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Without Boundaries: The Role of Virtual Fantasy in 'Altered' Identities in Deviant Sexual Behaviour

Dr Carla Reeves, University of Huddersfield and Ms Kim Sadique, De Montfort University
- Exploratory psycho-social approach
  - Complexities of both the inner and outer world taken seriously (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007; Frosh, 2003)
- Role of online virtual fantasy ‘otherworld’ in constructing deviant sexual self-identities
- Question the problematic nature of virtual deviant sexual self-identities in the real world
Internet virtual deviant sexual identities

- Deviancy - range of criminal and non-criminal behaviours
  - Coroners and Justice Act 2009 ss 62-8

- From paedophile chat rooms, viewing and sharing of digitally created images (pseudo-photo or fantasy media) to sexual age-play

- Share a lack of a ‘direct’ victim

- Online behaviour indicative of *virtual* deviant sexual identity

- This does not necessarily transcend to real world...but does it alter real world identity?
Internet, virtual offending (no direct victim)

Real world offending that facilitates or involves abuse (direct victim).

Neglected role of internet in developing self-identities & whether these are bounded by the virtual ‘otherworld’

Real world abuse (direct victim)

Research focus on links between virtual and real world
Identity: typical profiles

Internet sex offender

- Socially withdrawn
- Unconventional
- Isolated
- Feel misunderstood by others
- Difficulty in developing & maintaining ‘appropriate’ real world relationships
- Use of abuse images to regulate negative mood states
  - (Laulik et al, 2007; Middleton et al, 2006)

Internet ‘virtual’ identity

- Socially engaged
- Confident
- Ability to develop and maintain virtual world relationships
  - Appropriate or otherwise
  - Pseudo-intimacy
- Hero of the ‘Otherworld’?
“It was my own world. It was a place I felt safe in. I could get everything I wanted out of it and I didn’t have to feel inadequate” (convicted child sexual offender) (as cited in Wilson & Jones, 2008)

Most everyone will reject me as a monster...I am a failure (Priest convicted of CSA) (as cited in Horley, 2008)
**Idealised self hypothesis**

(malleable possible selves) v

- Expression of ‘hidden self’: removal of ‘gating features’ allows construction of a virtual desired identity/ies - ‘new me’, ‘ideal me’
- Virtual worlds/social groups which are anonymous, disembodied & discultured
- But what does this mean for possibility of altering real world self to virtual & increased likelihood of committing real world abuse?

**Extended real self hypothesis**

- Real self represented in an extension of ‘real’ social interactions – ‘mini-me’, ‘best of me’
- Online networking which is used as extension of real world: lack of anonymity, reference to real world activities
- Bounded by real world unlike solely virtual contacts – unbounded ‘otherworld’
Internalises deviant identity & lowers internal inhibitions to offline abuse

Reduces social isolation

Reinforces cognitive distortions

Normalises deviant sexual attitudes

Combats social stigma

Reinforces techniques of neutralisation

Shared values and culture

Social presence in virtual environments

Validates deviant sexual desires

Cohen-Almagor (2013: 194): “The Internet has made it possible for online child sex offenders to find entire online fraternities of like-minded people with whom to share experiences and gain reassurance of a supporting group.”
Sheldon and Howitt (2007: 191-2): “[…] fantasy provides the offender with the opportunity to visualise, plan and test out the offence-to-be.”
Idealised identities in the ‘otherworld’

- Otherworld of internet allows freedom in expression of self & to explore alternative identities

- Guinchard (2010): cyber-self = idealised representation of real self in an unbounded, anonymous world
  - Inhibited offline – external and internal
  - Disinhibited online – lack of boundaries & real world identity
  - Possibly a ‘safe’ expression of aspects of offline identity normally repressed

- Are online identities the same as offline?
  - Largely un-explored criminologically – assumption of a connection in behaviour, attitudes & cognitions
Celtic Otherworld: Gateway to an idealised paradise of freedom & happiness

- Childress (1999): the psychology of ISO where they experience the internet as:
  - Cauldron of Plenty
  - Annwen (Court of Intoxication)
  - Place that is ‘ageless & without disease...magical, idealised image of the human world... boundless happiness & the source of all wisdom.’
Fantasy Media and Identity

- ISO’s more open to fantasy, focused more on their ‘inner’ world and emotional life, higher levels of obsessive and compulsive behaviour than contact offenders (Rooney, 2003)

- ISO’s – significantly higher identification with fictional characters than contact offenders. Increase in scores on scales of fantasy, under-assertiveness, & motor impulsivity were predictive of internet offence type (Elliot et al, 2009)

Fantasy and the real world

- Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)
  - Measures ability to put yourself in the place of fictional characters & to identity with ‘their’ feelings (Elliot et al 2009)
  - Nature of fantasy abuse simulations/images?
    - Simulations/images of fictional characters performing a role
    - Not real, no real world transcendence
- Anecdotal evidence – ISO’s reported an interest in fantasy media not identified in the contact offender population.
time appears to function outside of normal temporal boundaries (links to OCD and addiction) = TIME DILATION
also applies to the victims of child sexual abuse (COPINE study)
damage to social relationships by this time dilation
Perpetuates living in the ‘otherworld’ for longer
Loss of ‘real world identity’?
Does a virtual sexually deviant identity encroach on real world identity & change behaviour?
  - Without dedicated research on identity, internet, deviant sexualities & fantasy - cannot determine the strength of these arguments.

More research on ISOs who are not solely fantasy
  - this confuses the issue as may be number of sub-groups
  - Need to consider the impact on self-identity concepts and behaviours
  - Relationship between the two

Need to explore possible subgroup that do not cross from virtual to real behaviours
  - Develop tailored treatment programmes
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