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Internet sexual offending from an anthropological perspective: analysing offender perceptions of online spaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on anthropological research focused on users of online child sexual exploitation material. The empirical foundations are 17 months of participant-observation in UK group programmes for offenders, and semi-structured interviews with group participants and programme staff. While explanations for offending often emphasise individual-psychological characteristics of offenders, I suggest attention should also be given to offender perceptions and constructions of online spaces. For many in the sample, decision-making and the choice to view material were influenced by perceived boundaries and associated altered features of social interaction, said to demarcate online environments from other contexts. Participants perceived online offending spaces as lacking the interaction and potential gaze of others that normally reinforce social norms. This resulted in a feeling of freedom to break norms of childhood and sexuality online, contrasting offline society where such norms are actively reinforced. The article therefore localises factors for Internet offending in social processes.

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Introduction

The proliferation and use of online child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) represents a growing concern. With increased uptake of Internet and digital technologies, this material has become easier to create, share, and find (Taylor & Quayle, 2003; Wortley & Smallbone, 2012). In the UK specifically, it is estimated that 50,000 individuals view CSEM (Jütte, Bentley, Miller, & Jetha, 2014, p. 7). Of particular concern, there is increased opportunity to obtain CSEM with decreased risk (Seto, 2013), suggesting "… little doubt that the Internet has allowed many individuals who otherwise would not have used child pornography now to do so" (Wortley, 2012, p. 192).

How do we explain increases in CSEM usage? Researchers have largely focused on individual-psychological factors, often comparing Internet versus contact offender characteristics. For example, studies have reported on psychological profiles (e.g. Elliott, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009), psychological problems (e.g. Webb, Craissati, & Keen, 2007), antisocial or psychopathic tendencies (e.g. Babchishin, Hanson, & Hermann, 2011; Babchishin, Hanson, & VanZuylen, 2015), loneliness and emotional identification with children (e.g. Bates & Metcalf, 2007), victim empathy, pro-offending attitudes, and impulsivity (e.g. Elliott, Beech, & Mandeville-Norden, 2013), and histories of mental illness, substance abuse, and/or violence (e.g. Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2005, 2011, 2012).

While these perspectives provide valuable insight, the purpose of this article is to move away from a psychological model, foster cross-disciplinary dialogue, and look more in depth into online

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environments, offenders' perceptions of them, and consequences for offending. By employing the anthropological approach, which prioritises grasping and reporting participants' insider perspectives, the paper demonstrates the unique influence of Internet usage upon this crime. A potential factor for CSEM offending then lies in users' perceptions of online offending spaces, which revolve around the social processes of interaction and surveillance. "Perceptions" are defined here as the ways in which online spaces are interpreted and conceptualised in the context of offending.

The information in this paper is founded on one primary question: how does looking at CSEM fit into participants' lives, and how does the Internet facilitate this? I begin by discussing the research methodology and sample. What follows is an analysis of participants' perceptions of online spaces through the application of anthropological theory, with particular attention to boundaries, social interaction, and social surveillance. The consequences of such perceptions for participants' offending are then demonstrated, with further attention to social norms and morality. Throughout the article, "participants", "group members", and "the men" are used interchangeably to refer to those in the sample, and when block quotes are separated, this indicates statements by different participants.

Methodology and participants

An anthropological study of CSEM users required an in-depth methodology departing from the current scholarly base. At present, a majority of research on this topic is undertaken in correctional, clinical, or other post-court sentencing locations (e.g. Bourke & Hernandez, 2009; Middleton, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009; Quayle & Taylor, 2003; Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard, 2006), and/or uses crime data as a primary source (e.g. Eke, Seto, & Williams, 2011; Endrass et al., 2009; Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011; Wolak et al., 2005, 2011, 2012). Methodology is largely quantitative, most often statistical analyses from official records (e.g. conviction rates), questionnaires, clinical interviews, or experiments (e.g. penile responses to stimuli). Such studies produce particular types of results, most frequently inferences about offender demographics, rates of reoffending, and psychological variables; rarely does one gain a glimpse of offenders' worldviews. A recent exception is a review article of CSEM users' "Implicit Theories" by Bartels and Merdian (2016); however, reviewed studies come from the existing research base. Much less is known about offenders outside post-sentencing settings, and those who have not been convicted and/or may never reach the later stages of the criminal justice process. While one anthropologist (Waldram, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012) and one sociologist (Lacombe, 2008, 2013) have engaged in comprehensive fieldwork with sexual offenders, their studies have not been particular to CSEM users, and both were in correctional settings.

In essence, there is a need to further engage with offenders directly, qualitatively, and in new locales to produce a diverse research base, which was a direct motivation for my methodological and analytical choices. Researchers should actively listen, watch, and regard offenders' perceptions as vital for study. In gaining such knowledge, potential explanations of why and how they offend, and the root issues, are better informed. To address this, I studied a subset of offenders at an earlier point in the justice process through extensive fieldwork. This provided a different perspective from those "in the system" for a longer period, and by using anthropological methods, allowed for long-term engagement in which I heard participants' statements, watched their actions, and analysed their perceptions.

Fieldwork, methods, limitations, and assets

Fieldwork took place at two UK sites over 17 months, both managed by the same institution. The primary methods were participant-observation in group programmes for individuals arrested for CSEM crimes, and one- to two-hour semi-structured interviews with these individuals. The programme consisted of weekly sessions with between six and nine participants and two facilitators, who led group-based discussions. Importantly, it was largely pre-trial and not mandated, thus

representing a novel setting and sample. Each week, I would attend sessions, observe, and speak when prompted; however, I did not alter content or facilitate. My role as a researcher was known to all, partaking in the study was entirely voluntary, and each participant gave independent informed consent for my involvement in groups and again for interviews. All participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, along with the promise that I would not seek them out beyond the groups, and therefore details that could reveal their identities are omitted from this paper. By conclusion of fieldwork, I attended close to 100 sessions in 10 distinct groups with 81 offender participants, entailing 10 full programmes. I conducted 31 interviews with group members, and a further 15 interviews and two focus groups with programme staff.

Participant-observation was particularly useful for understanding dominant patterns across groups. Information was gathered by taking field notes in sessions (these were not recorded at the request of all involved). In interviews, I then expanded upon information from groups, corroborated and triangulated what was said, and gained richer data specific to particular participants. Interviews were semi-structured so that participants could convey what they felt was vital information; however, to meaningfully compare data, interviews also followed a basic guideline of 24 questions in five sections: background information (e.g. "Could you tell me a bit about your life story?"); the Internet and pornography (e.g. "What do you view as the main function(s) of the Internet?"); children and childhood (e.g. "How would you define a child?"); insights into offending (e.g. "What do you think were the main factors that led to your offending?"); and current circumstances (e.g. "What is your experience of the justice system?"). Staff interviews followed the same guideline, adapted to reflect their role (e.g. "Based on your experience, what do you think are important factors that lead individuals to offending?"). Focus groups concentrated on the development, goals, and evaluation of the programme (e.g. "How do you think this programme differs from others?"). Unlike participant-observation, interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

I did not test any preconceived hypotheses or theories during fieldwork, but rather took an exploratory position allowing the data to drive analysis and theoretical development. Analysis focused on emergent themes coming out of the data. Eighteen overarching themes were eventually determined by coding transcripts and field notes according to both frequency and consistency across groups and interviews.

The methodological decisions produced some limitations, as well as assets. I had a relatively small sample, which was skewed because the programme was self-selecting, and thus it is not my aim to put forth generalisable conclusions. There is also a potential limitation because I cannot verify what the men said in comparison to forensic evidence (Glasgow, 2010). Third, outside of interviews, I was limited by programme content and foci, and therefore the context influenced the research process. It is also worth noting that because research took place after arrest, data represent the men's *perceptions about their perceptions* as opposed to knowledge in the present. Information could not be gathered when they were offending, so participants instead provided the best available reconstructions after having had time to consider their actions. Lastly, it could be argued that timing was a limitation: because groups were pre-trial, participants may have filtered information (e.g. admitting further offences). However, the purpose of this study was not to evaluate participants' claims, nor to determine other offences. Rather, I endeavoured to grasp what participants conveyed about the Internet at the time of research, which was corroborated through consistency at different periods, locations, and between people with no feasible way of knowing one another.

The main advantage, likely not possible in another setting and without such limitations, was that groups were places in which participants were encouraged to talk and had already agreed to do so. In prison or investigative settings, it may be difficult to inspire participants to speak due to fear of repercussions from inmates or judicial authorities (Waldram, 2007b, 2012). The men in fieldwork groups were living in society and not allowed to contact other members outside the programme. Moreover, groups were a safe place in which personal and sensitive information could be shared. In short, using anthropological methods, I became immersed in a space where participants felt safe to divulge information, resulting in rich data.

Sample

CSEM offenders are a heterogeneous population (Jewkes, 2010; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006, 2012). To date, the only major consistent finding (which may be a result of selection effects) is that they are almost always male, and often Caucasian (Aslan & Edelmann, 2014; Babchishin et al., 2011; CEOP, 2012; Faust, Bickart, Renaud, & Camp, 2015; Middleton, Beech, & Mandeville-Norden, 2005; Quayle, Lööf, & Palmer, 2008; Seto, 2013; Taylor & Quayle, 2003; Wolak et al., 2005, 2011, 2012; Wortley & Smallbone, 2012). Many also appear to be "apparently normal men in normal families" (Harrison, 2006, p. 368), perhaps best described by one participant reflecting on his impressions of fellow group members:

> … you might think, "well he, he might be the bloke that serves me in the post office. Or he might be the bloke who, who runs my fruit through the till at Tesco". You know and you, you always imagine it'll be a load of blokes going, "yeah! Yeah! I want kids!"

Based on information from groups and interviews, the sample reflected both heterogeneity and research consistency. All participants were male, and all but two were Caucasian. They were clustered between 30 and 60 years old; however, there were some in their 20s and 70s, suggesting large age variability. They came from different backgrounds and had varied personalities and states of mind. Some were lacking confidence and depressed, some were recovering addicts, while others were boisterous and assured. Some came from working-class families, while others were wealthier. Their professions varied from computer programmers, to electricians, to lecturers, to teachers, to nurses, to taxi drivers, to servicemen, to civil servants, to unemployed. In terms of families and significant others, 58 (71.6%) had current or ex-partners (defined as wives, husbands, or long-term companions), in comparison to 19 without, and four unknown. Thirty-six had children (44.4%), 39 did not, and six were unknown, with approximately half of those without children below their mid-30s, suggesting a possibility of future families. Eight of the 81 men also disclosed their own abuse as children.

Regarding contact with the justice system, most did not have criminal records. Of the 81 participants, one had a previous conviction for contact offences against a child, and two others had allegations against them that were being investigated during fieldwork. One had been previously convicted of voyeurism, while one other had been previously arrested for sexual assault against an adult. Two had concurrently been arrested for online grooming, and five were second-time CSEM offenders. To my knowledge, the remaining 71 were arrested for sexual offences for the first time, and for CSEM only. All had been apprehended for possessing and viewing, fewer for making (e.g. copying to USB drives) and distributing, and none for producing CSEM. They were at various stages in the justice process, from being arrested, to charges, to their fourth bail over 18 months, to occasionally receiving a sentence. Two men had to leave the programme because they received prison sentences, while two others left voluntarily. The remaining 77 saw the programme through.

Perceptions of online spaces and CSEM offending

Although those in the sample were in many ways heterogeneous, there were some striking similarities in their accounts of offending. The remainder of the article will delve into these similarities to demonstrate how perceptions of changes in online social interaction, social surveillance, and norms had influence upon CSEM usage.

The personal factors that may lead individuals towards problematic Internet use are vast, and largely out of the scope of this article. Participants cited a multitude of social and emotional issues such as depression, loneliness, stress, difficulty with past abuse, low self-esteem, and a lack of agency, which they claimed led to offending. In response to these, some used online pornography and CSEM, along with masturbation, as an attempt to escape or mend their lives, closely resembling Bartels and Merdian's (2016) "Unhappy World" Implicit Theory. Through collecting, others found joy

or tried to exercise control and power in a life they saw as meaningless. Relationship difficulties and a lack of interpersonal intimacy also featured in the men's narratives, with pornography and CSEM being used as an apparent substitute. Admitted sexual preference for children was also present for a minority of the sample (less than 10%). These factors were described by participants as exerting influence in different ways: some claimed they *led* to offending, while others said offending was escapism *from* these issues.

Similar influences are echoed in other research reporting on offender motivations (e.g. Beech, Elliott, Birgden, & Findlater, 2008; Glasgow, 2010; Merdian, Curtis, Thakker, Wilson, & Boer, 2013; Merdian, Wilson, Thakker, Curtis, & Boer, 2013; Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Quayle, Vaughan, & Taylor, 2006; Seto, Reeves, & Jung, 2010; Sheldon & Howitt, 2007; Surjadi, Bullens, van Horn, & Bogaerts, 2010; Taylor & Quayle, 2003; Winder & Gough, 2010; Winder, Gough, & Seymour-Smith, 2015), particularly that which examines CSEM offending as an improper response to reduce stress or cope with anxiety, depression, anger, loneliness, poor intimacy skills, lack of control, and lack of relationships (e.g. Beech & Elliott, 2012; Laulik, Allam, & Sheridan, 2007; Marshall, O'Brien, Marshall, Booth, & Davis, 2012; Middleton et al., 2005, 2009; Middleton, Elliott, & Mandeville-Norden, 2006; Quayle et al., 2006; Seto, 2013). A sexual element is often central to this, as masturbating and fantasising to online material is distracting and temporarily makes people feel positive (Seto, 2013).

Also prevalent was a narrative about pornography progression leading to CSEM:

> … I started looking at pornography, sort of legal adult pornography online. Gradually over time, that went from sort of legal teens, sort of down through, into illegal stuff … and for a long time I was sort of kept the age to be 16 … And gradually, it became, under that and then sort of went down to sort of 13–12, where it kind of stopped.

Participants may have first used legal pornography to alleviate boredom, or because it was thrilling. They may have used it to respond to social, emotional, or relationship issues. Again, a sexual element was often key, as they frequently then described "curiosity" and excitement about CSEM, desensitisation and increased sexual interest over time (also described by Bensimon, 2007; Quayle & Taylor, 2003; Seto, 2013; Wortley, 2012), and continued offending: "I got to the point where I was seeing so much porn, it became completely meaningless". This was influenced by two aspects of Cooper's (1998) "Triple A" engine of online sexuality: accessibility and affordability. Ease of access provided by the Internet gave opportunity to view all types of pornography: " … it's easy to access a wider, variety of, pornography, than you could, you know, just going to the local shop".

All of the above are of course important in understanding CSEM offending, and may have contributed, led to it, or fostered its continuation. However, these factors do not necessarily in themselves fully explain why participants continued to view CSEM. As one programme facilitator told me, "I think they're in there, absolutely. But you know, I've been bored, isolated, low self-esteem … Whatever you want to mention there. I've been all of those things. But I've never thought about that [offending]". Furthermore, while accessibility and affordability are integral, these do not in themselves lead to offending. The online environment creates opportunity (Wortley, 2012); however, individuals choose to engage with CSEM. To better understand this, it is therefore imperative to analyse the perceptions of online spaces that fostered participants' engagement with CSEM, and how these relate to social interaction and social norms.

Offender dichotomisation of the online/offline

In early social scientific studies of the Internet (e.g. Rheingold, 1993; Stone, 1991; Turkle, 1995), a prominent line of inquiry revolved around anonymity, identity construction, and fluidity of the self. Conclusions often suggested that in online spaces, users escaped the shackles of their offline bodies and associated expectations of everyday life (Hardey, 2002). It was often argued that anonymity allowed people to become disembodied, leaving behind offline deterministic aspects such as ethnicity and gender in favour of self-authorship, making users architects of new "selves" and challenging notions of universal and stable identity (Turkle, 1995). This body of work suggested that in using

the Internet, users could in a sense become "different people". To begin understanding participants' perceptions, it is first relevant to discuss their dichotomisation as it relates to this notion.

Throughout fieldwork, sessions were filled with statements in which participants described a firm distinction between online and offline worlds and "selves". One characterised offending as "lockdown": "Compartmentalise it, that's over, that's happened … I'm a different person now". "Jekyll and Hyde" was mentioned in four distinct collectives, and participants would tell their groups, "Your online character would do things that you would never dream of doing offline" and, "You ask yourself 'what would this person do?' as opposed to 'what would I do?'" Some claimed their online personas were fundamentally different with statements like, "It was two different people. I just want to kill one of them and go back to the other completely". Participants essentially described dichotomous online "selves" that contrasted who they "were" in the "real" world.

However, anthropological critiques of early social science of the Internet suggest that activities undertaken online, constructions produced there, and "identities" in various online spaces often tie back to the physical body and/or aspects found in the offline realm (Axel, 2006; Barendregt, 2013; Hart, 2004; Katz & Rice, 2002; Kirmayer, Raikhel, & Rahimi, 2013; Miller & Slater, 2000; Sprondel, Breyer, & Wehrle, 2011; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Logic also suggests that while users can act or represent themselves differently online, one does not literally "change" who one is; it is the same physical person sitting behind the screen. With these ideas in mind, a more fine-grained analysis of participants' CSEM usage suggests that instead of "becoming different people", the sentiments above reflect more complex perceptions of online spaces related to boundaries, interaction, and social surveillance.

Anthropological theory and the construction of boundaries

There are two theoretical concepts that are essential in elaborating the complexity of participants' perceptions of online spaces. The first comes from French philosopher/historian Michel Foucault. In his famed work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discussed prison systems and their effects. He described the Panopticon, a prison design in which there is a central guard tower and cells surrounding it. With this design, inmates can be seen at all times by guards and *may* be watched; however, prisoners are unable to see the guards and thus never know *if* surveillance is occurring (Foucault, 1991). Foucault (1991) argued that in this system, individuals *subject themselves to norms without the need for force*, which he described as "discipline"; in having the *potential* of being watched, inmates never know if this is occurring, and therefore alter their actions in case of surveillance. This form of interaction is not only applicable to prisons, but is a metaphor that Foucault (1991, p. 216) asserts can be applied to almost indefinite situations. The idea is less concerned with *state* surveillance than *social* monitoring of people by other people; it is about potential actions by individuals (Nealon, 2008), and suggests that compliance with social norms comes from "within the social body" (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). In short, people may obey particular norms and not break them because of the *potential of being seen by others*.

The second set of theoretical ideas come directly from anthropology, and more specifically describe boundaries. Anthropologists suggest that "the Internet" is not one homogenous entity, but rather, is multiple and differing spaces constructed by users in different contexts (Miller & Horst, 2013; Miller & Slater, 2000). While the online and offline are not dichotomous (Miller & Slater, 2000; Sprondel et al., 2011; Wilson & Peterson, 2002), users create boundaries between online/offline worlds, and also between different online spaces (Boellstorff, 2013). It follows that norms in given parts of cyberspace relate to, but also may differ from, other contexts. Social norms and forms of interaction may be different between parts of the Internet (e.g. Facebook versus an anonymous message board) or the offline world (e.g. Facebook versus a business meeting). These differences are dependent upon how users perceive and construct various online and offline spaces (Budka & Kremser, 2004; Slater, 2002). In sum, online spaces have emergent social realities influenced by the boundaries people create and perceive (Boellstorff, 2013; Escobar, 1994).

Particularly relevant to boundary construction is anonymity, which rounds off Cooper's (1998) "Triple A". The Internet is unique because it allows people to access material that may be more risky to obtain offline, potentially making users feel safe to engage in actions they "might not dare to" otherwise (Jewkes & Sharp, 2003, p. 9). As one participant described, " … the big difference in as much, you know, it's much more anonymous. You can go and look at pornography on the Internet without really anyone, knowing". For the men, the fact that they could experiment without seeing others was vital in creating boundaries:

> I mean it's [Internet] taken away the need, if you like, to put on the rain, you know the dirty mac and walk down to the newsagents and, slip a magazine behind, behind the newspaper … quickly buy it and then slip it in your pocket and walk, and walk off, you know.

Participants were in truth not anonymous, as they were arrested. However, this is not relevant for the analysis, as many *perceived* a sense of anonymity regardless of the "fact" that Internet monitoring is a reality. The most common pattern related to this was an association between anonymity and security when looking at pornography, which one participant likened to being cut-off in a car:

> … if you're driving a car, you know, and you're going down the road and someone cuts you up … You might react very differently, if, if they walked in front of you in a, in a supermarket … Because you're feeling perhaps safe, cause you're, in a, in a tin can, you know, something like that.

Related are notions of distancing and detachment. Online, users are not forced to engage, but rather move in and out of social situations if and when they please (Amichai-Hamburger, 2007; Gackenbach & von Stackelberg, 2007). A potential result is a perception where "typing is more distancing than talking" (Ross, 2005, p. 347). While being detached, the Internet also provides immediate feedback (Burke, Sowerbutts, Blundell, & Sherry, 2002) and rapid access to pornography (Taylor & Quayle, 2008). This means that one can be detached while also getting a "quick hit". For participants, this aided the construction of boundaries through a perception of the computer as a partition between abuse of children and the farther step of viewing, marked by statements such as, " … looking, through a, a window at, a, a, the, again the same thing happening in, real life, I suppose as a picture of something happening … I guess that's the difference really. It's that one step away from it". In line with the anthropological theory, these elements of anonymity, distancing, and detachment demonstrate that there are opportunities to construct boundaries related to online spaces.

Boundaries of computers, times, solitariness, places, and "realness"

The boundaries constructed by participants differentiated particular online spaces, and circumstances when engaging these spaces, from the offline world and its set of social norms and moral codes. The first set of boundaries separated what was done in certain online contexts, as well as on which computers. For some, offending was only on a specific computer: "That computer was just purely for that. And my other computer was the computer I allowed people to access and do whatever they needed to on it". Actions taken on the Internet were also sometimes contrasted, such as social networking versus offending: " … online, I'd even separate normal Internet use, Facebook things like that, and offending".

Boundaries were further constructed through temporality. Offending was often confined to specific times, usually at night:

> … when I was out I wasn't thinking, um, "oh, that's, that's, that's a nice looking child", or "I'd like to do stuff with that kid". Um, I, it was just like, this stuff only existed in these dark hours of the night [when online].

> … it would be late at night. When everybody was asleep. The children in bed, she [wife] was in bed, and that was it.

Very much connected to time was offending alone: " … it was a solitary activity. I only, I only did this when my wife wasn't in the house, because being at home on my own, off sick, depressed … fed up with watching daytime TV, I'd go online". This solitariness further contributed to feelings of safety. Anonymity was felt online, but also when nobody was present to catch the men offline, and thus

offending could continue: " … it became about it when I was alone by myself. And, I knew I had the freedom to go and download". While it is possible that offending at certain times and when alone was primarily a strategy to avoid detection for some, this nevertheless created boundaries: nighttime and solitariness were clearly demarcated from other times and places.

The final aspect related to boundary creation was places in the home, within which offending was localised:

> You confined it to one room of the house, you know, just to my bedroom. And everything outside it is … has got nothing to do with that.

> … particularly if, if I was in, in a room where there wasn't really anybody else that could see me, I could possibly look at, be looking at images every day.

By creating such boundaries, the shame, guilt, and risk associated with offending could be perceived as contained online, marked by statements in which participants described the arenas that such boundaries separated as distinct:

> … yes it was completely separate … from the rest of my life, yes. Um, you know it's that dirty little secret I had … [snaps] switch off, [snaps], back to normal.

> During the day I was myself. At nighttime I was not myself.

This meant that online offending spaces were not "real", whereas offline social contexts were "real" and required adherence to social rules:

> Cause one's normal life, and the other one isn't. One is, is just sat in front of a computer screen, just you and a computer screen, and, uh, I considered them both totally different.

> There's a kind of unreality with the spectacle on the screen … the whole screen has elements of unreality.

Ultimately, I suggest that in creating boundaries and claiming online offending spaces were not "real", the men perceived such spaces to be missing key elements of social interaction and surveillance that normally reinforce norms. This is the most vital aspect of their perceptions that fostered continued engagement with CSEM.

Online offending spaces as lacking interaction and potential social surveillance

By constructing the boundaries above, participants perceived online offending spaces as arenas in which they were less likely to be watched, both online and via their circumstances of offline usage. Returning to Foucault's (1991) Panopticon metaphor, online offending contexts were said to have less or no social interaction, meaning social penalty was less likely because *the potential of being watched was significantly lower*. Thus, the men were free to violate social norms and engage in prohibited sexual actions because the usual level of social surveillance did not appear to apply.

Anonymity, distancing, and detachment played a particularly important role in influencing the perception that the men were not being watched *online*: " … it [the Internet] was certainly a good thing because, for me I could, um, I, I didn't have to go and buy pornography in a magazine, um, in a shop, which I'd been very very embarrassed and ashamed about doing". In offending alone, at certain times, and in specific rooms, the men perceived the potential gaze of others to also be eliminated *offline*; they offended in places and at times unlikely to be interrupted.

These elements then created a perceived freedom to break norms of childhood and sexuality online, representing a contrasting relationship to an offline society where such norms are actively reinforced. To apply the term from Foucault (1991), online offending spaces were *less disciplined*. Without the potential for being watched either online or offline, there was freedom to "do anything you want" because one is "in your own little bubble" *without social relations*:

> Because it's, it's all at your fingertips, you just do anything you want on a computer can't you? And, it sorta detaches you from the real world I believe. It just puts you in your own little bubble, your own little tiny little world, devoid of everything else that's going on.

Specific to communication when online, participants perceived a lack of interaction, signals, and responses, resulting in a feeling of less need for empathy and responsibility. For example, in an exercise with his group, one man said that he did not feel empathetic when offending because "it's not a social situation" and "nothing comes back at you". In response, another noted, "I don't think that in everyday life we lack empathy, just in a specific context". This lack of social contact meant that, "You see it as a virtual world, not the real world. It's just the Internet". This "fantasy realm where normal rules don't apply" was again a perceived space where offline social rules were not enforced, and self-policing therefore decreased. During a group exercise, one participant summarised this perfectly when he said, "I think you can just remove all the barriers. No one is looking, you are on your own, and you can make up the rules".

These findings differ from research reporting *increased* online social interaction as a motivation for offending. Such research posits that offending can be promoted for those who communicate with like-minded others, and that interaction can reinforce sexual interest in children, for example, by attempting to justify offending through portraying adult/child relations as natural and loving (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010; Merdian, Curtis, et al., 2013; O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010; Pritchard, Watters, & Spiranovic, 2011; Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Sinclair & Sugar, 2005). The majority in this study did not describe communicating with others as a motivation; in fact, some saw this as a line they were not willing to cross. However, this does not discount the results of researchers above, but instead further confirms the heterogeneity of this population: increased interaction is likely central for some offenders, while a lack of interaction could be key for others, and understanding how both exert influence is important.

A final theme speaking further to a lack of interaction and surveillance was a perceived absence of Internet regulation. Participants believed that "there is no governing body" and "no one takes responsibility for what's on there". The result was "absolute freedoms without boundaries", and because of this freedom, "Anything goes". One man summarised this in discussing consequences for his morals, which is the subject of the final sub-section:

> The control, um, is in the hands of the individual who's sitting at the keyboard. So if your, if your moral compass or your, your, your attitudes get skewed, it's very easy, as experience has taught us and that's why we're here, um, to go down the wrong path.

Moral flexibility

In the context of spaces perceived to be free from interaction and social surveillance, participants then became flexible with their morals. They described a state of anomie, which contrasted the moral certainty when offline and subject to the potential stare of others:

> … this frontier [the Internet] that's just wild and lawless. It's like being, you know, in the Wild West. There's just so much out there, and you can just get lost in it … when you're in that bubble it's like a very strange virtual world that you're in, and, and it becomes, you lose track of time, you lose track of place, but mostly importantly I think you lose track of morality.

Participants described many processes of moral flexibility. For some, the Internet was used to "feed immoral behaviour". For others, they " … found that my morals … they just eroded, that's the only way I could put it". Some reflected boundaries by telling me how they were able to uphold morals offline while also offending: "I felt it was okay to look at pictures on the screen and [sigh] then go out and almost be moralistic". For others, morality converged with offline "reality" in hopes for the future. For example, in discussing a job review, one man told his group, " … three out of those people described me as a very moral person. Which, uh, brought me up short because I don't think I am. Otherwise I wouldn't be here".

Thus, the men were not "different people" online. Rather, they were reflecting a construction of online offending spaces as bounded, lacking social interaction, and missing potential social surveillance, which provided opportunity for moral flexibility where " … a potential offender in a precriminal

situation can move to become a real offender, through points and clicking on a link" (Taylor & Quayle, 2008, p. 122).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the importance of understanding offender perceptions of online spaces, and how these potentially influence CSEM usage and users. Utilising anthropology and Foucauldian theory, I first illustrated that by feeling anonymous, distanced, and detached, and through offending on certain computers, at particular times in particular parts of the home, and being alone, participants constructed boundaries that contested the "reality" of offending spaces. I then suggested that through these boundaries, participants perceived online offending environments as having less social interaction enforcing appropriate behaviour and less likelihood of surveillance by others. Therefore, they felt free to break norms and be flexible with their morals, going against something they "knew was wrong" with less fear of social punishment normally present offline. Most critically, this roots an explanation for offending in social processes, as participants' perceptions centred on interaction and social surveillance.

I hope to have provided insight into offending factors, choices, and decisions, and to stimulate a conversation about the centrality of perceptions of online spaces for some CSEM users' decision-making. Going forward, more research is needed to test if similarities are present across larger and more heterogeneous samples. If so, perhaps future treatment and prevention efforts can address such perceptions in an attempt to deter the decision to (re)offend. In a larger manner, perhaps the upsurge in CSEM usage since Internet popularisation partly represents an increase in people exploring a taboo in spaces perceived to be safer, devoid of social relations, and missing key elements of social surveillance that often reinforce normative behaviour. For now, I ultimately hope to have demonstrated that anthropology can provide an additional perspective to offending research, helping to explain why and how people engage with CSEM.

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