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Book chapter

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Children and young people's vulnerabilities to being groomed; what can be done?

Keywords: child abuse; grooming, preventative learning, simulations, radicalisation, child sexual exploitation

Child abuse is evolving, pervasive and complex and children are vulnerable to its widespread reach in many aspects of their lives, from face-to-face interactions to those they have online. This chapter aims to review contemporary literature which outlines the vulnerabilities of children to face-to-face and online grooming as part of a process leading to child abuse and exploitation. The chapter will undertake a review of literature on two aspects of grooming: child sexual exploitation (CSE) and radicalisation. It will draw contemporary case examples to illustrate grooming drawn from UK Serious Case Reviews (SCR) on CSE and, on radicalisation, the case of the three girls from Bethnal Green who were groomed for travel to Syria. It will then reflect on the push and pull factors of grooming to highlight the similarities between CSE and radicalisation. Moving on, the chapter will then consider how and if interactive social media simulations, linked to an innovative, preventative educational approach and designed with reference to Vygotsky's social construction theory, have the potential to educate young people to help protect them from being groomed. The chapter will then make reference to the findings of a small pilot study which evaluated the use of this approach with young people.

1. The context of grooming in the UK

Whilst many children across the globe experience happy, secure childhoods, amassing the skills to help them thrive into adulthood, many are abused in the most horrific and sustained ways possible. UNICEF in a report from 2014 [1] estimate that around 120 million girls worldwide (about 1 in 10) will have experienced forced intercourse or other forced sexual acts at some time in their lives; a shocking almost incomprehensible amount. Child abuse is an evolving, pervasive contemporary social problem for humanity, but for some it is a multi-million pound business with transactions carried out on the 'dark web' via the internet as well as face to face in contact abuse. Some young people are born into this type of abuse in families or community circumstances or latterly in the form of trafficking and modern day slavery, others are groomed into being abused. 'Stop the traffik' [2] estimate that 600,000-800,000 men, women and children are trafficked across international borders each year with an approximation of 80% women and girls. Up to 50% are estimated to be minors. A recent report by The Children's Society [3] estimates that "The scale of child trafficking, as officially monitored, has increased by 55% between 2012 and 2014 and the numbers of boys and young men trafficked has more than doubled in the same period" – though the recorded levels are widely regarded as underestimating the issue.

Grooming children and young people into abuse in the form of CSE, to be trafficked into becoming slaves and victims of multiple abuse as well as for radicalisation and terrorism, is now a well-documented 'process' [4]. Vulnerable young people are targeted, often online, and groomed via different social media, as well as face to face, to become victims of abuse or to commit or contribute to terrorist offences. Serious Case Reviews in the UK on CSE [5-8] and radicalisation [9] clearly document the consequences of this for the victim, professionals and policy makers.

Grooming is currently defined by the NSPCC as: “when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for the purposes of **sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or trafficking**. Children and young people can be groomed online or face-to-face, by a stranger or by someone they know - for example a family member, friend or professional. Groomers may be male or female. They could be any age. Many children and young people don't understand that they have been groomed or that what has happened is abuse” [10].

Many children and young people are consequently at risk of being groomed. In the UK Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, who inspect and regulate services that care for and educate children and young people, require organisations to teach children and young people about being groomed: “...how to keep themselves safe from relevant risks such as abuse, sexual exploitation and extremism, including when using the internet and social media” [11].

However, this is a difficult and complex task, often requiring specialist knowledge. Research suggests that many professionals do not feel equipped to tackle these issues, particularly in relation to radicalisation, where lack of appropriate training impacts on practitioner confidence [12,13]. Brighton and Hove SCR on siblings W and X indicates how the social workers in this case lacked the knowledge, experience and training to deal with radicalisation [9].

2. Vulnerabilities to being groomed

Risk factors for being particularly vulnerable to CSE are identified in literature and SCRs and include those listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1 Vulnerabilities to CSE

CSE has been identified as being widespread in some areas of the UK, with several cases highlighted in the local and national press following court appearances of perpetrators, often gangs of men, and subsequent serious case reviews [5-8] CSE can affect all ages and is described as happening when:

“...an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology” [13].

The consequences of being groomed for CSE are considerable for each young person (Table 2) and some extreme cases have resulted in young people being murdered (see for example the cases of Breck Bednar [14] and Kayleigh Haywood [15]), suffering long term physical and psychological trauma [13] and being groomed into gangs [16] a life of crime, drug and alcohol related activities [17].

TABLE 2 HERE

Table 2. CSE: why do young people get drawn in?

In terms of understanding grooming in the context of radicalisation in the UK, schools, colleges, Universities and health and social care organisations are obligated under the Prevent Duty to address radicalisation with children, young people and young adults: *“In order for schools and childcare providers to fulfil the Prevent duty, it is essential that staff are able to identify children who may be vulnerable to radicalisation, and know what to do when they are identified. Protecting children from the risk of radicalisation should be seen as part of schools’ and childcare providers’ wider safeguarding duties, and is similar in nature to protecting children from other harms (e.g. drugs, gangs, neglect, sexual exploitation), whether these come from within their family or are the product of outside influences”* [18, 19].

The Channel vulnerability assessment framework [20] outlines twenty two factors that may cause someone to engage with a terrorist group, cause or ideology. The list is designed to assess whether individuals need support to safeguard them from the risk of being targeted by terrorists and radicalisers. These factors have been contested, including human rights groups who claim that the assessment framework is divisive and stigmatises and alienates segments of the population [21].

It has also been recently argued [13] that the way harm manifests in radicalisation can be quite different to CSE. Young people targeted do not have to be ‘vulnerable’ in the CSE sense (for example being in care) they can be well educated and well cared for as in the case of the three Bethnal Green girls (Table 3). As a consequence, some young people may not have overt signs of being groomed; for example, they often don’t go missing for extended periods of time, as with grooming for CSE. Detection of this type of grooming may well require a detailed examination of their social media profiles and online activity.

TABLE 3 HERE

Table 3. The case of the Bethnal Green girls.

3. The ‘process’ of grooming

“Today, online grooming has a whole new use. Radicalising young, impressionable minds by extremists. *If you’re young and struggling to find your place in the world, and someone appears to understand you, that makes you vulnerable. Many children and young people are unaware they are being controlled. Groomers will hide their true intentions, often spending a long time gaining a young person’s trust, slowly manipulating their thoughts so they can begin introducing their twisted ideologies”* [23].

Young people are naturally inquisitive and keen to explore new avenues and ideas. When ideas are shared on line, and an apparent likeminded person replies reiterating their beliefs and opinions, this can increase vulnerability to grooming. Grooming for radicalisation in particular does not necessitate face-to face meetings, highlighting the power of the internet and social media in covert grooming. Five hypotheses identified in the literature [24] links the internet with increased opportunities to become radicalised; it acts as an ‘echo chamber’ to find like-minded individuals, accelerates the process of radicalisation, increases opportunities for self-radicalisation and allows radicalisation to occur without physical contact. In the case of Breck Bednar there were several months of grooming activity via

online gaming sites prior to meeting his attacker Lewis Daynes. During this time Daynes groomed Breck to be anti-establishment and anti-government. Breck was told by Daynes that he has contributed to Daesh through making money from his computing business. Just months after the grooming started Daynes lured Breck to his address and murdered him in a sexual motivated attack. This is thought to be the only time the two had met in person. Links between the sexual exploitation process and that of radicalisation can clearly be seen in this case [14].

Such is the power of grooming, in cases of CSE victims may be coerced into initially sending indecent images or making videos whilst radicalisers can convince someone to create a homemade device without directly meeting them. The internet acts as a place where individuals find their ideas supported and echoed by others, giving them a misplaced sense of empowerment and belonging.

Because the outcomes of being groomed for CSE or radicalisation are often very serious, resulting in serious injury trauma and death, it is often assumed that the process of grooming is therefore aggravated or aggressive. Groomers, however, are often quite sophisticated in their approaches, often unknowingly adopting techniques more usually associated with attachment; providing a 'secure base' or a 'safe haven' for individuals whilst they flatter, accept and 'nurture' them. Young people are often drawn to groomers' because of a need for 'attachment or affection' [25, 26]. Whilst the threats and fear do materialise, as indicated by the quotes from the Oxford Serious Case Review in Table 2, the initial approaches, whether face-to face or online will often be enticing and flattering, often accompanied by gifts, in order to facilitate trust and confidence.

It is often argued that grooming is a 'process' with clearly defined stages leading to the ultimate end goals of sexual abuse or radicalisation, however face- to-face and online grooming often have different starting points and consequently variables may be different. Moreover, a process suggests a linear route and this may not necessarily be the case as one or more grooming techniques can be occurring at the same time. Consequently, rather than a 'process' grooming can be visualised as more of a matrix (Figure 1) with some, many or all of the following features slotting together and overlapping in time and context:

FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1 The grooming matrix

Key:

Bold text: indicates grooming factors in both CSE & Radicalisation

Plain text: indicates grooming factors in CSE

Italics: indicates grooming factors in Radicalisation

4. How do we currently try protect children and young people from being groomed for radicalisation and CSE?

Because grooming is such a serious and widespread social problem on and offline, educational resources from a variety of sources have been produced to work with children and young people on the topic (see Table 4).

TABLE 4 HERE

Table 4. Resources on CSE and radicalisation in the UK for use with young people

Many of these resources are used as part of personal, health and social education (PHSE) in schools in the UK and some are very impactful, delivering clear messages via a popular medium of film. However, because some are often film based they are essentially 'passive' tools for young people. Film based approaches, whilst popular with students and teachers alike may also have drawbacks [30] and may not involve learners in the development of critical thinking and analytical skills so important for evaluating the myriad of information often inundating young people in their daily lives through social media [31]. A clear example of this is the current trend towards 'fake' news, often celebrity related which can be hard to evaluate truth from fiction.

5. Using simulated learning

Simulated learning is used in many different context with adults and with children and young people. Simulation can, however, mean different things in different contexts. From a simulated suite of learning at UWE, which is in fact a physical learning ward, to using actors with young people in mental health these are both considered simulations. [32] As well as attending a school in Second Life [33].

However, using simulations in child protection are in their infancy [12, 34]. The Centre for Child Protection at the University of Kent is at the forefront of this development and has now created, by working in partnership with health & social care, law enforcement and education organisations, seven simulations on different aspects of child protection, designed for use with both professionals and young people.

Simulated learning is associated with a tranche of associated benefits; they are engaging [35]; promote good discussion [36]; offer opportunities for immersion & interaction in a 'safe' space [37] allowing individuals to take risks safely. Perhaps of most significance however, is that they offer experiential learning [38] which many people thrive on and they are learner centred rather than teacher led – the 'teacher' becomes the facilitator rather than disseminator. With young people in particular it is argued that 'virtual role play allows students to develop 'embodied empathy' for complex social systems' [39].

Drawing on social constructionist educational theory, it can be argued that in order for children and young people to develop into individuals who can reflect and evaluate knowledge, they need to be active learners and develop skills of critical self-reflection, which they are prepared to apply this to their worlds and themselves [39]. Learners do this at different rates and times and some may not have opportunities to develop these skills at all. It is suggested by Barnett [40] that to become critical beings young people have to 'think collaboratively' and this must be sustained through shared activity and discourse around collective standards in a community'. Wass [41] argues that Vygotsky (1896-1934) conceptualised the zone of proximal development (ZPD) [42] to help teachers assist people to develop skills beyond their immediate reach, and this can include critical thinking. He argued that ZPD is the difference between what a learner can do on their own and what he or she can achieve with help. Put simply teachers, peers, activities and some learning environments can help develop critical skill via scaffolding: structuring an issue clearly and problematizing it.

In terms of answering the question posed by this chapter what can be done to prevent children and young people being groomed? Part of the answer may lie in designing interactive content on grooming for young people which is just beyond their reach which, as a consequence, then stimulates them to interrogate the issue. It is often easy to develop **passive** learning information on radicalisation and CSE, including films, listening to visiting speakers, and watching actors. These resources can be positive as they can simplify key information on these complex and emotive topics which then leads to discussion. However, these type of activities often provide a 'structure' through radicalisation or CSE where the **solutions are often provided** in the film or by the presenter or actors. An alternative model could be to scaffold an issue, including the complexities & problems, (which may be just outside of a learners reach) and with help allow the learner to work through the scaffolding to develop their critical thinking, reasoning and evaluation skills on the topic. As Wass [41] suggests "Scaffolding allows students to identify and solve the educative problems, while structuring removes these problems for the student".

In the simulation 'looking out for Lottie' on grooming and CSE, we follow the life of 14 year old Lottie through four different social media sites, including a video diary. We have access to her social media and her private 'phone messages, allowing learners to interrogate her life, build rapport with her and evaluate events in her life as they unfold. The simulation is split into separate scenes and in each scene the learner (preferably in small groups to promote community thinking mentioned earlier) completes a set of questions reflecting on the social media content and on their own experiences. Using the 'boyfriend' model of grooming, set out in Figure 1, users find and are exposed to indicators of grooming and how manipulative and focussed groomers can be to achieve what they want. The final scene is, uniquely, from the groomers' perspective so learners are able to understand the motivating factors and consequences for Jake as a groomer.

In the simulation 'Maryam and Joe; behind closed doors' learners follow BBC and Sky news clips on radicalisation and are able to follow two storylines to analyse how different characters respond to the same news events and evaluate, through the characters social media sites and private messages, how these events impact on their lives. Again learners are interrogating information via social media, looking for the groomers and critically evaluating how the characters react to this grooming. The social media format is the 'scaffolding' and engages the learner by making the way they receive information current and young person focused. Learners are 'forensically' searching for signs of grooming for radicalisation in a format that is familiar to them, therefore encouraging them to engage with the simulation subject matter. Clues are hidden in popular social media formats ('Wetube' 'Hashtagged' 'whatchat' 'snappit' etc.) (Figure 2) and young people have evaluate this content to identify the groomers and evaluate the effects this has on the young people being groomed (Table 5).

FIGURE 2 HERE

Figure 2 Screen Shots

Maryam & Joe - Behind Closed Doors (left) and Looking for Lottie (right)

6. Pilot research with young people on the effectiveness of 'Behind Closed Doors'

Research [41] into the effectiveness of child protection simulations [12, 26, 34] has only just begun and is ongoing. However, by embedding teaching and learning techniques into a

simulation which require young people to 'forensically' interrogate a story via 'scaffolding' in a format which they use in their everyday lives, namely social media platforms, appears to have encouraging results (Table 5).

FIGURE 5 HERE

Table 5. How do we do this in our child protection simulations?

In a small scale pilot of 'Behind Closed Doors' conducted in a College of Further Education, 39 students were divided into five sessions. After a brief introduction to the simulation, each student was asked to complete a consent form and then asked to 'play' scene 1 of the Maryam or Joe story. After playing the game, either in pairs or individually, each student filled in a feedback form of 13 questions rating the simulation, the story and the simulation features. The questionnaire elicited the following results: on the 1-10 rating scale, 85% of students rated the game as 'Good to Excellent' (39% males: 46% females) and 15% of student rated the game as 'Ok to Not useful' (0-6 on the rating scale) (7.5% male, 7.5% female).

Whilst it is encouraging to have the simulation rated overall as good to excellent, what is noteworthy for future research is that 82% of students said that they had increased their knowledge about the topics of radicalization and grooming after playing the game. Additionally and of significance is that 61.5% of students said they would change their online behaviour after playing the game. Although this is only a very small scale pilot study, what these results give an insight into, and can be followed up in future studies, is that young people state that they are willing to change their online behaviour after going through an active process of learning whereby they have followed and interrogated the lives of young people who have been groomed and analysed how this happened. The features embedded in the simulation have allowed them to be active learners, constructing their own knowledge, being given a degree of control over how they learn and in what order, in a context which is meaningful to them and they have been given space and encouragement to reflect on a complex and difficult topic. Those students who said the simulation would not change their online behaviour often qualified this with a comment such as "*because I am careful anyway*" or "because I already am safe online but this keeps me aware".

7. Conclusions

Research reviewed clearly states that grooming is a serious contemporary threat to global childhoods. The research reviewed has shown that there are young people who are particularly vulnerable to being groomed and that policy and the law has moved to try to protect them. However, recent serious cases reviews in the UK clearly show that on-line and face-to-face groomers have a sophisticated modus operandi for entrapping children and exploiting them sexually and for radicalization. Children need to understand what these techniques and approaches are so that they can protect themselves and keep safe online. Parents need to have an ongoing dialogue with their children on online and face-to-face grooming and promote regular conversations between their children and with them, in order to understand online behaviour. Additionally, they need to know what approaches schools are adopting on the topics of grooming, CSE and radicalisation to teach their children to be critical thinkers on these issues in order to protect themselves and their friends. Schools need to share the resources they are using and clearly signpost parents to them to enhance their knowledge and understanding on these complex topics.

Existing research on simulations indicates that simulated environments offer a safe way for young people to evaluate situations and take risks safely. This chapter has reviewed innovative simulations currently being developed to help children and young people learn to protect themselves online in the form of simulations which follow the lives of young people who are themselves groomed, giving young people the scaffolding and tools through which to develop their evaluative skills in a way that is significant to them. A small scale pilot study has revealed that this approach to learning about grooming for child protection is encouraging and has the potential to change online behaviour.

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