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Research article

"In the street they're real, in a picture they're not": Constructions of children and childhood among users of online child sexual exploitation material

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research about online child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) users focuses on psychological assessments, demographics, motivations, and offending rates. Little is known about their understandings of children in CSEM.
Objective: From an anthropological perspective, examine CSEM users' constructions of children and childhood online and offline, and explore how these factor into their crimes.
Participants and setting: CSEM users in UK group programs.
Methods: In-depth ethnography, including 17 months of participant observation in group programs with 81 CSEM users, 31 semi-structured interviews with group participants, and inductive analysis of themes illuminated by childhood theory from anthropology.
Results: When referring to children offline, many participants claimed to align with Euro-American norms and constructions surrounding children's learning, protection, irrationality, inexperience, asexuality, and innocence. However online, many constructed children differently: as less or not "real," and as sexualized. This rendered children in CSEM *fundamentally different*, which facilitated offending, assisted in overcoming barriers, and allowed participants to hold conventional beliefs about children and childhood while engaging in incongruent online activity. Vital in this process was Internet use and associated distancing, detachment, anonymity, and cultural othering. The program used victim empathy to restore dominant norms to online children, for which participants invoked feelings, recognized their role in abuse, extrapolated consequences for victims, and reinforced norms.
Conclusions: Constructions of children and childhood were central in offending. The complexities of negotiating "real" versus "not real" in both offending and victim empathy are discussed, as are conceptual distinctions between "constructions" and "cognitive distortions," and implications for treatment and prevention.

1. Introduction

The spread and use of online child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) is a significant problem that proliferates as digital technologies advance (Seto, 2013; Wortley & Smallbone, 2012). Statistics over time illuminate this proliferation. In 1980, the most popular CSEM magazine in the United States was thought to sell 800 copies (Wortley & Smallbone, 2012). In 2014, the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported that there were 23,881,197 obscene images of children online including duplicates (Crawford, 2014). More recently, a Canadian study of CSEM was conducted that included a sample of 46,859 unique

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children, with 78.3% being younger than 12 (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2016). Putting this 46,859 figure in context, as of June 2016, there were 8,994 children from 59 countries identified in Interpol's CSEM database (Rimer & Prager, 2016). Specifically in the UK, it is suggested that 50,000 people access CSEM (Jütte, Bentley, Miller, & Jetha, 2014).

Researchers have endeavored to explain why and how people use CSEM, and why this has increased with the Internet, with a majority of explanations arising from the psychological sciences. Departing from a psychological perspective, this article stems from 17 months of UK-based anthropological fieldwork in group programs for people arrested for CSEM, and the application of anthropological theory. Emphasizing the uniqueness of the online context, it focuses on an in-depth understanding of participants' constructions of children and childhood, a comparison of these in offline and online spaces, and an exploration of the place of such constructions in offending. The article also analyzes how constructions were addressed in the group program, and discusses implications for treatment and prevention of offending. Constructions are defined here as ways in which children, childhood, and associated norms are conceptualized, imagined, and created by participants.

Research about CSEM offending has focused on diverse areas, one of which is motivations. Studies report both distinct and overlapping results. Seto (2013) notes that offending can be "paraphilic, hypersexual, compulsive or addictive, or specifically pathological in response to Internet-specific properties" (p. 129). Beech, Elliott, Birgden, and Findlater (2008) similarly summarize motivators as fueling or developing a sexual interest in children, using CSEM as part of a larger offending pattern (e.g., in grooming), impulsivity and curiosity, or other reasons such as financial gain. Quayle and Taylor (2002) identify six motivations in their research with 13 CSEM users: sexual arousal; pleasure in collecting; facilitating online relationships with other users; replacing negative offline relationships; a form of "therapy" to escape problems; and, a manifestation of "addictive" aspects of the Internet. Merdian, Curtis, Thakker, Wilson, and Boer (2013) suggest offending can be pedophilic, part of a general deviance, financial, or for other reasons (e.g., curiosity). In a paper based on 25 interviews, Steely, Bensel, Bratton, and Lytle (2018) differentiate by temporality: motivations at onset of offending included curiosity, exposure by accident, attraction to childhood innocence/inexperience, and thrill in risk taking, while most common for continued offending were attraction to innocence/inexperience and thrill in risk taking.

Some researchers point to more social explanations, and suggest that CSEM offending may be a form of improper behavior used to reduce stress or manage depression, loneliness, anger, anxiety, lack of control, poor intimacy skills, and/or problems with relationships (Laulik, Allam, & Sheridan, 2007; Marshall, O'Brien, Marshall, Booth, & Davis, 2012; Middleton, Elliott, Mandeville-Norden, & Beech, 2006; Quayle, Vaughan, & Taylor, 2006). There is also a broader debate about empathy and sexual offending (Barnett & Mann, 2013), which is examined in the Discussion. Still others focus on sexual preference: in comparing offense history and phallometric tests of CSEM users, people who offended against children, individuals who offended against adults, and general sexology patients, Seto, Cantor, and Blanchard (2006) concluded that CSEM offenses were the strongest indicator of pedophilia.

Another common research avenue is comparison of those who have committed Internet versus contact crimes. Studies conclude that CSEM users are: less likely to be antisocial, but more likely to be sexually deviant (Babchishin, Hanson, & Hermann, 2011; Babchishin, Hanson, & VanZuylen, 2015; Henshaw, Ogloff, & Clough, 2018); are more lonely, but less likely to emotionally identify with children (Bates & Metcalf, 2007); have higher victim empathy, lower pro-offending attitudes, and lower impulsivity (Elliott, Beech, & Mandeville-Norden, 2013); report higher levels of psychological problems (Webb, Craissati, & Keen, 2007); or conversely, are not likely to have backgrounds involving mental illness, substance abuse, or violence (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2005; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2011). Finally, there has been theorization of "Implicit Theories" (ITs) held by CSEM users. These are "interlocking core beliefs" hypothesized to underlie offense-supportive thoughts (Bartels & Merdian, 2016, p. 17). Bartels and Merdian (2016) suggest five ITs that they compare with contact offenses, the most pertinent of which is "children as sex objects" and is explored further in the Discussion.

An element that receives scant attention is users' perceptions and constructions of children and childhood both in CSEM and the offline world, along with how these factor into offending. Most relevant are studies that report on beliefs about images. In a case study, Quayle, Holland, Linehan, and Taylor (2000) noted how their participant dissociated from children in CSEM through file manipulation, describing "a sense of it just being electronic" (p. 90). In interviews, Quayle and Taylor (2002) also described emotional distancing through equating children with electronic images. Using an online survey with 68 respondents, Merdian et al. (2018) similarly found that CSEM offending facilitated "distal social and sexual engagement" (p. 247). Others have reported how CSEM users use terms such as "only an image" (Leonard, 2010, p. 255) and "only pictures" (Winder & Gough, 2010, p. 130) to create distance from the reality that children are abused, which are akin to what Burke, Sowerbutts, Blundell, and Sherry (2002) label "restricted view of harm" distortions (p. 81).

Also relevant is CSEM users' identification with fictional characters. In comparing psychological measures of 505 Internet and 526 contact offending participants, Elliott, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, and Hayes (2009) found that the Internet group identified with fictional characters at a significantly higher level. This was echoed by Elliott et al. (2013). In research with 16 professionals, Kettleborough and Merdian (2017) similarly found that experts believed CSEM users see children as unreal fantasy characters; however, their study was undertaken with professionals, and not with CSEM users themselves.

While the literature reporting on CSEM users' beliefs about images and identification with fictional characters provides a useful starting point, its focus is on pictures as objects as opposed to *the children in these objects*. Results indicate users' perceptions of images as electronic, distant, and a reduced form of harm; however, there is little about perceptions of *children in images, what they are, and who they are*. Similarly, while Elliott et al. demonstrate that CSEM users identify with fictional characters, little is known about *how such fictional characters may be constructed*. Finally, while the above studies include information about children in CSEM, they do not compare CSEM users' perceptions of children in online and offline worlds, and how Internet usage impacts such understandings.

Furthermore, existing research often utilizes case history and crime data as a main source (e.g., Endrass et al., 2009; Owens, Eakin, Hoffer, Muirhead, & Shelton, 2016; Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011; Wolak et al., 2005, 2011), and/or stems from samples

in post-sentence mandatory settings (e.g., Bourke & Hernandez, 2009; Middleton, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009). Less is known about individuals before their court cases, or those who may never be convicted. This is an important gap to fill, as working with people earlier can provide new insights from those who are closer to the time of offending and may be less influenced by judicial processes. As existing methodology is often rooted in surveys and questionnaires, official records, experiments, and clinical interviews, much of the literature reports on rates of reoffending, rates of crossover online and offline, user characteristics, and psychological assessments; at present, there is a dearth of in-depth qualitative work.

This article addresses the above gaps in topic and method by analyzing CSEM users' constructions. It answers one central research question: how do participants' constructions, perceptions, and actions compare to dominant cultural understandings of childhood and sexuality? It is the second paper from a large project, the first being an article about CSEM users' perceptions of online spaces that published a separate sub-set of the data and explored other offending factors (Rimer, 2017). By conducting long-term research in a pre-trial setting, utilizing anthropology, and presenting rich qualitative data, this study adds a new dimension to the literature on CSEM usage and users. In diverging from dominant modes of investigation, it builds upon and departs from the sparse literature that engages with notions of children in CSEM. This helps expand our understanding of why and how people offend.

1.1. Theoretical framework: anthropology and current norms of childhood

The application of anthropology to online sexual offending research is new; in their review, Schneider and Schneider (2008) note that when researching perpetrators of crime, anthropologists have focused on bandits, traffickers, drug dealers, street gangs, gangsters, and mafias. Regarding ethnographic studies with people who have committed sexual offenses, one anthropologist (Waldram, 2012) and one sociologist (Lacombe, 2008) have undertaken long-term fieldwork in correctional settings; however, in contrast to the present study, their work is not focused on CSEM, and their analyses center on therapeutic processes and power.

While anthropological study of sexual offending is limited, the discipline provides a unique untapped analytical lens. The framework for this article derives from the anthropology and sociology of childhood. At the core, such a perspective sees childhood as culturally and socially constructed (LeVine, 2007; Prout & James, 1997), and therefore not a universal and unchangeable concept, but rather a heterogeneous one that differs across historical, geographical, and cultural contexts (Montgomery, 2003). While there are biological realities regarding children's immaturity and development (Gittins, 2004), scholars point out that the life phase is construed and institutionalized in varying ways; it is the product of changing social, historical, and political processes and norms (James & James, 2001).

Using the above premise, scholars analyze current Euro-American norms of childhood, which center on interlinking notions of learning, protection, irrationality, inexperience, asexuality, and most of all, innocence. They note that assumptions about childhood as a life phase place it as part of a universal growth process, where change from irrationality to rationality is the mark of adulthood (Prout & James, 1997). Accompanied are generally accepted notions: first, children are innocent, asexual, and meant to be protected (Ennew, 1986; Kehily & Montgomery, 2004); second, they are not born competent or rational, so it is the duty of adults to socialize children within a safe environment (Boyden, 2001; Prout & James, 1997). Children are "useless but also priceless" (Lancy, 2008, p. 13), and childhood is a wholesome time for enjoyment before the woes of adult life (Rogers, 2003).

Regarding criminal contravention of norms, these ideas about limited competence and rationality are said to be primary reasons why children are vulnerable and need protection (Jewkes & Wykes, 2012; Scott, Jackson, & Backett-Milburn, 1998). Norms are based on "the sexually innocent child" (Ennew, 1986, p. 20), existing in a family of protected children and protecting adults. Adults are tasked with alleviating harms that destroy innocence, with sexuality being key (Scott et al., 1998). Innocence is the main aspect of childhood that sexual abuse is said to destroy (Kehily & Montgomery, 2003; Montgomery, 2009), and abusers have therefore "dishonoured the cultural conception of childhood" (Gooren, 2011, p. 31).

While identifying norms of childhood, the anthropological position also challenges their apparent universality by pointing to extensive cultural, historical, and geographical variation. There is vast heterogeneity in conduct toward, and beliefs about, children (Korbin, 1977). For example, differing to the norm that children are naturally good and in need of constant praise, Tongan children are said to be ignorant, unreasonable, and socially incompetent (lacking *poto*). They are perceived to be mischievous, and their social incompetence is openly berated to teach *poto* (Montgomery, 2009). Norms of innocence and sexuality also differ, ranging from harsh restrictions to open behavior that Euro-American society would consider inappropriate, with all societies delineating some form of sexual activity that transgresses local norms and requires punishment (Grubin, 1992; Korbin, 1977, 1987). For example, the Kwoma of New Guinea strongly prohibit children touching their own genitals such that a woman may beat a boy's penis with a stick if he is caught (Korbin, 1987). Conversely, the Canela of Brazil encourage young people to have sexual experiences with multiple partners of similar age before and after marriage, which is connected to a belief about semen being necessary for child development in the womb (Montgomery, 2009).

This heterogeneity is not restricted to far-away distant places: within Euro-America, there are differences, uncertainties, and contradictions in both laws and popular culture, all of which suggests difficulty in identifying a single universal threshold to demarcate childhood from adulthood. For example, ages of consent vary across Europe (Wortley & Smallbone, 2012). In the UK, while a person cannot drink alcohol until 18, they can consent to sexual activity at 16 (Gillespie, 2010), and can be held criminally responsible at 10 in England and Wales (GOV.UK, 2018). While childhood innocence is valued in society, it is also simultaneously sexualized in areas including fashion, child beauty pageants, and pop music (Gooren, 2011; Jewkes & Wykes, 2012; Kehily & Montgomery, 2003; Scott et al., 1998).

The purpose of including these details and examples is not to judge Euro-American or other cultural notions of childhood; rather, the point is to reinforce that conceptually, there is a lack of universal standards about childhood (Montgomery, 2001), and thus it is

constructed. This premise then acts as a foundation for the article: if childhood can change in space, place, and time, then does it change for participants? If so, how and across what contexts?

2. Method

The research underpinning this paper employed an in-depth ethnographic methodology: 17 months of participant observation in UK group programs for people arrested for CSEM crimes (10 full programs with 10 separate groups, encompassing nearly 100 sessions with 81 participants) and 31 semi-structured interviews with group participants. The participants, and thus research sample, were selected by the administering agency through its own process independent of the research. Therefore, to facilitate access, sampling was confined to the agency's protocol. Interviewees were volunteers from the 81-person sample. Throughout this article, the terms "participants," "the men," and "group members" are used interchangeably.

Groups took place at one of two locations and had six to nine members. They were not mandated by authorities, and were pre-trial for most participants. The program was described by staff as "information," "support," and "education," as opposed to "treatment." Each group had one session per week centering on particular themes and exercises, which were led by two staff members who facilitated discussions and take-home work. While not mandated, it is nevertheless possible that some participants felt obliged to take part, perhaps to convey that they wanted to change or that they recognized their behavior as wrong. It is difficult to determine if involvement impacted their court cases. There was no formal connection, but upon conclusion and if requested, participants were given a letter outlining their attendance record and the basic program content. There were no staff evaluations, reports, or testifying.

My role was clearly defined as a researcher and was known by all. I did not alter the program's content or structure, but rather observed, took notes, and spoke freely but rarely. Group sessions were not recorded, and information was gathered by writing fieldnotes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participation was voluntary, and the men's statuses on the program were not affected if they chose not to consent. Every participant gave a first independent informed consent to allow me into groups, conveyed anonymously away from the agency, and a second informed consent for interviews. All were promised that I would not contact them outside the agency during or after their programs, and all were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity; therefore, any identifying information is excluded from this article. After a thorough review, university ethics approval was awarded before fieldwork.

Interviews were one to two hours in length. They employed a 25-question guide to meaningfully compare data, but were semi-structured to allow for follow-up and probes as conversations evolved and participants shared information they felt was important. The guide was split into five sections: background (e.g., "Please tell me a bit about your life"); Internet and pornography (e.g., "Do you think the Internet has changed the world? If so, how?"); children and childhood (listed below); insights into offending (e.g., "Could you tell me a bit about your offending?"); and, current circumstances (e.g., "Could you tell me your opinions about the group program?"). The following are all questions about children and childhood:

- How would you define a child? Childhood?
- Are children different from adults? What makes children different from adults? Or youth?
- How do you think you came to your current definition of a child/childhood?
- Do you think that children have different roles in other parts of the world? If so, what do you think these roles are? In what places do you think children differ most from those in the UK?
- Are children online different from children offline? If so, how?
- When you were offending, did you think of children online as different from those offline? Has this since changed?

Both fieldwork and analysis were inductive for many reasons. First, in-depth qualitative work with CSEM users is sparse, so a ground-up method was needed to bring forth understudied foci. Second, ethnography necessitates flexibility and open-endedness where the researcher must be prepared to adapt and document all that may be relevant, as opposed to ignoring or evaluating particular observations in the moment. This is especially so in a group program, where the researcher has less control, and where it may not be known what is relevant until fieldwork is over and multiple strands of information have been collected. Finally, the project's research questions were open and did not endeavor to prove or disprove theories.

As such, the research took an exploratory approach, with the data being the driving force and no pre-determined coding framework or hypotheses being tested (applicability of theory was illuminated through data analysis). Transcripts and fieldnotes were coded and clustered for themes in groups and interviews. Themes were based on consistency, frequency, and outliers, and were triangulated through comparison across field sites, groups, sessions, and participants. The inductive nature meant that themes were derived from participants' statements and actions. The analytical method was informed largely by thematic analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, as is convention in anthropology, analysis was not rigid: themes were adapted as analysis progressed, and reflexivity about my place in the field (e.g., power dynamics) and how this may have impacted data gathering and interpretation was central throughout the process (Davies, 2008). By conclusion, 18 themes were chosen.

Fieldnotes were particularly useful in documenting group processes and interactions, and developing themes across the sample. Using these, I was able to gauge how prevalent themes were, and observing them in different groups increased confidence. This was then expanded through interview analysis, along with an assessment of similarity in results across situations in which I was as an observer versus an interviewer. I verified what participants said across settings, and gathered more in-depth details of individual lives and circumstances, which provided the richest data for elucidation and exemplification of findings.

There were notable assets to the methodology. Groups were safe spaces without judgment, where participants had agreed to speak and were encouraged to be candid. As the research was long-term and in-depth, I became absorbed in a space where they felt safe to

share, and where I could observe their actions and interactions. As the program was pre-trial, the men also represented a sample in a unique setting earlier in the justice process compared to a majority of research. This all meant that the research provided an alternative perspective to those in prison or other post-sentencing locations, and produced distinct results.

2.1. Sample

CSEM users are heterogeneous, with the only consistent demographic finding being that they are almost exclusively male, and very likely to be Caucasian (for reviews see Babchishin et al., 2011; Henshaw, Ogloff, & Clough, 2017; Seto, 2013; Wortley & Smallbone, 2012). In this study, all but two were Caucasian, all were male, and their ages ranged from 20s to 70s (with the main cluster between 30 and 60). Of the 81 men, 71 were apprehended for sexual offenses for the first time and for CSEM only, with the remaining 10 having contact with the justice system as follows: five previous CSEM convictions; one prior contact offense conviction against a child; one previous voyeurism conviction; one prior arrest for sexual assault against an adult; and, two concurrent arrests for online grooming. They were at variable judicial stages from recently being arrested to 18 months awaiting trial, and sometimes they received a sentence during the program. Seventy-seven participants completed the program, while two left early after receiving custodial sentences, and two quit voluntarily. All were arrested for viewing and possessing CSEM, with fewer for crimes of copying (e.g., to hard drives) and distributing. None were apprehended for producing CSEM.

Participants' careers and relationship statuses were heterogeneous and variable. Fifty-eight had current or ex- wives, husbands, or partners in comparison with 19 who did not and four unknown. Thirty-six had children, while 39 did not and six were unknown. Eight of the men discussed having been abused as children. Some participants came from working-class backgrounds, while others were more affluent, and their professions differed (e.g., teachers, academics, civil servants, programmers, tradesmen, nurses, drivers, and servicemen).

3. Results

This section presents findings through four strands: 1) participants' constructions of childhood and children offline, and the alignment of these with dominant Euro-American norms; 2) participants' constructions of children and childhood online as less or not "real" and as sexualized; 3) factors involved in participants' negotiation of children in CSEM as less or not "real" and sexualized, namely Internet use and associated distancing, detachment, anonymity, and cultural othering; and, 4) participants' negotiation of children in CSEM as "real," centering on engagement with the group program's victim empathy exercise. Note that when block quotes are separated, this indicates different participants. In all quotations, ellipses indicate when a word or words have been removed but the meaning has not changed.

3.1. Constructions of children in the offline world

As outlined in the theoretical summary, the dominant construction of childhood in Euro-America is based on interweaving notions: learning; protection; irrationality; inexperience; asexuality; and, innocence. Intriguingly, many participants appeared to absorb and convey these prevailing norms if speaking about children they knew and those offline. While offline childhood norms was not a major topic in groups, in 27 interviews, the men indicated alignment with various elements found in dominant constructions.

3.1.1. Childhood as a life phase defined by inexperience and irrationality, and children therefore requiring protection, learning, and socialization

One aspect that aligned with dominant discourse was the idea that childhood was a phase of inexperience and irrationality, and so children needed protection, learning, and socialization. For example, when asked how he would define "child" or "childhood," one man mentioned three features: "you learn"; "it's fun"; and, "need to be protected." Another similarly told me:

> …there needs to be a lot of focus around it on development, and you need to ensure that, that, um, you, since children are vulnerable, that you keep them safe. Um, so I think there's a development angle to children. There is a, um, something of safety or safeguarding a child…

Aligned with dominant norms, many interviewees described childhood as linked to mental development, suggesting children are not yet experienced enough to engage in the adult world. For example, one participant told me childhood was "the mental development I think, is, is the key factor…whether you're, aware about yourself enough to make informed decisions." Often the men described rational decision-making as a mark of this development:

> The adult is capable, one would hope, of making rational sensible decisions…also I think, uh, the big thing about being an adult is taking responsibility for what you do. And, recognizing that you need as an adult, to take a certain moral position.

> …you take say a 13/14-year-old person. Technically, okay they're a teenager but they're still technically a child…they haven't got the social skills or the, the, the development behind them to sort of make adult rational decisions…

Inability to make "rational sensible decisions" and have "a certain moral position" was linked to socialization: as one man stated, "childhood is like being at a time where you develop your skills, social, uh, you know, physical, emotional…childhood is being able to make as many mistakes as you want…to gain that experience for the real world." Learning and socialization were said to be the

responsibility of adults, matching the roles of teacher and protector discussed earlier. As described by one participant:

> Needs showing about the ways of the world really. You know. From very little, they got to be taught how to talk. Good manners etcetera etcetera. Children need to be taught, all these things, they don't know, they don't come along and just plop themselves on their head, you've got to put them in there…you've got to instill morals and the rest of it into them.

In terms of outliers, less frequent were those who did not cite mental development as a marker. Sometimes they described childhood as age: "I've always understood, to me, if someone says a child then it's under 16." At other times, childhood was defined by legality:

> …it's always been a sort of legal thing…that's the age at which, uh, you know they, they're allowed to leave school, they're allowed to, to, to, to do other things. So, a child is, is somebody, um, who has their choices circumscribe, uh, circumscribed by parents, laws, schools, teachers, you know.

Biology was sometimes, but less frequently, also cited as a marker of adulthood: "So I guess before puberty you're definitely a child. Once you've completed puberty you're definitely an adult." While not focusing on mental development, these explanations still point to dominant understandings about childhood as a distinct phase: children have different restrictions (e.g., legal prohibitions) because they are not perceived to be capable of making informed decisions; an age is a marker by which such development can be attributable; and, biological maturation is a clear way to separate adulthood from childhood, as physical traits can be observed. In all of these demarcations, there is separation of adults from children.

3.1.2. Children and childhood as innocent and asexual

As outlined in the theory, two of the foremost features of Euro-American childhood are asexuality and innocence. The linking of these stems from norms relating to children's immaturity, lack of experience, decision-making ability, and need to be protected. Many participants again described similar ideas of innocence and asexuality. For example, one spoke about innocence as an "obvious" given:

> They still have certain innocence as well that obviously adults don't…obviously sort of the sexual innocence. Um, and there's also the innocence of the things that they do when they're sort of growing up, you know, they'll quite happily go and play in the playground and things like that, that you won't see an adult doing.

A similar sentiment is found in another participant's evaluation of child marriage:

> Never mind the sex, they're, they're being made to be adult before I think they should be. I don't think any 12-year-old should be married basically…I think kids should live their childhood and play with dolls and play with makeup and do all of this until, until they're ready.

As described, a result of such discourse is the idea that childhood innocence and enjoyment is separated from adult seriousness. One participant discussed this in our interview. As a large and stern man with a commanding presence, this faded when talking about his own children and how he "hoped" that young people still had "the magic":

> I dug' em an underground den, and they had swings up and tree houses and so on, and did all that so they can get in there and play and enjoy themselves. I think it's a magic time being a kid…they haven't got that bitterness of being grown up have they? They still got the magic, well hopefully, that's what you hope for children to have.

Finally, in many statements already quoted, there are further indications that innocence was an integral part of childhood (emphases added):

> …you need to ensure that, that, um, you, *since children are vulnerable*, that you keep them safe.
>
> …*they haven't got that bitterness of being grown up have they? They still got the magic*, well hopefully, that's what you hope for children to have.
>
> …*childhood is being able to make as many mistakes as you want*…to gain that experience for the real world.

Thus, when referring to childhood and children in the offline world, the participants discussed above claimed to align with popular discourse. Children were said to be continually learning, in need of protection, irrational, inexperienced, asexual, and innocent. Their lives were supposed to be devoid of adult troubles, and they deserved to grow up unharmed. However, this was in stark contrast to what childhood and children were said to be online.

3.2. Constructions of children in CSEM and the online world

In the third week of fieldwork, the men had finished an exercise interrogating their steps to offending. In the ensuing discussion, one man told the group, "When I looked at photographs, I didn't view them as people. I viewed them as photographs." This participant used the word "them" to refer to *the children in images*. His statement corresponds and alludes to the common narrative among participants throughout fieldwork: while offending, children in CSEM were "not real," or somehow less "real," than children offline.

3.2.1. Children in CSEM as less or not "real"

Across groups and interviews, participants made claims disputing the reality of children in CSEM when offending: 32 used the exact terms "real" or "reality," while 51 in total indicated their questioning of reality. These men noted: "It's almost like they're not real"; "There was just this disassociation, the children weren't real"; and, "In the street they're real, in a picture they're not." This often manifested when describing *children in CSEM* as images, objects, and virtual. Participants would mention how "You see the images, not the people in images" and "When I was on the computer, I didn't see it, I just saw them as photographs." In engaging with the Internet, the "real" offline "child" became the "not real" online "image":

> I am ashamed to say, I a lot of the time stopped seeing them as children…I very often just saw them as images…
>
> It became, and that's a terrible thing to say, but it, it became, virtual.
>
> …it wasn't so much as I saw them as children, I just saw them as, as actors. It was, it was like a film, it was like a, a cartoon, a drawing.

For one participant, this went farther in his claim that the only "real" aspect of CSEM was computer code. To palpable disagreement, he told his group, "There are no mental processes applied to 'oh, I wonder where she lives or what kind of home she's got,'" and that "I still see it as a few pixels arranged in a certain order." In our interview, he elaborated:

> What it actually is, at the end of the day it is still ones and zeros. I still wouldn't feel any more guilt going onto a PC, um, doing, you know selecting a file, press "control c," and then press "control v" 100 times. I've made 100 copies. I still don't see that as being a huge crime, or, some moral change.

All participants also claimed that they had no intention to abuse a child offline, and in doing so, sometimes indicated their constructions about lack of "realness." For example, when asked if he made distinctions between children offline and online, one man's demeanor changed. He became very serious, emphasizing his points by tapping the table, making sure I understood while also noting that *children in pictures* were "just pictures":

> Well I'd, sorry, when you say did I make distinctions between online and offline, yes, in the, in that, I would never [taps table], ever [taps table], ever [taps table] knowingly [taps table] physically [taps table] or mentally [taps table] harm [taps table] a child [taps table]…children on, in the pictures were just pictures.

These men had reasons why such a forthright statement seemed obvious to them. Offline, actions with "real" children demonstrated this contrast, such as everyday parental duties:

> When I'm behind the screen, it's totally separate from when I'm not. When I'm not, I, I consider myself to be quite a normal person. I do everything for my children, I take them where they need to go. I help them with their homework. I do all sorts, like a normal parent would. And I don't see children in any other different light than that, than normal day-to-day living.

On some occasions, participants also professed that they would take different actions to the same abuse that they viewed online if they saw it offline, such as one man who said to his group, "If I saw someone abusing a child through a window, I'd call the police right away."

3.2.2. Innocence reframed as sexual

With the construction of children online as "not real," childhood innocence could then be reframed from asexual to sexual. One way this appeared was that offline, children could not be sexual, but online this was not the case:

> Uh, a child in the real world, not to be horrible, but they, they're dribbly, they're smelly, they're messy. And I've never wanted children, and I haven't actually got time for kids…and that was always the case. Um, for some reason online, sort of saying it, you make it not real.

Another way this appeared was an attraction to sexual innocence specifically in CSEM:

> …I found, um, women I saw in traditional pornography, quite intimidating, cause they had, usually have these big, great big breasts, and, and they have like tattoos and they're quite, the big lips and a lot of makeup…they're quite fierce looking women… when I'd look at those women I'd be thinking, "shit, if she came in the room I'd run away, because that's quite scary"…for somebody who's quite timid. So then I think I started, you know, looking at um, younger…and looking for, like you know, the teen titles. And cheerleaders. And innocent. And natural.

Paradoxically, some participants recognized these ideas of "realness" and sexualization as constructs. For example, during a group discussion on fantasy, one man stated that everyone surely knew children in images were "interested in their families and their iPhones, but not sex with adults," but online "in a Second Life kind of way," sexual aspects can be added. Others noted, "When you're looking on the screen they are real, but they don't seem real" or, "Sometimes you think they're real, that's when the shame and the guilt comes in." A few went as far as to admit that they were unable to view CSEM if such a construction was not made, describing a sexual element only made possible when seeing children as "not real":

> …I was watching a news report…it was like, "oh no actually…I have actually downloaded a picture of, something that could be similar to [how] that child's been abused." Um, so whenever it was, I honestly, I didn't think about the reality, because when it did

become real, I couldn't do it anymore.

None of the above means that there was no sexual element to less "real" children. Rather, precisely because many participants claimed to align with popular discourse defining children as asexual and innocent, a sexual element could then not be attributed if children online were "real." This sexual element was claimed as localized online, leaving conventional notions of childhood apparently consistent in the "real" world. In engaging with digital technology, these men held opposing constructions of children as innocent, inexperienced, asexual, and immature offline, while being sexualized online. These were not the same children as those in the street; children online were *fundamentally different*.

3.3. Negotiating "realness": making children anonymous, distant, and other

As demonstrated, in some ways, many participants claimed to have perceptions of childhood and children conforming to dominant norms. The question then is, how were they able to step out of this worldview and offend online? I posit that an important part of the answer lies in their use of the Internet and related distancing, detachment, and anonymity.

3.3.1. Distancing, detachment, and anonymity

The men described features of interacting with the Internet and associated transformations in their constructions. First, they claimed a lack of contact with the children online. Speaking to distancing and detachment, the men were removed from the production of CSEM, having allegedly not been present during its creation. This was marked by statements such as, "A picture is a moment in time. You don't have to think about it before or after" and "You can turn the computer off, you can't do the same with real life." Being able to turn a computer off and seeing a photo as finite meant that these participants could construct distinctions and make children "not part of your reality":

> …you don't view a horror film and see somebody having his head chopped off and think, "oh yes, I hope tomorrow I go down the road to chop somebody's head off." And it's almost the same with viewing stuff online. It's there, it's like a film you know, or a picture, it's just there. It's a, not part of your reality, it's not part of what you've seen, it's not part of what you've done.

Participants were also able to construct children as "not real" because the children in CSEM were anonymous: as noted in groups, "When you look at these images, it's not like somebody's children" and "You don't know people online, you'll never meet them, you're detached." Similarly, after another participant told me he "wouldn't have bothered with the police, I'd just go and kill the guys" if people had abused his children, I asked why he could view children online, as they were also somebody's children. He responded: "… they're not anybody I know, I'm not gonna see them again ever, you know, I'm never gonna meet them or anything of that nature. And therefore you feel, a lack of responsibility in a sense." Others paired anonymity with distance and detachment because there was no contact when online:

> …I didn't put, "oh that's Joe Smith from Idaho" or whatever, who is a person, and he's got to grow up and live like that. No, I didn't, didn't see it like that. There was a distinct difference in my brain between, between, yeah, if I saw it in real life…because I was online and I didn't have that direct contact, it was a bit removed, and, from, from dealing with it.

These elements rendered *online spaces as specific arenas* for alternate constructions of childhood sexuality. As such, the difference between "real" and not was most often tied to an online/offline distinction: "How are online relationships different than with children you know?" the facilitators asked one group in their seventh session. "Your own children you know and have a relationship with. These children you don't know and don't have relationships with," said one man. Answering the same question nine months later, a different participant said, "Because it's an image you're looking at, it's somehow objectifying or desensitizing. Whereas if you're actually in the room, you would think much differently." Specifically related to empathy, some noted: "The screen, there's a distance between it. The computer destroys empathy"; "It's so easy to look at an image, but it's so hard to empathize with that person"; and, "You're primed to be empathetic at a party, you're not primed to be empathetic on the computer." Summed up best by one participant, "I believed it wasn't real. It's almost like because it was a computer, it wasn't real."

3.3.2. Distancing through cultural othering

A less common distancing component that also factored into constructions for nine participants was cultural othering: through engagement with the Internet, they put forward the idea that children in CSEM were from elsewhere, and thus again different than children they knew or saw offline. For example, in one session, a participant discussed a fictional 11-year-old from the Philippines involved in CSEM to help pay for her father's medication. In response, another proclaimed, "Being so poor over there, it's what they have to do to make money." One other concurred: "That's how it all starts in these poorer countries. They're so desperate for money, one of the children is put on the street." Another noted, "Foreign countries and poor places, you can imagine it happening there, for the money." In a separate session, one man thought children in CSEM were likely "locked in brothels somewhere, not in the mainstream education system or other systems."

Also suggestive of cultural othering, of the 48 fictional victim empathy stories written by the men and discussed across fieldwork (elaborated in the next section), 21 were situated in the developing world compared to 11 in the developed world (eight in the UK) and 16 unspecified. Twenty-six had the child impoverished compared to two as middle- or upper-class and 20 unspecified. Thus, for the men that made such distinctions, children in CSEM were contrasted to those in local cultural contexts, and therefore differentiated from "real" offline children. Summarized fittingly by one participant, "It was very easy to tell myself it wasn't real…it's not the girl

next door, it's someone in Eastern Europe or something."

3.4. Negotiating "realness": victim empathy

While participants negotiated *lack of "realness"* in offending through interactions with digital technology, in the group program they confronted *"realness"* during a victim empathy exercise. This involved them going home and remembering an image, then writing a fictional account of the child's life and abuse experiences in a first-person, present-tense narrative. In groups, 48 volunteers then read their stories aloud, and others commented on credibility and level of empathy. The stories were summarized in fieldnotes, some of which are below.

It is not possible to evaluate the efficacy of this exercise. There were no pre-program assessments to examine if the men needed to improve empathy, nor were there post-program evaluations. Furthermore, there was no follow-up. I therefore was not able to determine if future offenses occurred, or if anything the men learned translated into changes when online or in emotional states that may have triggered offending. However, it is possible to explore the men's negotiation of online/offline distinctions and "realness" during the exercise.

3.4.1. Invoking feelings and emotions

The men often talked about the exercise as a difficult one that was "painful to write," feeling "absolutely devastated" or "drained." In following the task's demands, they regularly tried to invoke their emotions: objects that are "not real" do not have feelings, while children that are "real" do. Some participants discussed how they "felt" for victims, saying "you can feel the hopelessness," or crying while noting "you don't ever think of their feelings." One detailed to me his strategy, which involved remembering when he was most scared, and attempting to envision how CSEM victims felt worse fear:

> And I went through, when was I most ever scared in my life. And then, as I say, what one of the gents said in the group was, their [victims'] suffering would be 10 times worse. And I, I just, I felt awful. Like I couldn't imagine anything worse than what I had been through…I could feel the fear up to there, but after that, I thought how, how do people breathe? How do people carry on? How do they walk and talk, if their fear was worse?

This manifested in a story he wrote as a fairy tale, which he attested was an attempt to express abuse as a child would explain it. He told the group that the child would see him as "just another evil wizard taking pleasure from her pain," and his story was as follows:

> About a princess and an evil wizard. The wizard kidnapping her, appearing as a wolf and feasting on the princess's joy. The princess eventually stopped thinking of herself as a princess, wishing she would no longer wake up when she went to sleep. After escaping, the princess saw a puppet show, which was a reenactment of what the wizard would do to her. All the spectators' faces turned into the evil wizard. She wondered, "how could she ever live happily ever after again."

3.4.2. Recognizing one's role in abuse

Another way participants negotiated "realness" was to admit their role in abuse: children who are "not real" cannot be abused, while "real" children have endured abuse in order to produce CSEM. Part of this was guilt and shame in coming to terms with reality; for example, men told their groups how "there's an enormous amount of self-loathing when you know what you've actually contributed to" and that "one thing I'm going to have the most trouble with is that I was actually a part of a cycle of abuse for a child." In interviews, some expressed similar sentiments: "…it has a massive impact on the victims, the subjects, however, whatever you want to call the people in the pictures. And that, I think is something that I inhibited massively, when I was looking at the imagery…"

In admitting that CSEM is a part of abuse, participants also raised the idea that children therefore had "real" lives. This manifested in stories where background was a feature, such as one with a child's parents "not having a lot of money but they both worked hard and worked very long hours." For a few of the men who were themselves abused, the exercise also rang true. For example, one described how it "opened his eyes" by drawing a parallel to his life:

> And I think that was probably the first time, that what happened to me as a child had actually affected me trying to do, to do something…I've always dealt with it. But suddenly, the two had, collided… And it was so hard. So hard to get through that. But, I'm glad, I'm glad I did it. I'm so glad I did it. It's opened my eyes.

Some then told their groups how "It would be disingenuous to say that there is no back story to pictures" and that "Now you would never be able to look at a picture and say 'that's just a picture.'" Another told me that he had not considered children's circumstances, and that "It wasn't until we attended this group really, until it was brought out." In short, during the exercise, former anonymity, distancing, and detachment was re-negotiated: as stated by one man, "It's just an image at the time, until you look back and realize they are real victims."

3.4.3. Extrapolating consequences

Negotiating "realness" also required thinking about the consequences of abuse: children who are "not real" cannot suffer consequences, while those who are "real" have to live with their experiences. Analyzed through this lens, most stories had negative conclusions, with 37 of 48 ending in scenarios such as overdosing, prostitution, depression, trust issues, or seeing no end to abuse. The following story is an example:

"Sarah," who was born in Russia into a poor family. At age five, her father started to touch her inappropriately. He would tell her she was beautiful, and that she should have her photos taken. She was worried that her dad would be upset if she refused, so she said yes. Photos continued, and when she got older, her dad would drug her in order to get her to take pictures when she refused. In order to escape this, she ran away from home. She became a drug addict, and became a prostitute in order to pay for drugs. Eventually, she overdosed and died at age 17.

In some sessions, the men reflected on such consequences: "it really does make you think about what's happened potentially to the mental health, and the wellbeing…and everything to the person that's being exploited." In one group, facilitators asked what the adult results of abuse experiences would be. The men suggested child experience of stigma caused adult "damaged goods syndrome," lack of relationships, and low life goals. They thought betrayal caused trust issues, problems with authority, substance abuse, and low empathy, and powerlessness resulted in low self-esteem, anxiety, and anger. Finally, they thought early sexualization resulted in a warped view of sex and struggles with intimacy.

3.4.4. Reinforcing dominant norms

Finally, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the exercise instructions, "realness" was negotiated by reinforcing dominant norms of childhood. Innocence, inexperience, irrationality, and immaturity were found through an element of coercion/grooming in 38 of the 48 stories. The previous story of "Sarah" is an example, where there is abandonment of parental roles and a clear framing of innocence through the grooming process (e.g., the child afraid of her father being upset). The child's innocence and carefree upbringing is destroyed through abuse, culminating in overdose and death.

Furthermore, abandonment of adult roles of protector and teacher was evident in more than half of the stories with the child knowing the abuser, who coerced through force (e.g., "Eventually he beat her, would cuddle her and touch her inappropriately"), use of substances (e.g., "Man and her friend made her take drugs, and told her if she didn't smile she wouldn't get paid"), and lying (e.g., "He would tell Jenny that 'mom knows, but you can't tell mom or school about the pictures'"). Coercion was also found in buying of presents (e.g., "New dad always brought her new clothes and photographed her trying them on"), intimidation (e.g., "She hates it, feels embarrassed, but he tells her that he will hurt her and tell her parents she was naughty and she'd get grounded"), and compliments (e.g., "He would tell her she was beautiful, and that she should have her photos taken"). These details meant that during the exercise, online children were reframed to correspond with dominant norms: as stated by one participant, "A child, however you want to imagine it, cannot consent to sex."

4. Discussion

It has been argued that just as different conceptions of childhood are constructed across cultural, geographical, and historical contexts, many participants also constructed children online and offline in different ways. Offline, children were said to be learning, in need of protection, irrational, inexperienced, asexual, and innocent (i.e., Euro-American norms). However online in CSEM, they were less or not "real," and sexualized. Ultimately, these participants constructed a *fundamental difference* between children on the computer versus in the street: there is perhaps no difference more fundamental than something being real or not. The data then suggest that by using the Internet, notions of childhood can be constructed specifically in the online realm. For participants, this factored into their engagement with CSEM, within which children were considered sexual, while claiming to hold incongruent perceptions offline that corresponded to dominant norms. This helps to explain how the men were able to offend, despite believing that children are innocent and in need of protection.

Such constructions would likely not have been possible without engagement with the Internet. Indeed, scholars have posited that there are features of the online environment that factor into offending, which could result in individuals accessing CSEM who may not have otherwise viewed it or had an interest in doing so (Rimer, 2017; Taylor & Quayle, 2008; Wortley, 2012). In their work on Implicit Theories, Bartels and Merdian (2016) similarly note (emphasis in original), "underlying all five ITs appeared to be a general assumption about the *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet*" (p. 18). They suggest that with the "children as sex objects" IT, a result may be a belief that children are unreal fantasies. The present study is in agreement with the above, as participants described distancing, detachment, and anonymity through interaction with the Internet, which assisted constructing children in CSEM as "not real" and thus their offending.

The conclusions build on literature about CSEM users' efforts to downplay CSEM as electronic or merely images (Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Quayle et al., 2000; Winder & Gough, 2010). What the present study demonstrates differently is how they construct *children in images* as opposed to *images themselves*. Existing scholarship shows that users distance themselves from harm and describe CSEM as "only an image" (Leonard, 2010, p. 255) or "only pictures" (Winder & Gough, 2010, p. 130); however, this is different from children being "not real." Disputing "reality" goes deeper into what and who is in images, and is a stronger statement about separation and otherness. Words such as "only" and "just" downplay, but the idea that someone is "not real" removes from the world: that which exists is "real" and can be harmed, but that which does not exist is "not real" and cannot be harmed.

The findings also speak to Elliott et al. (2009), who focus on CSEM users' identification with fictional characters. They suggest that such identification aligns with features of CSEM, in which children are portrayed as characters performing a role. The present study explores *how such characters were constructed* as "not real," as sexualized, as images, and as culturally other. In addition, while it is true that fictional characters are by definition not real, what is important is that children in CSEM are not fictional. As is evident, some participants were aware of their constructions, sometimes even recognizing them. While it is not known if they had such awareness when offending, this suggests that they had insight into their behavior on some level. It would therefore be difficult to

argue that they believed children in CSEM were fictional prior to their constructions and offending; instead, constructing children as "not real" may have aided in a process of fictionalization.

4.1. "Cognitive distortions" or "constructions"?

Central to working with people who have committed sexual offenses is addressing "cognitive distortions," and a relevant question is if the results are better framed as distortions or constructions. At a conceptual level, there are distinctions to make between constructions and distortions. As noted earlier, constructions are defined here as ways in which children, childhood, and associated norms are conceptualized, imagined, and created by participants. Distortions are understood by clinicians to be self-supporting beliefs that defy rationality, minimize harm, and externalize blame (Burke et al., 2002; Ó Ciardha & Ward, 2013). Common distortions involve claiming adult/child sexual activity is consensual, children are being denied sexual freedom, and/or children suffer no harm (Waldram, 2008; Ward, Mann, & Gannon, 2007). With CSEM, distortions often present in failure to recognize that children need to be exploited for CSEM to exist and that viewing it causes harm (Burke et al., 2002).

However, scholars cite issues with overuse of the distortion concept. Ó Ciardha and Ward (2013) note that the term is used to mean excuses, rationalizations, beliefs, perceptions, justifications, denials, minimizations, and/or defenses. This renders it "vague and so broad that it is at best unwieldy and at worst meaningless" (p. 5). Maruna and Mann (2006) similarly state that the term is used to mean excuses, attitudes, beliefs, and justifications, and when referring to both post-offending explanations and cognitive processes while offending. They also suggest that excuse-making is something all people do, particularly when facing failures. Interpreting this study's results as constructions departs from the existing literature, which largely views statements that dissociate and distance from CSEM as excuses, justifications, and/or distortions. Some posit that CSEM users downplay their behavior and make it less threatening, which are argued to be distortions because they convey the message that CSEM is mundane and innocuous as opposed to deplorable accounts of abuse (Winder & Gough, 2010). While I would never suggest that CSEM is not harmful, or not an account of inexcusable abuse, I propose that framing the findings as constructions is useful.

While this study is not able to identify causal relationships about constructions leading to or resulting from offending, what is clear is that they played a key role. Conceptually, a construction is not akin to an excuse, justification, or distortion. For example, as noted by Maruna and Mann (2006, p. 156), "An excuse involves the admission that something was wrong, but the claim of irresponsibility ('It wasn't my fault'); whereas, a justification is the acceptance of responsibility, but the claim that the act was not wrong ('They had it coming')." These were not central for the men, as they admitted guilt and rarely suggested that offending was appropriate (if not, there would be little point in attending the program). Like distortions, excuses, and justifications, constructions may still allow actions to continue unchallenged. However, as opposed to assuming the men discussed in this paper perceive children the same both online and offline but try to excuse or justify their actions, as constructions, children and childhood become changeable between spaces. As people (children) and concepts (childhood) that are *simultaneously* "real" and asexual offline, and "not real" and sexual online, these men constructed them as *fundamentally different at the same time*. I suggest the complexity of this process cannot be adequately illuminated when conceptualized as a distortion. Understood as a construction, this helps to explain how many of the participants held beliefs about children as innocent and asexual, while also offending.

4.2. Treatment, prevention, and future research

To address constructions, the program used a victim empathy exercise. There is debate around the efficacy of this. Barnett and Mann (2013) argue that sexual offending is better explained by factors relevant to *experience of empathy*, such as compassion and perspective-taking. They suggest clinicians should not consider victim empathy to be a single target, but rather should focus on what has led to people lacking empathy. They also note that taking the perspective of a victim *could* help individuals view their behavior differently, and this *may* transfer to future situations, but currently victim empathy work is "inconsistently articulated, poorly understood, and largely untested empirically" (Mann & Barnett, 2013, p. 295). Indeed, research has not correlated victim empathy with reduced recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005), and the ability to teach empathy has been questioned (Waldram, 2012).

Simultaneously, research has reported that victim empathy work is salient for those undergoing sexual offending treatment (Mann & Barnett, 2013). For example, in their study, Wakeling, Webster, and Mann (2005) found that victim empathy was cited by participants as the most helpful aspect. However, it was also most often cited to cause distress. Mann and Barnett (2013) suggest that this could be a result of the unstated goal of having offenders feel remorse, an emotion "that is inevitably distressing" (p. 293). Such findings are consistent with the present study, where participants frequently claimed to find the victim empathy work powerful, memorable, and eye-opening, but also difficult, draining, and challenging.

The question remains: was victim empathy the best way to address participant constructions? As noted, in this study it is not possible to evaluate if the exercise brought about lasting change. In addition, the fact that participants were aware that they viewed children online and offline as different also suggests that some had insight into their offending before the exercise. However, it is possible to discuss how they engaged with the exercise and negotiated "reality." Through an anthropological lens, if children could be constructed as "not real" online, then they could be re-constructed: children online needed to become innocent, asexual, irrational, unable to make informed decisions, and immature. They could not be *fundamentally different* to those offline. Participants worked toward bridging this gap and online/offline distinctions by invoking their feelings, recognizing their role in victims' abuse, extrapolating potential consequences for children, and reinforcing norms.

While on the surface the stories appear to fulfill the exercise's goals, there is also the possibility that they could instead reflect eroticization. While not possible to know, some may have been written as erotic loss of innocence narratives. Given that Steely et al.

(2018) found a motivation for CSEM offending to be attraction to childhood innocence, this possibility should not be ignored. If the case, the stories could have reinforced constructions of children in CSEM as sexual, as opposed to the opposite. In addition, there exists a paradox. The goal was to make children "real" by having participants write a story about a child. Yet, the children were still unknown, and their experiences remained fictitious. The men projected what *could have* happened, but ultimately this was the result of their imaginations. Therefore, it is possible that children online could have remained "not real," and that the stories could have even reinforced this. However, what is clear is that participants cited anonymity, distancing, and detachment as contributing to their constructions. Aligned with the critique that the focus should be on what has led individuals to lack empathy (Barnett & Mann, 2013), perhaps such exercises should concentrate more on Internet use and elements that may impact empathy such as distancing, detachment, and anonymity, as opposed to victim empathy itself.

Seto (2013, p. 229) notes that because research on CSEM user treatment is lacking, "decisions are being made on the basis of intuition and best guesses." A potential next step from this study could be to examine if treatment should focus more on tackling constructions of children and childhood in online and offline spaces. Given the centrality of the Internet, the usefulness and efficacy of targeting conceptions of online anonymity, distancing, and detachment could be another productive avenue. Another area that warrants investigation is if the findings are applicable to people with a sexual preference for children, or those who engage in live webcam offending. Do these individuals dispute the reality of what they see? In these cases, it is perhaps reasonable to assume that individuals go online to look at real children, but this requires exploration. Finally, as participants focused on "realness" of children, future research could explore if prevention messages are more effective targeting this notion. For example, a current Google warning reads, "If you find it report it. Child abuse imagery is illegal! Report it or find help here." If acting as a deterrent, perhaps this warning should emphasize the humanity and *reality* of CSEM as opposed to the illegality by stating, "Children in child abuse images are real. Remember this. Report it or find help here."

4.3. Limitations

This study's methodology resulted in limitations. First, during participant observation, I was limited by program content and topics, which influenced the information obtained. The program was in effect a filter through which insights into offending were obtained. These insights may be applicable to other settings and moments in time, however this cannot be guaranteed. Second, the fact that the sample was self-selected through the agency, and that it was moderate in size, means it was skewed; for example, the findings might be most applicable to those who seek help. It is therefore not possible, nor my intention, to generalize. Third, I did not have access to participants' case files, so their claims could not be verified or challenged by comparison to forensic evidence (Glasgow, 2010). Fourth, fieldwork took place after participants had time to think about their actions post-arrest. Thus, the data represent the men's recollections about their constructions as opposed to current knowledge during offending. Finally, the pre-trial timing could have influenced the men to alter their statements in an attempt to look favorable (e.g., not admitting to additional crimes, changing in accordance with facilitator expectations). This had potential to influence results; however, the purpose of the research was not to discern additional offenses or evaluate truthfulness.

5. Conclusion

Using data from 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork in CSEM user group programs, this article demonstrates the centrality of constructions of children and childhood for CSEM offending, and the unique role Internet use plays in such constructions. Employing anthropological theory, the article illustrates that participants often claimed to hold dominant perspectives aligned with current Euro-American cultural norms when referring to children and childhood offline. However, in online space and negotiated through distancing, detachment, anonymity, and cultural othering, many participants constructed children in CSEM to be less or not "real," to be sexualized, and ultimately as *fundamentally different* to those offline. This allowed them to hold dominant perceptions offline, while simultaneously engaging in incongruent online activity. It is further argued that such ideas be conceptualized as constructions instead of distortions, as this aligns with the changeability of children and childhood when viewed by participants as simultaneously "real" offline and "not real" online.

The group program addressed online constructions using victim empathy. This strove to restore offline norms to children online and re-construct them as "real" victims. Participants engaged with these goals and negotiated "realness" by invoking feelings, recognizing their role in abuse, extrapolating consequences for children, and reinforcing norms. The article concluded by proposing that more attention can be given to CSEM users' constructions and online anonymity, distancing, and detachment in an effort to tackle elements that may impact empathy. Future research with larger more heterogeneous samples at varying judicial and therapeutic stages could examine if the results are present on a greater scale, and if and how treatment and prevention can be adapted to make children in CSEM "real."

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