



# Experts in rape: Evaluating the evidence for a novice-to-expert continuum in the offense behavior and cognition of sexual offenders



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## ABSTRACT

Despite being over 15 years old researchers have been slow to adopt the competency or expertise perspective advocated by Ward (1999) as a complimentary viewpoint to the dominant deficit model of sexual offending. A growing body of research on the behavioral and cognitive impact of expertise suggests that it is timely to revisit the question of whether individuals can become expert at rape. This review summarizes the key points in Ward's theory and evaluates the scant research that could lend it support. The expertise perspective is a fertile area for future research and may provide a mechanism for explaining the relationship between explicit and implicit measures of distorted cognition. The review makes suggestions for future research and appraises the clinical implications of considering sexual aggressors as novices or experts.

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## Contents

1. Introduction . . . . .	26
2. Evidence for expert/novice differences from the offending behavior of rapists . . . . .	27
3. Evidence for expert/novice differences from the knowledge structures of rapists and rape-prone individuals . . . . .	29
4. Sex offenders as experts but without expert performance . . . . .	30
5. Clinical implications . . . . .	31
6. Conclusions . . . . .	31
References . . . . .	31

## 1. Introduction

There are many discourses on sexual aggression and aggressors. These discourses often differ in the degree to which they see the aggressor as deficient or expert in some relevant characteristics. In the public media, sexual aggressors are often referred to as *predators* or conceptualized as calculating groomers of their victims. This implied attribution of expertise is in contrast to the prevailing deficit-based view of sexual aggressors from within the field of offender rehabilitation. The risk factors and treatment needs of sexual offenders are mostly framed around inabilities; such as the inability to emotionally regulate, the inability to inhibit behaviors, and the inability to suppress deviant fantasies. In this way those working in research and practice concerned with rehabilitation may see sexual offenders as novices in need of developing

expertise in their own risk management. The general public on the other hand may see them as expert hunters or manipulators of their potential victims. As is often the case, one viewpoint may benefit from adopting elements of the other.

There is a growing body of literature on the psychological nature and consequences of expertise across many domains (Nee & Ward, 2015). In other words, as individuals gain expertise in a given domain, there are measurable changes in their cognitive processes and behavior surrounding that domain. With sufficient rehearsal and repetition, an individual may become expert in a particular area, regardless of whether that behavior is prosocial or antisocial. Sexual offending is unlikely to be an exception. In 1999, Ward examined the case for a competency model of sexual offender behavior. In it he presented a compelling argument for the utility of this alternative view, not as a replacement for the more standard deficit model, but as a complimentary viewpoint that may help explain behavioral, cognitive, and treatment efficacy variability along a novice to expert continuum among sex offenders. However,

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this paper, and indeed this theoretical viewpoint, was not widely influential in the sex offending literature. Furthermore, any influence it has had has tended towards research examining expertise in sexual offending against children (e.g. Bourke, Ward, & Rose, 2012) and not on the victimization of adults. This is unfortunate as Ward makes some clear conclusions about expertise and rape.

Acknowledging some of the differences between the development of expert artistic or sporting skills and the development of criminal competency, Ward (1999) identified several ways in which the concept of expertise could be applicable to sexual offenders. Among these are that most sexual offenders evade capture for their offenses, many have long offending careers, they often have considerable knowledge about their offending group, and experienced offenders may have skills in detecting vulnerable victims or controlling their victims. Ward concludes that sexual offenders will fall along a continuum from novice to expert in the specific domain of their offending. As a result he proposes that those nearing the expert end of the continuum will have “knowledge structures related to their offending that are qualitatively different” (p. 301) from less experienced offenders. Ward argues that individuals with a long history of sexual assaults will have scripts for offending and hold offense-supportive core beliefs. They will also be able to draw on many real examples of victim responses etc. based on their offending history. Together these knowledge structures would allow the offender to make rapid decisions in offending situations and “encode information in offense-related domains in an integrated and holistic way” (p. 301). Individuals at the opposite side of the continuum, according to Ward, have knowledge structures that are less integrated and cannot draw on real-life examples in interpreting victim behaviors. While they may express some of the same distorted attitudes, they may hold them with less conviction. In terms of tangible competencies, Ward sees expert sexual offenders as more adept than novices at detecting and responding to emotional vulnerabilities in potential victims, better at monitoring risk to avoid detection and better at manipulating or disarming victims, deceiving authorities and maintaining normal relationships with friends, families, and partners. Expert rapists may show better emotional regulation, and be able to problem solve and plan more effectively within the context of committing sexual offenses. Ward (1999) does not explain in detail the mechanisms for some of these skills, such as superior risk monitoring. However, the general literature on expertise demonstrates that the increased automaticity of offense related tasks or processes may free up more cognitive resources to multi-task affording the expert rapist with a greater ability to monitor their surroundings (see Nee & Ward, 2015 for a detailed examination of the cognitive mechanisms underpinning expert performance). This yields clear predictions for empirical findings with expert sexual offenders additional to those proposed by Ward, namely that experts have more efficient cognitive processes for domain specific tasks. As a result expert sexual offenders will be more successful than novices at domain specific tasks under conditions where cognitive load is increased. Relatedly, experts will have superior performance on an unrelated task when conducting a domain specific task simultaneously, due to the assertion that experts will carry out the domain specific task more efficiently retaining greater cognitive resources for the unrelated task.

One of the greatest challenges in accepting the expert criminal concept (the public media discourse aside), is that while chess experts, astronauts, sports people etc. spend countless hours engaging in their expert activities, the absolute frequency with which most criminals commit their crimes is much lower. For example, two thirds of a sample of active burglars reported committing 10 or less burglaries a year (Wright & Decker, 1994) and a sample of non-incarcerated rapists had committed an average of seven rapes each (Abel, Becker, Mittelman, & Cunningham-Rathner, 1987). However, individuals may achieve *functional expertise* in a domain over much shorter time periods whereby their competency can be considered expert relative to a novice (Nee & Ward, 2015). Additionally, there are many ways in which sexual

offenders may develop expertise without the commission of a contact offense. Ward (1999) outlines several mechanisms that may plausibly relate to the development of offense-related knowledge and skills. These include “covert modelling and rehearsal (e.g., in the form of sexual fantasies), observational learning (via other offenders), symbolic modelling (e.g., cultural products such as films, literature, or pornography), and finally through an offender's own experience of early sexual or physical abuse” (p. 302–303).

As previously mentioned, very little research on sexual aggression since Ward's (1999) theoretical paper has explicitly focused on comparing experts with novices, or has included level of expertise as a covariate or moderator. As a result, the task of examining the veracity of Ward's hypotheses depends on examining empirical studies that may contain variables that could be considered proxies for expertise, or comparing studies that ask similar questions of different populations, populations that may differ on their level of expertise. In the following sections, I first examine whether the offense behavior of rapists supports the conclusion that certain individuals develop expertise in this domain. Later I will examine whether there is evidence for differences in the knowledge structure of sexually aggressive men depending on where they fall on the novice–expert continuum.

## 2. Evidence for expert/novice differences from the offending behavior of rapists

As the literature does not tend to explicitly report differences between expert and novice rapists, other variables must be used as proxies for this distinction. These proxies are admittedly imperfect and I will address some of these limitations later. One such proxy is to compare single with serial rapists. Samples of serial rapists or an examination of crimes believed to be linked to earlier rapes by the same offender are likely to contain more expertise than single rapes as a function of a longer offending career. Park, Schlesinger, Pinizzotto, and Davis (2008) found that serial and single rapists differ in their offending behavior, with serial rapists demonstrating greater criminal sophistication including being more likely to gag their victim, show forensic awareness, deter resistance, and complete the rape. The same study found that single victim rapists on the other hand were more likely to be violent and to display greater interpersonal involvement with their victim, for example by inducing the victim to participate in sexual activities. These findings could indicate superior detachment and competency among serial rapists. However in this sample a greater number of serial offender cases involved stranger victims relative to single offender cases. As a result, differences may be due in part to differences in the victim–offender relationship rather than due to duration of offending career. Examining only stranger rapists, Davies, Wittebrood, and Jackson (1997) found that rapists who took steps to avoid leaving semen at the crime scene were almost four times as likely to have previous convictions for sexual offenses, compared with those who did not. However, they were also three times as likely to have convictions for robbery, suggesting that this apparent “expertise” in forensic awareness may not stem from an expertise specific to rape and sexual assault but perhaps from a more general criminal expertise. This is consistent with findings that many if not most apprehended rapists can be considered generalist rather than specialist offenders (Lussier & Cale, 2013). It is worth noting that expert burglars, for example, have been shown to have domain specific expertise relative to other general offenders (Logie, Wright, & Decker, 1992). Future research should examine whether experienced rapists have improved domain specific memory performance relative to other offenders, such as in the recognition of rape related cues.

Comparing the crime scene behavior of single offense and serial apprehended stranger rapists, Slater, Woodhams, and Hamilton-Giachritsis (2014) found that most behaviors did not differ significantly between both groups. However they did find that serial rapists more frequently used solicitation to gain access to victims. The selection of

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