

Pornography and Violence: A New Look at Research

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Pornography is a potent teacher of both beliefs and behaviors, and in fact provides the ideal conditions for learning. It can teach not only specific sexual behaviors, but general attitudes toward women and children, what relationships are like, and the nature of sexuality. Certainly some important reactions are inborn and instinctual, but the great majority of our beliefs and behaviors have been learned. Once we learn them, we also learn if it is acceptable to engage in the behaviors and are sometimes stimulated to do just that. For many reasons, as we shall see, pornography is a very effective teacher of beliefs and behaviors, and one that also teaches its users that the behaviors are acceptable and stimulates them to do so.

Factors Affecting Learning

We learn better using images than words, because images carry more information in a more compact form. A split-second look at an image can convey more information than a split-second look at words. Words are often perceived as opinions while images are often perceived as events or facts. We argue in our head against words or opinions, but much less often against events or facts, particularly images.

We also learn better when aroused. If something activates our sympathetic nervous system, we are more prepared to remember the information received at that point. The arousal may come from excitement, joy, fear, disgust, or sexual tension. We tend to remember any experience we have in those aroused states.

And learning is better if it is reinforced. Behavior that is rewarded is likely to be repeated while behavior that is punished is less likely to be repeated. Sexual arousal and orgasm are extremely rewarding experiences. We may be innately predisposed to enjoy the

rewards of sexual arousal and orgasm, but we learn how and when and with whom we can experience those pleasures. If a novel sexual behavior produces an orgasm, we are more likely to repeat it and add it to our sexual template and repertoire.

Learning is also better if we see role models perform a behavior. Seeing them rewarded or punished will have some of the same effects on us as if we were rewarded or punished. We don't have to directly experience those rewards and consequences. We learn to repeat or avoid those behaviors by seeing their effect on others.

Finally, we learn better when the learning is rewarded. Imagery which contains role models who are demonstrating sexual behavior, who are rewarded for it, which produces sexual arousal in the viewer, and is followed by an orgasm can be extremely effective in producing deeply learned beliefs and behaviors.

Pornography can offer all these elements—images, arousal, reinforcement, the example of others, and reward—so it is a potent teacher of both beliefs and behaviors. It provides the ideal conditions for learning.

One category of beliefs we learn is called “permission-giving beliefs.”¹ They give us permission to engage in a behavior we would like to engage in or are engaging in and tell us there is no need to stop, change, or reduce it—they tell us, for example, that what we are doing is normal, that it doesn't hurt anyone, and that everybody is doing it.

This “may be pornography's most insidious influence; namely, the acceptance of the attitudes (some obvious, some more subtle) expressed in pornography. Pornographic depictions of the sexuality of women and children distort the truth about desires of women and children, and legitimize men's sense of entitlement, and use of force, violence, and degrading acts by the male actors.”² In other words, pornography has the ability not only to teach social attitudes and behaviors, but also to give permission to engage in them. Permission-giving beliefs become releasers of behavior.

Pornography is an ideal teacher of these releaser beliefs. It can teach specific sexual behaviors and general attitudes toward women and children, teach what relationships are like, and teach the nature of sexuality, and thus give permission for a wide range of actions. For example, a male masturbating to the images of smiling children having sex with adults, or of sexually aroused women being beaten, raped, or degraded, is learning that the

¹ Beck, 1999.

² (Marshall (2000) p 67).

subjects enjoy and desire this treatment and is thereby being taught that he has permission to act this way himself.

So pornography can be a teacher, a releaser, and a trigger of behaviors. Pornography is not only potent but multifaceted in its effect. Pornography can teach what to do, with whom to do it, when and how often to do it, it's okay to do it, and then stimulate the urge to do it now.

It is not surprising that many psychologists call internet pornography the new "crack cocaine" when you note the combination of the power of pornography with the ready, 24/7 availability of pornography on any computer, much of it free, accessible in the privacy and anonymity of the home.

Some of the messages of pornography teach beliefs and behaviors. Some of these behaviors are pathological, illegal, or both. The illegal behaviors are rape, child molestation, pedophilia, prostitution, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and some paraphilias (e.g., sexual deviances such as exhibitionism, voyeurism, and bestiality). Some of pornography's messages about relationships, sexuality, and women may be damaging, even if the pornography is not illegal or pathological.

This learning produces effects in attitudes toward sexual violence, relationships, the attractiveness of a partner, and women's liberation, and in sexual violence behaviors, pedophilia, sexual harassment, domestic violence, prostitution, sexual deviance, drinking, and physically risky behavior.

Pornography and Attitudes to Sexual Violence

The rape myth is a set of beliefs that women are responsible for rape, like to be raped, want to be raped, and suffer few negative outcomes because of it. A number of studies have looked at the acceptance of the rape myth after exposing the subjects to sexual imagery, both violent and non-violent, and after one also asked subjects about their typical pornography use.

Males shown imagery of a woman aroused by sexual violence and then shown pornography that involved rape were more likely than those who hadn't, to say that the rape victim suffered less and that she enjoyed it, and that women in general enjoy rape.³

³ Check and Malamuth, 1985

Japanese males exposed to a depiction of rape in which the woman enjoyed the rape were more likely to believe that women in general enjoy rape, and that they make false accusations of rape when compared to males exposed to a depiction in which the women showed pain.⁴

Males who viewed sexual violence obtained higher scores both on scales measuring acceptance of interpersonal violence and the rape myth, when compared to males who viewed either a physically violent or a neutral film.⁵ The increase in attitudes supporting sexual violence following exposure to pornography is greater if the pornography is violent than if it is non-violent.⁶

A similar effect is seen even when the pornography is not violent. Males who are shown non-violent scenes that sexually objectified and degraded women and were then exposed to material that depicted rape indicated that the rape victim experienced pleasure and “got what she wanted.”⁷ Even *women* who were exposed to pornography as a child have a greater acceptance of the rape myth than those who were not.⁸ Those exposed to pornography recommend a sentence for a rapist that was half of that recommended by those who had been shown non-pornographic imagery. These subjects appear to have trivialized the crime of rape.⁹

One study not only exposed subjects to pornographic imagery but also asked them about their typical pornography use.¹⁰ High pornography users were higher than low pornography users in acceptance of the rape myth, acceptance of violence against women, adversarial sex beliefs, reported likelihood of committing rape and forced sex acts, and sex callousness. High pornography users who were shown non-violent dehumanizing pornography show higher scores in reported likelihood of rape, sex callousness, and sexually aggressive behaviors than high pornography users who weren’t shown pornography.

These studies indicate that the use of pornography, even that which does not include sexual violence, changes beliefs about rape and sexual violence. If women like to be

⁴ (Ohbuchi, K. Ikeda, T. & Takeuchi, G, 1994)

⁵ Weisz & Earls (1995)

⁶ Allen, et al (1995)

⁷ (Millburn, Mather and Conrad, 2000)

⁸ (Corne, Briere & Esses, 1992)

⁹ Zillmann and Bryant (1984)

¹⁰ Check & Guloien (1989)

raped and deserve to be raped, there is no need for sexual restraint or frustration of sexual desire. Rape pornography teaches men that when a woman says no, the man does not need to stop. So a man may learn that there is no need to pay attention to a woman who is resisting, crying, screaming, struggling, or saying no, because ultimately she wants it and will enjoy it. He can conclude that her resistance is a sham and is part of a sex dance that leads to orgasm. He may assume that even her resistance is sexy and sexually arousing because it is part of the sexual template.

In other words, pornography makes violence sexy.¹¹

Pornography and Sexual Violence Behaviors

Sexual violence attitudes lead to an increased likelihood of violent sexual behavior. Some studies have looked at likelihood measures while other studies have looked at actual (self-reported) behaviors.

Pornography can start to cross the line between thought and behavior in the kinds of fantasies that can produce an erection. One study exposed males to an arousing rape or non-rape presentation and then asked them to try to reach as high a level of sexual arousal as they could without any direct stimulation of the penis. In doing so, those who had been exposed to the rape presentation created more sexually violent fantasies than those exposed to the non-rape presentation. For these males, rape fantasies were now part of their sexual template.¹²

Another study examined measures of the likelihood of future sexually violent behavior as well as past actual sexually violent behaviors. It found that all types of pornography (soft core, hard core, violent, and rape) are correlated with using verbal coercion, drugs, and alcohol to sexually coerce women. The likelihood of forcing a woman sexually was correlated with the use of hard core, violent, and rape pornography. The likelihood of raping a woman was correlated with the use of *all* types of pornography, including soft-core pornography. All types of pornography other than soft core were correlated with actual rape. Those reporting higher exposure to violent pornography are six times more likely to report having raped than those reporting low exposure.¹³

¹¹ Russell (1993)

¹² Malamuth (1981)

¹³ Boeringer (1994)

Similarly, men who engaged in date rape reported that they “very frequently” read *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Chic*, *Club*, *Forum*, *Gallery*, *Genesis*, *Oui*, or *Hustler*.¹⁴ The correlation between rape rates and circulation rates for eight pornographic magazines (the same magazines minus *Hustler*) indicated that states with higher circulation rates had higher rape rates.¹⁵

Adolescent boys who read pornographic material were more likely to be involved in active sexual violence.¹⁶ Juvenile sex offenders (juvenile rapists and child molesters) were more likely to have been exposed to pornography (42% had been exposed) than juveniles who were not sex offenders (29%) and also to have been exposed at an early age (five to eight years old), while juvenile child molesters had been more frequently exposed to pornography than those who did not molest children.¹⁷ Another study reported that 29 of the 30 juveniles studied had been exposed to X-rated magazines or videos, and the average age of first exposure was about 7.5 years.¹⁸ Only 11% of juvenile sex offenders said they did not use sexually explicit material.¹⁹ Ironically, given these figures, exposing adults to pornography decreases the number who believe that pornography needs to be restricted from children.²⁰

Similarly, adult sex offenders showed a high rate of using hard-core pornography: child molesters (67%), incest offenders (53%), rapists (83%) were significantly higher in use than non-offenders (29%). Child molesters (37%) and rapists (35%) were more likely to use pornography as an instigator to offending than were incest offenders (13%).²¹ It is an interesting finding that while these offenders used rape and child pornography to instigate their offenses, they did not exclusively do so, they often used adult and consensual pornography. Even adult consensual pornography can be used to instigate these offenses.

Pornography’s effect depends not just what you are exposed to but also how often. The more frequently men used pornography and the more violent the pornography they

¹⁴ Warshaw (1988)

¹⁵ Baron & Straus (1984)

¹⁶ Bonino, Ciairano, Rabaglietti & Cattelino (2006)

¹⁷ Ford & Linney (1995)

¹⁸ Wieckowski, Hartsoe, Mayer & Shortz (1998)

¹⁹ Becker & Stein (1991)

²⁰ Zillmann & Bryant, 1984)

²¹ Marshall (1988)

used, the more likely they were to coerce others into sex, including to use of physical coercion (i.e., rape).²²

Pornography's effect also depends upon individuals' characteristics as well as their use of pornography. Males who were high in hostile masculinity and sexual promiscuity and who used pornography frequently were significantly more likely to have physically and sexually aggressed than males who were low in these factors.²³ (This study was unable to determine if those individual characteristics, hostile masculinity and promiscuity, might have been produced by pornography use at an earlier point in life.)

Much of the research has focused on the males who perpetrate the behaviors. However, there are studies that have focused on the female victims. One questioned 100 women who presented to a rape crisis center. Twenty-eight percent said that their abuser used pornography; 58% did not know if he used pornography or not. Of those whose abuser used pornography, 40% said the pornography was part of the abuse, being used either during the abuse or just prior to it, and 43% said that it affected the nature of the abuse. None of them thought it decreased the frequency of the abuse, but 21% thought it increased the frequency, and 14% believed it increased the level of violence. In fact, 18% thought their abuser became more sadistic with the use of pornography. Of the total, 12% said the abuser imitated the pornography and 14% said someone had tried to force them to do something he had seen in pornography.²⁴

Another study found that 24% of women surveyed indicated that they had been upset by someone trying to get them to do something they had seen in pornography. Those who said this were more likely to have been victims of threatened or actual sexual assault.²⁵

A meta-analysis of thirty-three studies (meta-analyses examine findings across a large number of studies) revealed that exposure to either violent or nonviolent pornography increase behavioral aggression.²⁶ These studies taken as a whole indicate that many types of pornography and frequent use of pornography are connected to negative behaviors—both violent fantasies or actual violent assaults—with violent pornography

²² Koss & Oros (1982)

²³ Malamuth, Addison & Koss (2000)

²⁴ Bergen & Bogle (2000)

²⁵ Senn (1993)

²⁶ Allen, D'Alessio & Brezgel, 1995)

having the strongest negative effect. These patterns are seen in adults and in minors, and are found in studies focused on perpetrators and victims.

Pedophilia, Sexual Harassment, and Domestic Violence

The use of child pornography is a good predictor of who might get the diagnosis of pedophilia. It appears to be a better predictor than having raped a child. Individuals who use child pornography, whether or not they have offended against children, are more likely to be pedophiles than individuals who have offended against children but do not use child pornography. Fantasy can be a more accurate predictor than behavior, possibly because individuals have more options and more control of their options in fantasies than in behaviors that depend upon the availability of others.²⁷

Rape is not the only form of sexual violence perpetrated against women affected by the use of pornography. Many women will be sexually harassed on their jobs and elsewhere. The likelihood of sexually harassing another is significantly correlated with the volume of past exposure to sexually explicit materials.²⁸

Domestic violence is another form of violence against women, and like the others it is increased by the use of pornography. The violence may typically be physical and emotional, but these are often combined with sexual violence. Battered women experienced significantly more sexual violence than women who were not battered.²⁹ For example, 39% of the battered women said that their partners had tried to get them to act out pornographic scenes they'd been shown, as compared to 3% of other women.³⁰

The batterer's use of pornography and alcohol significantly increases a battered woman's odds of being sexually abused. Pornography alone increases the odds by a factor of almost two, and the combination of pornography and alcohol increases the odds by a factor of three.³¹

Forty percent of abused women indicated that their partner used violent pornography. Of those whose partners used pornography, 53% said that they had been asked or forced to enact scenes that they had been shown and 26 percent had been

²⁷ Seto, Cantor & Blanchard (2006)

²⁸ Barak, Fisher, Belfry & Lashambe (1999)

²⁹ Sommers & Check (1987)

³⁰ Sommers & Check (1987)

³¹ Shope (2004)

reminded of pornography by abuser during the abuse. Of the forty percent of the abused women had been raped, 73 percent stated that their partners had used pornography.

These studies may not indicate that pornography causes battering but they do suggest that battering may be expanded to include sexual violence when pornography is involved.

Prostitution, partners, and deviance

Men who go to prostitutes are twice as likely to have watched a pornographic movie over the last year (66%) than a national sample (33%). Men who go to prostitutes frequently are more likely to have seen a pornographic movie (74%) than those who have gone to a prostitute only once (53%). The same pattern is seen with the use of pornographic magazines; men who go to prostitutes frequently are more likely to have seen a pornographic magazine in the last year (75%) than men who have gone to a prostitute only once (56%).³²

Exposure to pornography leads men to rate their female partners as less attractive than they would have had they not been exposed³³ and to be less satisfied with their partners' attractiveness, sexual performance, and level of affection, and expressed a greater desire for sex without emotional involvement.³⁴ Undergraduate men who regularly viewed pornography spontaneously generated more sexual terms to describe the construct "women" than did those who viewed pornography less regularly.³⁵

Paraphilias are psychiatric disorders of sexuality as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association. Paraphilia used to be called sexual perversion or sexual deviance. These are behaviors in which the object of the sexual desire is abnormal (e.g., an animal), or the behavior itself is sexually abnormal (e.g., sadomasochism). Some paraphilias can be engaged in alone (e.g., fetishism), and some involve people who do not consent (e.g., exhibitionism).

Sexual deviance can be learned. Some men may initially look at deviant pornography out of curiosity. Some may move up to harder kinds because softer material no longer

³² Monto (1999)

³³ (Weaver, Masland, & Zillmann, 1984)

³⁴ Zillmann & Bryant, 1988)

³⁵ Frable, Johnson and Kellman (1997)

arouses them. Either way they may learn deviant beliefs and behavior from it. Things that used to lead to disgust now seem less unusual and more common and even normal, and over time, come to seem sexy. Through pornography males who would never have considered sex that involves feces (coprophilia), urine (urophilia), and animals (bestiality) may now learn about, get aroused by, and engage in these very things.

Individuals who already suffer from these deviances significantly prefer pornography that portrays their own deviance, but they also like other deviant pornography, especially sadomasochistic pornography, though to a lesser extent.³⁶ Those who were exposed to pornography were more likely to believe that unusual and pathological sexual behaviors were more common and more normal. These beliefs are permission-giving beliefs and become releasers of behavior. The frequency of sex with animals, sex in groups, and sex with violence was double in those exposed to deviant pornography when compared to those who were not.³⁷

Relationships, Women's Liberation, and Risky Behavior

The use of pornography has several other negative effects. One is a changed understanding of relationships. For males, more pornography use was associated with greater acceptance of sex outside of marriage for married individuals, greater acceptance of sex before marriage, and less child-centeredness during marriage.³⁸ The reduced desire for children is especially pronounced in a reduced desire for female children.³⁹

Those who were shown pornography reduced their support for the women's liberation movement. This is true for both men and women.⁴⁰

For males, more pornography use is correlated with more alcohol use and more binge drinking.⁴¹

Pornography also encourages physically risky behavior. In pornography no one is shown contracting and dying from AIDS, and no negative consequences are ever shown for having deviant kinds of sex.

³⁶ Langstrom & Seto, 2006, Langstrom & Zucker, 2005)

³⁷ Zillmann & Bryant (1984)

³⁸ Carroll, et al. (2008)

³⁹ Zillmann, 1989)

⁴⁰ Zillmann & Bryant (1984)

⁴¹ Carroll, et al, 2008)

Yet deviant kinds of sexual behavior carry a number of physical risks. The most obvious one is acquiring sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. These can lead to other diseases and disorders (e.g. cervical cancer and infertility). Sexual behavior involving feces and urine can lead to influenza, pneumonia, hepatitis A, hepatitis C, and intestinal parasites. Anal sex can cause ripping of the anal tissue, anal fissures, and puncturing of internal organs. The tearing of anal tissue makes it easier for the HIV virus to enter the body.

For example, pornography portrays sex with as many strangers as possible as normal, desirable, and without consequences, and those who use pornography do have more sex partners than other people. The factor most associated with HIV transmission is increased number of partners.

Summary

The large body of research on pornography reveals that it functions as a teacher of, a permission-giver for, and a trigger of many negative behaviors and attitudes that can severely damage not only the users but many others, including strangers. The damage is seen in men, women, and children, and in both married and single adults. It involves pathological behaviors, illegal behaviors, and some behaviors that are both illegal and pathological. Pornography is an equal opportunity and very lethal toxin.

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