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The use of online technology in the modus operandi of female sex offenders

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Abstract In this review we examine the methods by which female sexual offenders may use communications technologies such as the internet in their offending behaviours. We outline the context of sexual abuse of children both by female perpetrators and by those using the internet. The topic is examined based on three criminogenic areas highlighted by Lambert and O’Halloran: (1) interpersonal/socialization deficits; (2) deviant sexual arousal; and (3) cognitive distortions and recognition barriers. We include elements drawn from anonymized clinical cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse of children involving online technology. We present the argument that the characteristics of this population are likely to suggest that clinicians assessing cases of this nature may find it more useful to refer to the literature on female sexual offenders rather than that of male internet offenders.

Keywords Internet; child sexual abuse; female sex offender; grooming; child pornography

Introduction

There has been a recent increase in both public and professional awareness of two under-developed topics within sex offender research: (1) the use of internet-related technology to facilitate the sexual abuse of children; and (2) the sexual abuse of children by female perpetrators. Although the knowledge-base in both of these areas is developing, research into the use of internet technology has concentrated primarily on use by male perpetrators, and research into the modus operandi of female sexual offenders has focused on offline victimization. Thus far, there has been little discussion of the potential uses of internet technology by female perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

Female sex offenders

As Bunting (2005) notes, the small number of females detected and subsequently convicted of child sexual abuse fuels a misconception that it is so rare a concept as to become non-existent. On average, conviction rates and victimization studies from a variety of countries suggest that female sex offenders (FSOs) represent around 4–5% of all sexual offenders (Bunting, 2005; Cortoni & Hanson, 2005; Sandler & Freeman, 2007). Recent figures from the United Kingdom show, however, that of 12,268 callers to a confidential helpline for children in distress or danger (ChildLine) who reported being sexually victimized, 6% of females and...
36% of males identified a female perpetrator; 17% overall (NSPCC, 2009). Much of the research is based on small psychiatric or criminal justice samples, from which it is difficult to draw generalizable conclusions (Christianson & Thyer, 2002).

A number of typologies have been developed for FSOs (e.g. Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; Nathan & Ward, 2002; Sandler & Freeman, 2007; Wijkman, Bijleveld, & Hendricks, 2010). These, however, have been developed to discriminate FSO behaviours from those of male child molesters, producing an inherent gender bias (Ashfield, Eldridge, Brotherston, & Elliott, 2010). Five types are typically described (e.g. Mathews et al., 1989; Nathan & Ward, 2002; Sandler & Freeman, 2007; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004; Wijkman et al., 2010): (1) solo offenders who abuse adolescent children (the euphemistic “teacher/lover” group); (2) solo offenders who abuse pre-pubescent children; (3) psychiatrically disordered offenders—who have a variety of victim types, and whose behaviour is the result of a psychiatric disorder; (4) FSOs motivated by commercial profit—providing victims for child molesters in return for money; and (5) male-associated offenders, incorporating: (a) male-coerced—those who participate under the explicit threat of emotional abuse or physical violence; (b) active male-accompanied—those who play an interested and active role; and (c) passive male-accompanied—those who provide opportunities for abuse or do not act to prevent abuse, but do not take an active role.

**Female internet offenders?**

The number of sexual offenders utilizing the internet in their crimes appears to have increased in the past five years (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2009) and in the UK it is thought that around one-third of male sex offences are now internet-related (Middleton, 2009). The internet can facilitate a sexual interest in children through: (1) the access and dissemination of sexually explicit material involving children (SEM-c1); (2) the location of children for offline sexual contact; (3) engagement in inappropriate sexual contact with children; and (4) providing a supportive environment to validate child-sex beliefs (Durkin, 1997). As online technology quickly develops to become increasingly interactive, dynamic and user-constructed—known as “Web 2.0”—the potential for online harm may be likely to increase (Atkinson & Newton, 2010). In contrast to their male counterparts, however, female internet offenders appear to be rare in the criminal justice system, perhaps a result of the combined difficulty of detecting online offences and the low rates of detection for female sex offences. As a result, very little research exists on the role of the internet in the modus operandi or cognitive styles of FSOs. Thus, there is a gap in our current knowledge regarding both female use and dissemination of SEM-c and the use of the internet in the grooming of children in female-perpetrated child sexual abuse.

One exception to this is Lambert and O’Halloran’s (2008) analysis of a female pro-paedophilia website. Male-populated pro-paedophilia websites have been noted to provide information, support and validation for child-related deviant sexual interests (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Malesky & Ennis, 2004; O’Halloran & Quayle, 2010). Having established that the contributors to this forum were females, Lambert and O’Halloran describe five themes. First, a clear sexual motivation was noted, with the majority of contributors admitting openly to a sexual interest in children. Secondly, they present evidence of cognitive distortions in the comments and stories posted. This links to a third theme, recognition barriers, where contributors highlighted society’s lack of recognition for female sexual abuse, and the benefits of this, for potential abusers, such as easier access to victims and the ability to disguise abuse as child care. Fourthly, the authors noted a number of personal factors, such as early sexualization, poor socialization and dissatisfaction with their own persona. Finally, the role of
the internet itself is discussed in terms of the sense of community, education and acceptance it provides—to contributors that their interests are shared by others—further reinforcing cognitive distortions.

In this review, we hope to explore three areas based on those outlined by Lambert and O'Halloran (2008): (1) interpersonal/socialization deficits; (2) deviant sexual arousal; and (3) cognitive distortions and recognition barriers. We would argue that each of these will link to personal developmental factors (e.g. previous childhood, adolescent and adult adversity) and will discuss the developmental aspects of each. Within each of the following sections we will introduce examples from anonymized cases.

### Criminogenic factors

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation has undertaken clinical work with FSOs, both in custody and in the community, since it was established in 1993, and our Female Outreach Project has worked with 120 FSOs since 2005—40 in 2009. In the following sections we aim to examine the potential criminogenic factors related to the use of internet technology in the modus operandi of female sex offenders against children. Because of the small numbers of female internet offenders, this review is presented not as a comprehensive analysis but as targets for further exploration regarding a phenomenon that we as an organization are beginning to see on a more frequent basis.

### Interpersonal/socialization deficits

As Cortoni (2010) notes, among male sex offenders intimacy deficits tend to manifest in emotional identification with children, relationship instability, hostility towards women and a general loneliness and lack of concern for others. In contrast, she notes that female sex offenders tend to manifest a pattern of exploitative, often violent, relationships. For FSOs, their ability to initiate and maintain healthy adult relationships often represents a key treatment need (Saradjian, 1996; Strickland, 2008). This is likely to be a specific issue for a population with a history of childhood abuse and poor attachment to care givers (e.g. Gannon, Rose, & Ward, 2008; Green & Kaplan, 1994; Saradjian, 1996; Vandiver & Kircher, 2004). For some, their ability to initiate and maintain a relationship with a male is linked intrinsically to their self-esteem (Beech, Parrett, Ward, & Fisher, 2009; Eldridge, Elliott, & Ashfield, 2009; Saradjian, 1996). In many cases an FSO's ability to maintain a sexual relationship with a male partner forms their only source of self-worth, and as such some have been noted to have used dating websites in attempts to gain the intimacy and attention that they desire. The internet represents a forum for seeking friendship and romantic relationships, and there is evidence that some women view the internet as another method by which to initiate romantic and sexual relationships (Bolding, Davies, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2006; Daneback, Mansson, & Ross, 2007; Malu, Chellenor, Theobald, & Barton, 2004). Hence, the internet may be perceived by some women as a safe alternative to face-to-face activities, where chatrooms, websites and/or games represent an environment that offers a degree of individual control and safety. Over time this online activity can, however, begin to replace face-to-face contact, resulting in increased social isolation. It can also be utilized to invest in or replicate poor relationship choices made previously in face-to-face contacts (i.e. exploitative online relationships).

Online sexual behaviours can be particularly significant for individuals who have trouble obtaining sexual contact, and hence those with intimacy deficits may be prone to developing
online sexual habits (Elliott & Beech, 2009; Putnam, 2000). Dombrowski, Gischlar and Durst (2007) note that on the internet people may be more inclined to share deeply personal information in online relationships without ever meeting the other person, and the anonymity and seemingly playful nature of online activity may have a powerful disinhibiting effect on users, allowing them to explore and experiment with fantasies and activities that they might not in the offline world (Cooper, Galbreath, & Becker, 2004). For FSOs this use of the internet to initiate and maintain relationships may manifest in two ways: (1) solo offenders initiating inappropriate relationships with children online; and (2) male-associated offenders initiating relationships with individuals with whom they discuss or act out sexual behaviours with children.

Solo offenders against young adolescents. There is a distinct subgroup of FSOs who act alone and abuse adolescent children (Matthews et al., 1989; Sandler & Freeman, 2007; Vandiver & Kircher, 2004). They typically target adolescent males (although not exclusively males) around the age of 12–13 years and tend to be in a position of authority over the child (a professional position, a family member or family friend or simply by virtue of being an adult) and who view their offending as non-abusive (Fazel, Sjostedt, Grann, & Langstrom, 2010). This group seeks emotional closeness, and is often motivated by increased feelings of power and control, experiences that they have typically lacked in their adult relationships (Eldridge & Saradjian, 2000). As Gannon and Rose (2009) note, anecdotal evidence suggests that intimacy deficits are not as chronic for solo offenders against adolescents as for women who abuse very young children although they, too, develop relationships with children to attain the emotional fulfilment that they lack from adult partners (Ford, 2006).

For example, Ms A groomed and subsequently met an adolescent after posing online as a child of a similar age and exchanging telephone numbers, e-mail addresses and photographs. She had begun to use the internet to attract male partners, becoming increasingly reliant on online interaction as a safe and controlled way of relating to people emotionally and sexually. She described an inability to initiate and maintain adult relationships, which was likely to have stemmed from thinking associated with a range of emotionally, physically and sexually abusive experiences in her life history. She engaged in explicit conversations online and found these sexually exciting and secure due to the perception of control they provided. Ms A instigated contact by ‘chatting’ to her victim online and subsequently began sharing personal information and initiating a friendship, leading to feelings that they understood one another in a way that she had not previously experienced and believing that they could be “in love”. Her perception of her victim as more mature, understanding and experienced than other boys his age allowed her to exploit his normal adolescent interests in sex to satisfy her own emotional and sexual needs in a context where she was able to control the circumstances. This would be consistent with those patterns identified with male online groomers (e.g. Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006; Dombrowski et al., 2007; O’Connell, 2003). The previous abuse that Ms A had experienced in her life history was likely to have fuelled a belief that men are dangerous and threatening (e.g. Gannon & Rose, 2009) and may have led her to seek out: (1) an online environment that she is able to control; and (2) a young partner who represents a less threatening alternative.

This assessment, however, highlights the potential for a gender bias where female online grooming is perceived in terms of emotional loneliness, relationship forming and motivated by a need for intimacy, while male online grooming behaviour is perceived as predatory, impersonal and motivated by sexual gratification. There are likely to be many similarities between male and female perpetrators regarding online grooming of adolescent children, both in terms of inappropriate and predatory sexual behaviour online and also the use of online
communications as a less-fearful method of obtaining intimacy and connectedness. Clinicians may be tempted to assume that women are likely to be motivated by intimacy needs and men by sexual gratification. This may not be correct, and highlights the importance of individual assessment.

**Male-associated offenders.** It has been noted that FSOs are more likely than their male counterparts to offend together with another, typically male, adult (Giguere & Bumby, 2007; Grayston & DeLuca, 1999). Gannon and Rose (2008) describe FSOs’ dependency on a male partner. They cite Hunter’s and Matthews’ (1997) argument that strong states of dependency, coupled with low self-esteem and passivity, possibly combined with a fear of violence, could create a vulnerability for male-associated sexual abuse by females. There appears to be a subgroup of FSOs for whom the main goal of offending is the experience of intimacy with either the victim or a co-offending partner (Gannon et al., 2008). Predatory males may specifically target vulnerable women with children to gain access for sexual contact, and this is well established in an offline context (McAlinden, 2006).

For example, Ms B produced indecent images of children along with a male co-offender. He had requested that she send sexual images of herself with her children and of the children. As a consequence of poor childhood attachment and emotional distance from both of her parents, Ms B developed a system of measuring her self-worth through male attention. Ms B began using the internet to meet new partners, engaging in sexual conversations and the exchange of explicit photographs. Through the internet Ms B established an interest in “submissive/dominant” sex that tapped directly into her emotional dependency on male partners. Here she met her co-offender, who groomed her to an extent where he could exert her cooperation in sexual behaviour towards children, showing that co-offending does not require physical proximity. Ms B was dependent on male partners for a sense of her own self-worth to the extent that she was willing to subjugate the needs of her children for a fantasy of emotional closeness and security.

This highlights the need to understand the potential dangers of the internet for women who are vulnerable to exploitation. Considerable research attention has been given to the dangers to children of individuals who might groom them sexually online (e.g. Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002; Livingston & Haddon, 2009). Perhaps we should also focus on the potential for males to target and groom adult females (particularly those with young children) via the internet. Many FSOs demonstrate low self-esteem and passivity and are often emotionally dependent on the male partner as a result of assessing their self-worth through their ability to maintain the relationship and meet the needs of the partner (e.g. Elliott, Eldridge, Ashfield, & Beech, 2010; Gannon, Rose, & Ward, 2008). If these women are targeted by predatory males this is likely to present a danger both to the women and their children. There is evidence that frequent, intense online communication can: (1) accelerate the perception of intimacy and level of self-disclosure, which may provide males with personal information that aids the process in the grooming; and (2) negatively influence women’s decisions regarding engagement in risky sexual behaviours (Dombrowski et al., 2007; Padgett, 2007; Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008).

Females may produce and trade SEM-c not for the commercial or exchange value of the material, but for their emotional value in providing a commodity that maintains the attention of interested partners, in turn providing self-worth. The value to the male co-offender, however, may be his ability to manipulate a woman’s authority as a mother and her control over the lives of her children for his own sexual gain. This provides not only an understanding of how the internet relates to FSO behaviour, but also might give us an important insight into a potential method by which novel SEM-c is produced for trade. As Sheehan and Sullivan
(2010) note, there is evidence to suggest that the majority of SEM-c is produced in the home of the child victim(s) and that the majority of producers are primarily family members or those who have specific access to their victims’ social or educational context (e.g. Estes & Weiner, 2002; Sher, 2007).

**Sexual arousal**

The worldwide web is a powerful forum through which like-minded people can communicate and share their interest. For those with prurient interests there appears to have been an increase in the accessibility of images that involve more extreme sexual activity (Johnson, 2010; Murray, 2009). It would appear that sexual motivations are also demonstrated in FSO internet samples. Lambert and O’Halloran (2008) found that women in pro-paedophile web forums show a clear focus on a sexual attraction to children, desire for sexual contact with a child and the encouragement of children into sexual behaviour.

For example, Ms C used peer-to-peer computer software to download digital videos of children engaged in sexual acts, including penetration and sadism. She had also engaged in online discussions with a male about sharing of indecent images of teenage children and sharing sexual fantasies relating to their own children as teenagers. Ms C demonstrated an established pattern of using sexual fantasy as a strategy for mood management. Her fantasies often involved sexual arousal to impersonal and non-consensual sex, although not necessarily involving children, developing from and replicating her prior abusive sexual experiences. Her adult relationships were characterized by violence, dominance and rejection, and Ms C began accessing websites relating to the exchanging of partners, and arranging to meet men offline for sex.

Ms C’s interest in impersonal sex made online relationships an attractive choice. The internet provided escape from negative emotions through sexual behaviours and she developed an emotional dependence on men who engage in online sexual activities and gave her a sense of power and control which she lacked in the rest of her life. Avoidance of real-life issues has been cited previously as a potentially key function in the use of the internet to access SEM-c (Quayle, Vaughan, & Taylor, 2006; Surjadi, Bullens, van Horn, & Bogaerts, 2010). The constant erosion of her sexual boundaries by her partners, her inability to differentiate between abusive and non-abusive sex and a sense of entitlement regarding her needs taking priority over the needs of children combined to make the transition to discussions about children and sex online more fluid than might have been anticipated. Once the subject of children and sex was raised, initial discomfort quickly gave way to a strong sense of her own need and a curiosity about SEM-c.

In some cases, FSOs who begin their abusive behaviours as passive co-offenders find that sexual arousal becomes conditioned to abusive or non-consensual sexual activity, at which point they may begin to develop their own patterns of sexually abusive behaviour (Eldridge, Elliott & Ashfield, 2009; Saradjian, 1996). Their willingness to engage in impersonal sex (both online and offline) place women at considerable personal risk, and their willingness to use online technology to shore up their sense of power and control can increase their emotional dependence on shallow relationships as well as their risk of sexual and physical harm.

Similarly, Ms D appeared to have a developing sexual interest in both extreme sexual activity and children and sex in her own right; her interests and attitudes appeared to develop in synchronicity with her partner’s (e.g. Saradjian, 1996; Eldridge et al., 2009). Ms D abused her children and produced and distributed SEM-c. These offences were committed with a
male partner, her husband, with whom she had been downloading SEM-c through peer-to-peer file sharing for some time.

Although Ms D had been introduced to pornography by previous male partners, her co-defendant introduced her to more extreme sexual practices. Ms D stated that her first download of SEM-c was accidental, but having found images she began to purposefully search for it, sharing these images with her partner. She accepted responsibility for locating images, knowing this activity to be illegal, and took technical steps to avoid detection. She found herself becoming increasingly sexually aroused by the material and would post requests on online child abuse-related forums to obtain new material. Her interest in extreme forms of pornography appears to suggest that, like many male internet offenders, her viewing of SEM-c formed part of a larger interest in sexual material and the internet could provide a useful means to explore these interests.

For some women we see entrenched patterns of high levels of sexual arousal and fantasy which they have reinforced through regular and extensive internet use. When these women find themselves unable to access the internet (e.g. incarceration or court-applied licence conditions), consideration may need to be given to alternative means that may be utilized by these women to meet these needs. This may include, for example, the potential for some women to seek out any available male regardless of associated risk of harm to themselves, or if incarcerated perhaps the sexual exploitation of other vulnerable women. A combination of developmental adversity, an erosion of sexual boundaries and online access can create an environment in which a curiosity about children and sex develops. Such women may choose to use the internet to explore this curiosity and extreme sexual behaviour can be passively accepted and lead to more extreme sexual acts.

Cognitive distortions/recognition barriers

The “cognitive distortion” hypothesis, according to Gannon and Polaschek (2006), suggests that at the time they come to the notice of criminological clinical and research attention, sex offenders hold established and generalized offence-related beliefs that facilitate sexual contact with children. Gannon and Polaschek note that these pro-offending beliefs have been identified previously as both causative and “giving the offender permission to offend”, and also have been described as arising post-offence to “make the offender feel better about the offence” by justifying, excusing or externalizing blame to others, thereby minimizing self-blame and guilt. Post-hoc justification, excusing or externalizing blame for behaviours, it has been noted, is a universal and self-soothing mechanism to maintain self-esteem that should perhaps be separated from more enduring pro-offending attitudes in assessment and treatment with a focus on deeper-level causal processes (Maruna & Mann, 2006; Snyder & Higgins, 1988).

Cognitive distortions about children and sex. There is much clinical and self-report evidence that female sex offenders demonstrate attitudes supportive of adult child sexual contact (e.g. Beech et al., 2009; Elliott et al., 2010; Saradjian, 1996). In addition, Lambert and O’Halloran’s (2008) analysis of female pro-paedophilia websites found many examples of these attitudes from contributors. There is also evidence of these in our clinical work.

For instance, some women held beliefs that children can initiate sexual activity. This appeared to be linked to their own early abusive experiences. For example, some had rationalized that, as a child, they were the powerful ones who used this power to initiate sex with adult men. This allowed them to rationalize SEM-c in a similar way, where the children depicted were able to initiate, control and enjoy the sexual activities portrayed. Other
women see their sexual contact with adolescents as a natural expression of their emotional connectedness and “love” and describe them in terms of their maturity, emotionality and experience. They rationalized their behaviour with statements such as: “this is love”, “he needs me too”; “he wants this too”; “I can help him”—fuelling their perceptions of a tangible emotional and sexual connection. These distorted thoughts allow them to justify an online pseudo-relationship that eventually leads to sexual contact.

Assessment of implicit cognition, however, suggests that some FSOs (offline) do not appear to hold stable, enduring cognitions regarding the appropriateness of sexual contact between adults and children (Gannon et al., 2008; Gannon, Rose, & Williams, 2009). Instead, cognitive assessment demonstrates that some FSOs appear to hold implicit theories (ITs) that bias information processing about the nature of male status and behaviour, relating to a “men are dangerous” implicit theory.

Cognitive distortions about the nature of males. Gannon et al. (2009) measured schema-consistent interpretation of ambiguous sentences in 37 FSOs, to tap into implicit associations relating to: (1) children and sex ITs—e.g. “Young Simon kept wriggling about on the woman’s knee”; (2) men are dangerous ITs—“Liz knew just what to expect when she saw Jim’s look”; and (3) general negative social interactions—“All the guests at the wedding giggled at Mark’s speech”. They found that FSOs in their sample were significantly more likely to interpret ambiguous male-related sentences in a threatening manner, but found no evidence of schema-consistent interpretations for children and sex sentences. This schema-congruent response to ambiguous male behaviour may begin to explain why some females might seek to meet their needs for intimacy through the perceived safety and control of the internet, either through contact with adult males or with children directly, if their threat/danger schema diminishes their ability to establish and maintain offline adult relationships. This online activity can have ironic repercussions, as online activity increases and face-to-face contact decreases, resulting in further intimacy deficits and often simply the replication of poor relationship choices.

An alternative view is that this may be evidence of schemata regarding a fear of abandonment and a dependency on a male partner. Beech et al. (2008) also note schema that may be related to FSOs’ implicit attitudes regarding men: (1) subjugation, excessive surrender of control to another for fear of “anger, retaliation, or abandonment” (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003); and (2) self-sacrifice, voluntarily meeting the needs of others at the expense of your own. Although the authors report no evidence of implicit theories relating to entitlement, it could be argued that these “other-directedness” schemata may, in fact, be linked to the IT of entitlement. Elliott et al. (2010) note that the concept of entitlement for FSOs may be more related to the prioritization of needs, and this is certainly demonstrated by our clinical work. Some women found it perfectly acceptable to place both their own emotional needs and the sexual needs of an online acquaintance before the care needs of their own children. Others were able to place their own needs for intimacy above the needs of their adolescent victims and some were able to place both their own and their partners’ needs above the needs of the victims depicted in the SEM-c.

Cognitive distortions and SEM-c. Taylor and Quayle (2003) took an internet-specific approach in their description of the cognitive distortions of individuals who access SEM-c, suggesting four categories of cognitive distortion: (1) those justifying SEM-c as “only pictures”; (2) those normalizing SEM-c behaviour because others are engaged in it; (3) those that objectify the images; and (4) those that justify other forms of engagement with SEM-c (such as trading, or even production of images) through collusion with like-minded individuals in online networks. Elliott and Beech (2009) view these as offence-level reasoning that justifies viewing
SEM-c as opposed to sexual abuse-level attitudes regarding the appropriateness of sexual contact between adults and children. They note that this may relate more to concepts of moral disengagement (e.g. displacement of responsibility; dehumanization of the victim; reconstruction/minimization of consequences) and meta-analysis appears to demonstrate that a key difference between contact and internet child abusers is the latter’s lack of supportive attitudes towards adult child sexual contact and greater empathy for victims of child sexual abuse (Babchishin, Hanson, & Hermann, 2010). Auburn and Lea (2003) also suggest that verbal accounts are used by offenders to provide a moral position for the individual speaker and these themes have been noted in internet offenders’ accounts of their offending (Winder & Gough, 2010). Winder and Gough’s interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) highlighted a moral stance that images were “only pictures” depicting happy, complicit children engaging in abusive sexual acts, allowing offenders to minimize harm and distance themselves from the abusive nature of the scenes.

For example, one woman stated that she was happy to watch scenes depicting discipline and torture, but that the smiling faces of the children would reassure her that they were not being harmed and that they were willing participants who were enjoying the activities. She believed that the images were not morally wrong, but were simply illegal in this country, as opposed to being legal in other countries—a belief promoted by her co-offending partner.

She would also seek out images depicting females abusing children—indicative of her attempts to rationalize her own sexual interests in children as a female in a male-dominated community to receive reassurance that her behaviour was common and acceptable.

**Recognition barriers.** There is a cultural environment in which the behaviour of FSOs is often met with an attitude that minimizes, marginalizes, dismisses it outright or copes by demonizing the perpetrators (Bunting, 2007; Denov, 2001). Lambert and O’Halloran (2008) also noted the frequency of recognition barriers, barriers that prevent the reporting and recognition of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, in postings to female pro-paedophilia websites. Contributors highlighted society’s lack of recognition for female sexual abuse, and the benefits of this, for potential abusers, such as easier access to victims and the ability to disguise abuse as child care. Here we see the internet being used as a tool through which to identify and celebrate these recognition barriers, providing a supportive pro-offending environment and thus normalizing SEM-c behaviour because others are engaged in it (Durkin, 1997; Taylor & Quayle, 2003).

Ward and Beech (2006) describe the ecological role of the individual within the social and cultural environment in which they operate as their cultural niche, and that we are both shaped by our environment and continually modifying our environment reciprocally through our interaction with it. As they state, “cultural factors interact with biological individual learning to create ecologies that support or discourage sexual offending” (p. 57). Ward and Casey (2010) suggest that our cognitive processing incorporates both internal and external components and that attitudes (including pro-sex offending attitudes) are dynamic and fully context-dependent. As such they are impacted substantially by the broader social and cultural environment.

For example, a cultural and social environment that portrays females as sexual objects and males as sexually entitled can form the basis for the creation of pro-rape attitudes in males. Exposure to a social environment in which sexist and hostile attitudes and dysfunctional sexual norms predominates is likely to maintain, and potentially escalate, sexually harmful behaviour (Ward & Beech, 2006). Hence, it would be reasonable to suggest that exposure to the same cultural and societal environment could also lead to the creation of attitudes and beliefs in females that they have no value in their own right and that self-worth...
can only be obtained by their ability to “keep a man” and meet the needs of a male partner. It can also lead to the development of schema relating to abandonment and mistrust (Beech et al., 2008; Young et al., 2003). We feel that in order to understand fully the cognitive processes of FSOs, we need to understand the female cultural context and take a gender-responsive approach to factors that might impact on cognitive function (Ashfield et al., 2010).

Conclusions

Clearly, there appears to be a minority of female sexual offenders who, for a variety of reasons, use the internet to engage in the sexual abuse of children. Women can and do use the internet in exploring a sexual interest in children. We suggest three potential areas for further research into females who use the internet in the sexual victimization of children: (1) the role of the internet in the search to meet needs for intimacy and male partners to enhance self-esteem; (2) the role of sexual material in the development and escalation of deviant sexual interests; and (3) the effect of extreme and child-related sexual material on attitudes towards children and sex.

Although we cannot draw generalized conclusions, it would appear that the characteristics of FSOs whose convictions are internet-related share many of the characteristics associated with women who abuse children offline. Questions requiring further investigation may be: (1) the degree to which the differences we often see between male and female contact offenders are also evident in FSO internet offending; (2) whether offending is more likely to involve a direct male accomplice; (3) the nature of motivation; and (4) the degree to which female sexual offending, especially grooming behaviours, can be concealed or may go overlooked. In our view, professionals may find it more helpful to review the literature available regarding FSOs first, before the research regarding male internet offending, when identifying treatment needs and risk factors in this population.

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Note

1. There is considerable debate between academics about what terminology should be used to describe the material viewed by individuals with a sexual interest in children. We have opted to combine ideas from Malamuth, Addison and Koss (2000; “Sexually explicit media”) and Glasgow (2010; “sexually explicit material”), adding the suffix “-c” to denote the specific depiction of children.

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