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Porn Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprn20

Psychology and pornography: some reflections

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Published online: 21 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Meg Barker (2014) Psychology and pornography: some reflections, Porn Studies, 1:1-2, 120-126, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2013.859468

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2013.859468

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Porn Studies, 2014
Vol. 1, Nos. 1–2, 120–126, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2013.859468

Routledge
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Psychology and pornography: some reflections

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(*Received 20 August 2013; accepted 15 September 2013*)

This paper provides a brief overview of mainstream psychological research on pornography, which has mainly focused on determining the effects of pornography on human attitudes and behaviour and the possible mechanisms for these effects. The methodological problems with such research are well known in the field of porn studies. Rather than using this as a reason simply to dismiss the contribution of psychology, attention to methods and analyses may be one thing that psychology can particularly offer to work in this area going forward. Just as it is important that we recognize that we are studying pornographies (plural), there are a number of psychologies beyond the classic experimental behaviourist psychology with which people are generally familiar. This paper will argue that critical and applied psychologies, in particular, have much to contribute, with their ability to analyze the ways in which pornographies, sex and gender are constructed, and to hold on to the lived experiences of those engaging with pornographies. Like the rather more conventional forms of experimental psychology, critical and applied psychologies have the potential to offer a useful 'signal jam' to polarized debates in this area.

Keywords: pornography; psychology; critical psychology; applied psychology; effects research; qualitative research; polarization

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Mainstream psychologies

When most scholars consider what psychology has contributed to porn studies they are likely to think only of the kind of laboratory experiment studies that informed the US Meese Report on pornography back in 1986 (Attorney General's Commission on Pornography 1986). Such research was generally concerned with determining whether pornography was harmful by assessing whether men became more aggressive after exposure to pornography (Edwards 1992). The classic form of such research involved showing male undergraduate students edited clips of violent pornography (or neutral stimuli) in a laboratory setting and then requiring them to electrically shock a female confederate of the experimenter who had previously angered them: higher levels of electric shock than the control group suggested that exposure to violent pornography had made the men aggressive. Other related research studied the impact of exposure to various kinds of pornography on attitudes towards women, acceptance of rape myths, and self-reported likelihood of non-consensual sexual behaviour. It also explored correlations between extent of

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pornography use and scores on measures of sexual and aggressive attitudes and behaviour (see Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality 2007).

Reviews of such research – including meta-analyses that statistically combine previous studies to determine overall effects – generally agree that experiments demonstrate effects of violent pornography on attitudes and aggression, but that nudity alone shows no – or opposite – effects (Malamuth and Donnerstein 2000), and there are mixed results with non-violent pornography (Seto, Maric, and Barbaree 2001). However, there is much dispute over whether such findings can be generalized to the world beyond the laboratory, especially given that research on naturally occurring consumption of pornography generally does not find correlations with aggression or negative attitudes, and studies have failed to find increased rates of sex crime in countries following easier access to pornography (Kutchinsky 1991; Diamond and Uchiyama 1999). Also sex offenders have often been found to have less exposure to pornography than other kinds of offenders (even though they seem to show a greater response to violent, and other, pornography) (Allen, D'Alessio, and Brezgel 1995; Allen, D'Alessio, and Emmers-Sommer 1999).

Most psychologists in this area are mindful of the many limitations of quantitative and experimental research (see Fisher and Barak 1991; Malamuth and Donnerstein 2000) and are rightly cautious in the conclusions and claims that they make. Indeed, these methodological limitations are so well known that pornography research is frequently used as an example of the difficulties of researching human behaviour statistically on the research methods courses that form the spine of most undergraduate and postgraduate psychology degrees.

Having moved institution several times in my psychology career, I have frequently taught on such research methods courses (which are almost always given to the new lecturer to teach). Alongside the aforementioned difficulties in generalizing from laboratory studies on male undergraduates who choose to take part in sex research to consumers of pornography in the real world, psychological research on pornography also provides a good example of the difficulties in coming up with satisfactory operational definitions – with people defining things such as pornography, violent pornography, and aggression differently across studies, or failing to define them at all (Short et al. 2012). Additionally such research provides an excellent example of the classic problem that correlation does not equal causation, which is drummed into every psychology student, although remaining notoriously difficult to keep hold of as we seem to be drawn to make sense of the world through cause–effect relationships. If higher levels of aggression are found in people who consume more pornography it remains unclear whether the pornography makes people aggressive, whether aggressive people are more drawn to pornography, or whether some other aspect (such as being more conventionally masculine, for example) independently results in higher levels of both aggression and porn consumption.

More recent psychological research, on internet pornography for example, is shot through with these methodological considerations. Indeed it is not uncommon for papers to focus almost exclusively on such issues (for example, Short et al. 2012). Also, in recent years there seems to be more of a balance in exploring and reporting, both 'negative' and 'positive' effects of pornography. For example, Short et al. report higher levels of relationship and interpersonal distress, as well as improvements in sexual knowledge and attitudes, in relation to engaging with internet pornography.

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Critical psychologies

However, such research and writing generally fails to question the fundamental assumptions of mainstream psychology. These need to be understood in the historical context of the discipline, which has always endeavoured to position itself as a science for multiple reasons: political and pragmatic (Richards 2002). For example, there are underlying assumptions in conventional psychological research on pornography that it is possible to determine cause–effect relationships between outside stimuli and human behaviour, to label effects as straightforwardly 'positive' or 'negative', and to assume that people's attitudes will predict their behaviour – although there is much evidence, even within mainstream psychology, that the relationship between attitudes and behaviours is not a simple one (Potter and Wetherell 1987). Such assumptions are rooted in a dualistic understanding of human beings whereby it is deemed possible to separate out stimuli from responses, minds from bodies, and thoughts from actions. They are also rooted in an understanding of the individual as the object of concern, as can be seen in the tendency to search for 'individual differences' that may mediate or moderate the impact of pornography. This focus on the individual unit rests on an assumption that humans are easily separable from their social context, and that they remain relatively fixed and static, with certain personality traits or psychopathologies, for example (Rose 1998).

A form of psychology that moves away from such assumptions is critical psychology. Particularly strong in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, whilst still being marginalized in relation to much mainstream psychology, critical psychology is informed by social constructionism, phenomenology, feminism, and many of the other arenas of critical theory that will be familiar to colleagues across media and cultural studies, sociology, and the humanities. The understanding of the person, and their relation to the wider world, is consequently more complex than that of mainstream psychology, emphasizing intersubjectivity and the social construction of experience, for example.

Critical psychologists have particularly been at the forefront of developing qualitative approaches such as conversation and discourse analysis to study the ways in which psychological matters are constructed in everyday conversation and political rhetoric. However, it would be a mistake to conflate critical psychology with qualitative research and mainstream psychology with quantitative ones. Peter Hegarty is one major figure in the psychology of sexuality who, in addition to his work on the history of the field, employs quantitative methods to explore aspects of sexuality from a social constructionist perspective. For example, his past work has employed experimental methods to demonstrate that biological essentialist beliefs about lesbian and gay people do not necessarily relate to more tolerant attitudes (Hegarty 2010). In relation to porn studies, Hegarty and colleagues employed quantitative methods to explore whether people could differentiate between quotes about sex from lads' magazines and those of convicted rapists (Horvath et al. 2012). This provided useful evidence that rape mythology is indeed perpetuated in mainstream sexual magazines aimed at men.

Another recent, but this time qualitative, example of critical psychological work on pornography is Nicola Gavey's work. Gavey and colleagues conducted discourse analysis on the talk of male readers of mainstream pornography about the constructions of gender and sex in the materials that they engage with (Gavey and

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Antevska 2013). Such research sheds an intriguing light on how tensions between the belief in gender equality and the recognition of gender inequality in mainstream porn are negotiated. For example, readers used gender neutral terms, humour, and sidestepping, as well as presenting the male focus of mainstream pornography as natural and mundane.

On the face of it, each of these examples could be regarded as being on the 'anti' side of the pornography debates. However, both Hegarty and Gavey refuse such a polarized position. Hegarty's work can be more broadly situated within a non-pathologizing, queer and 'sex-positive' tradition, and he has resisted all attempts to employ his lads' magazines research in campaigns for censorship. Gavey's recent work is part of a much wider project on the 'cultural scaffolding of rape' (2005) in dominant discourses of (hetero)sex across media and public policy. She explicitly locates pornography within a wider cultural context of sexism and heteronormativity, and resists the polarization into a pro or anti position on pornography.

Indeed Hegarty (personal communication, 2013) suggests that psychology has a history of 'signal jamming' in relation to the polarized porn debates. The researchers whose work was drawn on for the Meese report publically challenged the misrepresentation of their findings and argued that the problems were in violent representations far more than they were in sexual representations (Donnerstein and Linz 1986). Whilst we may critique their research, such a position draws attention usefully to the cultural obsession with sexual materials. Similarly, Gavey's emphasis on wider societal rape culture and attention to the understandings of porn consumers and Hegarty's resistance to censorship and a non-pathologizing stance helpfully jam the signal, requiring something between or beyond simplistic pro and anti polarization.

Applied psychologies

Another important point about psychologists is that more of us work in applied arenas than do academics in other areas of the humanities and social scientists. That means that, in addition to conducting research and developing theories, many of us also work directly with clients in sex therapy, with imprisoned people in forensic settings, or with young people in education, for example. Arguably this means that there is greater potential, in our work, for holding on to the lived experience of those who engage with pornography, at the same time as researching and theorizing about pornography in a more academic way.

A good example of research that benefits from both the theoretical and research expertise of the psychologist, and their extensive clinical experience, is Christina Richards's work on the representations of trans* people in pornography (for example, Richards 2011). Richards brings together quantitative and qualitative analyses of the depictions of trans* people in mainstream pornographic magazines with clinical work on the sexualized constructions of gender that characterize some – but by no means all – trans* people's experiences of themselves. Such an analysis helps to illuminate the ways in which trans* women's sexualities, in particular, are located within wider circulating discourses about them. These may be drawn upon or resisted in various ways by the women themselves (as with all of our sexualities). Again such work is difficult to categorize into pro or anti camps: it criticizes the limited depictions of trans* in much porn, but it also considers potentially

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constraining *and* valuable reciprocal relationships between porn (and other sexual media) and trans* people's own lived experiences.

In my own work, I have found therapy with clients invaluable in relation to the idea of porn addiction. Whilst I completely endorse critical work that points to the grave flaws and limitations of the sex addiction discourse (for example, Joannides 2012), I also work one-to-one with people who struggle greatly with both the extent and content of the sexual materials with which they engage online. Such experiences have enabled me to carve therapeutic – and theoretical – paths between pro and anti positions; for example, in exploring (with clients and in my writing) what is opened up and closed down by engagements with various pornographies, as well as by acceptance or rejection of identities such as 'sex addict'. Specifically I have found ideas from Buddhist mindfulness to be helpful to clients in enabling them to notice the manner in which they engage with pornography and to challenge tendencies to categorize aspects of themselves as either 'good' (to be embraced) or 'bad' (to be eradicated) (see Barker 2013a). Feminist, existential and social constructionist perspectives on sexual ethics and consent have also proved useful both theoretically and pragmatically when working with clients. Such mindful and critical approaches have also informed my thinking on how we, in the area of porn studies, address the continued problem of polarization in our debates (see Barker 2013b, 2013c).

Obviously working in applied areas does not protect psychologists from producing problematic work. For example, I would argue that the input of a small number of educational psychologists, on behalf of the British Psychological Society, into the UK extreme pornography consultation was an example where applied experience did nothing to mitigate against an uncritical acceptance of a set of unfounded assumptions about the impact of pornography (for the correspondence within the British Psychological Society on this matter, see Backlash 2006). Also, experience on the ground is not unique to psychologists, and there are a number of excellent researchers and writers from other disciplines in porn studies whose engagement in youth work, for example, informs their perspectives in ways which are both intellectually illuminating and practically useful (for example, Bale 2011; Albury 2013).

Conclusions

It seems to me that perhaps there is a particular constellation of features of critical applied psychologies, at least, which may be of value to porn studies moving forward. This is the combination of an extensive grounding in quantitative research methods with a turn to more critical theories and awareness of historical context, and with an engagement with people on the ground. Strategically, policy-makers and practitioners generally place more weight on quantitative than qualitative research. Therefore it is immensely valuable to have pornography researchers who are both experts on the limitations of such research, and who are able to conduct more nuanced quantitative research, understanding – for example – the importance of employing valid and reliable measures, of using appropriate sampling methods, and of reporting effect sizes and power as well as statistical significance. The fundamental assumptions underlying much quantitative pornography research are flawed, and therefore it is important also to produce more critical work that studies both porn, and those engaging with porn, in ways which attend to their embodied lived

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experience and to the social world in which they are embedded. Finally, a continued engagement with people who are grappling with sex and sexuality in their everyday lives provides an important testing ground for research and theory, as well as keeping our attention – at least partially – on what is practically useful to those we are studying and theorizing about.

In relation to future possibilities for how psychology might inform porn studies, I would like to see critical and applied psychological expertise brought to bear on the polarized debates to which I have alluded throughout this article. Such tensions have dogged the area since the 'sex wars' of the 1980s, and the publication of this very journal has become caught up in battles between those who regard themselves as 'pro sex' and 'anti pornography' (Barker 2013b). Social constructionist psychologists employing conversation and discourse analyses have conducted in-depth studies on disputes in other arenas, and have developed innovative and exciting applied tools for mediation and conflict resolution on the basis of such research (for example, Gergen 1999; Stokoe 2013). I would like to see such detailed critical analysis of language brought to bear on the ongoing porn debates and I would be very intrigued at the potential of such applied methods to move us beyond polarized positions in this area, opening up the dialogue and enabling different conversations to occur.

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