

Pornography's Effects: The Need for Solid Evidence

A Review Essay of *Everyday Pornography*, edited by Karen Boyle (New York: Routledge, 2010) and *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*, by Gail Dines (Boston: Beacon, 2010)

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In an earlier article in this journal, I critiqued a particular theoretical approach to prostitution, what I call the “oppression paradigm” (Weitzer, 2005; see also Weitzer, 2010). The present review extends this critique to some recent books on pornography, both of which are grounded in the oppression paradigm—a perspective that depicts all types of sex work as exploitative, violent, and perpetuating gender inequality. This paradigm does not hold that exploitation and violence are variables—present in varying degrees or absent in some kinds of sexual commerce—but are instead constants central to the very definition of prostitution, pornography, and stripping. I have argued that those who adopt the oppression paradigm substitute ideology for rigorous empirical analysis and that their one-dimensional arguments are contradicted by a wealth of social science data that shows sex work to be much more variegated structurally and experientially (Weitzer, 2009).

The books under review make no pretense of being fair and balanced analyses of pornography. Several of the authors are self-described anti-porn activists and, given their strong political views on the subject, it is no surprise that they are critical of pornography, say nothing positive about it, and offer sweeping generalizations to condemn it. The lack of even the appearance of objectivity is revealed by the editor of *Everyday Pornography*,

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Karen Boyle, who writes: “my anti-porn politics drive what I think are the significant questions to be asked about/of pornography. These politics shape how I define pornography” (p. 12). Much of the book reads like a call-to-action: “Precisely because porn has taken over the culture to such an extent it’s getting to the point where a lot of people have had enough” (p. 21). One of the contributors, Rebecca Whisnant, calls on male porn consumers to reject porn and “reclaim their own humanity” (p. 132).

The book’s title, *Everyday Pornography*, is meant to convey the idea that the porn described in the book is utterly mainstream, not extreme fringe material. But this is simply an assertion by the editor; readers have no way of knowing if the book indeed reflects representations in mainstream pornography or if, instead, worst cases have been cherry picked for discussion. Boyle complicates the matter by her claim that “the ‘extreme’ [has] become increasingly mainstream” (p. 8). Nowhere are “mainstream” and “extreme” defined.

With the exception of two chapters (by Michael Flood and Susanna Paasonen), nothing positive is said about porn in the book. Missing from the remainder of the book is any notion that pornography might contribute to the sex education of some or many viewers or that it might lead to mutually pleasurable sexual experiences for male and female viewers alike. Flood reviews studies that find that porn can have educational and even “healthy” effects on viewers in addition to studies that point to negative effects. Paasonen states that porn is “more diverse than ever,” notes that some porn challenges rather than reproduces conventional power relations, calls for a “nuanced and rigorous analysis,” and exhorts other writers to eschew “predetermined and categorical positions of for or against” porn (pp. 74, 75). But the book’s other authors endorse none of Paasonen’s valid points. Instead, porn is portrayed monolithically and negatively. As Gail Dines declares, “Porn tells men that they have no sexual boundaries, morality, or compassion for women. It strips them of their humanity” (p. 23). And Rebecca Whisnant claims that “hostile and humiliating acts against women are commonplace” in mainstream porn, where “aggression against women is the rule rather than the exception” (pp. 114, 115). Whisnant bases these sweeping indictments on her review of online postings by individuals who discuss porn. She acknowledges that their comments may not be representative of porn consumers, but she nevertheless treats what they say as “rich” data (p. 117). After quoting some of the entries, she concludes that the “contemporary pornography industry is a wasteland of lost and damaged humanity” (p. 132). Boyle ends the book by advising analysts to “be wary of generalizing about ‘pornography’ by analyzing its fringes” (p. 210) but that is exactly what some of the contributors appear to be guilty of.

For Robert Jensen, porn is nothing short of apocalyptic; his chapter is entitled, “Pornography is What the End of the World Looks Like.” What this means is that “pornography demands that men abandon empathy” for the female performers and “a world without empathy is a world without hope” (p. 112). No evidence is provided that male viewers do not empathize with the women in porn, but Jensen insists that they simply *cannot* empathize and continue to watch porn: “Men would not be able to be aroused by such material if they routinely empathized with the female performers” (p. 112). Like Jensen’s other writings (1996), this chapter revolves around his personal feelings rather than any genuine data analysis: “every year my sense of despair deepens over the direction in which pornography

and our pornographic culture are heading” (p. 106). In an earlier piece, Jensen expressly dismissed empirical research (“instead of being paralyzed by the limitations of social science” [Jensen, 1997, p. 5]) in favor of relying on anecdotal testimonials about porn, for which others have criticized him (Hubbell, 2009).

In her chapter, Ana Bridges reviews some of the literature on the content of porn videos and then very briefly presents some of her own findings that suggest that some types of aggression are not unusual. In her sample of 304 scenes in 50 top-selling videos, extreme violence (torturing, punching, kicking, mutilating, use of weapons) was either rare or non-existent, whereas the “more mild and playful” acts (pinching, biting, slapping, spanking, hair pulling) were detected more often. Bridges argues that if these acts appear consensual and playful (only 12% of the acts were coded nonconsensual) they might send the message that people like such treatment and, for her, this is a problem in itself because it “may result in greater intimacy difficulties” for viewers or, worse, that they “may expect that these behaviors *should* feel erotic and arousing” (p. 47). This is an intriguing argument but seems to reflect Bridges’ value judgments regarding proper and harmful sexual behavior. And perhaps the most important finding, underplayed by Bridges, was that the frequency of the serious acts of aggression was *virtually identical* to what was reported a decade earlier in a study by Barron and Kimmel (2000). This finding challenges the claim made by some writers that porn has become increasingly violent in recent years. Judging from these two studies, depictions of the most extreme types of aggression have not increased at all.

A chapter by Meagan Tyler examines a unique source of information on the content of porn videos: the Editor’s Choice reviews of videos published in the industry’s premier magazine, *Adult Video News*. Tyler was interested in how highly regarded films are described to those working within the industry itself, and she was particularly interested in the issue of violence against women. She concludes that “extreme and violent pornography is permeating the industry” (p. 57), but a close examination of her data shows that this indictment is not supported. Of the 98 reviews she analyzed, the vast majority contained *no* descriptions of violence (one quarter [$N = 24$] did so). And, even more telling, the most serious types of violence were, on the whole, absent from these videos. *None* of the scenes described in the reviews involved torture, threats with a weapon, attempted or completed murder, dismemberment, kicking, or biting. There was only one scene involving hitting, mutilation, or use of a weapon; two involving kidnapping; and five involving fighting or a beating. The less serious and perhaps consensual acts of bondage, slapping, sadomasochism, spanking, and verbal aggression registered between three and nine scenes. Thus, not only were most of the videos devoid of any descriptions of violence but (just like Bridges’ findings) most of the violence that was described comprised the least serious types. Tyler’s summary of her findings, quoted above, is therefore rather disingenuous.

This book is lacking in several key areas. First, some of the chapters (not described here) are either quite uninteresting or filled with so much jargon as to be unreadable (e.g., a chapter by Jennifer Johnson). Second, solid original data are scarce, and anecdotes are abundant. Little secondary data are discussed as well. Third, there is an underlying assumption that viewing porn affects both attitudes and behavior, but no convincing supporting evidence is offered. Fourth, many claims are made *about* porn performers and consumers,

but these claims are superimposed on them by the writers. Consumers are rarely quoted, but when they are it is almost always negatively, and the voices of porn performers are entirely missing in the book. Boyle essentially dismisses the voices of performers because, she says, paying attention to them would “let men off the hook” (p. 205). For an inside view of the industry and those who work in it, readers would need to consult other sources, such as Sharon Abbott (2010), Jill Bakehorn (2010), Lynn Comella (2010), and Chauntelle Tibbals (2011)—researchers who conducted interviews with actors and directors and/or observations at film production settings and industry events.

Gail Dines is an academic and well-known antiporn activist. For her, pornography is dangerous and has far-reaching effects on society: “As long as we have porn, [women] will never be seen as full human beings deserving of all the rights that men have” (p. 165). Her book, *Pornland*, echoes much of Boyle’s book in its arguments. What are Dines’ core claims?

1. Porn is becoming steadily mainstreamed, “infiltrating” the wider culture. This has happened to such an extent that we are now living in the midst of a “porn culture.” “Porn is now so deeply embedded in our culture that it has become synonymous with sex” (p. x). Dines’ examples of this mainstreaming include young girls’ sexy attire, women’s genital waxing (which began in porn), magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim*, music videos adorned with scantily clad women, shows such as *Sex in the City*, websites such as *Girls Gone Wild*, and “hookup sex” between young people which “is a lot like porn sex” (p. 114). There is no doubt that Western culture has grown increasingly sexualized in the past 20 years (Attwood, 2006). But it is a separate question (a) whether this trend is a bad thing, as Dines thinks it is, and (b) the extent to which pornography is responsible for this broader sexualization, a claim that is only sketchily documented in the book.

2. Dines imagines that there is a distinct category of “porn sex.” Porn sex is “debased, dehumanized, formulaic, and generic” (p. x). It differs from proper sex, which she defines as involving “empathy, tenderness, caring, affection” and “love, respect, or connection to another human being” (pp. xxiv, xi).

3. Porn is almost universally “degrading,” “dehumanizing,” and violent, with women as victims and men as perpetrators. “In porn the man makes hate to the woman, as each sex act is designed to deliver the maximum amount of degradation” (p. xxiv). Women in porn do not experience pleasure, “rarely” receive oral sex, lack agency, and are simply vehicles for men’s satisfaction (p. xxiii).

4. Pornography itself has become increasingly extreme: “what used to be considered hard-core is now mainstream pornography” (p. xvii). “Body-punishing” sex is now the norm, meaning that it typically involves very rough sex harmful to women’s bodies.

5. The slippery slope: Men who watch porn become “desensitized” and seek ever more extreme porn to satisfy themselves. Dines declares that “users need to eventually seek out more extreme acts as a way to keep them interested and stimulated . . . heightening the level of degradation is what keeps men interested in and aroused by porn” (p. 68). Inevitably, it seems, men “end up masturbating to images that had previously disgusted them,” including bondage, violence, and child porn (pp. 93, 94).

6. Porn has strong, unequivocal effects on viewers: Viewers are passive recipients who do not actively engage with and interpret messages and meanings. Porn “leaves little room

for multiple interpretations” (p. 86), something media scholars would find outlandish. Dines rejects the notion that viewers are “sophisticated consumers who enjoy porn for the playful fantasy it is” (p. 82). This is a fiction created by the porn industry. It is “fantastical thinking that men can masturbate to porn images and walk away from them untouched by the misogyny” (p. 78). “The stories seep into the very core of their sexual identity” (p. xxii); “the ability to keep porn women separate from the women they date is eroded” (p. 67); men are “trained by the porn culture to see sex as disconnected from intimacy” (p. 92); and “porn trains men to become desensitized to women’s pain” (p. 74). The porn industry is depicted as “predatory,” preying on men and “hijacking” their sexuality (pp. xi, xii).

The Evidence

To evaluate these claims, it is crucial to ask if there is supporting evidence. Like Boyle’s book, Dines’ is evidence-thin. Although Dines cites a handful of academic studies, virtually the entire book is based on anecdotal information: (a) quotations from some men and women who attend Dines’ lectures; (b) her descriptions of some porn websites; (c) statements from a handful of actors and producers whom Dines met at the annual Adult Expo convention in Las Vegas; and (d) her accounts of selected scenes in pornographic videos. How does Dines use this impressionistic material and what alternative sources would be superior?

First, Dines did not conduct a systematic and rigorous review of porn websites or scenes, nor does she cite studies that do so. Neither are readers told how many websites or scenes she examined, nor how they were selected. Did she view 20 scenes or 2,000? She claims that they were representative—“these images are all too representative of what is out there on the Internet and in mass-produced movies” (p. xxi)—but we have no basis for believing that they were. With so much porn available today on the Internet and elsewhere, how could we ever construct a random sample from this universe to reach generalizable conclusions?

Older content analyses found that most pornography in videos and magazines was nonviolent (Scott & Cuvelier, 1987, 1993), and that the most sexually explicit or hardcore videos contained the least violence and the most reciprocal, egalitarian behavior between the actors (Palys, 1986). It is an open question how much violence exists in contemporary, Internet porn, but there is no doubt that today’s porn is much more varied than what Dines claims.

Second, grand generalizations are made throughout the book. Dines frequently refers to “men,” “women,” the “porn industry,” “fans,” and “performers” as monolithic categories. Also troubling is the jarring use of terms such as “never,” “always,” “usually,” and “most.” Similarly, nowhere does she define some frequently used terms: “degrading,” “dehumanizing,” or “empathy.” She does give examples of acts that she considers inherently degrading; these include anal sex, ejaculation on a woman’s body, two or more men having sex with one woman, and multiorifice intercourse. Whether these acts are indeed perceived as degrading by viewers and actors does not figure into Dines’ argument. They are simply defined as perverted by fiat.

Third, nothing is said about gay male porn, lesbian porn, alternative porn, porn made by women—which, together, constitute a sizeable share of the market. A small but growing literature on these genres shatters Dines' sweeping claims about "porn" (see Bakehorn, 2010; Collins, 1998; DeVoss, 2002; Stychin, 1992; Thomas, 2010; Tucker, 1991). The proliferation of alternative genres renders any generalizations about "porn" ludicrous. But even if we ignore these genres and focus exclusively on mainstream, heterosexual porn, most of Dines' claims ring hollow. Some of the most popular sites (xvideos.com, redtube.com, pornube.com, youporn.com) contain a very wide range of content and are by no means restricted to the images that Dines claims are the norm. A cursory examination of these sites shows that it is quite common for men to provide oral sex to women (contradicting Dines). To claim that "we never see any kissing or touching in porn" (64) is simply false. To claim that all or most women in porn are devoid of agency, that they derive no pleasure during the sex acts, and that "body-punishing" sex is pervasive in porn are simply unsupported assertions.

Fourth, Dines acknowledges that there is very little data on actual porn consumers—those who watch porn in the real world (vs. in laboratory experiments)—but then proceeds to make many far-reaching claims about them. She writes that the "men who speak to me are not that different from the general population of men who use pornography," but her source for the latter is another antiporn writer, journalist Pamela Paul (p. 89). Dines did not conduct a survey or in-depth interviews with a sample (let alone a representative sample) of consumers. A particularly troubling aspect of the book is her quotations from men and women who have spoken to her during and after her lectures. Blocks of sentences are quoted verbatim, bracketed by quotation marks, without indicating how these statements were recorded. How can readers have confidence that these statements were actually made by individuals with whom she had conversations? Was Dines somehow able to remember verbatim student statements consisting of two to four sentences at a time?

Few researchers have investigated the uses and meanings of pornography for consumers in the real world. The neglect of actual consumers (as opposed to lab participants) is remarkable in light of the sweeping claims about pornography's impact on them. Still, a handful of studies has shown that men and women decode and engage with sexually explicit materials in a wide variety of ways, which is exactly what media experts would predict. McKee (2006) found that some viewers prefer to see idealized bodies whereas others favor realistic bodies; some like plots and genuine "chemistry" between the actors whereas others want unadulterated sex ("gonzo"); some believe women hold the power in porn sex whereas others take the opposite view.

Compared to men, women are less likely to seek out pornography, consume less of it, are attracted to a smaller range of representations, and are more critical of porn. Many women dislike the portrayal of women in porn and are concerned that men might compare them unfavorably to models and actors (Boynton, 1999), yet other women find pornography to be entertaining, educational, or sexually stimulating (Attwood, 2005; Ciclitira, 2002). It is certainly not unusual for female consumers to view porn positively, and this is more likely for younger adults than older generations. In a unique survey of 688 Danish women and men aged 18-30, men reported significantly more positive effects of porn consumption

than women, but few women and men reported negative effects. Most perceived positive effects on their sex lives, attitudes toward sex, sexual knowledge, and the overall quality of their lives. Moreover, for both men and women, the higher amount of pornography consumed, the greater the perceived positive effects of exposure to porn (Hald & Malamuth, 2008). If these self-perceptions are valid, the researchers suggest that “pornography’s impact is relatively positive and that media and popular books’ reports of highly negative effects on consumers are exaggerated or unfounded” (Hald & Malamuth, 2008, p. 622).

For some men, there is no question that exposure reinforces callous or sexist views of women, whereas others interpret and experience it in an opposite way. A major study, based on in-depth interviews with 150 men, found that most of them understood porn as being about fun, beauty, women’s pleasure, and female assertiveness and power (Loftus, 2002). They did not like depictions of domination or aggression against women and were “specifically turned off by such behavior on the rare occasions they see it in pornography, and most haven’t even seen any” (Loftus, 2002, p. xii). Loftus concluded that it is “important to male viewers that the women really do seem to be enjoying themselves, that they are utterly involved in the sex for their own pleasure too, and not just serving the interests of the male actors and onlookers” (Loftus, 2002, p. 249). They also recognized porn as a fantasy world quite different from the real world in terms of people’s behavior and appearance (Loftus, 2002, pp. 137-147). Rather than emulating the men in pornography, the men interviewed by Loftus “usually did not like the men they saw in porn” and saw them as “unsuitable models for behavior” (Loftus, 2002, p. 61). And in stark contrast to the slippery slope argument, these men “have not sought ever more vivid, kinky, and violent pornography, but have either stuck with what they liked from the first, investigated wilder content and returned to what they preferred, or lost interest altogether” (Loftus, 2002, p. xii). Most of these men did not gravitate toward increasingly extreme representations. The men in the Loftus sample were largely contacted via the Internet and thus may be unrepresentative of the larger population, but the findings are consistent with some other inquiries (Klein, 2006; McKee, 2006). In short, the existing empirical evidence on real-world consumers contradicts Dines’ sweeping generalizations about them.

For readers of this journal, the question of whether porn contributes to violence against women is particularly salient. The books under review generally take the position that porn does lead to both attitudes supportive of aggression and actual violence, although they occasionally acknowledge that the matter is complicated. Several authors in the Boyle collection agree with Dines that “there is a link between porn consumption and violence against women” (p. 95). This is a long-standing debate that includes other media as well (e.g., rap music, video games). In laboratory experiments, the most consistent finding is that exposure to violent images, whether pornographic or not, tends to increase participants’ levels of aggression, whereas nonviolent porn does not have this effect (Bauserman, 1996; Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987). But there are serious problems with such studies because they rely on small, convenience samples of volunteers instead of representative samples and because of the artificiality of the (laboratory) settings in which they are conducted, quite unlike the viewers’ natural environment. Therefore, the “poor analogues provided

by laboratory research may tell us little or nothing about the relation of pornography and aggression in the real world” (Fisher & Barak, 1991, p. 77).

Similar evidentiary problems bedevil macrolevel, quantitative studies that purport to measure porn’s effects on the real-world treatment of women. These studies examine whether the availability of porn in a particular geographic area correlates with rates of violence against women—that is, (a) whether places with high availability of pornography (magazines, adult theaters, video rentals) have higher rates of sex crime than places where pornography is less available, or (b) whether increased availability over time in a particular region increases rates of sexual offenses. A comprehensive review of the literature concluded that macrolevel associations between pornography and sexual aggression were mixed: Some studies find a relationship between availability and reported sex offending, whereas other research documents a *decline* in sexual offenses with increased availability of pornography (Bauserman, 1996). But all such studies are inherently problematic because of their inability to control for all potentially relevant influences on male behavior. There is simply no way to confidently conclude that pornography is responsible for rates of violence, particularly when it is unknown whether those who commit violence have viewed porn and, even if they have done so, whether porn or some other factor is the cause.

The larger point is that it is virtually impossible to isolate the effects of the media in the context of other influences, including individuals’ demographic backgrounds and personality characteristics, socialization by family and peer groups, wider cultural influences, and so forth. A comprehensive literature review concluded that research has not demonstrated a link between media images—of any kind—and audience behavior. At best, media effects are “weak and affect only a small percentage of viewers” (Felson, 1996, p. 123). What matters most is whether a person is socially predisposed to act, or “primed,” in a certain way—with preexisting views reinforced by or resonating with new stimuli (Donnerstern & Linz, 1995). Moreover, the causal direction may be the opposite of the one typically asserted (i.e., exposure to porn leads to aggression), as indicated in research that finds that men who score high on sexual aggression are more likely to seek out sexually violent media and, in turn, to have their preexisting views reinforced by the latter (Bogaert, Woodard, & Hafer, 1999; Malamuth & Check, 1983). In short, media scholars would find the far-reaching claims of Dines and some of the contributors to Boyle’s book quite astounding.

Conclusion

Whatever one’s personal views of porn, for those who wish to know more about its content and the experiences of viewers and performers alike, the books under review offer little useful, evidence-based information. Overall, these books present an extremely biased picture of pornography that stands in stark contrast to sound scholarly research.

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Bio

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