

GROOMING THE VICTIM: AN ANALYSIS OF A PERPETRATOR'S SEDUCTION LETTER

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Abstract—The authors review the current literature on the sexual victimization of adolescent males with attention given to victim characteristics and victim selection factors and strategies. Following this review, a letter written by a middle-aged man to entice a teenage boy into sexual activity is presented and analyzed. The strategy used by the letter-writer is to refute the usual reservations a teenage boy might have about engaging in sexual activity with a man. The approach used in the letter and the ensuing analysis are generalizable to teenage boys experiencing similar encounters and highlight the sophisticated seduction and grooming strategies used to sexually victimize adolescent males.

Key Words—Sexual abuse, Perpetrators, Adolescent victimization.

INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER WILL review the current literature on the sexual abuse of males, particularly adolescents, as well as examine a rare piece of material documenting an actual attempt to entice a teenage boy into sexual activity. The material is in the form of a letter, which was given to staff at an inpatient adolescent psychiatric treatment facility where the boy was hospitalized after a suicide attempt. The letter is a compelling account of an attempt by a 38-year-old man to entice a 16-year-old boy into sexual activity. The perpetrator attempted to refute the normal reservations that a teenage boy might have from engaging in such behavior. He did this by cleverly introducing and imposing his view of sexual relationships, and skillfully countering what he perceives to be the arguments that this teenage boy would have against entering into a sexual experience with him. The counterarguments that are discussed seem to be quite generalizable to other teenage boys who may experience similar situations and consequently are illustrative of the sophisticated seduction strategies that are used to

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initiate exploitative sexual relationships with teenage victims. An awareness of these seduction strategies and a deeper understanding of their underlying dynamics could be useful to both investigators and clinicians working with teenage youth who have been sexually abused.

Perhaps of all groups, that which has received the least attention is adolescent males. Much has been written about the lack of attention to male victims (Nasjleti, 1980). Typically, this deficit is attributed to societal views of males and masculine roles (Lew, 1988; Finkelhor, 1984; Nielsen, 1983) which may mitigate against the reporting of sexual assault, and which may contribute to the public's ill-preparedness to believe male disclosures of victimization (Hunter, 1990; Crewdson, 1988). As a result, studies on the incidence of male victims vary in their estimates of prevalence ranging from 2.5% (Finkelhor, 1985) to 49% (Porter, 1986). Indeed, there is some support by clinicians and other specialists in the child sexual abuse field for the close-to equal or equal-risk theory of victimization between male and female victims (Porter, 1986; Summit, 1983).

Of all age groups, adolescent victims as a whole have received little systematic attention from researchers, scientists, and writers. This gap may be attributed to society's relatively greater concern with younger victims, a belief that adolescents have a greater capacity to protect themselves from molestation, or belief voiced by some that they are participant victims whose "seductive behavior" contributed to or precipitated the assault (Swan, 1985; Virkkunen, 1981). While the latter view has been refuted by de Young (1982) as reflecting tainted sources of data collection (for example, offenders' beliefs), and a misreading of victim's learned behaviors in response to this assault, it still may have a contributory effect on the quantity of dialogue about this group of victims, the characteristics of offenders, and the means used to entice youth into sexual relationships.

GENERAL VICTIM CHARACTERISTICS

A research review by Finkelhor and Baron (1986) help isolate some of the factors associated with vulnerability to abuse. While abuse appeared to be democratic in its occurrence among all social classes and in a proportionate distribution by race, they were unable to conclude that girls are at higher risk than boys, or that pre-adolescents were at greater risk than older or younger children. Strong associations were found across studies for both males and females concerning family characteristics and risk associated with: living without natural fathers, mothers employed outside the home, ill or disabled, having a poor relationship with one of their parents, living with stepfathers, or having witnessed parental conflict. It must be recognized that some of these factors may, in fact, be proxies for other, more central risk factors, and that characteristics putting children at risk for abuse may be differentiated from the effects of abuse itself.

Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Lewis, (1990) analyzed data from the 1985 Los Angeles Times Poll that questioned over 2,500 men and women on topics related to sexual abuse. They found that both men and women were more likely to have been sexually abused if they reported an unhappy family life, and if their predominant family situation had been without their natural parents.

In addressing male victims specifically, Finkelhor (1984) reviewed the available data and concluded that:

Two to three times as many girls are victimized as boys; boys, like girls, are most commonly victimized by men; boys are more likely than girls to be victimized by someone outside the family; boys are more likely than girls to be victimized in conjunction with other children; victimized boys are more likely than girls are more likely to come from impoverished and single-parent families, and are also more likely to be victims of physical abuse; and the abuse of boys is more likely to be reported to the police than to a hospital or child protective agency.

Abel (1989) reported information gained from interviews conducted with 453 child molesters over an 8 year period. Of the child molesting acts involving touching, 62% of the offenses were committed against males, with only 38% committed against females. These data are particularly interesting since only 162 of the 453 perpetrators had molested males.

Rossman (1980), in his studies of pederasty, concludes (based on his interviews with the young partners of pederasts), that there are four main reasons for the boys responding to men's overtures toward them:

A need for affection; a desire for money or gifts; a pursuit of adventure, new experiences, kicks; an enjoyment of the sexual arousal/stimulation.

VICTIM SELECTION FACTORS AND STRATEGIES

Some of the more interesting writings in the area of victim selection have been done by offenders themselves, or result from studies of incarcerated offenders. Budin and Johnson (1989) studied 72 prison inmates incarcerated for child sexual abuse. In response to the question on the type of child preferred, subjects reported a preference for their own children, and/or passive, quiet, troubled, lonely children from broken homes. Respondents noted that accessibility to children was a factor, and most were familiar or trusted adults to the children they victimized. A booklet on prevention developed by inmates from the Maine State Prison's Sex Offender Project supports those findings using the inmates' own words:

"I used camp counseling and sports coaching as a way to gain access to children."

"I was able to molest my friend's children by gaining trust first so I could take them to my place." (Project for the Advancement of Sexual Health and Safety, 1986)

Conte, Wolf, and Smith (1989) interviewed 20 adult sexual offenders about their selection, recruitment, and maintenance of children for sexual abuse. Many of the offenders claimed to have a special ability to identify vulnerable children. Their descriptions of the type of child who attracted them were:

"Someone who had been a victim before; quiet; withdrawn, compliant." (p.296)

"Quieter, easier to manipulate, less likely to put up a fight, goes along with things." (p.296)

"The look in their eyes. It's a look of trust. They like you. If they are going to show resistance, they'll look away." (p.296)

Suzanne Sgroi (1982) indicates a predictable pattern in the dynamic of sexual encounters between adults and children, consisting of five separate phases: the engagement phase; the sexual interaction phase; the secrecy phase; the disclosure phase; and often a suppression phase following disclosure. The engagement phase is characterized by the development of a relationship with the child, often in a caretaking or guardianship role, and the utilization of inducement to the child for participation in the sexual behavior. Such inducements can often be subtle and coercive, such as presenting the activity as fun or "special" or offering rewards or bribes for participation. It may even be that the "opportunity to engage in activity with a known and favored adult is sufficient incentive for the child to participate" (p.13). Should these efforts not be successful, threats or force may be used to induce compliance during the engagement phase.

Studies utilizing offenders' reports of their methods support the features of victim engagement suggested by Sgroi, (1982). Methods used to gain victims trust included being a friend; playing games; giving money, toys, beer, cigarettes, or drugs (Budin & Johnson, 1989); and taking advantage of natural sexual curiosity, offering the child preferential treatment; or threatening abandonment or harm for not participating (Project for the Advancement of Sexual Health and Safety, 1986).

Conte (1986) notes that the actual sexual behavior takes place only after a considerable period of time during which the adult manipulates the child into an abusive relationship. In

this "grooming process," the adult learns the child's likes and dislikes, concerns and fears, and uses this knowledge to entice him/her into the sexual contact. Such information may also be used to coerce or threaten the child, as needed, to continue the sexual relationship once it has begun.

Groth, Hobson, and Gary (1982) offer a similar scenario in their description of nonviolent child molesters:

"The perpetrator seeks to establish an ongoing relationship that includes, but extends beyond, sexual activity. Having first established a nonsexual relationship and position of familiarity with the child, he gradually indoctrinates the child into sexual activity, which become more advanced over time." (p. 33)

Based upon interviews with victims ages 10 to 18, Berliner and Conte (1990) develop another view of the process from the victim's perspective, and suggest that there are really three overlapping processes: sexualization of the relationship, justification of the sexual contact, and maintenance of the child's cooperation. Burgess and Holmstrom (1980) found three main types of pressure used: the offer of material goods, the misrepresentation of moral standards, and/or the enticement with warmth and social contact to youngsters or women who are isolated or impoverished emotionally or socially.

Lanning (1987) addresses the power of seduction, and includes it among the techniques used to obtain victims. Other methods of engagement include: befriending the child, paying attention; having hobbies or interests appealing to children; having youth-oriented decorations in the house or room; showing sexually explicit material to the child; and using manipulation, through seduction, competition, peer pressure, motivational techniques or child group psychology to ultimately lower the inhibitions of the children.

ANALYSIS OF A PERPETRATOR'S SEDUCTION LETTER

We now turn our attention to an examination of a rare piece of documentation that illustrates the seduction strategies and dynamics of a rather sophisticated perpetrator and a highly vulnerable teenage boy. The following was given to the staff of an adolescent psychiatric unit by the mother of a 16-year-old boy who was admitted following a suicide attempt. The boy was 15 years old when he received the letter (the age of consent in Ohio is 16 years). The letter was found in the pocket of the victim's coat by his mother several weeks following his hospitalization for the suicide attempt. While there were several other elements that contributed to the suicide attempt, the receipt of the letter and the continued attention from the perpetrator was considered a major precipitating factor. The letter, as well as a report to the police by the hospital, initiated an investigation of the perpetrator. He was already known to authorities, as his house was a gathering place for drinking and drug use by many local teenagers and runaways. The perpetrator, 38 years old, lived in a residential neighborhood with his 21-year-old wife. Names and other information that could be used to identify specific individuals have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

"Dear Alan,

I've sat here for the last hour or so debating with myself as to whether or not I should write you this letter. As you can now see, I am writing this letter so I hope you feel that what I have to say is worth listening to. I expect you might have some idea as to what I'm going to write about—it's not easy getting started, this is going to be one of the hardest letters I've ever written.

Joan is sleeping and I'm alone with my thoughts. You left here about an hour ago, but your brief stay again started feelings within me that need to be released and this letter is my attempt to release them.

You know by now that I love you. Don't let the word love scare you before I have a chance to explain what I mean by that statement. Love to me means caring. It means caring about someone else's happiness and well-being. It means wanting to be with that person and sharing the experience of a life together. And being in love gives me special feelings, like when the one you love smiles at you and a good rush of feelings fills your heart and mind. Love, after all, is an emotion, a feeling.

But love creates wants and desires, and the greatest desire and want is to be able to share love in a real and tangible way. To touch, both physically and mentally.

Mentally usually involves that special feeling you get when you make direct eye contact with the one you love, a kind of shyness, but a pleasurable one. And physically it involves touching, and the deepest way to touch someone is sexually.

I don't know what exactly you've heard about me, or what you believe. But in truth my sexual experience with other guys has been very limited. Joan and I lived with a friend for about 6 months once and we did share some sexual contact, and it was a beautiful experience. And no, I'm not trying to re-capture that with you.

I do want to share a sexual experience with you. I want to give you the greatest physical pleasure it's possible for one person to give another. And I realize the problems involved in that.

For one thing, I don't really know how you feel about me and things like that. Your joking manner often confuses me. I do know that you are sixteen and at the peak of your sexual needs, and I believe that you believe that if I give you head it would make you gay. Do you feel that way?

I think about you a lot, I dream about you, good dreams. I often imagine and hope that one day you and I will be able to get drunk together, a little high, and be alone. That your inhibitions will fail you long enough to allow you to step away from your fears and you'll let me perform oral sex on you. I need to get that close to you at least once to break away from the drives and feelings that now possess me. I need to show you how much I really care in some manner that will break all barriers between us and at the same time create that everlasting bond that only a sexual experience can create.

Alan, there will be times in the future that I'll be making passes at you. It'll probably be in light and humorous ways. I'd never try to pressure you into doing something that may go against what you were taught to be wrong.

But do me a favor, if it reaches the point where you decide to give it a shot, drop a hint to me, talk about how horny you are or rub your crotch, and I'll get the message. I promise it will be a great experience for you, and in such a way that you'll feel no guilt about it. And, if after trying it once, you decide it's not for you, I'll understand. Because once will be enough, once will give us something shared that too few people in the world share because they are afraid to share it, love.

I just hope that by revealing my true feelings to you it won't ruin the relationship we now have. This letter is like a go-for-broke attempt to reach out to you. I know that right now your life is in a state of turmoil and confusion. You're no doubt beginning to worry about your future, your family's future, and the rest of your life.

Alan, no matter what, even if we never share anything more than we are now sharing, I'll always be around to help you in any way I can. So please don't hesitate to come to me with your problems or dreams. Joan and I are going someplace in this world. We've been working at it for a long time and it's beginning to pay off, and there is always room to help a friend.

I might add here that your relationship between you and Joan is your own business. If you get the urge, go for it. The love that Joan and I share, although not always apparent, is strong enough and deep enough to survive whatever life throws at us. And, personally, I think you and Joan are beautiful together.

I trust that what I've revealed to you in this letter is between you and I and no one else. I trust that you do care enough about me to seriously consider all that's said here and will be equally honest in your feelings.

I want to be close to you. I want to be as close to you as I am to Joan. Love does not come easy to me. Too much in my life has hurt me deeply and I don't give my affections easily. But with you there is no helping it. You're one of the most beautiful people I've ever met, and writing and telling you this scares me. I'm afraid that now you know for real that I don't kid about what I kid about, you won't want to come around any more, that you'll be afraid to be alone with me. I hope and pray that that won't be the case, and even if things don't go as I'd like them to we will still be close friends.

I wanted to get into a discussion about feelings of right and wrong, especially on a sexual level. Do you believe it's wrong for a guy to show his affection for another guy by giving him sexual pleasure?

I don't know what types of sex you've experienced, whether they've been fulfilling or not. But I do promise you this, given the chance I'll do my damn best to make it good for you and I'd expect nothing in return but that you'd enjoy it. I see nothing wrong in my desire to do this, giving sexual pleasure is a great gift, and accepting it takes a special person indeed. And I think you are really special.

Alan, I won't be hurt if you turn my offer down. Disappointed, yes, but not in you. I'll be able to understand why, or at least I'll try to.

So, what do you think, want to get fucked up and half pass out and let me give you what I want to give you? You can always live with it, justify it as an experience you needed to try and blame it on the booze and smoke if you don't like it. And if you do like it you'll have found a great sexual release until the right person comes along for you.

And please don't let this letter prevent you from coming around, I'll still be able to face you and hopefully you'll still want to see me. Take Care.

Love,

John

P.S. Because you're under 18 this letter could send me back to jail, I'd like you to give it back or destroy it immediately, or, if you hate me, send me to jail (just kidding about that last part)."

The opening of this letter is a rather philosophical treatise on the nature of love and what it means to care about someone. The perpetrator advances the notion that love is a positive, powerful feeling that can be optimally expressed through a sexual relationship. Hunter (1990), refers to this offender mentality as one of "other-blame." This belief system is manifested in offenders' attempts to blame the victim, or attribute their actions to uncontrollable impulses, some environmental or circumstantial situation, or to being "misunderstood by a hung-up society" that won't tolerate his broad-minded approach to sex (p.75). Organizations such as the Rene Guyon Society, and publications which promote child sex or the weakening of laws on pornography and incest offer validation to the offender with this mindset (Howell, 1982).

After establishing the relationship between love and sex, the perpetrator then begins to overcome the anticipated resistance (Finkelhor, 1984) of the victim. In this instance the perpetrator refers to the victim's "inhibitions" as needing to be changed: "that your inhibitions will fail you long enough to allow you to step away from your fears." He suggests the use of alcohol or drugs as a possible vehicle for accomplishing this change. Here it would seem that the offender is well aware of the "disinhibitory" effects that mood-altering substances can have and the interest that many adolescents display in experimenting with much substances. Toward the end of the letter the suggestion of getting high or drunk is reintroduced, this time

from the perspective of a guilt-reducing mechanism: "you can always blame it on the booze and smoke if you don't like it." The focus of attention here is to reduce the victim's resistance due to concerns of homosexuality. Males who are abused often face the double stigma of both abuse and homosexuality, because most perpetrators are also male (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). The conflict around sexual identity issues is perhaps the major obstacle that needs to be negotiated by a male perpetrator in enticing an adolescent into a same-sex relationship. This sexual identity conflict is one of the main psychological impact issues that surfaces repeatedly in distinguishing the effects of abuse on males when compared to females. Berlin and Krout (1986) address this by pointing out:

"People do not decide voluntarily what will arouse them sexually. Rather, in maturing, they discover the nature of their own sexual orientation and interests. Persons differ from one another in terms of (a) the types of partners whom they find to be erotically appealing, and (b) the types of behavior they find to be erotically appealing. They also differ in intensity of sexual drive, and the degree of difficulty they experience in trying to resist sexual temptation, and their attitudes about whether or not such temptations should be resisted." (p. 156)

In this context the perpetrator is probably cognizant of the fact that adolescence is the developmental period when a young boy's sexual attitudes and desires begin to coalesce into a more stable sexual identity formation. Taking advantage of the identity struggles present within adolescence, the natural sexual curiosity of most teenagers, and the position of power and trust that has been carefully cultivated, the offender manipulates a potent combination of exploitative factors. Burgess and Holmstrom (1980), in discussing the offender's efforts to pressure victims into sexual activity state:

"The offender stands in a relationship of dominance to the victim. Ambivalence as a component of the decision-making process is a characteristic of the child's or young person's emotional life, and the offender trades in on this." (p. 69)

The offer of incentives, rewards, and enticement by the perpetrator is well noted in the literature on abuse (Sgroi, 1982; Budin & Johnson, 1989). Aside from drugs, the perpetrator in this letter also offers the promise of present and future help to the young victim. He clearly senses the confusion and vulnerability of his victim:

"I know that right now your life is in a state of turmoil and confusion . . . I'll always be around to help you in any way I can . . . don't hesitate to come to me with your problems and dreams. Joan and I are going someplace in this world . . . and there is always room to help a friend."

In effect, the perpetrator is offering a lifelong friendship if the victim succumbs to his sexual advances at least once. Even if this does not occur immediately, the ability to maintain the contact over time allows for the opportunity to further sexualize the relationship within the context of the victim's deepening emotional dependency on the perpetrator.

Lansing, in an FBI report, comments on the pedophile's skills at identifying vulnerable victims. Through practice and experience, the molester can observe a group of children for a brief time and identify a potential target. "More often than not, the selected child turns out to be from a broken home or the victim of emotional or physical neglect" (Lansing, 1987, p. 14). Thus, the perpetrator scans potential victims for signs of weakness/vulnerability. Such vulnerability is a victim selection factor that has been retrospectively noted in perpetrator observations:

"Frequently I molested children who clearly needed some attention from a caring adult. They seemed to crave being singled out and wanted."

"Using the fact that the child has a poor relationship with his parent, I'd move in and use this poor relationship to my advantage." (Project for the Advancement of Sexual Health and Safety, 1986).

Burgess and Holmstrom (1980) coined the term "in-accessory-to-sex" describing the na-

ture of many victim/perpetrator relationships in which the perpetrator pressures the victim into being an accessory to the sexual activity, that is, to go along with it at least once. In this instance, the perpetrator makes several pleas to the victim for "trying it once," promising optimal sexual satisfaction and pleasure, or at the very least, a neutral experience, absence of guilt due to the already presented justifications and rationalizations, including the use of mood-altering substances.

A further expansion of the accessory notion of sexual activity is the element of victim passivity within the relationship:

"But I do promise you this—given the chance I'll do my damn best to make it good for you and I'd expect nothing in return but that you'd enjoy it."

In this context the offender would have one almost believe that the victim isn't even entering into a sexual relationship since he is not required to perform any sexual activity. The victim's only requirement is to enjoy the experience. The passive acceptance of sexual behavior initiated by someone else disguises the complicity on the victim's part, thus further reducing guilt and resistance.

Sensing that this strategy might fail, perhaps the most clever and insidious appeal in this letter is to offer the victim a relationship with the offender's 21 year-old wife:

"I might add here that your relationship between you and Joan is your own business. If you get the urge—go for it . . . And, personally, I think you and Joan are beautiful together."

We can only speculate at this point that Joan is probably a victim of previous sexual abuse. She represents a very powerful enticement strategy because a sexual relationship with her, particularly given her husband's permission, could be perceived as a more convenient and potentially appealing sexual experience for a teenage boy. Access to the victim through the perpetrator's much younger wife is a well-devised, deliberate strategy to enhance probability of success. Authors such as Crewdson (1988) report that such exploitation has been romanticized in our culture, through the mystique of "initiation by an older woman," and thus diminishes the likelihood of a boy reporting abuse. While reduced resistance to initiating sexual activity is probably the goal of this suggestion, it also is quite likely that the accessory-to-sex notion with a female perpetrator would be used to expand the relationship to include her husband as part of a "threesome." The progression of an opposite-sex relationship into a same-sex relationship would be a skillfully orchestrated manipulation and entrapment designed as a way to overcome the victim's possible fears of homosexuality. The dynamics of the "grooming" process and substitution of a more risky or incongruent sexual encounter would be predicated upon the initial entrapment in an awkward sexual relationship with the male perpetrator's female partner.

The final note is the post script on the letter:

"P.S. Because you're under 18 this letter could send me back to jail—I'd like you to give it back or destroy it immediately—or, if you hate me—send me to jail (just kidding about that last part)."

Later reports indicated that this perpetrator had spent previous time in jail for manslaughter, not for a sexual offense. He is clearly aware of the consequences of his behavior, but reasonably confident that his victim will not turn him in with evidence in hand. As a brief postscript, the victim unconvincingly denied any sexual activity with the perpetrator, however admitted to some initial sexual encounters with the perpetrator's 21-year-old wife.

Through the existing literature and the contents of the preceding letter, a portrait of sexual offenders emerges that is at variance with a commonly held stereotype. Contrary to popular belief, sexual offenders are not often unskilled and inept, rather they are frequently quite sophisticated, calculating and patient. They employ these skills, along with an ability to identify and entrap vulnerable youth, to accomplish their goal of having sex with children.

Their understanding of children and facility in attracting their victims should not be underestimated.

Some of the unanswered questions raised by this analysis are how many other teenagers are groomed to succumb to similar sexual entrapments, and what can be done to spare them from the emotional and psychological consequences of such devious exploitations? A deeper understanding of these seduction strategies and dynamics can assist professionals in intervening with abused youth and developing prevention programs.

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Résumé—Les auteurs ont passé en revue les écrits sur l'agression sexuelle des adolescents, en se concentrant particulièrement sur les caractéristiques des victimes et les facteurs et stratégies qui mènent l'agresseur à choisir une victime plutôt qu'une autre. En plus des écrits, les auteurs ont analysé le contenu d'une lettre rédigée par un homme d'âge moyen pour séduire un adolescent, lettre dans laquelle il aborde le jeune homme en réfutant les objections habituelles que ce dernier pourrait présenter pour échapper à la séduction. L'approche du séducteur dans sa lettre et l'examen que font les auteurs des stratégies auxquelles il a recours peuvent s'appliquer à toutes les situations semblables et soulignent les manèges des séducteurs pour attirer les jeunes garçons.

Resumen—Los autores revisaron la literatura existente sobre victimización sexual de jóvenes adolescentes en enfocando las características de la víctima y los factores y estrategias para la selección de la víctima. Después de esta revisión, se presentó y analizó una carta escrita por un hombre de mediana edad utilizada para animar a un joven adolescente a participar en actividades sexuales. La estrategia usada por el autor de la carta es refutar las reservas usuales que un joven adolescente pudiera tener para participar en una actividad sexual con un hombre. El enfoque usado en la carta y el análisis que le sigue pueden generalizarse a los muchachos adolescentes en encuentros similares y resalta la sofisticada seducción y pulidas estrategias usadas para victimizar sexualmente a los jóvenes adolescentes.