Case Studies of Men’s Perceptions of Their Online Sexual Interactions with Young People: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Aims:
This paper forms part of a doctoral research project which aimed to gain an understanding of the perspectives of men who were convicted of committing a sexual offence that included online sexual grooming. It explores the men’s experiences of illegal interactions with young people via Internet communication platforms which progressed to physical meetings.

Key Findings:
- Three dominant themes emerged from the analysis: (a) fulfilling an unmet need, (b) spiralling cycle of use, and (c) confrontation with reality.
- Narrative tones employed by the two men were ‘being trapped in a lie’, analogous to a problem narrative through which their Internet use was presented as a poor and/or failed coping strategy to deal with stressful factors in their personal lives.
- Through a process of habituation, the men’s initially legal use of the Internet to access adult pornography and Internet dating sites were described as spiralling out of control – they had approached and interacted with young people via Internet communication platforms, and spent progressively more time on the computer to fulfil their unmet needs.
- Both men highlighted positive emotional aspects (avoiding negative emotions through experiencing positive emotions) of their motives for maintaining online contact, describing a sense of growing loss of control over their behaviour, as it didn’t produce the anticipated escape from their personal circumstances, or at least not in the long term.
- This loss and lack of control demonstrates the perceived compulsive nature of the men’s online interactions, with their accounts highlighting aspects of desperation.
- Once the men’s online interactions had escalated to physical meetings, they were able to acknowledge that they had lost control, and that their offending behaviour had a significant impact in both their lives.
- Both men showed self-awareness and -reflection in terms of the wide-ranging, negative consequences their offending behaviour had on their social environment, the victims and the victims’ families, and responded by making positive changes to areas in their lives relating to sexuality, relationships, friendships and family.

Policy Context:
- Both men appeared to present with intimacy deficits (one of the pathways in Ward and Siegert’s (2002) Pathways Model of Child Sexual Abuse) around the time when they commenced using the Internet for sexual purposes.
- Through a process of habituation, the men’s initially legal use of the Internet to access adult pornography and Internet dating sites was described as spiralling out of control. The progression of Internet use by both men in terms of frequency and intensity is not surprising, given that the engagement in sexual...
behaviour is particularly reinforcing when it culminates in masturbation (Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Quayle et al., 2006).

- Consequently, they withdrew personally, and their ‘real world’ social contact diminished as a result.

**Methodology:**
Seven suitable participants were identified through police forces’ intelligence systems, based on meeting the criteria of the individual having been convicted for committing (a) an offence of sexual grooming under Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Home Office, 2003), or (b) any other offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 that included sexual grooming – only three responded expressing an interest to take part in the research. Semi-structured interviews were carried out and audio-recorded using a dictaphone (one interview could not be audio-recorded and was excluded from the analysis). The two participants were males in their 30s and 40s. The data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

**Background:**
- The sparse literature on online sexual grooming has predominantly focused on offenders’ modus operandi and motivation, different stages of the offence process and typologies of offenders, as well as how offenders who engage in this type of offending behaviour may differ from those who commit contact sexual offences and offences relating to indecent images of children (Kloess et al., 2015; Quayle, Allegro, Hutton, Sheath, & Lööf, 2014).
- While these are important aspects in the commission of sexual offences via Internet technologies, the current research tells us little about the internal processes at play within an individual that may increase their vulnerability to engage in offending behaviour.
- By facilitating access to a vast amount of diverse and variable material that caters for almost any sexual interest and/or preference, the Internet has the potential to magnify certain vulnerabilities already present in an individual (e.g., confused sexual identity, perceived unmet intimacy needs), which may not have been significant up to the commencement of using the Internet as a sexual outlet.
- It would therefore be of interest to explore how individuals describe their experiences, not only of the situation in which they encountered themselves prior to engaging in offending behaviour, but also of the offending behaviour itself.


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