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Anna Marie Campbell¹

Abstract

This study examines the use of self-presentation strategies and manipulation by male sex offenders in grooming a victim for a sexual relationship. The study finds that male sex offenders use multiple categories of self-presentation strategies in their interactions with victims with the supplication strategy being present in a majority of reports of such interactions. Furthermore, the research reveals that the male sex offender uses manipulation to isolate and groom the victim for a sexual relationship in conjunction with coercive tactics to ensure the victim does not reveal the true nature of their relationship to other people. Findings are discussed in the context of luring communication theory and applications of the findings.

Keywords

male sex offenders, deception, manipulation, self-presentation strategies, luring communication theory

Humans use language and nonverbal behavior to communicate their basic needs, including those for intimacy and sex (Leary, 1995). Sexual behavior involves interpersonal relationship skills. The communication interaction between a sex offender

¹University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, CO, USA

Corresponding Author:

Anna Marie Campbell, 2830 Orion Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80906, USA
Email: Artraveler913@aol.com

and his or her child victim involves these same set of skills; however, the intent of the offenders' messages is to engage the child victim in a sexual relationship. Researchers have studied the development of and treatment for sexually deviant behavior, but recently the research is turning to the interpersonal communication strategies used by male sex offenders in interacting with victims (Olson, Daggs, Ellevold, & Rogers, 2007). The central issue in this study is to examine male sex offenders' use of self-presentation strategies and manipulative behaviors in grooming child victims for a sexual relationship.

Luring Communication Theory and Deviant Sexual Behavior

Luring communication theory (Olson et al., 2007) suggests that a male sex offender engages in a specific process to lure a victim into a sexual encounter. The cycle of entrapment, the core phenomena in this theory, is the development of deceptive trust by the male sex offender with the victim. The central concept in the cycle is "the sex offender's ability to cultivate relationships with potential victims and possibly their families that are intended to benefit the sex offender's own sexual interests" (p. 240). The cycle encompasses three constructs: grooming, isolation, and approach. Luring communication theory defines grooming as "the subtle communication strategies that child sexual abusers use to prepare their potential victims to accept sexual contact" (p. 241). This process involves two potential communication strategies: communication desensitization and reframing. The male sex offender uses a variety of schemes to enable his victim to become comfortable with him in physical settings as well as conversational opportunities to allow the male sex offender to begin to introduce sexual content into their conversations. Using a reframing technique, the male sex offender then begins to reframe sexual activity as an appropriate interaction between himself and the victim. One aspect for the cycle of entrapment is the power and control inherent in the relationships between the sex offender and his victim.

Power and control in the relationship between the sex offender and his victim may be related to the offender's distorted thinking about intimacy in adult relationships. Baxter, Marshall, Barbaree, Davidson, and Malcolm (1984) observed that "men who commit sex crimes are characteristically socially inadequate, lacking particularly in interpersonal skills, feelings of confidence and ease in heterosocial and heterosexual interactions" (p. 480). Ward and Beech (2004) have postulated that a multipathway model be used when assessing risk for sex offending behavior in individuals. The pathway model relies on four specific etiological factors that can be used to assess a person's potential for engaging in sex-offending behavior and to evaluate the risk potential of a person to commit a sex offense. Each of the factors involves one of these psychological mechanisms: intimacy and social skills deficits, distorted sexual scripts, emotional dysregulation, and cognitive distortions. Depending on the kind of sex offense (i.e., with a child or with an adult), the pathway model suggests that all four of the factors interact when a person commits a sex offense, but the sex offender may have a specific psychological disposition toward one or more of the primary risk

factors and these additional specific factors involve “sexual interest and regulation of sexual behavior; attitudes that are supportive of sexual assaults; overall interpersonal functioning, and emotional lability” (p. 277). Interpersonal functioning is seen as the ability to interact appropriately with others and requires high levels of interpersonal communication and interaction skills. The question becomes how the male sex offender who is perceived by adults as a socially anxious and possibly incompetent communicator uses specific communication strategies to begin the grooming process with his child victim.

Male Sex Offenders, Social Competency, and Communication

Social competency involves communication competence and social skills. Spitzberg and Cupach (2002) define social skills as “repeatable goal directed behaviors, behavioral patterns, and behavior sequences that are appropriate to the interactional context” (p. 574). A person is judged to be a competent communicator if the message is appropriate or legitimate for the context and effective if the message accomplishes the goal. Generally, research conducted regarding the social competency of male sex offenders found that deficits in social competency skills, including basic communication competence of male sex offenders, play some role in maintaining and developing sex offending behavior (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2004; Hudson & Ward, 2000). Social competency skills involve the ability to interact appropriately in a variety of social settings and also to communicate appropriately with relational partners.

In studying sex offenders’ notions regarding socially appropriate behavior and competence, Marshall, Barbaree, and Fernandez (1995) compared four unrelated groups: college students, unemployed men in the community, child molesters, and rapists. After controlling for differences in socioeconomic circumstances, the researchers found that college students were the most socially poised, exhibiting less anxiety. Unemployed men in the community were not as socially adept as the college students and ranked closely with the child molesters in social competency. Child molesters were found to be lacking in social self-confidence, were the most socially anxious, and were also the least assertive. Although the research suggests that male sex offenders lack social skills, the question becomes how the lack of such skill by the offender is managed in the relationship with the victim.

Impression Management

Impression management is a person’s ability to present themselves effectively to others in a communication interaction and to respond appropriately to cues from the other person. Metts and Grohskopf (2003) generally define self-presentation as the

process by which individuals, more or less intentionally; construct a public self that is likely to elicit certain types of attributions from others, attributions that

would facilitate the achievement of some goal usually to acquire social rewards, advantages, or to prevent loss of self-esteem when future failure seems probable. (p. 358)

Generally, five categories of “attributes” or “impressions” are used to manage their presentation of self during communication interactions (Metts & Grohskopf, 2003). These five categories are useful in classifying messages used by senders to initiate an interpersonal relationship. In this study, the categories will be used to classify the self-reported communication behaviors by male sex offenders during interactions with their victims. The five categories are supplication (i.e., presenting a helpless public persona), intimidation (i.e., presenting a powerful or harmful persona), self-promotion (i.e., presenting as competent), ingratiation (i.e., presenting likable or affiliative behaviors), and exemplification (i.e., presenting a self that is worthy, e.g., demonstrating high moral values; Metts & Grohskopf, 2003). Luring communication theory suggests that once the male sex offender gains access to the child, he begins to groom the child for a sexual relationship.

Using these categories to analyze communication interactions between male sex offenders and their victims will help researchers begin to see how male sex offenders manage the presentation of self to the victims in the cycle of entrapment.

Manipulation

In a sexual relationship, the sender initiates the interaction by using a strategic message designed to elicit a reciprocal response from the receiver regarding a need to have sex. Male sex offenders who have much anxiety in their social relationships may not be able to reveal the true nature of their intent in the relationship to their child victim and may use manipulation to draw the child victim into the relationship. Van Dijk (2006) defines manipulation as “a communicative and interactional practice, in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests” (p. 360). Deceiving a person could be construed as one form of manipulation and the effects of a manipulative communication act are more fully realized when the recipient is blind to the true intent of the manipulator’s motive for the communication interaction. Male sex offenders may use manipulation as a grooming technique in developing their relationship with the victim.

Manipulating another person involves social control and mind control, which work together to create influence over another person. Van Dijk (2006) suggests that social control involves the use of power by one person over another and further defines social control as a form of power abuse or domination. Manipulation also involves influencing the knowledge and beliefs that people hold regarding a specific issue. The manipulation occurs within a specific sociorelational context. Luring communication theory proposes that male sex offenders use secrecy and verbal coercion as strategies to prevent the child victim from disclosing the true nature of

the relationship to other adults. This study proposes that male sex offenders use manipulation and other behaviors not only to prevent disclosure by the victim but also to manipulate other adults to maintain access to the child victim.

Male Sex Offenders, Victims, and Communication Interactions

Three studies suggest that communication interactions are relevant to the study of male sex offenders. Auburn (2005) used narrative reflexivity to analyze conversations with male sex offenders in a British prison to determine the effect of the cognitive behavioral model of sex offender treatment. The study found that narrative reflexivity was a mechanism that could be used to monitor the progress of the offender through the treatment program—as the offender described his crime in therapy, the offender was “also actively engaged in diverting listeners from this trajectory of inferences and substituting other inferences which are less damaging” (p. 715). Thus, the study supported the notion that particular discursive devices could be used to challenge the offender’s psychological constructs surrounding the commission of his crime.

Singer, Hussey, and Strom (1992) analyzed a letter written by a sex offender to his adolescent male victim from the viewpoint of victim selection by the offender. The study supports the notion that male sex offenders are skilled and cunning communicators with patience to slowly pull children into sexual relationships. The study suggests the notion that the young male victim responds to the offender’s overtures because of a “need for affection, a desire for money or gifts, a pursuit of adventure and an enjoyment of the sexual arousal” (p. 879). Tainio (2003) used conversation analysis with a feminist perspective to analyze a sexually harassing phone call between a 15-year-old girl and a high-level official in the Danish government. This study revealed repetitive patterns in the harasser’s request to the victim to meet him at a hotel but did not explore the specific communication strategies used in interacting with the victim. All three of these studies suggest that further inquiry is needed into the specific strategies of a sex offender in his communication interactions with victims.

Research Questions

In sum, impression management involves strategies to present a specific image in an interpersonal relationship through the use of language that indicates the sender’s “persona” to the receiver. Little research has been conducted in the quality and quantity of strategic self-presentation strategies and manipulative communication techniques used by male sex offenders in engaging their victims into a sexual relationship. Using the definition of grooming as discussed in luring communication theory, this study initiates an investigation into these research questions:

Research Question 1: Using the writings produced by male sex offenders in therapy, which categories of strategic self presentation are used by male sex offenders in establishing a sexual relationship with the victim?

Research Question 2: What kinds of manipulative behaviors produced by male sex offenders in therapy toward victims are revealed in their writings?

Method

This study analyzed the self-reported information contained in therapeutic papers produced by male sex offenders who have agreed to enter an intensive psychotherapy and behavior modification program while incarcerated for their crimes. The project was approved by the university's institutional review board and the Western U.S. correctional agency. The participants consented to copying and analysis of their sex offender treatment records. No rewards were offered by the researcher to the offenders for participation in the study. All identifying information was removed from the records.

Sample

This study sampled 36 men who have been convicted of a sex offense pursuant to state law and are incarcerated in a Western U.S. correctional facility. Eighty percent of the participants were Caucasian and the remaining 20% were Hispanic or African American. The participants ranged from 24 to 66 years at the time of the study ($M = 43$), which does not represent the age at which the offender committed his crime. The sample contained 13 participants who were incarcerated for abuse of a child by a person in a position of trust (i.e., parent, teacher, parent's dating partner, etc.), 10 who were incarcerated for sexual assault on a child, 2 who were incarcerated for incest, 5 who were incarcerated for indecent exposure, and 4 who reported a conviction for first-degree sexual assault or rape. One participant did not report his crime.

Data Analysis

The data collected in this study comprised two sets of documents. The first set was the narrative papers written by the offenders after receiving 6 months of intensive psychotherapy. The papers ranged from 5 to 15 pages in length and were narrative descriptions of the events in the year prior to their arrest and conviction as well as the thoughts and feelings of the offender regarding his crime. The second set of documents was short answers from four questions contained in the treatment program's sexual history form. These questions asked about the use of the Internet to communicate with the victim, the use of verbal pressure with the victim, methods used to prevent disclosure by the victim, and methods used in getting the victim to participate in the sexual activity. All information related to the name of the offender, the victim, the victim's family, the offender's family, and the location of the crime were

removed prior to coding. Three files were removed because of incomplete information and 33 remained for analysis.

Coding

The researcher trained a graduate student coder on the categories for strategic self-presentation and manipulation. The five categories of self-presentation are ingratiation, self-promotion, exemplification, supplication, and intimidation (see the section "Impression Management" for definitions). Manipulation was defined in accord with Van Dijk (2006) as the abuse of illegitimate influence. Data from 10 subjects were used to prepare both the researcher and the coder on the categories. The coder and the researcher read the papers and, using colored markers, identified sentences that fit the categories. After extensive discussion, the researcher and the coder came to agreement on the interpretation of the coding categories. The remaining 23 sets of documents were then coded and interrater reliability was adequate (Cohen's $\kappa = .80$).

Results

Research Question 1

A total of 508 statements and phrases were identified as belonging to the five categories of self-presentation or manipulation, with supplication being the most frequently occurring category (see Table 1). Examples of supplication (presenting a helpless persona) are the following:

I started getting more depressed. I started forcing myself to have oral sex with [the victim].

I told the victim I was sorry but did not know what to do and told her to call and get me some help but she didn't want to probably because she felt embarrassed about talking to someone about what I had been doing to her.

Through these kinds of remarks, the offender appears to be a person who is unable to acknowledge and be responsible for his feelings about himself and his life circumstance.

The next two self-presentation strategies used equally by male sex offenders are the intimidating strategy and the self-promotion strategy. The intimidating strategy is one in which the public persona is perceived as powerful. Examples include the following: "I told her if she told anybody what I had done, I would tell the cops that her mom was a bad mom, and [the mom] would be taken away;" "I told the victim not to tell anyone, because if I was found out it would break up my marriage to [blank]." Thus, the intimidation of the victim is not always an overt threat of physical

Table 1. Strategic Self-Presentation Strategies Used by Male Sex Offenders

	Number of Phrases Involving (N = 508)	Total Phrases	Number of Respondents Using Strategy (N = 23)	Total Respondents
Supplication	169	33.2%	22	95.6%
Intimidating	64	16.5%	19	82.6%
Self-promotion	64	16.5%	15	65.2%
Ingratiating	49	12.7%	13	56.5%
Exemplification	40	10.4%	13	56.5%

harm, but instead the offender manipulates the victim's emotional attachments to other people as a way of intimidating the victim. Self-promotion leads another person to believe that person is a competent relational partner. Examples are "I always presented myself as a reliable and valuable employee when I was at work so I don't believe there was any suspicion," "I was feeling depressed on the inside and on the outside appearing to co-workers and friends that everything was alright," "I never bought the porno because I didn't want to be seen as one of those people." The strategy of self-promotion may be used by sex offenders who want another adult to perceive that they are a seemingly similar trustworthy adult.

The two strategies least used by male sex offenders are the ingratiation strategy and the exemplification strategy. Examples of ingratiation include "I would also groom some of them by being extra nice, trying to act cool, and give them compliments;" "I tried to get them to like me more by pretending to be more social;" "I also felt accepted, trusted, and loved because she would ask me the questions instead of her mother." The strategy of ingratiation may not be an effective strategy used by the male sex offender in grooming a child victim, because this strategy may be perceived as insincere to a child victim. In using exemplification, the sex offender presents a persona that appears to be morally responsible regarding his behavior toward the victim when confronted by a third party. In gaining access to a child, a sex offender may need to also groom adults into thinking his behavior is acceptable by suggesting that he does not behave this way. Examples of this strategy are "I acted appalled that she even asked me, but I said 'No, how could you think that?!' I got angry and aggressive in my voice and I said to [blank] I can't believe you asked me that!" After being confronted by his ex-spouse regarding the assaults, the offender wrote: "I told [blank] that I couldn't believe she would even think that I could do something like that." The grooming process is not just directed at the child but is also directed toward other adults in the child's life who may control access to the child.

Research Question 2

Manipulation encompasses communication behavior used by the sex offender to exert illicit influence over the victim and to silence the victim from telling anyone

else about their activities. Manipulation involves social control and mind control. The data indicate that male sex offenders use social control by giving the child victim gifts, privileges, or participation in other activities they would not necessarily have. The data also demonstrate that male sex offenders manipulate the victim by engaging the child in shared activities, and once the sexual assaults were initiated, the male sex offender uses secrets as a form of mind control over the victim. Within the data set, 21 cases contained 122 phrases that illustrated manipulative behavior on the part of a male sex offender toward his child victim.

Most of the offenders tried to become a friend to the victim by engaging the child victim in activities the male sex offender and the child share. For example, "I would interact with her, by playing Barbies, dancing, singing, using the computer, playing and doing what she wanted to do;" "She was a friend to me and I loved her. I spoiled her. I would take her places and show her new things . . . I think she liked being treated as an adult." Offenders also play games, engage in wrestling and tickling their victims, and carefully create situations in which they are able to sexually assault the victims.

When she went to play outside and no one wanted to play with her, I would be there. To gain her trust more and more. Show her that I care for her. Sometime if she wanted to watch movies and they would not let her upstairs, I would let her downstairs. Even when she would look for my kids, I'd tell her that they were downstairs that way I could sexually assault her.

These activities were specifically staged by the offender to allow the child to become familiar with him.

In getting the victim to participate in the sexual activity, the offender uses secrets as a way to ensure that the victim does not tell anyone about the relationship. As part of his grooming strategy, the sex offender actively seeks information regarding not only the victim's interest in sexual activity but also the victim's potential ability to keep the sexual activity a secret. One offender wrote the following:

I groomed this victim trying to discover his potential interest in sexual activities and his potential to not revealing the assaultive behavior. I would watch family dynamics and for personality traits such as poor self-confidence or low self-esteem. I felt this victim would not tell about any of the assaults.

Another example of the use of secrecy is "I would tell her that it was our secret, and she was very special for keeping that secret." Another offender stated "I told her specifically this is our secret you cannot tell anyone or I will go to jail." Finally, this offender told his victim that "if she wanted to be with us, that it had to stay between the three of us. No one else was to know or be able to participate with us." Secrets and the victim's ability to be trusted not to disclose the activity are vital to the offender's ability to not only establish the relationship with a victim but also to maintain it.

In addition to secrets, the offender uses nonverbal pressure in the form of gifts, privileges, and special activities to gain the victim's compliance in not disclosing the sexual relationship. Two thirds of the offenders in this study reported they did not use verbal pressure to gain the victim's compliance in not disclosing the sexual relationship to anyone. The sex offender uses gifts and privileges that the victim would otherwise not have to maintain the secrecy regarding their relationship. Examples of this behavior are "helping her with everything she need it, like, homework, problems at home with her mom, or problems in school with the teachers, and buying everything she wanted. I did all this so she didn't go and tell no body;" "I would bribe her, by buying her gifts, giving her money, letting her due what she wanted around the house, telling her that she was right when she was wrong;" "I established this relationship by including my victim in recreational activities and purchasing gifts and toys prior to and throughout the assaults." Thus, secrets, gift giving, and inclusion in activities that the victim might otherwise not have an opportunity to participate in are three practices that offenders use to manipulate the victim and prevent disclosure of the sexual relationship by him or her.

Discussion

This study investigates male sex offenders' use of strategic self-presentation and manipulation in establishing and maintaining a relationship with a victim using self-reports of male sex offenders who have completed 6 months of intense psychotherapy.

Luring communication theory (Olson et al., 2007) proposes a dynamic process by which male sex offenders approach and groom victims for a sexual relationship. The core concept, deceptive trust development, suggests that the focal point of grooming is the sex offender's ability to cultivate the relationship with the victim. Although this sample contained only male sex offenders, previous research into the social behavior of sex offenders suggests that these men and women present to other adults as socially unskilled people who have trouble establishing and maintaining adult relationships (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2004; Hudson & Ward, 2000; Marshall et al., 1995). The present study suggests that male sex offenders may be cunning and skilled communicators. Although the male sex offender may be a socially anxious person with other adults, he uses a variety of strategies, particularly the helpless supplication persona, to present a nonthreatening adult face to his young victim. The use of these strategies allows for the development of trust between the child victim and the sex offender and allows the sex offender to begin the grooming phase of the cycle of entrapment.

This study suggests that male sex offenders use the powerful self-presentation strategy as well as the self-promotion strategy that allows other adults to see him as a competent relational partner in an adult relationship. The sex offender may be using the powerful self-presentation strategy to coerce the victim into a sexual relationship as well as begin the isolation necessary to approach the victim regarding sexual

activity. The use of this self-presentation strategy by a sex offender with a victim would be consistent with previous research into coercive sexual tactics such as rape and other forms of nonconsensual sex (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). The sex offender may also use the self-promotion strategy with the adult members of the victim's family to further the development of trust with these adults and maintain access to the victim at the same time he is attempting to isolate the victim.

Another aspect of the cycle of entrapment is the use of manipulation by the sex offender to isolate the victim from his or her family and approach the child victim to begin to desensitize and reframe the sexual activity as trust grows between the male sex offender, the child victim, and the other adults in the child's life. Davis, Shaver, and Vernon (2004) postulated that anxious people may use sex as a means to control or exert power over the partner and that the "coercive strategy essentially refers to how a person attempts to elicit desired behaviors from others" (p. 1088). A sex offender's use of secrets, bribery, and other forms of manipulation allows him to exercise control over his victim in order to ensure the victim remains available to him for a sexual relationship.

This study used self-reported behaviors by male sex offenders who have undergone 6 months of treatment during their period of incarceration. The limitation of this study is that a bias may exist in the narrative documents as the sex offender may be attempting to please his therapist to be released from treatment. Male sex offenders manipulate not only their victims and their families but also other people, and their disclosures about their behavior should be taken with caution (Sawle & Kear-Colwell, 2001). Also, because the researcher and the coder are adult women raised in American culture, a bias may exist on their interpretation of the self-presentation categories. The data in this study describe traumatic events that have been perpetrated against children and the ability of the researcher and coder to remain neutral and objective in evaluating the data may have influenced the results.

Turning to future directions, luring communication theory provides a framework with which to continue analyzing this kind of communication behavior. The motivations driving a sex offender's communication with the victim need to be further explored with quantitative studies that relate to the human need for intimacy. Another avenue for research is to use a quantitative instrument to begin to develop a better definition of manipulation used by a sex offender to groom, isolate, and approach a victim as well as a deeper understanding of the use of the manipulative behavior by the male sex offender within the three processes in the cycle of entrapment. Further research into the tenets of luring communication theory would also include studying females who are incarcerated for sex-offending behavior, and comparisons between the genders would be valuable to mental health professionals, corrections administrators, and the public. The psychosocial characteristics of a sex offender as they relate to communication behaviors and message sending would enhance the lay person's understanding of the sex offender's communication behavior with both adults and children. The research may serve as a basis for educating mental health professionals as well as parents and other caregivers of children of the interaction cues that

may give them legitimate cause to question the intent of another adult who seems overly interested in a relationship with a child in their care. In addition, this research would be valuable in educating young adults about the overall content and context of inappropriate sexual communication and behavior.

Author's Note

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Bio

Anna Marie Campbell (MA, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, 2007) is employed by a Western U.S. correctional agency in the health care services division. Her research interests include communication and the criminal justice system, communication technology, and intercultural communication.