

When Words Are Not Enough

The Search for the Effect of Pornography on Abused Women

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Using data collected from 271 women participating in a battered women's program, this study examines whether pornography use increases the probability that a battered woman will be sexually abused by her partner. The analysis also examines whether individual and certain disinhibitory factors, such as alcohol use, mediate or exacerbate the effects of pornography on sexual violence. Results of a logistic regression indicate that pornography use significantly increases a battered woman's odds of being sexually abused. Compared to batterers who do not use pornography and alcohol, the combination of alcohol and pornography does increase the odds of sexual abuse.

Keywords: *domestic violence; pornography; sexual abuse*

Although sexual abuse occurs frequently in physically abusive relationships—more than 50% of physically abused women have been sexually abused by their partners (Pence & Paymar, 1993)—the majority of studies on intimate violence do not include sexual abuse as a separate category of analysis. Sexual abuse is defined as a facet of physical abuse or as a separate problem addressed in studies on rape and sexual violence. As Mahoney and Williams (1998) pointed out, separate bodies of research on spousal violence and sexual assault exist with distinct theories, methodologies, and research objectives. The majority of women's shelters do not even ask their clients about sexual abuse (Russell, 1990) despite its serious emotional and behavioral effects on battered women. For example, compared to women who have been physically abused only, women who have been sexually abused are more likely to have experienced more severe physical violence (Bowker, 1983; Hanneke & Shields, 1985; Shields & Hanneke,

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1983), to have lower self-esteem, to be at greater risk of being murdered or murdering their abusers, to be more likely to have been beaten during pregnancy, to have more mental and physical health problems (Bergen, 1996; Campbell, 1989), and to perceive their assaults as having more negative long-term effects than sexual assaults by strangers (Russell, 1990). Despite the prevalence of sexual violence and its effects on women, there is a paucity of research that investigates the co-occurrence of multiple forms of violence against women (National Research Council, 1996).

As a result of the particular eclipsing of battered women's sexual abuse, studies of intimate violence do not critically examine factors, such as pornography use, that may increase the likelihood of being sexually abused. Because sexually aggressive behavior is correlated with hostility toward women and an acceptance of interpersonal violence (Einsiedel, 1993)—factors associated with battering—the effects of pornography on battered women may be particularly pronounced. Malamuth (1985) argued that individuals with higher inclinations to be aggressive toward women may be more influenced by media portrayals of violence against women. The images of sex and violence depicted in pornography may act as cues that are more likely to evoke an aggressive response when viewed by angered men (Berkowitz, 1984; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981). Based on a meta-analysis of previous research and statistical findings from a large representative sample, Malamuth, Addison, and Koss (2000) reported a reliable association between frequent pornography use and sexually aggressive behavior, particularly for aggressive men.

Given the effects of pornography on hostile men, batterers may be particularly influenced by the images depicted in pornography. Sommers and Check (1987) found in their study of battered and nonbattered women that battered women are at greater risk of harm from pornography than nonbattered women. Thirty-nine percent of battered women compared to 3% of nonbattered women were upset by requests to enact pornography. Similarly, Bergen (1998) found in her study of wife rape that one third of the women in her sample reported that their partners used pornography, and pornography use was associated with the most sadistic rapes.

This study examines whether pornography use increases the odds that a battered woman will be sexually abused. I also

examine whether alcohol abuse, a socially constructed disinhibitor in American culture, intensifies the effects of pornography on sexual abuse.

PORNOGRAPHY AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The mass media play an important role in shaping and reflecting cultural images and beliefs. Pornography is one form of media indicative of a cultural climate conducive to violence against women. Some feminists object to the degrading and dehumanizing images of women portrayed by pornography and the fusion of violence with sex (Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1989; Russell, 1990; Stoltenberg, 1993). Russo (1998) argued that the feminist critique of pornography is not based on an objection to sexual activity and its representation but to the pervasive sexism and racism in pornography, specifically its eroticization of inequality. MacKinnon (1989) contended that violent pornography depicts women as things for sexual use and socializes its consumers to desperately want women who desire cruelty and dehumanization. In pornography, women are to be violated and taken. The connection of violence with sex normalizes force as part of heterosexual relations; women enjoy sexual violence. Rape myths, common in pornography, depict women's resistance as a prelude to what women want: to be taken with force.

Other feminists maintain that pornography resides in the sphere of representation separate from material reality and social structure. Moreover, it offers a vital arena for sexual expression, particularly those forms of expression that deviate from hegemonic forms of sexuality.

At issue in the debate over pornography is whether pornography "causes" violent behavior. As Cameron and Frazer (2000) asked, "Can we, in other words, establish a firm relationship between the sphere of representation where pornography is located and the sphere of action in which specific individuals harm other individuals" (p. 240)? Since the 1970 Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, which concluded that there was no evidence that pornography increased violence against women, a flurry of studies, using a variety of data sources, has examined the

relationship between pornography and sexual violence against women. The strongest and most often cited evidence of harm comes from experimental studies on college-age men. These studies indicate that exposure to violent pornography increases sexual aggression toward women and intensifies beliefs in rape myths (Allen, Emmers, Gebhardt, & Giery, 1995; Demare, Briere, & Lips, 1988; Donnerstein, 1984; Donnerstein & Linz, 1986; Malamuth & Check, 1981). In a meta-analysis of 33 studies using experimental designs, Allen, D'Alessio, and Brezgel (1995) concluded that exposure to violent and nonviolent pornography increased both attitudes supporting sexual aggression, referred to as rape myths, and behavioral aggression.

Crossman's (1995) research on the relationship between various degrees of sexual aggression and individual characteristics found that pornography use was the strongest correlate of sexual aggression. Furthermore, Crossman's findings suggest that the more pornography used and the more violent the content, the more likely the men were to be involved in coercive sex.

In an effort to address issues of causality, researchers have attempted to isolate the direct effects of pornography. Fewer studies have examined the conditions in which pornography has an effect on behavior and attitudes. Russell (1993) argued that pornography increases the likelihood that men will be sexually aggressive by pairing sexually arousing stimuli with portrayals of rape, by increasing men's rape fantasies, and by sexualizing dominance and submission. Russell warned, however, against notions of simple causation. She argued that researchers need to move away from models that posit simple causal relationships in order to understand the relationship between pornography and sexual violence. The influence of pornography is filtered through a complex interaction of individual and situational factors, which may intensify the effects, reinforce them, or diminish them. Malamuth et al. (2000) pointed out that one of the problems with previous research has been a reliance on overly simplistic models that fail to consider the import of individual and cultural differences as moderators of media influence.

The effects of pornography on sexual violence may be particularly pronounced under certain conditions. It may be that other factors in combination with pornography use act in a synergistic manner affecting the probability of certain outcomes. Russell

(1993) contended that because not all men who view pornography are sexually aggressive toward women, certain individual and situational factors may exacerbate or mediate pornography's effects.

Some studies suggest that an individual's personality characteristics and predispositions (e.g., hostile) and the emotional state of the person (e.g., angered) are of particular relevance. Men scoring high on self-reported measures of aggression and hostility exhibit the strongest negative effects of exposure. Some research suggests that men who are aggressive are more likely to be influenced by pornography. Sexual criminals were more aroused than noncriminals by pornography. Following exposure to pornography, criminals were more likely than noncriminals to engage in some form of sexual activity (Allen, Emmers, et al., 1995).

Malamuth and Briere (1986) maintained that aggressive men are more likely to be influenced by pornography when disinhibiting situational factors are present. It would follow from their argument that alcohol, a socially defined disinhibitor in American culture, would intensify the effects of pornography on aggressive men. Scully (1990) noted that in a culture that displays a belief in disinhibition, men use alcohol as an excuse for sexually violent behavior.

The link between alcohol consumption and sexual violence is well established (Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, 2001). Ullman, Karabatsos, and Koss (1999) found offender drinking is associated with more aggression and greater sexual victimization. Alcohol may reduce internal inhibitions against translating pornography into sexual violence against women. Norris and Kerr's (1993) findings showed that among male subjects, alcohol consumption was associated with the increased likelihood of behaving like the male character in a violent pornographic study. Moreover, in a study of undergraduate men, Boeringer (1994) found that the group exposed to violent pornography was 6 times more likely to report rape behavior than the low-exposure group. Drug and alcohol use was strongly correlated with the use of all types of pornography.

To assess whether the effects of pornography are more pronounced under certain conditions, this study examines the effects of the combination of alcohol abuse and pornography use on the odds of being sexually abused.

METHOD

From 1988 to 1991 a New York program for battered women collected information from 271 women, most of whom were seeking shelter from their abusers. On entering the program, the women were asked by counselors about the nature and frequency of their abuse, alcohol usage of their abuser, intergenerational transmission of violence, pornography use by the abuser, requests for orders of protection, and if they had left their abuser in the past.

The majority of women, 77% ($n = 154$), were 35 years of age or younger. Forty-two percent of the women were Black, 27% were Hispanic, and 23% were White. Sixty-two percent of the women were married. Forty-two percent of the women had completed some college. Forty-one percent of the respondents were unemployed. The median income of employed women was \$13,000. Half of the women had been sexually abused by their partners.

VARIABLES

The dependent variable, sexual abuse, is measured by the question, "Were you sexually abused?" A dichotomous variable was created, in which 1 = yes, 0 = no. Pornography use is measured by the question "Does the abuser use pornography?" Responses were coded 1 = yes, 0 = no. Respondents were also asked if the pornography affected the abuse. Unfortunately, because of the small number of respondents, I was unable to use this measure. The women were also asked if their batterer abused alcohol. Responses were coded 1 = yes, 0 = no.

A variable was created that included various combinations of pornography use and alcohol abuse by the batterer: 1 = pornography use and no alcohol, 2 = alcohol abuse but no pornography use, 3 = pornography use and alcohol abuse, and 4 = no pornography use and no alcohol abuse. Three indicator variables were created that compared pornography use and alcohol abuse to the reference group, no pornography use and no alcohol abuse.

Several additional measures believed to increase the odds of sexual abuse were included in the analysis: childhood abuse, parental abuse, and military service. The women were asked if they were abused as a child and if they observed abusive behavior

between their parents (1 = yes, 0 = no). Research on vulnerability shows that factors relating to family history, such as violence in the family of origin, increase women's risk of sexual assault in adulthood (Bachar & Koss, 2001). For women, witnessing abuse between parents is associated with an increased risk of victimization by a male partner. The majority of women in Peacock's (1998) study of marital rape survivors had a history of prior childhood abuse. In this analysis, measures of the woman's childhood experiences of violence are hypothesized to increase the probability that the respondent will be sexually abused. Unfortunately, measures of abuse in the batterer's family are not included in the analysis because of missing data; the woman often did not know about her abuser's family history.

An indicator variable, military service (1 = yes, 0 = no), measures whether men who have served in the armed forces are more sexually aggressive than other men. The military embraces a conception of masculinity that emphasizes male dominance and physical aggressiveness, two traits associated with violence against women. This form of particularly aggressive male socialization may spill over into interpersonal relationships with women. Baron and Straus (1989) argued that in environments that approve of the use of physical violence to acquire socially accepted goals, there is an increased risk that persons will generalize and legitimize the use of force in other spheres of life. Some studies have found higher rates of domestic violence in military populations than civilian populations (Neidig, 1985). Moreover, recent details of sexual abuse in the military, for example, Tailhook, suggest that the aggressive male socialization provided by the military may increase sexual violence against women.

Length of the abusive relationship is hypothesized to increase the odds of sexual abuse. Studies show that violence escalates over time (Browne, 1987; Frieze & Browne, 1989; Walker, 1984). As the time at risk increases, the odds of sexual abuse also increase (Pagelow, 1988). Sommers and Check (1987) found that more severely battered women were asked to enact pornography at a higher rate than less severely beaten women.

Length of the abusive relationship is measured in years: 1 = 0-1 months, 2 = 2-6 months, 3 = 7-11 months, 4 = 1-3 years, 5 = 4-6 years, 6 = 7-10 years, 7 = 11-13 years, 8 = 14-16 years, 9 = 17-20 years, 10 = 20+ years. Race was included in the analysis as a

control. Some research has shown that women of color have higher rates of intimate violence (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Race is measured by a series of indicator variables that contrast Latina, African American, and Asian women with White women.

This analysis uses logistic regression to assess the effects of pornography use on the probability of being sexually abused. Logistic regression avoids assumptions of linearity, thus making it an appropriate statistical technique for analyzing dichotomous dependent variables.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the variables included in the analysis. As shown in the table, 46% of the women reported that they had been sexually abused. Forty percent of the women were abused as children; 45% observed spousal abuse between parents. On average, the women were abused between 1 and 3 years. Thirty-two percent of the women were Latina, 41% were African American, 20% were White, and 7% were Asian.

Nineteen percent of the abusers had served in the military. Forty-five percent of the men were identified by the women as having an alcohol problem. Thirty percent of the abusers reportedly used pornography.

Table 2 presents the results of the logistic regressions. Four models were examined using the occurrence of sexual abuse as the outcome variable. Model 1 examines the main effects of pornography use on sexual abuse. As shown in the table, pornography use significantly increases the odds of being sexually abused. For women whose abusers use pornography, the odds of being sexually abused are increased by a factor of 1.9. The other variable in the model that increases the odds of sexual abuse is abuse between the respondent's parents. Women who observed abuse between their parents are significantly more likely to be sexually abused than women with no history of abuse between parents. Quite unexpectedly, military service significantly decreases the odds of sexual abuse. Men who have served in the military are less likely to sexually abuse their partners than non-military men.

Model 2 examines the effects of alcohol abuse on sexual abuse. Alcohol abuse increases battered women's odds of being sexually

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations

	M	SD
Sexual abuse	0.46	0.49
Respondent abused as child	0.40	0.49
Abuse between parents	0.45	0.49
Military service	0.19	0.39
Length of abuse	4.83	1.47
Alcohol abuse	0.45	0.49
Pornography use	0.30	0.45
Race (Latina)	0.32	0.46
Race (African American)	0.41	0.49
Race (Asian)	0.07	0.26

TABLE 2
Results of Logistic Regression Predicting Sexual Abuse

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coefficient	Exp(B)	Coefficient	Exp(B)
Abused as child ^a	0.639	1.894	0.828*	2.290
Parental abuse ^a	1.046**	2.846	0.991**	2.639
Length of abuse	0.219	1.245	0.235*	1.265
Latina ^b	-0.690	0.501	-0.452	0.636
African American ^b	-0.627	0.534	-0.415	0.660
Asian ^b	0.225	1.253	0.100	1.105
Military service ^a	-0.899*	0.407	-0.899*	0.411
Pornography use ^a	0.673*	1.960	—	—
Alcohol abuse ^a	—	—	0.717*	2.049
Only pornography, no alcohol ^c				
Only alcohol, no pornography ^c				
Alcohol and pornography ^c				
Constant	-1.432		-1.814**	
-2 log likelihood	233.20		229.90	
Percentage correct	68.00		68.7	
Cases without missing data	200		201	

a. Reference group = no.

b. Reference group = White.

c. Reference group = no alcohol abuse and no pornography use.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

abused. The odds of sexual abuse increase by a factor of 2. As observed in Model 1, abuse between parents increases the odds of sexual abuse. After controlling for the other variables in the model, military service decreases the odds of sexual abuse. Length of the abusive relationship increases the odds of sexual

TABLE 3
Results of Logistic Regression Predicting Sexual Abuse

Variable	Model 3		Model 4	
	Coefficient	Exp(B)	Coefficient	Exp(B)
Abused as child ^a	0.750	2.166	0.770	2.161
Parental abuse ^a	1.016**	2.761	1.01**	2.763
Length of abuse	0.218	1.243	0.251*	1.285
Latina ^b	0.463	0.629	-0.600	.549
African American ^b	-0.585	0.557	-0.567	0.567
Asian ^b	0.244	1.276	0.166	1.18
Military service ^a	-0.986*	0.373	-0.796	0.451
Pornography use ^a	0.500	1.648	—	—
Alcohol abuse ^a	0.637	1.891	—	—
Only pornography, no alcohol ^c			1.277**	3.584
Only alcohol, no pornography ^c			1.270**	3.561
Alcohol and pornography ^c			1.193**	3.299
Constant	-1.678*		-2.246**	
-2 log likelihood	218.65		232.72	
Percentage correct	70.3		72.4	
Cases without missing data	192		210	

a. Reference group = no.

b. Reference group = White.

c. Reference group = no alcohol abuse and no pornography use.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

abuse by a factor of 1.2. In other words, as the abuse continues over time, a woman's odds of being sexually abused increase.

As shown in Table 3, Model 3 examines the effects of pornography use and alcohol abuse on the odds of sexual abuse. What is interesting in this model is that with the inclusion of both pornography use and alcohol abuse, neither variable is significant. Both exert an influence in the predicted direction, but not significantly.

To tease out the joint effects of pornography use and alcohol abuse, Model 4 (Table 3) contrasts the effects on the odds of sexual abuse of only pornography use, only alcohol abuse, and the combination of both pornography and alcohol to those abusers who use neither. As shown in the model, compared to those abusers who do not reportedly use pornography and abuse alcohol, those batterers who only use pornography are significantly more likely to sexually abuse their partners. Similarly, men who abuse alcohol but do not use pornography are more likely to sexually abuse their partners than men who do not use pornography and alcohol.

The combination of pornography and alcohol also increases the odds of sexual abuse. Abusers who use both alcohol and pornography are significantly more likely to sexually abuse their partners than men who do not use pornography and abuse alcohol. The odds of sexual abuse increase by a factor of 3.2. However, when I ran another model that contrasted batterers who abused alcohol and used pornography to batterers who only used pornography, the findings, although in the predicted direction, were not significant. It appears that alcohol does not exacerbate the effects of pornography on the odds of sexual assault.

Model 4 also shows that length of the abuse increases the odds of sexual abuse, and abuse between parents increases the odds of sexual abuse. Military service, which was significant in the other models, no longer significantly affects the odds of sexual abuse.

DISCUSSION

The paucity of research on the effects of pornography on battered women is disturbing in light of research findings linking pornography to sexually aggressive behavior, particularly among angered men. In this study, of the women whose abusers used pornography, 58% acknowledged that the pornography affected their abuse. The logistic regression corroborates what abused women already know: For women in physically abusive relationships, the images of women depicted in pornography translate into sexual violence.

The findings of this analysis support previous research demonstrating the harmful effects of pornography on women. Among battered women, pornography use increases the odds of sexual violence. What is striking about these findings and makes them more disturbing is that a significant relationship between pornography use and sexual abuse emerges even when using variables where there is considerable measurement slippage. One would expect the relationship between pornography use and sexual abuse to be even more pronounced in studies using more elaborate and specific measures. Battered women are often pressured into having sex with their abusers after being beaten. Many women who experience this kind of abuse are reluctant to define it as rape or sexual assault (Mahoney & Williams, 1998). Hence, the prevalence of sexual abuse among women may be under-

reported. Moreover, the data do not distinguish between violent and nonviolent pornography, a distinction found to be of significance in previous studies.

Consistent with previous studies examining the effects of alcohol on sexual abuse (Frieze, 1983; Scully, 1990), abusers identified as having an alcohol problem are more likely to sexually abuse women than other abusers. Women whose batterers abused alcohol were at greater risk of being sexually victimized than women whose abusers did not have an alcohol problem. However, one cannot conclude from these data that alcohol consumption occurs at the time of abuse. The women were not asked if their abusers were drinking at the time of the abuse. Moreover, this analysis does not examine the effects of alcohol on sexual abuse among women whose batterers were not identified as having an alcohol problem.

Contrary to earlier claims, the effects of pornography are not contingent on the presence of a disinhibiting stimulus, specifically alcohol. Although women whose batterers use alcohol and pornography have greater odds of being sexually assaulted than women whose abusers do not use either, the combination of pornography and alcohol does not exacerbate the effects. In other words, pornography use and alcohol abuse together do not significantly increase the odds of sexual abuse compared to *only* pornography use or *only* alcohol abuse. Ullman et al. (1999) also failed to find a synergistic effect between alcohol and offender behaviors on increased victimization severity.

The findings of the logistic regression also indicate that other factors increase the likelihood that a battered woman will be sexually abused. As expected, there is a positive relationship between length of the abusive relationship and sexual abuse. The longer that women are in a physically violent relationship, the greater their odds of sexual violence. These findings support previous research that shows that as relationships become more violent over time, the likelihood of sexual violence increases (Pagelow, 1988).

Although abuse as a child does not affect a woman's odds of being sexually abused, women who have observed abuse between parents are more likely to be sexually abused than women with no history of parental abuse. Perhaps women with abusive parents have learned the passivity and helplessness asso-

ciated with victimization and thus are involved in more abusive relationships. As Russell (1993) suggested, social learning may reduce a woman's ability to resist.

Contrary to previous findings, this study did not find a positive relationship between military service and sexual abuse. Rather, the results of the analysis indicate that military service significantly decreases the occurrence of sexual abuse among battered women. It is likely that other unmeasured effects not included in the model explain the negative effect of military service on sexual abuse. Men serving in the military had significantly higher levels of education and were less likely to have witnessed parental abuse than nonmilitary men. Also, the number of batterers who were in the military was small.

Disagreements over the empirical validity of research on pornography and narrow conceptualizations of abuse have limited our understanding of the relationship between pornography and abuse. Smith, Smith, & Earp (1999) pointed out that falling into the measurement trap produces a cycle of inattention that leads to misinterpretation, which limits further research and affects domestic violence program efforts. Although this study is not intended to provide support for a causal relationship between pornography and sexual abuse, it is intended to call attention to a factor that is associated with sexual abuse. As noted earlier, the majority of women whose abusers used pornography acknowledged that the pornography had affected their abuse. These findings suggest that researchers should include pornography as a variable in their research designs, and service providers may want to inquire about batterers' pornography use and the possible links it has to sexual abuse. Although we may not be able to marshal the evidence needed to constitute "causal proof," an elusive criterion for social scientists, we certainly have enough evidence to warrant identifying pornography use as a risk factor, much like alcohol consumption, associated with sexual violence among some populations.

The women depicted in pornography are often silent, their mouths covered, gagged, or filled. Their bodies are objects to be manipulated. In our attempt to empirically validate the harm of pornography, we also have silenced women's voices and statisti-

cally manipulated their bodies. Women's accounts, such as the ones below, on the effects of pornography are minimized and/or ignored.

When I was 10 or 11, my stepfather made me watch two movies and then do what the women had to do in them. In one of the movies a lot of men raped a woman, and did whatever else they wanted to her. The other movie showed a woman being cut up alive after the men had sex with her. My stepfather threatened to do the same to me if I told anyone what he was doing to me. That is why I would rather have died than tell anyone. (Russell, 1997, p. 64)

A woman who was raped by her partner recalls,

He was really into watching porno movies, and he tried to make me do all sorts of things. And I [didn't] like it. He hurt my stomach so bad because I was pregnant, and he was making me do these things. (Bergen, 1998, p. 242)

Jensen (1998) described another woman's experience:

He would bring pornographic magazines, books, and paraphernalia into the bedroom with him and tell her that if she did not perform the sexual acts that were being done in the dirty books and magazines he would beat and kill her. (p. 115)

Women's experiences of pornography are dismissed as anecdotal, nonrepresentative, and unimportant. Falling into the measurement trap, we have turned to science, instead of to women, for answers. As Jensen (1998) pointed out, how we ask the question affects the methods used. Rather than framing the relationship between pornography and sexual violence in causal terms, if we examine pornography as one of many factors that makes sexual violence more probable, then we are more open to hearing women's experiences and asking relevant questions. If we listen to women's accounts and try to understand their experiences of violence, the question of causal proof seems less urgent, in fact secondary, to women's pain. As Kelly (1988) pointed out, while we debate it, many are coping with its unwelcome presence in their lives.

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