From child pornography offending to child sexual abuse: A review of child pornography offender characteristics and risks for cross-over

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ABSTRACT

In this review, concrete directions are provided for individual risk assessment, treatment planning, and future research on child pornography offending. First, based on reviewing offender characteristics, including demographics, socio-affective difficulties, cognitive distortions and psychosexual issues, it is concluded that despite individual differences, many child pornography offenders have psychological difficulties in multiple areas of functioning. Based on earlier child pornography offender typologies, it is proposed that risk factors of individual offenders can be viewed along the lines of two continua: (1) features related to criminal behavior, and (2) sexual deviance/fantasy. These continua not only give insight into psychological differences between offender types, but also allow for variation in the severity of psychological difficulties within offender types and therefore may enhance individual risk assessment and treatment planning. Moreover, risk factors for cross-over are discussed, including individual characteristics, factors related to engagement with the internet, and the offline environment. Future research should focus on the integration of risk domains within particular offending types. Specifically, research is needed on non-offending pedophiles in order to gain more insight into the relationship between pedophilia and child pornography offending in general.

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1. Introduction

Child pornography, which includes visual depictions of sexual conduct involving a minor, has been a problem for many decades. However,

the advent of the internet has made it a bigger and more widespread societal problem (Webb, Craissati, & Keen, 2007). Despite its high relevance, it still remains unclear what factors are associated with engaging in child pornography offending or predispose one to cross-over to committing child sexual abuse. For example, for some offenders, child pornography may help control their deviant sexual interests in children and prevent them from committing sexual hands-on offenses. However, for others viewing this material stimulates existing fantasies and lowers inhibitions to act on them which may result in cross-over behavior (Quayle & Taylor, 2002). Furthermore, research on the characteristics of child pornography offenders is scarce, inconsistent, and still in development. Only recently, researchers have begun to develop typologies that characterize different child pornography offending motivations and behaviors (e.g., Krone, 2004; Lanning, 2010; Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard, 2006; Seto, Wood, Babchishin, & Flynn, 2012). Moreover, despite efforts to explain child pornography offending within more general frameworks of sex offending (Elliott & Beech, 2009; Middleton, Elliott, Mandeville-Norden, & Beech, 2006), there is only one model to date that provides an explanation for cross-over behavior directly related to internet offending: the model of potential problematic internet use (Quayle & Taylor, 2003). This model, based on the etiology of Pathological Internet Use (Davis, 2001), states that cognitive distortions not only promote problematic behavior, such as downloading of child pornography, but also partly cause the progression of this behavior into sexual contact offending. According to this model, other factors that contribute to the process of engagement in the internet and problematic internet behavior include individual risk factors such as early sexual experience and sexual preference for children (i.e., 'setting events'), internet characteristics, such as anonymity, and 'cognitive–social factors' such as less contact with people in the offline world. However, despite a growing interest in child pornography offending, an overview of the state of knowledge and a clear focus for future research are lacking.

This study aims to address these limitations, by providing a selective overview of the contemporary literature on child pornography offending. Specifically, current gaps in the literature are identified and promising directions for future research are suggested. We will discuss four domains of child pornography offender characteristics, including demographics, psychological problems related to socio-affective issues, distorted cognitions, and psychosexual difficulties. Furthermore, we highlight the heterogeneity among child pornography offenders and the importance of focusing on offender specific risk factors in order to enhance risk assessment and treatment planning. It is proposed that offender specific risk factors may be mapped onto two continua: (1) features related to criminal behavior, and (2) sexual deviance/fantasy. Moreover, we discuss risk factors for cross-over, including individual characteristics, factors provided through engagement in the internet, and through contact with the offline environment. Finally, we provide concrete directions for future research. In order to better understand child pornography offending, we will first touch upon the issues related to legally defining child pornography and the diverse working definitions in practice and research.

2. Legal definition and research problems

It is complicated to provide a global legal definition of child pornography because views about 'children' and 'child pornography' are bound to moral, cultural, social, and religious beliefs. Hence, definitions differ across countries and even among legal jurisdictions within the same country (Healy, 1996). This has consequences for law enforcement because different legal definitions make it difficult to combat child pornography offending internationally (Burke, Sowerbutts, Blundell, & Sherry, 2002). United States federal law, for example, defines child pornography as any visual depiction, including any photograph, film, video, picture, or computer-generated image or picture, that is made or produced by electronic, mechanical, or other means, of sexually explicit conduct that involves or seemingly involves a minor (18 U.S.C. § 2256(8), 2006). However, whether or not clear definitions of child

pornography are at hand, it can be difficult for law enforcement to make decisions on the basis of computer data and images to determine which individuals should be prosecuted. For example, it may be hard to estimate the age of the victims depicted on the images in order to determine if a minor is involved (Wells, Finkelhor, Wolak, & Mitchell, 2007).

What makes research on child pornography even more complex is that definitions of child pornography may differ between legal and academic contexts (Beech, Elliott, Birgden, & Findlater, 2008). For example, although images depicting clothed children may be considered legal by law, they may serve as child pornography for some individuals because the erotic nature of the images can not only be viewed in light of the objective qualities of the material itself, but is also determined through the person that is watching. Hence, such images may be used to relieve sexual arousal by someone with pedophilic interests (Taylor, Holland, & Quayle, 2001). Furthermore, views about what constitutes child pornography and child pornography offending may differ across studies because the inclusion criteria for child pornography offending vary greatly. That is, some studies include those who have sexually abused a child in the past (e.g., Bates & Metcalf, 2007; Laulik, Allam, & Sheridan, 2007; Niveau, 2010; Seto et al., 2006), whereas other studies focus on community samples that include individuals who have admitted that they have engaged in child pornography, but who did not come into contact with the legal justice system (Seigfried, Lovely, & Rogers, 2008).

Moreover, insight into the type of material is often not specified; yet, this may give insight into offender specific risk factors because the type of material that offenders use varies greatly. For example, pictures range from depicting relatively innocent nudity through to pictures of children being sexually abused (Taylor et al., 2001). Furthermore, pseudo imagery exists in which non-sexual photographs are digitally adjusted into child pornographic images (a phenomenon that is called *morphing*) next to virtual images of digitally created children, films, stories, and even live child pornography via webcams (Krone, 2004; van Wijk, Nieuwenhuis, & Smeltink, 2009).

As a consequence, different definitions of child pornography and different research samples have led to problems with the generalization of the findings and the comparability of results across studies. This should be kept in mind while reading this article. In this study, the term child pornography offender refers to those who accessed and/or distributed and/or produced child pornographic material without having committed a (known) child sexual hands-on offense. When the studies described also included child pornography offenders that have committed a contact offense, this will be clearly specified.

3. Offender characteristics

3.1. Demographics

There is some consensus about the demographic characteristics of child pornography offenders. For example, studies report offenders to be primarily white, aged between 25 and 50 years, and compared to child sexual abusers, more likely to be employed (Burke et al., 2002). With regard to intellectual functioning a considerable amount of child pornography offenders has above average intelligence; in several studies about 30% had completed higher education (McCarthy, 2010; Seto et al., 2006; Surjadi, Bullens, van Horn, & Bogaerts, 2010). With regard to employment, law enforcement and mental health professionals argue that child pornography offenders often have jobs in sectors with little or no social interaction or where contact with children is a daily activity (van Wijk et al., 2009).

However, a typical profile of child pornography offenders is missing. Research on marital status shows mixed results with studies showing that more than 50% of child pornography offenders were single, either at the time of the offense or at the moment of the conducted study (e.g., Henry, Mandeville-Norden, Hayes, & Egan, 2010; Neutze, Seto, Schaefer, Mundt, & Beier, 2011; Reijnen, Bulten, & Nijman, 2009). Some professionals argue that these offenders are often characterized