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RISKTAKING ONLINE BEHAVIOUR
EMPOWERMENT THROUGH
RESEARCH AND TRAINING

ROBERT

Online behaviour related to child sexual abuse. Creating a private space in which to offend – Interviews with online child sex offenders.

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Content

Introduction

Fears about online predators are frequently expressed in the popular press, and are given credence by, for example, citing statistics from law enforcement agencies. An example of this can be seen from one report in October 2012, which alleged that the Federal Bureau of Investigation says that the Internet makes it easier than ever for predators to access children, that their figures show 40,000 chat rooms that are frequented by sexual predators, and that your child has a 100 per cent chance of encountering one in those chat rooms[1]. Such assertions can also be found in academic publications with, for example, Kierkegaard (2008) arguing that recent technological advances aid sexual predators, stalkers, child pornographers, child traffickers and others who intend to exploit children and that multiple platforms are used daily to meet unsuspecting children. However, while the empirical evidence would seem to contradict the suggested size of the problem, the Internet *is* used in sexually abusive and exploitative ways towards children, through the production and dissemination of indecent images of children, online grooming and solicitation, and the abuse of young people through Internet facilitated prostitution (Aslan, 2012; Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2010). It is clear that there is little consensus about whether there are inherent properties of the Internet that encourage the commission of these offences or whether the use of technology has simply made them easier to detect (Yewkes, 2010). However, teasing out the evidence to support such claims is a challenge (Finkelhor, 2012).

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[1] http://www.newson6.com/story/19782416/encountering-child-sex-predators-on-the-internet

Schrock and Boyd (2008) in the report from the Internet Safety Technical Task Force[2] do point out that there is a danger that fears about safety can become exaggerated, and ignore or distort the findings of research in this area. The Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire published two survey studies (YISS-1 and YISS-2), which involved telephone interviews with national samples of young Internet users aged 10 to 17 conducted in 2000 and 2005 (Finkelhor, Mitchell & Wolak, 2000; Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2006). This research has dominated our understanding of the incidence and types of online solicitation and makes it clear that the stereotype of the Internet child molester who uses trickery and violence to assault children is largely inaccurate (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell & Ybarra, 2008). This US research would suggest that most Internet-initiated sex crimes involve adult men who use the Internet to meet and seduce underage adolescents into sexual encounters and that in the majority of cases victims are aware that they are conversing online with adults.

A comparison of survey data obtained from United States' law enforcement agencies in 2000 and 2006 showed a 21% increase in online predators, but an examination of the data indicated that this was largely accounted for by an increase in the number of young adults arrested (from 23% to 40%; Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell, 2009). The authors also point out that in 2006, of those who were arrested for online solicitation 87% had actually targeted online undercover investigators.

The role of the Internet?

Sexual offences against children clearly do not have their origin with the Internet, but it does appear that technology affords opportunities to offend (Taylor & Quayle, 2006) and that engagement with technology impacts on the individual's behaviour, mood and ways of thinking. Cooper (1998) made reference to the 'triple A engine' of the Internet: accessibility, affordability and anonymity. Internet usage statistics would estimate that for 2011 in Europe over 61% of the population have access to the Internet and 78% in North America and there is evidence that the cost of Internet access is falling (International Telecommunication Union, 2012)[3]. It is also the case that while perceived levels of anonymity might be different from what is actually the case, the sheer volume of traffic on the Internet makes detection and management a challenge (Rashid, Greenwood, Walkerdine, Baron & Rayson, 2012). However, access implies not only access to technology but access to images of children and, potentially, to children themselves. Davidson and Gottschalk (2011) describe a number of Internet characteristics that may have relevance. These include: 'disconnected personal communication, mediating technology, universality, network externalities, distribution channel, time moderator, low-cost standard, electronic double, electronic double manipulation, information asymmetry, infinite virtual capacity, independence in time and space, cyberspace, and dynamic social network' (p 23). On-going research by this research group, and funded by the European Commission, focusing upon men convicted of online luring, grooming or solicitation has found some evidence of child pornographic images being used alongside, and as part of, the grooming process. Their findings suggest that approximately 40% of offenders interviewed had easy access to child pornography images, used newsgroups and social networking sites to share images with others, categorised images and

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[2]   Available from http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/research/isttf. Accessed online 0n 13.07.11

[3] http://www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/press_releases/2011/15.aspx

attempted to connect these in terms of physical characteristics with the children they were grooming (Webster, Davidson, Bifulco, Pham, & Caretti (2011).

As already noted, there is concern that certain Internet platforms provide grooming and solicitation opportunities for people who are sexually interested in children, and that the use of social networking sites (SNS) in particular may be associated with increasing risk of harm (Staksrud, Ólafsson & Livingstone, 2012). Social networking sites are popular with adolescents and adults alike (Barker, 2012), although media portrayals of the potential dangers have been hard to examine empirically. In recent years there have been increasing concerns about the kinds of behaviour relating to social networking sites that may be associated with children placing themselves at risk. In particular, empirical work by Nol, Shenk, Barnes and Putman (2010) would suggest that some young people, in particular those who had a prior history of sexual abuse, are particularly vulnerable to future online sexual approaches in part because of the ways that they self-present and communicate in the online environment. They suggest that adolescents who may be unaware of how their appearance might be perceived may not, from a developmental perspective, possess the social sophistication necessary to field and ward off sexual advances in ways that protect them from sexually explicit suggestions. Staksrud, Ólafsson and Livingstone (2012) conducted a population survey with over 25,000 young people aged 9-16 years of age across 25 European countries. They found that SNS use did increase young people's encounters with risks online but that this depended on how they used such sites. Importantly, once other variables had been taken into account, there was no evidence that SNS use increased experiences of harm.

From an offender perspective, Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones and Wolak (2010) explored the variety of ways social networking sites (SNSs) are used to facilitate the sexual exploitation of young people. A nationally representative sample of over 2,500 local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies in the United States were sent mail surveys followed by telephone interviews for a subset. Their results suggested SNSs played a role in an estimated 2,322 cases of Internet sex crimes against minors, ending in arrests in the year 2006. SNSs were used to initiate sexual relationships, to provide a means of communication between victim and offender, to access information about the victim, to disseminate information or pictures about the victim, and to get in touch with the victim's friends. However the authors pointed out that the largest number of SNS-related arrests (1,696) involved police acting in an undercover capacity. The majority of such cases were initiated in chat rooms (82%); the SNS component being a web site constructed by law enforcement under the guise of a teenager as a place for the suspect to go to see pictures of the "victim" and to further corroborate the undercover agent's identity. The authors suggested that SNSs can be useful in terms of their ability to enhance law enforcement's capacity to detect and catch criminals and that a law enforcement presence may actually serve as a deterrent (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones & Wolak 2010, p 186). Sengupta and Chaudhuri (2011) however, contest whether it is social networking sites per se which are associated with grooming behaviour and argue that their data suggest that it is the behaviour of young people themselves that may increase risk.

Typologies of grooming activity.

Webster et al. (2011) developed a grooming typology from their qualitative analysis of interviews with 36 men convicted of offences in the UK. They identified three types of offenders: "Intimacy Seeking Offender";

⁴ http://www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/press_releases/2011/15.aspx

"Adaptable Offender", and "Hyper-Sexual Offender" (NatCen, 2011)[4]. The Intimacy Seeking Offender was described as someone who thinks that they are in a romantic and consenting relationship with the young person. These offenders do not make use of indecent images of young people or try to hide their identity but long periods are spent socialising with a young person online, and getting to know them before arranging to meet in real life. The Adaptable Offender was seen to be a person who used lots of different identities online, and adapted their behaviour depending on the young person they were in contact with. This offender views the people groomed as sexually mature and may or may not use indecent images as part of the process and will not necessarily attempt to meet his victim(s) in real life, or have significant contact with other offenders online. The Hyper-Sexual Offender is engaged in sharing and acquiring an extensive number of indecent images of children. They will have contact with other sexual offenders online, but have little or no interest in meeting victim(s) in real life and may use different identities or a sexually explicit profile name and photo. Typically, the online behaviour of such offenders is to move quickly to highly sexualised contact with the young person.

An exploratory study by Briggs et al. (2011) of 51 people convicted of an Internet sex offence in the United States in which they attempted to entice an adolescent into a sexual relationship using an Internet chat room. Clinical and behavioural data were obtained from forensic assessments and chat logs. Ninety per cent of their sample was apprehended as a result of proactive policing. The authors concluded that Internet chat room offenders constitute a separate group from other sex offenders and were characterised by less severe criminogenic factors. They hypothesised that chat room sex offenders typically avoided relationships and spent a significant amount of time in chat rooms as a primary social and sexual outlet. They also appeared to engage in other sexually compulsive behaviours. The observation of compulsion has also been suggested to be a feature of downloading Internet abusive images of children (Berlin & Sawyer, 2012). Briggs et al.'s data suggested two subgroups: a contact driven group who were motivated to engage in offline sexual behaviour, and a fantasy driven group motivated to engage in cybersex, but without an express wish to meet young people offline. They suggest that the contact-driven offender utilises Internet chat rooms as a medium to connect with other people in the online community, with an intention to develop a sexual relationship with a teenage female (or male). The function of the Internet is therefore seen as a medium for victim location, communication, relationship building (grooming), and coordination of a future meeting place. The authors note that this offender will also transfer communication to telephone and text communication.

A further Canadian study by Seto, Wood, Babchishin, and Flynn (2012) compared 38 contact offenders, 38 child pornography offenders, and 70 online solicitation offenders. Their purpose was to compare these groups of offenders on socio-demographic and psychological variables as well as existing risk measures. Their results suggested that offenders convicted of online solicitation, or crimes related to the possession of child abuse images, were better educated than contact offenders but there were no differences on other socio-demographic variables. When compared to child pornography offenders (which excluded those who had produced abusive images of children), online solicitation offenders had lower capacity for relationship stability and lower levels of sex drive or preoccupation and deviant sexual preference. Their analysis also indicated that online solicitation offenders were more likely than contact offenders, however, to have viewed child pornography, to report hebephilic sexual interests (in children who show the development of

pubic hair and breasts: Prentky & Barbaree, 2011), to have problems in their capacity for relationship stability, to be better educated, and to be more likely to have unrelated and stranger victims. The latter is possibly not surprising given that the contact offenders in this sample were more likely to reside with a child and therefore have increased access. However, unlike Brigg et al.'s (2011) study only 6 of the 70 online solicitation offenders could be classified as 'fantasy driven' as 91% of this group of offenders in the Seto et al. (2011) sample had attempted to meet a minor and would be classified as contact-driven offenders.

However, the empirical research in relation to grooming or online solicitation, while growing, is still sparse, and has largely focused on the behaviour of the young person as opposed to the offending adult. It is also worth noting that in the University of New Hampshire research by Wolak and colleagues, both the 2000 and 2005 surveys indicated that nearly half of the sexual solicitations were initiated by other young people, somewhat challenging some of our assumptions about the nature of online grooming gained from criminal justice populations (Wolak et al. 2008).

Young people and grooming.
Mitchell , Finkelhor & Wolak, (2001) found in their first Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS-1; United States) in 2000 that 19% of youth who used the Internet regularly were the targets of unwanted sexual solicitation in the previous year. Of these approximately 25% reported being upset after these incidents, although greater distress was associated with being younger and whether the offender had attempted to meet them. Risk was associated with being female, older adolescents, youth who had emotional problems, frequent Internet users, chat room participants and those who communicated online with strangers. The publication in 2005

of the second Youth Internet Safety Survey enabled a comparison of the two data sets (Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2007). The study showed that the overall incidence and 5-year trends of reporting unwanted sexual solicitations, harassment, and unwanted exposure to pornography varied by age, gender, race, and household income. A decline in the percentage of youth reporting sexual solicitations was seen for both boys and girls and across all age groups, but not among young people from minority groups and those living in less affluent households. There was an increase in online harassment within particular sub-groups of young people but the authors concluded that this could be explained by the increase in the amount of Internet use over the past five years, and presumably increasing access by these young people.

A European survey by the Swedish Media Council (2010) indicated that 21% of 12-16 year old children answered that someone had talked about sex with them over the Internet and just over one third of these conversations were with a total stranger (8% of the total sample). Girls reported having Internet contact with a stranger three times more frequently than boys (13% compared to 4%). In the EU Kids Online survey[5], 15% of 11-16 year olds had received peer to peer "sexual messages or images". The study defined sexual messages as "talk about having sex or images of people naked or having sex" (Livingstone et al., 2011). A further Swedish study from 2005 (Brå, 2007), with nearly 7,500 students from grade 9 (14-15 year olds) from 107 schools, asked if these young people had been contacted by unknown adults who had made suggestions of a sexual nature. Thirty per cent of children (48% girls and 18% boys) reported that they had had contacts with sexual content through the Internet during the previous year. Twenty-five per cent responded that sexual suggestions had been made to them or that they had been

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[5] Available from http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx. Accessed 20.1.11

asked for sexual services through the Internet (girls 38% and boys 12%). Nine per cent reported that sexual suggestions had been made to them through their mobile phone (girls 11% and boys 6%)[6].

In the Second Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS-2) in more than half (56%) of solicitation incidents, young people had been asked for photographs, and in 27% of these incidents the requests were for sexual photographs. In addition, in 15% of these incidents online groomers sent sexual photographs of themselves to young people (Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2006). Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak (2007) found that 4% of Internet-using youth (10-17 years old) reported an online request to send a sexual picture of themselves during the previous year. Only one out of 65 children said that they had complied with the request. Being female, being of Black ethnicity, having a close online relationship, engaging in sexual behaviour online, and experiencing physical or sexual abuse offline were risk factors for receiving a request for a sexual picture. It is still unclear why ethnicity should have played a role in these cases.

Lansdown (2011) identified three possible pathways linking offline experiences and risks of online sexual solicitation: that young people are more at risk where there are high levels of conflict with parents that impacts on supervision, communication and emotional bonds; that vulnerability increases where there is a history of prior sexual abuse; that young people who have experienced parental conflict or physical abuse may have pre-existing mental health problems which places them at high risk online.

The EU Safer Internet Project (ROBERT)[7] (Ainsaar & Lööf, 2011) outlines a range of individual and environmental risk factors associated with children and young people becoming victims of internet-related sexual abuse but is clear that these factors are complex and intertwined. The project identifies online risk-taking behaviour as the most important and most studied of these risk factors. In the review of the literature provided by the project, Soo and Bodanovskaya (2011) conclude that the more young people are open to online sexual activities (especially flirting and having sexual conversations with strangers), the more probable it is that they may become victims of sexual harassment, solicitation or grooming. However, Munro (2011) has concluded that currently available research provides 'at best a partial and somewhat US-centric picture of who may be particularly vulnerable to specific contact and content risks' (p 13)[8].

The aims of the current research were to explore the ways in which people convicted of online grooming identified the young people they targeted and the strategies that they used to engage them in both online and offline sexual behaviour. We were also interested in the attributions that they made about their behaviour.

[6] Taken from Svedin, C-G (2011) in M. Ainsaar and L. Lööf, (eds) Online behaviour related to child sexual abuse. Available online from http://www.childcentre.info/robert/public/Online_behaviour_related_to_sexual_abuse.pdf. Accessed 28.06.11

[7] Available from http://www.childcentre.info/robert/about-the-project/. Accessed 09.09.10

[8] Munro, E.R. (2011) The protection of children online: a brief scoping review to identify vulnerable groups. Available from https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/CWRC-00085-2011. Accessed 12.12.11.

Method

A qualitative design was adopted in order to meet the aim of the study, which was to explore the experiences of young people who have been involved in online grooming.

There are a number of qualitative research approaches available to the researcher. In this instance, grounded theory methods (GTM) were chosen as they have been used in related research from the ROBERT project with young people[9] and with contemporary research on sexual offending (e.g. Bourke, Ward & Rose, 2012; Burrows & Day, 2011). Grounded theory methods are used to identify psychosocial processes, human experiences that involve change over time and are influenced by both internal psychological factors and social interactions (Benoliel, 1996). Grounded theory is the most commonly used qualitative research approach by researchers across a variety of disciplines (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010).

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s and it is suggested that its logical and systematic approach comes from Glaser's background in quantitative research whereas Strauss was influenced by symbolic interaction which is reflected in grounded theory's focus on process, meaning and action (Charmaz, 2006). In grounded theory, researchers start with a general research aim or question and gradually develop a theory through analysing the research findings (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory is inductive in that the theory develops after data collection commences however it is also deductive in terms of analysing data and then deciding where or who to sample next (Glaser, 1978). Glaser and Strauss (1967) highlight the importance of the underlying process involved in developing theory, which is the simultaneous collection, coding and analysis of data. They advise that researchers should engage in all three tasks together as often as they can. Glaser and Strauss (1967) use the term, theoretical sampling to describe this process. Researchers stop collecting data when they have reached the point of saturation. This means that nothing new is coming out of the data and where gathering more data would probably not develop the theory or explanation much further (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) also state that in reality, saturation often occurs when researchers have limits on their time or financial resources.

Researchers have a number of grounded theory methods to choose from (e.g. Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006) however all types of grounded theory provide useful guidelines for the collection and analysis of data (Charmaz, 2006). For the present research we decided to use Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach, as she does not assume that theories emerge from the data distinct from the researcher and instead proposes that they are a construction of reality between the participant and researcher.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was gained through the University of Edinburgh Research Ethics process. The main ethical issues in the present study related to protecting the identities of participants, however in the information provided to respondents we were clear that should a new disclosure be made of sexual abuse then this would have to be reported to the relevant child protection agencies.

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[9] Available online at http://www.childcentre.info/robert/

i. Anonymity

In order to ensure anonymity, code numbers (e.g. S1) were used instead of participants' names on the interview transcriptions. Participants were informed verbally that direct quotes would be used in the written report of the research to illustrate theoretical categories, however any personally identifiable information (names of people, places, dates etc.) would be altered or removed.

ii. Confidentiality

A number of steps were taken to ensure confidentiality. The research interviews were transcribed, translated, and back-translated (from English to Italian) to ensure accuracy, and the recordings on the digital recorder were deleted once transcriptions were complete. The anonymised transcripts and digital files were stored on a secure web-based platform to which only those directly involved in the research process had access. Consent forms were kept by each of the organisations who facilitated the research.

iii. Informed Consent

The participant information sheet highlighted that participation was voluntary; participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason, and that there was no impact on care regardless of whether an individual decides to participate or not. At the beginning of each research interview participants were reminded of the aim of the study, what participation would involve and their rights were explained. Participants were also given the chance to ask questions relating to the research and their involvement in the study. Once participants indicated they were willing to take part in the research they were asked to sign the consent form. Participants were also requested to provide consent for their interview to be recorded.

Participants

The data for this study were derived from two sources. Fifteen cases, including forensic reports and chat logs, were examined. All cases involved online grooming by male offenders targeting exclusively female victims. A thematic analysis of the content of these cases helped in the formation of the semi-structured interview guide for the interviews with offenders and also provided complimentary data for constant comparison with the current interviews. As the data were not derived from research interviews, extracts are not used in the following analysis. Twelve offenders were then interviewed: 4 from Italy and 8 from the United Kingdom. All were identified through the criminal justice system and interviews were carried out by people unknown to them but working within that context. All were being managed within the community and all of the UK offenders had been on a Sex Offender Treatment Programme. This was not the case for the Italian respondents. All were male, of white European descent, and the age of participants at the time of the offence ranged from 21 – 59 years. Only two had a known previous conviction for any type of sexual offence (exposure and downloading of indecent images). Six had been married. The young people targeted by offenders were female in all but one case and aged between 10-16 years. The exception to this was JV, an adult male who targeted boys.

Procedure.

All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. On completion of the interviews, each file was downloaded directly from the recording device to dedicated laptops and placed on a secure, password-protected platform hosted by the Council of the Baltic Sea States. A semi-structured interview schedule was devised following critical examination of relevant research literature and the forensic cases previously described. Interviews were collected over a 12-month period.

In line with grounded theory, interviews were collected over a period of time and analysis took place along with further data collection (Charmaz, 2006). This allowed for theoretical sampling, although the pool of available respondents was restricted to those currently managed within the community and who expressed interest in being part of the study. Each interview was transcribed and all identifying data were removed, with each respondent allocated a unique identifier. Transcripts were analysed one at a time, moving from line-by-line coding, to focused coding and then theoretical coding. There was no attempt at inter-rater-reliability as this is not the norm with GTM, but steps were taken to ensure the quality of the analysis (Yardley, 2000). In relation to GTM these include: cross-checking emerging concepts against participants' meanings, asking experts if the theory 'fit' their experiences, and recording detailed memos outlining all analytical and sampling decisions (Cooney, 2011).

Data Analysis

The aim of the research was to generate a tentative exploratory model of the ways that offenders selected children online and the methods used to engage them sexually both online and offline. We were also interested in exploring the attributions that they made about their behaviour. The model was composed of two theoretical categories which reflected the content of the interviews: Creating a private space in which to offend, and Targeting minors. These will be described using anonymised extracts from the interview data (with allocated random initials to identify each respondent) and addressed in relation to their respective sub-categories.

Creating a private space in which to offend

What was interesting across all accounts was that the men interviewed described using the Internet to fulfil routine activities in their everyday lives, but within this they were also able to create a private space, separate from other parts of their online lives (and in the main their offline lives) in which to commit these offences. As will be seen, they selected technological platforms that would enable meeting minors, and these choices were also associated not only with meeting their immediate sexual goals but with changing emotions and thoughts about their activities.
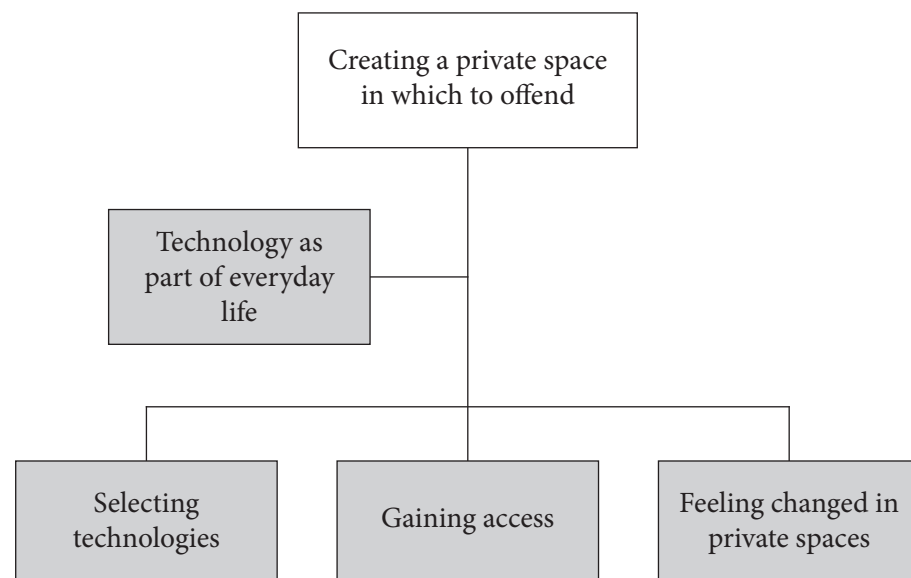
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│      in which to offend   │
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Figure 1: Creating a space in which to offend

Technology as part of every day life

Although the men within this sample represented a spread of ages, it is possibly not surprising that all of them used technology to achieve things in their everyday lives. For the younger respondents this included using the Internet to search for information as well as downloading music and videos:

> *Yes, I go to YouTube, I watch videos, I really like model cars, I like to look at radio-controlled models. I also look at model trains, vehicles in the building sector, the construction sector. Then, maybe if I want to listen to the score from some advert, I'll search for the music. (AM)*

> *Yes, I also use the Internet to find shops, the location of a street, also for games and for music, a bit generally, yes. (DP)*

While for older respondents it was seen as a way of carrying out domestic and family tasks:

> *…we done a lot of eBay stuff, used to buy, sell stuff on eBay. Excuse me. I would help my daughter with stuff from school, and things like that, and I would say it's just normal stuff. Just normal, legitimate, legal stuff. (HT)*

> *Well, me and my wife used to use it, well, my wife used to use it for shopping, and things like that. (IU)*

However, one respondent captured the all pervasiveness of technology as part of everyday life, which for him is seen as most noticeable by its enforced absence:

> *I'd use it for everything – for work, for following sports, for my home, my daughters used it for their schoolwork. By now, it's a tool that's essential, for official forms affecting your family you can just print them out at home with no need to go to public offices to get them stamped. Even purely from the point of view of functionality, and so on…now, not having it is a problem. (JV)*

Such variation in Internet usage appears not to be simply related to access, and it was the case with our sample that some of the younger Italian respondents only had access through cyber cafes or through their mobile phones. An empirical study by Hargittai, (2010) showed

that skill itself was positively related with Internet use, as was socioeconomic status an important predictor of how people are incorporating the Web into their everyday lives. For people convicted on an Internet related offence, sanctions often include denial of access to the Internet and even to computers, which as noted by JV can be seen as a considerable problem and one that limits routine activities in every day life (Berlin & Sawyer, 2012).

Selecting technologies

Many of the platforms used for routine activities also offered opportunities to gain illegal content and to contact others:

> *...Facebook then came out, and everyone was going on there then, wasn't they, and they had 1 or 2, they had, oh, there was, Facebook had one called are you interested, that was another dating thing that you could sign up for, so, you had like Zeus and are you interested, and are you interested I signed up for, because that was all part of Facebook, all you had to do was put a tick in it, and put your profile in... (IU)*

> *… through chat rooms, do I need to give the name? Social networks… (DP)*

However, there was increasing selectivity in platforms used which offered access to sexual content and easy access to young people:

> *In chat rooms or through Facebook, using a made-up name, I'd ask 'to be friends with girls, all females, aged between 12 and 19; if they accepted we'd chat for a while', talking about various topics to do with school, with romantic relationships… if I came across one that*

was more uninhibited, easy-going I'd start complimenting her (you're really cute…etc.) and maybe we'd start a conversation, talking in a way that had sexual undertones (GS)

> *Frequenting this particular chat room it was quite clear that it was about seeking exchanges of a sexual nature, mutual sexual satisfaction. (JV)*

> *And then I started using Bearshare, and they had profiles, they had the sections of profiles, like, of thirteen to eighteen, eighteen to twenty, et cetera, I started looking at the profiles of thirteen to eighteen year olds, and started chatting to whoever was there to chat to. (EQ)*

> *It was a peer to peer website, where you could download music, or videos, but if you typed in appropriate names you could find abuse images. (EQ)*

Some of the technologies used were clearly for sexual purposes, but which were legal. However, what was identified was that social exchanges with people within these often involved the exchange of illegal images:

> *The images…that…the child pornographic images? Because I'm bisexual, I was on a site called Gaydar, which I used quite a lot, just for adult conversations, there was never any children or anything, that was total adult stuff, and I was chatting to a guy one day and that, and he just sent me this DVD, which I thought was just DVD films, gay adult DVD films, and the actual disc had pornographic images on them, but because I had watched and stored them on the computer, obviously the police had to look at that, and I had to take the consequences of having that. (HT)*

Well, it's quite easy because, for example, I simply used my Mule. I used it…that is, I had thought that it was used only for music and films, then, when during various chats I was told it was really quite simple to find certain films and photos. And so I started to search around for films of a homosexual nature. And it happened that I also downloaded material with minors and so, the novelty… (JV)

Chat rooms and instant messenger were the preferred platforms for communication with minors, and often there was a migration from one to the other:

I would use Messenger with persons I had already established a certain familiarity. Because then I'd move on to Messenger because it was much more direct. But to go on Messenger to look for someone who you couldn't honestly know whether he may actually be bisexual, that no, in fact I was quite afraid of doing something like that. (JV)

No what would happen is I'd start chatting to these girls on the chat room and then I'd ask them if they had MSN, which is like a soft messenger, and then I'd invite them to view the webcam from there. (KX)

I got involved in discussions with people on social networking sites and then I moved onto MSN and talking to them on that. (CO)

And, I think, I think, there afterwards MSN, and what ultimately in the latter stages, I'm jumping forward a few years, it was a group called Face Party, and they were probably some of the worst ones (FR)

A further migration as part of the offence process was to mobile phones:

Yes phone calls and messages, and photos but not all that much because with a mobile… Mainly, we'd use it if we had something to tell each other or to set up a meeting. (JV)

Right, and she was only on the website for the one day, but she gave me her phone number, and we'd have phone sex. (EQ)

At that time I had 2 phones, I had the phone that I would normally have, and I had another pay as you go (EQ)

Wolak et al., (2010) have also described a similar process where offenders use Internet communications such as instant messages, e-mail, and chatrooms to meet and develop intimate relationships with victims. Webster et al. (2012) have also noted the importance of mobile technology in grooming behaviour. As can also be seen, the simple addition of a webcam or camera phone changed the nature of the communication in terms of the sexual engagement with the young person:

But it might happen that if I had the webcam through MSN I'd show my sexual organ. (AM)

Well, what I would do, I would chat to them, and go down the sexual line, right, normally ask them if they wanted to, kind of, masturbate on a webcam, or if they had a webcam. (EQ)

I basically went on chat rooms for sexual gratification basically, I used to expose myself. (KX)

If you wanted you could send pictures, images, through that and you would link in via the webcam. So if you've got MSN and you've got a webcam, you just plug it in and then you can chat to them that way. (CO)

While the use of images as part of the grooming process has been described in the popular press, 'The 31-year-old offered them money, alcohol and phone top-ups to persuade them to send indecent pictures of themselves' (Evening Gazette, 2012) there has been much less consideration of this in relation to academic research. Lanning's (2001) work with the FBI had identified the variety of ways that offenders use illegal images (child pornography), which included: sexual arousal and gratification; lowering children's inhibitions; blackmail; as a medium of exchange, and profit. However, this predated the ease of user-generated content, which to a great extent has changed the nature of online abusive practices. While Ghose and Han (2011) have pointed out that content generation requires disproportionately more effort and resources than does content usage, it may be that in the context of online grooming (and possibly the production of images for personal use and exchange), the salience of the material is highly motivating and makes the additional effort worthwhile.

Gaining access

Regardless of whether the primary intention was to access images of children and young people or to try to meet them offline, once access had been obtained it became a focused and purposive activity. What respondents described was ease of accessing young people, and while not all of them responded in the desired way, the sheer volume of potential contacts made this worthwhile:

Right, say I spoke to 2 hundred, I'd, maybe, get twenty personal hits in some degree (EQ)

Well, I chatted with loads of minors, because in any case, inside these chat rooms on various sites there are really loads of them. As for how many I met up with, well the number could be somewhere around ten. (JV)

It was every day. It was literally every day. When I got a chance I put the computer on for an hour or two and that was it. Everybody would send you offline messages and you just reply to them, if they're there, they're there, they'd reply back to you. But that was virtually every day. (BN)

There's literally hundreds of thousands of people that you can link up with but obviously as many MSN friends as you like. I suppose the more you have when you log in as well, there's more chance of somebody also being logged in that you can start a chat with so it can easily become an obsession to find more and more people to talk to. (CO)

This is in contrast to both the risk and effort described by one offender when he sought to meet his sexual needs by exposing himself to young people offline:

I would sit and be in the gardens and then maybe as soon as I saw some little girl I'd get ready and then do the rest of it. (AM)

Researchers such as Kierkegaard (2008) and Davidson and Gottschalk (2012) have drawn attention to the fact that while sexually abusive and exploitative behaviour existed prior to the Internet, its advent has

allowed for easier and faster distribution of pornographic materials and communication across national and international boundaries. Briggs et al., (2011) in their study of online grooming offenders suggest that the function of the Internet is as a medium for victim location, communication, relationship building (grooming), and coordination of a future meeting place. The authors also noted the movement to telephone and text communication and this was evident with the current interviews:

> *I mean, it made life easier for me, I mean, I went into Shiraz and would look at the profiles of thirteen and fourteen year olds, and think, oh, phone number, right, [inaudible 37:41] on the mobile, started texting them, right, or contacting them on Shiraz, or Bearshare, and say, are you into talking sexual, what about giving me your mobile number, I'll phone you, et cetera. (EQ)*

What was also evident from our respondents was not only sequential access to a large number of young people, but concurrent access. Respondents were able to communicate effectively with as many young people at any one time as they had the capacity to manage:

> *It could be, I mean, the other factor which we haven't touched upon, which I do now, is the fact that conversations could be held simultaneously... for example, if you were on any of these things, or MSN, you could, you know, minimise (FR)*

> *I used to open so many windows, as best I can imagine one in 20. When I went on to masturbate on average I'd open up the 20 little windows because that was about as much as my laptop could cope with and I'd just standard message them all and I'd just delete them if they didn't reply or weren't interested. It's a horrific thing to say when I think back on it but yes sorry it was what I did. (KX)*

Feeling changed in private spaces

Creating a private online space, in which it was possible to access children and young people, was also associated with a change in how these respondents felt, and to some extent how they were thinking. Some of the most intense changes related not surprisingly, to sexual excitement and arousal:

> *Even when I'm just talking in chat rooms, when they talk about certain things and experiences, even then I get excited. (AM)*

> *… and so everything that I came across that was a novelty was something totally captivating in my view (JV)*

> *One in ten. One in ten. But I'm not saying that with, oh, [inaudible 27:46], right, honestly a hit for me would be for me to masturbate for them, right, and I'd have them masturbate back, or the least show some part of their body naked, right, okay, that would be, I don't know, say, that would be a hundred per cent, that would be a total hit. (EQ)*

Some respondents emphasised that this arousal was only associated with what was happening online, as opposed to be the possibility of the contact taking place offline:

> *Because I wouldn't have been turned on by the time I'd driven there, there would be this actual physical thing in front of me, I mean a physical thing should I say not "that" physical thing in front of me and that would have done nothing for me. Because as I walked down the street it did nothing for me it wasn't until I was actually on line. (KX)*

At times, the imperative to secure more of the same meant quickly moving on to another target:

Sometimes, generally I know it sounds really bad but I'd get bored, I'd get bored and want someone new to talk to after a short period of time because the way that I used to, sorry this is quite graphic, but get off in effect, was receiving comments about me exposing myself on webcam. So after someone had seen it once or twice there wasn't really much to do, (KX)

I don't think I ever pushed anyone, you know, if they weren't interested they weren't interested I didn't have time to waste I suppose. In a very rude way I didn't have time to waste trying to convince them that this was a good idea. (KX)

However, excitement was not the only emotion experienced.

I found after talking to her for a little while, and the way we were talking, I felt relieved. I felt as if I had somebody that actually wanted to listen to me and with the anonymity of the internet I felt more secure. Because at that time I couldn't talk to anybody; I was literally locked up, I was… (BN)

And at that stage there was a requirement to escape from this pressure, and what I did was I was using the internet, I was using generally [inaudible 13:20] chat rooms (FR)

Chatting with young people online was also associated with a rationalization of what was happening and a suspension of any thoughts that what might be happening was wrong:

I was acquiring my own visions by saying effectively nobody's going to get hurt, we're not together, nobody's going to get hurt, it's basically what L wanted and I saw her as wanting this. (BN)

I mean, at that time, I didn't look on these people as victims. (HT)

The internet is a sort of means of pretending almost that you're something you're not and the anonymity of - I could say things on there that I would never say in real life. You're behind a screen and you can do what you want and no one is seeing what you're doing, that's why it's easier for me. (CO)

…I mean, yes, depending on who it was, some girls had webcams at the other end, sometimes they didn't…they only saw me, from neck downwards, and as I say, I just looked at it as…I wasn't doing any harm. (HT)

What is of interest is that once the contact with the young person had finished and the respondent had disengaged from using the Internet it was possible that there was an emotional and cognitive shift:

…there was clearly a stimulus, because, I mean, I'm not going to say that there wasn't, because it just wouldn't be true, there was a stimulation, but once I had left the place of, you know, I just, it just wasn't with me anymore…. And it wasn't a question of just coming out the site, it was a shutting, the machine would be shut down, I would leave the office, I might go and watch television for a while. (FR)

I felt sick every time I did it, though (LW)

… and when I left that room, having done, well, whatever, this chat, when I left that room it was left behind. (FR)

The conversation part…I didn't think it was wrong. When we were talking on the phone sexually, masturbating and all the rest of it and me getting sexual gratification out of it, I knew it was wrong but I didn't want it to stop. (BN)

For at least one respondent, the offence was described as being specific to the context of being online:

The thing is I always found if I was on holiday with my wife and boys in the caravan, it never entered my head, I didn't miss it, or whatever, but as soon as I got back... (EQ)

The category of 'Creating a private space in which to offend' involved both a literal and metaphorical space.

Anonymity. I didn't like anybody to know anything about me, because I've always been very inward in respect to what I do, my work, my life, everything about my life, my previous history and all the rest of it. So being online, I just wanted to disguise all that… (BN)

I think it's because you could hide behind…I mean, on the programme I always just say, I could always hide behind the monitor. That person wasn't seeing me, I wasn't seeing that person. I felt safe and secure, and at that time, I felt that they felt safe and secure. (HT)

I wasn't very secure about myself going out and meeting women so

for me the safe place, the untouchable place was the computer for me (KX)

The family would go off to bed, my wife would go off to bed, so it tended to be more late evening - ten onwards. Ten till twelve, that type of thing. The computer was in a separate room just off the living room so you could go on there with relative anonymity as to what you were doing but it tended to be more of a late evening when no one else was around. (CO)

The Internet, for me, was an outlet for a part of me that had been hidden away and which was a bit troubled. Of course I would never have gone and hung around outside a school or outside a… Like, for example, men-only saunas – something that has never attracted me. I mean, I would never have approached anything like that. The Internet, on the other hand, opened all possible doors for me…from that point of view. (JV)

So I was frightened that I was going to be rejected, I was frightened that people wouldn't like me for the person that I was. So the anonymity of using the computer like MSN, Yahoo!, Facebook, there was another one but I can't remember the name of it. (BN)

The internet is a sort of means of pretending almost that you're something you're not and the anonymity of - I could say things on there that I would never say in real life. You're behind a screen and you can do what you want and no one is seeing what you're doing, that's why it's easier for me. (CO)

But the metaphor I used to describe, this going into this dark room to escape was the room under the stairs. (FR)

The reasons given for needing this space, which clearly was used to also justify their offences, often included a break down in adult relationships:

> I was, personally, under a great deal of strain at the time, my marriage was a short one, and irrevocable. (FR)

> …and me and my wife split up way back in 2007… (IU)

> When it all went wrong with me and me wife, now. (LW)

> … my ex-partner, M, had taken my daughter off me, even though I had full custody of her and wouldn't return her point blank. I didn't know where to turn. (BN)

> As I say, I think it was just down to the fact that, probably because – not that it's an excuse – but because my wife and I weren't having sex at the time and that, it maybe seemed like my daughter's friends all coming about the house, everything like that, all sort of added up to it. (HT)

Equally, relationships with young people were seen as less threatening:

> I had difficulties relating to those my own age, I was afraid to be compared with and forced into submission. (GS)

> I wasn't very secure about myself going out and meeting women so for me the safe place, the untouchable place was the computer for me (HT)

> I mean I'm a confident person but I wasn't confident about women and I was very scared of rejection from a woman, but I also needed

to be, well to sexually pleasure myself and satisfy myself in a manner, and it came through masturbation. (KX)

> I'm probably quite a shy type person and I don't really express my feelings very well. (CO)

However, this private space also allowed for relationships with young people that were less sexually challenging and were inherently flattering:

> Well, maybe because when it comes to a minor it's more likely that you'll get a response, of a sexual type, than from an adult woman. Because a woman needs to be courted, invited – even there you may find someone really easy – but mainly it takes more time…and it's different, and I don't know, maybe with minors there's more imagination at play…because their approach towards sex is just starting, knowing that at 14 you're already starting to do things. While with a woman you know that she's already had some experience…obviously. (DP)

> It was almost too easy. (JV)

> I mean, I didn't have to try hard to contact them, put it that way. (EQ)

> The key difference is there was more acceptance and there was less criticism. So say an adult female was viewing me on webcam and I wasn't as big as I'd said or she didn't like my body, she'd be quite happy to say that. Whereas sort of the younger people I chatted to it was the fact that "Oh this is an adult male's body, who trims his pubic hair and is quite happy to masturbate for me" and I don't know, I don't know exactly what they thought but that was the

perception at the time I was getting, you know, there was less criticism. That these people were far happier to accept what was there I suppose rather than be critical of it, which again was good for me at that time because of my heightened, I was turned on I wanted that compliment, I didn't want someone to say "Oh your penis is really small." That just wouldn't have done anything for me. (KX)

… and you're being flattered as well. (FR)

Targeting minors.

All of the men interviewed explicitly targeted young people who were below the legal age of consent. For some men, however, these were described as 'consensual' and positioned as 'affairs' in a similar way to how illicit adult relationships might be described. What can be seen in relation to this category is that the opportunities afforded by these technological platforms allowed respondents to search for particular physical, psychological and behavioural characteristics of the young people. These engagements enabled sexual fantasy, which for some men was a prelude to meeting the young person. Fantasy also included playing with identities.
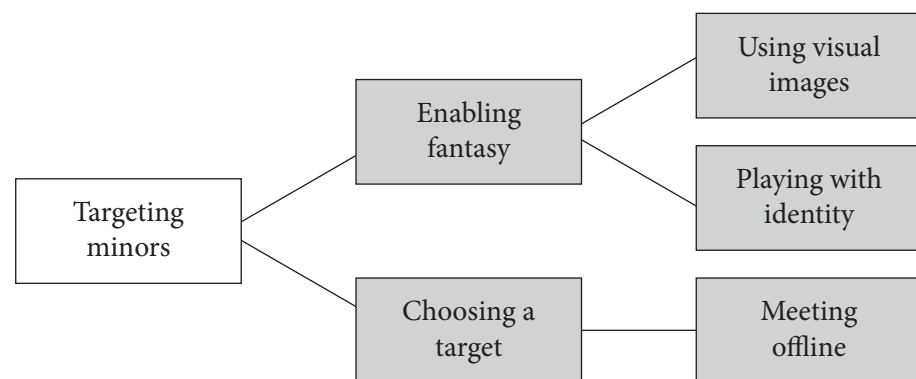

Figure 2: Targeting minors

Choosing a target

The men interviewed for this study talked at length about how they chose young people to target for their sexual needs. In part this clearly followed from the research questions and the information sheet that had been provided as part of the study. However, what respondents described focused on both the characteristics of young people and the way they behaved online, as well as aspects of their own behaviour that encouraged a response.

Targeting minors might seem initially to be indiscriminate, making as many contacts as possible in the hope that some would actually respond in the ways that the respondent hoped for:

Select the profiles, I'd select the profiles, yeah, but when I was at my worst, you know, how, say the girl had an MSN address I would add it to my contacts, and you know how when you send an email to your friends you cc it, et cetera?... Right, see a certain girl sent an email, it would come to me, it would have her friends cc'd onto it… Any female names I would add to my MSN, and start to chat to them. (EQ)

It was whoever happened to be there, I mean at one point when I was really, well messed up as far as I'm concerned, I used to just double click and open as many private messages, there's a little tab at the bottom, that my browser would allow me to do. And I'd just send a sort of copy and paste a message and whoever replied I'd talk to them, I'd sort of chat to the people that chatted back if that makes sense. (KX)

There's literally hundreds of thousands of people that you can link up with but obviously as many MSN friends as you like. I suppose the more you have when you log in as well, there's more chance of

somebody also being logged in that you can start a chat with so it can easily become an obsession to find more and more people to talk to. (CO)

I just randomly picked somebody, and a hell of a lot of them weren't interested. They weren't interested in wanting to watch me masturbate, that was it. (HT)

However, respondents also looked at the available profiles of young people when making a decision about who they would try and contact:

A whole list of people would come up and then you can go in and look for their profile and you can see their photos and things like that, or their interests and everything like that. You could ask them to add them as a friend and they'd come back and say yes the next time they're online and things, so that's your initial contact. (CO)

And I would tag the ones with the provocative photographs, or phone numbers, or email addresses, and, basically, ask them if they wanted to talk to an older guy, et cetera. (EQ)

Well, to allow girls of thirteen year old to have full frontal nudity, right, I mean, we've looked at close up of their vaginas on their profile pages, right, and allowing them to have phone numbers, et cetera, I mean, people like myself I'm going to target that instantly. (EQ)

Selections were also made in terms preferred physical characteristics and ages of the young people:

Yeah, I didn't, I've never been into, no, I didn't want flat chests, there had to be some, sort of, growth there, yeah. (EQ)

Well, at first I was starting off with 14- or 15-year-olds, and then slowly, slowly over time the age became always lower… Between 10 and 13. (AM)

…I like little girls, both physically and to get to know, and so… (GS)

In terms of easiness, it would vary from 12 and up, from 13 and up. It would depend also on the photo she posted, whether the image inspired me. (DP)

Some of the reasons that respondents felt they would get a response from a young person related to construing them as sexually curious:

I think it was out of curiosity for the most part. I was more mature than any of their peers, they felt more comfortable, and they'd confide in me, ask for advice. I made it clear that I cared for them…then, in the sense that…they seem to be innocent but some of them are quite cunning, some, in any case, told me they were chatting with other adults even older than me, people aged 40 and beyond. (GS)

Now I'm able to say that their hormones were going wild and the Internet gives you the possibility to let it all out as much as you wish to. (JV)

However, there was also acknowledgement that what was targeted was not only curiosity but at times an obvious vulnerability:

Yeah, yeah, and I just, on the girls side of it, I just think it's the age you're at, and they're just unsure of their sexuality, and whatever, and I don't know, I don't know, but I know that that's what I targeted, if they looked to be vulnerable, or anything sexually, I would just go for it. (EQ)

She wasn't getting on with her mum and dad in a big, big way. Previously she'd thought of suicide, which for a father that I am I was worried sort of thing. And I got her out of that situation and then I found out she was only 15. (BN)

… she was having big problems with her family, she wanted to run away, she wasn't happy, she wanted to commit suicide and she used to go away and hide somewhere, she used to tell me about all the problems that she was having. (BN)

Well, I think, a lot is, they're that age, and they're just adventurous… and, obviously, people like myself target that naivety, or vulnerability, I think. (EQ)

No I was fairly manipulative I admit, I did groom, I was very polite to start with. But when I started conversations it was very general, it was very cheery, it was "Oh hi how are you? Where are you from? Have you had a good day? Have you had a good weekend? Have you seen your mates?" and then I'd turn it towards the sexual content and nine times out of then they had no objections to that. Even though they knew my age and probably in some cases knew what was about to happen. But again they were the vulnerable party and I took full advantage of that. (KX)

And as a result I went onto the teen room instead of going onto adult room because I basically worked out that these people were vulnerable, but again nothing clicked in my head, not at that point anyway, that that was wrong. (KX)

However, one respondent was reluctant to see himself in a predatory role and felt that the young people he spoke to were not vulnerable but were responding to him because they saw him as friendly:

The way I portrayed myself I was being nice and friendly and there was never the intention of preying on anybody, I wouldn't go on seeking vulnerable people who I could pick on, I never got that impression. They were people who had, or at least said they had, good lives. Went out and did things with friends and family and everything like that. (CO)

Having found a likely target the men in the sample responded in a variety of ways, one of which was to immediately move into sexual behaviour:

So, the first thing is if she's a virgin, then if she's already had any sexual relations, how many times she has seen the sexual organ. Then maybe I'll also ask her to tell me some of her stories, some experiences, a description of her first experience, where they were, what did they do, what she did first to him or him to her, or things… these sorts of exchanges. Then I ask what type of relations she had, oral, anal, or just plain, normal relations. (AM)

… like if it was someone who immediately understood what I wanted, then she too would get right to the point. Otherwise, it might be one step at a time, maybe not right away. It was a bit like that, they were not all like replicas… each one was a bit different. (DP)

Well, what I would do, I would chat to them, and go down the sexual line, right, normally ask them if they wanted to, kind of, masturbate on a webcam, or if they had a webcam… Right, or if they wanted to chat on the telephone… Right. And if they went, no, [inaudible 09:57] fuck off you pervert, or whatever, right, I would delete the contact of my MSN, et cetera, and no contact them again… Right, but if I got any, like, they were half interested I would keep going at it, et cetera. (EQ)

Right, and it went in, sort of, that direction. I mean, it wasn't, we're not talking hundreds of girls I contacted and masturbated to, we're talking, I don't know, twenty, thirty over, maybe, a year spell. (EQ)

Respondents were keen to point out that there was never any need to put pressure on young people to respond, or to engage in ways that they did not feel comfortable with:

There is a wee box, especially on MSN, when you chat privately to somebody, a wee icon comes up, saying that that person's got a webcam, but a lot of the girls and that wouldn't put their webcams on. I would ask for it, I would ask if they had a webcam, and they said no, totally don't want to do it, and I said, that's fine, never pressurised them. (HT)

However, what was apparently offered was not just an opportunity to for young people to satisfy sexual curiosity but promises of a relationship or, at least, affection:

And she loved me to bits because of the attention I was giving her, because I was always there for her, because I was always… (BN)

I think the way L was with me and the conversations we had, I think she was looking for companionship, somebody she could trust, somebody she could look up to, somebody that could be there for her as the family weren't sort of thing. (BN)

… sometimes, you would go online on the teenage chat rooms, and that person at that end would contact me. They would look at my name and say, I'll chat away to you, and it sometimes started like that. (HT)

Enabling fantasy

All of the men interviewed acknowledged that meeting young people online enabled sexual fantasies, which ultimately were associated with arousal and masturbation. One respondent described struggling to remember the details of what had happened, but recalled that he had put up images of his penis as part of his profile and talked sexually with someone he claimed to have thought was not a minor. The fantasies of these men at times seemed voyeuristic:

Like within four messages I would make it clear… would write something, and she would understand right away. And then those who were like "no, no, no," maybe after one or two days, one will just let it go. I met one, by chance, who had finished her fifth year in elementary school, physically more developed, who didn't do anything, didn't say anything… very intelligent for her age, very, and now that she 13 she's already changed, having grown… in these three years, three years have passed and even when she was just 11 the "sexual approach" wasn't necessary, because there was no need for it. (DP)

I'd chat; I'd ask them to describe themselves… well, yes, in the end I'd be sexually excited at times after having finished talking… maybe that would even be enough… it's not that I'd contact them just for that, that is, if I saw…it depended on how much chemistry there was, I might just ask a few questions, like what size bra do you wear, what type of pants… depending on whether it was appropriate or not in each case (GS)

One in ten. One in ten. But I'm not saying that with, oh, [inaudible 27:46], right, honestly a hit for me would be for me to masturbate for them, right, and I'd have them masturbate back, or the least show some part of their body naked, right, okay, that would be, I don't know, say, that would be a hundred per cent, that would be a total hit. (EQ)

Yes, I was always nice and pleasant and that and there was a very quick transition, because at this point I was turned on, I was probably masturbating already over images or videos, you know, either legal or illegal and I was wanting to develop that and heighten my excitement by chatting to someone. So although it was pleasant to start with it did turn very quickly because of what I wanted to happen. (KX)

Well, as I say, it was starting up…because these girls are only 13 year old and that, I mean, I was thinking that these girls are naïve. They've never seen a man masturbating before, whereas when you went onto the Gaydar sites, it was adults you were talking to anyway, and I could watch them, and they would watch me, but with the girls, no, I just got the excitement that these girls are only 13 year old… (HT)

And if I was chatting to a girl on line and there was no photo, quite often I'd look at one of these pictures and imagine if that was her. (KX)

Sometimes the locus for initiating sexual chat was attributed to the young person:

L used to say I like, 'playing with myself.' At first I wasn't happy about it and I don't mind admitting I wasn't happy about it, but after a while I started to get gratification out of it as well. (BN)

On, say I talked to twenty girls, maybe, nineteen I would go in the sexual direction, and, maybe, one out of twenty, maybe, they might start. (EQ)

Well yes, in the same chat room, basically, yes. The types might even change, like if it was someone who immediately understood what I wanted, then she too would get right to the point. Otherwise, it might be one step at a time, maybe not right away. It was a bit like that, they were not all like replicas… each one was a bit different. (DP)

Yeah, and then the pair of you would construct a, sort of, fantastic story…scenario which would involve a person that was under aged… …and a scenario could be that, you know, you would be parents, but, certainly, perhaps, a scenario whereby as well a younger person would be involved within the triangle. (FR)

Using visual images

The relationship between using illegal images of children and the commission of contact offences (both predating image use and as a consequence of image use) has dominated much of the Internet offender-related research. Research on the offence histories of Internet offenders and the likelihood of future offending would suggest that with a longer period post-offence more offenders are detected for new offences, with recidivism for contact sexual offences predicted by criminal history, and in particular violent offence history and the age of the offender at the time of their first conviction (Eke et al., 2010). However, there is less clarity about the relationship between the use of abuse images and online grooming. The role of images in online grooming was, as already discussed, central, both in terms of these men talking about images as being a precursor to online grooming:

> And the sites I used for downloading these images was Limelight… It was a peer to peer website, where you could download music, or videos, but if you typed in appropriate names you could find abuse images. (EQ)

> Yes, I'd use them also to masturbate… Not essentially the paedo-pornographic photos. Those photos and those films were the ones I enjoyed the most...but not necessarily… But at times I'd even use pornographic films that were heterosexual. (JV)

> Right, and instead of doing the obvious thing I said to my wife, look what I've downloaded, et cetera, I watched it, obviously, was aroused, and moved it to a different part of the computer, and would view it, then started searching for likewise material. (EQ)

> But then as I say, you know, there was that slip, the website I used to go onto, which I don't know if it's still in operation but I guarantee it shouldn't be because it is, I mean I looked at a lot of illegal images on it. I suppose my feelings did change because at the time I felt, you know, you're on the internet, you can't hurt anyone it's not wrong. People have had their pictures taken, I'm not doing anymore hurt by viewing them so I suppose my attraction towards the younger female did develop whilst I was online but never in the physical. (KX)

The results of the third NJOV study (Wolak, 2012) would indicate that of arrested groomers who met their victims online: 53% were aged 25 or less; fewer possessed child pornography than in two previous surveys, and about one-third of cases involved youth-produced sexual images. A Canadian study by Seto et al., (2012) found that their online grooming sample were more likely than contact offenders to have viewed child pornography, and consistent with other samples were more likely to report hebephilic sexual interests (an interest in children showing some sexual development).

> Nude photos… Well, up until a few days ago there was one who sent me a photo of her intimate parts. This girl is 14 years old. Conscious of what she was doing, because when I tried to talk to her about sex, she got a lot of pleasure out of it and sent me this photo. (AM)

However, for the respondents in the current study, images were not only accessed as a related offence but were an explicit part of the grooming process:

> Then I asked for her phone number and we exchanged numbers and so then I didn't use the chat room after that, or just a little…because there was the phone. And then I started also talking a bit dirty,

provocative, and there was the exchange of photos, not dressed. From then on, after the first… Maybe sometimes they'd send photos in their underwear and I'd say, come on, take off your bra, it's just like being on the beach and similar things and so, without forcing them, they'd send them. And then I would send mine. (DP)

I think they were there in their pyjamas and they were more than happy to strip off clothes and dance and I don't know what would possess everyone to ever want to do that in front of a webcam when there's a few of them, they were doing it in front of each other. They did it separately and once you get into that sort of thing, you know it's wrong but it's hard to get out of, wanting to see that sort of thing. (CO)

… right, honestly a hit for me would be for me to masturbate for them, right, and I'd have them masturbate back, or the least show some part of their body naked, right, okay, that would be, I don't know, say, that would be a hundred per cent, that would be a total hit… Right. A good hit would maybe for me to have them in their underwear and for me to masturbate, right… And it maybe a slight hit for me if they were to talk sexually. (EQ)

For some respondents establishing a 'relationship' (which might have taken minutes or days) allowed them to request still or moving images from young people:

Well, what I would do, I would chat to them, and go down the sexual line, right, normally ask them if they wanted to, kind of, masturbate on a webcam, or if they had a webcam. (EQ)

It's like…conversations with others, then just drop in conversation, have you got any pictures? And they say, what sort of pictures do you want? And you say, any. And then they send some of both. (LW)

For others, what was important was an exchange of images:

… because in any case they formed part of my "entertainment", in inverted commas, that of exchanging photos or showing one's self on the webcam. (JV)

… or I would masturbate to them on webcam, or they would maybe do a webcam and they would show a body part, and I would masturbate, et cetera, right, and sometimes a couple of occasions [inaudible 17:07] we'll do this once but never again, and then I'm going to delete you and block you. (EQ)

There were, however, exceptions to this:

No, there was never a reciprocal thing. Sometimes I'd go in and maybe that girl would have a pal in, or something. I'd get excited a wee bit, because somebody else want to, but that was it, but there was never reciprocal things. They never ever done anything sexual towards me, at all, never. (HT)

It was also suggested by some respondents that at least some young people initiated the production of sexual images of themselves which might have become part of their profile or which they might have sent to multiple other people online:

Definitely, they were doing it with multiple people. Sending pictures to people and things like that. You can always tell from the dates and things, sometimes the dates taking the pictures were a long time before I knew her, been in discussion with her and things like that. They'd been done for other people. (CO)

Yes, her profile photo …you look like a prostitute – there's no need. And she said: It's just in order to see how many comments I get. (DP)

Right, then she'd text me saying, she says, oh, she'd say, oh, I'm feeling a bit naughty, or horny, or whatever, can you phone me, and we'd have phone sex. Right, but, yes, I would send her a top up for her phone, and she'd send me the odd image, et cetera. (EQ)

She'd been sending pictures to blokes. They got password off her, and when her mum logged on, I were online that day and started talking to her mum, who I thought were… (LW)

Images sent (and sometimes taken by respondents) were also kept:

I found one of the areas when the girl I met, J, I had photographs of her, some video we took when we met, right, some photographs she took, and the girl, the other one that I [inaudible 19:11] photographs, they were in a folder, and I had that area password protected on the computer. (EQ)

However, one image-related activity by these men did not necessarily include seeing sexual images of the young person, but having them as an audience to the respondents' own sexual performances:

I was only going in there for my own personal pleasure, just looking at them, to watch me on webcam masturbate, and that was it, that's all I was interested in. (HT)

But again the way my head worked at that point what I wanted from it wasn't necessarily to see them, it was to expose myself, that's what got me, that's what got me the comment, hopefully a good one and

that's what, that's why I went, you know, seeing them was a bonus, that it was actually that person, but it wasn't the actual, it wasn't the be all and end all it wasn't what I was looking for. (KX)

No. But it might happen that if I had the webcam through MSN I'd show my sexual organ. (AM)

On I think two occasions there were but I quite quickly realised that actually most females weren't willing to show themselves on webcam. Some would have a picture on their little display window and sometimes people changed them but that was about it that was all I got back. But again the way my head worked at that point what I wanted from it wasn't necessarily to see them, it was to expose myself, that's what got me, that's what got me the comment, hopefully a good one and that's what, that's why I went, you know, seeing them was a bonus… (KX)

Again there were instances where this was not the case:

No, apart from the profile one I didn't do anything like that. I never had my own webcam, I never took any pictures of me. There were pictures of males, rude ones, and I could have copied and sent them but I never sent any, no. (CO)

The role of images in the grooming process was similar to that reported by Briggs et al., (2011) in their sample of 51 luring offenders, "All of the participants engaged their victims in a form of sexually explicit chat. In addition to sexually explicit chat, 68.6% sent their victim nude photos of themselves (penis exposed), 41.2% masturbated at least once during their communication, and 29.4% attempted to teach their victim to masturbate" (p 82).

Playing with identity

Evidence concerning technology-mediated sexual activity has largely come from studies carried out by the University of New Hampshire which has challenged some of the stereotypes of the 'Internet child molester' as someone who uses trickery and violence in order to assault children (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchel & Ybarra, 2008). In the first N-JOV Study, only 5% of offenders pretended to be adolescents when they met potential victims online (Wolak et al., 2004) and rarely tried to deceive young people about their sexual interests. Their data would suggest that when deception does occur it more often relates to promises about love and romance by people whose primary intention is sexual. There have been some competing accounts drawn largely from qualitative studies of interviews with offenders (e.g. Quayle & Taylor, 2001; Webster, Davidson, Bifulco, Gottschalk, Caretti, Pham, Grove-Hills, Turley, Tompkins; Ciulla; Milazzo; Schimmenti & Craparo, 2012). Within the present study a continuum of deception did occur across number of areas, such as age, name, physical appearance and interests. It might have been anticipated that all of the respondents would have used a false name given that they were engaging in activities that were potentially illegal:

> *In chat rooms or through Facebook, using a made-up name, I'd ask 'to be friends with girls, all females, aged between 12 and 19; if they accepted we'd chat for a while (GS)*

> *She thought I was 18, because I'd created this pseudonym, a different name, a different age. She thought I was a lot younger than I was. (BN)*

> *Right, so, initially, under my own name, then when I realised there was underage girls there, I used a pseudo-name, and that was first, basically, a girl was downloading music off me, and I started chatting to her, and it led on from there. (EQ)*

> *I did on Facebook. On MSN, I had two accounts. One was me, and one with a different name. (LW)*

The most commonly acknowledged deception related to age, with some respondents taking just a few years off their actual age:

> *I can't understand why I did it, because still, it's near enough my age, isn't it? (LW)*

> *...I think, if I remember rightly, when it was read out in the Court the, whatever it is, when they were reading it out, I think, my age was mentioned, but I gave the impression that I was in my late thirties... Thirty eight, I think... yeah, I think, that's what it said, but that might have been a typing error, because at the time I would have been, was it, forty six, forty seven... (IU*

While other respondents (the majority) pretended to be considerably younger than they actually were, and sustained this deception:

> *When I first done it…the first time I went in, kidding on I was a 19 year old guy, I thought, that's strange, but of course at that time, I didn't have the webcam on anyway. That's quite obvious. I found it pretty funny at the beginning, but the more I done it, I believe that I was that 19 year old guy. When I went on the computer, I was relaxing on the computer, I was that 19 year old guy, and that was it. (HT)*

Yeah. [Pause] I just took a couple of pictures originally to put in a profile and people would come back and say, "how do I know who you are? Send me another picture" and things like that. I didn't take a note of where I got the original pictures from so I couldn't go back in and look and get more. Yeah, people did question it. I did speak to people and, maybe one person on the phone - and I don't think I sound 16 or 18 [laughs] and I thought - I don't know. I suppose the strange thing is people thought I was. I suppose some people did question, they said, "you don't sound like the age you're saying you are". (CO)

Sometimes a younger age was given initially in order to gain access, either to the Internet platform:

And it just happened. I actually went into an MSN chat room…well, it was MSN chat rooms and Yahoo chat rooms. I went into one of them. Obviously, I had to make up a false profile, because of my age. I would never have been allowed to go in. (HT)

Well, when I register I give a different age. On this latest one I'm 15 or 16 years old. Then, on the basis of the information given, and in which you can include an entire description of yourself, I put my actual age. My name is A, I am A, I am single, I come from …, I'm almost 23 years old, I even put the date and day I'll turn 23. I wrote that I'm only looking for under-age girls who have fun talking about very "hot" topics. (AM)

Or more often to access young people:

Right, well at first, talking about right at the very beginning, I gave my name and surname and the rest, all normal. And then, at a

certain point, when a girl says to me: you're old, at that point the spring had sprung and I thought, ok, and so I lowered my age and change my photo, so that I ended up lowering my age to 16-17 and I put the photo of a young guy, with blue eyes, with dark hair, etc. And then I started to chat, messages, etc. (DP)

It was a teenage chat room, yes, it was between 13 and 14…aye, there's 13 year olds to 15 year olds, that were in that area, so as I say, I just went in there, chatted away for a couple of times, just to see what it was like, and then obviously, just as I say, made up a false profile, that was a 19 year old male. (HT)

Occasionally such deceptions were detected, although detection in itself did not deter future deception:

It was just a flash that came up and says, I don't have my login details and that, just a warning came up. I can't remember the wording or nothing, it just says, if you use this room again, we'll contact the police, but what I done is, I just made a different profile. (HT)

What also was evident was that for some respondents they made a choice not to maintain the deception about their age, which seemed like a calculated risk:

If, how I went was, I would chat to them, make it sexual, right, if it seemed to be going okay I would say, look, I'm no twenty four, I'm actually forty four, right, and a few times I got a negative response, and I would just delete it... and whatever, and I think they done the same. If I didn't get a bad response I would just keep chatting to them. (EQ)

… I'd become even more open. I mean, with a few of them I even felt comfortable enough to tell them that I was married with two children…and what kind of life I led. (JV)

It was not only age that was changed, but physical and personality characteristics and interests. On occasion attempts were made to selectively match these to the young person being talked to:

Let's just say that I'd describe myself on the basis of what was in her profile, I tried to make myself seem interesting. (GS)

A 17-year-old boy, blue eyes, dark hair, tall – well, I'm tall too (hehe) – and already, just the fact that you're young with blue eyes and dark hair… with that photo, well… oh, and then, athletic, non-smoker and all these sorts of things. Even though some girls say: oh, you don't smoke, so that's no good… (DP)

When I set up this profile as someone else then I could be that open, outgoing type, sporty, fit person that I'm clearly not in real life. The internet is a sort of means of pretending almost that you're something you're not and the anonymity of - I could say things on there that I would never say in real life. (CO)

Yeah. I think it were how I wanted to be. Because all the way through school, and all the way through growing up, I were really quiet. (LW)

That it allowed me to take on another identity that wasn't really mine, which I wasn't really like. (JV)

Such deceptions about age and looks could be reinforced by using facial images on the profile-page that were really of someone else:

No, I did change it. But it happened just twice, that is the one I have now and one I had before where I used my name in an abbreviated form… Now it's with another name, yes, with another name. And so it was different, even the photo was different to the first one because I didn't have... (DP)

You see pictures, they're so easy just to - you can copy and paste someone else's pictures so I probably just found a photo of a 16, 17, 18 year old person that could be cut and pasted from the site and just cut and pasted into your own profile. It was some absolutely random person, (CO)

Where deceptions were maintained then it was necessary for the chat to stay congruent with who the respondent was supposed to be:

I suppose chatting firstly on the internet you get to know what sort of language they use and probably - I wouldn't pretend to know all the things that she says but you get into the way of talking to them. (CO)

What seems obvious is that such deceptions could not be sustained where there was an intention to physically meet young people. As we will see in the next subcategory, even though all of the men in the sample were charged with offences that related to grooming, for some an assumption had been made (by law enforcement) from their communication with the young person of an intention to meet, but which had not actually taken place. For some respondents there was a denial of any intention to meet:

The discussions I was having with this person were in the lines of, "we must meet up", and things like that. There was never any intention of actually meeting up. (CO)

I felt, well, they're wanting to speak, so…try them, and see how it goes and that, but never, ever, never once did I ever, ever want to meet any of these girls, never, ever. That was never my intention. It was solely go in, masturbate, and that was it, cut them off, and that was it, never ever. (HT)

Where the goal was to meet then deception would have been more problematic:

As a minor, no, because then it wouldn't work physically speaking, and I was really set on obtaining my goal – a pleasurable encounter. And so… (JV)

For one respondent, he described using deception when initially talking to a young person, but choosing to disclose who he was when circumstances changed:

My original accounts, because I created a new account to talk to L, made myself out to be a younger lad, sent false pictures, everything. But my other account, my original account I had one, two, three, four, five people on it, and that was it. (BN)

BN describes the young person putting pressure on him to meet, which was not possible because he had created this false profile:

And the other reason for her doing that was because I refused point blank to go down to G to see her for obvious reasons, I couldn't, because I wasn't an 18 year old guy, I was this 49, 50 year old guy. (BN)

His decision to 'come clean' was prompted by his friend contacting the young person to tell her that he had been killed:

Yeah. And that is when I came totally clean with L and told her my real name, my real age, and everything about me, everything, I left nothing out. (BN)

His response to this was to disclose information about who he actually was. The response from the young person, similar to that seen in the findings from Wolak et al. (2010), was one of apparent acceptance:

When I revealed my real identity, totally all the way through, including my email address, everything included with MSN, she wasn't bothered. I can't remember her exact words, but she said, 'I'm not bothered, I like you for the person that you are and I wish I'd known you for the person that you are from the start.' (BN)

Meeting offline

Within our group of respondents, 5 men actually met their victims offline. As was seen in relation to deception, a number asserted that they had never intended to meet, but for others an arranged meeting could not be followed through on because of an arrest:

We arranged to meet up one day. I didn't realize that that day I were talking to… arranging to meet up with her, it weren't her I were talking to, it were her mum. (LW)

For him, as with others, the promise to meet was seen as part of relationship-building:

… we never met up, I suggested that we see each other or meet up but it never happened… then, I knew that … I also tried with others but they never accepted, but I knew it wasn't realistic, that is maybe I'd do it to let them know that I cared, that I was interested in them… (GS)

It might also have been used as an aid to fantasy:

Because there was sometimes a suggestion that I'd meet up with them but by that point it would have been futile and it was just a way of reaching climax quickly, I suppose is an accurate way to put it. I wanted that buzz and that "Yes, oh yes, you're body is amazing, your penis is amazing, I want to meet you" type of thing and that would almost, you know, that would assist on the way to climax. (KX)

However, for others the goal was to meet:

I met a person, a girl on Facebook. I managed it, yes. (AM)

Well, I chatted with loads of minors, because in any case, inside these chat rooms on various sites there are really loads of them. As for how many I met up with, well the number could be somewhere around ten. (JV)

Right, but after about 2 weeks I told her my true age, and my true name, right, and it still continued on after that, but that was the only girl I was chatting to that I ever told my real name… Well, I think, I started chatting to her around, maybe, March, April… and we met up in the October, and we met 4, or 5 times in a hotel in G. (EQ)

… and despite all this… she said she likes me anyway, because we met and would talk everyday… (DP)

For BN, as noted previously, the suggestion was that he had not intended to meet, but after disclosing who he really was to the young person he did go on to see her and to have sexual intercourse with her. This was positioned as something that she wanted to do and had initiated:

Basically I didn't want to go down, but continuous, and she was on about it all the time, I did go down and I met her at G Train Station. (BN)

When we got into London we got the hotel room, we got into the hotel room, we went out, had something to eat, went back to the hotel room again, L went, she got undressed in the bathroom section of this hotel room thing, she came out and we hugged. We hugged, it was something that was 50/50 between the two of us. Then I undressed her completely and the sexual intercourse took place. (BN)

Even though saying that yes, I penetrated her twice, once she was bent over between the two beds and the other time she laid on her back, when she laid on the bed it lasted ten seconds, fifteen seconds, because something inside me went you're bang out of order pal, what are you doing? And I stopped. I came up with the cute excuse that I've got cramp in my leg, and I stopped completely. Because I can't even…I honestly can't say what was going through my head at the time, why I stopped, and I was disgusted with myself for what I was doing. But then we still continued on and went to F. (BN)

During his interview BN acknowledged that he was already charged with rape of a minor met through the Internet and was on bail when he was in contact with L.:

Yeah, she knew my age because I was using my own MSN address anyway. We met up, we stayed in B. the night, we had consensual sex, she went back to the house and I came back up north, went back to work, working away. (BN)

When reasons were given by respondents, for not meeting the young person, it was not explained in terms of it being impossible, but was largely framed as not meeting the needs of the respondent:

A lot of them were on about contact offences and to me that was something that I even found extreme if that makes sense. I, as I said there was a suggestion, but that was more to reach climax of meeting someone it was never to actually, it was never my intention to do so and I never would have done. Because I wouldn't have been turned on by the time I'd driven there, there would be this actual physical thing in front of me, I mean a physical thing should I say not "that" physical thing in front of me and that would have done nothing for me. Because as I walked down the street it did nothing for me it wasn't until I was actually on line. (KX)

… but never, ever, never once did I ever, ever want to meet any of these girls, never, ever. That was never my intention. It was solely go in, masturbate, and that was it, cut them off, and that was it, never ever. (HT)

I didn't want to meet them, it's really just for a chat. (CO)

What was also suggested by three respondents was that there was an opportunity to meet the young person, but somehow that was a step too far:

But the darker side of dark, now we're into the fantasy world, couldn't come out and transfer. (FR)

… we stopped seeing each other because it was getting too serious, I mean, she knew it was for sex, I knew it was for sex, but there was feelings starting to come there, and I was, I wouldn't say I was happily married, but I was married with 2 kids... (EQ)

The person I was speaking to did want to meet up and she would have done. She wanted to do everything - meet up, go to a hotel, all the stuff like that. It's hard to understand because I now know - I knew then before I went on probably teach my own kids what the dangers were. (CO)

Discussion

The analysis of the interview data indicated that for these fourteen respondents the Internet was used to create a private space within which to engage with young people sexually. This engagement was for all an aid to fantasy, and for some was a precursor to an offline sexual assault. When such offline sexual activity took place, their accounts did not suggest forcible activity and it would appear that all of the young people knew that they were going to meet an older male who was sexually interested in them. Even where no sexual activity had taken place online prior to meeting offline, there had been 'telephone sex'. Similarly to Briggs et al.'s (2011) study these men seemed to divide into two groups: those whose offence related to fantasy and meeting sexual needs online, and those whose intention was to meet young people. Of course, what cannot be known is whether the men who did not meet a young person might have gone on to do so. What was also similar to the result of Briggs et al. (2011) was the use of still and moving images as part of the sexual offence, with many of these respondents more interested in displaying their own genitalia rather than looking at those of the young people they were chatting to.

It is worth noting that while some of the respondents in this study acknowledged that they requested and exchanged abuse images of children there was no evidence of sending such images to young people. Krone (2004) had earlier talked about those involved in online grooming using child abuse images to lower a child's inhibitions concerning sexual activity, which Aslan (2012) had speculated, in his discussion of typologies of Internet offenders, as being one possible motivation for offenders to possess illegal content. However, it was apparent that images of the young people themselves, or images of the respondent, were used as part of the sexual exchange and were associated with sexual arousal. For many of these men there was impatience in engaging sexually which meant that they would move quickly through a large number of contacts waiting for a desired response.

The majority of the respondents were employed and several had no home access to the Internet. This meant that time spent online had to be managed and opportunistic, especially where the respondent lived with others, such as partners and children. However, it appeared that being online in order to contact children sexually was a high-rate activity when online access was possible. In a related but non-criminal context, Brand, Laier, Pawlikowski, Schachtle, Scholer, and Altstotter-Gleich, (2011) examined what might predict how self-reported problems in everyday life were linked to online sexual activities. The men were exposed to images of sexual activity (which were presented in the same way as web images) and asked them to rate the images in terms of how sexually arousing they were. They were then given a modified version of the Internet Addiction Test, completed a novel questionnaire of online sexual activities as well as a standardised measure of psychological symptoms. The results of the study indicated that subjective sexual arousal ratings while watching Internet pornographic pictures was related to self-reported problems in daily life due to excessive use of cybersex sites. Higher sexual arousal therefore seemed to be associated with compulsive use of online pornography, and there is some suggestion that this might also have been the case in the current study, although the activities were clearly different.

Other authors have also described what might be considered as compulsive activity, although the empirical base for such assertions is as yet weak. Kool (2011) discusses this in terms of a weakening of self-management in the context of feelings of vulnerability. Certainly, in relation to men convicted of downloading abuse images, Marshall, O'Brien, Marshall, Booth and Davis (2012) provide some preliminary evidence in a comparative study of Internet offenders and contact offenders. Their results suggest that men who download abusive images are more lonely and obsessive-compulsive than are contact offenders, and that while social anxiety does not distinguish the two groups, the Internet offenders score in the range that meets diagnostic criteria for this problem. As yet we do not know whether men convicted of online grooming who go on to meet children are psychologically different from those who do not.

What Kool (2011) also describes is a process model of grooming, similar to that originally proposed by O'Connell. O'Connell (2010) categorized online text conversations containing online grooming by a predator, into the following six stages: friendship forming; relationship forming; risk assessment; exclusivity; sexual, and conclusion. More recent research by Gupta, Kumaraguru and Sureka (2012) used a word-counting program to create psycho-linguistic profiles for each of these six online grooming stages. They observed that there was more text that related to friendship forming than there was to sexual activity. Clearly, it is not possible to make a comparison between this finding and the current study, but it was apparent that not all of the sexual contact was related to sexual activity and certainly for those who were seeking to meet a young person time spent chatting related to what was seen as guidance, support and sharing purported interests rather than actual sex.

The importance of relationships has been noted in other research that examined the differences between men who are same-sex attracted and seek sexual contact with young people online. Grosskopf (2010), in her study of online grooming conversations with undercover police officers, found differences between those who target boys as opposed to girls. The differences include less aggressive online behaviour and language, with an emphasis on the male child's sexuality and sexual experience. It is argued that these strategies appear to assist the formation of an online friendship which precedes sexual topics, rather than the reverse as is largely reported in literature. Grosskopf (2010) noted that a key theme through the majority of interactions was the focus on the 'boy'. This might be in relation to enquiring about his sexuality, physical body, sexual experience or involving him as the central role in a sexual fantasy. Within the current study there was one man who specifically targeted boys and his account is very similar to that described by Grosskopf (2010). He saw his relationships as friendships that enabled boys to explore their sexuality in a safe and non-threatening way. Earlier reports from focus groups conducted as part of the ROBERT study had suggested that GLBT young people used the Internet both in terms of romantic and sexual relationships as well as providing support and friendship for other GLBT young people. An empirical study by Baams, Jonas, Utz, Botz and van der Vuurst (2011) was able to show that younger compared to older same-sex-attracted people are found to receive more online social support, whereas older people used the internet more for sexual purposes.

The opportunities afforded by Internet platforms for men sexually interested in young people seems obvious, both in terms of access to sexual content as well as access to young people. Jung, Ennis and Maleasky (2012 have argued that the Internet dramatically changed the economic landscape for men with 'paedophilic inclinations'. People who might have had difficulty in accessing sexual material related to children, or for whom the cost and risk of doing so would have been problematic,

now have an almost limitless supply of what they refer to as desired commodities (images and, in the current study, young people), with few associated costs and lower risks of detection. They suggest that, 'Subsequently, the new economic market is devoid of many of the inhibitory influences that previously served to deter many consumers from acting on their deviant urges'. Given the number of young people currently online, a percentage of which our respondents had contact with, the availability of youth-as-targets and the perceived lower risk was important.

From the perspective of our respondents (which could also be seen as a self-serving justification), while their behaviour was seen as 'out of line', they did suggest that they were only interested in young people identified as likely to be interested in them. Prentky and Barbaree (2011) have suggested that heterosexual human males are hard wired to respond sexually to young females with secondary sexual characteristics, and raised the possibility that there is little evidence for men with an exclusive sexual interest in this age group. Certainly within the current sample all respondents had had sexual relationships with adults, although many of them described these relationships as being unsatisfactory. What was also of note was that these men described themselves often seeking young people because of certain information included in their profile, including images. Sengupta and Chaudhuri (2011), in their survey of young people aged 12 to 17, suggested that the online attitudes and behaviours of young people, including 'uploading pictures of themselves accessible to all users, disclosing information about the school they attend or home phone number and instant messenger id, flirting with unknown people, visiting online chat rooms and privately accessing the internet are all key to unsolicited stranger contacts or being bullied online'. This is similar to the finding of Mitchell Finkelhor and Wolak, (2007). A further study by Noll, Shenk, Barnes & Putnam

(2009) indicated that adolescents who present themself as provocative in terms of body and clothing choices is more likely to have had online sexual advances. They suggest that self-presentations can change the way Internet users interact in a manner that increases the risk for online sexual advances.

However, it would appear that young people were targeted not only because of their profiles but because of perceived vulnerabilities, including perceived poor relationships with parents and symptoms of what might be considered to be depression. Ybarra, Alexander and Mitchell (2005) had demonstrated that young people who do report depressive symptoms are more likely to engage in personal disclosure online compared with young people who had little or no depressive symptoms. The authors considered that one explanation is that this was one way in which young people could reach out to others online and establish feelings of intimacy. Without wishing to trivialize the experiences of young people sexually targeted by adults, this bid to establish intimacy was also one of the alleged motives for our respondents.

Barnard-Wills (2012) has argued that e-safety texts tend to represent the online environment as threatening and anonymous, populated by paedophiles, online predators and sexual abusers. It is of interest that this is how this group of respondents also described themselves and, in talking about the Internet, argued for greater controls, and moderation of Internet platforms. This can be compared with the message given out by the young people interviewed for the ROBERT study, who felt that this was an unhelpful way of positioning potentially abusive practices.

Limitations

This was a qualitative study of a small group of respondents. While the number interviewed was appropriate for the methodology used, it is important to note that this tentative model requires further research and it is not suggested that our results can be generalized across other populations. There are some things which we have not been able to adequately explain, in particular the use of deception by this group of respondents, which has been so contested by the survey data from the University of New Hampshire. As with all research, this work marks a beginning, not a conclusion.

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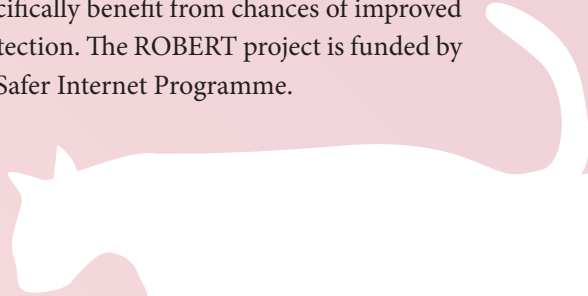
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RISKTAKING ONLINE BEHAVIOUR EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RESEARCH AND TRAINING
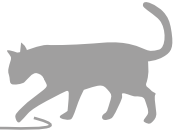
ROBERT

ROBERT project intends to make online interaction safe for children and young people. This will be achieved through learning from experiences of online abuse processes and factors that make young people vulnerable as well as those that offer protection. Perpetrators' strategies in relation to grooming of children online will also be explored along with developing an understanding of how abuse may develop in the online environment. Children and young people will be empowered in order for them to better protect themselves online. Groups of children perceived to be more at risk will specifically benefit from chances of improved self-protection. The ROBERT project is funded by the EU Safer Internet Programme.

Innocence in danger

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