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From Playboy to Prison: When Pornography Use Becomes a Crime

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ABSTRACT

This study explores pornography use across the lifespan for a sample of registrants convicted of child pornography related offenses. We conducted qualitative life history interviews with nine offenders to examine how offender, victim, and situational factors interact to produce pornography related criminal events. Using a hybrid analytic approach, themes related to persistence in pornography use and the social acceptability of pornography are identified. These themes relate to transitions from legal pornography use to illegal child pornography possession.

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Introduction

There is an intuitive or “common sense” link between child pornography possession, manufacture, and/or sale and sexual contact offending against children (Howitt 1995). If child pornography possession is indeed a “gateway” or at least a co-occurring crime with physical child sexual abuse (Kettleborough and Merdian 2017), a better understanding of viewing and possessing child pornography could help create proactive programs and policies to prevent victimization before it occurs. Unfortunately, traditional psychological and criminological examinations of child pornography crimes limit current understanding by relying on quantitative methodologies, which isolate child pornography uses from general pornography viewing patterns and focus on offender characteristics, while holding some situational factors constant (Kor et al. 2014; Stack, Wasserman, and Kern 2004; Wegmann, Stodt, and Brand 2015). Victim factors, or factors associated with the images possessed and/or viewed, are often overlooked in these traditional examinations, as are cultural, social, political, and historical changes in what is considered obscene and who are defined as “children.”

Different from prior studies on child pornography possession, we take as a point of departure that viewing/possessing child pornography is part of broader and legal pornography viewing patterns across the life course that need to be examined. Humans are sexual beings, and an interest in learning, reading, or viewing sexual material is part of normal human sexual development (Kar, Choudhury, and Singh 2015) that does not naturally end post puberty or after reaching “adulthood.” In fact, many pornographic images involving “adults” (persons 18 or older) are quite legal to view, download, and possess. Therefore, our research goal is to understand how people come to view obscene material that is illegal to possess.

We conducted life history interviews with nine registered sex offenders living in the community to situate their histories of pornography viewing into social, political, historical, and cultural contexts. As Meier, Kennedy, and Sacco (2001) explain, criminological studies of criminality often examine criminals, victims, and situations separately, rarely investigating how the interactions between these factors produce dynamic criminal events that occur in space and over time. This study uses a criminal event perspective to guide data collection and analyses. By their very nature, criminal events require people motivated to break laws, victims or those harmed by law violations, and situational contexts viewed as routines and/or opportunities (Cohen and Felson 1979; Warr 2001). This qualitative examination overcomes limitations of prior studies that quantitatively investigate individual level factors in ways that isolate them from social and cultural contexts. In other terms, we move beyond identifying significant individual level variables that influence child pornography possession while holding other factors constant. Rather, we depict how individual level factors interact with victim and situational factors within social, political, historical, and cultural contexts to culminate in pornography-related criminal events.

Background

The legal definition, or the political context, of pornography or “obscene material” in the U.S. has remained rather vague over time and is subject to prevailing community standards. Defining something as pornographic material involves individual decision-making as to the prurient interests of the material, including its erotic, abnormal, unhealthy, and degrading nature, or demonstrates morbid interest in nudity, sex, or excretion (Smith v. United States 1977; Miller v. California 1973; Pope v. Illinois 1987). When contemplating what material is and is not pornographic, Justice Stewart famously noted in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964: 197), “I know it when I see it.” This definition is unique to the U.S. as other countries have different definitions of pornography or have no definitions of pornographic material at all. When we situate child pornography use into general pornography viewing patterns, material considered “obscene” or “pornographic” varies across nations, cultures, and over time as “community standards” of what is or is not “normal sexual activity” evolve.

Given that “pornography” is often defined on a case-by-case basis, it is difficult to discern what community standards currently regard as “obscene.” What we do know, however, are the prevailing community standards in the U.S. regarding the viewing of pornographic material. In 2011, Gallup found 30% of the U.S. population believed pornography viewing to be morally acceptable, which rose to 43% by 2018 (Dugan 2018). In 2014, nearly two-thirds (64%) of American men admitted to viewing pornography (Watson 2014). This finding is consistent with current pornography-related search terms used on the Internet. Pornhub Insights’ (2018) 2017 Year in Review found that of the top 20 countries that comprised 80% of the daily pornography search traffic, the U.S. ranked first, followed by the U.K., India, Japan, and Canada.

Legal pornography viewing has become more culturally accepted over time (Carroll et al. 2008; Szymanski and Stewart-Richardson 2014; Twenge, Sherman, and Wells 2015). Common uses for pornography include stimulating masturbation, for entertainment, as distraction from daily responsibilities, to manage stress (Hertlein and Stevenson 2010), to help develop sexual identities (Tolman and McClelland 2011), and as sex education (Sun et al. 2016). Pornography serves a purpose for some people and they seek it out, so perhaps illegal pornography viewing results, to some degree, from the confusion created by our social, political, and cultural tolerance of general pornography viewing involving adults and “teens.”

The facts are that despite pornography/obscenity laws in the U.S., culturally, a growing number of men and women admit to viewing pornography, Americans lead the world in searches for “pornography-related” terms, and the moral acceptability of viewing obscene material is increasing over time. This suggests discrepancies between policy and public opinion (Roberts and Stalans 2018) when it comes to pornography viewing. While legislators are busy changing definitions of what is “obscene” and increasing penalties for possessing such material, the polity is busy searching for and viewing it.

Pornography-related criminal events are based on either the activities depicted or the perceived age of the “actors” in images. Therefore, we must explore the social and political spheres for how we define “children,” or people who cannot provide legal consent to sexual

activity based on their chronological age. Sample (2001) notes variability across states concerning the age of consensual sex. In 2001, states' ages for sexual consent ranged from 13-years-old in Kentucky to 18-years-old in Vermont, Wisconsin, and other states. What is considered "illegal" pornography possession varied by state depending on how groups of physicians estimated actors' ages, using hair patterns and other biological markers of puberty to determine if those portrayed in obscene material were over the age of 13, 16, or 18-years-old, depending on the state (Rosenbloom 2013). Further, what is considered a sex-related crime in one state is not necessarily a sex crime in another, leading to much confusion in sex offender management. The passage of the Adam Walsh Act of 2006 intended to end this confusion and bring standardization to sex crime types, penalties, and offender management in the community by creating a national sex offender registry. To maintain the registry, the federal age of consent for sexual activity became 18, at least in terms of the sexual exploitation of "minors" and Internet-related sex offenses, such as possession of child pornography. Oddly, the policy of being 18-years-old before one can legally consent to sexual activity, contradicts biological markers of sexual development.

For females, menstruation has long been associated with the transition to adulthood and an interest in sexual information, and the average age of first menstruation has been declining since the Victorian age. In 1901, the average age of menses onset was 14-years-old (Moss 2015). By the 1950s and 1960s, the average age of first period dropped to 13.5 years, was down to 12.8 years by 1970, and 12.5 years in 2018. Females are becoming biologically interested in sexual activity between 12 and 13-years-old, yet in many ways their interests must be legally put on hold for five to six years. For males, the onset of puberty is the biological marker at which males begin to transition into adulthood and demonstrate interest in sexual activity. In 2012, the average age for beginning puberty in boys was nine to ten-years-old, two years earlier than two decades ago (DeNoon 2012). The onset of puberty for both males and females is becoming younger throughout time, yet policy makers continue to push the age of sexual consent up to 18 years. Clearly, notions of adulthood are not related directly to biology.

Notions of adulthood are socially and medically constructed over time. Currently, most neuroscientists agree that the human brain is not fully developed, or mature, until the age of 25 (National Public Radio 2011), with female brains maturing two years earlier than males. Legally/politically, you can drive an automobile in most states by the age of 16, enter the military without parental consent and consent to sex at 18-years-old, and purchase alcohol at the age of 21, all before brain maturity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted a public survey in 2017 to determine age of first sexual intercourse and found the average age for males was 16.8 years, as opposed to 17.2 years for females, meaning that socially, people believe they are having consensual sex before 18-years-old with few social or legal repercussions (National Survey of Family Growth 2017).

Limited historical, political, cultural, or social agreement exists over time regarding what "pornography" is, the acceptability of its viewing, what age is appropriate to begin thinking

about sexual activity, and the age at which you can consent to sex. It is within these contexts that individual, victim, and situational factors can culminate in the possession of illegal obscene material.

The interaction of individual, victim, and situational factors

Individual factors

At the individual level, religiosity and social attachments can mitigate or provide boundaries for pornography use (Hardy et al. 2013; Ley 2016; Stack, Wasserman, and Kern 2004). People will tend to avoid behaviors that appear “sinful” or risk the existence and strength of social relationships in their lives. In this way, individuals’ desires to seek pornographic material depend on the standards friends, family, and other social institutions (e.g., churches and schools) hold regarding what material is obscene and what is acceptable. Also, studies suggest a range of motives for child pornography possession such as sexual interest in children, indiscriminate sexual intercourse, affective states, or unmet emotional needs, regardless if adjudicated for possession of child pornography or not (Howells, Day, and Wright 2004; Merdian et al. 2013; Seto, Reeves, and Jung 2010). These motives result from cognitive distortions, or unfounded thought content, that allow offenders to think of children, for instance, as fantasy characters or as actors in movies and serve to meet child pornography offenders’ voyeuristic interests (Kettleborough and Merdian 2017; Quayle et al. 2000). Others suggest pornography crimes are situated within routine activities and rational choice frameworks (Cohen Almagor 2013). For instance, Quayle and Taylor (2002) suggest some choose pornography offending to avoid contact offending. Yet, the dual process model of thinking suggests emotional arousal can change cognitive landscapes (Exum 2015), and emotion more than rational thought exerts a causal relationship to child pornography offending (Howells, Day, and Wright 2004). Last, low self-control (Buzzell, Foss, and Middleton 2006) and the “third person” effect, or the belief pornography holds negative consequences for other users, but not for yourself, can increase pornography use (Ven-hwei and Wei 2002).

It is important to understand that most illegal pornography viewing includes images of adults, not children (Finkelhor and Ormrod 2004), thus limiting individual level explanations of deviant sexual interest in children. Research posits that illegal viewing may function as a coping mechanism to manage stressful life circumstances (Quayle et al. 2000; Winder, Gough, and Seymour-Smith 2015) and is experienced as a stress-reliever (Coleman 2003; Kaestle and Allen 2011).

More profuse in existing literature than motives for illegal pornography offending are correlates of the behavior (Babchishin et al. 2018; Henshaw, Ogloff, and Clough 2017). Elliott, Beech, and Mandeville-Norden (2013) suggest contact offenders have less empathy, more pro-offending attitudes, are more assertive, and have greater impulsivity than Internet offenders. Merdian et al. (2013) and others (Broome, Izura, and Lorenzo-Dus 2018) find fantasy-driven pornography offenders had significantly different personality profiles than contact-driven offenders. Seto

and Eke (2015) find that physical child molesters and Internet offenders have similar backgrounds but differ by antisocial variables such as acting out and breaking social rules. Differences between pornography offenders and contact sex offenders also focus on differential opportunity and the access people have to children or the Internet, as well as psychological barriers to contact offending (Babchishin, Karl Hanson, and Heather 2015; McCarthy 2010; Webb, Craissati, and Keen 2007). These explanations suggest we must look beyond individual factors and examine their interactions with how people view the actors in illegal material, to understand this behavior.

Victim factors

Regarding illegal pornography viewing as a criminal event, there must be people harmed by that behavior, or what we call “victims,” involved. Social norms involving sexual activity are a taboo subject in the U.S. that many do not feel comfortable discussing (Leonard and Donath 2017), leaving room for sexual curiosity, self-education, and self-reflection of what is and is not socially acceptable, pleasurable, and “appropriate.” In turn, cultural factors such as media contributions, including movies, television programs, and advertisements, can suggest cognitive sexual scripts, or what our sexual desires should be and how we can obtain them (Sun et al. 2016). For instance, actress Audrey Hepburn was 24-years-old to Gregory Peck’s 37-years-old when filming the 1953 film “Roman Holiday,” and Julia Roberts was 22- years-old in the 1990 film “Pretty Woman” compared to her leading man, Richard Gere, who was 41. Since the invention of moving pictures, the average age of lead actors is older compared to their female leading ladies (Women and Hollywood 2015), making it appear perfectly natural for older men to be attracted to much younger women.

Historically, one thinks of magazines like Playboy, introduced to the public in 1953, as pornographic because it includes still photos of women nude from the waist up who were paid to pose for photos (New York Times 2017). By the 1970s, feminists began portraying Playboy’s still photography as demeaning to and exploitive of women, thus questioning if women were providing voluntary and informed consent to partake in sexually explicit material (Bronstein 2011). By 2000, the U.S. passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) largely based on assumptions that a sizeable proportion of women in pornographic material were coerced or physically forced to participate in sexually explicit posing or acting, particularly those in their teens and/or pre-pubescent females (Hughes 2013). What these feminists could not foresee is a world of “sexting” or the voluntarily-taken “naked selfie” (Englander 2017; Holoyda et al. 2018; Phippen and Kennedy 2017; Walrave et al. 2018). Are those who choose to partake in intimate self-disclosures before the age of 18 victims of themselves? Were these “selfies” a function of sexual self-expression (Ashton, McDonald, and Kirkman 2018) and a means to construct sexual identity (García-Gómez 2017), or were they the result of “revenge” pornography – the sharing of intimate personal moments beyond the people intended to view such images (Franks 2017; Lageson, McElrath, and Palmer 2018; McGlynn, Rackley, and Houghton 2017)? Few would question that “revenge porn” incidents have distinct victims and there is widespread support in

the U.S. for criminalizing material deemed “revenge porn” (Lageson, McElrath, and Palmer 2018; Uhl et al. 2018), but it is difficult to determine the differences between “selfies” and “revenge pornography” without speaking to victims.

The historical and cultural contexts of defining “victims” of illegal pornography viewing and possession demonstrate that notions of victimhood are perceptual, situational, and contingency based. Some choose to believe that all women in obscene material are unwilling participants, whereas others resort to historical notions of pornography “actors” as paid employees. The advent of the Internet, cell-phones, and “selfies” have changed the face of who we think consented to being in obscene material, who produced obscene material, and whether participants in obscene material posed willingly. This conceptually convolutes the “victims” of pornography possession and interacts with sexual cognitive scripts of individuals.

Situational factors

Motives for sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, and cognitive scripts of who are appropriate sexual partners, and what sex acts are socially acceptable, do not interact in a vacuum. Pornography, of any type, is more accessible today than in prior years when one left gas stations with magazines in plain brown paper wrappers (Najdowski 2017). Advancements in technology led to greater availability of pornography and more anonymity in obtaining it. Despite the seemingly cultural acceptance of obscene magazines like Playboy, the viewing of pornographic films used to occur in seedy movie establishments or one acquired it in the basements of such places. Prior to the Internet, pornographic material viewing required effort and occurred outside the home. The Internet removed much of the work involved in “finding” obscene material and bringing it into the home. Even with the onset of Internet pornography viewing, a need for some privacy when viewing or owning obscene material still existed. The invention and widespread use of the cell phone facilitated ownership and viewing of pornography at virtually any time of the day and any place you may be. Still, the days, times, and number of hours people are available to download and view pornography (Buzzell 2005) can vary by employment, social engagement, and marital status.

Perceived legal repercussions of pornography possession can interact with individual and victim level factors. Structurally, the certainty of apprehension for child pornography possession is increasing (Wolak, Finkelhor, and Mitchell 2011), but it is still impossible for law enforcement to police the whole of the Internet for pornography searches 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Englander (2017) found young people reported no positive or negative outcomes after “sexting,” or self-disclosing sexual images, so few young people would perceive criminal apprehension for their self-disclosures. Legal and social consequences for sending or receiving “sexting” messages from “children” or persons under 18 exist (ten Bensel and Sample Forthcoming), but for laws to serve as deterrents of behavior people first must believe the likelihood they will be caught breaking the law is high and second, that they will receive a harsh

punishment for law breaking. “Sexting” behavior among youth has made apprehension and punishment more difficult.

Other situational factors involved in illegal pornography possession include setting, the move to child pornography, and collecting behaviors (Quayle et al. 2000). Studies suggest child pornography offenders do not start out seeking images of children (Fortin, Paquette, and Dupont 2018; Morahan-Martin and Schumacher 2003; Winder, Gough, and Seymour-Smith 2015). Rather, they lack the agency to deny curiosity as “pop-ups” appear on Internet screens, they click on new images, and then use psychological notions of “addiction” to describe continued child pornography viewing. The setting involved in illegal pornography viewing is related to individual level factors such as affective states, feelings of loneliness and unattractiveness, stressful life conditions, work stress, limited sexual activity, and/or marital discord all combine to influence illegal pornography possession. Research in the developmental life course perspective supports that marriage, employment, and/or military service may be turning points in individuals’ lives that relate to decisions to commit crime or to desist from such behavior (Laub and Sampson 1993; Sampson and Laub 1993, 2003). Prior research on the relationship between marriage and offending suggest that these relationships lead to social bonding and increased support, and therefore may lead to cognitive transformations required for criminal desistance (Bersani et al. 2009; Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998). Additionally, Lytle, Bailey, and ten Benschel (2017) found that the quality of the romantic relationship matters perhaps more so than their existence. Concerning environment, a continuum of Internet engagement occurs and broadens the types of pornography, viewing images of children becomes part of some people’s sexual interests. As images are viewed and collected, social network sites appear on which people are discussing their similar sexual interests (Quinn and Forsyth 2013). Relationships form between people in the online sites, and illegal images become a currency to exchange.

Literature suggests that the possession and use of illegal child pornography is dynamic in nature, can be situated within broader pornography viewing patterns, involves individuals’ ideas of with whom they may have sex, and what sex acts people may find enjoyable. Sustained illegal child pornography viewing may eventually require some refined knowledge (Wright, Logie, and Decker 1995) of how to negotiate Internet firewalls, passwords, and why illegal pornography possession can be beneficial to creating and maintaining virtual social relationships. Unlike prior investigations into illegal child pornography possession, we are not trying to isolate the effects of individual factors on pornography viewing while accounting for victim and situational variables. Rather, through a qualitative research design, we seek to understand how individual, victim, and situational factors interact within historical, political, and cultural contexts to culminate in illegal pornography possession.

Methods

Research design

We used an exploratory informal conversational life history interview design on a snowball sample of people convicted of pornography crimes living in the community in one Midwestern state. The informal conversational interview style allowed subjects to prioritize what they felt were influential and turning point factors in the evolution of their pornography viewing history. Also, this style prompted greater understanding of offenders' emotional and mental states at the various stages before, during, and following the commission of their offenses. The probing questions related to the life history of pornography viewing allowed us to gather retrospective data over time.

Sampling

Purposive snowball sampling techniques were employed to recruit subjects and are commonly used in exploratory qualitative research (Anderson 2000; Jacobs 2006; Wright and Decker 1996). This sampling strategy is used to study difficult-to-reach populations. Sex offenders are often hesitant to communicate with others due to fear or previous experiences of harassment, stigma, and embarrassment (Klein, Bailey, and Sample 2018). Given possible apprehension, we allowed a sex offender organization to recruit subjects for this study (for details see Cooley, Moore, and Sample 2017; Sample, Cooley, and ten Bensel 2018; ten Bensel and Sample Forthcoming). These efforts yielded nine individuals with non-contact child pornography related offenses who volunteered to provide life history information of pornography use and were willing to prospectively continue to provide us with data on viewing pattern updates. The purposive nature of the final sample of nine was based on analysing a broad range of pornography experiences across subjects. People were interviewed for this study from 2017 to January of 2019. Some subjects had been interviewed on other aspects of desistance from sex offending beginning in 2012, which afforded us prospective longitudinal data as well as retrospective data from life histories.

Using the criminal event perspective to guide the research, our goal is to understand the interactions of offender, victim, and situational conditions and circumstances that led to the commission of the pornography offense. All registrants offended against a person under 19-years-old, which is the legal definition of childhood in Nebraska. Not surprisingly, all offenders were male and white, which likely reflects the sample bias inherent in snowball sampling techniques, general demographic trends in reporting sex offenses to police, and the demographic composition of the state.

Table 1. Participant descriptives.

Variables	<i>f</i>	Average	Min	Max
Age				
Exposure	9			
Marriage (first)	7	10.44	5	20
Offense	9	26.75	19	46
Current	9	44.44	27	65
		53.33	35	71
Race (white)	9			
Sex (male)	9			
Child pornography offense				
Fine	1			
Visual depiction	1			
Attempted possession	1			
Possession	5			
Receiving	1			
Distribution	1			
Sentence length				
Probation (years)	2	6.5	2	11
Prison (months)	7	38.86	18	72
Post-conviction (years)	9	8.89	1	20

N = 9

Data collection

The primary form of data collection for this study included semi-structured interviews. We also used informal conversational interviewing techniques in which the researcher was a “traveler” in the subjects’ lived experiences of social life pre- and post-conviction (Kvale and Brinkman 2009). For this reason, no two interviews revealed the same exact amount of information as would be expected based on the variability in human experiences. These conversational interviews began by asking subjects, “Would you like to tell me about the first time you viewed pornography?” Asking subjects to define pornography provided data not be constrained by legal definitions. Interviews often lasted one to three hours and included at least one follow-up interview that often began with probing questions based on the initial responses. Interview types varied depending on the geographic location of registrants. Some interviews were conducted either face-to-face or over the telephone, as were follow-ups. Others too apprehensive to talk in person or by phone, were contacted via email. Subjects were given pseudonyms that are used for identification in the research. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

Although the unstructured nature of these interviews limited our ability to make direct cross-case comparisons in all narratives and stories shared with researchers, this limitation was acceptable based on the variability in responses from the initial probing questions. For instance, this allowed research subjects to prioritize what they found most difficult, what stories they felt

were most important to share, and what experiences had the most impact on their lives rather than sharing topics forced upon them by researchers.

Despite variability in the stories, researchers had similar probing and follow-up questions that afforded the ability to determine themes, similarities, and differences across subjects' experiences. This process was facilitated by weekly peer debriefings (Charmaz 2006). For instance, regardless of what stories were shared with us by offenders, we always asked, "Do you mind explaining how it was that you came to be on the registry?" We also asked, "What was depicted in the images/videos you viewed, did you have access to a computer at home, did you view pornography alone or with someone else, did you consider the viewing of this material to be criminal, how would you describe your relationships with intimate others, what circumstances led to you viewing illegal pornography, and how would you describe your pornography use throughout your life?" It was responses to this last question that became the point of departure of the current research.

The informal conversational interview style made subjects feel comfortable enough not only to participate in this study, but to continue to contact us as their life circumstances change over time. Since initial contact, all nine participants in this study contacted us, mostly via phone or email to share new experiences, ask for opinions on circumstances, seek information about legal reforms, let us know of marriages, divorces, or births, and feelings of loneliness, isolation, or have thoughts they feel they should not have (e.g., self-harm) (Klein, Bailey, and Sample 2018). We do not counsel, treat, or judge, the information we receive from participants. Rather, in all cases, we simply listen, and that not only seems to therapeutically aid registrants through lonely times, but also enhances the professional friendships we created during our informal conversational interviews.

In sum, we gathered qualitative data through initial interviews that occurred in-person, over the telephone, and via email. We conducted follow-up interviews when necessary as well as experienced subject-initiated follow-up contact. The multiple sources of data in this study provide triangulation of information across sources; and allowed for saturation of information to occur across registrants' and family members' experiences. The length of contact with subjects allows for a check on reliability of information as subjects' narratives built on themselves over time. Last, intercoder reliability was facilitated through peer debriefing and weekly crosschecks on probing questions across researchers and the coding of all data by researchers of this study.

Analysis

As the purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the interactions that gave rise to child pornography offenses, researchers applied thematic narrative analysis to identify the current themes and trends in the transcripts and emails from registered citizens. The analytical approach employed was outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) when reviewing interview transcripts and emails. First, researchers familiarized themselves with the data and then read it

in an active way while searching for meanings and patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006). Second, analysts generate codes of interest from manifest or latent context. Next, the codes are examined for overarching themes occurring at various decision-making points for the offender, including before, during, and after the offense. Identified themes are developed into a process-based model and comparative analysis was performed (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within a given dataset, which are later identified as codes. This technique organizes and describes a dataset in detail (Braun and Clarke 2006). The current study employed thematic analysis in identifying the themes and trends found in the transcripts and emails from registered sex offenders. As found in grounded theory approaches, thematic analyses require more interpretation from researchers. Rather than simply counting explicit words or phrases, grounded theory focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit concepts within a dataset (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). In short, thematic analysis allowed researchers to explore child pornography as a process, through the examination of similarities and differences between registrants before, during, and after the commission of an offense.

Results

Thematic analyses revealed a number of themes regarding illegal pornography possession as a criminal event. We found persistence in legal pornography viewing across the life course, but individuals' ages interacted with their sexual interests over time, as did the advent of Internet pornography. Respondents' beliefs that people were "actors" or paid professionals in pornographic material rather than "victims," interacted with cognitive sexual scripts that allowed subjects to see teen females as "women." Participants formed conclusions about the social and familial acceptability of pornography viewing, which facilitated social learning of motives for viewing legal and illegal child pornography, determining sexual preferences, and ways to mitigate responsibility for pornography possession.

Although social institutions such as churches, families, friend networks, and schools did not prevent pornography viewing, these connections engendered feelings of guilt and shame DEVIANT BEHAVIOR 25 surrounding viewing patterns over the life course. Most participants hid their behaviors from their parents and eventually from spouses and children. Last, we found no single individual, victim, or situational factor responsible for pornography criminal events. Rather, it was clear historical and cultural beliefs interacted to facilitate an interest in pornography viewing, as did biological factors of puberty, a lack of sexual activity, individual affective states interacting with cognitive scripts of "victims" and "non-contact" offending, and perceived social acceptability of voyeurism developed early in life. Below we offer data in support of these themes and counterfactual data suggesting some subjects exhibit deviant sexual interests with no explanation for why.

Persistence in pornography viewing across the life course

Using a grounded theory approach to analyze data, researchers identified the theme of persistence of pornography viewing across the life course. As well as the stability of pornography use throughout life, we note the importance of turning points, such as marriage and the birth of children, during life that relate to shifts in viewing patterns. Bill's story furthered our understanding of the manner by which legal pornography viewing becomes a criminal event as it highlighted the importance of examining pornography use across the life course and the relevancy of turning points.

Bill's story

Bill was first exposed to pornography at the age of eight. The first pornographic material he saw was a magazine picture hanging in the barber shop he visited with his father. "My dad noticed me looking at [the naked female picture] and asked what I was looking at ... this made me feel ashamed ... the image was intriguing. It's not every day you see something like that." The illicit nature of the image Bill saw, coupled with his father's reaction, peaked Bill's sexual curiosity. Later during childhood, Bill recalled visiting the home of his uncle who kept magazines from his subscription to Playboy on the kitchen table, so illicit material was available to him throughout his pre-pubescent years. Pornography viewing by members of his family was perceived as a normal healthy adult behavior, an acceptable choice made by his father, uncle, and barber, regardless of their social attachments, religious beliefs, and personal levels of self-control.

The first time Bill had any pornography of his own was during adolescence, at the age of 12. A friend gave Bill a picture of the naked bust of a woman, again suggesting social acceptability of material, and Bill carried the image in his billfold with pride for many years. He recalled that it made him feel "cool" suggesting his belief in the "normalness" of pornography viewing. He says he did not date much during high school and characterized himself as small and "not someone that others would want to date." He did not recall actively seeking out pornography, beyond the picture in his wallet, until college.

Bill discovered pornographic books, such as *The Carpetbaggers*, during college and remembers enjoying the stories. Bill asserted that he did not think he would ever get married, due to his physical appearance. This suggests that Bill's poor self-image from adolescence carried into early adulthood and led him to avoid romantic relationships. Bill used pornography to fill an emotional and physical void that stemmed from a lack of involvement in physical and emotional relationships with intimates.

Bill eventually married later in life, at the age of 46. He continued to view pornography after he was married. As pornography viewing had become a routine behavior for Bill, he introduced it into his marriage. Bill and his wife viewed pornographic videos together early in their marriage. However, his wife grew increasingly disinterested in watching pornography especially following the birth of their children, "She didn't want to watch it anymore, so I would sneak off and

watch it alone.” Not only was she not interested in watching pornography, but her interest in physical intimacy with Bill also decreased. Bill sought out pornography to satisfy his sexual desires. Clearly, Bill’s viewing patterns had moved beyond simple curiosity and sexual desire toward a way to cope with the withdrawal of intimacy in his marriage. Given his already poor self-image developed during childhood, we can only surmise that decreasing intimacy in his marriage influenced his affective states, his personal identity, and his sense of worth in his marriage.

By this time in his life, he had access to the Internet at home. “I moved my computer to my office ... then I could get out of bed in the middle of the night and watch for an hour or so.” He took steps to improve the accessibility of pornographic material and ensure privacy. Bill said that the Internet “opened up his world and presented him with more variety” that led him to discover some “strange stuff.” Bill recalled similar feelings from the first time he viewed pornography, the variety of images he could find online felt “forbidden” to him and “kind of neat.” As his porn searches evolved, he began to search for images of 10 to 12-year-old girls. According to Bill, he collected images and videos of underage girls like “baseball cards.” He also found chat rooms and video chat rooms that featured “women” (15-year-old females) undressing and masturbating. Bill recalled that he “was aroused ... sometimes I would masturbate to it.” He said that he was aware the females in the videos and images were under legal age, but still felt as if the images had been obtained voluntarily even though viewing it was against the law, but he continued to do so “because he didn’t think he would get caught” as he was careful to keep his hard drives clean. He compared his pornography use to a “bad habit” and expressed remorse for having missed opportunities to spend time with his family. Following his interaction with the criminal justice system, Bill no longer views pornography online, as he does not have access to the Internet, leaving us to wonder what happens at such time he regains Internet access.

Bill’s story presents themes related to the stability of pornography viewing, its relationship to sexual interests, as well as the role of the Internet and turning points. These themes were common in our interviews with other sample respondents. Most respondents reported stable pornography viewing patterns across the lifespan. The average age of exposure among the sample participants was 10.44 years. Like Bill, after his first exposure to pornography, James began a pattern of consistent pornography viewing throughout his life, until his conviction. He recalls seeking out “porn instead of socializing” as a teenager and that he became “consumed with finding it and hiding it.” Otis also reported viewing pornography frequently from the time he was a teenager. We found a shift from group to solitary pornography viewing as individuals moved from adolescence into adulthood, defined here as after age twenty. This shift suggests that viewing pornographic images corresponded with sexual arousal. Simon explained, “my habits of consumption of pornography and masturbation changed little in most of my relationships. When it did, it was because sex was very frequent. Basically, I have a standard number of orgasms per week, and so porn/masturbation were used to meet that quota.”

We found the Internet played a major role in the acquisition of pornography for the entire sample. The Internet enabled individuals to access a variety of images and videos with little effort. Frank used online chat rooms to meet other men because he was not ready to publicly identify as gay. Through participation in online chat rooms, Frank was exposed to child pornography. He said, "I don't recall exactly how long I had been chatting when he sent me a file of him raping his 4-year-old daughter ... I got physically ill. I wanted to find him and report him," he continued, "I played along to try and find out who he was and get invited to one of his 'parties.'" Further, Aidan gained access to fast Internet service while in graduate school. He noted that the Internet "opened his world," he categorized himself as "intellectually curious" and said he was not prepared for what he could find online. Along with Bill who attempted to avoid detection by keeping his hard drives clean, most participants reported deleting images from hard drives. James explained his reasoning for hiding his pornography collection from others, he recalled, "my wife didn't like that I would order videos ... I had them shipped to a post office box."

In addition, we noted the importance of turning points during the life course, such as marriage and children, which related to shifts from legal to illegal child pornography for Bill and other participants. Marital issues appeared as a common theme among respondents. Bill's strained relationship with his spouse following the birth of their children led to a lack of physical intimacy. Bill dealt with his lack of intimacy by searching out pornography, often in the middle of the night to avoid detection and disruption from his spouse and children. Similarly, Otis began searching for and using illegal pornography following his marriage and the adoption of his children. He recalled, "I made up a family online ... I found two pictures to send to my internet friends to show my family was real." Otis said the appeal of creating an internet family was that he got attention from other people, which suggested that he lacked attention offline. Clyde also recalled marital issues with his ex-wife prior to the incident which put him on the registry. As well as for Frank who started using online chatrooms after splitting with his long-term partner.

Participants, at the time of first exposure, viewed individuals depicted in pornography as paid adult actors and believed that viewing this material with friends was acceptable, although they did not want to get caught by their parents. Bill's story above suggested that he was naturally curious about the images he saw, explaining that it was "intriguing and forbidden" to him. Carl recalled, "The first time was with friends of mine ... I was young and it was available ... didn't cross my mind as being criminal. But at the same time didn't want to get caught looking." Similarly, Simon said, "I never considered porn to be criminal when I was young. I knew that viewing it at my age was taboo, but I never considered criminality." As participants began to enter adulthood and legal pornography viewing continued, participants continued to view people in pornographic images as willing participants or paid actors. Aidan explained that while he knew it was not illegal to look at because it was adult women, it violated his "moral code." Carl reported looking at pornography that included "adult/teen women" and did not believe it was illegal because "it was so readily available." Every respondent viewed illegal child

pornography at one time or another throughout their lives but for most of the sample the illegal images included those with who were in puberty. Participants that viewed illegal images of pubescents developed cognitive scripts which allowed them to view these people as “actors” and not “victims,” letting subjects see teen females as “women.” Three participants in the study viewed material that involved pre-pubescent children. Frank and Otis acknowledged that while viewing the images was “wrong” and claimed to have found the images and videos to be “gross,” they did not believe they had done anything illegal because they were not the ones who victimized the children in the images or videos. James asserted that “the child pornography stuff made me sick,” but this did not deter his urge to collect it. At no time did anyone admit that their viewing of illegal material made them complicit in victimization since they were not the ones who made the images. The belief in the consenting adult in images carried throughout the life course. What was variable across members of the sample were perceptions of adulthood, if it began during puberty or at age 18. In other terms, subjects were not aware of or ignored neuro- and psychological sciences that suggests brains are not mature until age 25, thus questioning the nature of “informed and voluntary” consent.

However, in addition to the data offered above in support of the themes in the research, counterfactual data suggested some subjects pornography viewing patterns differ from the rest of the sample. Unlike the rest of the study participants, Frank and Aidan, who were both exposed to pornography around the same time as other participants and in similar social settings, did not develop stable legal or illegal child pornography use patterns throughout their lives. In addition, both, along with James, differ from the rest of the sample in that they did not associate pornography viewing with sexual arousal during adolescence and adulthood. While findings for most subjects suggest the importance of turning points, such as marriage and the birth of children, during adulthood that related to illegal child pornography use, Frank, Aidan, and James were never married and have no children. These data suggest that child pornography offenders are not a homogeneous group and suggest that for some individuals, pathways to offending likely vary by other relevant victim or situational factors. Counterfactual data support the importance of examining pornography related offenses with more than just offender level factors.

Interviews with child pornography offenders regarding porn use throughout the lifespan revealed how themes interact over time. There was stability in viewing patterns for participants following exposure, through adolescence, and into adulthood. With few exceptions, legal pornography use, though episodic at first, increased due to sexual interests and curiosity during adolescence, becoming more stable and frequent into adulthood. Perceptions of those people in images included “actors” 28 J. D. GARMAN ET AL. consent that changed little into adulthood. Regarding viewing habits of illegal pornography, our data suggested that patterns of child pornography use was situational and less stable in nature. They were stimulated out of curiosity and de-sensitivity. Obviously, there are signs of coping, impulsivity, and low self-control in illegal viewing patterns as subjects just kept “clicking” on ads and pop-ups, but these traits worked specifically within the context of marital discord, diminishing sexual activity, lack of

certainty of apprehension, and the lack of perceived “victims.” Respondents viewed people in pornographic images according to cognitive sexual scripts developed across the life course, which allowed some to view teen girls as “women.” Furthermore, the Internet provided more opportunities for the acquisition of legal and illegal pornography for nearly all participants.

Acceptance of pornography and the role of social learning

Otis’s story provided an exemplar example of the interaction between perceived social and familial acceptability and social learning. Aspects of social learning are important regarding exposure to and use of pornography across the life span. Similar to Bill’s story above, Otis’s exposure to pornography and his consumption of pornography throughout his life underscores the importance of these themes.

Otis’s story

Otis’s first-time viewing pornography was at the age of 11 in a magazine that belonged to a friend’s father. His pornography habits from the time of his first exposure through adolescence involved viewing material with adult females. He recalled occasionally viewing material with a date, but mainly by himself. While he suggested that the material was legal and the actors were not victims, he recalled, “I did not want my parents to know ... that was part of the excitement.” After first exposure, Otis’s use of pornography increased during adolescence to “almost every night” by the time he was in his early twenties. Like Bill, opportunities for Otis to view pornographic material were available throughout his teenage years. Pornography viewing was acceptable, interactions with friends and intimates supported this belief as these relationships both facilitated Otis’ exposure to and use of pornography.

Otis married in his forties and reported that he and his wife would occasionally watch pornographic videos together. Otis introduced adult pornography magazines and video into his relationship with his spouse as an activity the couple could enjoy together, but still maintained steady solitary viewing habits. Otis recalled how the Internet changed his pornography habits. What once was part of Otis and his wife’s relationship, soon shifted to Otis searching for and viewing pornography online by himself. He also found online message boards where those with similar interests could share stories and fantasies. His participation in online message boards increased in frequency, and following the arrival of children, Otis “made up a family online.” He recalled that he “started to message a lot ... then for attention, I acted like a girl. I found that people who talked about incest got more attention. I started talking about incest ... I developed an incest family on the net.” Otis’ pornography viewing patterns became more solitary after he began viewing illicit material online. In addition, interacting with others online became a way for Otis to cope with the lack of attention he was feeling from his personal relationships.

Participation in this online community continued for approximately seven years when he received an email with a link to a website that contained child pornography. Otis found two pictures “of child porn to show as my internet family ... to ‘prove’ I was who I was.”

Furthermore, he recalled spending “four and five hours a day” messaging from work. The amount of time Otis invested into maintaining his online persona suggests that these relationships filled a void in his life. Attention from individuals in online communities meant that someone was paying attention to him and that likely contributed to increased feelings of importance and self-worth. When asked about the legality of the material he was viewing, Otis offered this: “Was it rong [sic]? Yes! But I felt like going 75 in 70 mile an hour. I thought 90% of what I viewed was grose [sic] ... I kept two to ‘prove’ myself.” While DEVIANT BEHAVIOR 29 he acknowledges that retaining two images of child pornography was inappropriate, his comments suggest that he felt that he did not feel what he was doing was that bad and what he received emotionally as a result of his participation in online communities was worth the risk of getting caught. “Rong [sic], but overlooked ... ‘no one would want me.’” Viewing pornography and sharing images of child pornography online continued, according to Otis, for another year until his contact with law enforcement.

Participants in the study experienced some degree of social learning related to their exposure with and use of pornography. The first exposure to pornography for all subjects occurred in the context of peer interactions. This is notable because these peer interactions took place regardless of an individual’s social and familial attachments, religious beliefs, personal beliefs, and levels of self-control. Not only were these interactions important for gaining knowledge about where to find pornography, they also provided context for viewing the actors in the images and the development of sexual scripts. Otis learned where to find pornography as a child during interactions with friends and that viewing pornography was acceptable because his friend was doing it and adult male figures in his life (his friend’s dad) owned it. The inclusion of legal pornographic magazines and videos into relationships from his teenage years into his twenties and beyond suggested that Otis believed porn was socially acceptable. Participation in online messaging illustrated that Otis learned from his peers. Like his peers, Otis learned what behaviors were acceptable in this online community and how to get attention from others.

We found themes related to social acceptance and social learning in interviews with other participants as well. Aidan recalled that although he had no interest in viewing pornography as a teenage boy, he realized he was “atypical.” From the time he was first exposed, James learned from those in his social environment where he could find pornography. When caught by his father, he was sent for counselling with a priest. During these sessions, the priest introduced James to other varieties of pornography, including illegal stag films. Visits with the priest reinforced the social acceptability of pornography, owing to the priest’s status and role as a respected adult, mentor, and spiritual leader in the community. Moreover, it was during these visits that James learned about a variety of forms of pornography of which he was previously unaware. In addition, Carl recalled finding magazines that belonged to his dad, he recalled that they “all sat around looking at them ... passing them around.” The perceived social acceptability of porn throughout the life course enabled participants to learn about pornography viewing habits.

Although the data suggested that individuals perceive pornography to be socially acceptable, upon first exposure, respondents recalled feelings of guilt and shame related to concerns about getting caught while engaging in pornography use. Simon recalled, "I knew that viewing at my age was taboo ... I remember asking my mom how old does one have to be to watch X-rated films? Her response was, 'I'm not even old enough to watch those.' The implication being: never." Moreover, although pornography became part of some of the participant's relationships, as they moved into their twenties and thirties, all participants developed solo pornography viewing habits. Bill viewed pornography with his wife early in his marriage but said that "he would sneak off to look at it when she wouldn't watch anymore."

In addition, we also noted the role pornography played in facilitating determinations of sexual preference for respondents. All men in the sample sought out pornography that coincided with their sexual preferences. For the respondents that identified as heterosexual, they sought out pornography that depicted heterosexual relationships and acts. The only respondent that identified as gay, Frank, said he repressed these feelings as an adolescent because his sexual orientation did not align with his religious upbringing. Even though he was not openly gay until his thirties, he reported buying magazines that included pornography involving adult men beginning in his twenties.

Finally, we found that respondents employed various methods by which they attempted to mitigate their responsibility for possessing illegal pornography. James recalled that as an adolescent he became "addicted" to pornography. James saw his pornography viewing habits as an "addiction," which enabled him to dismiss criminal responsibility for viewing illegal child pornography. "I knew what I ordered what child porn, I didn't care ... it is not about arousal, just my need to collect." Aidan also explained that his possession of illegal pornography was a result of his "intellectually curious" personality. After reading an article online during graduate school claiming child pornography was easy to find, he decided to look for himself. He recalled that he did not understand that possession of illegal child pornography was a prosecutable offense, "as long as I don't download and keep it, it is fine." Still others minimized the harm caused by the material they viewed. Clyde, whose offense related to video footage he recorded of his underage stepdaughter, said "I only recorded video from her knee to the ground," which suggested that there was nothing inappropriate captured on video. Peter downloaded pornography prior to deployment and claimed that he inadvertently received child pornography images with other legal pictures. Otis minimized the harm caused by his offense as he compared trading images of child pornography to driving five miles per hour over the speed limit. Bill felt that the videos he viewed of teenage girls had been obtained voluntarily, and like Otis, did not feel like he would get caught.

Data suggested that social and familial acceptability of pornography viewing facilitated social learning motives for viewing legal and illegal pornography. Additionally, individuals learned about socially acceptable and appropriate sexual interests through the pornography that they were exposed to as children. Finally, subjects learned social cues regarding acceptable ways to

mitigate their responsibility for pornography possession, both legal and illegal. Even though social institutions in respondent's lives were unable to prevent pornography viewing, we found that they were responsible for imparting feelings of shame and guilt about viewing.

Discussion

Prior studies related to child pornography largely isolate child pornography consumption from general pornography viewing patterns and focus solely on individual level factors (Kor et al. 2014; Stack, Wasserman, and Kern 2004; Wegmann, Stodt, and Brand 2015). The current study extends this body of research by situating illegal child pornography possession into broader pornography viewing patterns across the life course. Legal pornography viewing has become more culturally accepted over time (Carroll et al. 2008; Szymanski and Stewart-Richardson 2014; Twenge, Sherman, and Wells 2015). Further, viewing pornography is part of normal human sexual development (Kar, Choudhury, and Singh 2015). The findings of this study support the notion that viewing sexual material is part of human development during adolescence which does not end for most people upon reaching adulthood. We used a criminal event perspective to guide our research (Meier, Kennedy, and Sacco 2001), which allowed us to examine how offender, victim, and situational factors interacted within historical, political, and cultural contexts to produce dynamic criminal events.

Analysis of offender life histories suggested themes related to possessing illegal pornography as a criminal event. First, we observed the persistence of pornography viewing throughout the life course. With few exceptions, pornography use can be characterized as episodic during adolescence. The pattern we found is comparable to prior studies on adolescent pornography use (Kar, Choudhury, and Singh 2015), which suggested that our sample of child pornography offenders exhibited relatively normal pornography use in adolescence. Patterns of viewing relate to sexual development during adolescence and use becomes more frequent and stable during adulthood. Transitions from legal to illegal pornography viewing occurred most commonly in adulthood. This finding is consistent with prior developmental life course research on the importance of turning points during one's lifespan, such as marriage (Laub and Sampson 1993; Sampson and Laub 1993, 2003). Turning points during adulthood interacted with pornography use. Marital problems and children were common themes related to increased pornography use, as well as, the transition from legal to illegal pornography. This finding supports previous research on the importance of examining the quality of intimate relationships as it relates to decision making processes (Lytle, Bailey, and ten Benschel 2017). Also, we note that factors such as marriage and children interacted with other contexts to facilitate pornography use. The Internet played a role in providing opportunities for increased pornography use as well as expanding the amount and types of pornography available. Furthermore, the Internet provided participants with anonymity that interacted with their individual desires to allow respondents to acquire pornography. This

finding indicates that veil of anonymity on the Internet may diminish a sense of risk, which enables people to indulge in otherwise stigmatized sexual behaviors such as illegal child pornography viewing (Quinn and Forsyth 2005).

Second, another prominent theme in the data is that social and familial interactions allow respondents to draw conclusions about the acceptability of pornography and learn motives for viewing. Individuals perceived that viewing pornography was socially acceptable as it was available in their homes and viewing occurred during social interactions with peers. Social interactions facilitated porn viewing through adolescence and, for at least some participants, pornography became part of their adult relationships as well. Furthermore, while social interactions did not prevent pornography viewing, we observed that they did lend way to feelings of guilt and shame throughout the life course. Concealing pornography use from parents gave way to hiding pornography use from spouses and children, even among offenders that introduced pornography into adult relationships. Additionally, individuals learn scripts that allow them to view people in pornography as “actors,” not “victims” (Evans-DeCicco and Cowan 2001). As pornography use became a criminal event, the application of cognitive sexual scripts allowed some individuals to view teen females as “women,” minimizing the impact of their offense and mitigating culpability for pornography possession.

A primary concern regarding this study is its external validity. The use of non-probability sampling techniques reduced the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, individuals who responded to the initial call for research participants and those who actively participated in this study are generally active in the sex offender community, advocating for sex offender legal reforms, and feel comfortable sharing their stories, as such, study subjects are likely different from those who did not respond to solicitations to participate. However, the current study establishes a process-based model of pornography use across the lifespan that has not been previously applied to this offending population and can be incorporated into future surveys of sex offenders that are administered to a larger, probability-generated sample. The use of qualitative methods results in greater internal validity among the reported findings that will benefit future research on child pornography.

Finally, our findings suggest that pornography criminal events are part of broader pornography viewing patterns and should be examined as such. While we could not isolate a single individual, victim, or situational factor responsible for pornography-related criminal offenses, data suggested that the interaction of these factors facilitates the transition from legal to illegal pornography use. Our approach allowed us to examine the interaction of these factors as a process, rather than relying on a statistical approach that would seek to isolate one factor while holding the rest constant. Future research should extend this work with a larger sample of noncontact offenders to examine the applicability of themes found in this data.

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