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Child Sex Offender Mind-Set and Grooming Strategies: A Discourse Analysis of Sex Offender Narratives from South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Violence against children, particularly sexual violence continues to threaten South African society. Whilst severely under-reported, the perpetration of child sexual abuse (CSA) against boys and girls is a significant societal concern, underpinned by adverse childhood familial instability, childhood abuse in particular sexual abuse, violence, inequality and wider structural forces. The research base is growing, despite low disclosure rates and significant barriers to access. In order to better understand unique trajectories of perpetration of CSA, particular to the South African context, we conducted an in-depth qualitative study with twelve male child sex offenders who were attending a therapeutic, rehabilitation programme. They provided open discourse on the forms of enticement, exploitation or entrapment of child victims, including threats of harm, used to elicit compliance into sexual activities. They disclosed trauma dictated fantasy, and that they felt powerful and in control, when they sexually abused their victims. Most of the offenses took place in their own home. By delving into the strategies and mind set of the offender who sexually abuse children, this study provides evidence of a distinct and deliberate, 'grooming process' used by offenders; and emphasizes the cyclic patterns of offending. Understanding these truths explores its potential for the prevention of the CSA. In its entirety, the research deconstructs the strategies of the offender and examines their actual role in the onset of sexually offending behavior against children; in order to draw out the implications of these complexities for policy, practice, crime prevention, particularly in terms of the prevention of CSA.

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perpetration; grooming;
South Africa

Background

Violence permeates the daily, lived experience of the greater South African society, with communities being plagued by high levels of violent crime. Efforts to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse (CSA), should take cognizance of the broader patterns of violence in South Africa. The current limitations of prevention and response programs culminate in unrecognized and untreated childhood trauma, perpetuating into intergenerational, cyclic patterns of

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violence. Living in a society characteristic of violence provokes chronic fear, anxiety, insecurity; significant psychological, social, behavioral maladjustment (Gilbert et al., 2009; Maniglio, 2009; Mathews et al., 2013; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014). Children in South Africa are exposed to violence, especially sexual violence in various settings, including in their homes, schools, communities, cyberspace – either as victims of violence, innocent bystanders, peers, and as initiators of violence (Aboujaoude et al., 2015; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014). Violence against children (VAC) is a pivotal inclusion, respecting the human rights of children, under Section 28 of the Constitution of South Africa, and legislation and policy is guided by several regional and international rights conventions to which South Africa is a signatory.

Although there is a high VAC prevalence, data is fragmented, the phenomenon is largely unreported, undocumented and the full scale of violence is uncertain (Richter & Dawes, 2008; United Nations Children's Fund, 2014; Mathews et al., 2013; Ravi & Ahluwalia, 2017). Research studies in South Africa, have indicated some concerning statistics: three children a day are murdered, and three out of four children aged <5 years are killed as a result of fatal abuse by a carer at home (Mathews et al., 2013); in 44% of sexual offenses reported to the police, the victim is a child; rapes of children (an estimated 84%) are predominantly perpetrated by men known to the child (Jewkes et al., 2002); approximately 60% of parents report physical assault of their children, predominantly between the age of 3–4 years, and further including high numbers of educator perpetrators (Dawes et al., 2005; Meinck et al., 2016); and 35–45% have witnessed domestic violence (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). A 2015 national prevalence survey of 9,730 young people between 15 and 17 years of age provided a birds-eye view of the violence affecting children, confirming that 1 in 3 children have been sexually abused, commonly by known adults (Artz et al., 2016). The study indicated that boys and girls are equally vulnerable, with girls more likely to experience forced and penetrative sex, and boys more likely to be exposed to sexual acts and pornographic material. Only 33% sought assistance for their injuries – with boys least likely to tell anyone about sexual abuse. While legislation and policies depict a strong commitment to protect children from harm, studies indicate that lack of adequate quality service provision (Jamieson et al., 2017) and perhaps a fuller understanding of the phenomenon.

Societal and cultural norms play a key role in contributing and perpetuating children's vulnerability in South Africa. CSA has a distinctly gendered nature, as dominant patriarchal constructions legitimize adult male control and ownership over children. Children are socialized not to question authority, allowing sexual violence to occur without much resistance from children and impunity by men. Against this background, when disclosure does occur, victims are often met with disbelief, blame or silencing to protect known offenders. Indeed, less has been done about the issue of how offenders actually target children and maintain

them as victims. In sexual offenses against children, there is a distinct lack of knowledge regarding the issue of perpetrators. Criminological research has indicated the value of probing offender–victim interaction to understand the crime in its entirety. Hence, it is imperative to extend our understanding of the offender–victim interaction in sexual offenses against children and, in particular, what specific factors might facilitate the offense. By delving into the strategies and mind-set of the sex offender, we deconstruct the “*modus operandi*” strategies of the offender and examine their actual role in the onset of the sexually offending behavior against children.

Methods

A critical social work framework (Bhattacharjee, 2012) underpinned the design of an in-depth qualitative study with 12 male child sex offenders who were accessing a therapeutic rehabilitation programme. This framework was used to support critical reflection in practice, introspection on mind-set and grooming strategies of the perpetrator toward the child victim, and the wider structural issues related to the perpetration of CSA, particularly inequality along with gender, economic, social forces, power structures and systems of resource distribution that undermine the well-being of victims (Fook, 2002; Dominelli, 2002; Rogowski, 2013; Sewpaul, 2013). The study design lent itself to an interpretivism paradigm, as it sought to study the “*modus operandi*” of the offender; particularly their mind-set and grooming strategies, through their subjective lens, understandings and perspectives. The therapeutic context opened a safe trusting space for hearing their voices, with qualitative data collected by the lead author, the social work lead of the therapeutic programme. Multiple fortnightly interviews alternating with groupwork sessions were conducted and facilitated by the lead author over a two year period. This prolonged qualitative process of immersion in data collection and analysis, yielded unique insights into the realities of CSA from the perpetrators lived experiences of personal abuse and perpetration, thought processes and mind-set.

Ethical approval for the study was given by the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Durban, South Africa. Participants were recruited purposively, based on their dual personal experiences as victim and perpetrator of CSA. Interviews and groupwork sessions in combination were used to understand their personal accounts and experiences of child sexual abuse leading up to perpetration (reported elsewhere), with a specific and emotive focus on the “*modus operandi*” of the perpetrator, triggers, behaviors, mind-set, and grooming strategies. We recognized that obtaining reliable and detailed information from offenders is a challenge. In the engagement with participants, the lead author was conscious of adopting an ‘*open-minded*’, approach with ‘*a reflective appraisal*’ and she took into account ‘*different perspectives, experiences and assumptions*’ in order to obtain as much information as possible of the ‘*life*

politics' of the participants (Adams et al., 2002, p.2; Jones et al., 2008, p. 33). Data garnered was based on establishment of a trusting and open relationship with the lead author, and the group itself, and underpinned by motivation of the participants to yield credible accounts in order to help others. Participants partook voluntarily, were fully informed about the research and its objectives, and all aspects of data collection were audio-recorded with permission and supported by extensive note taking, and reflective memos. Trustworthiness of the data was further ensured by triangulation with victim statements (including police records), interviews with family members, and detailed case notes. Audio recordings were transcribed shortly after data collection.

Interpretative discourse analysis was conducted on the final data set, and focused on the contextual knowledge, social aspects of communication and meaning in terms of how participants used language to describe their "*modus operandi*" in child sexual abuse. Their reflective stance on their life experiences were analyzed using a biopsychosocial perspective to assist a deeper understanding of the interplay of factors which contributed to their entrenchment in child sex offending. We adhered to the step-wise process of discourse analysis by sticking closely to the defined research question, the real life context of the discourse surrounding perpetration pathways, identified social and historical reflective contexts, and the close analysis of content for relevant themes and patterns. The information was thematically analyzed using the QSR NUD*IST 4 (Non numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing) software.

Results

Profile: The participants were English speaking males, and therapy was provided by a therapist of the same language group of the client. In terms of criminal records, one participant was court diverted into the therapeutic programme; another was pardoned after serving a six year prison sentence, and referred to the therapeutic programme; nine of the twelve participants who were convicted were mandated to attend the rehabilitative programme. Three participants who were not formally charged by the family were instructed to attend the programme. One of the twelve participants was warned by the police that charges would be formalized should he be found in the possession of child pornography again, and two participants volunteered to attend the therapeutic programme. Eleven were employed, and one was unemployed. Three completed secondary education; four only attended primary school; with five having obtained some level of tertiary education. Five were married; two were single; one was widowed; four were divorced, primarily as a result of the sexual abuse of their children. Most lived alone or with their parents. See [Table 1](#) 'Biographies'. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their identity.

The participants shared some common characteristics and a common link: they all sexually abused children or/and watched pornography, and simultaneously

Table 1. Case biographies.

- Case one: Bungie Bungie's family was characterized by family violence. His parents engaged in alcohol abuse, shared a conflictual relationship and relocated regularly, almost annually. They subsequently divorced when he was eight years old. He performed poorly in school, engaged in chronic behaviors of nail biting, and experienced social anxiety. His first sexual exposure to pornography was at the age of six years, when he watched a video of his parents having sex. He compulsively used pornography from the age of 10 years and masturbated to sexual fantasies. He engaged in penetrative sex play at the age of six years with friends. At the age of 10, he had sex with his seven year old cousin for a duration of two years and at 12 years he had sex with his nine year old step sister for a period of two years. He sexually abused his two stepdaughters, aged six and thirteen years, as well as his six-year-old biological daughter, over a period of three years. He had groomed his child victims with pornography and sexually themed games. He indicated that he experienced some sexual dysfunction and felt rejected by his adult female partners. Some critical points of concern were that he chose single parent partners with children, whom he had all sexually abused. He indicated that he felt addicted to sex. In two of the criminal cases of child sexual abuse, the charges against him were withdrawn, and in the third he was sentenced to a period of two years to a community based therapeutic programme.
- Case two: Tom Tom's family was characterized by violent onslaughts from his alcoholic, sexually permissive, and emotionally abusive father. Tom was a weak scholar, and displayed chronic behaviors of drug and alcohol use, depression, and suicide. He urinated in his pants when his parents fought, had feelings of self-loathing, felt rejected by his parents, experienced insecurity in social situations and in relationships, had low self-esteem, felt a sense of powerlessness, unhappiness and displayed anger outbursts. His parents divorced and later remarried other partners. He was sexually abused by several abusers: from the age of five years by his father; from six to eight years by his uncle; at 15 years he was sexually abused by his friend's 25-year old brother. His uncle also sexually abused his younger sister and two brothers. The siblings engaged in sex play with each other, as well as with two cousins and four neighbors. Whilst in self-induced detention after school, he was exposed to the self-masturbation activities of an educator for a period of 2½ years. At the age of 17 years Tom and his brother ran away from home. His brother became a drug addict and later a drug dealer and was stabbed by the police. Tom married at the age of 21 years. He believed he was a sex addict as he had sex five times per day, frequent sexual fantasies, sexual relations with approximately 50 sexual partners, collected pornography and video-recorded his sexual acts with children. From the age of 24 years, he chose approximately six relationships with single parents who had young children, whom he sexually abused. When he was sexually spurned by his partners, (four of his partners had other sexual relationships) which gave him a sense of inadequacy and hounded by flashbacks of sexual abuse by his father, he felt driven to sexually abuse children. He had aberrant sexual fantasies and objectified women. Tom compulsively used pornography as a form of escape from his loneliness, and later created videos of his sexual abuse of children, which he used to groom his victims, and fuel his fantasies. All of his victims did not disclose the sexual abuse, and two of the victims were sexually abused over a period of five years. Concerns existed as he was not convicted nor mandated to attend therapy. He left the therapeutic programme prematurely and continued to choose relationships with single women with children.
- Case three: Mathew Mathew's family was characterized by severe marital discord and family violence, perpetrated by the father who abused substances. Mathew's father physically and sexually abused his children, when they were at the age of five to six years, for a duration of six years. His mother was an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Mathew displayed chronic patterns of stealing from his parents, truancy, aggression, alcohol and drug abuse, withdrawn behavior, and compulsive use of pornography. He attended a remedial school at the age of 15 years and was not able to secure stable employment. From the age of 15 years he started sexually abusing other children in the neighborhood, he also engaged in babysitting, which created an opportunity to access and sexually abuse children. He was not reported to the police during these encounters until, at the age of 25 years, he sexually abused his four-year-old nephew. He displayed characteristics of low self-esteem, poor social skills with women, (was rejected by two of his girlfriends) poor work skills and emotional immaturity. Concerns were that he enjoyed having sex with children and found it easy to manipulate children.
- Case four: Ronnie Ronnie's parents divorced when he was just a year old due to severe marital discord. The parents later remarried but experienced hostile and conflictual relationships in their new marriages. Ronnie stayed with either parent at alternate school holidays but attended a convent boarding school with his sister. Ronnie displayed chronic behaviors: he urinated in his pants when parents fought; was a weak scholar as he indicated that he could not concentrate and cheated in tests; felt inferior to his peers, and chose negative friends; lied; stole; engaged in alcohol and drug abuse and was uncomfortable in social relationships. At eight years he engaged in penetrative sex play with friends. In his adolescence he engaged in compulsive masturbation, developed a fetish for women's underwear (stole them), and at 17 years, he sexually abused his nine-year-old sister (father dismissed the behavior as sexual experimentation). He indicated that he was addicted to: pornography, including child pornography; and sex, and had multiple, risky sexual encounters with prostitutes and other women. Ronnie married his pregnant wife, an adult survivor of sexual abuse, who was diagnosed and treated for major depression. He indicated that he developed deviant sexual fantasies of his three-year-old, stepdaughter, groomed her in sexually themed games, lavished her with attention and sexually abused her when she was six years old for a period of three years. His personal characteristics were: low self-esteem, emotional – cried easily, lack of social skills, inadequacy and self-doubt, social incompetency, poor work skills and ethics as he stole from his work situations. Although he was criminally prosecuted and charged, he still appears to be high risk for his compulsive use of pornography especially child pornography, .

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

- Case five: Derek Derek's family of origin was characterized by conflict and violence, and his father dominated the family with rigid and harsh discipline. Derek was an average scholar. At the age of 12 years he was sexually abused by a 17-year-old neighbor over a period of four years. At 15 years, he sexually abused his 11-year-old sister, over a three-year period, to prove he was not gay. He sexually abused his nine-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter, believing that he was entitled to some source of sexual gratification, as his wife denied him any sexual relations. His wife was an adult survivor of sexual abuse, and was diagnosed and treated for depression for a period of 15 years, subsequent to the miscarriage of their first baby. From an early age, the children displayed uncontrollable behavior, were manipulative and aggressive. Derek took responsibility for the care and discipline of the children, taking them shopping, on vacations and outings with the children, as his ill wife preferred to remain at home and was hospitalized on several occasions for depression. The couple separated after Derek was convicted for the sexual abuse of his children. He was a compulsive user of pornography on incest, particularly of children between 10–13 years. He had sexual fantasies of his abuser and masturbated excessively. He felt sexually inadequate, had a low self-esteem, was socially isolated, lacked social skills, engaged in excessive eating, passive in relationships and used economic manipulation with wife and children.
- Case six: Larry Larry's family of origin was characterized by incest and family violence. Larry's mother committed suicide when he was 13- years old and his sister committed suicide a couple of years thereafter. Larry did not do academically. Larry was sexually abused from the age of four years by: a female, teenage neighbor; family members; family friends; his teenage brother and sister. He was easily bribed and manipulated by the abusers, felt ashamed and guilty. Larry was violent, controlling and manipulative with his immediate family. He coerced his first wife into sexually abusing their four children from their infant years; and coerced his second wife to have sex with his two male children from his first marriage. He sexually abused the children from his first two marriages; his wives three brothers, neighbors' children, as well as his children's friends (it is alleged that he sexually abused 35 victims – he did not verify this). He was not able to accurately recollect the number of children that he had sexually abused. He exposed his three wives and children to acts of physical violence and intimidation. He was verbally expressive but showed little empathy, was deceptive, denied the details of his offenses, manipulative, charismatic and engaged in intensive grooming of children. Concerns remained that he left therapy prematurely, was living with his third wife and two little stepchildren and appeared to be a risk to children.
- Case seven: Jason Jason's family of origin was characterized by family violence and substance abuse. He indicated that he was sexually fondled by a teenage boy at the age of 15 years, and compulsively masturbated. Jason qualified as an electrician, married at the age of 21 years and engaged in three polygamous marriages of which he had 13 children. His youngest wife was 32 years his junior (24 years: 56 years). Jason had a hearing defect and his behavior was characterized by temper outbursts and strong patriarchal dominance. He sexually abused three related children over an eight-year period. Jason used his economic resources to control his family and victims. He viewed men as the head of the household, the dominant initiators of sex, who should introduce force to persuade women to comply. He had poor self-esteem, feelings of inferiority, was suicidal in his early adulthood, and had a sense of entitlement. His sexual experiences with children and women gave him a feeling of superiority. He had no close friends since he was a child and was insecure in new situations.
- Case eight: Roy Roy was lonely, unhappy and attempted to run away from the catholic boarding school at which he spent six years of his childhood. He spent Christmas vacations with his family. He did not recollect many memories of his childhood with his family. His scholastic performance was weak, and he completed his grade nine. He had chronic asthma, which prevented him from engaging in sports and developing friends. He had poor impulse control in relation to his anger and aggression, poor social skills, introverted personality, had no friends in school, had a patriarchal view of sexual relationships with women, and felt rejected by family. At the age of 15 years he sexually abused his eight-year-old sister. He dominated and controlled his family economically as he financially provided for them. His sexual relationship with his wife terminated early in their marriage due to her long-term psychiatric treatment for depression, cancer and various other illnesses, and untimely death in 2008. He sexually abused his eight-year-old granddaughter and her friend and was referred for therapy. He denied responsibility for the sexual abuse, and blamed his granddaughter for initiating the sexual contact.
- Case nine: Alton Alton's life was characterized by family violence perpetrated by his father on his mother and the children. Alton and his older sister attended a boarding school, but his youngest sister remained at home. Alton attempted suicide at the age of eight years, due to fear of being punished by his father, and twice subsequently as an adult. His performance at school was satisfactory but he received no tertiary education. He did not regard his parents as sexual beings as they did not show affection, did not communicate, and he did not notice any sexual nuances between them. At the age of six years, he played sex games with his ten-year-old sister and her friend. He was sexually abused by his grandmother at the age of eight years. From the age of 13 years he masturbated frequently having experienced his first nocturnal emission associated with fantasies of his youngest sister. He was caught masturbating a couple of times and felt awkward about his sexuality. His marital relationship was fraught with conflict and sexual dysfunction. Intercourse had occurred once a week with his ex-wife and once or twice per month with his current partner, as she decided on the rules of their intimacy. He sexually abused his 12-year-old stepdaughter (for a period of three years) which was triggered by sexual fantasies of his younger sister (according to him, this was his best sexual fantasy, and dominated his sexual life). He indicated that his substance abuse also led to his reckless driving in which his best friend died. He engaged in excessive substance abuse; had suicidal tendencies; a poor body concept; compulsively used pornography; had fantasies of teenage girls; had inadequate relationships with women, as he was not sexually satisfied in their sexual relationships. He displayed characteristics of: low self-esteem; loneliness; isolation; felt unwanted, abandoned and rejected by his family; had pent up feelings of revenge against his wife who had engaged in several affairs, as a result of which two of the four children were born out of wedlock. He had a poor relationship with his son, who was suicidal.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

- Case ten: Deshan The home of Deshan's adoptive parents was characterized by family violence and conflict, as his adopted father consumed alcohol excessively and was emotionally, physically and verbally abusive toward him, his sister and mother. At the age of six, Deshan and his sister were informed that they were unrelated and that both had been adopted. He was an average scholastic performer. He was sexually abused by his cousin at the age of 12 years, over a three-year period. He and his sister ran away from home during their late teenage years. Deshan married his wife who was pregnant from another relationship. He exposed his wife to physical and emotional abuse. Deshan groomed and sexually abused his eight-year old stepdaughter over a three-year period. His wife divorced him as a result of the abuse of her child. His personal life was characterized by: loneliness, social isolation, fear, self-loathing, attempted suicidal attempts, aggression and anger, frustration for concealing his female nature (he was a male transvestite), risky sexual relationships with prostitutes (approximately 30–40 prostitutes), reckless behavior due to alcohol and drug abuse, compulsive use of pornography, and sexual dysfunction – erectile dysfunction.
- Case eleven: Khuzwayo Khuzwayo's parents' relationship was characterized by marital conflict; his mother was on tranquilizers and his father engaged in substance abuse. At the age of five, his mother abandoned the family to live with her boyfriend. Khuzwayo shared a poor relationship with his father and sought out his mother at the age of 19 years, hoping to reconcile with her. He stayed in a boarding school from the age of seven to thirteen years, at which he was sexually exploited by both the school personnel and his peers. He was a poor performer, scholastically. He had a chronic problem of biting his nails, was extremely anxious, and he was treated for his alcoholic and drug dependency. He was distrustful, introverted, self-reliant, reclusive in nature, had a poor self-concept and found expression in his poetry, and appeared to have an inability in maintaining employment. He was introduced to pornography at his senior primary and secondary schools and became a compulsive user of child pornography, as it helped him to escape the rejection and loneliness. He had sexual fantasies of boys between seven and eleven years. He had not engaged in any sexual relationship and felt inadequate to socialize with women. He avoided his peers and family, as he felt inadequate and unloved. Concerns: he did not complete therapy; the police had not charged him for possession of child pornography; his presenting personal characteristics made him a risky candidate for future sexual abuse of children.
- Case twelve: Tony Tony's family of origin was characterized by chronic disruption, instability and family violence, perpetrated by his father, who consumed alcohol and drugs, and spent late nights out, returning home when intoxicated. When Tony was 11 years, his father was murdered. His mother subsequently engaged in a relationship with a married boyfriend, who was unemployed, suicidal, a substance abuser, and a thief. Tony was weak in his scholastic achievement until his grade 12 year, and truant school. Tony displayed particular behavior patterns: poor social skills; introverted behavior; urinated in his pants out of fear for his father; alcohol and drug abuse, which provided an escape from problems and gave him confidence. He was emotionally immature; belonged to a gang who engaged in anti-social behavior; aggressive – stabbed a person; inept in relationships with women, as he was afraid of rejection, and maintained short-term (three months) relationships, until he met his wife who was 10 years his senior. His six-year-old marriage was characterized by marital conflict. He groomed his four-year-old stepdaughter extensively prior to his marriage, and sexually abused her after his marriage for a period of 3.5 years. He was motivated by sex fantasies of his victim, and felt dominated by his wife in their sex activities.

engaged in intimate relationships with adult women. Eleven sexually abused victims, and the twelfth offender participant engaged in compulsive use of child pornography, which is an offense in South Africa. Nine had been exposed to sexual abuse during their childhood: seven by family members (father, uncle, grandmother, cousin, siblings); five by non-family members (neighbors, peers, family friends, doctor, principal) and two were sexually abused by both family and nonfamily members. Four were exposed to pornography between the ages of six to ten years of age. All had lived in a sexualized and traumatic atmosphere that affected them and their siblings. Four had sexually abused their siblings (two victims were step-sisters and two victims were biological sisters); and a fifth participant was sexually fixated on his sister and his fantasies of her predisposed him to sexually abuse his own daughter. Five of the siblings of the participants were further sexually abused by relatives, and five of them by their father (these fathers further, sexually abused their 2 other sons and three daughters). One participant was sexually abused by his two siblings.

The victims of the participants in the study, were aged between two and thirteen years, with those most at risk being under ten years. Sixty-six percent of the participants had some form of intimate relationship with the mother of the victim, whether through marriage or cohabitation. Six of the victims were stepdaughters; eight were biological children of the offenders; five were the children of girlfriends of the offenders; or children of the extended family. The range of number of victims per participant was from one to eleven. The timeframe and occurrence of the sexual abuse of a victim ranged between a once off incident – to a maximum duration of fifteen years. The setting for the sexual abuse of the victims was generally within the home. There was a higher occurrence of female victims (71%(30) of the victims), compared to 29% (12) of the victims being male. Participants performed various forms of sexual acts on their victims, ranging from fellatio, frottage, cunnilingus, sexual penetration, mouth-to-mouth deep kissing, caressing of breasts, buttocks, thighs, and sexual penetration of the anus or vagina with either a penis or fingers. Non-touch forms of sexual abuse included voyeurism, engaging the children in suggestive talk, video recording of the victims engaged in the sexual acts, bathing or whilst naked. Some of the participants disclosed offenses in the therapeutic setting, not previously disclosed or reported but released within the client-therapeutic alliance context.

Higher level abstraction revealed the following pathways into, “*modus operandi*” and entrenchment in the perpetration of CSA was embedded in significant exposure to trauma (violence, detached parenting, institutionalism, interpersonal, sibling abuse, social isolation) during childhood, a sexualized climate at home, the deliberate pursuance of single parents as partners in adulthood, sexual and social rejection, difficulties regulating emotions, loss of identity and self-esteem, harmful coping mechanisms (compulsive use of pornography, substance abuse) and sexual dysfunction in relationships leading to a sense of power and control only achieved with children. Compensatory mechanisms linked to low self-worth were grounded in trauma dictated fantasy and opportunity in exerting influence on the “*modus operandi*” of the sexual offenses. We present the following key themes with illustrative quotes using pseudonyms.

Escapism and pornography

The participants were exposed to various formats of pornography, both during their childhood and adult years, commencing as early as six years of age and this became an enduring use. All participants developed an increased compulsion to view pornographic materials. The motivation to view appeared to be driven by unappeased sexual gratification, a re-living of their personal victimization in an attempt to gain some form of mastery, as a form of escapism or coping mechanism. The participants appeared to hence, have developed paraphilias in relation to their own adverse childhood sexual abuse;

I have pictures in my mind of the past that haunt me, porn helps relieve my mind of the abuse. Ronnie

For the last seven years, I watched porn of boys between the ages of nine to eleven years because I wanted to relive and rethink what happened to me, when I was sexually abused at that age. I wanted to feel powerful and in control. But when I am done, I feel empty and ashamed. It didn't make me feel the way I wanted it to. Khuzwayo

For some watching pornography incited and acted as a precursor for their offending behavior. Tom created various videos of his child victims, which were confiscated and used to convict him. It could not be confirmed, however, that he had distributed the videos.

I decided to make a tape of me and the daughter having sex. The tape kept me from sexually abusing her and when the flashbacks got really bad, I would just watch the tape until the images went away. Tom

It became apparent that the compulsive use of pornography became an insatiable obsession, it shaped their perceptions, relationships, and interaction. Aspects of pornography as behavioral addiction were evident. Long history of exposure to pornography led some participants to treat women as non-human, objects for sexual use, which ultimately robbed their ability to develop meaningful relationships with them, leading to greater alienation and social isolation.

I've never wanted to abuse a child, but it's the thoughts that come to me that scare me – picturing a child naked more so on a computer screen than in real life. It became an outlet for all my frustration. It didn't take long for it to become an addiction. I spent all my time searching for child porn. I didn't care if it was illegal. Derek

Another participant indicated that: I watch porn and other sexual material. This has made me focus on just having sex with my partners not having relationships of love. Tom

Continuous exposure to child pornography also led to distorted perceptions facilitating reduced guilt. The interplay between pornography inciting perpetration, and co-existence as behavioral addiction was described by four of the participants.

My intense guilt of watching pornography disappeared with time, and it became easier to watch and indulge. The more I saw, it became addictive like drug dependency. It was on my mind all the time. Khuzwayo

Escape from trauma, fantasies, and opportunities. Many participants described symptoms of post traumatic disorder with recurring flashbacks of their own abuse. For some, rejection by their adult partners heightened a sense of disempowerment, which could only be mastered when controlling and violating children. Immediate predisposing and disinhibitory factors leading to sexual abuse of children included drugs, alcohol, pornography, and flashbacks.

My girlfriend said that she does not want to have sex with me anymore. This was the time that the images started – I saw this figure lying on top of me rubbing his genitals on me. I had to get rid of this disgusting feeling I was getting. I took her 5-year-old daughter and lay on top of her and rubbed myself until I came. I was so angry and disgusted with myself. This was the start of the many incidents. It took away the anxiety, frustration, pain, anger from my abuse and gave me a sense of relief. It started just with touching in the beginning, but when my marriage was going bad, I started having sex with my 13-year-old step-daughter. That felt more like a stable relationship, more than anything I have felt. That is the only time of the years of abuse, that I got pleasure and excitement. Tom

Many discussed the impact of sexual fantasies/flashbacks which precipitated incidents of sexual victimization, which was also carefully orchestrated and enacted. Derek fostered sexual fantasies of his preadolescent sister, leading him to orchestrate the abuse of his own preadolescent daughter. He vividly described his deviant sexual fantasies which paved the way for future sexual offending behavior. He believed that his daughter was conceived in an extra-marital relationship, and that he had no real loyalty to her as a father. His victim preference appeared to be females in their early pubertal years.

When my daughter started puberty, she became my ‘sister’ in my ‘nocturnal emission’. It started out as a fantasy, and then progressed to sexual activity. Derek

The role of fantasy and opportunity were significant attributes to the offending behavior. Bungie indicated that his deviant fantasies exerted an influence on his “*modus operandi*” of sexual offending.

It started with a vision of kissing. I was alone with her, my vision led to a fantasy of being naked together, lust, then the art of pleasure and the fulfilment of that pleasure. I just could not control these fantasies. I convinced myself it was okay – as the child would not risk losing me as a father, no-one was there, and that child wouldn’t understand why and what was happening. I felt a sleeping child would not realize what’s wrong. I was so aroused I didn’t even think that this person was my child, but just a naked female to please my needs. After that – once I gratified myself, I did a reality check of what I saw – It was my own kids! I felt relieved and angry with myself at the same time. I also wanted to let them experience some pleasure and I wanted to teach a child about sex. I thought they would enjoy it and didn’t think they would tell on me as I was their dad and they loved me. Bungie

Another participant indicated I would fantasize about being touched and I would masturbate to these thoughts. I would fantasize about her touching me in an innocent way. I would think of a way to get her to do more. I saw myself in her. I would fantasize about her touching me. Ronnie

Many participants cited varying reasons for the motivation of the abuse of children, which included stress, partner rejection, the seeking of perceived love and attachment, and addiction to the sex abuse of children. Participants described how deviant fantasies and poor regulatory control set in motion an orchestrated series of events leading to the abuse.

Grooming tactics and the orchestration of sexual abuse

All participants illustrated how deviant fantasies and ‘*offense*’ scripts merged and unfolded into realities for the participants. They used their circumstances and adult positions of authority to gain access to children ensuring their trust, by luring and controlling their victims. The distortion of the role of the adult as carer, nurturer, educator was illustrated and central to opportunities to abuse children. The circumstances of the chosen families had similar characteristics as the victims were vulnerable, living in estranged, stressed families with multiple problems, abandoned or rejected by their fathers, unsupervised by carers. The offenders as their new parental figures appeared to be the rescuers who filled the emptiness and the gap of taking responsibility for caring and attending to the victims’ activities. Bungie sexually abused children from two different relationships, as well as his own biological daughter. Tony and Ronnie had initiated grooming of their stepdaughters prior to marrying their mothers, so it was not certain whether they chose these relationships to have access to the children or the context provided an opportunity to abuse the children. Rejection by adult partners also appeared to be a pervasive theme, as the victims in some instances became the substitute sexual partners. When Tom was betrayed by his girlfriend – which occurred in several of his relationships – he too, turned to his stepdaughter for affection and sexual gratification. Tom always chose partners who had female children below the age of 10 years, and because of his expressed interest in caring for the children, their mothers left them unsupervised in his care.

When my girlfriend started having an affair, I felt so hurt, that I turned to her child to help me with my feelings. Tom

The participants were well placed to supervise the care of the children and used those opportunities to further their schemes of abuse in the pretext of routine activities to groom and confuse their children into compliance to abusive activities. Deviant sexual fantasies consisted of distorted cognitions of perceived love and the sexual development of little children.

I felt that my stepdaughter didn’t love me and felt that molesting her was a way of showing her deeper love. I felt vulnerable; felt I could not please my partner sexually. I was exposed too early to sex and it became uncontrollable –I could manipulate them – I was this strong figure, step dad, and in control. I used love- that I loved her mother and her. Tony

The various participants developed their own “*modus operandi*” to ensure their child victims involvement and cooperation in the sexual abuse act. The timeframe of the grooming or seduction process ranged from a few minutes to even years. The participants appeared to be more willing to ensure that they got the scheme right so that they were not detected, moving from a continuum of normal activities to deviant activities with them.

It is very easy for a father to abuse his own children because there are many opportunities and you manipulate your own children with your power, authority, instructions to keep secrets. Jason

The participants exhibited distorted cognitions leading them to always believe that children enjoyed the sexual activity with them. Larry used books on animal mating and pornography to normalize sexual practices, indicating to his children that families and animals bathe together so it was normal for them as a family to conduct these activities too. He moved his interactions along a continuum of non-sexual to sexual activities, from stories to real situations. The whole family bathed together, and the parents masturbated the children and took them on nudist outings.

My first wife and I were jointly involved in the sexual abuse of all our children. We started off by giving body massages to each other, in the nude. Larry

Desensitization to pornography was a part of the seduction process.

“I had a camera posted over the shower and I would show the children the videos of our activities of sexually fondling each other, oral sex and masturbating. Tom

Mathew realized that although he was not always able to succeed in establishing adult relationships, relationships with children were easier, and that it was also gratifying sexually to have control and power over these relationships. He was the reliable, affectionate, entertaining babysitter, for neighbors, family, and friends. He played fun-filled, games with children, and he felt he could cognitively and emotionally identify with children. This provided him with self-confidence, and he soon realized that children could also be easily manipulated, controlled and used to provide him with sexual gratification that was lacking in his adult relationships. His victims were between the ages of four to eight years, both male and female, but commonly male. He emulated the patterns of his own victimization, by grooming victims, building a relationship of trust, responding to their interest of play, then manipulating them to concede to sexually abusive acts:

This child would ask me to read stories to him in the room and play games with him. So I did. I would fantasize about this boy. One day I was going to leave the room and this child said no I must stay so I stayed. The next day I wanted to leave the room and he said no- and I said “okay only if you show me your winky” and he did. I did this a few times until one day I asked him if he trusted me . he said he did . I asked him to close his eyes and I sucked his winky . I asked him to do the same to me and he did.

An incident of a female child:

We lay on the bed and as I read her the story, I took my penis out of my pants. She asked me what it was and I told her that it was my penis and that she could touch it if she wanted to. She touched it. I asked her if I could see her fanny and pointed to her vagina. She pulled her pants down and I rubbed her vagina. This was the first time I abused a kid and I could not believe how easy it was. Mathew

Transactions and quasi-relationships

The power of manipulation, deception, of an offender draws similarities to the control of men in a patriarchally dominated society, and appeared central to the foundations of enacting the abuse, within trusting relationships, minimizing disclosure by victims. Many participants were tortured with regrets, guilt, fear and resolutions to stop, but the forbidden quality of the experience and the unexpected ease of accomplishment seem to invite repetition and a compulsive, addictive pattern developed until the matter was reported to the police. Nearly all of the victims did not disclose the sexual abuse at the time that it occurred. Even more startling was that, four of the offenders sexually abused their victims while their partners were in the home, but their partners were oblivious of the situation. This was the extent and sophistication of their levels of manipulation. None used physical force or coercion in the sexual abuse of their victims. For instance, Mathew indicated the ease in which he abused his nephew, and obtaining little resistance. The offenders became accustomed to using their authority, relationship to abuse the victims:

When my five-year-old nephew came for a holiday, I sexually abused him several times. The first time I got him to sit on my lap and I put a blanket over us and put my hand on his pants and rubbed him until he was hard and then stroked him until his body stiffened. He did not fight this. Mathew

It was apparent that the participants, groomed their victims into the sexually abusive acts. In the research, it was apparent that more than 60% of participants commenced grooming patterns in the very early years of their children's lives, and the grooming appeared to be a lengthy process, leading to the sexualization of the victims, and then culminating in the sexual abusive acts.

And it progressed. And when she straddled her legs around me, I use to massage her private parts inside her panties, as she most often wore a dress. She did not resist at all to what I was doing, and the incidents increased, and the moments intensified. And she did not resist or say no or stop but continued to rub onto my fingers. Roy

Derek very aptly described the vulnerability of his victims.

Victims don't have a chance at all. You can manipulate children and win their trust and force the abuse on them. My children did not have a chance of not being abused. They trusted me as their father, and I bought them presents to gain their trust and manipulate them. Derek

Deshan indicated that a child is totally subject to the control, manipulation, authority of an offender, especially a trusted person like a parent, and hence cannot fend off the sexual advances. He commented on the offender's determination to succeed in committing the sexual abuse. In order to conceal the abusive behavior, Deshan manipulated and deceived his wife, educators and a psychologist, by denying the abuse and disclosure of his stepdaughter.

Once an abuser has set out to abuse a child, that child has no chance of getting out of that situation. My stepdaughter was saying that it was me that I was abusing her, but I always got to convince everyone that I was the caring parent and that I wanted to get to the bottom of the problem. Deshan

Tony used a strategy of enticing his victims to obtain their cooperation and then making them feel entrapped, by offering them privileges, materials rewards, affection and attention. He normalized their sexual encounters, and convinced her that, that it was a normal process of love shared between father and daughter. Once Tony introduced the foundation of a loving, caring relationship to his victim each consequent activity became more acceptable and his victim even insisted on the sexual activities as she associated it with expressions of affection. He wanted to be seen as the better parent just like Derek, Deshan, Ronnie and the others did. They gave up the normal parenting structure of discipline and excessively indulged the children, which ultimately served their advantage. Tom had created a cupboard of sexual toys and videos for his stepdaughter, which she had easy access to and could show off to other children to evoke their interest, and entrapment.

I tried buying her stuff so that she owed me favours, sexual favours. I was curious to know what it would feel like teaching her about sex. . . . I was in this and did not know how to get out of it. Sometimes the victim use to tell me if I 'I didn't give her love' she's going to tell her mother. Tony

Roy distorted expressions of love from his granddaughter and used the opportunity to manipulate her and gratify himself.

My granddaughter became very attached to me and I thought she wanted to love me this way and that she was enjoying it. I misinterpreted her feelings and I started to sexually abuse her. It started off with her giving me a kiss, which I used to intensify into a French kiss. So whenever she kissed me, I tried to distort the kiss and teach her, how the kiss should be. Roy

The victims developed a dependency on the abusers who cared for them, gave them attention, nurturance, which they generally otherwise lacked.

My daughter saw me as a role- model; she looked up to me as her parent because I was supposed to offer her security. She loved me as a parent and would kiss me when she was small and growing up. She also did not tell my wife or anybody else about me touching her private parts. It became a game to me and a habit. Derek

Strategies with their victims included gifts to gain the cooperation of children as described by Jason.

After being in therapy, I can be honest and say that I enticed the victims with money, sweets, affection, sweet talks. We did stuff together like talking, playing card games, and advising about problems. These acts progressed from touching their breasts to their private parts and oral sex. When I abused them, I tried to achieve some sort of satisfaction thinking that the victims will not tell because I was so good to them. Jason

Discussion

The study findings posit a unique exploration of perpetration of CSA from the offenders' perspectives who were attending a therapeutic, rehabilitation programme. We utilized a critical social work approach to yield a deep, rich, qualitative understanding of enticement, exploitation or entrapment of child victims, including threats of harm, used to elicit compliance into sexual activities. Narratives highlighted the interplay between prior exposure to adverse childhood experiences, family instability, violence, familial sexualized climates, behavioral addictions in the form of substance use, excessive use of pornography, as destructive to a life course. The study summarily confirms that cumulative exposure to multiple forms of adverse, traumatic childhood experiences, maladaptive occurrences, family instability, violence, does culminate in multiple negative outcomes in one's life. These findings, supported by several other research studies, conclude that childhood sexual abuse is especially destructive, and provides a catalyst for engagement in staging the repetition of these experiences. Hence the study provides evidence to support the cycle of violence related to the association between childhood sexual abuse and subsequent pedophilia or sexual offending (DeLisi et al., 2014; Drury et al., 2019; Hailes et al., 2019; King et al., 2019; Leroux et al., 2020; Levenson et al., 2016; Seghorn et al., 1987).

Offenders are likely to have committed many more, sexual offenses before they are officially reported (Abel et al., 1987; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001; Salter, 2003a, 2003b; Richards, 2011). We report on their histories of childhood trauma elsewhere (Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014). Many commenced their aberrant sexual behavior earlier in their lives, commonly in their adolescence, which is generally regarded as a period of increased risk, and consistent with other research findings (Abel et al., 1987). The results of this study and a previous local study (Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014) support the view that watching pornography seems to serve as a precursor to sexually offending behavior, in order to self-medicate, revoke control, and desensitize themselves and their victims. This paraphilia is aptly described by Beech and Ward (2004), that *“viewing child abuse images antecedes the desire to resort to physically offending against a child so, pornography could escalate to the commission of a contact sex offense through the process of pairing images with fantasy, masturbation and cognitive distortions”* (p. 52).

Participants cited the existence of repetitive trauma depicting fantasies including flashbacks, as a precursor to the *“modus operandi”* of committing the abuse, similar in research elsewhere (Leclerc et al., 2009). Deviant fantasies influence a carefully planned out and manipulative strategy and set in motion the orchestrated set of events leading to the sexual offending behavior (Beech & Ward, 2004; Gee et al., 2003; Sheldon & Howitt, 2007). They can serve to regulate affect, or enhance sexual arousal, as a coping strategy, justifying a mind-set or irrational

thought that sexual relationships with those of one's own age are impossible or undesirable. (Gee et al., 2003). Ward and Hudson have argued that due to the poor regulatory control of an offender, that even a child's touch or smile can trigger an "*offense-script and the fantasy unfolds into reality*" (2006, p. 71). The home constituted the setting for desensitization of the victim, often within a trusting or transactional relation. Availability of a victim, poor regulatory control, and opportunity appeared central (Covell & Scalora, 2002; Maniglio, 2011; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014; Richards, 2011; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001). The intra-familial offenses were commonly committed by fathers, stepfathers, and mothers' boy-friends (someone who had some guardianship over the child). This is consistent with other research that indicates that intra-familial abusers exploit their children over a longer period of time, constituting a paraphilia (Smallbone & Wortley, 2001). The children most at risk of sexual abuse were females below the age of 10 years.

By delving into the strategies and mind set of the offender who sexually abuse children, this study provides evidence of a distinct and deliberate, '*grooming process*' used by the offenders. The participants used the process of grooming to create opportunities to abuse children, as grooming lowers sexual inhibitions, and creates an atmosphere of normalization and acceptance to sexual activities introduced by offenders (Leclerc et al., 2009). In many instances they took advantage of the victims sexual curiosity, need for attention, and love (McAlinden, 2013). This is similar to Minnie (2009) who indicated an initial phase of identifying and selecting the victim, followed by a process of gaining access to the child and then building a relationship to obtain compliance by the victim, to the sexual abuse. The final phase included various techniques used by the abuser to ensure the child's secrecy of the abuse. These phases are not always distinct, or time bound and varies from victim to victim depending on the type of relationship shared with the victim. Some victims exhibited development of quasi relationships with their offender, which along with classic role reversal of child abuse where he/she is given the power to destroy the family and the responsibility to preserve it, was observed to impede disclosure. These victims accepted the sexual contact without resisting, and structured their reality to protect their mothers and the family unit (Summit, 1983).

Conclusion

VAC, particularly sexual violence continues to threaten the South African society. Whilst severely under reported, the perpetration of CSA is a significant societal concern, underpinned by familial violence, gender violence, patriarchy, inequality, wider cultural and structural forces. In its entirety, the research deconstructs the strategies of the offender and examines their actual role in the onset of the sexually offending behavior against children. Understanding the truths are imperative in future prevention, including crime prevention, and

response to CSA. Multi-faceted programmatic strategies that span the life-course, are required to prevent CSA: including probing early offender risk factors, the role of pornography, substance abuse, rehabilitation, policy and practice; positive parenting programmes, that includes gender equity, non-violent forms of discipline, includes fathers as positive role models, respects the human rights of all children; school based programmes, that includes transformation of ideas of masculinity, gender equity, protective factors on reducing VAC; strengthening families and communities, by targeting risk factors for VAC such as multi-problem families, economic strengthening, reducing childhood trauma and sexual abuse; changing social norms, reducing the culture of violence in South Africa, and being receptive to the disclosures of children. The INSPIRE report provides key evidence-informed strategies and interventions that can be adapted to prevent VAC (World Health Organization (WHO), 2016). Future studies should explicitly include a focus on investigating pathways of prevention of early risk factors, to very young children, and determining the evidence of what works best, for adaptation and scale-up in different settings.

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