



## Examining the role of opportunity in the offense behavior of victim age polymorphic sex offenders<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Victim age polymorphism (also referred to as victim age crossover) describes sexual offenders who offend against multiple age groups. The present study examined whether polymorphic offenders could be differentiated from age-specific offenders based on the role of opportunity in the commission of their offenses.

**Methods:** The current study examined age polymorphism in 72 sexual offenders who committed 361 stranger offenses. Incarcerated offenders were interviewed about their sexual offending history and provided information on their crime scene behaviors (i.e., pre-crime activities, victim selection, and behaviors during the commission of the offense, such as sexual behaviors), which was cross-checked with file information. A PCA and logistic regression were conducted using crime scene behaviors to determine latent constructs that differentiated age-specific and age polymorphic offenders. Individual crime scene behaviors were also analyzed.

**Results:** Polymorphism occurred in 36% of offenders' sexual offense histories with most polymorphic offenders victimizing those aged 11 to 14 and at least one other age group. Compared to age-specific offenders, polymorphic offenders were more opportunistic and less concerned with the specific characteristics of their victim.

**Conclusion:** Polymorphic offenders can be distinguished from age-specific offenders by their pre-crime decisions and the sexual behaviors committed during the offense.

### 1. Introduction

Not only are sexual offenders generally assumed to be a unique type of offender, they are believed to maintain specific preferences that influence who they victimize and it is assumed they are stable in their crime scene behaviors (i.e. *modus operandi*; e.g., Kleban, Chesin, Jeglic, & Calkins Mercado, 2012; Laws, 1994; Lussier, 2005). This is largely based on the belief that sex offenders are driven by specific urges and paraphilias (i.e., intense anomalous sexual interests; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) that influence their sexual behavior (Beauregard, Leclerc, & Lussier, 2012; Laws, 1994). Researchers informed by the developmental and life-course criminology perspective (DLC) have started to examine offending trajectories (e.g., Farrington, 2003). As part of this research, a debate has emerged on whether sexual offenders' criminal careers are marked by generalization or specialization. Longitudinal research with sexual offenders has found that sexual offenders could overall be characterized as *generalists* (i.e., they committed a broad array of offenses); however, there was evidence

for specialization when examining the type of sexual offenses committed (Soothill, Francis, Sanderson, & Ackerley, 2000). Despite this stability, there is evidence for versatility within offending type, which is more common in opportunistic offenders (Fox & Farrington, 2016). Overall, there is a growing body of literature suggesting that sex offenders are capable of offending against different victims depending on (a) the opportunity that presents itself (b) the desire to diversify sexual and criminal experience; and (c) the element of risk exposure inherent in different victim types (Lussier, 2005). As a result, the present study examines versatility in victim selection to examine why some sexual offenders are more versatile within their sexual offending.

#### 1.1. Victim choice polymorphism

As part of the assumption of specialization, there has been a long-standing tendency to categorize sex offenders based on victim characteristics under the assumption of stability (Kleban et al., 2012). Conversely, victim choice polymorphism, or victim crossover, refers to

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sex offenders who do not limit themselves to one specific victim type (gender, age, and victim-offender relationship; [Beauregard et al., 2012](#); [Guay, Proulx, Cusson, & Ouimet, 2001](#)). There is a lack of consensus regarding the prevalence of polymorphism with reports ranging anywhere from 25% to 89% of sexual offenders ([Cann, Friendship, & Gozna, 2007](#); [Heil, Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003](#); [Kleban et al., 2012](#); [Stephens, Seto, Goodwill, & Cantor, 2016](#)).

The wide variation in prevalence may be partially due to the victim choice domain under investigation. Both victim gender (i.e., male and female) and victim-offender relationship (i.e., stranger, acquaintance, intrafamilial) remain highly stable, with rates of polymorphism generally below 10% and 20%, respectively (e.g., [Cann et al., 2007](#); [Guay et al., 2001](#); [Heil et al., 2003](#); [Kleban et al., 2012](#); [Sjostedt, Langstrom, Sturidsson, & Grann, 2004](#); [Stephens et al., 2016](#)). This is in contrast to victim age, where offenders have demonstrated the highest levels of polymorphism (e.g., offending against adults and children; [Guay et al., 2001](#); [Heil et al., 2003](#); [Kleban et al., 2012](#); [Stephens et al., 2016](#)). Accordingly, the present study will focus on victim age when examining polymorphic serial offenders.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2. Understanding victim age polymorphism

### 1.2.1. Sexual surrogate hypothesis

Despite research on the occurrence of polymorphism, we have a poor understanding of why it occurs. [Lussier, Leclerc, Healey, and Proulx \(2007\)](#) found that when it came to age, a non-randomized pattern emerged where offenders selected a victim that was not significantly different from their preferred victim choice. For example, offenders who victimized children tended to do so exclusively and if they switched it was often to an adolescent, but not an adult victim. This is consistent with the wider literature that polymorphism is highest among those with at least one adolescent victim ([Guay et al., 2001](#); [Laws, 1994](#)). Given their sexual development, adolescents may represent the second option in the absence of a preferred victim type, as they may represent an appropriate transition for an offender who prefers to offend against children or adults ([Guay et al., 2001](#)). Adolescents fit into the expanded victim pool targeted by offenders when their preferred victim type is unavailable ([Guay et al., 2001](#); [Heil et al., 2003](#); [Lussier, Leclerc, Healey, et al., 2007](#)).

From this perspective, polymorphic offenders may be less likely to select victims on physical characteristics and more likely to select victims on characteristics that signal opportunity (e.g., victim vulnerability). The role of opportunity in the commission of sexual offenses has been researched in the criminological literature where criminal behavior is viewed as an interaction between the offender's characteristics, the victim and the context in which the crime is committed ([Deslauriers-Varin & Beauregard, 2010](#)). Empirical evidence suggests that the suitability of a target can be explained by various factors, including, anticipated success, potential pay-off ([Cornish & Clarke, 1986](#)), ease of entry or physical accessibility ([Bernasco & Nieuwebeerta, 2005](#)), and the level of guardianship that is present ([Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2003](#)). For example, offenders are likely to choose a suitable place to offend on the basis that there is a high likelihood that they find a desired target; however, an offender's selection of a specific target over another within a particular sociospatial context is determined by what the offender perceives their value to be and how much risk is involved ([Bernasco & Nieuwebeerta, 2005](#)). Further, vulnerability plays an important role. In one study 66% of offenders selected their victim on the belief that they were vulnerable (i.e., it was assumed the victim would not fight back) with the age of the victim contributing to this appraisal, as young females were judged as more vulnerable ([Stevens, 1994](#)). This

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified "polymorphic" and "polymorphism" will be used to describe polymorphism specifically in terms of a victim's age, as opposed to the victim's gender or relationship to the perpetrator.

is an important finding given the high rates of polymorphism in those with adolescent victims (e.g., [Guay et al., 2001](#)), as it suggests they may be more suitable victims for opportunistic offenders.

### 1.2.2. Sexualization hypothesis

In contrast to the sexual surrogate hypothesis, but consistent with the notion of opportunism, [Lussier, Leclerc, Cale, and Proulx \(2007\)](#) proposed the sexualization hypothesis. Specifically, polymorphic offenders are characterized by high levels of sexualization, in that, they have disinhibited sexuality (i.e., sexual compulsivity) and are more likely to have trouble controlling sexual urges, which can lead them to seek out gratification in different contexts. This is consistent with the observation that polymorphic offenders are more likely to be psychopathic, as psychopathy is correlated with sexual sensation-seeking (e.g., [Porter et al., 2000](#); [Skorvan, Huss, & Scalora, 2010](#)). Further, polymorphic offenders showed similar penile responses to various stimuli that suggests a high degree of arousability. This is in contrast to offenders against children who had a more specified arousal pattern ([Michaud & Proulx, 2009](#)). This provides some support to the sexualization hypothesis.

## 1.3. Current study

The present study examines specialization within sexual offending, consistent with the wider literature on the DLC perspective ([Farrington, 2003](#)). Although there is a lack of consensus as to why offenders are polymorphic, the notion of opportunism is consistently linked across hypotheses, in contrast to offenders who follow a specific offending pattern (offenders against children utilize a complex, structured and manipulative process that requires thought-out decisions and structured planning; [Beauregard et al., 2012](#)). Currently, there is a lack of research that utilizes crime scene behaviors to understand differences between victim-age polymorphic offenders and age-specific offenders. This an important area to explore as crime scene behaviors have the specific advantage of being easily observable and offer investigators a more objective interpretation of an offender's behavior. Therefore, the objective of the present study was to provide an analysis of the types of crime scene behaviors polymorphic offenders engaged in to examine if these behaviors were suggestive of opportunistic offending.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

Data on crime events were collected from a sample of sexual offenders incarcerated at a Correctional Service of Canada federal institution between 1995 and 2004 (i.e., serving a custodial sentence of two years or more). Offenders were recruited from institutions of various security levels to obtain a broad range of offenders and were selected based on criteria of committing two or more sexual assaults or other sex-related crimes against stranger victims of any age/gender (i.e. the victim and offender had no personal relationship prior to the date the offense was committed). Stranger sex offenders were selected to maintain a relative homogeneity in terms of the situation faced by the offenders; prior relationships between the offender and the victim would arguably, heavily influence the crime event in terms of sexual acts performed and level of preparation needed ([Hewitt & Beauregard, 2014a](#)).

A non-probability convenience sample was utilized and 92 offenders matched the defined criteria and 72 agreed to participate. These offenders were responsible for a total of 361 sexual offenses. The number of sexual offenses the offenders had committed ranged from two to 37 (*Mode* = 3). Most victims were female (80%) with as mean victim age of 18.7 (*SD* = 9.60). The average age of the offenders at the beginning of their sexual offense series was 30.72 years (*SD* = 9.40). Most offenders (91.3%) were Caucasian, 39.6% were unemployed, and 89.9%

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