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Understanding Sexually Deviant Online Behavior from an Addiction Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergent phenomenon of virtual sex offending and based upon a study of 22 forensic interviews, outlines a framework for understanding this type of sex offender from a clinical perspective. Specifically, this paper examines the role of online sex addiction in the development of virtual sex offending and outlines five stages from inception to incarceration that the virtual sex offender follows. More importantly, this paper differentiates patterns of online behavior of virtual sex offenders that suggest they are fantasy users who dabble in pedophilic themes compared to classic sex offenders who seek out children for sexual gratification. The results will assist law enforcement agencies and Cyber-Crime units in the development of more accurate indicators for pedophile profiling online and facilitate a greater understanding among the psychiatric community of Internet-enabled pathology and its role in criminal conduct.

Keywords: virtual sex offending; sex offender; cyber crime; Internet enabled pathology;

Introduction

Statistics show a sharp rise in the number of sexual predators who prowl the Internet looking for vulnerable children, then make arrangements to meet the child for sex (Andrews 2000a). The FBI calls these criminals “travelers.” The numbers are hard to document but travelers are clearly part of the Internet-era crime wave. According to a CBS News report, the FBI alone opens up six new traveler investigations every week (Andrews, 2000b). This same report indicated that the Center for Missing and Exploited Children receives about fifteen new leads about online enticements each week, and a traveler is arrested somewhere in the United States almost every day. A disturbing number of recent traveler cases involve men who are first-time offenders with no criminal history of sexual activity towards minors. Some high profile cases include Patrick Naughton, a top executive at Infoseek/Go.com, Terry Spontarelli, a Los Alamos research chemist, and George DeBier, a former Belgian diplomat (Andrews, 2000b). Their profiles were similar, that of men who held upper-income jobs, and otherwise law-abiding citizens, arrested for traveling to meet undercover agent posing as a minor on the Internet.

Chat rooms exist in cyberspace with names such as “Daddy4daughter,” “Men for Barely Legal Girls,” and “Family Fun.” While these are branded as “fantasy only” chat rooms and require participants to be over the age of eighteen, it is difficult to decipher what is fact and what is fantasy, based upon the chat dialogues in such pedophilic virtual communities (Trebilcock 1997). It is unclear from the discussion that whether users are

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describing fictional stories, sexual fantasies, and stories about past activities, or plans for the future (Lanning 1998a). Given the lack of restrictions in cyberspace and its sexual subculture, predators have a new medium to not only pursue potential contacts with children, but also unite and unionize with fellow users in a way that allows them to validate and normalize their sexual proclivities (Lanning 1998b).

Psychologists have begun to question how the anonymous availability of child-oriented sexual material not only creates an ideal breeding ground for pedophiles but also how this opens up a Pandora's Box for unsuspecting users (Farella 2002). Unlike in the physical world, conventional messages about sexual behavior are ignored in cyberspace. Users are free to explore pedophilic themes within the sexually uninhibited environment of the Internet. In this way, cyberspace becomes an enabler allowing users to create personalized content without any limitations that provides them with an outlet to explore sexually deviant online behavior.

Internet Sexuality

Early studies of Internet sexuality, or "cybersex" emphasized the fantasy nature of online sexuality and focused on use of the Internet for criminal and deviant behavior (Durkin & Bryant, 1995). They distinguished various motivations for erotic computer communication, from mild flirtations to seeking and sharing information about sexual services to frank discussions of specific deviant sexual behavior. They posited that cybersex allows a person to operationalize sexual fantasies that would otherwise have self-extinguished if it were not for the reinforcement of immediate feedback provided by online interactions. As the Internet gained in popularity, researchers began to identify similar patterns in the addictive aspects of online communication.

Internet addiction, as it is often called, is a pathological preoccupation with Internet use (Young 1998). Studies estimate that nearly six percent of online users suffer from Internet addiction (Greenfield 1999) and can lead to significant occupational, social, familial, and psychological problems (Morahan-Martin 1997; Scherer 1997; Young 1998). In one of the largest studies of online sexuality, Cooper et al. (1999) posted an online survey on the MSNBC Web site, netting a sample of 9,177 respondents, 86 % of them men. The study found 8% of users showed signs of sexually compulsive online behavior and that among both men and women "the most powerful and potentially problematic" interactions happened in online chat rooms.

According to the study, this "seems to corroborate an association of sexually compulsive or addictive behavior with social isolation." Consistently, Young (2004) found that online sexual compulsives became increasingly socially isolated as they retreated into a sexual fantasy world inside the computer. The majority of these cases involved previously law-biding men who had no history of sexual addiction, no history of renting adult movies, visiting strip clubs, or collecting pornography, but their sole problem with sex stemmed from using the Internet.

Users can explore darker parts of their sexuality using the anonymous and limitless context of the Internet, changing their name, age, occupation, or physical description. A woman can pretend to be lesbian online or a middle-aged man can pretend to be a hot young stud when talking to women in an online chat room. Young (2001) referred to these individuals "fantasy users" who utilized online chat rooms and instant messaging for the express purpose of role-playing in online fantasy sex chat. Fantasy users often

progressed into sexually more explicit dialogue as a novelty created through cyberspace, and within the anonymous context of these virtual environments, gradually experimented with more obscene types of chat. Fantasy users hid their online interactions from others, and despite feelings of guilt or shame, continued to engage in such acts. Most importantly, fantasy users dissociated from what they did or said online, and often expressed that their online fantasies did not represent what they wanted in real life.

In one noted example, Donald Marks, the attorney for Patrick Naughton, won a hung jury in the case, arguing that Naughton was only playing out a fantasy and that Naughton would have never acted upon that fantasy had it not been for the Internet (Andrews, 2000b). The “fantasy defense” as it is often called, directly questions the addictive nature of online adult fantasy sex chat rooms and their ability to enable users to develop an unhealthy obsession with the Internet.

Despite its success, the fantasy defense has sparked a heated debate in both the legal and psychiatric communities and little has been discussed in the literature to explain how “fantasy” online users develop a sexual interest in children using the Internet. Based upon a case study analysis, this article examines the psychological perspective of online sex offenders and the role of cyberspace in the development of deviant behavior. Specifically, this article profiles how these “fantasy” online users can be assessed from an addiction perspective and utilizing Young’s five-stage model (2001) to explain the development of online sexually compulsivity, examines how fantasy users progress into sexually deviant behavior online involving adult-child fantasies.

A Case Study Methodology

The cases involved 22 clients seen through the Center for Online Addiction. The Center for Online Addiction was established in 1995 and provides education, support, and treatment to those concerned about Internet addiction. The center also provides diagnostic and forensic evaluations of Internet addiction conducted by the author. In all 22 cases, clients were men arrested for engaging in sexual misconduct with a minor using the Internet. In each case, this was a first-offense and clients had no previous criminal record or sexual history involving children.

Clients ranged in age from 34 to 48 with a mean of 38. 58% were employed in white-collar professional work, often engineers, doctors, or lawyers, 17% were blue-collar workers, often working in factories or in manufacturing, 15% were unemployed, and 10% were on disability. In ten cases, extensive collections of pornographic images downloaded from the Internet were found, in three cases, the images contained child pornography, and in one case, the client had a long-standing history of meeting women on the Internet for sex. At the time of arrest, 47% of the clients suffered from depression or anxiety, 39% had a history of alcoholism or drug dependence, 19% had a history of sex addiction, and 10% had a history of sexual abuse.

In all cases, clients engaged in pedophilic themed adult chat rooms, unknowingly chatting with a federal agent or police officer posing online as a minor. The undercover agent established an online persona of a pre-pubescent girl or boy and online conversations led to an arranged meeting in real life. In ten of the cases, clients arrived at the designated meeting place, but when spotting the police decoy (someone posing as a minor), made no attempt to approach the minor, and arrested at the scene. In nine cases, clients were arrested immediately upon arrival at the designated meeting place. In two

cases, the client never showed up at the arranged meeting time and was arrested at home for attempting to engage in sexual misconduct with a minor over the Internet. In one case, the client sat down with the police decoy and was then arrested.

Online behavior patterns were analyzed in each case using clinical interview and available discovery materials such as psychological reports, progress notes from therapists currently treating the individual, pre-sentencing reports, warrants or affidavits by investigators, and transcripts of chat room dialogues. Clients were also administered the Internet Addiction Scale developed by Young (1998), an eight-item questionnaire that examines symptoms of Internet addiction such as a user's preoccupation with Internet use, ability to control online use, extent of fantasizing when online, and continued online use despite its potential consequences. This screening instrument modified the DSM criteria for Pathological Gambling and evaluated a client's non-essential computer or Internet usage (i.e., non-business or academically related use). Clients were considered addicted users when answering 'yes' to five (or more) of the questions over a six-month period, when not better accounted for by a manic episode (Young 1998).

Results

In all 22 cases, clients met the basic criteria of Internet addiction. Similar to an alcoholic who consumes greater levels of alcohol in order to achieve satisfaction, clients routinely spent significant amounts of time online. Clients went to great lengths to mask the nature of their online activities, primarily to conceal the extent and nature of the behavior. In most cases of impulse-control disorder, an individual's compulsion is often associated with increasingly painful states of tension and agitation which are relieved through the completion of the act. For example, an alcoholic is often driven to drink at moments of excessive stress or an overeater is often driven to binge on food during moments of tension. The compulsive behavior serves to reduce underlying emotional tension and serves as a reward for future behavior. Similarly, clients reported finding that they turned to the computer to find relief from moments of mental tension and agitation present in their lives. That is, their computer use was less about using it as an information tool and more about finding a psychological escape to cope with life's problems.

The Addiction Perspective

Unlike classic child sex offenders who exhibit chronic and persistent patterns of sexualized behavior toward children that typically begins in early adolescence (Salter, 2003), each of the 22 cases were first time offenders with no previous history of sexual activity towards children. Their offenses seemed entirely related to online sexual fantasy role-play rooms. Based upon Young's addiction model (2001), fantasy users follow five stages of development: discovery, exploration, escalation, compulsion, and hopelessness or regret. The stages are interdependent and highlight how users utilize the Internet as a progressive means of escape as part of an addiction cycle. Using Young's model to analyze the case studies, each of the stages are described in more detail to discuss their behavior from an addiction perspective.

Discovery

In the discovery stage, users make the initial discovery that adult web sites and sexually-explicit chat rooms exist and are available on the Internet. A man doing research

online may accidentally bump into a pornographic web site or a woman enters a social chat room and meets a man who entices her to 'talk dirty' with him. In either case, the person discovers the sexual thrill of the act, which opens the door for further exploration.

Many Internet Service Providers (ISPs) permit sexually oriented chat rooms to exist with names that clearly indicate the types of sexual practices which will be discussed by the participants. Those practices range from the most ordinary to the most deviant. In all 22 cases, clients began as 'fantasy' users engaging in erotic dialogue in sexually oriented chat rooms often know as "cybersex" in which two online users exchange in private discourse about sexual fantasies and the act may be accompanied by sexual self-stimulation. Online chat sex or cybersex allows two users to co-create an online erotic fantasy, typically tailored to each one's desires, and in many cases the assumptions for what is desired is taken from the nature of other's handles and the chat room description. It is not uncommon to find pedophilic chat room themes such as "Want F under 15," "daddy4daughter," "Family Fun" and "Barely Legal" that freely allow users to exchange fantasies related to sexual themes that involve adult-child interactions.

For clients, the fantasy theme began and progressed as a novelty created through cyberspace chat rooms and their anonymous availability. Jack was a 48-year-old senior executive at an engineering firm near Palo Alto, California. He was highly educated and spent long hours with his team researching new product designs. Late at night, in his office alone while doing research on the web for work he discovered, Naughty Chat, an adult site.

"I was instantly curious," he said. "I didn't think it would lead to anything serious until the police arrived at my office." Jack had been arrested for sexual misconduct with a minor.

Exploration

In the exploration stage, they may begin to experiment, exploring new web sites such as pornography or gambling sites, or they may enter a chat room for the very first time. Whatever the behavior, for the person who becomes addicted, it is usually new and something tempting - and it usually isn't something that they would have tried if they thought someone was watching.

In Jack's case, once he discovered, Naughty Chat, he started to use the Internet to search for other adult web sites. "I did it a couple of hours a week at first, then it escalated to more. I started to stay late at work and coming in on the weekends just to look at porn. I hated myself. I became bored pornography and started chatting with other women. We had phone sex, some showed me their web cams and they would be naked and some even masturbated for me."

Many individuals secretly begin to experiment online without the fear of being caught (Young & Klausing 2007). They feel encouraged by the acceptance of the cyberspace culture, especially when cloaked behind the anonymity of the computer screen, and many feel less accountable for their actions over the Internet. Within the anonymous context of cyberspace, conventional messages about sex are eliminated allowing users to play out hidden or repressed sexual fantasies in a private lab. Furthermore, online experiences often occur in the privacy of one's home, office, or bedroom, facilitating the perception of anonymity and that Internet use is personal and untraceable. For anyone who has ever been curious about a particular hidden or deviant fantasy, cyberspace offers an anonymous way to explore and indulge in those fantasies.

Escalation

In the escalation stage, the behavior escalates as users feel that they have to look for new pornography every time they are online, they have to make another bet at a virtual casino, or they have to enter the chat room and see who else is online. They cross a line from using the Internet as a productive tool to developing a recurrent habit. The user feels compelled to go online, feeling more obsessed with being online and the behavior becomes more ingrained and ritualistic. They enjoy particular sites, they establish online relationships with a regular set of fellow users that they have cybersex with, have phone sex, or meet for real life sex.

Jack started surfing chat sites looking for women. “It was so erotic hearing about their wildest fantasies, things I never thought of,” he explained. “I told myself it was harmless. I rationalized lying to my wife about needing to work late and I started missing deadlines at work, but after 20 years of marriage it exciting to rekindle something about my own sexuality. I played off what these women said. It was all just a fantasy. They were all ages and backgrounds, I felt like a virtual Playboy but it all seemed okay, as long as it was only online it didn’t seem wrong.”

The risk of experimenting in sexually deviant online fantasies is that the virtual sex offender begins to distort what normal sex is. “I masturbate nightly to nasty and kinky online pornography,” explained one client. “What turns me on the most is the “devious” aspects of viewing otherwise inaccessible photos, such as naked teens, water sports, and scat pictures. Now, sex with my wife seems so dull in comparison. When I do have sex with my wife, I am always fantasizing about the pictures I recently saw from the Web. This is destroying my marriage. We are now sleeping in separate beds and I am alone all night with my computer instead of her. I know this is sick. I want to quit doing this but I just feel too weak to stop.”

As the alcoholic requires larger and larger doses of the drug to achieve the same sensation and pleasure from the experience, the virtual sex offender becomes bored with routine fantasies and now looks for the next big virtual thrill. In the escalation stage, the behavior becomes more chronic and pronounced such that fantasy users become saturated with a continuous stream of sexual content that can take on riskier and riskier forms. In cases of virtual sex offenders, they begin to engage in pedophilic sexual fantasies and use more graphic online handles such that “John Engineer” becomes “M4Teen” or “Pamela” changes to “Teen Slut”.

In order to deal with the double-life that occurs, the fantasy user often rationalizes the behavior and disowns what he says or does online with self-statements as, “It’s just a computer fantasy” or “This isn’t who I really am.” They detach from the online sexual experience and perceive their secret fantasy world as a parallel life that is completely separate from whom they are in real life. However, these rationalizations are temporary and eventually break down as the he becomes more and more disgusted by his online actions and experience episodes of despair, as promises to stop are broken and attempts to quit fail. They may also progress into more sexually deviant topics that they normally would find reprehensible that over time becomes acceptable as they become increasingly “desensitized” to the experience.

Compulsivity

The habitual behavior becomes more ingrained and develops into a compulsive obsession. In this stage, life becomes unmanageable, as relationships or careers are jeopardized because of the compulsive behavior. In his pioneer book, *Out of the Shadows*, Patrick Carnes best explains sexual compulsivity: “The sexual experience is the source of nurturing, focus of energy, and origin of excitement. The experience turns into a relief from pain and anxiety, the reward for success, and a way to avoid addressing other emotional issues in the person’s life. The addiction is truly an altered state of consciousness in which ‘normal’ sexual behavior pales by comparison in terms of excitement and relief from troubles that is associated with sex.”

Jack often described his online sessions as a ‘drug high’. He felt an altered reality, like the person who he was online didn’t overlap with the person he was in real life. It is a common theme among all 22 subjects. They each described their Internet use, whether sex chat rooms or Internet pornography, as a rush or high that they experienced while online. They felt as if their Internet was less about using as information tool but as form of psychological escape.

In the same way, the fantasy online user’s online sexual experience produces an altered state of consciousness that becomes associated with tension reduction and he displays a progressive retreat into the use of the computer as a means to avoid life’s complications and responsibilities. In this stage, the fantasy user is largely driven by increasingly painful states of tension and agitation, as an alcoholic is driven to drink at moments of excessive stress or an overeater is driven to binge on food during moments of tension. He exhibits addictive patterns as he becomes preoccupied with the computer, attempts to conceal the nature of his online activities, and continues to engage in the activity despite its known potential risks, including arrest and incarceration. After his arrest, Jack explained, “after a while I knew it was wrong, I knew I was bordering on big trouble and for what? My life became a lonely isolated mess. I realized that I could lose my job, my marriage, and the respect of everyone I love if I was caught. I have two daughters and would never think about doing anything inappropriate with them, but I could not bring myself to stop despite knowing all the consequences for my actions.”

Hopelessness

In the hopelessness stage, the addict hits that metaphorical “rock bottom” only to realize the extent of damage done because of his addiction. Feelings of helplessness develop, especially as the he becomes fully aware how out of control life has become. In this stage, the addict realizes the unhealthy excess of the behavior only to attempt total abstinence. They will often cancel their Internet service, disconnect the modems, or install filtering software in the attempt to stop the compulsive behavior. The addict struggles with staying clean and sober and feels desperate to put his life back on track. Since relapse is only a mouse-click away, the addict slips back into old patterns beginning the cycle once again.

Given that the addict lacks proper impulse control, he may be more likely to dabble in sexually inappropriate or deviant material, which is easily accessible through the Internet. This is especially troublesome when the addict experiments in pedophilic and incest theme chat rooms with names like “Daddy for Daughter,” “Barely Legal Females Wanted,” and “Horny Teens for Sex,” which abound in cyberspace. While these are branded as “fantasy only” chat rooms, it is difficult to decipher what is fact and what is

fantasy, based upon the chat dialogues. For instance, when one many entered a pedophilic fantasy role play room, another use instantly typed, “So what is your pleasure? Do you want me to be your mom, sister, daughter, or aunt?”

For addicts going into these rooms created feelings of despair as they felt unable to pull away. In these 22 cases, each client described feelings of low self-worth, making statements: “I hate myself.”, “I am weak”, “I am defective”, or “I am disgusting because of my dirty habit”. They made repeated attempts at abstinence and had repeated incidences of relapse. They cycled in this way for months or years prior to their arrests and often are hoping to get caught. They see it as a way of relieving themselves from their secret online lives and as way to ultimately stop.

Conclusion

With its proliferation of sexually explicit chat rooms, newsgroups, and web sites, the Internet provides an outlet for a curious person’s initial exploration, and cyberspace, with its lack of restrictions, creates immediate access to sexually-explicit chat rooms considered offensive, including adult-child interests. Most people do not yet realize that there is any risk involved in engaging in online sexual pursuits. While in some ways it may seem like a journey into “foreign territory,” online sexual behaviors occur in the familiar and comfortable environment of home or office thus reducing the feeling of risk and allowing even more adventurous behaviors.

The variety and scope of these computer-enabled fantasies are limitless and still evolving. In the post-Internet era, new chat rooms, new technology, and new online users all help to build new sexual fantasy experiences. From the legal perspective, given the proliferation of sexually explicit content on the Internet, forensic psychologists, law enforcement, and the court system in general should consider the role of the Internet and its potential for addiction in the development of inappropriate or deviant online sexual behavior, especially as it relates to pedophilic interests.

Clinical research suggests that deviant sexual fantasies carried out online do not always originate from individuals with a pre-existing disposition for deviancy, but cases document how once pro-social citizens will engage in this same behavior (Young et al., 2001). In several legal cases against certain ISPs (e.g., AOL), it has been noted that they have neglected to monitor chat room activity and failed to respond to public complaints. In cases of child pornography, ISPs often neglect to provide warnings informing subscribers that looking at or downloading these images is a crime in the prevention of these events. It has been argued that in this manner, those ISPs act as “enablers”, similar to that of a person providing alcohol to an alcoholic, by allowing virtual environments that serve that can encourage and validate potentially criminal behavior.

Given the sexual permissiveness of the cyberspace subculture, forensic evaluations should examine conduct that differentiates classic sex offenders from virtual sex offenders, or addicted fantasy users who engage in pedophilic themes, in the context of how they utilize the Internet. Specifically, three key variables should be assessed: (1) the chat room theme, (2) handles utilized, and (3) the level of intimacy and engagement between the alleged predator and child.

From a clinical perspective, forensic evaluations of virtual sex offenders should also evaluate if the user exhibits symptoms of compulsive Internet use. Does the client demonstrate a significant and regular loss of impulse-control? Does the client exhibit a

preoccupation with the Internet? Does the client continue to engage in the activity knowing its potential consequences?

If compulsivity is present, the exam should further evaluate the presence of psychological stress such as marital discord, job dissatisfaction, or health concerns. The more extreme and extensive the stress, the more users will utilize the online world as a means to cope with problems or escape one's real life roles and responsibilities. It is also important to assess if the client reports failed attempts at self-regulation and an inability to control online behavior.

Internet addiction and the involvement of otherwise pro-social and law-abiding persons in illegal online sexual behavior with children have distressingly been on the rise as availability of the Internet has grown. Research has hypothesized that traditional notions about the type of person involved in these illegal online acts frequently do not apply to such Internet utilization. This paper seeks to document the recently evolving phenomena and to provide insight in relation to it for use by treating professionals, academia, and the general public. New and continued research in the area of online sex offenders will also assist the courts in achieving learned, accurate and just evaluation of such matters as they become presented with increasing frequency.

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