

## Offence Processes of Online Sexual Grooming and Abuse of Children via Internet Communication Platforms

### Aims

This paper forms part of a doctoral research project which aimed to develop a better understanding of the characteristics, modus operandi and motivations of individuals who engage in offending behaviour that involves sexual grooming as part of sexually exploitative interactions with young people online. It aimed to examine the context in which such interactions are initiated and continued/maintained, as well as identify strategies offenders employ to approach, initiate and maintain online contact with (potential) victims. It also examined the process of sexual grooming and related offender behaviours.

### Key Findings

- Offenders employed either an indirect or a direct approach to conversations with victims and initiating contact with them.
- The approach offenders employed was further reflected in the types of strategies they used during the grooming process.
- Aspects of the process of sexual grooming were only present in interactions which reflected an indirect offender approach (and were lacking in those using a direct approach).
- There appeared to be differences in the way offenders approached victims and the types of strategies they used to initiate online sexual activity and incite victims to engage therein.
- Offenders appeared to be relatively consistent in terms of the strategies they used across interactions with different victims.

### Policy Context

- The lack of a process of sexual grooming in the majority of interactions in this sample is important given that they are commonly referred to as online (sexual) grooming. It provides new insights into the varied nature of sexually exploitative interactions, and suggests that Internet communication platforms may facilitate a more directive approach by offenders, whereby they bypass conventional constraints of achieving another person's compliance. This would further support the role of opportunity in the progression and escalation of offending behaviour.
- The finding that a majority of the interactions did not progress to a physical meeting supports more recent research suggesting that there is a group of individuals who are solely motivated to engage in 'cybersexual' interactions with young people (e.g., Briggs et al., 2011; Webster et al., 2012).
- Contrary to assertions in the literature that offenders engage in a process of sexual grooming for the purpose of arranging a physical meeting with a particular child (e.g., Malesky, 2007), most interactions in the present research lacked this aim. This not only challenges the use of 'sexual/online grooming' to refer to such interactions, it also provides new insights into offenders' modus operandi as part of sexually exploitative interactions with victims online. Specifically, the Internet provides an environment in which conventional constraints to achieve another person's compliance can be bypassed, thereby enabling offenders to make use of direct, aggressive approaches.

- The finding that most interactions in this sample lacked a process of sexual grooming contests current applications of this terminology and its definition in relation to sexually exploitative interactions. These apparent discrepancies and variations not only hinder our understanding of this phenomenon, but may also impact on young people's awareness and recognition of it. This is exacerbated by the labelling of Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Home Office, 2003) as the "sexual grooming legislation" (Craven et al., 2007, p. 60), despite this process not being the focus of the legislation.
- Transcripts of chat logs may further provide important information about offenders' sexual fantasies, interests/preferences, and potential paraphilic tendencies, whose assessment can prove difficult in light of absent evidence. This knowledge is essential for informing appropriate risk assessment protocols, treatment needs and management requirements.

### Methodology

A five case series, comprising 29 transcripts of 22 interactions, were analysed using thematic analysis. These were identified and selected by the police forces involved based on meeting the criteria of the offender having committed (a) an offence of sexual grooming under Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Home Office, 2003), or (b) any other offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 that included sexual grooming. The relevant police reports were reviewed for descriptive and case-specific information. The five offenders were men aged between 27 and 52 years ( $M = 33.6$ ,  $SD = 5.6$ ), and the number of children they communicated with ranged from one to twelve ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ). Victims were aged between 11 and 15 ( $M = 13.0$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ), and were both female and male.

### Background

The current literature illustrates apparent discrepancies and variations in the use of terminology and definition of online sexual grooming, which, coupled with the wide range of behaviours this process reportedly comprises, hinders our understanding of it. Whittle et al. (2014a) have noted that there appears to be a lack of acknowledgement of the process of sexual grooming developing into exploitation and/or abuse. Studies consistently refer to children being groomed, however, this merely implies that abuse has occurred. As sexual grooming is characterised as a process of preparation for the abuse of a child (Craven et al., 2006), it is suggested that interactions which move beyond this process more accurately constitute sexual exploitation and abuse rather than grooming.

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