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Bearing witness to child sexual abuse: What do we call it? How should we understand it?

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A recent [sting operation](#) resulting in hundreds of arrests on child pornography charges around the world has been in the news in recent days. At the center of an investigation that involved 90 countries was a distributor of “naturist” pictures of children that were not - on the face of it - illegal. Over time, however, it turned out that he was also distributing images of child sexual abuse.

This and related events have been discussed in various social media, including listservs of professionals and interested parties. One sexologist took offense to a recent situation in which a man was arrested for pre-offense behaviors involving a girl who was actually an FBI agent. The logic was apparently that since no one was abused, no one should be punished. Another professional decried that many jurisdictions in the US consider possession of child pornography to be a violent offense. In opposition to this judgment, they stated, “LOOKING at pictures is not violent,” and “Calling it such belongs in some Orwellian ‘1984’ scenario.” Indeed, those of us over a certain age are accustomed to describing violence as overt activity of a hands-on or weapons-based nature. The Internet has caused many to reconsider what stalking, violence, and similar crimes are and how they might be defined. On the other hand, prosecutors can be called “soft on crime” if they elect to prosecute only the most egregious of cases. So what’s violent? What constitutes child pornography (legal definition) and child sexual abuse images?

One place to start might be with definitions of violence. Here’s what the World Health Organization has to say:

Violence is “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.”

My belief is that we should strive to be accurate and truthful in our use of language; I’m sure no one disagrees. Obviously, not all images of children and child sexual abuse are created equal. Elsewhere in the thread there has been discussion of the often-cumbersome nature of language in our field. My hope is that professionals will err on the side of accurate, precise language; they may be “sex offenders” in the eyes of the law, but whenever possible we should still remember and express that they are people who have sexually abused. As humans, they are more than the sum of their worst behaviors. Ultimately, terms like “sex offender” and “child pornography” are heterogeneous and legal, not diagnostic. Likewise, “violent crime” is its own sort of catch-all and, indeed, there are some overtly violent child sexual abuse images on the Internet.

Some friends of mine (who live in Eastern Europe) recently showed off pictures of their toddler-age daughter taking some of her first steps, as captured on an iPhone. No one in their right mind would consider parents taking that picture an act of violence, even though it can and does get classified that

way in many jurisdictions. To our knowledge, it would not have been against the law in the country in which the images were taken. Further, one member of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers also observed privately that just because they downloaded pictures of Nazi war crimes does not make them a Nazi war criminal. This point is well taken.

But at what point in our attempts to counter legal over-reach are we missing more fundamental issues? When people say that a broad category of activities is either violent or non-violent, isn't that a particularly black-and-white way of thinking? Are these really our only options? Without meaning to cause offense to some of those in this discussion, isn't trying to "classify" a broad range of heterogeneous images (images of child sexual abuse as well as pictures of naked children in bathtubs) an exercise in futility? Can't we do better?

Whatever lawmakers and prosecutors use to classify crimes (e.g., violent/nonviolent), where does our professional obligation to tell the truth begin and end? Prosecutors are obviously not going to classify "child pornography" as a drug offense or moving violation. The problem isn't that looking at images of child sexual abuse has nothing to do with violent acts, it has to do with the legal definitions ... and lawmakers are typically less concerned with the precise nature of language than we typically are.

However, there is a real question about how much masturbating to images of violence against children actually does become an act of violence in itself. I don't have the answers, but I do have some questions:

- At what point does watching images of children being sexually abused become an act of violence regardless of legal definitions? To use some analogies, at what point is receiving stolen goods akin to the actual theft? And, at a time when we can buy goods made by American corporations in countries where they may exploit child labor, at what point do we all need to consider our actions?
- Isn't the act of looking at pictures on the internet somehow different from how violent someone might be elsewhere in their lives? Or their risk to become violent? Do we minimize peoples' actions because they're less likely to be violent in the future?
- Setting aside looking at imagery on computers, how would we understand someone who is present at a sexual crime, observes, and perhaps masturbates during it, and does nothing?
- Before we assume that it is or is not its own form of violence, abuse, etc., maybe we should ask the young people in the images themselves? Or their caregivers and guardians?
- Maybe we should consider that the notions of many interested persons about what is and isn't violence came about before the current state of electronic communications and social media?
- Given that society has changed (e.g., social media and its prevalence in the lives of people) is it time to revise our definitions of what is and isn't an act of violence? Or is it time for us as professionals to be more aware of the potential for violence within communications?
- When we look at the results of cyber-bullying (e.g., [Rehteah Parsons' suicide in Nova Scotia](#)), at what point do we agree that Internet-based imagery and statements *do* become an act of violence?
- At what point do silent observers become collaborators in violent processes? Isn't this a question that western societies have asked many times since the start of World War II?
- Are we as professionals simply asking the wrong questions when we rely on legal definitions to shape our language? Granted, most of us need to work within legal frameworks and understand the relevant terminology. Should we have higher standards in our own reports? In other words,

whether an images “meets criteria” for a legal standard or not, shouldn’t we be clear in our communications about what we do and don’t know about the clinical implications?

- If we say that laws considering it are “Orwellian” and make comparisons to the fantasy writings of Lewis Carroll, are we not engaging in the same kind of overstatement that we’re accusing our lawmakers of?
- There is a saying that “all that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good men do nothing.” Personally, I have little use for the word “evil.” Just the same, how might that phrase apply to people who view images of child sexual abuse? Is it possible that lawmakers are recognizing the harm to children and using the first words that come to mind? Is that really “Orwellian”?