



From online to offline sexual offending: Episodes and obstacles

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ABSTRACT

Script theory explains how different types of crime may be committed in a particular sequence. While researchers have traditionally been interested in crimes against property and crimes against persons, this study analyzes a new form of crime: sexual crimes committed on the Internet. The objective of the present study was to review the scientific literature and investigate how viewing and creating Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) can be understood dynamically. It is suggested that a motivated CSEM user, in acquiring new knowledge and techniques, goes through many stages and obstacles that lead ultimately to the contact sexual abuse of children. It is important to note that only a small proportion of individuals who follow the scripts described move on to the next step. The focus here is on the context and not on any causality between the steps, as the latter has not been demonstrated. Specifically, this study looked at the offenders' path from consumption of adult pornography, to consumption of CSEM, to its distribution, to child luring, and, finally, to child sexual abuse and production of CSEM. The limitations and implications of the study are discussed.

1. Introduction

Technological developments such as the computerization of almost all spheres of human activity and the omnipresence of the Internet have afforded offenders new opportunities. The vast majority of studies of online offending have adopted a typological approach (e.g., Krone, 2004; Lanning, 2010), the tacit assumption being that consumers of Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) fall into static types, with no inter-type migration possible. However, this type of taxonomic analysis may not fully explain the behaviour of online sexual offenders (Aslan, 2011). Moreover, while studies have attempted to identify the predictors of hands-on acting out by CSEM users (e.g., Lee, Li, Lamade, Schuler, & Prentky, 2012; Long, Alison, & McManus, 2013; Seto & Eke, 2015; Smid, Schepers, Kamphuis, Van Linden, & Bartling, 2014), little is still known about how the mechanisms and factors influence a consumer's progression from apprentice to expert and, in the worst case, to sexual abuser. This study was undertaken to identify offending scenarios based on a review of the literature on CSEM. Its analytical framework draws upon script theory (Cornish, 1994), with special attention to the evolution of events and episodes involving online sexual offenders.

A product of the cognitive sciences, scripts are defined as metatypes that describe the way in which events normally occur (Schank & Abelson, 1977). The adaptation of the script approach to the study of criminal acts facilitates the generation, organization, and

systematization of knowledge on procedural and routine aspects of criminal acts (Cornish, 1994). This approach breaks down criminal acts into a series of steps, and is particularly useful for the analysis of the offending process and the characterization of the offender's decisions and actions. Cornish (1994) describes the following criminal steps: target selection, preparation, commission of the crime, escape, and post-crime acts. In any given situation, individuals tend to adopt a trial and error method to obtain the results they desire; scripts are the step-by-step description of the procedure that allows offenders to successfully offend (Leclerc, Wortley, & Smallbone, 2011).

There are four levels to crime-script analysis (Cornish, 1994). The metascript comprises all the crimes within a given class—for example, sexual aggression, which encompasses many types of infractions. The protoscript distinguishes between subgroups of offenders (e.g., child molesters). Scripts correspond to specific offenses, which are further divided into categories specific to the crime in question. Scripts are useful for designing situational prevention strategies based on characteristics of victims, situations, and modus operandi. Finally, the track is the lowest, most pragmatic, level of abstraction. The development of multi-level crime scripts allows for a more detailed, and more useful, description of processes relevant to crime prevention.

1.1. Application of crime-script analytical frameworks from other studies

Criminologists have widely used crime scripts to better understand

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crimes with significant technical dimensions. First applied to crimes against property (Cornish, 1994; Morselli & Roy, 2008), scripts have subsequently been applied to crimes against persons, for example sexual aggression (Beauregard, Proulx, Rossmo, Leclerc, & Allaire, 2007; Deslauriers-Varin & Beauregard, 2010; Leclerc et al., 2011), suicide bombing (Clarke & Newman, 2006), and carjacking (Copes, Hochstetler, & Cherbonneau, 2012). Research suggests that criminals can adjust their scripts to specific circumstances, and that some criminals adopt an approach that maximizes the cost–benefit relationship of their crimes. This research does not however appear to have considered the dynamic nature of offenders, who change script as their expertise grows, and commit increasingly serious offenses.

1.2. Application of script theory to online offending

The application of crime scripts to the analysis of the consumption of CSEM users requires some nuance. First, it appears necessary to adapt and refine one of the conceptual bases of scripts proposed by Schank and Abelson (1977). This is because while scripts are fundamentally dependent on the characteristics of crime scenes, this study is concerned with activities that begin in virtual spaces. It is therefore important to bear in mind that websites and website-related tools are a form of “location”, in that they are “visited”. However, the relational properties of virtual locations differ from those of physical spaces, particularly with regard to anonymity, the ability to be simultaneously present in multiple jurisdictions, and the availability of camouflage and encryption techniques that have no real-world analogues (see Castells, 2002).

One noteworthy aspect of this study is its consideration of the temporal evolution of online sexual offending. It has been suggested that each new child sexual abuse image corresponds to a criminal act. However, this study took a more top-down approach, since image downloading is rapid, susceptible to partial automation, and part of a broader pattern of collecting behaviours. Our analysis of the behaviours of CSEM users thus takes a much more longitudinal perspective than is typical of analyses of urgent and immediate situations involving split-second reactions of victims (e.g., carjacking; see Copes et al., 2012). In fact, temporality lies at the heart of the analytical framework for online offenders, with criminal episodes distributed along more extended scales of severity and time. Moreover, this conceptualization of online offending emphasizes the causes and nature of the escalation of criminal episodes. The concept of metascripts will be used, as it encompasses a wide variety of offenses related to the consumption of CSEM. The way in which crime scripts of online offenders merge into a coherent whole will be explained.

1.3. Implications of the study

This study was undertaken to clarify the dynamics of acting out by the small proportion of sexual offenders who migrated from merely consuming CSEM to sexually assaulting children. It is important to note that research suggests that only a small proportion of CSEM users commit sexual assault (Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011), and that the large majority of them might possess psychological and social characteristics that protect them from hands-on acting out (see Finkelhor, 1984). The process that leads from one crime to a different crime is a very dynamic one. While many of the stages presented in the paper are descriptively accurate, one cannot conclude that these stages occur in a linear manner. This being so, this study reviewed the scientific literature in an attempt to explain the dynamics of the behaviour of this specific subgroup of online sexual offenders.

2. Methodology

In order to establish a list of potential activities of online sexual offenders, the literature on online sexual exploitation was reviewed,

focusing on both child pornography and luring offenses. Four online databases were searched: PubMed, PsycINFO (APA), and Social Abstracts (ProQuest). The following keywords were used: “child sexual exploitation material”, “child sexual abuse material”, “child luring”, “online solicitation”, “child pornography”, “child grooming”, “sexual grooming”, “internet sex offender” and “online sex offender”. To be eligible for review, studies had to be published in peer-reviewed journals between 1990 and 2017. Duplicates and studies not relevant to this study’s objectives were eliminated. This resulted in 506 candidate articles from PubMed, 6 from PsychINFO, and 6 from Social Abstracts. Several studies addressed related issues: sexting, legal considerations, medical manifestations, deviant sexual preferences in the general public, impact on individuals working with this clientele, etc. Books cited in the selected articles and containing empirical data were also retained for review. In order to fill the gap between academic research and recent reports that may provide insights into the topic, we also added technical reports from credible sources such as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children - NCMEC reports and the Internet Watch Foundation. From all these sources, 64 papers were retained. The behaviours reported in the studies were grouped into episodes, and the context in which individuals transitioned from one episode to another was noted. As such, we used the literature to learn about the *modus operandi* of the crimes under study. This approach is similar to that of Clarke and Newman (2006), who re-created the scripts of suicide bombers in the absence of direct data.

The nature and use of the tools used by online sexual offenders, as well as these offenders’ *modus operandi*, were reviewed and grouped into four broad categories of online sexual activities. The literature review revealed the existence of three categories of online sexual offenders: explorers (who access and view CSEM); distributors (who share CSEM); groomers (who sexually solicit children) and aggressors (who sexually abuse children) (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2011; Corriveau & Fortin, 2011; Fortin & Roy, 2006; Klain, Davies, & Hicks, 2001; Krone, 2004; McLaughlin, 2000). On the basis of a meta-analysis of the characteristics of consumers of CSEM, Babchishin, Hanson, and Hermann (2011) suggest four profiles: (a) curiosity- or impulse-driven consumption, with no special sexual interest in children; (b) consumption to satisfy sexual fantasies, with however no hands-on sexual offenses; (c) creation and distribution of CSEM solely for financial gain¹; and (d) use of the Internet to facilitate the commission of hands-on sexual offenses.

3. Analysis

3.1. The relationship between scripts, child pornography and acting out

The time has long past that online CSEM was readily and openly available with minimum controls. Today, motivated CSEM users, like other criminals, must embark on a trial-and-error learning process. On the basis of the results of the literature review, a dynamic four-episode model of the scripts related to the online sexual exploitation of children was developed (Fig. 1). In each episode, online offenders assimilate knowledge about virtual spaces and useful tools; it is likely that social learning (Sutherland, 1947) proceeds differently in virtual contexts than in physical ones. As Ouimet (2006) notes, online interactions between individuals leaves indelible traces in the vast ocean of Internet data. Today’s virtual criminals do not obtain their social learning from criminal peers in the real world, but in virtual discussion forums. Thus, Internet users with no previous criminal experience can obtain new knowledge simply through asynchronous consultation of the archives of online forums. The Internet’s anonymity emboldens Internet users, who do not hesitate to communicate freely (Corriveau, 2010; for examples,

¹ This study did not investigate commercial CSEM distribution networks, as they have so far garnered little research attention and have different objectives.

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