

Sexual grooming of children: Review of literature and theoretical considerations

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Abstract *The current review aims to outline the existing understanding of sexual grooming. Issues of poor definition, the adoption of the term “grooming” and the prevalence of sexual grooming will be discussed. Consideration will be given to how prominent theories of child sexual abuse often neglect sexual grooming. This will be followed by a detailed account of the existing knowledge within the literature. Three types of sexual grooming were thus identified: self-grooming, grooming the environment and significant others and grooming the child. Based on these findings, a new definition of sexual grooming is suggested. Furthermore, the findings correspond well with current models of the sexual offence process. A more comprehensive understanding of sexual grooming is required to facilitate a preventative approach to child protection.*

Keywords *Sexual grooming; theory of child sexual abuse*

Introduction

The complex nature of the tactics used by child sex offenders in their efforts to sexually abuse children is increasingly evident in the accounts of the people affected by this predatory behaviour. Sexual grooming is a pertinent issue evident in society, but there is still little understanding about this phenomenon. This is reflected in problems relating to definition, which will be discussed in addition to the evolution of the term “grooming”. This review will consider whether present aetiological theories of child sexual abuse can account for “sexual grooming” behaviour, and further determines what knowledge has already been established about the phenomenon of sexual grooming. Based on these findings, a new definition is presented and consideration is given to how current knowledge of sexual grooming relate to models of the sexual offence process.

Definition

Professionals are yet to agree on a definition of sexual grooming of children (Gillespie, 2004). Previous literature has provided three specific definitions of grooming. The strengths and

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weaknesses of these definitions are discussed in turn below. First, O’Connell defines sexual grooming as:

A course of conduct enacted by a suspected paedophile, which would give a reasonable person cause for concern that any meeting with a child arising from the conduct would be for unlawful purposes. (O’Connell, 2003, p. 6)

Second, Howitt suggests that:

Grooming . . . is the steps taken by paedophiles to “entrap” their victims and is in some ways analogous to adult courtship. (Howitt, 1995, p. 176)

These two definitions are problematic, because they both refer to the term paedophile. Most sexual offenders who target child victims use sexual grooming, not just those classified as paedophiles. The term “paedophile” is a very specific clinical diagnosis, clearly not applicable to all offenders, and the association of grooming behaviour with paedophilia may prevent some offenders from acknowledging their own grooming behaviours. In addition, people known to the offender may not identify the grooming behaviour because they do not consider the individual to fit their image of a “paedophile”. The public perception of a paedophile is littered with stereotypes that they are “dirty old men” or strangers; these perceptions may affect an individual’s judgement of whether the behaviour they have observed is grooming. These misperceptions distract from the truth that most victims know their abuser. It is important that the wording of a definition does not thwart the identification of sexual grooming and the subsequent prevention or ending of abuse.

Furthermore, the phrase “a course of conduct” requires subsequent definition. Additional problems include reference to “a reasonable person” and “cause for concern”. Although legal precedent defines these phrases, they are ambiguous to the lay reader and hence they are open to misinterpretation and confusion. These definitions are confusing, at best, and at worst they reinforce the myth that strangers are the biggest risk to children. Consequently, this ambiguity may hinder the identification of the full range of sexual grooming behaviours.

Gillespie (2002) provides the third definition:

The process by which a child is befriended by a would-be abuser in an attempt to gain the child’s confidence and trust, enabling them to get the child to acquiesce to abusive activity. It is frequently a pre-requisite for an abuser to gain access to a child. (Gillespie, 2002, p. 411; based on van Dam, 2001)

This definition avoids the use of the term paedophile. It also provides some clarity about the purpose of sexual grooming behaviour and identifies some of the stages that it involves. This appears to be the most appropriate published definition to date. Further evaluation of this definition will follow consideration of previous literature and current understanding about sexual grooming.

Prevalence

Canter, Hughes and Kirby (1998) provide evidence for the prevalence of the sexual grooming phenomenon. They used Small Space Analysis on a behaviour matrix of the interaction between 97 incarcerated child sex offenders and their victims. They identified three distinct behaviour repertoires of offender–victim interaction. The different types of offender–victim interaction acknowledged were aggressive, which was identifiable by the use of extreme

violence, threat and force; criminal–opportunist, which tended to be one-off offences on strangers; and intimate, which was categorized by the identified use of sexual grooming behaviours.

Forty-five per cent of Canter et al.'s (1998) sample were classified as being intimate offenders. Thus, 45% of the child sex offenders employed an intimate behaviour repertoire and sexual grooming behaviours. This figure is likely to be unrepresentative of the child sex offender population as a whole. Intimate offenders tend to cause less physical harm to their victims than the other categories of offenders and the very nature of the behaviour used to categorize the intimate offenders implies that they would be less likely to be reported, identified and convicted, because these grooming behaviours are used to avoid disclosure and conviction. Hence, it is likely that intimate offenders were under-represented in this prison sample.

Figures show that eight of 10 sex abuse victims know their abuser (Stop it Now, 2003). In such cases, offenders have substantial interest in preventing disclosure, because in the event of disclosure the victim would be able to easily identify them as their abuser. This is supported by offenders' accounts about the strategies they employed to victimize the children they sexually abused; fear of disclosure affected how and when they victimized their victims (Conte, Wolf & Smith, 1989).

Aetiology of a motivation to abuse

Before an individual begins to groom a child, some level of motivation to abuse a child needs to be present. Furthermore, adequate theories of sexual offending should be able to account for the phenomenon of sexual grooming. Until recently there have been three dominant theories of child sexual abuse, namely Finkelhor's Pre-condition Model (1984); Marshall and Barbaree's Integrated Theory (1990); and Hall and Hirschman's Quadripartite Model (1992). In 2002, Ward and Siegert proposed a more comprehensive theory of child sexual abuse by "knitting together" the strengths of each of the above theories. They propose that there are five pathways to sexual offending against children; hence, the theory is called The Pathways Model. This review shall consider each of these only briefly, because Ward and colleagues have already provided in-depth reviews (see Ward, 2001, 2002; Ward & Hudson, 2001). Herein, more emphasis will be placed on how these theories relate to the phenomenon of sexual grooming.

Marshall and Barbaree's Integrated Theory

Marshall and Barbaree's (1990) Integrated Theory of the aetiology of sexual offending proposes that the presence of vulnerabilities, which develop as a result of adverse early developmental experiences, leave offenders unprepared to deal with the surge of hormones at puberty, and unable to understand the emotional world. As a resultant, offenders satisfy their emotional and sexual needs inappropriately in deviant ways. This theory suggests that sexual offending occurs as a consequence of an individual's sex and aggression drives becoming fused, as these functions share the same structure in the brain. Ward and Siegert (2002) state that this need not be the case, as there are many functions that are close in proximity but that do not affect each other. Furthermore, this theory suggests that sexual offending would be aggressive. Therefore, it would seem that it does not account for the phenomenon of sexual grooming, because the process of sexual grooming is generally not aggressive in nature.

However, this criticism may be countered if a definition of aggression were to include indirect aggression, which sexual grooming could be considered to be.

Hall and Hirschman's Quadripartite Model

Hall and Hirschman's (1992) Quadripartite Model was first developed as a theory of rape, but it was applied subsequently to child sexual abuse. This model suggests that someone commits an act of child sexual abuse because of four vulnerability factors and the presence of opportunity. The vulnerability factors are physiological sexual arousal, distorted cognitions that act to justify sexual aggression, affective dyscontrol, and personality problems. It is suggested that offending will occur when the presence of these vulnerability factors exceed a threshold, this could include one or all of these vulnerabilities. There are several problems with this model; first, it does not explain why someone chooses to offend against a child rather than an adult. Second, sexual grooming is not an impulsive act and the threshold would need to be maintained over a long period of time in order to explain sexual grooming, because it can occur over weeks, months or even years. Hence, this theory can account for sexual grooming if it is accepted that, for example, sexual arousal persists over long periods of time, so once sexually aroused to children/child the offender would be continually aroused to them. A further problem with this theory relates to the presence of opportunity; offenders often create their own opportunities to offend.

Finkelhor's Pre-condition Model

Finkelhor's Pre-condition Model (1984) suggests that there are four pre-conditions to sexual offending. The first is the motivation to sexually abuse; it is suggested that this develops as a result of emotional congruence (a fit between the offender's emotional needs and the child's ability to meet them), deviant sexual arousal and blockage (the sexual needs of the offender not being met by appropriate adults). The second is to be able to overcome internal inhibitors; the third is to be able to overcome external inhibitors; and the fourth is to overcome the child's resistance. Before an incidence of abuse would take place, these pre-conditions need to be satisfied. Although Finkelhor does not use the term sexual grooming, others (e.g. Morrison, Erooga & Beckett, 1994; Sampson, 1994) have reviewed his work using this term. They referred to overcoming the child's resistance as grooming.

Ward and Siegert's Pathways Model

Ward and Siegert's (2002) model is based on the dysfunction of one or more psychological mechanisms—emotional regulation, intimacy deficits, cognitive distortions and sexual arousal (deviant sexual scripts). All the aforementioned psychological mechanisms are involved to some degree. There is evidence of these dysfunctional mechanisms being present typically in child molesters, although to different degrees and for different functions. The five possible pathways are specified by whichever dysfunctional psychological mechanism is the most dominant; in turn this will affect the others. In the case of the fifth pathway, all the psychological mechanisms would be similarly dysfunctional. A sexual offence occurs when the above is present in conjunction with sexual need. In addition, Ward and Siegert still emphasize the importance of there being an opportunity to offend; however, the nature of sexual grooming is to create an opportunity to offend. Successful theory would need to account for this.

Despite Ward and Siegert presenting their Pathways Model as a comprehensive theory of sexual offending, it still only considers aetiology and no consideration is given to the offence process. In a comprehensive theory it is necessary to consider the whole journey from initial onset to the offence and beyond. In a similar way that the Transtheoretical Model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982) of change considers not only the action stage, where the overt behaviour is changed, but also the precontemplation, contemplation, preparation and maintenance stages, a theory of sexual offending against children needs to consider the whole journey. As demonstrated above, it is necessary that theories of aetiology are coherent with the phenomenon they are attempting to explain. While endeavouring to explain sexual offending it is important that sexual grooming is also factored into the equation, because it is part of the sexual offending phenomenon. Of the above theories, only Finkelhor's (1984) Pre-condition Model has taken this approach.

Offence process

In addition to the Pre-condition Model (Finkelhor, 1984) there is one other model that considers the offence process of sexual offending. This is the Descriptive Model of the Offence Chain (Ward, Louden, Hudson & Marshall, 1995). Ward et al.'s model provides a much more detailed account of the offence process than the Pre-condition Model. While little evidence has been found to support Finkelhor's Pre-condition Model, Ward et al. used a grounded theory approach and developed their model directly from offenders' experiences. They identified nine stages of the offence chain. Stage one relates to the offender's background factors, including their perception of themselves and their life at the beginning of the offence chain and whether these factors caused positive or negative affect. Stage two describes distal planning of access to their victim; this could take the form of implicit, or explicit planning or chance. Contact with the victim takes place in stage three. Stage four involves cognitive restructuring, which will result in either positive or negative affect. Stage five entails proximal planning, which would either be self-focused, victim-focused or a mutual-focus. This leads to stage six and the sexual offence, which is followed by further cognitive restructuring at stage seven. This results in negative or positive evaluation and future resolutions regarding continued offending at stage eight. This resolution will be to either avoid future offending or to persist in an abusive pattern. Stage nine depicts the impact of these resolutions on the offender's life.

It is important to consider how sexual grooming fits into, and facilitates, the offence process, as this understanding is likely to aid the management of offenders and potential offenders by identifying the offence process prior to an sexual offence taking place. In addition, it is reasonable to suggest that motivation is not static but could be affected by later stages of the grooming and offence process, e.g. cognitive distortions developed later in the process could serve to reinforce prior motivation resulting in an entrenched deviant sexual interest. This may prove valuable to treatment programmes efforts of reducing motivation to offend.

The grooming process

The current review has identified three types of sexual grooming present in the literature—self-grooming, grooming the environment and significant others and grooming the child. Each of these will be discussed to explore current understanding of sexual grooming. Understanding of the grooming process and an ability to identify sexual grooming behaviour

is crucial in order to prevent child sexual abuse. However, retrospective identification of sexual grooming, i.e. after a sexual offence has been committed, is much easier than prospective identification, i.e. before a sexual offence. Nevertheless, the latter is necessary in order to prevent the sexual abuse from taking place. The reason for this is because the behaviours used to groom a child for sexual abuse are not dissimilar to innocent behaviour intended to broaden a young person's experiences. The only difference may be the motivation underlying the behaviour.

Self-grooming

van Dam (2001) reports that during treatment, offenders' talk about "grooming themselves". They were referring to the justification or denial of their offending behaviour. It therefore seems important to consider this as part of the grooming process. However, it may be more agreeable to refer to this phenomenon by another name, avoiding the use of the term "grooming". Nevertheless, self-grooming is likely to play a part in the move from being motivated to sexually abuse a child to the subsequent targeting of a child, through the justification or denial of the steps child sexual offenders take towards abusing a child. Furthermore, self-grooming is likely to be affected by the response from the community and the child, and the success or failure of the efforts to victimize the child. "Success" is likely to result in further justification or denial of their actions and more entrenched sexual interest in children and motivation to offend. "Failure", on the other hand, is likely to result in the desistence of offending or the offender developing/enahancing his skills/strategies to ensure success.

Justification and denial of offenders' behaviour manifests in cognitive distortions. Ward and Keenan (1999) propose that child sex offenders have cognitive distortions in the form of implicit theories, which relate to themselves, the victim and the world. Implicit theories help individuals to understand the world around them. Problems arise because offenders' implicit theories are maladaptive and supportive of sex with children. These implicit theories subsequently affect encoding and interpretation of future behaviours and events. Ward and Keenan have identified five implicit theories that account for most of the cognitive distortions held by child sex offenders: children as sexual objects; entitlement; dangerous world; uncontrollability; and nature of harm.

Of course, it is not only offenders who have maladaptive implicit theories. For example, many people have an implicit theory that children are at most risk from strangers, which is not consistent with research findings. However, it is easier to believe that strangers sexually abuse children than accept that friends and family do; hence, this implicit theory helps to shelter people from the harsh nature of reality. Offenders' implicit theories work in a similar way, because it is easier for offenders to believe that the child seduced them than to accept that they sexually abused a child.

Grooming the environment and significant others

Grooming the child begins with identifying a vulnerable child (van Dam, 2001). Child sex offenders seem to have a special ability in recognizing vulnerable children (Conte et al., 1989). These vulnerabilities may be that the children have a poor relationship with their parents, do not have many friends (Berliner & Conte, 1990), or have already been victimized (Leberg, 1997). Alternatively, offenders may target women who were sexually abused as children, because the offender considers them easier to re-victimize.

In order to gain access to their victim(s), offenders groom the environment and their potential victim's significant others (e.g. parents, carers, teachers, etc). This may mean the offender integrating themselves into society and places where they are likely to meet children. This will often be a position of trust. Offenders then begin grooming the adults in this community, specifically those who are significant to their potential victim, with the aim of creating an opportunity to access and abuse a child or children. van Dam (2001) reports that offenders are frequently charming, very helpful, and have insider status. This is often an important factor in gaining access to potential victim(s). As offenders help out in the community, they are considering how their efforts will be rewarded later when they can then abuse the children in that community. Offenders are often able to "read the community like a book" in that they assess what they "need" and fulfil these needs accordingly (Hare & Hart, 1993). They can make themselves indispensable, too good to be true and will freely undertake jobs that others do not want to do (Leberg, 1997).

A desire on the part of parents to avoid cognitive dissonance may assist offenders' grooming efforts. A parent may suffer cognitive dissonance as a result of concerns about the trustworthiness of the offender alongside their hospitality and acceptance of the offender. When thoughts do not match behaviour, cognitive dissonance manifests, and often thoughts are changed to be consistent with behaviour (van Dam, 2001). Thus, offenders gain insider status long before they start abusing a victim (van Dam, 2001). Grooming is therefore a well-organized long-term activity (Sanford, 1982). Offenders groom the community so well that if a victim discloses their abuse, the community may support the offender rather than the victim, because they deem the offender to be more believable than the child.

In the case of intrafamilial child sexual abuse, offenders are already in a position of trust and integrated in an environment where they can access potential victims. Some offenders groom the environment by targeting single-parent families to gain this status (Elliott, Browne & Kilcoyne, 1995). Offenders may do this because they believe that these children are more vulnerable and because they believe it will be easier to create opportunities to be alone with the child. Alternatively, offenders may target children or young people who have absent parents, and hence have less protection. In this incidence there is no need for the offender to groom the parents. They can become the child's friend and more easily arrange to have time alone with the child.

Intrafamilial offenders often isolate the victim from their non-abusing parent, siblings and the outside world by developing an exclusive relationship with the child. For instance, they may encourage mothers to have more of a life outside the home, which then gives themselves increased opportunities to abuse their victims. Alternatively, they may isolate non-abusing parents from the outside world in order to prevent them from having people in whom to confide about any concerns (Leberg, 1997). Some offenders encourage mothers to develop an alcohol dependency, in part so that any future disclosures made lack credibility (Leberg, 1997). Other similar strategies employed to limit credibility include questioning the mother's parenting ability in front of friends and other family members. This may constitute part of their strategy for grooming the environment and significant others.

Grooming the environment and significant others can occur as a result of implicit or explicit planning; alternatively, access to a child may occur by chance. Ward and Hudson (2000) have developed a conceptual model of how child sex offenders' implicit planning or seemingly unimportant decisions (SUDs) implicate their offending behaviour by leading them to high-risk situations, i.e. contact with children. This appears to be automatic, because although offenders are conscious of their specific behaviours, they are often unconscious of the effect of implicit goals on these behaviours.

Gollwitzer and Schaal (1998, cited in Ward & Hudson, 2000) suggest that it is through automatic goal-dependent action plans that these SUDs manifest. Ward and Hudson (2000) propose that there are two such action plans: offence scripts and mental simulations. Offence scripts manifest as a result of associations that have developed between situations and behaviours; subsequently, in the presence of certain cues, offence scripts may be activated without any conscious awareness. This is a possible explanation of continued offending and relapse following treatment.

Automatic goal-dependent action plans can be activated regardless of whether an individual has committed any previous sexual crimes. This alternative involves mental simulation. Mental simulation is where an individual plans out in detail how he would commit an offence. As with offence scripts, the presence of certain cues may activate this implicit planning, resulting in the enactment of the individual's fantasies. The notion of implicit planning may provide a possible explanation why the majority of victims know their abuser, because the cues that activate the implicit planning are more likely to be present within the family or in relation to children in the immediate locality (i.e. the places where an individual spends the majority of his time).

It is reasonable to suggest that the fundamental human need to belong may present one possibility to further understand offenders' ability to identify a victim and groom the environment and significant others. Research has shown that a need to belong can affect very basic cognitive functions, e.g. attention and encoding of social information (Pickett, Gardner & Knowles, 2004). Pickett et al. found a positive relationship between a need to belong and sensitivity to social cues. Sexual offenders often come from neglectful, violent and dysfunctional backgrounds (Craissati, McClurg & Browne, 2002). This environment is unlikely to provide an abundance of opportunities for emotional closeness and thus offenders are likely to have a need to belong. In addition, a need to belong is related to low self-esteem (Pickett et al., 2004) and research to date suggests that child sex offenders typically have low self-esteem (Marshall, Anderson & Champagne, 1997). This is supportive of the idea that a need to belong facilitates offenders' identification and access to a victim, because of the associated increased sensitivity to social cues. Children may be approached because the offender perceives them to be less threatening than peers. Alternatively, offenders may be able to identify vulnerabilities in other people because they themselves are vulnerable and thus recognize these signs in others. This explanation would relate to offenders that commit offences following implicit planning. Offenders using explicit planning may also have a need to belong and the associated increased sensitivity to social cues, as a result of a need to belong to the family of community in order to groom and subsequently abuse a child. It is therefore suggested that, in the presence of a motivation to sexually abuse a child, a need to belong often facilitates the identification of a victim and grooming of the environment and significant others.

Grooming the child

Grooming the child is the most commonly recognized form of sexual grooming. In addition to a desire for sexual gratification, there may or may not be a relational aspect to the grooming process, depending on the offender's motivation to abuse. Sexual grooming has been considered by some to be analogous to adult courtship (e.g. Howitt, 1995). In addition, Herman (1981) and Christiansen and Blake (1990) talk about sexually abusive fathers adopting the role of suitor towards their daughter. In the case of intrafamilial abuse, the offender promotes the child in place of the mother (Leberg, 1997). Alternatively, the offender may interact with the child on the child's wavelength (van Dam, 2001). Wilson (1999) found

that offenders who abused boys showed a preference for interacting at the child's level, and incest offenders tended to raise the victim's status to that of an adult, while offenders who abused girls were more concerned with sexual gratification. The types of behaviour that constitute grooming the child take two different forms—physical and psychological.

Physical grooming involves the gradual sexualization of the relationship between the offender and the victim (Berliner & Conte, 1990). *Psychological grooming* is used to achieve this increased sexualization. At first, the offender may justify the sexual behaviour through providing the child with his version of sex education, which states that sex between children and adults is acceptable and that the offender has a responsibility to train the child for later life (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Leberg, 1997). The abuser builds the child's trust (Christiansen & Blake, 1990; Leberg, 1997; Wyre, 1987, cited in Howitt, 1995; van Dam, 2001), makes him or her feel good (Warner, 2000) and then starts to violate boundaries (Christiansen & Blake, 1990; van Dam, 2001). This may involve intentionally entering the bedroom while the child or young person is undressed, or getting dressed together and exposing himself to the child.

Offenders often desensitize a child to touch by beginning with non-sexual touching such as tickling or stroking the child's head. Conversation may also become more sexual. Alternatively, offenders may confuse victims by continuing to talk to the child about a positive unrelated issue while they begin touching the child sexually (Leberg, 1997). The child may have no idea that something inappropriate is happening. The aim is to progress to sexual touching, first on top of clothes and later under or without clothes (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Christiansen & Blake, 1990; Leberg, 1997; van Dam, 2001). Thus, the intention is to make the child compliant with the offender's sexual demands and overcome the child's resistance (Finkelhor, 1984; Leberg, 1997; Warner, 2000).

In addition to using psychological grooming to increase compliance, it is also used to avoid disclosure. Children are groomed to want to be around the adult who is grooming them (Wolf, 1985). Offenders need to maintain the child's cooperation and secrecy to achieve this. One way that the offender does this is by isolating the child and alienating them from others (Warner, 2000). Leberg (1997) refers to this factor as something separate from grooming, others (e.g. van Dam, 2001) consider it to be part of the grooming process. Isolating the child creates a barrier which prevents the child from having a confidant in whom to disclose (Warner, 2000). In addition, the keeping of secrets acts as a source of further isolation (Lerner, 1993, cited in van Dam, 2001). Children are very good at keeping secrets when asked to. Peters (1991, cited in Ceci & Bruck, 1993) found that 82% of children in his study delayed or did not report an event that they had witnessed, because the thief in the scenario asked them not to tell anyone. The thief in this scenario was a stranger, to whom the children had no loyalty, and so it is likely that children would be even more likely to protect a known and loved adult.

Further strategies used by offenders to maintain the child's compliance include issuing threats and bribes (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Christiansen & Blake, 1990). Bribes may take the form of material gifts or extra privileges (Christiansen & Blake, 1990). In addition, offenders are skilled at using children's natural vulnerabilities against them. For instance, children very often have a strong desire to protect their parents. When the offender informs them that their parents would be very hurt if they found out what they had been doing, children may remain silent (Berliner & Conte, 1990). Offenders may also demonstrate their potential for violence through violence towards others, e.g. other family members. Thereby offenders reinforce the message that they will enact their threats about hurting the child and/or the child's family.

Offenders frequently make the child feel responsible for the abuse (Leberg, 1997; van Dam, 2001; Warner, 2000). They convince the child that they are to blame for letting the abuse happen and that they should have stopped it (Leberg, 1997). This is reinforced by stereotypes in society, which emphasize that men cannot control their sex drive (Warner, 2000). Additional guilt may be felt if the child has been made to perform sexual acts on the abuser or another child (Warner, 2000). However, this feeling of responsibility and guilt is overshadowed by the self-betrayal the child feels as their body reacts to sexual stimulation against their will (Warner, 2000) which children may interpret as evidence that they are enjoying themselves. This is internalized and resultantly may have an impact on the child's developing identity. Disclosure is avoided because the child feels that it is "all their fault", that he/she is bad and that no one will believe them (Warner, 2000).

Each victim's experience of grooming is different, because offenders adapt their strategies dependent on the child, whose response during the grooming process is important. It seems reasonable to suggest that offenders require some level of "empathy" during the grooming process to recognize reactions in the child, so that they can adapt their strategy accordingly. For example, during the desensitization process an offender would need to recognize the limits of the victim and to strategically increase those limits. It is proposed that empathy involves four components: (1) emotion recognition; (2) perspective-taking; (3) emotion replication; and (4) response decision (Marshall, Hudson, Jones & Fernandez, 1995). Continuing with the previous example, offenders recognize the distress in their victim and make a decision based on this, because they choose to stop temporarily as a strategic part of the desensitization process. Thus, offenders appear to have ability in components (1) and (4), which are the cognitive components, but not in the affective components (2) and (3). While early research on empathy in sex offenders concluded that they have empathy deficits, more recent research has found that this empathy deficit to be victim-specific (Fernandez, Marshall, Lightbody & O'Sullivan, 1999; Marshall, Hamilton & Fernandez, 2001; Marshall et al., 1995). This is inconsistent with the suggestion that the grooming process requires some level of empathy. However, Fernandez et al. (1999; Marshall et al., 2001) provide a possible explanation for this. They suggest that victim-specific empathy deficits manifest as cognitive distortions, which protect the offenders from negatively evaluating themselves, thus allowing them to continue abusing a child. Based on this suggestion, victim-specific empathy deficits arise as a consequence rather than a cause of the abuse. These cognitive distortions therefore facilitate self-grooming.

The manifestation of a cognitive distortion relating to a victim-specific empathy deficit may be facilitated by cognitive deconstruction. Cognitive deconstruction (see Ward, Hudson & Marshall, 1995) is a state entered into to escape negative experiences and negative self-evaluation. Cognitive deconstruction involves processing at a lower, more concrete, level, i.e. muscular movements, and rewards of behaviour, rather than social action. Resultantly, the individual has much more focus on feelings of pleasure and less awareness of the consequences of his behaviour. This concrete-level focus may reinforce cognitive distortions such as victims enjoyed the abuse because they became physically aroused, which justifies the offender's lack of empathy toward their victim.

Self-grooming, grooming the environment and significant others, and grooming the child are relevant to situational and preferential offenders, extra-familial and intrafamilial offences. It is important that the different types of sexual grooming apply to these different typologies and classifications of offenders because sexual grooming is not used solely by one group of offenders and, furthermore, these categories are not mutually exclusive (Itzin, 2001).

Towards a new definition of sexual grooming of children

The definitions of sexual grooming presented at the start of this review do not reflect the complexity of the sexual grooming of children, which is demonstrated in the previous discussion of the different types of sexual grooming. Based on the above findings it seems necessary to provide a new definition that attempts to encapsulate the complexity of sexual grooming, while still being easy to understand. We propose the following:

A process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender's abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions.

Conclusion

Despite the wide acceptance of the term, sexual grooming of children is not understood clearly, particularly in the public domain. Testimonies from both victims and perpetrators highlight the pertinence of the problem. Furthermore, the government in England and Wales has introduced legislation in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 regarding "meeting a child following sexual grooming" (see Part 1: section 152003). A greater understanding of the meaning, elements and process of sexual grooming is required to effectively utilize this legislation (for review see Craven, Brown & Gilchrist, in press).

Regardless of the prevalence and pertinence of sexual grooming, most aetiological theories of child sexual abuse neglect the phenomenon. The main reason for this is likely to be because prominent theories of child sexual abuse were devised more than 10 years ago, at a time when sexual grooming was not recognized as it is today. Therefore, it is necessary that theories be reconsidered based on this recent awareness. Ward (2001, 2002; Ward & Hudson, 2001; Ward & Siegert, 2002) has begun the process of theory knitting and development. While Ward and Siegert's Pathways Model is able to account for sexual grooming, it still focuses on the presence of opportunity rather than explicitly recognizing that offenders often create their own opportunities to offend.

The current review has identified three types of sexual grooming discussed in the literature: self-grooming, grooming the environment and significant others and grooming the child. Based on these findings an alternative definition has been suggested, which includes details about offenders' objectives, e.g. gaining access to a child, gaining the child's compliance, maintaining secrecy and avoiding disclosure.

A fuller understanding of sexual grooming is required. Consideration needs to be given to offender–victim interaction (before, during and after the offence), micro behaviours that may indicate to significant adults that a child is being sexually groomed, or indeed that they themselves are being groomed by an offender, and the seemingly impossible task of proving beyond reasonable doubt that the ambiguous behaviour of sexual grooming is sexually motivated. This would provide many benefits to child protection and the policing and treatment of child sex offenders with a specific focus on prevention of child sexual abuse rather than reactive responses to it. To optimize the impact of acquired knowledge and understanding, it is necessary to consider how these findings are disseminated to the relevant groups involved with children, e.g. parents, police, and social workers.

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