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

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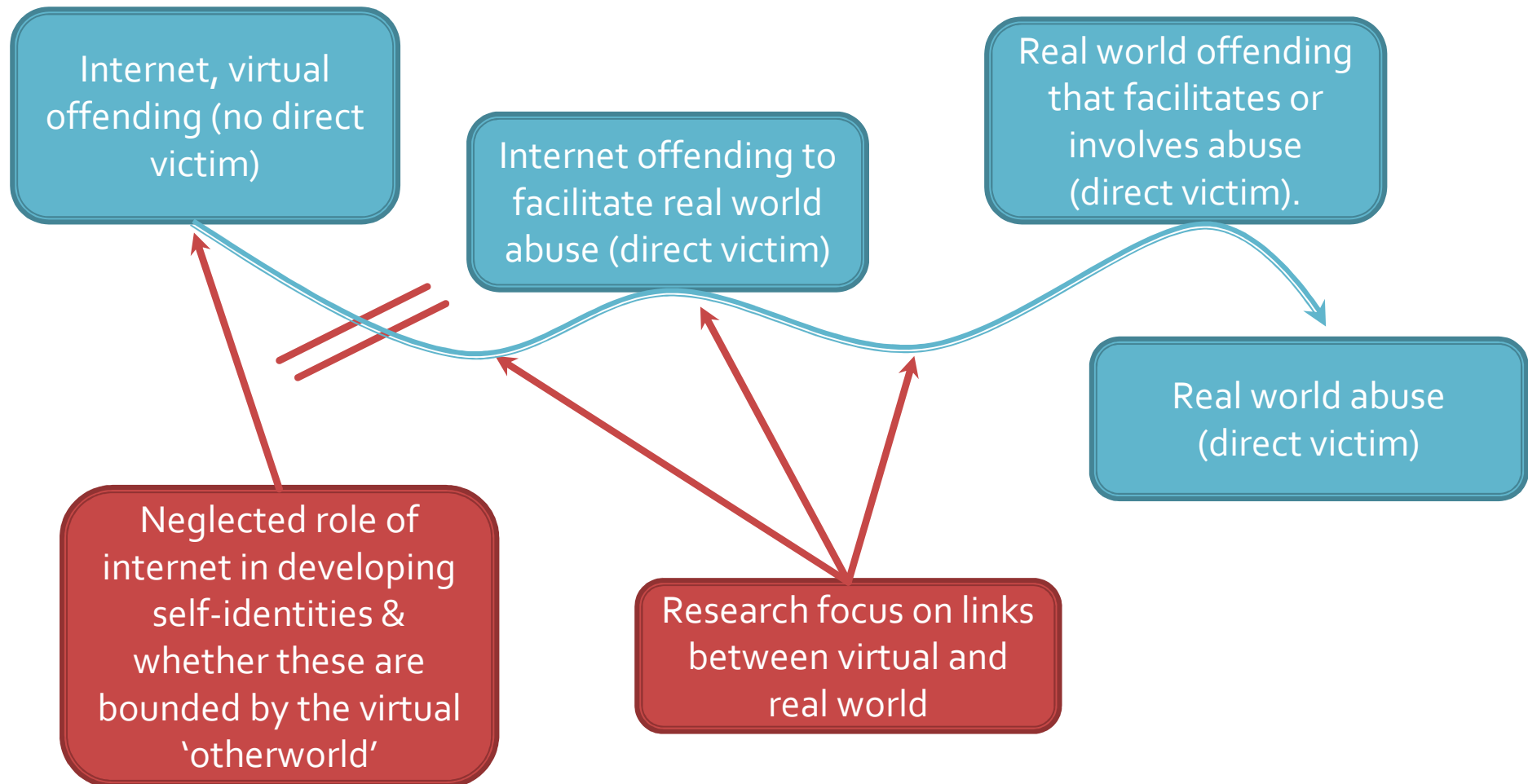
Aim of today

- 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



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- Socially withdrawn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'?

In their own words...

- “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)

Constructed identity in the virtual world

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?

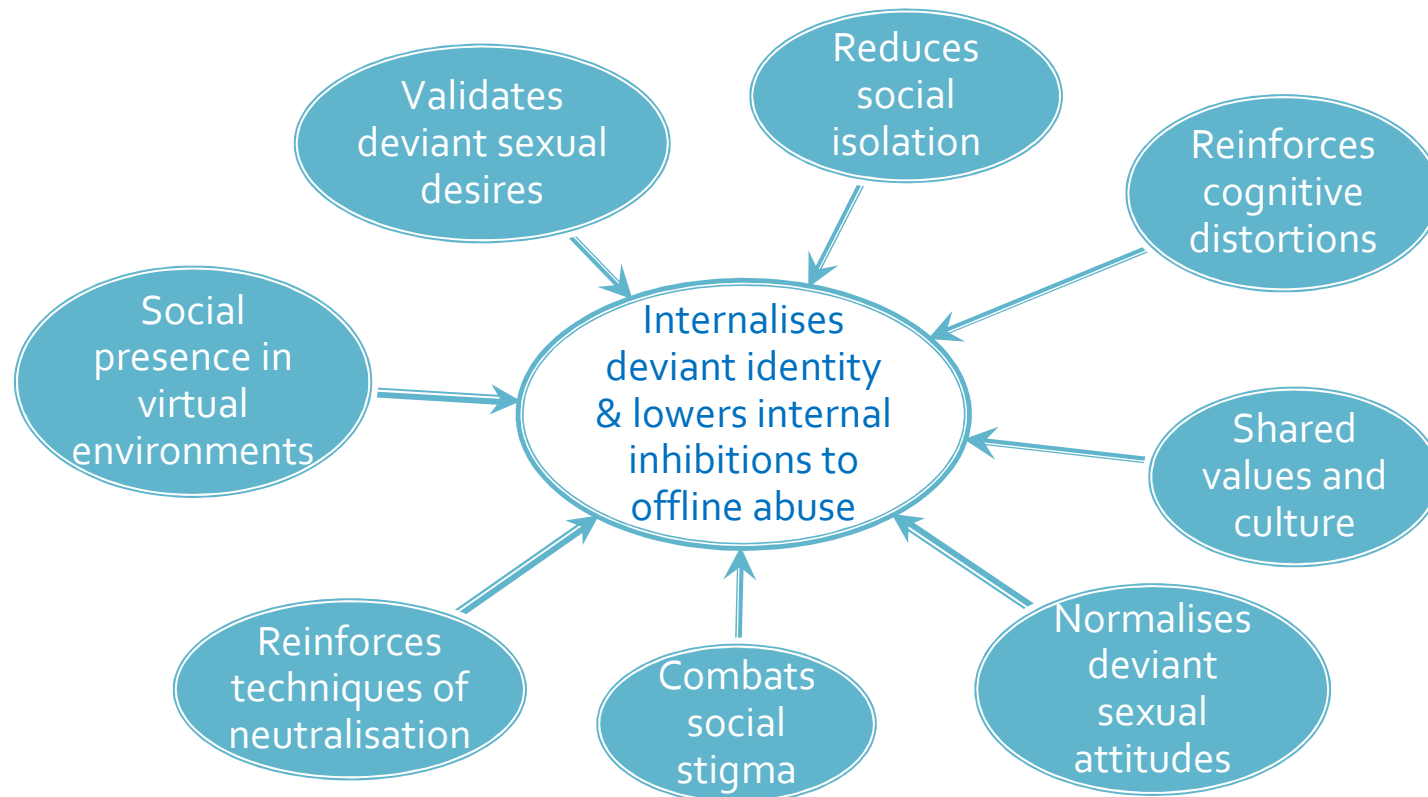
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Extended real self hypothesis

- 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'

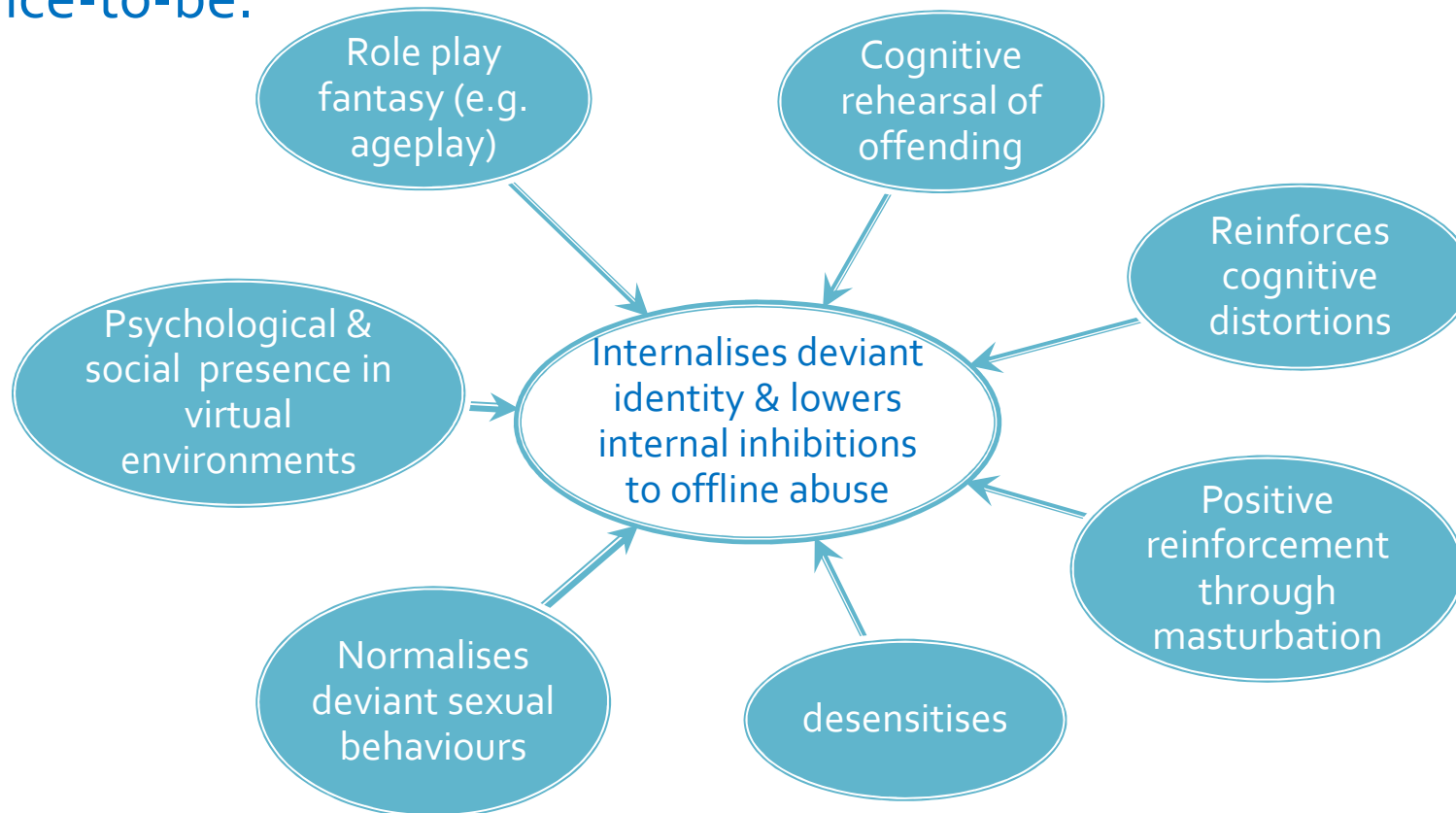
Altered Identity: supports through online community

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."



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.”



Altered Identity: refutes through idealised identity

Idealised identities in the 'otherworld'

- Otherworld of internet allows freedom in expression of self & to explore alternative identities
- Guinchart (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 a an idealised paradise of freedom & happiness



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- 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)
- Taylor and Quayle (2003): lack of empirical evidence of a relationship between altered perceptions of children & child abuse images (including fantasy, pseudo-real & real).

Fantasy and the real world

- Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)
 - Measures ability to put yourself in the place of fictional characters & to identify 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.

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'?

So...

- 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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