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Reeves, Carla and Sadique, Kim

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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
Aim of today

- 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?
Virtual and real world deviant sexual identities

- Internet, virtual offending (no direct victim)
- Internet offending to facilitate real world abuse (direct victim)
- Real world offending that facilitates or involves abuse (direct victim)
- Real world abuse (direct victim)

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

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- Socially withdrawn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

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)

- 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’
Altered Identity: supports through online community

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.”

Internalises deviant identity & lowers internal inhibitions to offline abuse

- Validates deviant sexual desires
- Reduces social isolation
- Reinforces cognitive distortions
- Shared values and culture
- Normalises deviant sexual attitudes
- Reinforces techniques of neutralisation
- Combats social stigma
- Social presence in virtual environments
Altered Identity: supports through fantasy rehearsal

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
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.’
Altered Identity: refutes through research on ISO

**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 transcendance
- Anecdotal evidence – ISO’s reported an interest in fantasy media not identified in the contact offender population.
Problematic Internet Use

- 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
Contact details:

Dr Carla Reeves
Subject Leader, Criminology
Institute of Research in Citizenship and Applied Human Sciences
University of Huddersfield

c.reeves@hud.ac.uk

Kim Sadique
Senior Lecturer in Community and Criminal Justice
CCJ Division and Cyber Psychology Research Group, De Montfort University

ksadique@dmu.ac.uk