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“Otis”: A Case Study of an Online Attempt to Purchase Children for Sex

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ABSTRACT

The researchers analyzed court documents to develop a case study of an individual convicted of buying sexual services from exploited children. Findings indicate that the subject deviates from preexisting victim selection processes and demonstrates characteristics inconsistent with existing sexual offender typologies that likens offender behaviors to the hunting techniques and behaviors of predatory animals. As evidenced in the case study, the individual perceived the victims solely as a means of deviant sexual satiation and did not participate in traditionally established victim acquisition techniques. In addition, the researchers propose adopting terminology that adheres to the term *consumer* rather than *buyer* as it better represents some offenders' disconnect and lack of empathy in the victim acquisition process.

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Human trafficking is considered one of the three largest criminal enterprises worldwide (Bales, 2004, 2007; Bales & Doodalter, 2009; Hussein, 2011; Schauer & Wheaton, 2006; Skinner, 2008). Human trafficking can be further outlined to include crimes such as child soldiering, labor trafficking, organ trafficking, and sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2013). Although rates of forced labor are notoriously difficult to obtain (Fedina, 2015; Hyland, 2001; Laczko & Gramegna, 2003), it is estimated almost 21 million people are victims of forced labor worldwide, 4.5 million of whom are victims of sex trafficking (International Labour Organization, 2012). Human sex trafficking is characterized by commercial sex acts induced by force, fraud, or coercion or in which the person induced to perform the sex act has not attained 18 years of age (U.S. Department of State, 2000, 2011). Sex trafficking is a transnational crime that affects every region of the world (Chung, 2009). National estimates identify 100,000 to 300,000 American children as at-risk for sex trafficking. Only one percent of traffickers are arrested and convicted (Bales, 2007).

Sex trafficking does not require forced transportation across international borders. In fact, the majority of victims are domestically trafficked by persons

of the same nationality (Shelley, 2010; U.S. Department of State, 2009). Within recent years, gangs and organized crime affiliates have expanded their criminal business repertoires to include trafficking in humans as it represents a more profitable avenue compared to other methods of crime (Bales, 2004, 2007; Bales & Doodalter, 2009; Skinner, 2008). Whereas guns and drugs can be sold only once, people can be sold multiple times and are disposable when they no longer produce value (Neville & Martinez, 2004). According to Kara (2010), sex trafficking rings can net up to \$500,000 annually for those in charge. Continued research on sex trafficking is necessary to avoid inadvertent propagation of the crime due to lack of understanding amongst law enforcement and stakeholders (Tyldum, 2010).

Researchers agree the fundamental strategy to end sex trafficking is to arrest customers and limit demand (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Raphael & Myers-Powell, 2010). Men who buy sex must be held accountable for their actions because they contribute to the of sex trade by propagating the demand for sexual exploitation (Hughes, 2004). The movement to abolish human sex trafficking and forced sexual exploitation should include a comprehensive approach that focuses on combating the demand side of trafficking in receiving countries (Hughes, 2004). Therefore, a deeper understanding of the characteristics of men who purchase commercial sex is an important area of investigation.

Buyers of sex trafficking

Although men are not the only buyers of sex, for the purpose of this study, they will be the primary focus. Researchers have identified multiple characteristics of men who buy sex from children within the United States. Buyers of trafficked children who travel into the United States from other countries tend to be more affluent in nature and originate from developed nations (Jordan, Patel, & Rapp, 2013). These types of buyers prefer increasingly younger products due to the perception that younger victims are healthier and more vulnerable (Smith & Vardaman, 2010–2011). According to Shared Hope International (2009), buyers of sex from juveniles, both internationally and domestically, are a heterogeneous population, and their motivations may stem from online temptation to “act out the visual exploitation through physical sexual exploitation of children” (p. 17).

Domestic buyers of sex trafficking

A study conducted by Raymond, Hughes, and Gomez (2001) interviewed 128 individuals to understand the attitudes of domestic men who buy sex and their treatment of women in prostitution in the United States. The sample included international women trafficked into the United States, social service

providers, and law enforcement officials (Raymond et al., 2001). Findings indicated that men who purchased sex in the United States come from all nationalities and races (Raymond et al., 2001). Some brothels that housed women who had been trafficked into the United States from other countries specifically catered to male clientele from within the women's ethnic communities (Raymond et al., 2001). This was especially prevalent in New York and San Francisco as evidenced by one law enforcement official's report that Chinese brothels were closed to non-Chinese buyers (Raymond, Hughes, & Gomez, 2001). In the northern Midwest, interviews with law enforcement officials described U.S. buyers as white males aged 30 to 50 (Raymond et al., 2001). American buyers of sex also held various types of employment, ranging from blue collar or nonprofessional occupations, such as military personnel, fast food employees, warehouse workers, and truckers, to professionals such as lawyers, doctors, police officers, politicians, and dentists (Raymond, Hughes, & Gomez, 2001).

A study conducted by Farley, Golding, Matthews, Malamuth, and Jarrett (2015) interviewed 101 male sex buyers and 101 non-sex-buyers in the United States to better understand the characteristics of the two groups and the deterrents to buying sex. Results indicated the majority of sex buyers were heterosexual, had a wife or steady relationship at the time of the offense, and were more likely to report engaging in prostitution as a way to mitigate their fear of rejection (Farley et al., 2015). Male sex buyers also were more likely to have higher numbers of sex partners, expressed greater preference for impersonal sex, had a greater history of sexual aggression, and demonstrated less empathy for prostituted women (Farley et al., 2015). Both groups of men identified deterrents to purchasing sex as inclusion on the sex offender registry, jail time, and public exposure (e.g., having their names listed in newspapers or on the Internet; Farley et al., 2015).

Smith and Vardaman (2010–2011) identified three types of commercial sex buyers within the United States: *situational*, *preferential*, and *opportunistic*. Situational buyers are individuals who purchase sex acts with minors due to availability, and preferential buyers are typically those with more pedophilic traits and who have a sexual preference for victims in a specific market, typically young children (Smith & Vardaman, 2010–2011). Finally, opportunistic buyers purchase sex indiscriminately, lacking preference for age, willingness, and whether the victim is an adult or minor (Smith & Vardaman, 2010–2011).

International buyers of sex trafficking

International buyers of sex also appear to demonstrate heterogeneous characteristics. A five-country study conducted by Raymond, D'Cunha, and colleagues (2002), interviewed 146 victims internationally trafficked for

sexual exploitation from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Venezuela, and the United States to better understand the characteristics of male-prostitute buyers. Findings from the study found international buyers in Indonesia and Venezuela were married, and the ages of Venezuelan buyers encompassed all men in the population, ranging from 17 and 80 years old (Raymond, D’Cunha, et al., 2002). International buyers also achieved various levels of education, the majority of whom had completed high school or university, with some buyers having attained doctoral degrees (Raymond, D’Cunha, et al., 2002).

International buyers who purchase minors for sex in the United States are typically white males from developed European nations and do not display pedophilic behaviors (Jordan et al., 2013). In the Netherlands, international buyers of children for sex were usually characterized as being married and having children, were middle aged, had an average to high IQ, and held good jobs, although they were noted to have difficulties maintaining social relationships (Smith & Vardaman, 2010–2011). In many cases, international buyers used sex tour operators to help make travel arrangements and assist in arranging the encounters between offender and child (Jordan et al., 2013).

In support of the current literature regarding buyers of sex, this article provides a further contribution to the field by presenting a case study of “Otis,” who was found to possess many of the traits characterized by international sex buyers. Otis’s case study provides a valuable opportunity to examine the processes of an international buyer in his selection of U.S. children for sex. The cognitive distortions, or thought patterns used to deny, minimize, or rationalize the behavior of having sex with a child (Conte, 1985), are also critically examined. In addition, by introducing exiting document analysis via Pacer.gov to the academic community, it is hoped that studying the patterns in one distinct case will encourage further, more extensive research into trafficking-related offenses through such means and contribute to an emerging literature base empirically examining the demand aspect of human sex trafficking.

Methodology

The present case study was selected from a collected sample ($N = 24$) of court documents associated with individuals charged with sexual exploitation of children (U.S.C. §18.2251). Cases were obtained by contacting the clerk of courts office within a large, Midwest region. The clerk of courts facilitated the collection of court documents including affidavits, criminal complaints, and court transcripts. The collected documents also contained detailed reports filed by federal agents from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Homeland Security (ICE). The ICE agents were collaborating with a sex trafficking task force intent on arresting and convicting buyers of domestic

minor sex trafficking. Although information in the study was openly available to the public, institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to analysis.

A documentary analysis was conducted utilizing direct testimonies, sworn affidavits, purchase records, e-mail communications, and other sections of data from court documents to create a detailed timeline of events. Nonapplicable data pertaining to scheduling documents, requests for information, and appeals were not analyzed for the case study. After review of all available records, Otis's case was selected for extensive case review as it represented a much richer sociodemographic breakdown of his life and economic situation as compared to the other examined cases. For the purposes of this study, Otis's name was changed to protect the identities of those involved in his case.

Case study

At the time of his arrest, Otis was a 63-year-old retired medical doctor living in Germany where he had graduated from college and earned a medical degree. In the 25 years prior to his arrest, he successfully ran a medical practice with his wife, a 63-year-old Indian citizen. Throughout their lives, both reported dedicating a tremendous amount of resources toward charity, especially in India. Prior to his arrest, Otis and his wife had been separated for approximately one year. Otis has two economically successful daughters. One daughter, a lawyer, worked for an international law firm in Germany and was fluent in German, English, and Japanese. Otis' other daughter worked in advertising and obtained a college degree in economics. Otis was described in court documents as a "person of significant financial resources," owning real estate valued at \$325,000 and receiving a pension of \$4,300 per month with no outstanding debt of any kind. Otis had no prior adult or juvenile convictions and no reported history of violence or substance abuse. He was able to speak and understand conversational English but admitted that at times he needed clarification. Otis engaged in social activities, reportedly enjoying an occasional beer with friends. During the court proceedings, Otis stated that he began viewing age-appropriate (as opposed to child) pornography after becoming lonely following separation from his wife.

During that time, a sting operation in a large, Midwest city was being set up to apprehend individuals attempting to exploit children within the United States. A website advertising international sex tourism was created to provide buyers with opportunities to purchase sex with children; links were placed in chat rooms, bulletin boards, and forums frequented by individuals interested in the exploitation of children. The sting website contained acronyms and jargon that would be familiar to individuals involved in the sexual abuse of children (e.g., PTHC, or "preteen hard core" and several "girl-boy love

symbols”). In June 2010, Otis initiated contact with the website with the intention of purchasing a child for sex. He also sought to obtain a video of his sexual encounter for an extra fee.

In September 2010, three months after initiating communication with the website, Otis backed out of the arrangement. He later explained, at his trial and under oath, that he knew his behavior was wrong, which prompted him to end his pursuit. The operator of the sting website reinitiated communication with Otis, however, after four months of non-communication on January 3, 2011, to inquire as to whether Otis was still interested in the previously arranged encounter. This time, Otis confirmed his wish to continue and arranged international travel plans for the purpose of following through with the encounter. According to court documents, Otis indicated that he had sexual interests in prepubescent children, requesting specifically a girl between the ages of 10 and 13 and a boy of the same age, both without pubic hair. Otis’s initial correspondence described a desire to watch the two juveniles engage in sexual intercourse with one another without his direct sexual involvement.

Otis sent a \$100 online deposit to reserve seven hours with the two children and agreed to pay an additional \$1,499 upon his arrival to the United States. Otis purchased additional video and picture options to record the sex acts as offered through the website. To enter the country, Otis obtained a student visa by enrolling in a flight school in a southern state from March 12, 2011, through May 15, 2011. On April 1, 2011, Otis traveled from this southern state to the large Midwest city where he met a special agent (whom he believed to be the trafficker) at a predetermined location. Upon providing his receipt, indicating the purchase of two juveniles with video options, Otis was arrested.

Upon arrest, a search was conducted, and among Otis’s belongings were three shirts intended as gifts for the children, a Disney tote bag, and three boxes of condoms. When questioned, Otis initially reported that the condoms were for the boy to use while engaging in sexual intercourse with the girl as Otis watched. Upon later questioning, Otis admitted that his true intentions were to engage in penetrative sexual intercourse and oral-genital sexual acts with the children. Otis denied previous sexual contact with children, and a forensic examination of Otis’s computer found no pornographic images or child pornography in his possession.

Discussion

The current case study illuminates the sociodemographic information and victim selection process of Otis, a German citizen who attempted to purchase sex with U.S. children through a sex tourism website. Review of Otis’s case reveals traits consistent with established descriptions of

international sex buyers, as evidenced by his history of marriage, children, difficulty sustaining his marital relationship, high level of education, stable employment (Raymond, D’Cunha, et al., 2002, report of no previous pedophilic tendencies (Jordan, Patel, & Rapp, 2013), and specified preference for younger children (Smith & Vardaman, 2010–2011). Otis’s case appears to be inconsistent, however, with other research in which male sex buyers were found to have a greater preference for impersonal sex, scored higher on measures of aggression, and demonstrated less empathy for prostitutes (Farley et al., 2015). Of interest is that upon his arrest, Otis was found with items that he reported were gifts for the children; it is hypothesized that a buyer with a greater preference for impersonal sex would have been less likely to attempt to please his victims by bringing gifts, as his focus would have been solely on his own sexual gratification. Another aspect that differs in this case is that Otis had no previous legal history or arrest record, which might suggest he had no history of sexual aggression, or at least no history of behavior rising to the level of being known to authorities. Finally, Otis admitted he knew his actions were wrong during his court testimony and at one point attempted to back out of the arrangement. These actions and his lack of denial about his behavior suggest Otis demonstrated some capacity for empathy when conceptualizing the possibility of purchasing sex with trafficked U.S. children.

Critical examination of Otis’ case suggests he likely employed the use of cognitive distortions in order to deny, minimize, or rationalize the behavior of having sex with a child (Conte, 1985). According to Conte (1985), offenders utilize cognitive distortions to misrepresent their behavior as something other than what it is. During his testimony, Otis explained that after separating from his wife, he began to view adult pornography as a result of experiencing feelings of loneliness. Otis’s attempt to purchase and exploit children may be consistent with child molesters’ explanations of how offending stemmed from their desires to alleviate negative emotional states or to experience intimacy (Mann & Hollin, 2007). It is also possible that (at least at one point during the process when he reneged on the arrangement) that he engaged in more logical thought, which further supports the idea that lapsing back into cognitive distortions eventually presented a means to an end. Otis abandoned exploration of his pursuit initially (knowing it was wrong, per testimony), and only upon being reengaged by the website did he follow through. This would indicate that he managed to override the normative responses/cognitions one might expect an otherwise emotionally healthy adult male to have in regard to being approached about buying sex with children.

Sex offenders may use self-distancing to minimize the belief that their actions result in negative consequences to their victims (Winder & Gough, 2010). One method of self-distancing is through the dehumanization of

others. According to Kelman (1976), dehumanization involves denying people's identities or failing to perceive that a person is "an individual, independent, and distinguishable from others, capable of making choices" (p. 301). Subsequently, denying the human nature of others results in distorted views where people are almost animal-like, thus facilitating the ability to ignore the possibility of pain and suffering (Haslam, 2006). Victimized persons outside one's own cultural identity has historically been used to justify violence. According to Haslam (2006), individuals who are ethnically and/or racially different are often represented as lacking culture, self-restraint, moral sensibility, and cognitive capacity. Otis, a German citizen, may have selected non-German children from a distant country to amplify the emotional blunting necessary to harm a child. Otis also may have believed that purchasing sex with a child outside his country was safer and thus he would be more likely to complete the act while avoiding punishment.

Further discussion is warranted to understand how the Internet may ease the facilitation of international sex trafficking. The Internet served as a convenient means for Otis to plan his encounter, select potential victims, schedule flight school requirements, and obtain a student visa. The free access and anonymity afforded by the Internet has created greater access for offenders who purchase sex online, where a wider variety of options exist (Chung, 2009; McCarthy, 2010); this case is but one example that illuminates how international sex buyers may use the Internet to plan encounters with U.S. children.

Limitations

Although the researchers attempted to create a thorough and exhaustive timeline outlining the process of Otis' international crime, it is important to note that court documents are not objective resources. Instead, court documents represent artifacts from emotionally charged environments and are thus subjected to biases. Judges, witnesses, defendants, and prosecutors influence the captured narratives within court documents. Due to the sensitive nature of the crime, undocumented conversations and nonpublic documentation were unable to be analyzed. Court transcripts should not be considered complete representations of court proceedings or the events in question. Use of court transcripts, court documents, and other publically available forms of data must be interpreted within the context of the overall findings.

Another limitation exists related to Otis's criminal history and specifically Otis's lack of reported sexual aggression. Although court documents indicated the study subject held no prior adult or juvenile convictions and had no reported history of violence, one cannot assume that prior sexual misconduct

did not occur in his sexual history based solely on a lack of prior convictions for such behaviors.

Future research

Collecting, transcribing, and analyzing publically available court documents to study criminal behavior represents an effective strategy in studying the phenomenon of sex trafficking. Use of this methodology in future research, especially in national data sets, would be beneficial in identifying possible sociodemographic patterns in individuals who purchase commercial sex. Understanding the shared characteristics between buyers of commercial sex both internationally and across the United States may strengthen the field of typology development as well as increase and enhance the effectiveness of rehabilitative programs in assessing and treating such offenders.

Additional research is needed to develop effective treatment for men who purchase sex. According to Hughes (2004), men who purchase sex may be amenable to change. Evidence of this may be represented by Otis' attempt to back out of the arrangement and his reported perception that what he was doing was wrong. Offender programs identified as "John schools" are designed to reduce the incidence of reoffending in known buyers of commercial sex through psychoeducation (Shively, Kliorys, Wheeler, & Hunt, 2012). The duration of these programs range from 1 to 10 sessions and focus on the health and legal consequences for men who continue to engage in commercial sex acts and the negative impact of prostitution on girls and women (Shively et al., 2012). Although evidence exists that psychoeducation programs for buyers of commercial sex may reduce the rates of reoffending among men arrested for soliciting prostitutes (National Institute of Justice, 2016), more information is needed to understand and identify best practice approaches for the population of offenders who target children when purchasing sex.

Conclusion

The present case study supports the conviction of Raymond and colleagues (2004) who found that domestic and international buyers of sex are not marginalized men. Instead, buyers are "regular men who are in regular marriages, study in regular educational programs, and have regular jobs, some of whom are entrusted with upholding the very laws that they violate" (Raymond, 2004, p. 1170). Researchers and practitioners are therefore called to expand the lens through which buyers are conceptualized. A deeper understanding of buyer behavior may be helpful in increasing prevention efforts and developing effective offender rehabilitation programs and empirically based treatment for men who purchase commercial sex.

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare they have no financial or personal conflicts to report that might have biased the work being submitted.

Ethical standards and informed consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000.

Notes on contributor

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