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Dr Sharon Lambert & Elaine O'Halloran

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Deductive Thematic Analysis of a Female Paedophilia Website

Sharon Lambert and Elaine O'Halloran

Department of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

The role of the Internet and other technologies in sexual offending has recently received much attention. The literature, however, has focused largely on male sexual abusers and much has to be learned about deviant female arousal patterns. The purpose of this article was to investigate how women with a sexual interest in children engage with the Internet. Data taken from one female paedophilia website have been subjected to a deductive thematic analysis. The analysis generated five main categories: cognitive distortions, recognition barriers, sexual motivation, the role of the Internet, and personal factors. The findings indicate that women are using the Internet to express a sexual interest in children and that they display similar characteristics to male individuals engaged in the same processes.

Key words: cognitive distortions; female offenders; online paedophilia; sex offenders.

As of March 2007, worldwide there are 1.114 billion people using the Internet, with a usage growth of 208.7% between 2000 and 2007 (<http://www.internetworldstats.com>). The speed at which this technology has been adopted into society has been described as revolutionary, with particularly significant saturation into schools, work and family environments (Stanley, 2001). As yet, little is understood of the potential problems and benefits associated with Internet use, and the resulting social outcomes that may arise (Quayle & Taylor, 2002).

The term "Internet" as used in this research is a global one, encompassing descriptors such as "worldwide web" and "cyberspace". Internet communication can

be in the form of text, audio and visual material. This is commonly accessed through the medium of electronic mail (email), newsgroups, bulletin boards and chat rooms (Stanley, 2001).

The term "paedophile" in this study is based on the definition provided by the ICD-10-CA, "a sexual preference for children, boys or girls or both, usually of pre-pubertal or early pubertal age" (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2006, p.242). The type of problematic use of the Internet that serves as the focus of this study may be viewed through two lenses: first, how children engage with the technology and the consequent risk to this population; second, the ways in which paedophiles have adopted

This paper has been presented at a number of conferences and workshops: Child Exploitation and Online Protection of Children (CEOP), Metropolitan Police, London, United Kingdom, January 2007; Paedophile Investigation Unit, An Garda Siochana (Irish Police), Harcourt Square, Dublin, Ireland, May 2007; Forensic Symposium, Psychological Society of Ireland's Annual Conference 2006 and 2007.

Correspondence: Dr Sharon Lambert, Department of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland. Email: sharonbernblambert@hotmail.com

the Internet to legitimize, reinforce and facilitate their sexual interest in children.

It is argued that young people and children have especially adopted this new technology into their lives (Stanley, 2001). In the United States, 63% of 9–17-year-olds stated that using the Internet was a preferred pastime over watching television (Starch, 1999). An Australian survey found that 66% of children regularly used the Internet to access chat rooms (Stanley, 2001). The development of the potential dangers of this technology has been somewhat ignored, but it is clear that the Internet can be a source for the abuse or exploitation of children (Stanley, 2001). Dangers can manifest in a number of ways such as exposure to explicit or offensive material, or being contacted and manipulated by a paedophile.

In a US survey of children aged 10–17 years who defined themselves as regular users of the Internet, 19% reported being approached for sex through some Internet media at least once a year (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000). The survey further reported that one in seven of these children reported that the offenders had attempted to contact them via telephone or post. A similar study conducted in Australia found that 27% of their sample reported that they had been contacted by a sexual predator while using a chat room (Stanley, 2001). Children are also at risk of accessing inappropriate and explicit material. Finkelhor et al. (2000) argue that 20–25% of children have accessed offensive content online. Research on the impact of this material on children's development is still in its infancy and thus the effects of this exposure are not yet understood (Stanley, 2001).

The growth of the Internet has also generated the emergence of a new type of sex offender: individuals with a sexual interest in children who can now go online to engage in illegal activities (Quayle, Holland, Linehan, & Taylor, 2000). According to Durkin (1997) there are a number of ways in which paedophiles can

misuse the Internet: to trade child pornography, to locate children to molest, to engage in inappropriate sexual communication with children, and to communicate with other paedophiles. Traditionally, paedophiles were a marginalized group of people but the Internet assists communication within this community and facilitates the rationalization of deviant behaviours. Durkin (1997) examined a forum for male "boy-lovers" and concluded that these forums serve two functions: a validation function and an information function. The ability to converse with like-minded individuals can validate pro-offending thinking and justify adult sexual interest in children. Sellier (2001) reported that there were more than 23,000 sites and 40,000 openly advertised chat rooms devoted to the defence of adult–child sexual relationships.

Traditional paedophile organizations such as North American Man Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) have also developed a strong presence on the Internet. Two recent sites BoyWiki and GirlWiki have also emerged and these are based on the Wikipedia model, a popular online encyclopaedia. These websites contain a range of literature that supports the paedophilia point of view (Durkin, Forsyth, & Quinn, 2006). The Internet also facilitates the transfer of information between paedophiles, such as technical advice, the locations of newsgroups and websites, legal issues, and integration into the virtual community (Stanley, 2001).

The relationship between online fantasy and offending behaviour has not yet been established. Durkin et al. (2006) hypothesized that the online sharing and validating of deviant fantasies may have several possible outcomes: new interests in proscribed behaviour may be initiated, repressed intentions may expand with the reinforcement, or the use of virtual realities may substitute for real life contacts.

It is generally accepted that the large majority of sexual offences committed

against children are perpetrated by men (Elliott, 1997; Marshall, Laws, & Barbaree, 1990). But the profile of the online offender presents a different picture. Finkelhor et al. (2000) report that just under one third of online offenders are female. It is argued that it is difficult to ascertain perpetrator gender in many of these cases because individuals who seek children online for sexual contact can misrepresent themselves (Stanley, 2001). Others, however, argue that the convenience of the Internet and its assumed anonymity has contributed to an increasing and more diverse population of child pornography users who did not actively seek out such material via more traditional mediums (Burke, Sowerbutts, Blundell, & Sherry, 2002).

There is limited research available on female sexual offenders in general, with a particular scarcity in the emerging area of Internet offending. The facilities offered by expanding Internet technologies to those with a sexual interest in children are immense, but the research has not caught up with this new method of paedophile activity. As shown in the present study, female paedophiles are making use of the Internet to fulfil their sexual needs with regard to child pornography, erotic child-centred literature and corresponding with others holding similar desires in a safe and supportive environment. Although some of these women may not have, or may never, commit a contact offence, the likelihood is that the Internet is reinforcing their maladaptive cognitions and behaviours through a type of community alliance. This problematic use of technology may in fact intensify behaviours and lead from relatively harmless voyeur-type behaviour to illegal, dangerous and traumatic contact crimes.

Researching virtual communities presents uniquely complex methodological issues. It is difficult to establish identity, nationality, ethnicity and gender (Durkin et al, 2006). There are also concerns about ethical considerations and sampling. But it is

vital to understand the impact of the Internet on sexually deviant interests and behaviours and to recognize changing trends in online communities. Burke et al. (2002) argue that it is essential for clinicians to familiarize themselves with these virtual communities due to the increase in referrals for individuals who have accessed child pornographic material online. The purpose of the present study was to analyse the content of one female paedophile website and to apply this analysis to issues in the current literature.

The review of the literature on current typologies of female sexual abusers has shown that there is a denial of female sexual aggression, and current categories of abusers do not acknowledge deviant female sexual interest. This article highlights the existence of a clear sexual motivation. In addition, it is well established that cognitive distortions play a major role in the behaviour of all sexual offenders; this analysis demonstrates the presence of such distortions that are equivalent to those of male paedophiles. Finally, Mendel (1995) argues that the presence of several recognition barriers prevents the detection of female sexual abusers, in particular a woman's ability to have greater leeway in her interaction with children, and the fact that the abuse tends to be intra-familial and subtle; this will also be discussed with examples from the data. It will be recommended that traditional assessment and treatment programmes require modification in order to facilitate the changing trends in female sexual offending.

Method

Participants

The data on which this paper is based were collected from a website that is written by women for women with a sexual interest in children.

The personal stories of six women have been analysed along with the frequently asked questions (FAQs) page. Before

commencing with this study the researcher needed to consider if the contributors were indeed women. A number of the contributors were contacted via email and they confirmed that they are in fact, women who are sexually attracted to children, in particular girls. There are also male contributors on the site who have identified themselves as male. In addition, female authors tended to draw distinctions between themselves and male paedophiles, claiming that men are coercive and women are nurturing. Finally, the researcher felt that there would be little motivation for men to pretend to be women because there is a plethora of websites containing images and text for male paedophiles.

Material

This consisted of a female paedophilia website (data corpus); FAQ pages (data set); and personal stories $\times 6$ (data set).

A number of female pro-paedophilia websites were identified as a result of conversations with child protection and law enforcement officials. Only one of these sites was chosen for analysis, because it was updated most regularly and the researcher was restricted by time constraints. The selected text was collected from the female paedophile website, the data corpus (all data collected), and the selected text or data set (the data from the corpus that were used for analysis, identified by a particular analytic interest) was analysed using deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Design

This was a qualitative design utilizing the method of deductive thematic analysis informed by Aronson (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006). Deductive thematic analysis was chosen because it facilitates the interpretation of identifiable themes and patterns of behaviour. The process

involved five main stages: detailed reading of the data corpus, identification of data sets, identification of initial themes from the data sets, refinement of themes, and clustering themes into categories. The data were also analysed by a second rater in order to validate the findings.

Procedure

Qualitative data were collected by the researcher from a website identified as a female paedophilia site. Several close detailed readings of the data were made in order to familiarize the researcher with the accounts provided. This was then followed by a detailed thematic analysis based on the guidelines of a number of sources (Aronson, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Breakwell, Hammond, & Fife-Schaw, 2000). This involved a number of stages, as follows.

Stage 1

The data corpus was read a number of times and data sets were identified. These data sets were copied into a document containing two margins (one left and one right). A detailed reading was carried out where initial thoughts were noted in the left hand margin. These notes related to concepts and phrases that the researcher considered interesting or significant.

Stage 2

The data set was re-read several times and the initial notes were transformed into specific themes. A theme can be defined as something important that relates to the research interest, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Notes that were considered irrelevant or vague were excluded. At this stage the data were also given to another rater who also generated a list of themes from the data. The two raters then discussed and

negotiated the findings until agreement was reached as to the validity and appropriateness of each theme.

Stage 3

The data were again re-read and the themes were refined into more specific clusters based on psychological concepts or constructs (described in data analysis section). For example, the researcher identified nine themes that related to notions of cognitive distortions that are well documented in the male sexual offending literature, such as child sexuality is oppressed in society, and that relationships with children are consensual (Laws & Marshall, 1990).

Stage 4

The clusters were categorized based on their relationships to a specific psychological concept. Five main categories were identified each consisting of a varying number of themes. These categories were as follows: sexual motivation, the role of the Internet, cognitive distortions, personal factors, and recognition barriers. The frequency of occurrence of each of the themes within the data set was recorded to establish the strength of each theme.

Stage 5

Statements from the raw data were extracted to provide evidence of the existence of each theme within the various categories. Following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006), a final analysis of the selected extracts was related back to the research question and the appropriate literature, thus permitting the production of a scholarly report.

Ethical Considerations

The Internet has transformed the research landscape for psychological researchers

with regard to the availability of text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC). According to Kopala and Suzuki (1999), ethical considerations on research using the Internet have been shaped by two prominent cases in which basic ethical principles such as confidentiality were breached. Researchers are presented with a range of ethical dilemmas when dealing with data from the Internet and a conclusive formula has yet to be established. Informed consent can be difficult to obtain because many contributors to the website may not log in regularly. In this research the moderator of the website was emailed and, where possible, contributors were informed that this author intended to analyse the data for the purpose of research. Privacy and confidentiality are also considered when dealing with the Internet; many researchers consider the content of the discussion forums to be public and this has been interpreted as such by legal experts (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). In the present study the privacy of individuals was maintained by not revealing any personal or identifiable information.

Results

A thematic analysis approach informed by Aronson (1994), Breakwell et al. (2000) and Braun and Clarke (2006), was applied to text from a female pro-paedophilia website. The analysis focuses on the FAQ page and personal stories posted to the site.

The researcher familiarized herself with the material and compiled a list of themes. The data were then coded and these themes were clustered into five main categories (Table 1). The analysis is presented here, with extracts from the website to support each category.

Sexual Motivation

As discussed above, there is a tendency to dismiss deviant female sexuality in the

Table 1. Breakdown of Categories.

	Category	No. themes per category
1	Sexual motivation	3
2	Role of the Internet	4
3	Cognitive distortions	9
4	Personal factors	4
5	Recognition barriers	4

literature and to attribute the behaviours of female sexual abusers to external factors such as male coercion or prior victimization in the abuser's history. But there is growing evidence to suggest that women do commit a wide variety of sexual offences (Bunting, 2005). The analysis of the personal stories found 42 references to sexual motivation, while 55 references were located in the FAQs. There were three themes identified in the category of sexual motivation (Table 2). Extracts from the text are furnished here to verify the presence of each theme within this category.

Sexual Interest in Children

A question from the FAQ page asks "who are the people visiting this website?"

They are mostly women and girls ranging in age from their teens to quite old who share a bond of having a particular affinity for teen and/or pre-teen girls. In most cases this encompasses a clearly sexual attraction most of these women accept the label "girl lover" which is often abbreviated to GL.

This is a very clear statement that the purpose of the website is to facilitate an online community of women with a sexual interest in children. The fact that the author specifically mentions pre-teen girls is evidence that children who would be under the age of consent in most countries are a focus for their sexual attraction. Thus, for many people this would be classed legally and socially as sexual abuse.

Table 2. Emergent Themes in Each Category.

	SEXUAL MOTIVATION
1	Sexual interest in children
2	Desire for sexual contact with child
3	Encouraging child sexual behaviour
	COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS
1	Child as seducer
2	Consensual relationship
3	Sex with children is natural
4	Need to educate the child
5	Sexual contact with females is positive
6	Child has right to be sexual
7	Justification of adult behaviours
8	Child sexuality oppressed in society
9	Differences between male and female paedophiles
	RECOGNITION BARRIERS
1	Easy access to children
2	Encourages child to be secretive
3	Awareness of society's attitudes
4	Ability to be incestuous
	PERSONAL FACTORS
1	Dissatisfaction with current persona
2	Early sexualized experiences
3	Poor adolescent socialization
	ROLE OF THE INTERNET
1	Sense of community
2	Provides information
3	Need for acceptance
4	Reinforces distorted cognitions

K: "I really look at little girls and want to see them naked."

V: "I am a 21-year-old, and for as long as I can think back I have been attracted to young girls, around 5–12 years old . . . I buy movies just because there are little girls in them. Books about little girls in sexual situations . . . I am not a lesbian; I am not attracted to women, only young girls, and I am not attracted to little boys at all – just men, and little girls."

H: "I am a 36-year-old bi mum of a 10-year-old daughter. I know and have known for a long time that I am attracted to young girls and would lie endless nights masturbating thinking about many things and those nubile bodies."

The above extracts from the personal stories posted by contributors identified by their initials also describe a clear sexual interest in children.

Desire for Sexual Contact with Child

The following extract describes a contributor's change in focus from child pornography to a desire to have physical contact with a child. The relationship between online fantasy and offending behaviour has not yet been established. But Burke et al. (2002) have argued that the longer the online fantasies are maintained, the more the likelihood increases of a progression to contact offending.

C: "I left the child porn behind. I was bored with it and preferred the erotic stories, they took up less space on my floppy disks. But I eventually got bored with that as well. I wanted a real experience with a child."

Both the social learning and conditioning theories of sexual offending behaviour suggest that under certain conditions exposure to sexually deviant stimuli and support from like-minded individuals can result in the development of deviant sexual interest, arousal patterns and behaviours (Laws & Marshall, 1990; Stermac, Segal, & Gillis, 1990). Thus it is important that clinicians working in this area acknowledge the potential dangers of problematic Internet use.

Encouraging Child Sexual Behaviour

Young (1997), states that offenders with a sexual interest in children focus their attention on the routinization and normalization of sexual behaviour in order to facilitate their sexual exploitation of children.

FAQ: "The mother encourages the child's sex play, masturbation, and sexual activities with selected other children and adults."

FAQ: "We have argued convincingly that child sexuality is natural and normal. We allow children to be seductive. We encourage their sexual expression."

The literature on female sexual offending to date has failed to acknowledge a sexual motivation for the abuse of children by women. The extracts provided here from the FAQ page indicates that women can also engage in a grooming process in order to facilitate their sexual motivations.

Cognitive Distortions

Another major category emerging from the data analysis was cognitive distortions. It has been well established that sexual abusers deny, minimize, rationalize or justify their behaviour using cognitive distortions, which legitimize or maintain abusive behaviours or thoughts (Marshall et al. 1990). They serve a "self-protective" function for the abuser by reducing the anxiety, guilt or shame that accompanies inappropriate and/or illegal sexual behaviour. Examples of cognitive distortions include the perception of children as both sexually attractive and as wanting sex with adults (Horley, 2000). Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner (1984) were among the first to provide a list of basic cognitive distortion categories: children are willing sexual partners, adult child sex is educational, children keep sexual abuse a secret because they enjoy it, future society will learn to accept adult-child relations, fondling without penetration is harmless, children ask about sex because they want to experience it, and having sex with children strengthens emotional bonds.

There is extensive literature on the role of cognitive distortions in offending behaviour (Tierney & McCabe, 2001; Webster, 2002). But this almost exclusively assumes that the perpetrator of the abuse is male and many treatment programmes for female abusers neglect this important aspect, whereas it is standard in treatment programmes for men. The text analysed in the present study is filled with cognitive distortions that attempt to justify the women's sexual interest in children. Ten themes can be identified, presented in Table 2.

Cognitive distortions were the most prolific themes uncovered during data analysis. Forty-one cases of cognitive distortions were found in the personal stories, while in the FAQ section this figure rose to 204. The following section will list each theme in this category followed by a representative extract from the text.

Child as Seducer

B: "an hour later I had really had my first lesbian experience with a 10 yr old and I was truly ashamed of myself as I had let her do what she wanted with me and I had responded to her requests and I had become a victim. I hadn't touched her but she had done things to me like I could not believe, even down to a very good session of oral sex and I was 12 years older than her."

This extract put the child in the role of seducer, a common distortion by paedophiles to justify their sexual involvement with children. This bias processing of innocent child behaviours was also identified as a significant core belief of child molesters in the Ward (2000) implicit theory of cognitive distortions. A child showing affectionate behaviour is interpreted as "sexually knowing" and the child is perceived to be seductive, which gives the offender the green light to proceed with sexual abusive behaviours.

Consensual Relationship

C: "I finally had something I hadn't had in a while. Someone to talk to. It sounds silly, but Dawn would listen to my problems and I to hers. I began to fall deeply in love with that child. Our relationship became very adult like in sexual terms but we kept our dealings a secret."

This extract from a personal story presents the relationship between the adult female and the 12-year-old child as a consensual adult relationship. Abel et al. (1984) have identified this particular belief as a

common cognitive distortion in male sexual offenders and as a belief that must be addressed in treatment programmes.

Sex with Children is Natural

FAQ: "Adults do not have to awaken the sexuality of children in order for children to be sexual. Usually they do not. Children are sexual."

FAQ: "Horniness is not a horrible desire for a kid. Orgasm is not illegitimate for a kid. I do not consider the existence of child sexuality to be worth debating. It exists. Numerous sources tell us of natural child sexuality. Attendants at day care. Teachers. Parents. Scientific researchers. Anthropologists who have studied many types of cultures."

These extracts from the FAQ page argue that children are sexual beings. This is a common cognitive distortion in sexual abusers. But it worth noting that the writer comments that "usually they [adults] do not" have to awaken the sexuality of a child. This suggests that the author accepts that at times the adult may have to coerce the child into their way of thinking. The writer also attempts to support their argument that child sexuality is natural by referring to external sources such as researchers, but does not provide specific examples of studies or names of researchers.

Need to Educate the Child

FAQ: "I believe that parents have a duty to support, aid and encourage the developments of the child sexuality. Not to attempt to repress or suppress it for the incestuous mother, sex education is much more than giving the child books to read . . . the mother encourages the child's sex play, masturbation and sexual activities with selected other children and adults."

Here we see a demonstration of the distorted cognition that sex with children is a necessary tool in sex education and that

sexual involvement with children is a responsibility of parenthood. This belief is common in male offending also, and is included as an item in a questionnaire developed by Abel et al. (1989) to measure the strength of cognitive distortions.

Sexual Contact with Females is Positive

Again the belief that female adult and child sexual relations are positive is a common core belief of sexual offenders that serves to justify sexually abusive behaviour. Early accounts of cognitive distortions state that it is common for child molesters to profess that having sex with children strengthens emotional bonds (Abel et al., 1984).

FAQ: "Females who love children are motivated by the purest of desires, rather than any perversions. A giving sexuality and sexual expression is pure We share in their sensuality and their sexuality. We give rather than take from them."

Child has Right to be Sexual

Traditional paedophile organizations such as NAMBLA contain a range of literature that supports the paedophilia point of view, including rhetoric that purports to crusade for the rights of the child to be sexual (Durkin et al., 2006; Stanley, 2001). Again this can be viewed as the bias processing of information in order to facilitate the individual's sexual attraction to children.

FAQ: "Girls and boys have the fundamental and inherent human right to initiate and enjoy sexual contact, including masturbation, sexual activities with same sex and opposite sex age mates, adults, and family members."

Justification of Adult Behaviours

The author of the FAQ page refers to a number of sources such as practices in

ancient societies and academic writings in order to support and justify the female paedophilia perspective. This type of cognitive distortion has also been acknowledged within the male sexual offending literature. Ward (2000) proposed an implicit theory of cognitive distortions that argues that child molesters distort social information in an offence-supportive manner. Given here is one example in which a Freudian concept is used to normalize adult female sexual relationships with children.

FAQ: "Freud had pointed out that initially both the male and the female infant were cared for by a female. The mother is the first erotic love object for both sexes. This love is the prototype for all later love relations."

Child Sexuality Oppressed in Society

The notion that child sexuality in society is repressed or suppressed is a common feature of paedophilia literature, and it is regularly referred to on male paedophilia websites (Durkin et al., 2006).

FAQ: "The oppressor moral stance flies directly in the face of the child experience and desire. The issue that female child-lovers have with child oppressors evolves out of the oppressor's confusion over nature and morality. The oppressors seek to repress and suppress child sexuality. Clearly, their efforts go against nature when they attempt to prevent any child sexual expression, including nudity, masturbation, involvement with an age-mate or an adult, and involvement with a same-sex partner."

Differences between Male and Female Paedophiles

A common theme also found in the text of this website was the differentiation between male and female paedophiles. This is reflected in the academic and professional literature also, with general opinion

viewing female perpetrated abuse as less traumatic and harmful than male perpetrated sexual abuse.

FAQ: "The pathetic reality that many male practitioners of incest demand and force exclusive sexual attention from the daughter [does not] applies to the incestuous mothers discussed here. These mothers and incestuous men have absolutely nothing in common"

FAQ: "I would never defend depictions of girls being raped and forced, with unmistakable terror showing on their faces. Such are no more than objects for patriarchal male pleasure I disagree with the assertion by the legalists and moralists that being depicted in film, video, etc. while nude or in sexual activities inherently harms or exploits children."

The first extract attempts to differentiate between child–adult female relationships and child–adult male relationships, presenting men as more abusive and coercive. The second extract appears in a section that defends child pornography and erotica. The author, however, although defending the use of child abuse images, also seeks to present men who engage with child pornography as sadistic. This gender bias is also evident in the literature on female sexual offending, where women are seen as less bad than men. This is problematic because it implicitly affects the management of female sex offenders in terms of recognition, assessment and treatment issues (Allen, 1991; Mendel, 1995). Many have argued that the similarities between male and female offending must be acknowledged (Bunting, 2005; Denov, 2004).

Summary

It is as yet unclear whether the antecedents of sexual offending against children are the same for men and women. Many people assume that female offending materializes from loneliness, a desire for emotional

intimacy or misguided childcare. But the evidence of cognitive distortions found on the website analysed in the present paper suggests many similarities between the aetiology of male and female offending.

Recognition Barriers

The third most common category was that of recognition barriers (Table 2). Mendel (1995) proposes several arguments as to why society tends to dismiss the existence of female sexual abusers and these have been discussed in the introduction. But for the purpose of the present paper the focus will be on his argument that women have greater leeway in their physical interactions with children and that there is a greater tendency for female perpetration to be interfamilial and to be covert and subtle. He also argues that there is an assumption that women offend only under coercion by a man but the website analysed here is anti-male paedophile and there is an attempt to distinguish between abuse by men and "childlove" by women. The traditional role of caretaker provides a screen for the potential sexual nature of adult female and child contact. Maternal incest is seen as particularly rare but the stories posted on the website show this to be untrue and it is argued that this form of abuse is much more prevalent than many assume (Banning, 1989; Denov, 2001).

Easy Access to Children

It is argued that women have greater leeway in their interactions with children because society views women as nurturers and tends to be more suspicious of men (Mendel, 1995). As a result women have easier access to children in areas such as childcare and education.

B: "I do quite a bit of sitting for a few families. Last week I was at a home where I had done two visits before but this time

they had a female child guest sleeping over."

BE: "My next door neighbor's grade-school daughter would come to my house often to "hang out" because she felt comfortable with me. She was raised by a single father and the absence of a mother-figure in her life made her consciously or unconsciously drawn to me."

The extracts from the personal stories of two different authors provide an insight into the freedom that women experience in their interactions with children because they are not likely to be viewed as potential sexual abusers. In addition, contributors discuss how being a woman can be used to manipulate situations and gain access to illegal material as outlined here by C.

C: "I became a regular on IRC pedo chatrooms. It was easy for me to get porn because I was a female. The men just gave it to me in the hopes of meeting me for cybersex. I would usually laugh them off."

Encourages Child to be Secretive

There is a tendency for female perpetration to be covert and subtle. This argument finds much support in the literature, numerous studies show that women tend to abuse within the family and the victims can have difficulty interpreting the behaviours as abusive (Denov, 2004; Saradjian, 1996). A child can be encouraged to keep the abuse a secret and this is evident in the website analysed where the author describes that while a child is groomed sexually they are also groomed into maintaining secrecy.

FAQ: "[child] is encouraged to look sexual, act sexual, and be sexual. She learns to fully and maturely integrate her sexuality within her personality and being. While her sexuality is never to be hidden, she is taught the importance of privacy, if necessary given an understanding of the need to insulate herself from the intolerance of certain cultures."

Awareness of Society's Attitudes

The text of this website is saturated with offence-supportive cognitions that attempt to justify sexually abusive behaviour toward children. But the contributors also are aware of how society views them as "deviant" and "perverted". In an attempt to insulate themselves from this viewpoint the contributors acknowledge the need to hide their sexual preferences from an intolerant society.

FAQ: "Unfortunately, some western cultures have more or less designated the mother's sexual arousal during nursing as child sexual abuse. As a result, incestuous mothers need to insulate themselves from these negative forces challenging their family privacy."

FAQ: "We are to be made perverts by recognizing, accepting, and enjoying child sexuality."

FAQ: "We well understand that our motives are misunderstood, our passions suspect, and our activities often criminalized. Regrettably, we must guard our privacy with the utmost care."

Ability to be Incestuous

According to some researchers, there are barriers to disclosure that are specific to female-perpetrated abuse. Saradjian (1996) argues that female abusers tend to initiate the abuse of the child at an earlier age than male offenders, the abuse is more likely to be intra-familial and lasts for a longer period of time. This early onset and long duration can make disclosure more difficult. The Allen (1991) comparative study of male and female offenders found that 70% of female offender victims were immediate family members or close relatives in comparison to 59% of the male offender victims. It is hypothesized that this offender-victim relationship makes recognition and disclosure much more difficult (Denov, 2004; Elliott, 1997; Saradjian, 1996). The website clearly acknowledges that women are in a position to abuse children within the family,

and visitors to the site are given advice on how to make everyday activities with children (e.g., bathing, playing, napping, etc.) more sexual without attracting the attention of authorities.

FAQ: "When mothers cuddle and play with their children, the goal is to share pleasure together. Body to body! Caresses, kisses, tickling. Full body caresses, or massage. Kisses all over her body, avoiding no part, especially her vulva. Similarly with the son – full body intimacy, including penile contact."

The extract is from a section that discusses routine child care activities where a woman can take the opportunity to engage in sexual activity with a child. The advice provided falls under the following headings: nursing, bathing, hygiene tasks, greeting, carrying, sleeping, playing, comforting, and sex education. Women have greater leeway in their physical interactions with children than men do. This facilitates the underrecognition of female perpetrated abuse (Mendel, 1995).

Personal Factors

Research on problematic Internet use in people with a sexual interest in children has identified personal factors that may make an individual more susceptible to engaging in the inappropriate use of the Internet (Quayle & Taylor, 2003). A number of these were identified in the current analysis (Table 2).

The above themes comprise the category of personal factors and relevant quotes from the data have been cited here to illustrate each theme.

Dissatisfaction with current persona

K: "This site saved my life – I was going to commit suicide because of the thoughts I was having."

Early Sexualized Experiences

Research using semi-structured interviews noted that early sexualized experiences were present in the histories of people expressing a sexual interest in children (Quayle et al., 2000). An analysis of the personal stories in the present study shows that all of the contributors mention early sexual experiences; these are described in vivid detail by the women and are depicted as pleasurable.

V: "I am 21 years old, and for as long as I can think back I have been attracted to young girls, around 5–12 years old. Even when I was that age. I had a few sexual experiences as a young girl, around 7. [describes experiences in detail] . . . I am very attracted to men, [...] But I also am fascinated by young girls . . . Do you think it's because of my early experiences?"

Poor adolescent socialization

C: "By the time I was 11, I only had one true friend . . . I truly began to think I was ugly. And I began to get in trouble in school, fighting and smarting back at teachers, lying to my parents and making terrible grades . . . In the end, they placed me in a school for children who were emotionally handicapped or learning disabled. It was a common alternative during the late eighties, since no one truly understood ADD/ADHD."

Role of the Internet

Durkin (1997) argues that there are four ways in which people with a sexual interest may use the Internet: trading in child pornography, engaging in inappropriate communication with children, identifying children to molest, and corresponding with other paedophiles. The current article identified four themes that related to the role of the Internet (Table 2). These relate primarily to corresponding with other paedophiles. Durkin (1997) also examined a forum for male "boy-lovers" and concluded that these forums serve two

functions: a validation function and an information function.

Sense of community

The extract here supports the Durkin (1997) findings that child love forums serve two functions (i.e., information and validation). The quotation from B illustrates that the site serves a validation function because the women feel that sharing their stories and reading the stories of others validates their deviant sexual interest and provides them with a sense of community.

B: "have been looking for a community like this for years. I wasn't sure how prevalent "Girl Love" was, but with all the pedophilia "witch hunting" going on I'd always assumed my experiences would simply have to be hidden for all time except from the lucky few with whom I've shared love. Finally through the net (although it took quite a bit of searching!) I've found a group with whom I can share experiences and lend and receive support."

Others argue too that the convenience of the Internet and its assumed anonymity has contributed to an increasing and more diverse population of child pornography users who did not actively seek out such material via more traditional mediums (Burke et al., 2002).

Provides information

FAQ: "What is the purpose of this site? To inform the public and reduce prejudices against female girl lovers, children's sexuality and voluntary emotional and sexual relationships between girls and women. 2. To establish social contact and support for women who have emotional, sexual, juridical, or social problems related to lesbian paedophilia. 3. Creating a forum for the sharing of opinions and experiences relating to roles, identity, and life-style for women and girls who are attracted to each other. 4. To educate female girl lovers

about behaving in a responsible manner towards children. 5. To possibly engage in other issues relating to sexual politics and child politics. 6. Not to organize or be an intermediary in any kind of criminal activity."

This FAQ quotation states that the website serves an information function; as with male paedophilia websites this site provides users with information about novels, poetry, movies and other paedophile websites. This is also supported by Durkin's analysis of male child love forums.

Need for acceptance

Paedophiles have traditionally been a marginalized section of society; but, the Internet has facilitated the creating of online communities by these individuals. The existence of female paedophilia has received little recognition so this group has been particularly isolated. The website analysed demonstrates that these marginalized women can now go online, interact with like-minded individuals and feel that their sexual preferences are acceptable.

K: "I want to scream! I feel so accepting and loving of myself. I just wish many others would know about this site – the ones that are hurting because of their feelings toward children – and see that they are not alone."

Reinforces distorted cognitions

Paedophiles have adopted the Internet to legitimize, reinforce and facilitate their sexual interest in children (Durkin et al., 2006). The Internet provides instant justification for pro-offending behaviour (Quayle & Taylor, 2003).

FAQ: "[the website] is primarily a place where for female girl lovers to find information about the nature of their attraction to young girls and a place of mutual support for women, young and old, who are attracted to girls."

K: "I just wish that many others would know about this site, the ones that are hurting because of their feelings toward children, and see that they are not alone."

Burke et al. (2002) have argued that online interactions provide immediate feedback that result in powerful reinforcement and that the longer the fantasies are maintained the increased likelihood of progressing to contact offending. Both the FAQ page and the personal story from K are examples of how the Internet facilitates communication between like-minded individuals, thus reinforcing the cognitive distortions of a traditionally marginalized population. The FAQ page in particular presents many arguments to justify adult child sexual relationships, thus fortifying the cognitive distortions of those visiting the site. The social learning theory of offending behaviour suggests that individuals who receive support for their deviant fantasies may move from contemplation to action (Stermac et al., 1990). Thus, the impact of this type of interaction should not be underestimated.

Summary of findings

One of the purposes of the present study was to establish the fact that deviant arousal patterns have a role in female sexual offending and to identify how the analysis fits with current literature. The conclusion of a literature review by Wakefield, Rogers, and Underwager (1990) states that "women in childcare roles are sometimes vulnerable to sexual acting out patterns" – even professional research compounds the notion that female perpetrators are victims of circumstance rather than sexual deviants. But the analysis of data in the current research shows clearly that there is a strong sexual component to the paedophilic activities of at least some women as well as men. The female contributors to this website discuss the sexual motivation for, and sexual

gratification from, their interactions with children. The notion that female paedophiles act only in cooperation with men, or that they are somehow victims themselves, must be challenged. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (Bunting, 2005), in their review of child protective services in the United Kingdom, concluded that the similarities between male and female sexual abusers need to be recognized. This research has identified those similarities particularly in relation to cognitive distortions. A number of researchers have highlighted recognition barriers and their effect on how society views women who have a sexual interest in children. These have also been identified in the current analysis, where contributors discuss ways in which women can take advantage of their greater leeway in their interactions with children.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to analyse the content of a female paedophilia website. The thematic analysis generated five categories: sexual motivation, the role of the Internet, cognitive distortions, personal factors, and recognition barriers. These categories were then analysed in relation to the current literature on female sexual offending.

A number of typologies of female offenders exist, but it has been argued that these have neglected to include a category that recognizes deviant sexual interest. Others too have stated that there is a denial of female sexual aggression in the literature (e.g., Mendel, 1995). But the present study has identified deviant sexual interest in children, as the category of sexual motivation has demonstrated.

There has been a rise in the research literature on how people engage with the Internet, for sexual purposes, but this has largely focused on male interactions. Durkin (1997) concluded that paedophile

forums and the Internet serve two functions: a validation function and an information function. Paedophilic websites provide information and support to those experiencing difficulties regarding their feelings, while also providing a discussion forum where communities of individuals (in this case women) with similar thoughts and feelings can validate their experiences. Historically, women may have had difficulty obtaining child images/erotica but presently Internet paedophilia is widespread. This may affect the categories of people assessing the material. It is now much easier: they can share stories, meet others and use the Internet to communicate with potential victims. The current research has highlighted this new trend of women engaging with the Internet to validate their sexual interest in children. These women may be expressing a fantasy but there is a plethora of research available that highlights the link between fantasy and sexual offending. Drieschner and Lange (1999) argue that by entertaining deviant sexual fantasies during masturbation, sexual arousal becomes conditioned to these fantasies.

In addition to investigating the presence of a sexual motivation for female paedophilic activities, the present study also analysed the use of cognitive distortions by women with a sexual interest in children. It is not clear whether cognitive distortions are an aetiological factor in child sexual abuse or whether they serve as post-hoc rationalizations for offending behaviour (Marshall et al., 1990). It has been well established, however, that cognitive distortions are utilized by male offenders; this knowledge has informed treatment programmes for male paedophiles. However, the same has not been true thus far in treatment plans for women apprehended for sexual crimes against children. It needs to be recognized that at least a percentage of female offenders report similar distorted cognitions to their

male counterparts. This knowledge should be used in the design and implementation of assessment and treatment programmes. Common cognitive distortions included the belief that children are sexual and that inter-generational sex is natural. Incestuous paedophilia was believed to be a responsibility of parenthood, a tool for sexual education. Additionally, some of the women contributing to this website put children in the role of seducer and described how the children they had been involved with initiated sexual contact. One cognitive distortion common in the text analysed was the proposed difference between male and female paedophiles. This differentiation was used as a justification for the feelings and actions of the website contributors. While male paedophiles were condemned as cruel misogynists, women with a sexual interest in children were hailed as nurturers and labelled "girl lovers" rather than abusers or paedophiles. Coupled with this distorted belief that female paedophiles are less harmful than male paedophiles are the recognition barriers that allow women access to potential victims.

The recognition barriers highlighted in this article function to protect women with a sexual interest in children. Women can avoid detection in many cases, and this is difficult to control because they generally fulfil caregiver roles, whether as teacher, parent or childcare worker. Everyday activities such as feeding, bathing and playing can be used by female adults for sexual gratification, but it is impossible to monitor day-to-day interactions, and also it is impossible sometimes to distinguish between affectionate care-taking and inappropriate abuse of power. People assume that the incest taboo is so strong that it is very rarely broken. This over-estimation extends to disbelief that mothers could ever become sexually involved with their children (Mendel, 1995). There is a risk that children may not be taken seriously when

they report inappropriate sexual behaviour by a woman because there is a societal belief system that inhibits the recognition of women as sexual deviants and perpetrators of abuse. Historically, women have been regarded as nurturers. Despite growing evidence that women are committing sexual offences against children, in many cases, both lay and professional communities have yet to accept this fact (Bunting, 2005).

Finally, the analysis identified a category labelled "personal factors", which consisted of three emergent themes: dissatisfaction with current persona, early sexualized experiences, and poor adolescent socialization. Research on problematic Internet use in people with a sexual interest in children has identified these personal factors and argues that these may make an individual more susceptible to engaging in the inappropriate use of the Internet (Quayle & Taylor, 2003). Quayle et al. (2000) conducted research on male Internet offenders utilizing semi-structured interviews and noted that the personal factors referred to above were present in the histories of people expressing a sexual interest in children. The present analysis identifies the same factors present for the female contributors. It has been argued that in order to move forward in the area of female sexual offending, the similarities between male and female abusers need to be recognized (Bunting, 2005).

Clearly there is much to be learned about female sexual offending and many limitations have been identified in current thinking. This analysis has shown evidence that female paedophiles may display similar behaviours and thinking styles to male paedophiles; this may mean that clinical practice needs to be fashioned accordingly. Assessment and treatment should acknowledge deviant sexual interest and address cognitive distortions that may facilitate offending behaviour.

Professionals need to be aware of recognition barriers that allow women to have unrestricted flexibility in their

interactions with children. And finally, much research is required into how women with a sexual interest in children are engaging with the Internet and what effect this may have on their risk of committing a contact offence.

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