

# The Role of Pornography in Sexual Offenses: Information for Law Enforcement & Forensic Psychologists

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**ABSTRACT:** *Many police investigators do not fully understand the role that pornography plays in violence. We have come to understand how sex offenders use pornography to support their deviant and violent fantasies which in turn support deviant and violent behavior. In addition, abusers, including those that commit domestic abuse or child abuse, almost all use pornography to feed their deviant and violent fantasies as well. With this understanding, it is imperative for the investigator to not only find the sexual offenders and physical batterer's pornography but to review the pornography to determine the preference and intent of the offender's crime. The offender's pornography (the type, theme, and content of the pornography) is an indicator of what the offender would like to do, and in some cases, what they have already done. In fact, most pornography displays women whose facial expressions clearly are indicative of fear, discomfort, anger, frustration, surprise, or a neutral, void expression. These expressions are contrary to what we would expect of consensual, appropriate sexual partners.*

**Key words:** *Pornography, sexual offenses, sexual offenders, sexual fantasy*

## DEFINITIONS

I will use a definition of *pornography* to include magazines, movies, videos, and pictures depicting people engaging in any type of sexual behavior or people posing partially or fully nude. This includes people posing naked or partially clothed while exposing at least some of their genitals areas. Pornography can be in the form of magazines and pictures, video and movies, or on the Internet. Sex lines and strip shows also constitute pornographic material in my definition (Johnson, 2007; 2014). Pedophiles commonly use department store catalogs and newspaper ads depicting children and adolescents wearing underwear or swimsuits. I found that when searching the prison cell of pedophiles that they often had such materials. Yet not one thought twice about the materials being in the inmate's cell. Basically, pornography is any material or item that a person finds sexually arousing and/or sexually stimulating. *Sexual behavior* can be autoerotic, which involves masturbation, a solo sex act that does not involve a partner. Sexual behavior and sexual contact can also include acts involving sexual interaction between two or more people.

Pornography also has many forms, from legal to illegal. Legal pornographic material involves partially nude or nude consenting adults engaged in posing or actual sex acts. The sex acts can range from gentle and mutual sex to rough acts including bondage, sadism and masochism, bestiality, to name a few. Unfortunately, legal pornography also includes rape pornography, including depicted and actual rape. Illegal pornography typically involves minors in posing naked or actually engaging in any type of sex act.

*Erotica* is closely related to pornography but includes any material or object that serves a sexual purpose for a person. Erotica can be unique and is highly personal, that is, what one person finds sexually arousing another does not. However, erotica serves a specific sexual purpose for a person. Erotica can include almost any object that has become sexually meaningful to a person, including but not limited to vibrators, dolls, specific clothing (e.g., undergarments), naked or clothed pictures of a child or adult, whips, magazines, etc. Lanning

& Hazelwood (2001, p. 224) suggest that in determining whether an object or specific material serves as erotica for a particular person the following should be considered: 1) is the material behaviorally related to the crime under investigation or to a fetish; 2) is there an abnormal amount of the material present and the amount of the material serves no practical purpose; 3) is the material secretive (e.g., hidden and/or protected for discovery); and 4) does the subject have a large financial investment in the material. Offenders tend to keep their pornography and erotica stash hidden and secret from others. They may have hundreds of photos and/or magazines, numerous sexual toys and objects as well as thousands of photos and videos taken from online sources. They typically spend significant amounts of time searching for, viewing, and masturbating to their pornography.

## PURPOSE OF PORNOGRAPHY

Pornography is used to satisfy sexual urges and fantasies. People who say that they buy pornography only to view and read the articles (such as Playboy) are simply liars. If they wanted articles, they could have found similar articles and topics in non-pornographic magazines. Pornography serves a sexual purpose, each and every time it is used. There is no such thing as a "nonsexual" use of pornography. People view it and usually masturbate to it. Pornography provides a playground for deviant and violent fantasies to be developed and perfected, eventually leading to some individuals acting those fantasies out (Johnson, 2014).

There is no doubt that practicing and memorizing new information (also referred to as studying) improves our skill base, and if repeatedly reviewed, the material generally improves skill base and eventually behavior. The impact of practicing and rehearsing results in new or altered beliefs and behaviors is supported by the cognitive-behavioral theories and therapies that are most commonly used to treat psychological and behavioral problems. Utilizing pornography has some questionable benefits for those who need to develop and reinforce healthy and/or appropriate sexual interests and behaviors. However, when the pornography use becomes more frequent or when used to cope with negative emotions I argue that the negative impact far outweighs any potential healthy benefit.

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Consider that the use of pornography generally occurs in private, a solo and personal activity. The viewing of pornography reinforces impersonal sex, sex that is one-sided and selfish in nature, relying heavily on the user's fantasy. The user of pornography imagines and fantasizes their personal interaction with the person or object represented in the pornographic material. Remember that the persons depicted in pornography never interact with the user; they never talk back, make requests, place demands, or in any way control how the material is used. What is reinforced for the user of pornography is one-sided, superficial, controlling sexual experiences. Pornography is a compliant sexual partner!

Even the use of prostitutes, strip clubs, and telephone sex lines rely on the one-sided fantasy and demands of the user. The exchange is not mutual but rather one based on a power imbalance- the user and payer of services demanding what they want often with little regard for the safety, well-being, or pleasure of the other person. In fact the very purpose of paying for the sexual contact implies a power imbalance regardless of the fantasy acted out. Paying for sexual contact is never mutual. The person paid to behave sexually or engage in sexual acts, regardless of whether direct sexual contact occurs, is an object bought for the selfish sexual desire of the user.

Sexual fantasies involve thoughts, plans, and images that are sexually arousing to you. Sexual fantasies are a form of sexual self-stimulation. If you masturbate during or following the sexual fantasy, then you are reinforcing the fantasy with a pleasurable reward (sexual stimulation and orgasm). You are more likely to repeat the same sexual fantasies when reinforced. If the content or theme is healthy and involving consensual, respectful sexual activity, then you are more likely to act sexual in healthy ways. If your themes are deviant in nature, then you are supporting engaging in deviant sexual behavior. Fantasies have a strong influence on our behavior. Anecdotally, as a psychologist as well as my 27 years addressing sexual predators I believe that all behavior is planned, that is, we think about what we are going to do and then decide to act on it (Johnson, 2007; 2014). Therefore, if you are often engaging in deviant sexual fantasies and reinforcing these with sexual stimulation (masturbation), then you are encouraging yourself to act-out the deviant and/or violent behavior.

## **PORNOGRAPHY OBJECTIFIES WOMEN & CHILDREN**

Here is what I have noticed over 27 years addressing sexual violence. When people look at pornographic materials, they most often first notice and focus on the genitals of the person pictured. Why else are they looking at the pornographic material! They then become sexually aroused. If they were not sexually aroused, why then would they continue to view the pornography? What I hypothesize is that as the men looked at faces of women in pornography, their sexual arousal results in the misinterpretation of the women's facial expression as happy, sensual and consensual, when in fact the facial expression was unhappy, fearful, or it appeared that the women were crying or in pain. In fact, at least half of the pornography displays women whose facial expressions clearly are indicative of fear, discomfort, anger, frustration, surprise, or a neutral, void expression. These expressions are contrary to what we would expect of consensual, appropriate sexual partners.

## **THE ROLE OF INTERNET PORNOGRAPHY**

The Internet has made access to pornographic material exceptionally easy and tempting. People can access any type of pornography on the Internet, including content involving violent sex, child pornography, bestiality, fetishes, as well as general sexual content. Just browsing offers almost unlimited access to any type of pornographic material, including graphic samples of pictures, including entire archives, as well as movies. The easy

accessibility creates the problem of being able to view and download pornographic material at any time. The pornographic material supplied on the Internet often over time replaces sexual intimacy that would normally occur with their partner.

## **IMPACT OF PORNOGRAPHY USE**

The issue of how pornography impacts deviant sexual thoughts, fantasies and behavior has been widely debated (Itzen, 1992; Swisher & Wekesser, 1994). I assert that the majority of people who view pornographic material are not likely negatively impacted unless they have a predisposition for violence or sexual violence, are using pornography frequently, or are using violent and/or extreme pornography. When pornography is used more frequently (e.g., several times per week, hours per week), then I assert that the pornographic material would likely have more negative and destructive impact on the viewer. What has yet to be researched is examining the relationship of the frequency of viewing pornography and engaging in violent crimes including child molestation and rape. However, the general finding is that the negative and destructive impact of pornography appears to significantly outweigh any positive benefit (though again the frequency of viewing the pornographic material does not appear to be addressed or specified). Consider the following research. For further research and information see (Johnson, 2007; 2014 & Russell 1980, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1999).

Osanka & Johann (1989) found that pornography played a significant role in physical and sexual violence for both the physical abuser and sexual offender (also see Johnson, 2007 & 2009). Hazelwood & Warren (1995) indicate that sexual fantasies are an important component of sexual crime. Zillman & Bryant (1986) found that after massive exposure to pornographic materials, men found pornography less offensive and less objectionable. They found that massive exposure to pornography significantly increased men's sexual callousness toward women. When intoxicated, men found more extreme and violent pornography more acceptable (Johnson, 2014b).

For victims who are forced to view pornographic material, it can be even more degrading and fearful. Many offenders choose to show their victims pornography and then demand that the victim perform the same behavior or sex act, regardless of the possible injury, pain, or force involved. In addition, many victims are themselves forced to have sexual pictures and videos made of them, further reducing the victim into deeper depths of fear and dehumanization.

Cramer & McFarlane (1994) found that 40% of 87 battered women who filed charges reported that their male partner used one or more pornographic materials. Use of the pornographic materials was significantly associated with the women being asked or forced to participate in violent sexual acts, including rape. Some findings provided by Hazelwood (1998) suggest that 1) 61% of serial killers (not necessarily sexual murders) used and/or had pornography collections and 2) at least 90% of pedophiles used and/or had pornography collections. Anecdotally, I have found that the majority of sexual and physical abusers regularly use some form of pornography.

Viewing pornography and imitating what is depicted in the pornography have played a key role in the sexual victimization of women as well as to the physical abuse of women (Bergen & Bogle's, 2000; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Gager & Schurr, 1976; Hald, Malamuth, & Yuen, 2010; Russell, 1993; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). When pornography was used just prior to an abusive incident, the pornography appeared to have a tempering or lessening effect on the degree of violence in that episode of violence (Mancini, Reckdenwald, & Beauregard, 2012). In addition, the younger the age of first pornography use, the more likely that individual will engage in physically and sexually assaultive behavior

and cause a higher degree of humiliation in their victims than those who begin pornography usage as adults (Mancini, Reckdenwald, & Beauregard, 2012).

### **Ted Bundy (1989) said:**

*“My experience with pornography that deals on a violent level with sexuality is that once you become addicted to it- and I look at this as a kind of addiction- I would keep looking for more potent, more explicit, more graphic kinds of materials. Until you reach the point where the pornography only goes so far. You reach that jumping-off point where you begin to wonder is maybe actually doing it will give you that which is beyond just reading about it or looking at it.”*

Violent pornography use resulted in significantly greater attitudes supporting aggressions and rape than nonviolent pornography (Allen, Emmers, Gebhardt, & Giery, 1995), although nonviolent pornography still resulted in some sexually aggressive behavior (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000). In addition, studies have found that exposure to pornography containing nudity only versus sex Acts or violence reduced aggression whereas pornography containing nonviolent and/or violent depictions increased aggressive behavior (Allen, D'Alessio, & Brezgel, 1995). Heavy pornography use was approximately three times more likely to result in sexually aggressive behavior (Frank, 1990). Those with histories of childhood abuse and/or a family history positive for parental violence and were frequent users of pornography were much more likely to engage in sexual aggression versus those with similar childhood backgrounds but who were not using pornography often (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000).

### **THE IMPACT OF ONGOING PORNOGRAPHY USE**

Overall, the impact of ongoing pornography use serves an important and powerful reinforcer of psychologically, physically, and sexually violent and degrading thoughts and behavior (Johnson, 2009, pending; Russell, D.E.H., 1994a; 1994b; 1999). Understanding the impact of how pornography reinforces violent and degrading thoughts and behaviors for the abuser and sexual offender is essential for understanding how pornography impacts the professionals involved in any violent offender's case. Overtime the offender becomes more and more comfortable with the pornography content and develops a desire to act out what is being depicted in the pornography (Johnson, 2014).

### **THE IMPACT OF VIEWING THE OFFENDER'S PORNOGRAPHY**

The investigator is often negatively impacted by having to review the offender's pornography (Johnson, 2009). The impact of viewing the offender's pornography can be stressful and at times devastating due to the nature and content of the material. Imagine having to sift through hundreds and at times thousands of pornographic photos and videos. The material is nauseating, stressful, disgusting, and at times, horrifying. Even more disturbing is that the police officer understands that the pornographic photos and videos brought significant pleasure and joy to the offender and may have provided a guide for the offender's crimes. The pornography in and of itself is wrought with thousands of victims that will likely never be identified or helped. Some of the pornography may involve the victim or victims of the current offense, which may negatively impact the officer as well (Johnson, 2009).

For the investigator, finding the offender's pornography stash is imperative. The pornography is the violent offender's bet kept secret, the offender's secret world of degrading and violent desires and fantasies, and of course, a road map to the offender's criminal history. The pornography represents what the offender is sexually attracted to and represents what the offender would like to do. The

impact on the investigator can be overwhelming. To look the offender in the eye, investigate the offense, and know how the offender kept their deviant and violent thoughts and behavior secret is difficult and can be at times unbelievable. For the investigator, an extra burden also occurs in that the pornography often suggests the presence of additional victims who have yet to be identified.

Cognitive dissonance refers to the process of being aware that our beliefs and behaviors are in conflict, and as a result tension and stress occurs. This process occurs when the professional must view the offender's pornography while being aware that their own beliefs and attitudes may not support the use of pornography. This stress and tension must be addressed. Either the professional stops viewing the offender's pornography or the professional must adjust their attitudes about the pornography. Perhaps the healthiest way to do this is to keep in mind that the viewing of the offender's pornography is not for their own sexual enjoyment but rather to solve a case, help with criminal conviction, and/or to provide adequate intervention and protection for the victim.

It is important for the officer to always keep the end goal in mind which is typically arrest and prosecution of the suspect as well as the protection of the victim.

### **WHAT INVESTIGATORS CAN DO**

I enjoy the analogy that Lanning and Hazelwood (2001, p. 243) provide, referring to the investigation of sexual crimes as being similar to being a garbage collector. No one really wants to know what the sexual or violent offender really was doing and certainly collecting and examining the offender's pornography is like sifting through garbage. But this garbage is meaningful and necessary to understand the offender. However, the pornography is offensive to any moral and ethical person. To help deal with the content of the pornography, several suggestions are useful.

First and foremost, I strongly recommend that the investigator keep in mind that overall goals and purpose of gathering and reviewing the offender's pornography: to help understand the offender's pathology, desires, and behavior; to help formulate an effective profile; and to help facilitate a conviction; and to assist the victim (Johnson, 2009). The offender's pornography is rich with meaning and must be confiscated.

In addition, it is important for the investigator to maintain a sense of professionalism. Doing this job requires that we at times address unpleasant, uncomfortable and morally challenging material. Another helpful survival tool is humor. Being able to laugh off the day's stress is beneficial and necessary. Lastly, having a support system is vital. No one does this type of work without the support of others. Discussing a difficult case with one's peers does wonders. In fact, openly discussing a case not only helps to alleviate stress and negative emotions (cynicism, disgust, anger) but also allows for consultation and an opportunity to learn from the case and from feedback. This makes for a more effective, competent officer and helps to dramatically prevent burnout!

### **SUMMARY**

It is imperative for investigators to gather and examine the pornography of violent offenders. Doing so not only helps to better understand the personality, motive, and thought processes of the offender but helps in the prosecution of the offender. The impact of reviewing pornographic material is serious and draining and must be attended to. I strongly recommend Practical Aspects of rape Investigation (Hazelwood and Burgess, 2001) for any professional working with physically and sexually violent offenders. It is an

invaluable resource!

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