collins and Read<sup>13</sup> on the potential relevance of the assessment of dimensions of adult attachment (i.e., anxiety, trust in others/depend, and comfort with intimacy/close) rather than discrete attachment styles. This way, it would be possible to explore possible additional styles, thus expanding our understanding of adult attachment.

### 1.2. Interpersonal behavior style in sex offenders

According to Marshall,<sup>14</sup> insecure childhood attachment may result in later deficits in interpersonal skills leading individuals to satisfy intimacy needs primarily through sexual activity. In line with that claim, sex offenders, in general, seem to lack the basic social skills necessary to establish adequate interpersonal relationships with peers.<sup>1,15</sup> More specifically, child molesters were particularly characterized by deficient social skills and heterosocial inadequacy, reporting lower self-esteem, higher levels of social anxiety, and underassertiveness. Conversely, rapists appeared more confident and more assertive.<sup>15,16–19</sup> They were also significantly more aggressive than child molesters, showing higher levels of hostility (e.g., indirect and verbal) and impulsive-aggressive traits.<sup>20–22</sup> Finally, available studies conducted with male pedophiles showed that they were characterized by reduced assertiveness, elevated passive-aggressiveness, and poor self-esteem.<sup>23,24</sup>

### 1.3. The present study

This study aimed to examine the relationship between adult interpersonal features and subtypes of sexual offending behavior. In particular, we compared three subtypes of sex offenders (rapists, pedophilic and nonpedophilic child molesters) and a nonsex offender group on the basis of adult attachment and interpersonal behavior dimensions. With this study, we expected to give some new contribution to the available literature on the adult interpersonal features of pedophilic offenders.

Based on the literature reviewed above, we predicted that child molesters, particularly pedophilic, would be more likely to present higher levels of anxiety in adult relationships. Moreover, we expected that rapists would be more likely to present higher levels of general aggressiveness, whereas nonpedophilic as well as pedophilic child abusers would present lower levels of general assertiveness.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Fifty men convicted for rape, 63 men convicted for child sexual abuse, and 51 men convicted for nonsexual crimes participated in this study. The group of child molesters was divided into two subgroups based on the *Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests*<sup>25</sup>: pedophilic child molesters ( $n = 20$ ; i.e., *pedophiles*), and nonpedophilic child molesters ( $n = 43$ ; i.e., *nonpedophiles*). The nonsexual offenders were convicted for different crimes such as fraud, burglary, robbery and homicide. According to their criminal files, they had no history of prior sexual offenses.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the four groups are shown in Table 1. Statistically significant differences were found between the groups regarding age,  $F(3,160) = 3.812, p < .05$ , and years of school education,  $F(3,160) = 5.227, p < .01$ . Accordingly, age and school education were included in the analyses as covariates. No significant differences were found regarding marital status,  $\chi^2 = 12.512; df = 6; p = .051$ .

### 2.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited from four Portuguese prisons after the ethical approval of Direcção Geral dos Serviços Prisionais in Portugal. Data were collected between January 2012 and October 2013. Before participation, all participants gave written informed consent and then answered the questionnaires individually and voluntarily with the assistance of the primary researcher. Individual privacy rights and confidentiality of data were assured. The criminal files of the participants were also checked to obtain factual information about their crimes.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests (SSPI)

The SSPI<sup>25</sup> (translated to Portuguese by Carvalho<sup>26</sup>) is a four-item measure of pedophilic sexual interests among sex offenders with child victims. It is significantly correlated with phallometric assessment.<sup>25</sup> The scale is scored based on file information about offense-related variables (i.e., any male victim; more than one victim; any prepubescent victim; and any unrelated/extrafamilial victim). Total score ranges from 0 to 5 with higher scores indicating pedophilic interests.<sup>25</sup> In this study, the group of men convicted for child sexual abuse was dichotomized based on high (3–5; pedophiles) vs. low (0–2; nonpedophiles) SSPI scores.

**Table 1**  
Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

	Rapists (n = 50)	Pedophiles (n = 20)	Nonpedophiles (n = 43)	Nonsex offenders (n = 51)
Age (years)				
M (SD)	38.0 <sup>a</sup> (9.1)	45.7 <sup>b</sup> (14.3)	44.4 <sup>b</sup> (9.7)	40.6 <sup>ab</sup> (12.2)
Range	24–60	23–76	27–73	25–78
Marital status (%)				
Single	58.0	50.0	30.2	43.1
Married/Cohabiting	34.0	25.0	41.9	27.5
Separated/Divorced				
/Widowed	8.0	25.0	27.9	29.4
School education (years)				
M (SD)	7.7 <sup>ab</sup> (3.0)	9.2 <sup>bc</sup> (3.8)	6.5 <sup>a</sup> (3.0)	9.3 <sup>c</sup> (3.7)
Range	4–12	4–15	4–15	4–15

Note. Means in the same row with different superscripts letters differ significantly from each other.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

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