



Examining the modus operandi of sexual offenders against children and its practical implications

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to review the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications related to the modus operandi of sexual offenders against children. First, the rational choice perspective in criminology is presented. Second, descriptive studies aimed specifically at providing information on modus operandi of sexual offenders against children are also presented. This is followed by research that investigates the links between the modus operandi of sexual offenders against children and various factors such as victim characteristics. Third, offenders' treatment, as well as situational crime prevention implications in regards to modus operandi, is discussed in order to highlight their respective potential for the prevention of child sexual abuse.

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In their empirical studies on sexual offenses against children, Kaufman, Hilliker and Daleiden (1996) define the modus operandi as “the pattern of behaviors that perpetrators display in the periods prior to, during, and following illicit sexual contact” (p. 18). Another definition is provided by Douglas, Burgess, Burgess and Ressler

(1997), who define modus operandi as “the actions taken by an offender to perpetrate the offense successfully” (p. 353). Over the years, the interest regarding the study of the modus operandi of sexual offenders against children has increased. As an example, a series of modus operandi studies have been carried out by Kaufman and his colleagues (e.g. Kaufman, Hilliker, & Daleiden, 1996) to provide empirical information for prevention purposes. As the rational choice perspective in criminology focuses on the criminal decision-making in

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relation to crime commission (Cornish, 1993), which includes the strategies adopted by the offender, it represents a useful framework to better understand the *modus operandi* of offenders.

1. Theoretical context

1.1. The rational choice perspective in criminology

The starting point of the rational choice perspective on criminal behavior is that criminal acts are never senseless, but purposive (Clarke & Cornish, 2001; Cornish & Clarke, 1986). Offenders are seen as rational individuals who commit crimes in an attempt to satisfy their need for rewards such as money, sexual intercourse, elevated status, and excitement. Cornish and Clarke (2002) also state that “the choice of methods for carrying out the crime, and the decision-making involved, are also best regarded as instrumental behaviors in the service of offenders’ goals” (p. 41). Even though decision-making is constrained by time, the offender’s cognitive abilities, and the availability of relevant information (Cornish & Clarke, 1987; see also Johnson & Payne, 1986), offenders nevertheless attempt to minimize their risks of apprehension and maximize their gains. Offenders are thus perceived as decision makers, whose choices are directed by the values, the costs, and the likelihood of obtaining desired outcomes. The rational choice perspective is particularly relevant since it “offers just such a fluid, dynamic picture—one that views offending as more present-oriented and situationally influenced” than other criminological theories (Clarke & Cornish, 2001, p. 32). Situational factors, such as the resistance of the victim, are seen as having an important role since it influences the decisions of the offender and consequently, the offender–victim interaction that follows when a crime is committed (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). For example, Elliott, Browne, and Kilcoyne (1995) found that 39% of sexual offenders in their sample said that they would use threats or violence to overcome child resistance if necessary. Because crime is viewed as a dynamic process influenced by situational factors, offenders are seen as individuals that may improve their decision-making through experience and learn to modify their strategies to commit crimes.

An important feature of this perspective is that it emphasizes the importance of the behaviors adopted by the offender to more fully comprehend the “how” of the crime. From a rational choice perspective, Proulx, Ouimet, and Lachaine (1995) conducted an exploratory study examining the decisions and behaviors of sexual offenders against children to better understand their crime-commission process. These authors suggested that the offender has to make a series of decisions before sexually abusing a child. According to Proulx et al. (1995), the offender has to choose his hunting ground, that is, the places where he is likely to encounter a potential victim and the time when he is going to offend. Following these decisions, the offender has to select a victim according to his/her erotic value (age, gender and physical characteristics), to his/her vulnerability (physical and/or psychological) and to his/her familiarity. Finally, the offender has to decide how he is going to approach the victim, and which strategy he will adopt to get the victim involved in sexual activity. But more importantly, this study suggested that the strategies adopted by a sexual offender may be influenced by situational factors. For instance, it showed that a public hunting ground and a stranger victim are characteristics that may be related to using coercion for obtaining sexual contact. Ouimet and Proulx (1994) also suggested that the more distance traveled by the offender to find a potential victim, the higher the level of violence used to commit the crime.

1.2. The crime-commission model in criminology

The rational choice perspective was used as the theoretical framework to derive models of criminal behavior, each implying a distinctive decision process influenced by a different set of factors (Clarke &

Cornish, 1985, 2001; Cornish & Clarke, 1986). For the purpose of this study, the model of interest is the criminal event model which accounts for the commission of a specific crime. Because the initial criminal event model involved only one stage of the crime-commission process, that is, target selection, Cornish (1994) proposed the concept of *crime scripts* to assist in the analysis of the whole crime-commission process. Crime scripts are step-by-step accounts of the strategies adopted by offenders to commit crimes. The most important benefit of the crime script concept is that it provides a framework to systematically investigate all of the stages of the crime-commission process of a specific crime and in as much detail as existing data allow (Cornish, 1994). It also helps to identify the decisions that the offender must make at each stage as well as the situational variables such as obstacles that might lead the offender to alter his initial *modus operandi*.

Cornish (1998) was the first to elaborate crime-commission script models for sexual offenses against children. He outlined two particular scripts related to sexual abuse of male victims, that is, a script to account for offenses committed by stranger offenders in public places and another explaining offenses perpetrated by offenders in residential institutions. As an illustration, the latter script is the following: preparation (elaboration of sexual fantasies, access and use of child pornography, network of other offenders), entry to setting (already in setting), preconditions (using a legitimate role, right of access to all aspects of setting, absence of capable guardians), instrumental precondition (selecting a potential victim), instrumental initiation (“grooming”), instrumental actualization (removal or access to an unsupervised place, lack of escape routes), doing (sexual assault), postcondition (successful disengagement) and exit from setting. Although these crime-commission script models were not empirically verified, they showed the relevance of studying sexual offenses using this approach. Moreover, the crime-commission script model represents a sequence of instrumental actions adopted prior, during, and following the criminal act and thus, is consistent with the *modus operandi* temporal framework provided by Kaufman, Hilliker, and Daleiden (1996).

Somewhat influenced by Cornish’s work (1998), Beauregard, Proulx, Rossmo, Leclerc, and Allaire (2009) conducted a study on serial sex offenders to identify particular crime-commission scripts with this population. This study analyzed 361 criminal events reported by 72 serial sex offenders, mostly offenders against women. Using hierarchical cluster and multiple correspondence analyses, the authors identified three different crime-commission scripts: (1) coercive; (2) manipulative; and (3) non-persuasive, that is, no particular strategy. This study also suggests that sexual offenders can switch from one strategy to another according to environmental factors, such as the crime location, when committing crimes.

2. Empirical studies

The first studies which specifically analyzed the *modus operandi* of sexual offenders against children were conducted in the late 1980s (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Budin & Johnson, 1989; Christiansen & Blake, 1990; Conte, Wolf, & Smith, 1989; Lang & Frenzel, 1988) (see Table 1). These studies were mainly undertaken to provide information for prevention purposes. As Berliner and Conte (1990) pointed out: “Much current prevention knowledge is based on anecdotal information about the victimization process. Understanding the process... will help locate areas for prevention education both for already victimized children and for children in general” (p. 29). These studies provided crucial data about the strategies adopted by sexual offenders against children to commit their crimes. For example, offenders have been found to gradually desensitize the victim to physical contact before moving to sexual touch (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Christiansen & Blake, 1990). Offenders also use some type of coercion and threats (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Budin & Johnson, 1989; Conte et al., 1989; Lang & Frenzel, 1988), particularly when manipulation fails (Christiansen &

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