

PORNOGRAPHY AND THE LIMITS OF EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

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We live in a culture that likes “science” answers provided by “experts,” even when the questions are primarily about human values. Not surprisingly, experimental laboratory research has played an important role in the debate over pornography in the past three decades.¹ Advocates of regulation, both feminist and conservative, cite studies showing links between pornography and violence, whereas opponents of regulation point to other studies that show no link or that are inconclusive. One government commission read the evidence to support increased regulation (Attorney General’s Commission, 1986); an earlier commission used the evidence available at that time to support lifting most regulation (Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, 1970).

Experimental research on pornography’s effects looks at the perceptual and behavioral effects of viewing or reading sexually explicit material. A typical study might expose groups of subjects to different types or levels of sexually explicit material for comparison to a control group that views nonsexual material. Researchers look for significant differences between the groups on a measure of, for example, male attitudes toward rape. One such measure could be subjects’ assessments of the suffering experienced by sexual assault victims or subjects’ judgments of the appropriate prison sentence for a rapist. From such controlled testing—measuring the effect of an experimental stimulus (exposure to pornography) on a dependent variable (attitudes toward women or sex) in randomly selected groups—researchers make claims, usually tentative, about causal relationships.

Although there is disagreement among researchers about what has been “proved” by these studies (Linz, 1989; Zillmann, 1989), some themes emerge. I will be questioning the value of these studies, but I follow Weaver’s (1992) assessment. He reads the evidence to support the sexual callousness model, which suggests that exposure to pornography activates sexually callous perceptions of women and promotes sexually aggressive behavior by men (Zillmann & Bryant, 1982; Zillmann & Weaver, 1989). This appears to be the result of both pornography’s promotion of a loss of respect for female sexual autonomy and the disinhibition of men’s expression of aggression against women (Weaver, 1992, p. 307).

After reviewing the experimental research, Russell (1988, 1993a) outlined four factors that link pornography to sexual violence. Pornography (a) predisposes some males to desire rape or intensifies this desire, (b) undermines some males’ internal inhibitions against acting out rape desires, (c) undermines some males’ social inhibitions against acting out rape desires, and (d) undermines some potential victims’ abilities to avoid or resist rape.

Taking a different approach, Donnerstein, Linz, and Penrod (1987) argue that only pornography that combines violence and sex has been shown to be harmful, and then only in the sense of immediate effects; they hesitate to speculate on the long term. They conclude that there is not enough evidence to show that exposure to nonviolent pornography leads to increases in aggression against women under most circumstances, suggesting that “some forms of pornography, under some conditions, promote certain antisocial attitudes and behavior” (p. 171).

My work on pornography is grounded in a radical feminist critique that focuses on how male dominance and female submission is sexualized. Pornography is an expression and reinforcement of a male sexuality rooted in the subordination of women that endorses the sexual objectification of, and that can promote sexual violence against, women (Dworkin, 1981;

Itzin, 1992; MacKinnon, 1987; Russell, 1993b). Although much of the experimental work supports that position, I argue that we need to be skeptical of the value of such studies, no matter what the results; the limits of the experimental approach should lead us to look elsewhere for answers.

The Limits of Experimental Research ◆

In addition to a number of specific technical complaints over methodology and research design (summarized and rejected by Donnerstein et al., 1987, pp. 12-22), most of the critics of these studies suggest that any connection between pornography and sexual violence found in the lab is probably overstated; they warn of overgeneralizing from experimental studies because the effects found might evaporate outside the lab:

It is a considerable leap from the laboratory to the corner store where men rifle the pages of magazines kept on the top shelf. It is a long step from the laboratory exposure to such stimuli and subsequent aggression to real-world sexual and physical abuse. (Brannigan & Goldberg, 1987, p. 277)

Although it is possible that the research overreaches, we should be at least as concerned that lab studies underestimate pornography’s role in promoting misogynistic attitudes and behavior (see also Dines-Levy, 1988).

First, these studies may be incapable of measuring subtle effects that develop over time. If pornography works to develop attitudes and shape behavior after repeated exposure, there is no guarantee that studies exposing people to a small amount of pornography over a short time can accurately measure anything. For example, in one study, the group exposed to what the

researchers called the “massive” category of pornography viewed six explicitly sexual 8-minute films per session for six sessions, or a total of 4 hours and 48 minutes of material (Zillmann & Bryant, 1982). The “intermediate” group saw half the number of sexual films. These categories are constructed, obviously, for comparative purposes, not to suggest that such an amount of viewing is massive. But even within the confines of a laboratory study, these amounts may be inadequate to test anything.

In addition, as Brannigan and Goldenberg (1987) suggest, no lab can reproduce the natural setting of the behavior being studied. They paint a rather harmless picture of men paging through magazines in the corner store, but what about the other common settings for the consumption of pornography? How is watching a pornographic movie in a university video lab (the experience of experimental subjects) different from being one of a dozen men in a dark movie theater, frightened but excited by the illicit nature of the setting? How is the lab different from the living room of a fraternity house where a group of young men might watch a pornographic videotape, drinking beer and urging each other to enjoy the tape? And how does the act of masturbating to pornography, a common male experience, influence the way in which men interpret and are affected by pornography?

The lab experience is unreal in terms of both the physical and the psychological environments. If experimental data seem to suggest, for example, that exposure to depictions in which women appear to enjoy being raped can increase men’s acceptance of sexual violence against women and increase men’s endorsement of that rape myth (Malamuth & Check, 1981), can we assume that those effects will be even more pronounced on a man who views that same sexual material in a real-world environment in which male aggression is often encouraged and sanctioned? Because it would be impossible, not to mention ethically unacceptable, to recreate such a situation in a lab, we must question the value of lab

data. Instead of assuming that the lab overstates the potential for aggression, we should consider how it could understate the effect.

These problems are compounded if one acknowledges that such studies can never be impartial and objective and always are value-laden. Researchers generally accept a mainstream definition of what is to be considered “normal” sexuality. Although the existence of sexual drive and interests is in some ways “natural,” or biologically based, the form our sexual practices take is socially constructed, and that construction in this culture is rooted in the politics of gender. Relying on the majority view to determine what is erotic implicitly endorses the sexual status quo, which means accepting patriarchal definitions.

This point about values often is used by sexual libertarians, who contend that by labeling practices such as sadomasochism “deviant,” research is biased. But the critique also has to come from a different angle; in patriarchal society, what has been considered normal sex generally has been what serves to enhance men’s pleasure; the line between “normal” intercourse and “deviant” rape is a fine one. As Catharine MacKinnon (1989) puts it, “Compare victims’ reports of rape with women’s reports of sex. They look a lot alike” (p. 146).² Researchers must make value judgments about what is erotic, nonviolent, and normal, and those decisions define what is a deviant, unhealthy, callous, or socially undesirable response to the material. It is not that any specific researcher has blundered by letting value judgments in, but that such research always makes normative judgments about sexuality.

Listening to Stories ◆

He held up a porn magazine with a picture of a beaten woman and said, “I want you to look like that. I want you to hurt.” He then began beating me. (*Public Hearings*, 1983, p. 48)

It would be simplistic and misleading to suggest that the magazine was the sole cause of the beating, and the vast majority of activists and scholars in the feminist antipornography movement do not make such a claim (Russell, 1988, 1993a). Still, for many people that lack of deterministic causality means that society cannot give the woman who was beaten any legal recourse against the creators and peddlers of the pornography. That simplistic view of causation is of little value in examining human behavior, which is always the product of complex factors and unpredictable contingencies. The important research question is not, What kind of experiment will tell us about causation? but rather, If we listen to people's accounts of the world, what do we learn?

Positivist social science considers the evidence that comes from such testimony to be merely "anecdotal" and warns that generalizing from personal experience is problematic. From that view, the fact that a woman was sexually assaulted by a man who modeled his attack on a pornographic work tells us nothing about how pornography generally influences male sexual behavior toward women. For proof of causation, social scientists look to the laboratory, not experience:

Even if we were to observe a nearly one-to-one relationship between viewing violent pornography and committing a sexual assault or rape in the real world, this finding is not as compelling in a causal sense as is an experiment. (Donnerstein et al., 1987, p. 10)

Donnerstein et al. have faith in the possibilities of lab research to answer these questions, although other researchers who share their loyalty to experimental methods are far less optimistic about proving causation. Zillmann (1989), for example, warns that "research on pornography cannot be definitive. It cannot satisfy the demands for rigor and compellingness that have been placed on it" (p. 398). He believes that social

science can, however, be of value in guiding policy and making final decisions. Although not definitive, this research is "far superior to hearsay, guessing, and unchecked common sense" (p. 399). But is guessing the only alternative to experimental research?

The work of feminist scholars who have challenged Western science's claims of objectivity and neutrality (e.g., Harding, 1991) and proposed alternatives to traditional methods of social science research (Reinharz, 1992) makes it clear that human behavior and social patterns can be understood through research that takes seriously the stories people tell about their lives. This kind of research, as Marilyn Frye (1990) points out, rests "on a most empirical base: staking your life on the trustworthiness of your own body as a source of knowledge" (p. 177). Instead of looking to science for answers to questions it cannot answer, we can look to each other.

What we learn from the testimony of women and men whose lives have been touched by pornography is how the material is *implicated* in violence against women and how it can perpetuate, reinforce, and be part of a wider system of woman hating. Rather than discussing simple causation, we think of how various factors "make something inviting."³ In those terms, pornography does not cause rape, but rather helps make rape inviting. Research should examine people's stories about their experiences with pornography and sexual violence to help us determine how close is the relationship between the material and the actions, which can inform personal and collective decisions. This kind of examination will not produce certainty. The work of judging narratives can be difficult and sometimes messy; the process doesn't claim clear, objective standards that experimental research appears to offer. There are no experts to ask for authoritative answers; we all are responsible for building responsible and honest communal practices.

Although often drowned out in the policy debate, the stories that people tell about pornography have begun to be collected,

both in public hearings and through research. Sources for the experiences of women include the following:

1. Silbert and Pines's (1984) study of prostitutes, in which 73% of the 200 women interviewed reported being raped, and 24% of those women mentioned that their assailants made reference to pornography.
2. Russell's (1980) survey of more than 900 women about experiences with sexual violence, which includes women's responses to the question "Have you ever been upset by anyone trying to get you to do what they'd seen in pornographic pictures, movies, or books?" Of the women, 10% reported at least one such experience.
3. Kelly's (1988) detailed interviews with 60 British women about how they experience sexual violence, during which women reported that pornography often is a part of the continuum of violence.
4. The Minneapolis hearings (*Public Hearings*, 1983) on a proposed anti-pornography civil rights ordinance, which included the testimony of a number of women about how pornography was used in acts of sexual violence against them.
5. The hearings of the Attorney General's Commission (1986), which gave women a forum to tell about their experiences with pornography.

There also is a small but growing body of work on men's experiences with pornography through autobiography and research (e.g., Kimmel, 1990; Marshall, 1988). I have conducted in-depth interviews with male pornography consumers and convicted sex offenders that illustrate the different ways in which pornography is an important factor in the sexually abusive acts of some men (Jensen, 1992). Those interviews provide specific examples of

how pornography can (a) be an important factor in shaping a male-dominant view of sexuality, (b) contribute to a user's difficulty in separating sexual fantasy and reality, (c) be used to initiate victims and break down resistance to sexual activity, and (d) provide a training manual for abuse. A quick tour through some of those stories follows.

Although some of the pornography consumers I interviewed reported positive effects in their lives from pornography consumption, some of the consumers and all of the sex offenders identified pornography as an unhealthy influence on their sexuality, hurting their intimate relationships with women. One sex offender, echoing a common experience, reported that heavy use of pornography beginning as a child contributed to his belief that women "were made for sex and that's all." The men's narratives make it clear that pornography was not the only source of such messages in their lives but was important in shaping their sexuality.

Another theme that emerged in some men's accounts was pornography's role in blurring the line between fantasy and reality. One man, who was convicted of molesting two 6-year-old girls and said he also had raped teenage girls, explained how he would masturbate at home to pornography while thinking of the young girls who rode the bus he drove and then watch the girls on the bus while fantasizing about the pornography.

Another man convicted of sexually abusing his teenage stepdaughter explained that he watched pornographic videotapes with her before and during sex. The tapes served both to break down the girl's initial resistance to his sexual overtures, showing her that such sex was "normal," and provide him with fantasy material that allowed him to pretend that he was having sex with the women on the screen, not with his stepdaughter.

Finally, although pornography may not independently create desire for a specific sexual act, pornographic scenarios shaped

some men's sexual practices. One man—who detailed an extensive history of pornography use, visits to prostitutes, and rape and sexual abuse of women and girls—said he believed his obsession of having women perform oral sex on him was connected to the pornography he used. He explained how he would use “ways that would entice it in the movies” on his girlfriend, whose resistance often led to beatings. “I used a lot of force, a lot of direct demands, that in the movies women would just cooperate,” he said. When women in his life didn't cooperate, he said he usually became violent.

None of the sex offenders avoided personal responsibility by contending that pornography caused them to rape; those who described themselves as heavy pornography users saw pornography as one of a number of factors that contributed to their abusive behavior.

◆ *Conclusion*

Three decades of experimental research on pornography's effects have not answered questions about sexually explicit material and sexual violence. Should we hold out hope that more experimental studies will provide answers? Should we privilege that research in the public policy debate over pornography? To do so marginalizes a type of knowledge that holds out much more promise for helping us understand pornography, sexuality, sexism, and violence.

Not taking steps to eliminate misogynist pornography is a political act that has consequences. Vulnerable individuals, mostly women and children, will continue to be hurt in the making and use of pornography, and the lack of definitive scientific proof of the connection between pornography and harm does not change that brutal reality. To postpone action until science gives us that definitive answer—which even scientists agree isn't possible—is simply a cover for unwillingness to confront the political

and moral questions. We know enough to act, and we should.

Notes ◆

1. In the courts, however, such studies are not necessary to defend obscenity laws. Chief Justice Warren Burger's decision in *Paris Adult Theatre v. Slaton*, 413 U.S. 49 (1973), stated that conclusive empirical evidence was not needed for states to exercise their “legitimate interest” in regulating obscenity in local commerce and public accommodations to safeguard the quality of life, protect the total community environment, and enhance public safety. The more recent attempts to confront pornography legally have focused on women's civil rights, not criminal obscenity law, but the courts have generally been unwilling to consider this new approach. For more on the differences between obscenity and the feminist antipornography critique, see MacKinnon (1987, 1989).

2. MacKinnon's assertion perhaps should be modified to say that *some* women's reports of sex look a lot like reports of rape. MacKinnon is often criticized for her “totalizing” theory that paves over the complexity of individual women's lives, and in this case that is a valid complaint. However, the essence of her point is well taken.

3. I borrow the phrase from feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye's remarks in an informal seminar at the University of Minnesota in 1991.

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