

## ***SHAPING THE FUTURE***

2019 ATSA Conference | Thursday November 7 | 10:30 AM – 12:00 PM

**T-05**

### **Exploring and Understanding the Experiences of People Who Own Sex Dolls: Toward an Evidence-Based, Sex Positive Approach**

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The topic of sex doll ownership and use has become a much-discussed social issue over the past two years. Prosecutions have been brought against several people – typically men – in a range of jurisdictional areas, such as the UK, USA, and Australia, in relation to the ownership of obscene materials. Their import and ownership of dolls that resemble children have also been debated as to whether they constitute ‘child pornography’ offences, despite these dolls not being sentient beings and no real victims being harmed.

Critics of sex doll use cite a range of concerns, such as dolls acting as a gateway to contact sexual offending, through processes of misogynistic objectification (for adult-like dolls), the building-up of existing sexual urges (for child-like dolls), and the fostering of sexual entitlement (in users of all types of doll). These critics typically write from ideologically feminist perspectives, and call upon personal feelings about the potential effects of mainstream pornography of sexual attitudes and behaviors when formulating their arguments (Eggleton, 2019). In contrast, those who advocate on behalf of doll owners report how such dolls could offer a safe sexual outlet for those with non-mainstream sexual interests (e.g., pedophilia), or those who are unable to access real sexual partners for a host of social and interpersonal reasons (Döring & Pöshl, 2018). However, attempts to systematically evaluate the research base for both sides of this emerging and controversial social debate have found an almost total lack of published empirical studies on the topic of sex doll ownership and use (Cox-George & Bewley, 2018).

In this project, we have conducted a series of semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of people who own and use sex dolls. In this presentation we will discuss our findings to date, related to the various sexual and non-sexual functions of sex doll ownership, the impacts of doll ownership on interpersonal relationships with real partners, and experiences of social stigma related to sex doll use. We will also discuss the legal and

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social implications of our findings, and aim to facilitate a broader discussion as to the best ways in which to advance an evidence-based social debate about this topic.

### **Learning Goals:**

- To define the legal status of sex doll ownership.
- To explore the lived experiences of sex doll owners in relation to the function of dolls, their effects on intimate relationships, emotional wellbeing, and sexual behavior.
- To advance a broader evidence-based debate about the future directions of social discussions about sex doll ownership.

**Craig Harper** is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. His research interests lie in the psychological processes that underpin decision-making in relation to controversial social and political topics. Most of his research has been focused on how people form and express attitudes towards people with sexual convictions, with the aim being to promote progressive and evidence-based policies to prevent and reduce sexual victimization. Away from forensically-based research, he is a member of the Heterodox Academy, which is an organization seeking to promote viewpoint diversity and reduce political polarization in higher education.

**Rebecca Lievesley** is a Senior Lecturer in Forensic Psychology and member of the Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University. She has worked and researched within the Criminal Justice System for around 10 years, currently engaged in various research projects including an investigation of reoffending and desistance in those serving short sentences, an evaluation of anti-libidinal medication for individuals convicted of a sexual offence and help seeking prior to committing a sexual offence. Rebecca is also a co-founder and trustee of the Safer Living Foundation, a charity established to reduce sexual (re)offending through rehabilitative initiatives and prevent further victims of sexual crime.

**Rebecca Reynolds** is an MSc student in Forensic Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. Her current research project explores the lived experiences of people who self-report owning sex dolls.

**Mia Davis** is an undergraduate researcher and student in Psychology with Sociology at Nottingham Trent University. Her research interests lie in the sociology of sexual behavior, and she has completed research assistantships and projects related to judgements of revenge pornography, the effects of pornography literacy on sexual satisfaction and aggression, and the lived experiences of people who own sex dolls (and their partners).

**Jeremy Malcolm** is a lawyer, human rights activist, and Executive Director of ProStasia Foundation. Prior to his work at ProStasia he held the position of Senior Global Policy Analyst at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, where he led the development of the Manila Principles on Intermediary Liability and worked in numerous other areas defending digital privacy, free speech, and innovation.