Progression, maintenance, and feedback of online child sexual grooming: A qualitative analysis of online predators

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ABSTRACT

The limited literature on online child grooming has focused mainly on studying the characteristics of perpetrators and victims that facilitate the sexual abuse of minors. Little attention has been given to the perceptions of the perpetrators about the abuse process and the strategies used to sustain it over time. In the present study, after identifying a sample of 12 men convicted of online grooming, we used qualitative grounded theory through in-depth interviews and comparisons with the proven facts of their convictions. The results show how aggressors actively study the structural environment, the needs and vulnerabilities of the minors). In this way, the aggressors adapt by using most effective strategies of persuasion at all times, so that the child feels like an active part of the plot. This allows the aggressors to have sexual interactions with minors either online or offline and in a sporadic or sustained manner. This process is maintained with some distorted perceptions about minors and the abuse process, which seem to feed back to the beginning of the cycle with other potential victims. The interaction between the persuasive processes and the distorted perceptions of the aggressor leads to a potential work focus for treatment as well as detection and prevention. Trying to visualize the complexity of the phenomenon could also help researchers to understand processes from this approach that may be applied with other types of vulnerable populations.

1. Introduction

Recent studies have revealed a worrisome increase in complaints of sexual solicitation and exploitation of children through the Internet (De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 2014; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2010). Originally, interest in sexual exploitation was more focused on the field of production, use, and distribution of child pornography, with limited studies on online grooming to date (Whittle et al., 2013). *Online grooming* is the process by which an adult, using the means offered by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), enters into the dynamic of persuading and victimizing a child sexually, both physically and through the Internet, by performance or obtaining sexual material from the minor (Kloess et al., 2014; Mcalinden, 2006).

ICTs enable issues such as greater accessibility to children who participate in a normalized way in the virtual environment (Gámez-Guadix, De Santisteban, & Alcazar, 2017b; Gámez-Guadix, De Santisteban, & Resett, 2017a; Gámez-Guadix & Gini, 2016;

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Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Quayle & Cooper, 2015). Motivated adults see increased opportunities for interaction with minors as well as the ability to operate in multiple scenarios and with different potential victims at the same time (Quayle, Allegro, Hutton, Sheath, & Lööf, 2014; Winters, Kaylor, & Jeglic, 2017). Likewise, elements such as anonymity and the ability to operate from a distance are significant factors that enable perpetrators to overstep habitual limits of social control, favoring abusive behaviors (Garaigordobil, 2011; Smith, 2012; Suler et al., 2004). Studies have found that most offenders have abused several victims (Bergen, 2014; Winters et al., 2017). Little is known, however, about how this cycle of grooming progresses and is maintained throughout several cycles of abuse with different victims (Winters et al., 2017).

Most studies show a greater sexual victimization online among girls, followed by victims who are either gay minors or have a poorly defined sexual identity; victimization is most common among minors between 13 and 17 years of age (Winters et al., 2017; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013; Wolak et al., 2010). Associated behaviors also include contact with strangers over the Internet or using chat-rooms (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007a; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007b; Wolak et al., 2010). The existence of vulnerabilities in the minors, such as the need for affection and attention, the existence of depressive states, or early traumatization (e.g., having suffered sexual or physical abuse) seem to be related to a greater probability of victimization by online grooming (Mitchell et al., 2007b; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2015; Wolak et al., 2010).

Apart from elements favored by ICTs and variables related to online predators and victims, little is known about the processes of persuasion that are developed during online grooming (Whittle et al., 2013; Quayle et al., 2014). There are studies, however, regarding the tactics of persuasion in processes of offline grooming that can provide us with valuable information to understand the tactics of online grooming (e.g., Gallagher, 2000; Mcalinden, 2006; Ost, 2002; Salter, 2003). For example, Mcalinden (2006) makes a classification of the different strategies of offline grooming. Specifically, "personal grooming" refers to strategies that adults use to make their contact legitimate and to gain power over children, such as knowing their interests and building a special rapport by giving them gifts (e.g., comics, sweets, etc.). The "familial grooming" is about preparing the child's parents or caregivers by establishing a friendship with them, to ensure trust, gain cooperation in accessing the child, and reduce the likelihood of discovery. Finally, McAlinden points to "institutional grooming," which is the strategy of using one's own job or professional situation as a means of abusing the children with whom they work. At the same time, one of the issues that is well-known regarding offline grooming is that the aggressors are usually people of the child's own family environment or close acquaintances (Grubin, 1998). Mcalinden (2006) pointed out that contact via Internet or via ICTs is a way in which aggressors can get to know children and stop being "strangers" to them. In this case, the time spent engaging with minors varies between studies (Whittle et al., 2013). According to Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen (2011), if the goal is to meet the child offline, "contact-driven" offenders typically spend less than a week in online engagement before arranging to meet. This is consistent with other studies showing that some abusers spend little time trying to engage with minors (Winters et al., 2017). On the other hand, "fantasy-driven" offenders were found to communicate online with victims for an average of 32.9 days, with the maximum relationship examined in that study lasting 180 days (Briggs et al., 2011). This is in agreement with other studies showing that some abusers expend considerable effort and time in engaging with minors (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004).

When identifying relevant elements in the perpetration of online grooming, Quayle and Taylor (2003) used a qualitative approach to analyze the model of problematic Internet use in people with a sexual interest in children. Their study established relationships between elements of ICTs and the role of cognition in men convicted of downloading child pornography as a part of their offense. The results showed that the perpetrators' cognition about themselves and about the minors or the pornographic material about the minors influenced the development of the problematic use of the Internet in adults with a sexual interest in children. In another study with offenders convicted of online grooming in the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Norway, Webster et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of the distortions of thoughts fed by interactions in forums for people with a sexual interest in minors. In this study, the authors emphasized that the adults' beliefs of minimization of harm were maintained when there was no direct contact with the children or when there were no signs of resistance of the children in the pornographic material (Webster et al., 2012). In addition, the offenders exhibited other characteristics that complicated accountability, such as undercontrol of impulses or feelings of addiction to the Internet (Webster et al., 2012).

Additionally, O'Connell (2003) suggested a model of the online grooming process based on sequentially organized stages. The analysis came from conversations between a researcher posing as a decoy between 8 and 12 years old and potential sexual offenders. The study suggested a progression between stages when starting and maintaining the relationship, with different persuasive elements typical of each of the five stages: the friendship forming stage, the relationship forming stage, the risk assessment stage, the exclusivity stage, and the sexual stage. However, later studies have examined the progression developed by O'Connell (2003), and have revealed inconsistencies that reflect the non-linearity and universality of the elements of the model (Williams, Elliott, & Beech, 2013; Black, Wollis, Woodworth, & Hancock, 2015). In the work of Black, Wollis et al. (2015), a computerized content analysis was performed on transcripts of convicted online offenders to analyze the type of language used in the different stages proposed by O'Connell (2003) and to examine the frequency of specific persuasion techniques used in grooming both online and offline. Assessing the target´s location and attempting to make plans to meet, using flattery and compliments, and assessing for the target´s parent´s work schedule were techniques used most often. The main limitation of the study by Black et al. (2015) is that the analysis was not conducted on conversations with real minors, but with volunteers trained by the Pervert Justice Foundation (PJF), a nonprofit organization committed to catching and exposing online sexual offenders in the United States.

Several studies have focused on analyzing elements that have generated an online predator's interest in a particular victim at the beginning of the grooming process (Malesky, 2007; Marcum, 2007). For example, Malesky (2007) highlighted elements such as a minor mentioning sex in any fashion online, a child online who appeared "needy" or "submissive," and the minor's screen name, especially if the name was "young sounding." All participants in this study were recruited from the Prision´s Sex Offender Treatment