Debate

Pornography: Is it Harmful to Women?


AND


Instructions:

1. Read both the pro and con side of this article.

2. All students are to type out the answers to the questions below, regardless of whether they signed up to be on this panel. This will be collected.

3. Everyone on the panel will be expected to participate in the debate. Thus, you may want to take additional notes on the article or write down some on the points that you think are important to make during the debate.

4. Part of this assignment involves fine tuning your ability to define terms or narrow parameters within debates pertaining to gender. Therefore, I have intentionally left the initial question somewhat vague.

Questions:

1. According to Scott, what is the difference between pornography and erotica? Why does she believe this is an important distinction?

2. What are the findings of experimental studies? Make sure to discuss the findings regarding the possible effects on both men and women? What are the limitations of these studies in answering our question?

3. What are the findings of correlational studies? What are the limitations of these studies in answering our question?

4. In your opinion, should pornography be censored? Should it be more highly regulated?
Porn Up, Rape Down

Today's headlines are shouting RAPE IN DECLINE! Official figures just released show a plunge in the number of rapes per capita in the United States since the 1970s. Even when measured in different ways, including police reports and survey interviews, the results are in agreement; there has been an 85% reduction in sexual violence in the past 25 years. The decline, steeper than the stock market crash that led to the Great Depression, is depicted in this chart prepared by the United States Department of Justice:

Rape rates
Adjusted victimization rate
per 1,000 persons age 12 and over

Source: The National Crime Victimization Survey. Includes both attempted and completed rapes.

As the chart shows, there were 2.7 rapes for every 1,000 people in 1980; by 2004, the same survey found the rate had decreased to 0.4 per 1,000 people, a decline of 85%.

Official explanations for the unexpected decline include (1) less lawlessness associated with crack cocaine; (b) women have been taught to avoid unsafe situations; (c) more would-be rapists already in prison for other crimes; (d) sex education classes telling boys that “no means no.” But these minor factors cannot begin to explain such a sharp decline in the incidence of rape.

There is, however, one social factor that correlates almost exactly with the rape statistics. The American public is probably not ready to believe it. My theory is that the sharp rise in access to pornography accounts for the decline in rape. The correlation is inverse: the more pornography, the less rape. It is like the inverse correlation: the more police officers on the street, the less crime.

The pornographic movie “Deep Throat” which started the flood of X-rated VHS and later DVD films, was released in 1972. Movie rental shops at first catered primarily to the adult film trade. Pornographic magazines also sharply increased in numbers in the 1970s and 1980s. Then came a seismic change: pornography became available on the new Internet. Today, purveyors of Internet porn earn a combined annual income exceeding the total of the major networks ABC, CBS, and NBC.

“Deep Throat” has moved from the adult theatre to a laptop near you.

National trends are one thing; what do the figures for the states show? From data compiled by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration in 2001, the four states with the lowest per capita access to the Internet were Arkansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, and West Virginia. The four states with the highest Internet access were Alaska, Colorado, New Jersey, and Washington. (I would not have guessed this.)

Next I took the figures for forcible rape compiled by police reports by the Disaster Center for the years 1980 and 2000. The following two charts display the results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Internet 2001</th>
<th>Rape 1980</th>
<th>Rape 2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Virginia</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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All figures are per capita.

While the nationwide incidence of rape was showing a drastic decline, the incidence of rape in the four states having the least access to the Internet showed an actual increase in rape over the same time period. This result was almost too clear and convincing, so to check it I compiled figures for the four
The incidence of rape?

The line include (1) less lawless-ness taught to avoid unsafe sex for other crimes; (d) sex offenders. But these minor factors can increase the incidence of rape.

States almost exactly with the Internet. My accounts for the decline in the less rape. It is like the more rental shops at first..

The flood of X-rated magazines also sharply potential a seismic change: purveyors of Internet content of the major net-

All figures are per capita.

states having the most access to the Internet. Three out of four of these states showed declines (in New Jersey, an almost 50% decline). Alaska was an anomaly: it increased both in Internet access and incidence of rape. However, the population of Alaska is less than one-tenth that of the other three states in its category. To adjust for the disparity in population, I took the combined population of the four states in each table and calculated the percentage change in the rape statistics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States with Highest Internet Access</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
</tr>
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Combined Per Capita Percentage Change in Incidence of Rape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aggregate per capita increase or decline in rape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four states with lowest Internet access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four states with highest Internet access</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

I find these results to be statistically significant beyond the 95% confidence interval.

Yet proof of correlation is not the same thing as causation. If autumn regularly precedes winter, that doesn’t mean that autumn causes winter. When six years ago my former Northwestern colleague John Donohue, together with Steven Levitt, found that legalized abortion correlated with a reduction in crime, theirs would have only been an academically curious thesis if they had not identified a causal factor. But they did identify one: that prior to legalization there were many unwanted babies born due to the lack of a legal abortion alternative. Those unwanted children became the most likely group to turn to crime.

My own interest in the rape-pornography question began in 1970 when I served as a consultant to President Nixon’s Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. The Commission concluded that there was no causal relationship between exposure to sexually explicit materials and delinquent or criminal behavior. The President was furious when he learned of the conclusion.

Later President Reagan tried the same thing, except unlike his predecessor he packed the Commission with persons who passed his ideological litmus test (small wonder that I was not asked to participate). This time, Reagan’s
Commission on Pornography reached the approved result: that there does exist a causal relationship between pornography and violent sex crimes.

The drafter of the Commission's report was Frederich Schauer, a prominent law professor. In a separate statement, he assured readers that neither he nor the other Commissioners were at all influenced by their personal moral values.5

Although the Reagan Commission had at its disposal all the evidence gathered by psychology and social-science departments throughout the world on the question whether a student's exposure to pornography increased his tendency to commit antisocial acts, I found that the Commission was unable to adduce a shred of evidence to support its affirmative conclusion. No scientist had ever found that pornography raised the probability of rape. However, the Commission was not seeking truth; rather, as I said in the title to my article, it sought political truth.

If pornography does not produce rape, I thought, then maybe it reduces rape. But no one apparently had any incentive to investigate the latter proposition. But the just-released rape statistics provide the necessary evidence.

Although neither Professor Schauer nor the other Commissioners ever responded to my William & Mary article, now they can forget it. For if they had been right that exposure to pornography leads to an increase in social violence, then the vast exposure to pornography furnished by the Internet would by now have resulted in scores of rapes per day on university campuses, hundreds of rapes daily in every town, and thousands of rapes per day in every city. Instead, the Commissioners were so incredibly wrong that the incidence of rape has actually declined by the astounding rate of 85%.

Correlations aside, could access to pornography actually reduce the incidence of rape as a matter of causation? In my article I mentioned one possibility: that some people watching pornography may “get it out of their system” and thus have no further desire to go out and actually try it. Another possibility might be labeled “Victorian effect”: the more that people covered up their bodies with clothes in those days, the greater the mystery of what they looked like in the nude. The sight of a woman's ankle was considered shocking and erotic. But today, Internet porn has thoroughly de-mystified sex. . . .

I am sure there will be other explanations forthcoming as to why access to pornography is the most important causal factor in the decline of rape. Once one accepts the observation that there is a precise negative correlation between the two, the rest can safely be left to the imagination.

Notes

2. Statistics on Internet Access compiled from National Telecommunications and Information Administration. . . .
3. Statistics on forcible rape compiled from. . . .
In 1983, at the request of the Minneapolis, Minnesota, city council, feminist activist Andrea Dworkin and legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon drafted an Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance. Their ordinance was not about censorship, but about providing women some legal recourse when they had been harmed by pornography; that is, women would be able to sue when they had been coerced into pornography, had pornography forced upon them, been assaulted because of particular pornography, or been defamed though pornography. In addition, the ordinance declared that the production, sale, exhibition, or distribution of pornography is sex discrimination and thereby allowed any individual to file a complaint against pornographers for subordination of women. In MacKinnon’s (1997) words, “Its point [was] to hold those who profit and benefit from that injury accountable to those who are injured. It [meant] that women’s injury—our damage, our pain, our enforced inferiority—should outweigh their pleasure and their profits, or sex equality is meaningless” (p. 465). The ordinance was passed twice by the Minneapolis city council and vetoed both times by the mayor. Why did Dworkin and MacKinnon consider pornography to be a violation of women’s civil rights? The answer lies in their definition of pornography.

**WHAT IS PORNOGRAPHY?**

Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988) included a very specific definition of pornography in their ordinance:

Pornography is the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words, that also includes one or more of the following:
(i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities; or (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation, or (iii) women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or (iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or (v) women are presented in postures or positions of sexual submission, or (vi) women's body parts—including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, or buttocks—are exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts; or (vii) women are presented as whores by nature; or (viii) women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or (ix) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, abasement, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual.

(p. 101)

The important thing about this definition is that it does not define as pornography all sexually explicit material. Although the general public tends to label all sexually explicit material as pornographic (e.g., Lottes, Weinberg, & Weller, 1993), Dworkin and MacKinnon focused on material that combines sex and degradation or sex and violence. Dworkin and MacKinnon are not the only scholars to emphasize this distinction. Philosopher Helen Longino (1994) described pornography as "...verbal or pictorial explicit representations of sexual behavior that...have as a distinguishing characteristic the degrading and demeaning portrayal of the role and status of the human female as a mere sexual object to be exploited and manipulated sexually" (p. 154), and sociologist Diana Russell (1993) described it as "material that combines sex and/or the exposure of genitals with abuse or degradation in a manner that appears to endorse, condone, or encourage such behavior" (p. 3). According to these definitions, not only is some sexually explicit material not pornographic, but some material may be pornographic without being "X-rated."

Can you think of examples of sexually explicit material that would not fit these definitions of pornography? Examples include instructional videotapes used by sex therapists to help couples improve their love making skills and erotic photographs that celebrate the beauty of the human body and the joy of sex without degrading or objectifying the persons pictured.

Can you think of examples of less explicit material that would fit these definitions? Many R-rated Hollywood films mesh sex and violence in scripts that show harassment, stalking, voyeureism, prostitution, rape, or murder of women. These films are often marketed as "erotic thrillers." Pornographic themes have been pandemic in music videos since the inception of MTV in the early 1980s. More recently, images of sexualized violence have become commonplace in fashion photography and in advertising for numerous products, including jeans, alcohol, and computer games. I challenge you to begin looking critically at the images that surround you every day on billboards, in magazines, on posters in your campus bookstore, in movie advertisements, on television commercials, in unsolicited
e-mail messages, and so on. (For examples collected by other critical consumers, see the "No Comment" page in every issue of Ms. magazine or go to www.about-face.org.)

"PORNOGRAPHY" VS. "EROTICA"

At this point, you may be wondering whether the distinction between sexually explicit materials and materials that combine sexual themes with violence or degradation is based solely on feminist theory or whether it is also supported by research findings. If we consider the impact that exposure to these materials may have on attitudes and behavior, there is empirical evidence that favors this distinction. Some of the research evidence was reviewed by Daniel Linz, Edward Donnerstein, and Steven Penrod (1987) who stated:

The research...has demonstrated, for the most part...that sexually explicit images, per se, do not in the short run facilitate aggressive behavior against women, change attitudes about rape, or influence other forms of antisocial behavior. Instead, the research indicates that it is the violent images embedded in some forms of pornography, or even the violent images alone, that account for many of the antisocial effects observed in experimental studies. (p. 97)

For example, in one of their own studies, Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1984) exposed male college students to 10 hours of R-rated or X-rated movies (two hours a day for five days). Some of the men saw films that were sexually explicit and portrayed sexual assault; some saw films that were sexually explicit but portrayed consenting sex; and the rest saw films that were less sexually explicit but portrayed violence against women within a sexual context. At the end of the five days, the three groups of men, along with a control group who had not seen any films, were asked to watch a re-enactment of a rape trial and to make several judgments about the case. Compared with the control group and the group that had seen the X-rated nonviolent films, the two groups who had seen violent films judged the rape victim’s injury to be less severe and rated her significantly more worthless as a person. The pattern of results in this study corresponds to the definitions previously presented; negative effects were observed for material that combined violence and sexual themes, regardless of the level of sexual explicitness, but no negative effects were observed for the sexually explicit nonviolent material.

With few exceptions, other experiments have yielded similarly disturbing findings. Exposure to sexually violent material increases men’s sexual callousness toward women and lowers their support of sexual equality (e.g., Zillmann & Bryant, 1982); desensitizes men to violence against women and increases men’s acceptance of rape myths such as “all women secretly want to be raped” (e.g., Malamuth & Check, 1981), and increases aggression toward women in the laboratory (e.g., Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981).
Meta-analysis reveals a reliable association between frequent use of violent pornography and men's sexually aggressive behavior, especially when the men are predisposed to aggression (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000).

More recent experiments have focused on the distinction between sexually degrading and non-degrading material in the absence of violent content. "Degrading" films are operationally defined as those that contain male dominance, female availability, penis worship, female insatiability, and the objectification of women; "non-degrading" films contain mutual respect, affection, and sexual pleasure (Cowan & Dunn, 1994). Researchers have found that male college students exposed to a sexually explicit and degrading film clip behave differently in a subsequent interaction with a woman than do men exposed to a sexually explicit but non-degrading film clip. One study showed that highly gender-typed men who had viewed a sexually degrading scene underestimated the woman's intellectual competence and overestimated her sexual interest in them (Jansma et al., 1997). In another study, the less gender-typed men were more impacted by the degrading film in that they displayed more dominance behavior in the subsequent interaction (Mulac, Jansma, & Linz, 2002). Men who have viewed video segments that sexually degrade women—whether explicit or not—exhibit more rape-supportive attitudes than do men who have viewed non-degrading segments (Golde, Strassberg, Turner, & Lowe, 2000).

The bulk of social science research on the effects of pornography has focused exclusively on men's attitudes and behaviors. Because pornography historically has been produced for and by men, researchers have directed their efforts accordingly; however, these studies of men suggest that pornography may be harmful, at least indirectly, to women. Legal scholar Kathleen Lahey (1991) has argued that an "alternative, feminist way [to conduct research on potential harmful effects of pornography] is to listen to women" (p. 118). Recently, a few researchers have included women participants in their studies; some have conducted traditional correlational or experimental studies, and others have done what Lahey advocated by collecting women's accounts about their experiences with pornography.

**Experimental Research on Women and Pornography**

Few researchers have directly investigated women's responses to sexually explicit material. Some early work conducted in the 1970s and 1980s looked at whether women are aroused by visual depictions of graphic sex. The general consensus among researchers was that women are not particularly aroused by visual sex. We cannot tell from these studies
whether the materials used were pornographic in the sense described previously, but we can be confident that the stimuli used were produced by and for men.

In the past decade, there has been an increase in sexually explicit material geared toward women. For example, former-porn-star-turned-director, Candida Royalle, produces sexually explicit videos under the *Femme* label. Her videos portray nonviolent, nondegrading, consensual sex within a romantic context. With new materials such as these films available, several researchers have designed studies to address the question of whether women respond differently to material designed for women and material designed for men.

In most of these investigations, researchers have focused on sexual arousal in response to the films. For example, Donald Mosher and Paula Maclan (1994) randomly assigned female and male undergraduates to watch one of six X-rated videos, three intended for men and three for women. Then, they measured sexual arousal, affective response, absorption in the material, and subsequent sexual behavior. They found that men had a more positive response than women did to all of the videos, but especially to the videos designed for men, which elicited a negative emotional reaction from the women. Compared with the women who had seen the videos designed for men, women who had seen the videos designed for women reported more sexual arousal, more positive affect, more absorption, and increased subsequent sexual activity. In a study that employed only women participants, Ellen Laan, Walter Everaerd, Gerdy van Bellen, and Gerrit Hanewald (1994) found that “woman-made, female-initiated, and female-centered” erotic films were considered more arousing than “man-made, male-initiated, and male-centered erotic films.” The men’s films also evoked feelings of shame, guilt, and aversion. In addition to asking for women’s subjective reports of arousal, these researchers also measured sexual arousal objectively with a vaginal photoplethysmograph. This device, about the size of a tampon, is inserted into the vagina to record vasocongestion (i.e., blood flow to the vagina); the greater the vasocongestion, the more physiologically aroused the woman is. It is interesting that physiological arousal measured in this way did not differ between the group who watched the women’s films and the group who watched the men’s films. In a combination experimental-correlational study, Sara Pearson and Robert Pollack (1997) showed women undergraduates either a female-oriented *Femme* video or a traditional male-oriented video and then collected subjective reports of arousal. They also correlated arousal with measures of previous experience with sexually explicit material, masturbatory experience, and sex guilt. Pearson and Pollack found that women reported greater subjective arousal in response to the *Femme* video and that greater arousal was associated with more previous experience with sexually explicit materials, more masturbatory experience, and less sex guilt.
At this point, you may be thinking, “This is all very interesting, but are these studies really about pornography?” Perhaps not. Most likely, the material designed specifically for women and labeled “erotica” would not fit the definitions of pornography offered earlier. The material designed for men might constitute pornography, but the researchers did not explicitly say so. There are, however, some studies in which the researchers have intentionally used violent or degrading pornography as experimental stimuli. For example, Charlene Senn and Lorraine Radtke (1990) exposed women undergraduates to one of three sets of sexually explicit slides: erotica (with a focus on mutual pleasure between consenting partners), nonviolent porn (with the implication of violence or submission), or violent porn (with explicit violence or its aftereffects). As predicted, women rated erotica positively, nonviolent porn negatively, and violent porn more negatively—and both types of porn decreased women’s moods. Participants who reported having experienced sexual coercion in the past evaluated the pornography even more negatively, and the erotica more positively, than did participants with no self-reported history of sexual coercion. Jack Glascock (2005) exposed both women and men undergraduates to either erotic or nonviolent but degrading pornographic video clips and then collected subjective reports of sexual arousal. Men’s and women’s arousal did not differ significantly in the erotica condition. In the degrading pornography condition, however, men reported significantly more arousal than women did—and the men’s arousal in this condition was slightly (though not significantly) higher than in the erotica condition, whereas women’s was lower than in the erotica condition.

Laboratory studies tend to be stripped down versions of reality; therefore, some researchers have explored whether situational factors present when women encounter pornography outside the laboratory might affect women’s reactions to pornography. Charlene Senn and Serge Desmarais (2004) addressed the social context in which women encounter pornography; they asked women participants accompanied by either a female friend or a male partner to view erotic, sexist, or violent sexually explicit images and then discuss them with the friend or partner. Women experienced more agreement with female friends than with male partners regarding evaluations of the slides (the men viewed them all more positively than the women did, especially the sexist set), but regardless of whether the discussion was with a friend or partner, women generally reported that discussing the slides improved their moods.

As a whole, the experimental research on women and pornography does not have much to say about how pornography might directly harm women (besides putting them in a bad mood). Take a minute to brainstorm other dependent measures that might better capture the effects of pornography on women. These could include measures of body image, self-esteem, the sexual self-concept, fear of sexual assault, relationship distress, women’s behavior toward other women, and...?
Several researchers have investigated the link between pornography and harm to women by soliciting accounts from battered women regarding the use of pornography by their abusers and the role of pornography in the abuse episodes. For example, Evelyn Sommers and James Check (1987) interviewed 44 battered women from shelters and 32 women from a “mature university population.” Thirty-nine percent of the battered women (compared with 3 percent of the other women) said that their partners had upset them by trying to get them to do something seen in pornographic pictures, movies, or books. The battered women also reported more sexual aggression from their partners than did the other women. Elizabeth Cramer and Judith McFarlane (1994) surveyed 87 women who were filing criminal charges against their male partners for battery. Forty percent of the women reported that their batterers used pornography, and use was significantly associated with these women being asked or forced to participate in violent sex, even rape.

Janet Shope (2004) collected information from 271 women in a New York battered women’s program. She found that women whose batterers used pornography, in contrast to women whose partners did not, were nearly twice as likely to have experienced sexual abuse from their batterers.

Sexual assault and battery happens to women in all walks of life, including to those walking the streets. Mimi Silbert and Ayala Pines (1984) set out to study the sexual abuse of prostitutes without regard to pornography, but found that nearly one-quarter of the victims in 193 rape cases spontaneously described their rapists’ allusions to porn. One victim quoted her attacker as saying, “I know all about you bitches, you’re no different; you’re like all of them. I seen it in all the movies. You love being beaten” (p. 864). Similar anecdotes surfaced in prostitutes’ testimonies at the Minneapolis Antipornography Ordinance hearings (MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1997). For example, a former prostitute, Ms. S., claimed that women prostitutes “were forced constantly to enact specific scenes that men had witnessed in pornography” (p. 116). One woman was told by a man holding a picture of a beaten woman, “I want you to look like this. I want you to hurt” (p. 118). Ms. S. claimed that another prostitute was burned with cigarettes, had clips attached to her nipples, and was continuously raped and beaten for 12 hours by a group of men brandishing sadomasochistic pornography.

What can we conclude from accounts such as these? Can we conclude that pornography causes male violence against women? No. In fact, even if all of the battered women reported that their partners used pornography, and even if all of the cases of assault on prostitutes involved pornography, we still could not conclude that the pornography was the cause of the violence. What we can conclude, however, is that pornography is associated with many cases of sexual violence and that from the perspective of these women, pornography suggested ways to harm the women and was, itself, part of the harm inflicted upon them.
Recently, Raymond Bergner and Ana Bridges listened to women in nonabusive relationships who believed that they, too, have been harmed by their partners’ use of pornography. In their first study (Bergner & Bridges, 2002), the researchers analyzed postings to Internet discussion boards by women distressed by what they perceived to be heavy use of pornography by their male partners. These women felt traumatized by their discovery of their partners’ porn usage and described negative effects on their relationship, their feelings of self-worth and sexual desirability, and their views of their partner. Based on these accounts, the researchers developed a 50-item Pornography Distress Scale (PDS) that they administered to a sample of 100 women (Bridges, Bergner, & Hesson-McInnes, 2003). Although the overall attitudes of women in the sample were neutral rather than negative, 42 percent reported that their partner’s use of pornography made them feel insecure, 41 percent felt less attractive and desirable since discovering their partner’s porn usage, and 34 percent said that their self-esteem had suffered.

THE "WHY" AND "HOW" OF FUTURE RESEARCH ON WOMEN AND PORN

I think it is imperative for researchers to conduct more studies on pornography and women. The study of pornography is one example among many in the field of psychology where women have been relatively absent as researchers and research participants, and where women’s perspectives have not been fairly represented in theory and research design. Without more studies to rectify this neglect of women’s experiences, psychologists cannot hope to offer a complete picture of pornography’s possible effects to those involved in the social and legal debates about it.

It is important for psychologists to conduct more studies on pornography and women in order to bring some diversity to the discussion. We need diversity of participants, not just regarding gender but also in terms of characteristics such as race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and ability. We need diversity in the research methods used, so that women’s perspectives are represented as more than group averages in experimental or correlational studies. We need diversity in what we consider “pornography,” so that we are not limited to studies about X-rated films or *Playboy* centerfolds. Finally, we need diversity in our ideas about what effects pornography might have on women; we need to consider more than just sexual arousal and mood.

**Diversity of Women**

I am advocating not only including women from a variety of demographic categories in studies of pornography, but also addressing how various demographic characteristics are integrated into pornography itself. Women
of Color must be included in the study of pornography, not only as research participants, but also as part of the theoretical understanding of what pornography is. Patricia Hill Collins (1997) suggested that

the treatment of Black women’s bodies in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States may be the foundation upon which contemporary pornography as the representation of women’s objectification, domination, and control is based. (p. 396)

She noted that the “image of Black women in pornography is almost consistently one featuring them breaking from chains” (p. 397). Black women are portrayed as (sexual) slaves and savages whose animal sexuality must be tamed. Collins also made reference to how Asian women in pornography are often portrayed being tortured. In her very disturbing collection of visual pornography, Russell (1993) included examples from a 1984 Penthouse photo essay that featured young Asian women trussed in ropes and, in one instance, hung from a tree. Russell also included anti-Semitic pornography that portrays women as concentration camp victims in such publications as Swastika Snatch. These are only a few examples of how women’s race and ethnicity are integrated into pornography.

Most research on pornography has addressed heterosexual men’s and women’s experiences with heterosexually oriented material. The voices of lesbian women have been largely absent. It is important for researchers to hear from lesbian women regarding erotica and pornography designed for their own consumption and regarding pornography for heterosexual men in which lesbianism is exploited and distorted into a fantasy for the male viewer. Todd Morrison and Dani Tallack (2005) conducted focus groups on these issues with a sample of lesbian and bisexual women. To spark discussion, they first showed the participants explicit film clips of “ersatz lesbian” material for men and material for lesbian women (without identifying which was which). The participants reported that, in contrast to the genuinely lesbian-oriented film clip, the scene from Lesbian Cheerleader Squad 2 presented an unrealistic portrayal of lesbian sexuality that lacked emotional intimacy and featured performers whose bodies conformed to a heterosexual ideal. Still, there was not uniform agreement about which film clip was “better,” and the women generally did not find either clip threatening or offensive. Morrison and Tallack (2005) advocated, therefore, that researchers explore the variety of reactions women may have to pornography and move beyond an exclusive focus on harm.

Current global politics dictate that we must consider the diverse experiences of women worldwide. Since the infiltration of the “free market” into the former Soviet Union, the production and distribution of pornography there have hugely increased. Some commentators have dismissed this surge as an expected reaction to the lifting of Communist restrictions
on such materials; others have sounded the alarm about what the increase in sex trafficking of women and children means for the status of women under the new political structure. Only time will tell what will happen with regard to pornography in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2002. Might the pendulum swing from one extreme of women’s sexuality completely muted under the burka to women being exposed and exploited as sexual commodities? We cannot afford an ethnocentric perspective when it comes to pornography. This is a global phenomenon, and it is facilitated in large part by the World Wide Web.

**Diversity of Pornography**

Most of you have probably experienced the unwelcome appearance of pornographic messages or images in your e-mail inbox. Some of you likely have explored pornographic sites on the Internet. Do you have a sense of what is out there? Unlike print media and video, Internet forms of pornography are very difficult to monitor and control. Child pornography, which is illegal in the United States, is widely available online. In fact, pornography catering to just about any taste is available somewhere in the electronic universe. In my own online research, I have encountered shocking photographs of women with their breasts nailed to boards, sickening text that glorifies the brutal anal rape of “teen schoolgirls,” and sites dedicated to mutilation in a sexual context. Jennifer Gossett and Sarah Byrne (2002) analyzed the content of 31 Web sites that included “rape” or “forced sex” in their titles, text, or Internet addresses. Twenty-one of the sites included visuals accompanied by captions such as “These teenagers’ hell is your pleasure. They are stretched, whipped, raped, and beaten. Their tits are crushed, twisted, pierced, thrashed, and tortured...they scream, cry, and plead” (p. 696). Fourteen of the sites described victims with derogatory terms such as “bitch,” “pussy,” “whore,” and “slut.” Four of the sites bragged that they featured documentation of actual rape, and several invited viewers to participate in sexual violence (e.g., by downloading a “cyberslave” whom the viewer can “torture” and “abuse” as he pleases). Martin Barron and Michael Kimmel (2000) conducted a comparative analysis of violent content in pornographic magazines, videos, and Internet newsgroups. They found that about 5 percent of the sexual scenes in videos and magazines contained violence or coercion, compared to 26 percent of the scenes posted on the Internet.

Some of the most common sexually oriented Web sites feature women who have no idea that their bodies are being objectified online: women captured by hidden cameras or cell phones in locker rooms or public restrooms, and women whose partners post pictures or video of them without their consent. And, with the increases in digital technology, when real
women are not available, the skilled graphic artist can create and post whatever type of image his mind can conjure up. The Internet makes pornography available in unprecedented volume and variety.

Graphic artists also use their skills in the video/computer game genre. These games are marketed almost exclusively to teenage boys and young adult men. Violence is a pervasive theme, and much of that violence is sexualized. Sexualized violence in video games is not a new phenomenon. For example, in 1982, a company called Mystique produced an Atari-compatible game called “Custer’s Revenge.” The goal of the game was for the player (Custer) to wend his way across the screen, avoiding cacti and arrows, to reach the nude Native American “maiden” tied to a post. Once there, he was to rape her as many times as possible with his crudely animated, but clearly erect, penis (see www.atariguide.com/3/320.htm). More recently, national media attention was directed at the highly popular Grand Theft Auto series of video games in which the player assumes the role of a criminal who engages in a variety of antisocial and violent behavior (e.g., stealing cars, dealing drugs, shooting police officers, and running over pedestrians). Grand Theft Auto III offered the player the opportunity to have sex with a prostitute and then to kill her to get his money back. Meta-analysis of research on the effects of violent video games shows a clear association with aggressive thinking and behavior (Anderson et al., 2004).

**Pornography and the First Amendment**

My hope for future research on pornography and women is that it will illuminate the ongoing debate about whether the production of pornography should be protected as “free speech” or whether it should be legally restricted or penalized in some way.

There is a wide range of opinions, even among feminists, about what constitutes pornography. Some people consider all sexually explicit material to be “obscene” and “pornographic” and draw no distinction between material that portrays consensual sex and material that shows real women experiencing real abuse. Some people do see a difference between instructional videos designed to help couples improve their lovemaking skills and magazines that feature photographs of tortured women being gang-raped at knife point. Even those who make distinctions, however, often think that protecting “free speech” is more important than protecting the women in the photographs, the women who see the photographs, or the women whose partners masturbate to the photographs. I am intentionally being provocative here because I personally do not agree that material that endorses, condones, or encourages the sexual abuse and degradation of half the human population should be defended as “free speech.” At the
same time, I think that many anticensorship feminists make important points, particularly regarding the potentially negative impact of censorship on women's sexuality.

Would Restricting Pornography Restrict Women's Sexuality?

At a 1993 conference entitled “Women, Censorship, and “Pornography,” sex therapist and President of the International Academy of Sex Research Leonore Tiefer argued that women benefit from access to sexually explicit materials. She claimed that such materials enhance women's ability to develop their sexualities, a challenging process in a culture that has traditionally suppressed female sexual exploration and expression (National Coalition against Censorship, 1998). Given that the estimated rate of inorgasmia (inability to achieve orgasm) among women in the United States is 30 percent (Palace, 1995), I find this a persuasive point. I agree that an important function is served by many sexually explicit materials. For example, sex therapist Betty Dodson produced a video, Selfloving, which graphically documents her hands-on workshops on female masturbation. Her intent is to benefit women. Women might benefit similarly from exposure to sexually graphic woman-oriented erotica, such as the Femme films I described earlier. I, however, see a clear distinction between materials like this (which I do not consider pornography) and pornographic periodicals such as Take That, Bitch! and Black Tit and Body Torture (Russell, 1993); it is difficult for me to imagine how photographs of women enduring extreme pain and physical injury inflicted by sexually aroused men would assist women in developing a healthy and fulfilling sexuality.

Some anticensorship feminists have argued that restricting pornography might especially limit lesbian women’s sexual expression; they believe that some of the first materials to go would be lesbian and gay erotica because they would be viewed by some as unconventional or obscene (e.g., Strossen, 1995). This position gained momentum in the wake of the Canadian Supreme Court's (1992) Butler decision. Donald Butler was a pornographer who had been prosecuted under Canada’s obscenity laws, which defined as obscene the undue exploitation of sex or sex and violence (MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1994). Butler argued that this obscenity law violated his rights to free speech under the new Canadian constitution. This new constitution, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, also included sexual equality rights, rights that the Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) had argued were violated by pornography. The Supreme Court agreed with LEAF that it is constitutional to restrict materials that harm women if that restriction promotes sex equality.

There is a striking similarity between the Dworkin and MacKinnon Ordinance, which considered pornography a violation of women’s civil
rights, and the Canadian Supreme Court determination that pornography can represent a violation of sex equality. Shortly after the Butler decision, there were widespread reports about Canadian Customs using the decision as justification for stopping gay and lesbian material at the border. Due to the resemblance between the theme of the Butler decision and the Antipornography Ordinance, these reports eventually metamorphosed into allegations that Canada had adopted the Antipornography Ordinance and was using it to ban lesbian and gay erotica. In a 1994 press release, MacKinnon and Dworkin clarified that, although the Butler decision was based on an equality approach to pornography, Canada had not adopted their Antipornography Ordinance or their civil (as opposed to criminal) approach. They also claimed that Canadian Customs had a long history of “homophobic seizures,” but under the new constitution these are illegal (this is actually supported by the Butler decision, which stated that it is unconstitutional to restrict materials on a moral basis). Indeed, the Antipornography Ordinance does not contain any language that would condemn lesbian or gay materials on the basis that they portray homosexuality; however, material that promotes the degradation, humiliation, or pain of women—whether homosexual or heterosexual—would fit the Ordinance definition of pornography.

**Pornography as “Free Speech”**

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), an organization that defends pornography as free speech, states on its Internet site that

> the First Amendment exists precisely to protect the most offensive and controversial speech from government suppression. The best way to counter obnoxious speech is with more speech. Persuasion, not coercion, is the solution. (ACLU)

Do you think that “offensive and controversial speech” is a sufficient label for the pornography that I have described? If not, in what ways do you think pornography differs from other forms of protected speech? Should some forms of pornography be censored?

In her book *Defending Pornography*, former president of the ACLU, Nadine Strossen (1995), offered a compelling argument about censorship being a “slippery slope” (p. 239). Like many anticensorship feminists, she warned that, if we restrict some material, we will open the door to restrictions on anything anybody happens to find offensive, including art, literature, scholarly works, and educational materials. Strossen believes that threats to the First Amendment threaten women in that freedom of speech consistently has been the strongest weapon for countering misogynistic discrimination and violence, and censorship consistently has been a potent tool for curbing women’s rights and interests. Freedom of sexually oriented expression is integrally connected with women’s freedom, since women traditionally have been straitjacketed precisely in the sexual domain, notably in our ability to control our sexual and reproductive options. (p. 30)
In my opinion, Strossen's points are good ones. I would characterize myself as a "prosex, proerota, antipornography feminist," so where do I stand on censorship of pornography? Like the 119 National Organization for Women newsletter recipients surveyed by Gloria Cowan in 1992, my views of pornography could probably be predicted by my beliefs about the importance of protecting free speech and my beliefs about the harmful effects of pornography. I do believe that the right to free speech is an important one to protect and that censorship is a dangerous practice. I am not, however, very troubled by the idea of restricting material that is, in fact, a documentation of actual illegal sexual violence. Some ant censor ship feminists argue that, because there already exist laws prohibiting sexual violence, we do not need more laws to address pornographic documentation of such violence (Strossen, 1995). My response to this argument is to point out that, if current laws were preventing the sexual violence, it could not be documented and sold as entertainment.

Clearly, there are no easy answers here. Were Dworkin and MacKinnon on the right track with their Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance? These feminists recognized the value of protecting free speech and so were not proposing the criminalization of pornography. They were not advocating censorship. They were suggesting, however, that pornography is propaganda that promotes and maintains the subordinate status of women in our culture and, as such, should be considered a violation of women's civil rights. They proposed their ordinance because they believe a clear distinction can, and should, be made between material that is simply sexually explicit and material that is potentially harmful to women and men. For the most part, I agree. I recognize, however, that even the detailed definition offered by Dworkin and MacKinnon leaves room for subjective interpretation.

Psychological research cannot determine whether pornography should be considered a violation of women's civil rights. Psychological research can, however, yield information about potentially harmful effects of pornography on women, men, and social relationships. I am a social psychologist who is motivated by the belief that the best research findings are those that have practical applications. I think that questions about pornography are ones that cannot be answered without the continued input of social science researchers.

REFERENCES


SUGGESTED READINGS


