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A Comparison of Victim and Offender Perspectives of Grooming and Sexual Abuse

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This study involved interviews with three female victims of on-line grooming and contact sexual abuse and the three adult males who groomed and abused them. Results indicate that victim and offender dyads most commonly disagreed in their accounts of the sexual elements of the relationship, including initiation; stage when sexualization took place; production of photos and videos; and initiation of contact sexual abuse. The study found that the dynamic between offenders and victims of on-line grooming and child sexual abuse can be varied and complex. Findings are discussed in the context of implications for practitioners and prevention.

It has been found that many child sex offenders use the Internet to access and groom young people (Cohen-Almagor 2013; Elliott and Beech 2009; Wolak and Finkelhor 2013). Grooming is the process whereby, “a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child” (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006:297). However, offenders who groom children and young people on-line often have different goals to those who groom off-line (Elliott and Beech 2009; European Online Grooming Project 2012; Whittle et al. 2013a) and may either be “fantasy driven” (i.e., their goal is to acquire sexual footage of the victim) or “contact driven” (i.e., their goal is to gain access to the victim off-line for the purpose of contact sexual abuse) (Briggs, Simon, and Simonsen 2011). Regardless of the offenders’ goal, victims of on-line grooming can experience a range of manipulation styles during the grooming process, which may include: flattery, trust building, threats, sexualization, and bribery (O’Connell 2003; Ospina, Harstall, and Dennet 2010; Whittle et al. 2013a). Research also suggests that both on-line groomers and those who are targeted and victimized are a heterogenous group (Briggs et al. 2011; Whittle et al. 2013b) and therefore dynamics within grooming relationships vary considerably.

Recent research by Williams, Elliott, and Beech (2013) has identified three main themes within the grooming process: rapport building; sexual content; and assessment. While largely

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consistent with O'Connell's (2003) earlier research, Williams et al. (2013) found the themes to be non-sequential and reported that they can occur at any stage of grooming, depending on the individual offender. Understanding the dynamic between victim and offender can provide key insights, increasing the likelihood of adults recognizing the discrete signs of abuse. This can improve detection and prevention, which is particularly important given the low disclosure rates among child victims of sexual abuse (Schönbucher et al. 2013).

While a number of child sex offenders do not feel shame or guilt for their offending, there are many who admit feeling negative emotions as a result of their behavior (Proeve and Howells 2002). Research indicates that in these cases, offenders often employ techniques that enable the facilitation of a more psychologically comfortable position; giving excuses or justifications for their offending behavior (Navathe, Ward, and Gannon 2008). Salter (1988) outlines denial in sex offenders as a spectrum rather than a single state. This continuum involves the following elements: (1) denial of the act itself; (2) denial of fantasy and planning; (3) denial of responsibility for the act; (4) denial of the seriousness of the act; (5) denial of internal guilt for the act; and (6) denial of the difficulty in changing abusive patterns (Salter 1988). It is understood that child sex offenders often attempt to minimize and justify their offending and will utilize enduring cognitive distortions as a means of doing so (Blake and Gannon 2006; Blumenthal, Gudjonsson, and Burns 1999; Ó Ciardha and Ward 2013; Sullivan 2002). Over time, the term "cognitive distortion" has come to encompass several dimensions including: excuses, minimizations, rationalizations, and denial (Murphy 1990) as well as justifications (Abel et al. 1989), victim blame (Ward 2000), and entrenched beliefs (Hall and Hirshman 1991), which implicate the child (for a review see Navathe et al. 2008). Cognitive distortions not only assist an individual in initiating a sexual offense, but they also encourage the maintenance of this offending behavior (Mann and Beech 2003).

Regardless of the environment in which sexual abuse occurs, increased understanding of the subtleties within the grooming process is imperative in order to improve prevention and intervention techniques. While significant steps have been taken to understand offenders who groom young people (European Online Grooming Project 2012; Seto et al. 2012), and initial steps have been taken to understand on-line grooming from the perspective of the victim (Quayle, Jonsson, and Lööf 2012; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, and Beech 2014b), few studies have compared perspectives of offenders and victims within the same case or dyad (e.g., a study by Phelan in 1995 compared cases of father–daughter incest by interviewing both offenders and victims), and no research to date has compared these perspectives from the same on-line grooming case.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the dynamic of the relationship between victims and offenders, to examine similarities and differences in their perspectives of the same events.

METHOD

Procedure

Police and professionals who had previously worked with the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre or had attended the CEOP training courses were approached by the researcher to enquire if they knew of young people who would fit the inclusion criteria for this study. CEOP is a UK government and law enforcement agency established to tackle the

sexual exploitation of children, both on-line and off-line. An information sheet was e-mailed to approximately 2,500 professionals outlining the research. Inclusion criteria were: (1) the young person is between 12 and 18 years old at the time of interview; (2) the young person has been a victim of on-line grooming in the past; (3) the case relating to the grooming had been closed; (4) the young person would like to participate in research; (5) the professionals associated with the case agree that participation will have no detrimental effects for the young person; and (6) the parent or guardian of the young person consented for the interview to take place. Exclusion criteria were: (a) the young person has mental health difficulties and/or (b) the young person has an intellectual disability. Young people who were interested in participating were given an information sheet about the research, as were their parent/carer. The participant, their parent/carer, and the professionals associated with the case were all required to sign a consent form prior to the young person's involvement. As part of the consent process for the young person, they could opt in or opt out of their offender being approached for interview. None of the victims opted out of this possibility. It was made clear to victim participants that their offenders would not be told that the researcher had interviewed them. In total eight young people agreed to be interviewed as part of this research, and also agreed for their offender to be approached for interview. A time and place was arranged for the interview, in a neutral setting. The young person was offered the option of having their parent present at the interview (this was not preferred by any of the participants).

Based on the victim sample, the researcher contacted the prison intelligence officer or probation officer associated with the offender. If deemed appropriate by this professional, a letter was given to the offender inviting them to participate in the research. Offenders were informed they had been selected based on the offenses they had committed. Of the seven offenders associated with the eight victims, two offenders were available to be spoken to. The reasons why the other offenders were not available to participate were as follows: one offender was currently being re-investigated for other crimes, two offenders were not convicted of the associated offense, and one institution did not wish to be involved in research. The remaining offender had been released and it was not deemed appropriate to contact him, however he had already been video interviewed by CEOP regarding his offenses against the victim, thus this data could be used. The researcher arranged an appropriate time to visit the institution where the offender was incarcerated with a CEOP officer to conduct the interview.

The Interview

Prior to the interview with all the participants, a verbal explanation of the research was provided as well as a description of the withdrawal process, the confidentiality agreement, and consent information. It was highlighted to all participants that involvement in the study was voluntary, thus participants were able to refrain from answering questions, and terminate the interview at any point. It was also emphasized that all participants were able to ask questions at any stage of the interview. All interviews were semi-structured in format, which, while covering similar themes, allowed flexibility for the interviewer to follow the flow of the participant. All victim interviews were conducted by the first author; in contrast, the offender interviews were conducted by two interviewers (the first author and/or a CEOP officer). All interviews with the victims were audio recorded, transcribed, and deleted. Interviews with the offenders were all video recorded and transcribed for analysis; the videos were retained with consent of the participants for use

within law enforcement training). At the end of all interviews, a debriefing sheet was given to the participant, giving further information about the research, outlining the withdrawal process, interviewer contact information, and detailing sources of additional support.

Sample

This study involves semi-structured interviews with three young victims of sexual abuse and the three adult offenders who abused them. All victim participants in this study were female and aged between 12 and 14 years during the grooming and abuse (but between the ages of 13 and 18 years at time of interview). All three victims experienced on-line grooming leading to sexual abuse both on- and off-line. The three offenders were male and aged between 20 and 49 when they committed offenses against these victims. They were all interviewed within four years of conviction and subsequent imprisonment. Please note all identifying features relating to participants have been changed throughout this article.

Dyad 1

Joanne was 14 years old when she started speaking to Sam. Sam was 49 years old but had created an on-line profile of a teenage boy. During the course of 18 months the pair talked frequently and Joanne was incited to send Sam sexual photos after a few months. Following discussions about meeting, Sam traveled to Joanne's home town. Joanne was shocked to discover Sam's real age; however, this shock was contrasted with Joanne believing she was in love with Sam, resulting in Joanne leaving her hometown with him. They were missing for over a week, during which time Sam sexually abused Joanne on one occasion. Sam attempted sexually abusive contact on a second occasion, but Joanne was able to prevent this. The pair was found and Sam was arrested. Sam has engaged with the Sex Offender Treatment Program (SOTP) in prison.

Dyad 2

Kelly was 12 years old when she started speaking to 28-year-old Pete on-line. Pete had a previous conviction for unlawful sexual intercourse (the victim was a teenage girl whom he claimed was his girlfriend). Kelly and Pete lived near to one another and met up almost immediately (Kelly states the same day, Pete says it was a few days later). Within a few days, Pete had sexual intercourse with Kelly. The pair met several times a week for approximately two months and engaged in regular sexual activity. Kelly's friend disliked Pete and felt she barely saw Kelly anymore and consequentially informed Kelly's parents, who reported it to the police. Kelly and Pete were found together in a house where Pete often stayed, when Pete was arrested. At the time of interview both Kelly and Pete felt that they had been in a relationship. Pete has participated in sections of the SOTP since being in prison, but is uncomfortable with the process and has not completed the course.

Dyad 3

Mona was 14 years old when she started talking to 20-year-old Chris on-line. They spoke for several weeks before Chris traveled to Mona's home town where they had sexual intercourse.

They continued speaking and sharing sexual photos and videos during the course of a year. They met and had sexual intercourse for a second time at the end of the year. Throughout the contact, Chris was inciting numerous other young people (male and female) to create sexual photos and videos on-line. One of Chris' other victims was discovered to have chat-logs and indecent images relating to Chris on her computer; this initiated a police investigation. Chris was arrested and following analysis of his computer, Mona was identified as a victim. As a result, Mona and her family were contacted by the police. Due to the ethical terms of the interview, Chris was unaware the researcher had interviewed Mona, but immediately and spontaneously referred to one victim as being different to the others. This transpired to be Mona. He described his relationship with Mona as "special" as he felt emotionally close to her; this was in contrast to all other victims. Chris has engaged with SOTP since being in prison.

Ethics

The study was approved by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee (Reference ERN_11-0083), and the CEOP Research Panel, ensuring all possible steps were taken to protect the participants. All personal details associated with participants were anonymized during transcription. Therefore, all subsequent references to the interviews relate to the pseudonym attributed to the participant and any names of places and people have been changed. Only the interviewer is aware of the participants' true identity. Voice recordings of the victim participants and pre-anonymized transcripts, were destroyed. One document linked the original information with the anonymized information and this is currently stored on an encrypted computer in CEOP (a secure government building). The offenders in this study were not informed that their victim had already been interviewed as part of the research. This was to keep the victim's involvement in the research confidential, and to prevent the offender seeking information from the researcher about victims' current circumstances.

Data Analysis

All victim interviews and one offender interview was transcribed by the first author, who conducted the interviews. The two remaining offender interviews were transcribed by a secure transcription company routinely used by government departments. Thematic Analysis is a qualitative analytical technique that identifies, analyzes, and report themes from data. It is flexible, enabling the exploration of rich and detailed data without theoretical constraint (Braun and Clarke 2006). Data-driven Thematic Analysis generates themes based solely on information contained within the data, rather than overlaying a theoretical perspective. For these reasons, this study utilized Thematic Analysis across the six interview transcripts.

The interview transcripts were uploaded into NVivo (qualitative analysis software) and each section of data was allocated a node depending on its content. This node described the theme of the particular section of text. This process continued until all of the data had been allocated a node. Approximately 1,000 individual nodes were identified with some sections of text being allocated to multiple nodes. Following initial coding, nodes that shared meaning were amalgamated to form one unified node (e.g., "socially isolated" and "felt alone" were combined to become "loneliness"), and nodes that were related to each other were combined to become tree nodes

(e.g., “believed was helping the victim” and “behavior was out of character” were joined under the tree of “offender cognitive distortions”).

Discussion between the researchers during the process of analysis was pivotal to ensure themes evolved fittingly. The second author also analyzed a section of the data to provide interrater reliability. The themes identified by the second researcher were extremely similar to those outlined by the first. Nodes and themes were explored and revised until a comprehensive set of tree nodes existed that the research team felt accurately reflected the content of the data.

For each case study, tables were drawn identifying different themes of the relationship (e.g., topic of first contact, methods of contact, feelings about sexual chat, secrecy). The comments of both the victim and offender regarding elements were inserted into the table (see [Table 1](#) for an example). A color coding system was used to highlight similarities and differences in perspective for each point of the contact (red signified disagreement, orange signified elements of agreement, and disagreement and green signified agreement between dyads).

RESULTS

The numerous themes of each dyad amalgamated into four super-ordinate themes within the grooming process, 14 sub-themes across the super-ordinate themes were identified. The super-ordinate and sub-themes are as follows: (1) initial contact—including subthemes of initiation and nature; (2) grooming techniques—including subthemes of regular/intense contact, deception, kindness and flattery, erratic temperament and nastiness, secrecy, and grooming others; (3) sexualization—including subthemes of initiation, stage when sexualization took place, photos/videos, contact abuse initiation; and (4) perception of relationship—including subthemes of relationship status and longevity. For each sub-theme, it was noted whether the victim and offender gave similar versions of events or different versions of events. This was recorded as either an agreement or a disagreement. For example, within the theme relationship, there are two sub-themes; status and future. If the victim and offender from dyad 1 gave similar versions of events about the relationship status (sub-theme 1), but gave differing opinions about their expectations of the relationship (sub-theme 2), then dyad 1 would have a score of 1 out of 2 (1/2) for the super-ordinate theme of relationship. However, if they disagreed about both sub-themes, they would be attributed a 2 out of 2 (2/2) level of disagreement. Proportions of disagreement were recorded for all dyads across all super-ordinate themes and sub-themes (see [Tables 2, 3 and 4](#)).

Dyad 1 had the most disagreements; 3/4 (9 of the 12 [75%] sub-themes mentioned in Sam’s interview). The remaining two dyads had similar levels of disagreement. Dyad 3 disagreed across 7 of 14 sub-themes (50%). The least disagreements were dyad 2, who disagreed about only 6 of the 14 sub-themes (43%). Interestingly, despite all three victims perceiving themselves to be in a relationship with the offender, there are still many disagreements between dyads. Patterns emerged regarding which super-ordinate themes were most likely to induce agreements and which super-ordinate themes evoked disagreements. These are outlined below. Please note that ages given are at the time of the offense.

TABLE 1
Section of the Table Outlying Key Themes within Dyad 3, Used during Early Analysis

<i>Event</i>	<i>Mona's perspective</i>	<i>Chris' perspective</i>
Victim Life Before	Long term, generally happy, a few family fights (reconstituted family). Trigger events—fight with friends, break up with boyfriend, wanted someone to speak to, granddad died, dog died.	Knew about family fights, fight with friends, low self-esteem. Split with boyfriend while already in contact.
Offender Life Before	Bit geeky, a big drinker.	Unhappy with living situation, became recluse in bedroom on the computer, using prescription drugs and alcohol, unhappy and lonely.
Initiation of Contact	Offender initiated	Offender initiated
Place of Initial Contact	Social networking site—Netlog	Social networking site (possibly MySpace or Facebook, not sure)
Topic of First Contact	Offender offered a gift in exchange for her underwear. Victim said no, go away. A few days later offender apologized and started normal conversations.	Normal conversation (nothing sexual for 5/6 months).
Conversation Topics	Normal topics, school, relationships (he'd just broken up with someone), confided in him about friends, family fights, being upset, break up with boyfriend (2/3 months into contact).	Normal topics, confided in her and she confided in him.
Deception	No deception. But thinks he may have lied on occasion about what he was doing sometimes and suspects he may have been seeing other people.	No.
Offender Manipulation Techniques	Blowing hot and cold (broke up half way through and lots of fights), flattery (both traditional and sexual), sexual flattery increased after break up/just before meeting, slow replies to texts. Offender in control of sexual elements. Offender was nasty sometimes.	Played on her emotions, flattered her, flirted. A lot of the nice things he said were true, but he knew they'd draw her closer to him. Sub-conscious manipulation at first, but as he got more depressed and got more victims, he became more consciously aware of how he was manipulating her. He was nasty to her when they had fights and he was very stubborn after fights sometimes, so he only got in contact first and apologized if thought he was in the wrong.
Methods of Contact	Multiple: Texting, MSN, Netlog, 6 or 7 phone calls	Multiple: Social networking site, MSN

A traffic light color code system was used to highlight agreements and disagreements.

TABLE 2
Summary of Disagreements between Sam and Joanne (Dyad 1) within Each Super-Ordinate Theme

<i>Event</i>	<i>Sam's perspective</i>	<i>Joanne's perspective</i>	<i>Agreement?</i>
Initial Contact			
Initiation	Group chat, then victim requested him as a friend, he accepted.	Offender requested her as a friend and she accepted.	No
Nature	Normal conversation, getting know each other, discussed similar interests.	Normal conversation, getting to know each other, discussed similar interests.	Yes
Grooming			
Techniques			
Regular/Intense Contact	Yes	Yes	Yes
Deception	At times yes, but then told the truth. Unsure.	Yes	No
Kindness and Flattery	No	Yes	No
Erratic Temperament and Nastiness	No	Yes	No
Secrecy	Not discussed	No	N/A
Grooming Others	Not discussed	Yes	N/A
Sexualization			
Initiation	Victim initiated	Offender initiated	No
When?	After a while	4/5 months	Yes
Photos and/or Videos	No	Yes, offender initiated	No
Contact Sexual Abuse Initiation	Mutual but offender stopped it	Offender initiated	No
Relationship			
Status	Good friends but not in a relationship.	In love with one another and in a relationship.	No
Future	Did not discuss it, but may have given victim the impression of future together.	Planned to runaway together and get married.	No
Total Disagreements			9/12

Initial Contact

The super-ordinate theme of initial contact involved two sub-themes: contact initiation and nature of early contact. Disagreements were more common than agreements between pairs within this theme.

Contact Initiation

Mona and Chris [dyad 3] were the only pair that agreed about contact initiation, with both participants describing Chris as the instigator of contact. In contrast, both other dyads placed responsibility on the other individual for starting contact.

TABLE 3
Summary of Disagreements between Pete and Kelly (Dyad 2) within Each Super-Ordinate Theme

<i>Event</i>	<i>Pete's perspective</i>	<i>Kelly's perspective</i>	<i>Agreement?</i>
Initial Contact			
Initiation	Victim joined group and she requested friendship, he accepted.	Offender requested friendship, she accepted.	No
Nature	Normal conversation, getting to know each other	Sexual; he offered her money to sleep with him.	No
Grooming			
Techniques			
Regular/Intense Contact	Yes	Yes	Yes
Deception	No	No	Yes
Kindness and Flattery	Yes	Yes	Yes
Erratic Temperament and Nastiness	Yes	Yes	Yes
Secrecy	Yes	Yes	Yes
Grooming Others	No	No	Yes
Sexualization			
Initiation	Mutual	Offender	No
When?	After ten days	Immediately	No
Photos and/or Videos	No	Yes, victim initiated	No
Contact Sexual Abuse Initiation	Mutual	Mutual	Yes
Relationship			
Status	They were in a relationship and fell for each other.	They were in a relationship and in love.	Yes
Future	Wanted to stay together but knew it was unrealistic as he would get caught.	Would stay together and have a family.	No
Total Disagreements			6/14

Dyad 1

He just started talking to me . . . asking me like my age and stuff like that . . . he seemed normal cos like obviously I hadn't seen him. So he added me and I accepted. [Joanne, 14]

Joanne was part of the chatroom she was part of all these many people. . . . I started talking to Joanne, and Joanne added me to her MSN and we just started talking through there. [Sam, 48]

Dyad 2

I was just on my phone and got an inbox; someone added me on Facebook. And they started talking to me and was like . . . "hi babe" and everything. [Kelly, 13]

TABLE 4
Summary of Disagreements between Chris and Mona (Dyad 3) within Each Super-Ordinate Theme

<i>Event</i>	<i>Chris' perspective</i>	<i>Mona's perspective</i>	<i>Agreement?</i>
Initial Contact			
Initiation	Offender initiated	Offender initiated	Yes
Nature	Normal conversation, getting to know each other	Bribed her for her underwear, she refused, he apologized and then had normal conversations	No
Grooming			
Techniques			
Regular/Intense Contact	Yes	Yes	Yes
Deception	No	No	Yes
Kindness and Flattery	Yes	Yes	Yes
Eratic Temperament and Nastiness	Yes	Yes	Yes
Secrecy	No	Yes	No
Grooming Others	No	No	Yes
Sexualization			
Initiation	Mutual	Offender initiated	No
When?	A few months	5/6 months	Yes
Photos and/or Videos	Yes mutual initiation	Yes he initiated	No
Contact Sexual Abuse Initiation	Mutual initiation	Offender initiated the first time, mutual the second time.	No
Relationship			
Status	Not a girlfriend due to the distance, did not love her.	Up and down relationship; at times were in love and in a relationship.	No
Future	Indicates no future as were not together.	May stay together.	No
Total Disagreements			7/14

She joined one day [a Facebook group] and anyway, she sent me a friend request, er, I accepted it. . . . I sent the first message, she sent the friend request. [Pete, 28]

Dyad 3

He started speaking to me on this website which I only joined because my mates made me. [Mona, 14]

I was looking through my profile and saw her; thought she seemed quite interesting and said hello. [Chris, 20]

All three offenders attempt to justify their initial contact with the victims, detaching this from the likely motivation that they engaged with the girls because of their age. Minimizations also

feature in the offenders' accounts; in particular Sam and Pete highlight the victims' role in contact initiation.

Nature of Early Contact

Joanne and Sam were the only dyad who agreed about the nature of their early contact, both indicating that they spoke about mutual interests. The other two pairs disagreed, with both offenders claiming that the early contacts were "normal" (non-sexual) conversations. However, both Kelly and Mona reported immediate sexual references initiated by the offenders, although Mona described Chris apologizing for this following her negative reaction, and then commencing non-sexual conversation.

Dyad 1

For the first month we were just general chat like friends. [Joanne, 14]

Because of the range of topics that we talked about, there wasn't anything sexual talked about, because that's not me. We talked about 50's and 60's music. [Sam, 48]

Dyad 2

He said, "hi babe, you're fit" and everything. . . . Well he offered me first 200 pounds to sleep with him. [Kelly, 13]

I tried to see if we knew anybody, you know that she knew anybody I knew. Um, that was, that was about it for, probably the first couple of days. [Pete, 28]

Dyad 3

One of the first messages he sent me was asking for my underwear! . . . And then I got one a few days after that I got one saying oh that was just a joke I'm sorry if you took it seriously. I was like yeah sure whatever . . . we just started having normal conversations about like my school life and stuff, how life was going for me, how it was going for him, just typical conversation. [Mona, 14]

Oh no, as I said there was nothing sexual about that for maybe the first 5 or 6 months. [Chris, 20]

Chris minimizes his grooming of Mona by ignoring the initial sexual contact; however, given the number of victims that Chris was abusing, it is possible that his memory of the first contact with Mona is weak. Pete and Sam both deny sexual first contact, and although this is consistent with the victim perspective in dyad 1, Sam denies that this is even something he would be interested in.

Grooming Techniques

The super-ordinate theme of grooming techniques included the following sub-themes: regular/intense contact, deception, kindness and flattery, erratic temperament and nastiness, secrecy, and grooming others. This was the super-ordinate theme that included the highest level of agreement between pairs.

Regular and Intense Contact

All six participants agreed that, within their pairs, they had regular and intense contact with one another; however, disagreements arose regarding who was responsible for the high levels of contact.

Dyad 1

It was just constant talking everyday all day . . . every time I looked at my phone there was a message or a missed call. [Joanne, 14]

She had my mobile phone number she used to text me quite a lot. [Sam, 49]

Dyad 2

I couldn't like hardly ever have any time to myself. [Kelly, 13]

I'll come back and there'll be missed phone calls, text messages, "Why aren't you answering . . . your phone? Why haven't you been on Facebook?" And it was just getting a bit all too much at first . . . she was constantly on the phone. [Pete, 28]

Dyad 3

It had got to about, probably about four hours a day and that's not including texting. [Mona, 14]

I would phone and text, but that was very much the minority [of victims] that tended to be the ones that I spoke to for longer periods of time. [Chris, 20]

There were high levels of agreement about the fact that contact was intense; however, dyads typically attributed responsibility for this to the other person. The way contact is described by the offenders is consistent with victim blaming techniques; the focus tends to be on the victim contacting the offender, which assists the offenders with justifying the abuse. However, given the victims' descriptions of loving feelings toward the offender and the vulnerabilities experienced by the victims at the time, it is possible that the victims did pursue contact with the offenders. Furthermore, when put in the context of early adolescent behavior and sexual development (e.g., intense feelings of "love" for pop stars), the prospect of an older boyfriend may have been appealing and exciting to the victims. Given that each participant is retrospectively recalling events, it must be considered that each is more likely to attribute greater blame to the other party, as part of reframing.

Deception

Most dyads agreed about the levels of deception used during the grooming process. Kelly and Pete (dyad 2) agreed that deception was not used. Mona and Chris (dyad 3) also agreed that deception about identity was not used, however Mona suggested that Chris is likely to have lied about who else he was seeing; this is consistent with the fact that Chris had multiple victims. Joanne and Sam (dyad 1) agreed to a point that Sam deceived Joanne about his identity (including age and appearance), but Sam contradicted himself and changed his mind during interview.

Dyad 1

I don't think there's one thing that he said back then that I know now, that was actually the truth. . . . When I first met him, he did look a bit different . . . he just said oh, obviously I'm not 18 and I was like, I can see that. [Joanne, 14]

I did set up another account because I'm very wary of something I don't know nothing or very little about so I set up another account, I didn't put an age down there, but I did tell her I was 19. . . . No I actually created the account beforehand erm and then I found out how old she was and within just under 9 weeks, 10 weeks I had actually told her what my real age was, my real name. [Sam, 49]

Sam's contradictions surrounding deception are likely to be demonstrative of his attempts to cognitively distort his grooming behavior and the reasons behind this. His story evolved due to interviewer probing, which required him to re-evaluate and regenerate these distortions.

Kindness and Flattery

The pairs generally agreed that the offenders treated the victims kindly and flattered them; although Joanne and Sam (dyad 1) disagreed about the extent to which this was used.

Dyad 1

Felt like I could tell him anything like, really trusted him. . . . It was mainly like everything a girl would like to hear, like you're beautiful, um you deserve good things and I can do all that for you. [Joanne, 14]

I used to quite happily talk to her, help her with her homework, help her with her problems and she used to listen to me when I was really down. . . . I told her I liked her as a very, very good friend, for her taste in music, for her taste in literature erm for the way we both could help each other, we could both understand and talk to each other. [Sam, 49]

Dyad 2

He was nice and nice how he's treating me. . . . I just felt loved and it's things like, I felt happy. [Kelly, 13]

Compliments all the time really. . . . She'd say things like, "I don't deserve you, you're every girl's dream." Half, half the time it just, it made me feel sick to be honest. I thought, "No, this isn't, this isn't the way." But it wouldn't make me feel good about myself. [Pete, 28]

Dyad 3

He was being really nice to me afterwards and stuff; he said really sweet things to keep me happy. . . . He kept going oh you're the prettiest girl ever; I'd love to be with you all the time all that type of stuff really. [Mona, 14]

Be nice to her, comfort her when she's upset, make her laugh, make her feel good about herself, flirt with her. . . . I made her feel special. [Chris, 20]

During the interview, Sam and Chris described emotional identification and emotional congruence with the victim. Chris admitted to exploiting this and using flattery techniques to do this; in contrast, Sam denied conscious flattery of Joanne and focused on their emotional congruence.

Pete displayed feelings of guilt and shame during the interview when he discussed the impact his flattery had on Kelly. This may assist him in justifying the offenses to himself and it is possible that increasing victim empathy may have been part of his SOTP.

Erratic Temperament and Nastiness

All victims within this sample felt the offender was nasty toward them on occasion and, when combined with the kindness they had already experienced, this resulted in a push and pull on the victims' emotions. Pete and Chris both acknowledged that they were doing this. Pete described that on occasion this was intentionally to play with her emotions, but at other times this was a direct result of the fact he knew what he was doing was wrong, and his attempts to pull away from the relationship.

Dyad 1

He just started going really mad and getting really angry um cos we was on the park on our own and he had like really evil eyes, I just remember his eyes, erm like he grabbed hold of my wrists and then was like well you're not going, you're staying with me. [Joanne, 14]

Dyad 2

Well it made me feel like he, like I'm not wanted anymore . . . and it made me [fall] like harder fast, because like losing somebody that you think you love it's dead hard. . . . He would sometimes be nice; sometimes he'd be in a mood. [Kelly, 13]

I turned round and said something along the lines of, "If you loved me you wouldn't say that, you wouldn't do that," I think I said, or used something along them lines, one time. And she bent over backwards to make sure she was there. [Pete, 28]

I'm feeling an attraction and I'm falling for the girl. But I've still got this at the back of the head, "This is wrong, this is wrong," but nine times out of ten it's when I've sobered up. But I just carried on going. [Pete, 28]

Dyad 3

It was a bit of a rollercoaster, because there were times when I thought I loved him and then others when I hated him and didn't want to speak to him ever again and it went on like that for about a year. [Mona, 14]

I knew that she had feelings for me that were stronger than the feelings I had for her and I played on them. [Chris, 20]

Sam did not acknowledge ever being nasty to Joanne or displaying erratic temperament; this conflicts with Joanne's perspective and indicates that Sam is likely to deny this aspect of his grooming. Pete and Chris to varying extents admit emotional blackmail of the victims and displayed guilt during interview when they recognized this. Chris informed the interviewer that he did not feel similar guilt with any other of his victims.

Secrecy

Kelly and Pete agreed that they regularly discussed the need to keep the relationship secret and Pete regularly told Kelly that if they got caught he would be sent to prison. Mona stipulated that Chris encouraged her not to tell anyone and other than talking to her best friend about him, she preferred it this way. In contrast, Chris said they did not discuss secrecy, but he was aware that some of her friends knew. Joanne described not wanting to talk to others much about the relationship, while Sam did not comment on the secrecy of the relationship.

Dyad 1

I wanted to keep to myself 'cos it was 'cos it was like that nice, you know, the stuff that he was saying, I didn't like wanna tell everybody. [Joanne, 14]

Dyad 2

"Don't say a word," basically. "When you send messages or whatever, make sure everything's deleted. . . . 90% me, trying to put safe measures up to make sure, um, that if it ever did blow up, minimal damage, to be honest. [Pete, 28]

Pete used the victims' emotional dependence on him to afford them secrecy and thus his protection from the police. During the interview he acknowledged that this was to prevent him going back to prison, but minimized the fact it also enabled him to continue meeting up with and abusing Kelly regularly.

Grooming Others

Both Kelly and Pete (dyad 2), and Mona and Chris (dyad 3) agreed that the offender did not groom others close to them. However, Joanne said that both her mother and her friend were also in contact with Sam:

I did get like my mum to speak to him and she, it was like even said stuff to her that made it seem as if it just normal 18 year old. [Joanne, 14]

Charlene she'd been my friend for at least like 2 years before I started speaking to him, erm she wasn't too, too keen I mean she had him on MSN as well cos he erm, added her. Erm, and he used to send her messages trying to say like, oh why isn't Joanne answering me and stuff, cos I used to stay at hers sometimes. [Joanne, 14]

Sam did not discuss any communication with Joanne's family or friends during interview and thus is likely to be in denial of this grooming technique.

Sexualization

The super-ordinate theme of sexualization included the following sub-themes: initiation, stage when sexualization took place, photos/videos, and contact abuse. This was the super-ordinate theme that included the highest level of disagreement between pairs.

Initiation

All pairs disagreed to some extent about who initiated the sexual elements of the relationship. Joanne described the offender initiating this aspect, but in contrast, Sam stated that Joanne started sexual interactions and he was reluctant to engage with her in this way. Kelly discussed Pete introducing sex into the conversation and explained this was based on their first contact. Pete felt that sexualization of the relationship occurred mutually. Chris also felt this was a mutual progression with Mona; however, Mona described Chris initiating this.

Dyad 1

I wasn't like into all that kind of stuff or talk or anything, so it was like all new to me when he did start talking like that. [Joanne, 14]

She used to sort of play with herself quite a lot and she told me she wanted me to listen but I refused, when I first, when she first started masturbating over the phone I used to hang up. [Sam, 49]

Dyad 2

We started getting more, a bit more personal with each other. Um, I suppose you could say it was more of like a fantasy role I suppose, you could say that in a way. [Pete, 28]

Dyad 3

That was him . . . in the days after my break up he was being quite flirty with me, telling me all the things he'd like to do to me and stuff. And it was like yeah, I'm still a bit upset here so it's not really the most appropriate time to be talking about this stuff. [Mona, 14]

She'd broken up with her boyfriend and was quite upset and I think looking for someone to make her feel special and I was there. And she phoned me, she was quite upset, I think she just wanted to feel better about herself so the conversation turned quite sexual. [Chris, 20]

Sam demonstrated denial of any responsibility in sexualizing the relationship, pretending that he did not like it, and attributed blame toward the victim as a means of justifying his behavior. When compared to the way in which the victims discussed sexualization of the relationship, Pete and Chris minimized the extent of these interactions and particularly their initiation of such interactions.

Stage When Sexualization Took Place

There were minimal discrepancies surrounding at what stage in the relationship sexualization began. Joanne and Sam generally agreed that sexual chat began after quite a while, Mona and Chris also agreed that this occurred several months into the conversations. Kelly maintains that conversation of a sexual nature occurred immediately, whereas Pete states this was not the case until over a week into the contact.

Dyad 1

At least like four or five months. [Joanne, 14]

Dyad 2

So he offered me [money] first and I was like I'm not a prozy and everything and so then he went, I'll give you £400 and I went, I told ya I'm not like that, I don't go around getting money off people for sex. And then he didn't say anything after that. [Kelly, 13]

No, it wasn't. No, I'd say it was after about a week and a half it started getting sexual, yeah. [Pete, 28]

While Sam and Joanne were in agreement about the amount of time it took for the relationship to become sexualized, Sam denies expecting this development and responsibility for it. Pete is likely to have distorted his account of when sexualization occurred to minimize the notion that sex was the dominant feature in his interactions with Kelly.

Photos and Videos

All pairs disagreed about what occurred regarding the solicitation of sexual photos and videos. Joanne stated that she sent sexual photos of herself to Sam because he asked for them. However, Sam stated that he received no sexual photographs. Pete also contends that no sexual photos or videos were exchanged; however, Kelly says they were and she initiated this. Finally, Mona and Chris agree that sexual photos and videos were mutually exchanged; however, Mona explains that Chris initiated this, while Chris believes this was mutually established.

Dyad 1

Yeah he did ask for some photos. . . . Cos it was like, for some reason it felt like I had to take them, for him to still talk to me and like me. [Joanne, 14]

Sam: No there was never any sexual activity on-line.

Interviewer: Any sexual photographs of her?

Sam: No. [Sam, 29]

Dyad 2

I think I sent him pictures. [Kelly, 13]

We sent pictures of each other, but nothing, er, nothing sexual or anything like that. . . . No, I've never been interested in photos or things like that, to be honest. [Pete, 28]

Dyad 3

He asked me what he wanted me to be doing and what he wanted me to be wearing and stuff. [Mona, 14]

Masturbating on the phone with each other or on the webcam or sending pictures. . . . Both of us [instigated] at sort of varying times. [Chris, 20]

Sam and Pete appear to be in denial that they incited their victims to create and distribute sexual photos and at various points during the interview confirmed this is not something that appeals to

them. While Chris does accept this offense, he minimizes his dominant role in the activity when compared to Mona's perspective.

Contact Sexual Abuse Initiation

Levels of agreement regarding the initiation of contact sexual abuse differed between pairs. Joanne described Sam initiating, whereas Sam explained that it was mutual initiation, but he stopped it prematurely. Joanne reported that Sam attempted contact sexual abuse a second time, which she was able to resist; he denies this. Kelly and Pete agreed that the contact sexual abuse was mutually initiated. Chris also stipulated that the abuse was mutual; however despite agreeing that it was mutual during the second meeting, Mona contended that Chris instigated this contact on their first meeting.

Dyad 1

He just started like hugging me and then he started undressing me . . . he wanted to, so he was trying to. [Joanne, 14]

I was aroused enough to have sex but I realized what I was doing was wrong, I shouldn't have been having sex so I stopped, I made an excuse, I had cramp, I had a headache, I stopped, I got up and she wasn't happy, she wasn't pleased about it, she didn't want me to stop, she wanted me to continue, but I didn't. [Sam, 49]

Dyad 2

In some ways it wasn't just all him doing it, it was me too . . . it is classed as raped, but where I'm coming from I don't class it as that because with me, I thought I loved him. [Kelly, 13]

I didn't have to raise the subject or nothing, it was, it just happened. So yeah I knew, I knew it was going to happen, but I didn't want to sort of force her into it or talk her into anything like that, you know . . . it just happened. [Pete, 28]

Dyad 3

It kind of took me by surprise really 'cause I thought we'd just start off as friends, if not, you know just a little bit of kissing. I didn't expect it to go as far as it did . . . it was more him the first time . . . the second time I just wasn't bothered, honestly, it's the only way of putting it! [Mona, 14]

It just felt sort of natural. [Chris, 20]

All offenders minimized their involvement in the initiation of contact sexual abuse and made various attempts to attribute at least some of the blame toward the victim. The most extreme example of this was Sam's account, which incorporated features of denial and rationalization.

Perception of Relationship

The super-ordinate theme of "perception of relationship" was divided into two subthemes: "relationship status" and "longevity." This super-ordinate theme generally reflected disagreements between pairs.

Relationship Status

Both Joanne and Kelly described feeling “in love” and being in a “relationship” with their offender. Pete agreed that he was in a relationship with Kelly; however, Sam stated that he was just good friends with Joanne. The relationship status between Mona and Chris fluctuated and perceptions changed at various intervals; however, Mona explained that she felt Chris was her boyfriend at certain points and loved him for a time. Comparatively Chris contended that they were not in a relationship; he attributed this to the long distance between their home towns, rather than the age difference.

Dyad 1

He wanted to become more than just friends . . . I started having feelings that didn't make sense; I thought I was like falling, that I had a crush on him . . . he was sending me messages saying like I love you and stuff like that. [Joanne, 14]

Interviewer to Sam: Did you ever declare your love for her?

Sam: No.

Interviewer: No?

Sam: No. [Sam, 49]

Dyad 2

He made me love him. [Kelly, 13]

Interviewer to Pete: Did you use the term love at all?

Pete: Yes we did. Yes, that was used many times.

Interviewer: And did you love her?

Pete: Yeah I did, I think I fell for her hook, line and sinker to be honest yeah. There was a big attraction there, yeah. I think that's the difficulty of trying to, well that was one of the main difficulties trying to walk away. [Pete, 28]

Dyad 3

We ended up going out until about May when he broke up with me . . . he made out like he loved me or something. [Mona, 14]

I hadn't been sort of declaring my love for her . . . the whole distance thing . . . it was too far away . . . If I was talking to her, I'd sort of sign off “love you, talk to you later” which I meant as in kind of the way you'd say to one of your friends, but it's possible she took to mean that I was in love with her. [Chris, 20]

It can be considered that Chris' description deliberately minimizes his role in romanticizing the relationship and he attributes blame toward Mona and her misinterpretation. Similarly, Sam is likely to be minimizing what he said to Joanne as a means of avoiding responsibility and blame, although his denial is more acute than Chris'. Pete's description of his feelings for Kelly highlights his cognitive dissonance and shame surrounding his offenses.

Longevity

Joanne described her expectations of a future with Sam, but Sam said this was not discussed however he could understand why Joanne may have felt this way. Kelly and Pete both agreed they discussed a future together, although Pete knew this was unrealistic as he expected to get caught. Mona described her feelings about the future fluctuating during the course of the relationship, but at points she felt there could be longevity with Chris.

Dyad 1

He wanted to marry me and then start a new life . . . he promised me a different life to what I was already living. [Joanne, 14]

Indirectly I was probably telling her that there would be a better life elsewhere. [Sam, 49]

Dyad 2

He was like, we'd stay together til I was 16 and all that . . . he wanted to get me pregnant and everything, like he wanted to have a baby with me and I didn't want to . . . I was scared in case the police found out . . . to Pete I was like, I know they're gonna get you and I was worried. [Kelly, 13]

She'd say "will we get married in the future?" this, that and the other, "are we still going to be together in ten years time?" I says, "I don't know," I said "I really don't know." And sometimes I'd bring it to an abrupt end and say, "I can't see that happening to be honest, because this is going to blow up one day." [Pete, 28]

Dyad 3

It was making me feel like ah this is someone I could probably speak to for the rest of my life, he makes me happy, maybe I could have a future with him; all that gunk. [Mona, 14]

Both Sam and Pete partially accept their role in manipulating the victim to believe they could have a future together; however, this is rationalized and minimized considerably. Pete's concerns about getting caught increased his influence over Kelly as it increased her concern and dependency. Chris did not specifically discuss this in his interview although the fact that he did not view this as a relationship indicates he would not anticipate a future with Mona.

DISCUSSION

This study explores and compares the perspectives of victims and their offenders at various stages of the grooming process, yielding some interesting results that can be utilized by policy and prevention efforts. Similarly to the findings of Williams et al. (2013), this study reports that while case examples may share super-ordinate themes, the grooming process varies depending on the individuals involved. The finding that grooming techniques utilized by offenders yielded the most agreements between pairs is not surprising; however, some of the findings within the sub-themes were unexpected. The erratic temperament that Kelly experienced, resulting in a push and pull of her emotions, correlates with the psychological highs and lows that Pete describes in his attempts to stop the relationship. Comparatively, Chris describes this push and pulling of Mona's emotions as intentional manipulation. This play on victim emotions is pivotal to the grooming

process and the victims within this sample felt enmeshed in the relationship with their offenders. The offenders were able to exploit this dynamic by exercising control over the victims, whether overtly or subconsciously (e.g., “for some reason it felt like I had to take the photos”—Joanne).

It is worth noting that both Sam and Pete indicated that the intense contact was attributed to the victim, rather than themselves. While this could be related to offender denial, consideration should also be paid to the possibility that the victims did pursue continued engagement with the offender. Indeed, Kelly, in particular, describes instigating much of the contact. The victims within this sample were displaying vulnerabilities (either temporarily or over a long period of time) at the point when they engaged with the offender (see Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, and Beech 2014a for further information) and, as a result, this is likely to have motivated them to engage with the offender and increased the likelihood of becoming enmeshed. Attachment behavior can bring about intense emotions (Bowlby 1988), which may have contributed to the victims’ intense feelings and desire for contact with the offender, as well as why the victims sustained contact with their offenders, particularly if they have insecure attachment styles. It is also possible however, that the offenders have over-emphasized victims’ contact as this forms part of the offenders’ cognitive distortions enabling their role in the abuse to be more “psychologically comfortable.” One way to ascertain this would be to undertake a further study looking at chat log records of conversations.

It is widely accepted within literature that sex offenders use cognitive distortions to assist in justifying their offending and reduce the guilt and fear they are likely to feel as a result of offending (Blake and Gannon 2006; Navathe et al. 2008; Ó Ciardha and Ward 2013). When applied to Salter’s (1988) spectrum of denial, the extent of Sam’s denial becomes clear. On occasion during the interview, he demonstrated denial of the acts themselves (sharing of sexual photos), denial of fantasy and planning (claiming that he did not intend to sexualize the friendship), denial of responsibility for the acts (blaming the victim for much of the contact and sexualization), and denial of internal guilt for the behavior (did not mention feeling bad about the abuse during the interview); however, it is unclear whether this was a denial of guilt or whether the guilt did not exist in the first place. Pete and Chris also demonstrated features of denial, but to a lesser extent.

The impact of offenders’ cognitive distortions, is evident throughout the interviews, most notably within the super-ordinate theme of sexualization, which is the theme yielding the highest level of disagreements between pairs. It is likely that the offenders perceive this aspect of their offending as most important in blame allocation and, therefore, this theme would be more likely to evoke cognitive distortions (resulting in disagreements) as a minimization technique. In particular, Sam’s suggestion that Joanne pursued him sexually may well assist him in dealing with the reality of his offending.

In a similar vein, the victims may also attribute blame to the sexualization of the relationship and it should not be overlooked that they may also have minimized the extent of their role within this dynamic, most likely, as a means of coping. It is also possible they may have minimized as a result of shame, embarrassment or fear of judgment or getting into trouble.

A surprising finding about the theme of sexualization is that many of the descriptions from the victims included positive feelings, and some beliefs that sexual behavior was not always initiated by the offenders. During a review of the literature surrounding statutory rape and statutory relationships, Hines and Finkelhor (2007) reported that many of the young people involved describe the experience in positive terms. In fact, studies have found victims (particularly of statutory rape) who report feeling a romantic and/or sexual bond with their offender (Wolak and Finkelhor

2013; Wolak et al. 2008). This is consistent with some of the victims' statements within this study, particularly Kelly and, to a lesser extent, Mona.

The victims in this study did not report viewing sex with the offender as abusive at the time of the offense and, even with hindsight, not all of them consider it to be abuse. This not only could be considered typical of adolescent behavior (Quayle et al. 2012), but is indicative of the extent to which the girls had been groomed and their expectations about the relationship (reiterated by the super-ordinate theme of "relationship"). Within their review, Hine and Finkelhor (2007) reported that research has found three reasons for victims' positive reflection: (1) the young people are unable to perceive or admit the harm; (2) there may be a delayed reaction to realize the negative impact of the events; (3) the harm is intrinsic and, in effect, a moral harm. It has also been hypothesized that if the offender ends the relationship, they are more likely to be perceived as an offender by the victim due to the feelings of rejection (Lanning 2002). In the case of Kelly and Pete, Pete's overt efforts to avoid law enforcement and continue contact may have contributed to hindering Kelly's ability to visualize Pete as an offender. This combined with the relatively short amount of time that had passed between the end of the offense and the research interview could form part of the explanation why she reported still being in love with Pete and not interpreting it as rape. Although very preliminary findings due to the sample size, these victim reports do emphasize that it is important for professionals working with young people, not to underestimate the feelings of love victims may have toward their offender and the extent to which they are enmeshed in the relationship.

All offenders within this sample would be considered "contact driven" (Briggs et al. 2011) and the extent to which victims felt they were in a relationship and expressed feelings of love toward their offender, cannot be taken out of the context that they had met their offenders. While this finding is largely unsurprising, it is more unusual that one of the offenders (Pete) also perceives himself to be in a loving relationship or at least this is how he presented during interview. Additionally, despite indicating that he was not in a relationship with Mona, Chris reiterated that she was different from all his other victims because he genuinely liked her. Chris did not know that the interviewer had previously spoken to Mona, but immediately singled her out as unique in his offending. Such an offender perspective makes this sample quite unusual. However, what is more typical is that the three dyads in this sample fit the common form of unlawful sexual intercourse cases, as they involve adult males and adolescent females (Hines and Finkelhor 2007). Furthermore, the literature more commonly reports offenders to be young (rather than older) male in these types of cases (Hines and Finkelhor 2007), as was the case with Chris and Pete.

Implications of This Research

This research gives a greater understanding of the dynamics between victims and offenders. The disagreements regarding the sexualization of the relationship are demonstrative of the challenges faced by both offenders and victims in treatment as both parties (for different reasons) may be uncomfortable with "owning" aspects of the behavior and as a result may seek to reframe it. Emphasis on this process within Sex Offender Treatment Programs is pivotal in reducing denial and cognitive distortions, thus facilitating acceptance of responsibility of their offending. Conversely, within a therapeutic framework, victims can be reassured that they should not feel guilt or responsibility if they enjoyed or even contributed to the sexualization of the relationship,

as this can be a result of the grooming dynamic. In addition, both boys and girls in early adolescence are looking for ways to develop and explore their sexuality; this makes them particularly vulnerable to some forms of grooming. Findings from this study support the recommendations of Wolak and Finkelhor (2013) whereby young people should be educated to the facts that they are likely to become sexually aroused when they speak about sex, watch sexual footage or are touched intimately, but offenders will exploit this natural arousal. Educating young people about healthy, age appropriate relationships and assisting them in being able to identify exploitative and abusive situations should assist prevention efforts.

The deeper understanding of the victim and offender dynamics provided by this study further informs prevention efforts of both practitioners and parents/carers. Awareness of subtle changes in the behavior of adolescents is necessary if on-line grooming is to be detected, particularly given the secrecy frequently afforded to such relationships and the young person's potential reluctance to envisage the relationship as abusive. Increased technological use, increased secrecy surrounding its use, increasingly sexualized behavior or an increased range or extremity of emotions, should be considered potential behavioral indicators of on-line grooming, particularly if already uncharacteristic to the individual adolescent. While any of these indicators should evoke immediate discussions between an adult and a young person about the dangers of on-line grooming, open discussions and education surrounding this should be accessed by all young people, regardless if they are displaying behavioral indicators or not.

Limitations of This Research

There are several limitations to this research. This research is based on interviews with offenders and victims and therefore is subject to each individual's recollection and interpretation of events. It should be assumed that from this sample, the offenders have a greater motivation to change details than the victims; most likely due to denial, cognitive distortion or a desire to be seen more positively by the interviewer. Furthermore, the offenders were at varying stages of sex offender treatment programs at the time of interview and this is likely to have a direct influence on their levels of acceptance. It is also possible that the victims may have provided incorrect information, most likely due to reframing events as part of coping, forgetting details, or a desire to be seen more positively by the interviewer. Police files were not accessed during analysis and therefore this analysis is based purely on the opinions of those involved, rather than the evidence of the case. This study is based on a small sample of case studies and thus it is unlikely to be representative of all types of grooming behavior and relationships between victims and offenders.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the small sample size, patterns in behavior reported by this study should be interpreted as a basis for further exploratory research. Objectivity can be increased in future research if evidence obtained within police case files (including chat logs) is also included in analysis, in addition to interviews with those involved. This would enable verification of some of the information provided during interviews and provide a deeper understanding of the process of grooming.

CONCLUSION

Better understanding the dynamics between victims and offenders not only contributes knowledge regarding the subtler aspects of the grooming process, but also informs professional practice within Sex Offender Treatment Programs and victim therapeutic work and prevention. Further research utilizing a similar and enhanced methodology will add value to this area of research and ultimately contribute to the protection of young people from on-line grooming and sexual abuse in the future.

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