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IRISH PROBATION JOURNAL Volume 5, September 2008

From Research to Practice: The Development of the Internet Sex Offender Treatment Programme (i-SOTP)

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Summary: The phenomenal growth in Internet-related sexual offending has proved a challenge for those providing intervention programmes to address this new form of sexual offending behaviour. This article describes the research that underpinned the development of the Internet Sex Offender Treatment Programme (i-SOTP). It explores similarities and differences between viewing behaviour and contact sexual offending, identifies treatment needs and describes the model of change upon which the treatment programme is based.

Keywords: Problematic Internet use, sex offender treatment, child pornography.

Introduction

The widespread implementation of cognitive-behavioural techniques in the treatment of sex offenders has reflected the move towards offence-focused work in dealing with criminal populations. Meta-analyses of treatment outcomes have shown that the most successful programmes are those which target the specific criminogenic behaviours involved (Andrews *et al.* 1990, Antonowicz and Ross 1994, Andrews 1995, Lipsey 1995, Losel 1995, Losel and Schumucker 2005). Typically such programmes focus on enhancing social and empathy skills, restructuring offence-supportive attitudes and improving self-management through the implementation of relapse prevention techniques (Fisher and Beech 1999).

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In 1992 the HM Prison Service (England and Wales) Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP) was established in response to the 1991 UK government strategy for the containment and treatment of sexual offenders. In 2001 the National Probation Service (England and Wales) began national implementation of community-based sex offender treatment programmes in a move to apply research evidence of effectiveness in a consistent manner. Each area of the service would run one of three programmes that had been accredited as conforming to standards of design, range of methods used, appropriate targeting, sequencing, motivation and evaluation (Middleton 2002, Home Office 2002). All probation areas were delivering community programmes by 2003, achieving 1,200 annual completions by 2007 (NOMS 2008a). Initial evaluation evidence suggests that those who complete the programmes reconvict at a rate 61% below the predicted reconviction rate (Hollis 2007). Over a follow-up period of two to four years, 4% of completers reconvicted, 'which is around half the expected rate' (NOMS 2008b).

Although the development and implementation of these programmes represented a significant achievement, the programmes were designed for male sex offenders, aged 21 years or over and within the normal range of IQ and, while differing offending types (for example rapists, child molesters and exposers) were accommodated within them, a need to move beyond a 'one size fits all' approach became apparent (Allam *et al.* 1997, Middleton 2002). In particular, the needs of sex offenders with learning difficulties and the growth in Internet sex offender convictions required the development of a new treatment programme (Home Office 2004).

In England and Wales in 1999 there were 238 convictions for publication, possession or distribution of obscene matter and indecent photographs of children. By 2005 this figure had reached 1,296 (Hansard 2008), representing an increase in convictions of approximately 500%. This level of convictions had a significant effect on the proportion of sex offenders entering or waiting to commence treatment programmes, leading to questions about the suitability of the treatment programme content, appropriate treatment dosage and the possible 'contamination effects' of exposure to contact child sex offenders.

The design of the Internet Sex Offender Treatment Programme (i-SOTP) was a direct response to the phenomenal growth in the number

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of Internet sex offenders in the criminal justice system (Middleton and Hayes 2006). The programme developers sought to review the literature on both the use of the Internet by sex offenders, and the risk of escalation from viewing behaviour to contact sex offences. They also conducted research into the psychological profiles of convicted Internet sex offenders and incorporated feedback from practitioners on the problems of applying current programme content to Internet offenders. This feedback provided the opportunity to develop a 'second generation' of accredited programmes that allow for a more motivational approach and offer greater flexibility for programme facilitators to tailor programme content to meet the individual offender's requirements.

The role of the Internet in child abuse

Before examining the role of the Internet in child abuse it is necessary to recognise that the term 'child pornography' has been often used in legislation and in the literature to refer to indecent images of children. This term does not seem appropriate, since it may mislead the reader into an assumption that pornography is produced with the consent of those taking part. Where children are concerned, this clearly is not the case. Indeed it is likely that the production of such images involved abuse of the child sexually, emotionally and psychologically. However, authors use of the term 'pornography' has been adhered to in this article's discussion of their work.

The rapid development of Internet usage, whilst in many respects beneficial and benign, has led to a significant increase in the production and distribution of child pornography (Taylor and Quayle 2006). It seems clear that computers can act as an aid for those who are sexually interested in children and can allow for the production, viewing, storage and distribution of child pornography. The medium also allows paedophiles to communicate with each other and acts as a conduit for contact with potential victims (Wolak *et al.* 2005, Gallagher *et al.* 2006).

The significant features driving the expansion of online sexual activity may be said to be its 'affordability, accessibility and anonymity', described as the 'triple "A" engine' (Cooper 1998). It is suggested that most child pornography is free and users can access material in quantities and at a speed hitherto not possible. Furthermore, rather than venturing into a bookshop or ordering through magazines, users can access

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indecent material online with a lower risk of detection than previously associated with such behaviour. Carr (2003) reports that 'collecting, cataloguing, trading and swapping is itself part of the pleasure for many of the men who get involved with child abuse images on the internet'.

The risk of offence escalation

In relation to the possible escalation of viewing behaviour into contact offending, the evidence is not conclusive. Most of the available research either predates or does not involve indecent images on the Internet. For example, Check and Guloien (1989) note that 'men who are predisposed to aggression are particularly vulnerable to negative influences from pornography'. Also, Vega and Malamuth (2007) found that 'high pornography consumption added significantly to the prediction of sexual aggression', although it should be noted that 'pornography consumption' relied on self-reported usage of *Playboy* (and similar magazines) rather than on indecent online images of children.

Drew *et al.* (2008) conducted a longitudinal reconviction study following a sample of convicted contact sex offenders against children (n = 341) assessed between 1982 and 1992. Participants were asked to rate the frequency and type of pornography viewed. Deviant pornography was categorised as involving children and/or violence. The study found that only 10% self-reported viewing 'deviant pornography' and that the use of this material was unrelated to their assessed risk level (using Static-99). In the total sample for the men who scored high on general and specific risk characteristics, frequent pornography consumption increased the risk for aggression. In contrast, the amount of pornography use had little predictive value for men assessed to be at low risk for sexual aggression. Those who viewed deviant pornography were more likely to reoffend than individuals who did not view deviant pornography and this difference was consistent across the levels of risk.

Marshall (2000) states that it is possible to 'infer from the available literature that pornography exposure may influence … the development of sexual offending in some men'; such individuals would be those who have experienced childhood development of vulnerability that in turn leads to a variety of problems including 'a greater focus on sex, and the

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need to control events during sex'. Viewing indecent images of children on the Internet can be used as an aid in generating inappropriate sexual fantasy, which in turn is reinforced through masturbation.

The escalation model, described by Sullivan and Beech (2004), suggests that users of these images report that they normalise the fantasy and this 'disinhibits' them. In other words, as users become familiar and bored with the pornography viewed, they seek out more 'intense' content. The combination of disinhibition, increased risk taking and the need to seek more intense experiences suggests the possibility of escalating behaviour into seeking opportunities for 'real-life experiences' and the potential for contact sexual abuse. It is of course the case that the production of any indecent image viewed must inherently involve exploitation and abuse of the child, however for many Internet sex offenders this fact has either been blocked or misattributed into offence-supporting cognitions, such as the children were willing or enjoyed the activity. However, Marshall (2000) cautions against ascribing a direct causal link between viewing pornography and contact sexual offending, suggesting that viewing pornography may accelerate a process already underway or may further justify an established set of antisocial beliefs.

The implication of these findings for the development of the i-SOTP was that the programme should aim to prevent further viewing behaviour and reinforce inhibitions to avert escalation to contact offending (Middleton and Hayes 2006).

Reconviction studies for Internet sex offenders

Few studies currently exist of reconviction rates for Internet offenders, primarily due to the relatively recent nature of this form of offence behaviour. Seto and Eke (2005) looked at the criminal records of 201 adult males who had been convicted of possession, distribution or production of child pornography, in order to identify potential predictors of later offences. The results suggest that offenders with prior criminal records are significantly more likely to offend again generally, that is both sexual and non-sexual offending. The study also found that those with contact sexual offences reconvicted at a higher rate, both for sexual and for non-sexual offences. In total, over a period of 2.5 years, 17% of the sample reoffended; however, only 6% committed new child pornography offences and 4% committed contact sexual offences.

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In a later paper Seto and Eke (2006) extended the follow-up period to 3.6 years on 198 offenders from the original sample. They found that 6.6% had committed a new contact sexual offence during the extended follow-up period, and 7.1% had committed a new child pornography offence. The overall rate for any new offence was 22%. Interestingly, they found that the most consistently significant predictor of new offences was violent offence history. Men with more extensive violent offence histories (non-sexual or sexual) were more likely to offend again, sexually or non-sexually. Prior non-contact offences, including prior child pornography convictions, were not a significant predictor of new offences.

However, the sample in the Seto and Eke (2006) study appears to have a high proportion of prior offenders. They found that 57% of their sample had one or more prior convictions, 24% had prior contact sexual offences, 17% had prior non-contact sexual offences and 15% had prior child pornography offences. These levels, together with the relatively small sample size, may have led to a bias in the reported results. Wolak *et al.* (2005) examined a sample of 1,713 arrests in the US for possession of child pornography in the twelve months beginning July 2000. They found that 22% had prior convictions for previous non-sexual offences, 11% had prior violence convictions and 11% had prior sexual offence convictions against children.

Other studies of Internet sex offenders suggest an even lower level of prior convictions. In the UK, for example, Webb *et al.* (2007) reported that only 8% of their sample of 90 Internet offenders in the UK had any previous convictions. While O'Brien and Webster (2005), in a study of 123 incarcerated and community-based Internet offenders, found that the mean number of any previous convictions for the sample was .40 (SD 1.3; Range 0–0) and the mean for previous sexual convictions against children was .10 (SD .57; Range 0–5). These findings led them to conclude that 'the total number of previous convictions for sexual offences against children in the sample was considered to be low'.

Psychological characteristics of convicted Internet sex offenders

At the present time, therefore, it is possible to conclude that there is little evidence to show that collectors of indecent images of children invariably or even predominantly go on to commit contact sex offences against children, although it is known that some do. Those that reoffend and

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those that escalate their offence behaviour would seem to have *static risk factors* that are similar to those that predict higher rates of recidivism amongst contact child sex offenders.

Middleton *et al.* (2005, 2006) sought to examine whether there was evidence that *dynamic risk factors* were congruent between Internet and contact child sex offenders. A sample of 213 offenders convicted of sexualised behaviour associated with Internet use was compared with a sample of 191 sex offenders convicted of contact offences against children. All offenders completed the standard psychometric sex offender assessment battery used in the National Probation Service for England and Wales (Mandeville-Norden *et al.* 2006). The results suggest a number of similarities.

In particular, the largest clusters for both groups were characterised by intimacy deficits and problems with emotional regulation. Both of these factors have been linked with a higher risk of sexual recidivism (Hanson and Morton-Bourgon 2004). It was suggested that the behaviour of those in the intimacy deficits cluster reflected a need to engage in a sexual relationship with another person to alleviate loneliness and to compensate for a lack of intimacy. Individuals in the emotional dysregulation group may have offended in the presence of strong, negative mood states, which, in conjunction with the use of sex as a coping or soothing strategy, led them to seek sexualised images of children to meet their sexual needs; such offenders often described viewing behaviour that includes a wide variety of pornography. Unlike those in the intimacy deficits cluster, those in the emotional dysregulation cluster were often in relationships; however, those relationships were often lacking intimacy, and there was also evidence of negative reaction to stress in the relationship and/or in work situations.

Support for findings that Internet sex offenders report higher levels of intimacy deficits or emotional dysregulation comes from Laulik *et al.* (2006), who assessed a sample of 30 Internet offenders under community supervision using the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI, see Morey 1991). They found significant differences between Internet offenders and a normative population in both interpersonal functioning and affective difficulties. The combination of Low Dominance and Low Warmth scale scores on the PAI for the sample is indicative, the authors suggest, of a rejecting and submissive interpersonal style, which is thought to preclude effective interaction with others. The study also found higher than usual levels of depression

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amongst the sample and, in particular, that this corresponded with increased usage of the Internet to access indecent images.

This correlation supports Morahan-Martin and Schumacher's (2000) assertions that viewing indecent images of children may be used as a mechanism to escape from negative mood states and provide individuals with, albeit temporary, psychological and physical relief from unpleasant feelings. The implications for treatment appear to be that a functional analysis must be conducted with each individual to explore the context of the behaviour and the needs that were being met. Once these are identified, the treatment programme should seek to develop skills within the offender to meet these needs in a pro-social way.

Although it may appear axiomatic that Internet offenders who access indecent images of children do so because of deviant sexual interest and arousal, practitioners find, at least in the initial stages of assessment, that such offenders deny any arousal. However, a study by Seto *et al.* (2006) provides confirming evidence of deviant sexual interest. They report on a sample of 685 male patients referred for assessment of sexual interests and behaviour, including 100 child pornography users. The latter group showed greater sexual arousal to children (measured by phallometric assessment) than to adults. Overall, child pornography offenders had nearly three times greater odds of showing phallometric arousal to children than did men who had committed contact sex offences against children. Clearly, any treatment programme must contain some exercises designed to help the individual deal effectively with deviant sexual fantasies and intrusive thoughts.

In an ongoing debate in the literature, some contend that problematic Internet behaviour encompasses the characteristics of addiction (see, for example, Cooper *et al.* 1999, Pratarelli and Browne 2002, Young and Rodgers 1998). Others suggest that while there is undoubtedly evidence of escalation in terms of hours spent online, particularly for those who are also collecting large volumes of indecent images, the case for addiction is not clear (see, for example, Beard and Wolf 2001, Caplan 2002, Quayle and Taylor 2003). Shapira *et al.* (2003) assert that individuals who exhibit problematic Internet use often suffer from other psychiatric disorders and that 'in the face of this comorbidity, it is essential to evaluate whether these individuals represent a distinct class of disorder, or a manifestation/coping mechanism related to other underlying diagnosis'. They further suggest that 'based on the current limited empirical evidence, problematic internet use may best be

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classified as an impulse control disorder'. Certainly it seems helpful to move away from the term addiction in relation to accessing abusive images of children on the Internet since, as Quayle and Taylor (2003) suggest, addiction represents an illness over which there is little or no control.

Davis (2001) suggests that the individual who uses pornography compulsively will begin to use the Internet on learning of the vast content of Internet pornography. The accessing of Internet pornography represents an immediate stimulus–response condition, whereby the individual can immediately locate and get reinforcement from it. In doing so, the behavioural response becomes stronger. Davis further suggests that these symptoms are cognitive in nature and include obsessive thoughts about the Internet, diminished impulse control, inability to cease and the feeling that the Internet is the individual's only friend. This can lead eventually to social isolation and a loss of interest in non-Internet activities.

In designing the i-SOTP, therefore, it seemed necessary to incorporate material designed to address sexual compulsivity, obsessional thinking and problematic Internet use which arises from collecting behaviour. However, since not every offender will have these behavioural characteristics, the programme needed to be flexible in design.

The structure and content of the i-SOTP

The model of change used in the general sex offender treatment programmes employed by the National Probation Service was developed by Fisher and Beech (1998). The i-SOTP developers also took cogniscence of the 'Model of Problematic Internet Use' (Quayle and Taylor 2003) and the 'Good Lives Model' (Ward and Stewart 2003). All three of these models, and the review of literature described above, are reflected in the i-SOTP model of change.

The revised model of change incorporates steps to:

- Increase motivation, decrease denial and identify and reduce discrepancy between perceived pro-social values and behaviour (addressing distorted attitudes).
- Challenge offence-supportive attitudes and behaviours (addressing distorted attitudes).

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- Build an empathic response to identifying that children depicted in the indecent images are real victims of child abuse (addressing distorted attitudes and socio-affective functioning).
- Reduce use of sex as a strategy for coping and emotional avoidance, replacing it with effective problem-solving strategies (addressing socio-affective functioning and self-management).
- Develop adequate relationship, intimacy and coping skills; improve self-esteem and internal locus of control (social adequacy factors and self-management).
- Develop realistic relapse-prevention strategies and new pro-social lifestyle goals (addressing self-management and socio-affective functioning).

The i-SOTP is designed for offenders convicted of the qualifying offences who have been assessed as low, medium or high risk using RM 2000 (Thornton *et al.* 2003) and as low deviance following assessment of psychometric responses (Mandeville-Norden *et al.* 2006). Offenders assessed as very high risk and high deviance are more likely to have treatment needs which will require referral to a longer generic sex offender treatment programme, as are offenders who have used the Internet as a means of facilitating meetings with children for sexual abuse purposes.

The programme was originally designed to be delivered on an individual basis during which the exercises would be selected directly according to treatment need. In this format the six-module programme lasts for between 20 and 30 sessions of 90 minutes' duration. Following piloting and feedback, the programme was further developed to be delivered in a group format comprising 35 two-hour sessions, again broken into six modules. Both formats were accredited for implementation in the community in December 2006. Provisional accreditation was awarded for implementation in custodial regimes from December 2007 (NOMS 2008b). In addition, agreement has been reached for the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) to begin implementation of i-SOTP in late 2008.

The i-SOTP begins with a number of exercises designed to help offenders identify values which are important for themselves, and how their behaviour has in some aspect not reflected these values. Building on the cognitive dissonance from this process enables a focus on new goal-setting, which can assist offenders to meet desired values. The second

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module includes a functional analysis of the offence behaviour and a beginning of the challenge to offence-supportive cognitions. The third module examines the victim experience and seeks to develop victim awareness. Facilitator feedback from piloting the programme suggests that most Internet sex offenders, once victim awareness is established, do not have difficulty in demonstrating appropriate empathy. Many offenders, it appears, had not previously considered their viewing behaviour to be linked to child abuse.

The longest section of the programme, module four, focuses on skills practice to deal with intimacy or emotional self-regulation deficits. Module five deals with recognition of, and appropriate responses to, collecting and compulsivity issues. This module also provides an opportunity to examine the needs met through joining pseudo-communities online and how these may be more appropriately met. Finally, some exercises are undertaken to deal with deviant sexual fantasy. The final module draws the new learning which has taken place on the programme together and incorporates this learning into relapse prevention strategies or a 'New Life Plan'.

Strengths and weaknesses of the i-SOTP

The i-SOTP is an offender intervention which seeks to draw on the success of previous generic sex offender programmes in the UK. It applies a 'risk–need' model that requires the identification of individual characteristics contributing to the likelihood of further offending and proposes a treatment of appropriate dosage to reduce those characteristics. The treatment plan focuses on reducing the dynamic risk factors, or criminogenic needs, that drive the offending behaviour. However, the i-SOTP also recognises the requirement to take a more holistic approach to individuals rather than simply acquiring coping skills to manage high-risk situations in an adaptive manner. To this end, the identification of values and goals that take into account an offender's strengths becomes an essential part of the therapeutic process. The personal action plan that each offender leaves the programme with should contain goals that can be strived for, in addition to goals that are obtained by avoidant behaviour.

The i-SOTP benefits from the use of an extensive assessment battery that has a proven utility with sexual offenders (Mandeville-Norden *et al.*

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2006). These assessments have been further refined to assist in identifying the suggested aetiology in the offence pathway (Middleton and Hayes 2006), which in turn provides guidance for facilitators in determining which exercises should be a focus of attention for individual offenders. In the individual format of i-SOTP, exercises that will have less utility can be omitted. In the group format, offenders, whilst remaining present in the room, will not be the focus of exercises that are not relevant to their treatment needs, but will be expected to contribute to the learning of other group members by sharing their experience of positive strengths.

The weakness of the i-SOTP is that the focus is solely on the offender. Although not every offender is in, or wishes to enter, a relationship, there are obvious limitations in working on developing intimacy and relationship skills without the ability to work with both partners. This is not to attribute blame or responsibility to partners for the offence behaviour but to seek to gain positive encouragement for the offender as they practise new skills. In addition, it would be appropriate to recognise the needs of partners who seek an understanding of the offence behaviour. It was not possible to address this deficiency within the accredited programme structure, but it may be something which can be remedied at a local agency level.

Finally, the programme requires evaluation and this is currently being undertaken by the Interventions and Substance Misuse Unit within the National Probation Service.

Conclusion

The term 'sex offender' is often used to cover a wide range of behaviours and it appears that the emerging use of the term 'Internet offender' also covers a spectrum of behaviours that are not homogeneous. The context and meaning of the deviant sexual behaviour requires individualised assessment. Viewing indecent images of children using the Internet fuels the demand for such images and requires children to be sexually abused in order to produce the images. This outcome in itself is sufficient to justify intervention in order to arrest the viewing behaviour. However, there is also concern that viewing such images can lead the individual to seek opportunities for contact sexual abuse with children. It is difficult to prove any causal link between the two behaviours, however the

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overlapping static and dynamic risk factors shared by Internet and contact sex offenders suggest that an individual may move from viewing to contact sexual abuse given the environmental opportunity and diminished inhibitors. It is hoped that early intervention through treatment programmes such as the i-SOTP can reduce this possibility and also help the individual to achieve a more satisfying and pro-social lifestyle.

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