PATHOLOGICAL INTERNET COMMUNITIES: A NEW DIRECTION FOR SEXUAL DEVIANCE RESEARCH IN A POST MODERN ERA[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of the Internet and related technologies on the nature of deviant behavior, deviant communities, and the future of deviance research. The idea that pathological communities, once largely suppressed by time, space, and societal restraints, can now create and use virtual communities is focal. Those new communities may expand their numbers and/or pathology, while reinforcing their rationales for rule violations. Investigation of these new virtual communities is especially complex for both conceptual and methodological reasons: identity is hard to ascertain in cyber-settings; nationality, ethnicity and other background traits and standard (e.g., random) sampling methods are not feasible. Nonetheless, the impact of communications technology on the creation and expansion of pathologically deviant communities requires exploration to determine whether, for example, immersion and social support lead to satiation-catharsis, more aggressive real-time behavior, and/or increases in the depth and number of pathological sexual preferences.

Key words: criminal justice, cybersex, pathological online sexual deviance, sexual preferences, deviant sexual behavior, internet subculture.

The sociology of deviance has a rich background but much of its conceptual territory has become the province of new "interdisciplinary" fields. These new fields reflect both societal and academic concerns (e.g., criminal justice) and changes in the boundaries between normative and deviant activity (e.g., gay and

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lesbian studies). While the sociology of deviance should remain attentive to the face-to-face subcultures and behaviors on which it has traditionally focused, the field must also address the growth of cybercommunities based on sexual preferences that are almost universally defined as pathological, such as pedophilia and bestiality.

The term pathological deviance is used as suggested by Quinn and Forsyth (2005) and originally by Gagnon and Simon (1967); it is deviance that involves individuals acting out of a particular psychological need without the support of traditionally defined subcultures. The term also infers widespread disapproval of the act and lack of face-to-face social support for its initiation or continuation. The term includes all forms of "deviance" but deviance is not limited to pathological acts. Pathology also describes the social view of those who perpetrate such acts. They are not eccentric or fringe elements. They are seen as so far beyond normative boundaries as to be "sick". This distinguishes "pathological deviance" from other behavioral manifestations of social disorganization and social problems.

The transition of pathological deviance from isolation to community life has been facilitated by the Internet and deserves sociological attention even when no laws have been violated. The growth of cybercommunities devoted to such activities poses a host of theoretical, conceptual, and methodological challenges (Lyons, Cude, Lawrence, and Gutter 2005; Heerwegh 2005; Hargittai 2004; Witte, Pargas, Mobley, and Hawdon 2004) that require elucidation and at least partial resolution. Current use of the Internet by social science research utilizes mainly survey and ethnographic methods (e.g., Hargittai 2004), but expansion of these approaches seems desirable. This process will inevitably be an interdisciplinary in which sociology provides a basis for integrating the insights of the many fields that will contribute to this area of inquiry.

THE RANGE OF DEVIANCE

The study of deviant behavior focuses on group and personal activities that range from relatively trivial (e.g., bikers' sex lives [Quinn 1987] and buckle bunnies (Gauthier and Forsyth 2000), strippers (Forsyth and Deshotels 1997), quasi-prostitutes (Bryant and Palmer 1975), mudeaters (Forsyth and Benoit 1989), and voyeurs (Forsyth 1996) to extraordinarily controversial bugchasers (Gauthier and Forsyth 1999) and even bizarre, sexual asphyxia (Lowery and Wetle 1982). These behaviors often have community support (e.g., mud eating) and/or represent extremes of "normal" behaviors (e.g., voyeurism).

Deviance is distinct from criminology, to which it gave birth, because many of these acts are consensual and community formation is all but impossible to legally proscribe. In some cases victims can be identified, either as abstract classes (e.g., women degraded by pornography) or as concrete recipients of abuse (e.g., sex tourists seeking child prostitutes; children victimized in pornography production).

Both scholars and the public seem to delight in expose´s of the controversial, but scholarship's task is to relate the evolution of deviance in both specific and abstract forms to the development of human societies and the basic mental processes that spawn and justify departures from normative activity patterns. At the extreme of deviance studies are acts of individual pathology which evoke a universally severe societal reaction (Bierne 1997; Mead 1964); although, not all deviations from a culture's sexual mores should be considered deviant or pathological.

The versatile but innately visual medium provided by the Internet (Cowan 2005) is well-suited to the desires of sexual deviants (e.g., pedophilia, bestiality) and has broad impact: Sex sites compose a three billion dollar per year industry; 35% of downloads are pornographic and over 75 million people annually visit porn web sites (Cooper 2004). The Youth Internet Safety Survey found that 19% of youth received an unwanted sexual solicitation, 25% had experienced unwanted exposure to sexual material, and 6% had been sexually harassed online (Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak 2003). Emergent Internet technology thus appears to have the potential to help shape the sexual tastes of many users in ways that are incongruent with ancient norm systems.

Sociology has long recognized that technicways come to have deviant purposes. Technological creations often yield fresh opportunities for the pursuit of deviance. In turn, new designs entice ventures employing the new technology with the result that cunning uses of these devices are always emerging (Durkin and Bryant 1995; Quinn and Forsyth 2005). Technicways change the nature of discourse which can facilitate identity and lifestyle. Similarly, new technicways may radically alter the nature of institutionalized behavior patterns, as the birth control pill did for heterosexual intercourse in the 1960s. Telephones, pagers, VCR's, CB radios, Polaroid cameras, camcorders, and cell phones have all extended deviant boundaries and frontiers (Durkin and Bryant 1995, 1999; Forsyth 1996; Jenkins 2002; Lamb 1998; Terdiman 2004). The Internet is the most prominent of these postmodern gadgets with its still largely unexplored capability for fostering both pathological and legitimate communities.

The Internet has revolutionized many aspects of social life, including communication, business, education, and leisure; it also appears to have revolutionized sexual deviance. Song (2002, p. 43) opines that the Internet makes it "quite easy to offer support to those conducting sexual relations that the current moral order deems illicit or inapproprate". Durkin and Bryant (1995) characterized the Internet as a social consolidation mechanism that can bring together geographically dispersed individuals with similar deviant proclivities. On the Internet, one finds "a community of like-minded enthusiasts willing to discuss their enthusiasm in length and in detail" (Leiblum 1997, p. 25). The Internet is an unprecedented source of support for those with the most devalued sexual identities – a place where they can readily receive affirmation and reinforcement (Durkin 2001, 2004). Some sexually deviant subcultures have emerged and others expanded

in recent years because of Internet capabilities. Jenkins and Thomas (2004, p. 5) noted: "communities have formed around behaviors and practices that are so objectively deviant from the standpoint of the numbers involved in them that the likelihood of a subculture developing in physical space is nearly nil."

Bestiality is surely one of the most extreme forms of sexual deviance. However, the Internet has presented a unique avenue for bestiality enthusiasts to share their fantasies and interests via websites, chat rooms, and discussion groups. Apparently, one of the historically popular discussion groups dedicated to this topic started as a joke but soon attracted a dedicated and sincere following of people with a genuine interest in the topic (Durkin and Bryant 1995). Currently, there is an Internet-based subculture of zoophilies that sometimes refers to itself as the "zoo community" (Jenkins and Thomas 2004). While some of the sites have exceptionally graphic pictures and videos, other are more focused on discussion and social advocacy. One example of an advocacy group is the Zoophiliac Outreach Organization (Durkin 2004). They present their unique beliefs and perspectives, "often explicitly comparing themselves to the example of other (more successful) movements, such as the gay rights movement" (Jenkins and Thomas 2004, p. 14).

The most well-documented Internet subculture of pathological deviants is composed of pedophiles who use the Internet to view and exchange pornography, and to locate and groom victims (Durkin 1997). The Internet provides pedophiles many opportunities to forge and maintain on-going relationships with others (Quayle and Taylor 2002). Traditional pedophile organizations, such as NAMBLA (the North American Man/Boy Love Association) have a prominent presence on the Internet. Pedophiles can receive affirmation for and validation of a deviant identity on-line, and some pedophiles use this as an avenue to proselytize their deviant ideology (Durkin and Bryant 1999; Durkin 2004). There is also a wide variety of literature available online which supports the pedophile view point (e.g., The Boylove Manifesto). There is also a new project called BoyWiki, which is modeled after the popular online, interactive encyclopedia Wikipedia.

Because of the nature of the Internet there is every reason to believe that more subcultures consisting of people with esoteric sexual predilections will emerge (if they do not exist already). This provides sociologists with the opportunity to study heretofore neglected forms of sexual deviance. One example would be apotemnophilia, or being sexually aroused by amputations (Durkin and Bryant 1995). These individuals have a notable presence on the Internet. For instance, the site "Amputee World" includes photos, videos, and a contact area to meet interested parties. Another site, "Naked Amputees", provides a place for "those who find amputees sexy and desirable" by offering "an appreciative look at beautiful women amputees". There is also a growing Internet subculture for people with diaper and adult baby fetishes. The site, "Understanding Infantalism," created in 1995, offers devotees "understanding and acceptance" and seeks to address

issues surrounding this form of sexual expression as a community. The Diaper Pail Friend web page states that members of the group: enjoy playing Adult Baby games, and meeting other adults through our classified ads (Roster). We have live conferences, chat rooms, and a private online club. We publish a Newsletter and sponsor Worldwide Parties. Our online store sells diapers, plastic pants, big baby clothes, videos, audio tapes, hypnotic tapes, stories, photos, and lots more. If you love diapers or being an adult baby, this is THE place for you!

These pathological communities are expected to create new forms of deviant behaviors that social science has barely begun to even catalogue. The modest number of people committed to these deviant ventures and the legal threats many face impede the development of a face-to-face subculture. The Internet offers a seemingly bottomless inventory of deviant practices because it lacks evident constraints and transcends spatio-temporal restrictions on association. The Internet can spawn and support communities formed around extreme forms of deviance. These processes of creating and supporting behaviors that are beyond the margins of most norm systems require empirical investigation as well as social commentary. However, commentary may be misleading without prior empirical investigation; pundits and (criminal justice) practitioners tend to presume the dangerousness of such communities despite the paucity of data on their actual impact. Early media studies (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1982) suggest that these may range from contagion and exacerbation of latent tendencies to the vicarious or cathartic release of deviant desires.

The Internet constructs what Goffman (1963, p. 81) terms "back places", where people of similar preferences feel no need to conceal their pathology and can openly seek out one another for support and advice. Chat rooms and message posting boards for pedophiles, sadomasochists, swingers, and tea roomers contain both efforts to find partners and a variety of neutralization efforts that plead for analysis. The felt-anonymity of cyberspace (Akdeniz 2002) eases concern with public stigmatization and legal sanctions and encourages communal rationalization.

The multicultural dimension of the Internet is also significant for sexual deviance research. Cybersex, consisting of explicit dialogue and role playing in email and chat rooms, for example, is common in many western nations (Marshall 2003). Cybersex is viewed with approbation by most Americans but is defined as harmless in Holland, while the converse is true of ethnic jokes (Kuipers 2003). The Internet also makes deviant practices from many cultures universally available. The Japanese term "bukkake," for instance, has been adapted by the Internet pornography industry to succinctly describe the more or less ritualistic ejaculation of several men upon a female paramour.

A wide variety of technology-based interactions may lead some individuals to believe that their desires are widely shared and supported. Several possible outcomes of this situation can be hypothesized: (1) new interests in proscribed

behavior may be initiated, (2) repressed intentions may expand or deepen with support and reinforcement, or (3) the use of virtual reality may substitute for real time contacts. In all probability some combination of these will pertain to sexually deviant Internet community participation, but the question of which actors will follow which route remains to be ascertained for different cultures, status groups and behavioral communities.

The social learning model (Lemert 1951) suggests that individuals choose stimuli to which they are already attracted. Nonetheless, it is interaction with others holding similar interests that reinforce their deviant interests, teach methods of achieving deviant goals and support rationales for the abrogation of basic norms. "Communities will have more deviance wherever the diversity makes it easier to associate with deviant others, learn definitions favorable for deviance, and have deviant behavior reinforced by those in one's social environment," (Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce, and Akers 1984, p. 357).

These interactions can provide the logistical, emotional, and social support needed to cross the line from contemplation to action. Such encounters are learning experiences in which deviant tendencies are found to be shared with others. Expansion of the deviants' repertoire of behaviors, beliefs and skills required for accomplishing the deviant goal while avoiding apprehension or censure can occur simultaneously in this process.

Interaction may also create new desires or be used to satiate extant fantasies in relatively harmless ways. Anonymity allows radical changes in identity – even ascribed statuses of race and gender may be altered on the Internet (Herring and Martinson 2004). Some pedophiles engage in "age-play" with one adopting the role of a child in cybersex. Pedophiles argue that this replaces the desire for "victim" and is thus safer. The practice may also drive desire to new heights in some participants, however, and clearly encourages a world view that sexualizes children.

RESEARCHING ONLINE SEXUAL DEVIANCE

The Internet has expanded pathological communities at the expense of the isolated pathological deviant (Leiblum 1997; Quinn and Forsyth 2005). This raises a variety of questions for empirical research. Prior to the Internet, only a few forms of pathological deviants had formed communities (e.g., leather fetishists, BDSM, Swingers, Tea rooms). Others remained more isolated (bestiality, pedophilia). The perceived anonymity of the Internet (Gyorgy 2002) lends itself to illusions that justify such behavioral preferences and facilitates experimentation with these forbidden visions. It is also an effective means for communicating with others who share similar interests regardless of how bizarre or rare that interest may be (Bell and Lyall 2000). This development among deviants parallels that of entirely legitimate Internet uses ranging from stamp collectors, MADD, parents of murdered teens, or youth subcultures.

Also of import are the questions posed by the notion of addiction – both to proscribed sexual activities (Carnes 1992) and Internet use (Young 2004). The immediacy of gratification permitted by the Internet merges with its convenience to provide an escape for emotionally troubled people through cybersex and pornography in a unique manner recognized as "cybersexual addiction" (Center for Online Addiction 2006). This new form of addiction requires linkage to an interdisciplinary literature on compulsive drug use, gambling, and sexual activity.

An increasingly common strategy has been to use data gathered from the Internet in the investigation of sexual deviance. This includes information from web sites, as well as discussion groups and other computer forums. For instance, Durkin and Bryant (1999) utilized the postings in a Usenet newsgroup frequented by pedophiles. Lamb (1998) examined the characteristics of visitors to online chat rooms. Panandri and Green (2000) examined image management in sadomasochism chat rooms. Gauthier and Forsyth (1999) gathered part of their data on bug chasers (i.e., men seeking HIV infection) from web sites and chat rooms. Hegland and Nelson (2002) examined the personal web pages of a sample of transvestites. Gossett and Byrne (2002) performed a content analysis of Internet rape sites.

The question for sexual deviance researchers revolves around the impact of this change on the actual behavior of the pathological deviant and tracing this development. The typology offered by Quinn and Forsyth (2005) allows retrospective classification of all varieties of sexual deviance documented in the pre-Internet era and encourages their comparison with their current manifestations. It expedites and encourages parallels between the nature of cybersexual interactions with similar ones that occur in real time and space. The impact of Internet communities on actual behavior can be described and discussed in empirical terms via this scheme. This is a necessary and much needed supplement to the speculative discourse that currently eclipses the social science literature on the Internet's social impact (e.g., Northcott 1999; Silverman 2001). New methodologies, and perhaps even statistical tests, will be needed to meet the challenges of the online world: For example, respondent=informant identity is uncertain, random sampling is not feasible, and selection biases cannot be known.

The expansion of pathological deviance on the Internet is due in part to the fact that bizarre forms of gratification are not confined to a physical "red light" district but are also spread through emails, accidental search "hits," and even use of mundane pornographic outlets (Grace 2000). Differences in the ways surfers encounter sexually deviant sites may be important to changes in how various acts are defined as well as in the behavior of those attracted to them. A potential consequence of this more macrosocial dynamic is broader cultural awareness which can foster fear, acceptance, or militant opposition in various actors.

Internet technology will continue to make the study of deviance a lively topic as new forms are constantly emerging. Quinn and Forsyth's (2005) typology

focuses on the behavior's social status (normal or pathological) and its social organization (isolated or communal). This scheme should better equip researchers to describe both historical and current changes in sexual behavior wrought by technology in ways that allow continuity with studies of more established deviant communities.

DISCUSSION

Given the size of the cybersex industry, the sort of theoretically guided research advocated by Quinn and Forsyth (2005) is sorely needed in social science. The distribution and organization of deviant sexuality and, indeed, the very definition of that term requires examination and critique. The Internet may, thus, be a goad for deviance researchers to deal with changes in how deviance is defined, rationalized and enacted. The Internet also offers a window on the thought processes of pathological actors in a natural setting that encourages the disclosure of their innermost fantasies while discouraging the collection of basic demographic data.

This means that a socially proscribed and severely sanctioned behavior that was once largely relegated to secrecy among isolated individuals is now at the core of a cybercommunity in which all manner of support is readily available. The likelihood of exposure to these communities or their imagery and rationales is also vastly increased by the Internet. Scientific exploration of the ramifications of this profound shift has only recently commenced and there is only one theoretical scheme (Quinn and Forsyth 2005) available to guide empirical research on this shift in the nature of deviant sexuality. Critique and modification of theoretical typologies by those utilizing them are integral to the progress of science.

The potential of the Internet to expand behaviors with innovative technicways is apparent with the recent advent of real time online big game hunting. Virtual hunts may satiate the desire for this activity without endangering exotic species or offending animal rights activists. However, such a satiation thesis cannot be applied to sexual activity without solid empirical support. What fresh openings for deviant communities, created by pathological imaginations and fostered by novel and ever emerging techniways, are there in the future?

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