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## Research article

# Exploring sexuality profiles of adolescents who have engaged in sexual abuse and their link to delinquency and offense characteristics



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## ABSTRACT

Very few studies have taken a specific interest in the various sexual dimensions, beyond delinquent sexual behavior, of adolescents who have engaged in sexual abuse (AESA). Those that went beyond delinquent sexual behavior have report mixed results, suggesting they are a heterogeneous group. The current study used cluster analysis to examine the sexuality profiles of AESA, which included information on several sexual dimensions (atypical and normative fantasies and experiences, drive, body image, pornography, first masturbation, onset of sexual interest and first exposure to sex). Participants (N = 136) are adolescents who have engaged in sexual abuse involving physical contact, for which at least one parent also participated in the study. They were recruited from six specialized treatment centers and three youth centers in Quebec (Canada). Cluster analyses were performed to identify specific sexual profiles. Results suggest three clusters of AESA: 1- *Discordant sexuality* pertaining to adolescents who show mostly normative sexual interests, 2- *Constrictive sexuality*, characterizing adolescents who seem to be less invested/interested in their sexuality and 3- *Overinvested sexuality* for adolescents showing an exacerbated sexuality, including atypical sexual interest. Additional analyses (ANOVAs and Chi-square tests) reveal that five delinquency and offense characteristics were significantly more likely to be present in the *Overinvested* than the *Constrictive* cluster: non-sexual offenses, three or more victims, peer victims and alcohol and drug consumption. Advancing our knowledge on this topic can provide relevant data for clinicians to better target interventions.

## 1. Introduction

In North America, between 17 and 25.8% of individuals who have committed a sexual offense known to police are juveniles (Allen & Superle, 2016; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Chaffin, 2009). Sexual crimes committed by juveniles are thus a significant and relevant issue. Even though an increasing amount of empirical and theoretical work on this topic has been published, many areas remain to be investigated. Seto and Lalumière's (2010) meta-analysis, comparing adolescents who had engaged in sexual abuse (AESA<sup>1</sup>) or in non-sexual delinquent behavior, brought major advancements to the field. The authors tested specific (factors specific to sexual abuse)

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<sup>1</sup> Following the ATSA's recommendation against referring to adolescents as "juvenile sex offenders", the term "Adolescents who have Engaged in Sexual Abuse (AESA)" will be used to designate our sample. The use of this terminology refers to a specific behavior (sexual abuse), without attributing a label (e.g., sex offenders) given that, for many, their developmental trajectories will be exempt from future sexual recidivism

and general explanations (general factors linked to general delinquency) for male adolescent sexual offending. Their results suggest that general delinquency risk factors are not sufficient to explain perpetrated sexual abuse. However, the hypothesis for specific explanations was supported, as the AESA group showed significantly more exposure to pornography, atypical sexual interest, a history of abuse or neglect, anxiety, and low self-esteem. These factors suggest that their experience of sexuality<sup>2</sup> is an interesting avenue to explore.

## 2. The difficulty of studying sexuality

Recognizing the difficulty to define and study sexuality and sexual development, [Drury and Bukowski \(2013\)](#) propose four basic premises. First, sexuality is not a single thing, and is implicated in various dimensions, including urges (e.g., sex drive, motivation), various sexual behaviors (e.g., relationships, interactions), sexual attitudes, and self-perceptions (e.g. body image). Second, sexuality is an integrative form of development since the intersection and coordination of its many intrapersonal and interpersonal components are at the core of its processes. For example, for some adolescents, the process of internalization of a positive body image may be more difficult when the satisfaction of sexual urges seems impossible given their deficits in reaching a more mature socialization with peers. Third, sexuality is a form of development that varies across age, and that is in part determined by past experiences. Thus, the impact of past sexual experiences (e.g., sexual initiation, early exposure to sex, etc.) and developmental stages must be considered. In fact, [Bancroft \(2006\)](#) considers that adolescents develop their emerging sexual identity before pre-labeling their sexual orientation and that evaluating the question of sexual orientation in adolescence is premature. Fourth, it is more difficult to define what would comprise normal sexuality than defining sex. In that sense, the attributes “atypical” or “deviant” or “anomalous”, which are often used as synonyms, can be confusing as they can be interpreted in different ways. For example, [Worling \(2012\)](#) has well explained that in studies of individuals who have committed sexual crimes, the term “deviant” is often applied to the sexual arousal by prepubescent children and/or sexual violence. Thus, in the current study, sexuality is considered “atypical” if it implies the use of coercion (e.g., imposing a sexual behavior) or is in line with the definition provided by the DSM 5 for paraphilic disorder (excluding the age and duration criteria). For the purposes of this paper, adolescents’ sexuality refers to the various dimensions in which adolescents experience and express their sexuality (current sexuality; ex. fantasies, drive, behaviors, body image, etc.) and the nature of their first sexual experiences that could possibly have influenced their sexual development.

## 3. Sexuality of adolescents who have engaged in sexual abuse

Studies that have taken a specific interest in the sexual experiences of AESA have reported mixed results. Some suggest that consensual sexual experiences among AESA are similar to those of adolescents who have reported non-sexual offenses with regards to the number of partners ([Seto & Lalumière, 2010](#)), or that they are “more experienced” than non-offending controls ([McCord, McCord, & Verden, 1962](#)). However, other studies report contradictory results indicating that they are less experienced and sexually active than adolescents involved in non-sexual offenses ([Daleiden, Kaufman, Hilliker, & O’Neil, 1998](#); [Driemeyer, Spehr, Yoon, Richter-Appelt, & Briken, 2013](#); [Fagan & Wexler, 1988](#)).

The literature has also shown that AESA report low satisfaction with regards to their physical appearance ([Daversa & Knight, 2007](#)). Adolescents with prepubescent victims struggling with masculinity challenges, embarrassed by their physical appearance, and worried about their ability to seduce same age partners, may choose younger victims to compensate for their inability to compete with their male counterparts ([Messerschmidt 1999, 2000](#)). [Hunter, Figueredo, Malamuth, and Becker \(2003\)](#) also suggest that many AESA towards prepubescent victims view themselves as socially inadequate and anticipate ridicule and rejection.

As for atypical manifestations, including fantasies ([Aylwin, Reddon, & Burke, 2005](#); [Glowacz, 2009](#)) or behaviors ([Burton, 2003](#)), they often emerge before the age of 18. As such, AESA report significantly more atypical sexual fantasies and behaviors, are more often diagnosed with a paraphilia, and spend significantly more time thinking about sex than adolescents who have perpetrated non-sexual offenses ([Seto & Lalumière, 2010](#)). Studies investigating recidivism risk factors have also highlighted that atypical sexual fantasies and sexual arousal, sexual preoccupations, and hypersexuality are significantly linked to re-offending ([Johnson & Knight, 2000](#); [Kenny, Keogh, & Seidler, 2001](#); [Knight & Sims-Knight, 2004](#)).

Thus, most empirical studies exploring sexual dimensions of AESA have been limited to the characteristics of their offenses or their atypical sexual interests, even though clinical and empirical data suggest that only a minority of these adolescents show atypical sexual interests ([Worling, 2012](#)). Although arousal or behaviors may likely play a role in perpetrating sexual abuse, research to date underscores that it is not the only factor. Therefore, we must consider broader dimensions of normative and atypical sexual experiences of AESA (e.g., fantasies, drive, experiences, behaviors, body image, pornography, etc.) and their sexual precocity (such as young age at first masturbation and at exposure to sex, and onset of sexual interest). These variables will therefore be investigated in the present study.

## 4. Sexual initiation and sexual development

Over the past decade, there has been a consensus that sexual development integrates several components and starts at an earlier

<sup>2</sup> In this study, the term sexuality refers to 1) the global concept as used in previous studies or papers and 2) a multidimensional concept encompassing multiple variables in the current study (e.g., atypical and normative fantasies and experiences, drive, body image, pornography, behaviors, interests, and sexual precocity).

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