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Victim Choice Polymorphism and Risk in Juveniles Who Sexually Offend

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Contrary to the popular assumption that those who offend sexually remain fixed with their choice of victim type, a large proportion of adult perpetrators display crossover/mixed offending tendencies for victim gender, victim age, and victim-offender relationship (Kleban et al., 2013). Levenson and colleagues (2008) similarly found that 22% of adult contact offenders had victims of both genders and 26% had both child and adult victims. The prevalence of polymorphic offending tendencies signifies the importance of understanding how those types of offenders are similar to or different from others who sexually offend against victims of more restricted characteristics.

How researchers categorize polymorphic offenders in previous studies potentially presents methodological issues that might obscure our understanding of important sexual offending patterns and offender characteristics. For example, many studies prioritize intrafamilial offender categorization. Stated differently, if an offender has both an intrafamilial and an extrafamilial victim, that offender is often classified in the research as an intrafamilial offender (e.g., Lutzman et al., 2011; Worling, 1995). Alternatively, other studies that categorize JSOs based on victim characteristics do not mention how they handle or classify polymorphic offenders (e.g., Fischer & McDonald, 1998; Kaufman et al., 1998).

The limited research that has examined polymorphic offenders versus those who offended against a particular victim type has produced mixed results. For example, Kleban and colleagues (2013) found that adult polymorphic offenders in victim-offender relationship scored higher, though not significantly, on the Static-99 than other offenders whose victim selection were stable. Joyal and colleagues (2016) found that polymorphic juveniles who sexually offended (JSOs) exhibited a number of differences from exclusive child victim and peer-adult victim JSOs on risk-relevant variables, though the direction of differences were not consistently across variable type.

Further, the relative risk of sexual recidivism associated with offenders with certain victim types may be related to how polymorphic offenders were categorized. For example, the greater risk associated with the intrafamilial offending (Seto et al., 2015) might have more to do with the way polymorphic offenders are categorized in research studies than a characteristic of exclusively intrafamilial offenders themselves. While there is some speculation that polymorphic tendencies do not act as distinguishing factors and only reflect the impact of number of victims on risk level (e.g., Lutzman et al., 2011; Stephens et al., 2018), this study sought to further explore this hole in the literature and as applied to JSOs.

The current study employed a sample of 1254 male JSOs adjudicated guilty for a contact sex offense. They were categorized on the basis of several victim characteristics,

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including victim age (i.e., peer-adult vs. child vs. mixed age), familial relation (i.e., extrafamilial vs. intrafamilial vs. mixed relationship), and victim gender (male vs. female vs. mixed gender). Fifty risk-relevant variables were scored for each JSO on the basis of a juvenile justice casefile review, and those variables were subjected to a principal axis factor analysis that resulted in a five-factor solution. Scores on the JSORRAT-II and Scales 1 and 2 of the J-SOAP-II also were collected. JSO polymorphic victim variables then served as quasi-independent variables in several series of factorial analyses of variance statistics, controlling for number of victims, with the factor and risk assessment tools scores as dependent variables.

Notably, despite some small cell sizes where JSOs were characterized as having multiple polymorphic categorizations, several main effects and interactions emerged. In general, polymorphic offenders scored higher across risk-related factors scores and risk assessment tool scores. The increase in scores was most pronounced as JSOs qualified for more polymorphic categories. These results together suggest that polymorphic JSOs tend to have histories that are associated with a greater likelihood of sexual offending and have a number of other risk factors associated with sexual offense recidivism. The implication of these findings for risk assessment and management, as well as treatment will be discussed during the presentation.

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