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Is Pornography Harmful?  
Taking Sides # 18

Shellie's husband loves to look at porn. She doesn't mind because it seems to enhance their love life. About a year ago, her husband suggested they act out some of the scenarios that he read in the magazines. She agreed, and at first it was harmless and exciting, but as the year went on, her husband began reading more violent pornography and wanted Shellie to act them out. These scenarios were degrading to Shellie and she felt uncomfortable doing them, but her husband saw nothing wrong. Eventually, Shellie began to protest to these encounters, but the more she protested, the more her husband forced her to participate. Was her husband's exposure to pornography the cause of his insensitivity? If so, would his continued exposure lead him to commit more violent acts in the future?

Diana Russell would answer both of these questions "yes." She argues that pornography is a cause of rape, as well as other forms of sexual assault. Her theory resembles that of sociologist David Finkelhor's theory for the occurrence of child abuse. There has to be four conditions met in order for the offender to justify his action: 1. they have to want to abuse sexually, 2. internal inhibitions against acting it out must be undermined, 3. social inhibitions are undermined, and 4. the offender has to undermine or overcome the victim's capacity to resist him. Pornography can cause this by desensitizing the offender to the crime itself, as well as objectifying the woman to the man. Russell gives seven ways that porn can cause rape; however, many of the reasons are so closely related that I see no reason why they can't be grouped together. It is as if she were looking for quantity in her reasons to make it seem more valid.

Examples that validate her position are the Malamuth studies of 29 men and the creation of a predisposition for rape after exposure to violent sexual situations, and the Minneapolis pornography trials in 1983. The Malamuth study showed that after exposure to the violent rape, the men created more violent sexual fantasies when asked to arouse themselves. The nonviolent group was normal and with normal fantasies. In the Minneapolis porn trials, several women testified of men who had made comments about their desire to act out scenarios they read in magazines. Some testified that the longer it went on the more violent the situations became. Several of the women were sexually assaulted as a result of the men's beliefs that they enjoyed the struggle. One problem with her evidence is that none of it comes from studies done on actual rapists or sex offenders. Is it possible that sex offenders develop their misbehavior through other means and not pornography?

The answer according to Michael Seto et al would be yes. Taking a logical approach, Seto discusses the fact that the number of rapes is going up every year, and that the number is widely unreported to officials. If the pornography industry is at an all time high, shouldn't more people be out committing violent sexual acts? Seto and Russell neither one directly say that pornography causes rape, rather they suggest that pornography could be a gateway for some violent acts. However, Seto presents evidence that suggests that actual sex offenders do not watch a lot of pornography. In one study, the author showed that sex offenders reported a less frequent exposure to porn than non sex offenders. In another study, Carter and associates reported that child molesters used more porn than rapists and were more likely to incorporate it into their offending. This evidence doesn't point to direct causality, but a correlation could be noticed. Overall, studies done on both sex offenders and non sex offenders showed no difference

in their sexual attitudes when exposed to violent sex scripts. There was no way to distinguish between the two, and therefore there was no way to say that porn causes rape.

While no direct causal relationship between porn and aggression has been found, there is no doubt that there is a strong correlation. At the same time, porn cannot be a predictor of sexual misconduct or assault because so many normal people observe porn in a normal healthy setting. If a more direct causal relationship is to be found, more research is going to have to be done on the offenders, and not people volunteering for a sex experiment. Both authors had a good argument, but neither completely contradicted each other. Rather each author took a stand that was similar to the other; their case was just presented a little different. I believe that Seto had the stronger argument, but I think that more research should be done before I pick a side to stick with.

Shellie's husband had a normal response. His actions are normal for men who look at porn, and although his actions have become increasingly violent, it does not mean that it is a predictor for illegal activity. If Shellie's husband were to stop looking at porn for a while his sensitivity would return and the violent scenarios would stop. While sexual assault is not right, there is nothing threatening about Shellie and her husband getting ideas from porn or just looking at porn. When the ideas turn degrading and violent is where the line is crossed between ok and dangerous.