



UNDERSTANDING THE HARMS OF PORNOGRAPHY: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

CULTURE REFRAMED

SOLVING THE PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS OF THE DIGITAL AGE

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Understanding the Harms of Pornography:
The Contributions of Social Scientific Knowledge

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INTRODUCTION

Pornography affects millions of people's relationships, attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors. This is not surprising because porn is, as documented by a wealth of research and Culture Reframed resources, widely used, produced and distributed around the world. Indeed, porn consumption is not a rare act committed by a small group of pathological people. There is much cultural and health-related damage associated with porn, and social scientists, particularly psychologists and sociologists, continue to advance a rich empirical understanding of its harmful impacts. This report briefly reviews social scientific knowledge about the harms of porn and suggests new directions in research. Following in the footsteps of the contributors to the anthology *Violence Against Women and Children: Mapping the Terrain*,¹ these three questions will be addressed: What do we know? How do we know it? What are the next steps? First, however, it is necessary to define the terms *social science* and *pornography*.

What is Social Science?

Defining social science is subject to much debate. If, though, for convenience, a simple definition had to be chosen, it might be wise to adopt the late sociologist Robert A. Nisbet's offering²: "Any discipline or branch of science that deals with human behavior in its social and cultural aspects." The social sciences include sociology, economics, psychology, anthropology, criminology, social and economic geography, gender studies, media studies and some types of educational studies. Once more, the bulk of the social scientific work on the toxic effects of porn is done by sociologists and psychologists. If society is regarded as a pie, then economists, political scientists, and geographers study slices of it, psychologists study the individual molecules of which the pie is made, and sociologists study the entire pie – that is, society as a whole.

Many social scientific studies of the impact of porn use are conducted by *social psychologists*. Here, social psychology is defined as "the scientific field that seeks to understand the nature and causes of individual behavior in social situations."³ To be discussed later in this report, early studies of the relationship between porn and aggression were primarily done by social psychologists in laboratory settings.

What is Pornography?

The definition of this term, too, is subject to debate. Translated from Greek, pornography means⁴ "writing about prostitutes." Not to be confused with *erotica*, which is "sexually suggestive or arousing material that is free of sexism,

racism, and homophobia and is respectful of all human beings and animals portrayed,"⁵ pornography is injurious on many levels and this current era features the degradation, abuse, and humiliation of women and girls never seen before in the mass media.

Of course, there are men who use gay male pornography⁶ and a growing number of women watch Internet porn,⁷ but the focus of this paper is on adult heterosexual porn produced for heterosexual men's consumption and its effects on these men. Detailed in numerous studies and reports, the lion's share of porn created today targets heterosexual males. Thus, the definition offered here focuses squarely on what Etheredge and Lemon refer to as sexual media that are "violent and regularly depict participants (mainly young women) in distressed situations or scenarios where they are being violently and inhumanely treated."⁸ Such images and writings are the most profitable in the industry and have two things in common. First, females are characterized as subordinate to men, and the main role of actresses and models is the provision of sex to men. Second, in the words of Gail Dines,⁹ Founder and President of Culture Reframed, the majority of today's porn "depicts hardcore, body-punishing sex in which women are demeaned and debased." These images are common. Social scientific research shows that a routine feature of contemporary porn is painful anal penetration, as well as brutal gang rape and men slapping or choking women or pulling their hair while they penetrate them orally, vaginally, and anally.¹⁰

Violent porn is now mainstream. One of the most widely cited studies confirming this claim is the work of psychologist Ana Bridges and colleagues.¹¹ They examined 304 scenes in 50 of what were at that time the most popular porn DVDs. Nearly 90% of them contained physical aggression (mainly spanking, gagging, and slapping), and roughly 50% included verbal aggression, primarily name-calling. Not surprisingly, males constituted most of the perpetrators and females were "overwhelmingly" the targets of their physical and verbal aggression. Furthermore, the female targets often showed pleasure or responded neutrally to male aggression.

¹ White, Koss, & Kazdin, 2011 <https://www.amazon.com/Violence-Against-Women-Children-Mapping/dp/1433809125>

² Nisbet, 2019 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-science>

³ Baron, Byrne, & Suls, 1989, p. 9 <https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-psychology.html>

⁴ Katz, 2006 <https://www.amazon.com/Macho-Paradox-Some-Hurt-Women/dp/1402204019>

⁵ Russell, 1993, p. 3 <https://www.amazon.com/Against-Pornography-Evidence-Diana-Russell/dp/0963477617>

⁶ Corneau et al., 2017 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19419899.2017.1360931>

⁷ Johnson et al., 2019 <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/jwh.2018.7006>

⁸ Etheredge & Lemon, 2016, p. 4 <http://www.rcfv.com.au/getattachment/B8A6174A-6C6F-495F-BF7B-9CA9BF902840/Etheredge,-Linette>

⁹ Dines, 2010, p. xi <https://www.amazon.com/Pornland-How-Porn-Hijacked-Sexuality-ebook/dp/B005OS3AJQ/>

¹⁰ DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016 <https://www.amazon.com/Violence-against-Pornography-Walter-DeKeseredy-ebook/dp/B0187PH90I/>

¹¹ Bridges et al., 2010 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20980228>

The consequences of viewing porn are hardly trivial. Note the results of a recent qualitative, longitudinal study of young people's experiences with heterosexual anal sex.¹² Conducted at three different sites in England, this project entailed individual and group interviews with 130 men and women aged 16-18. The main reason respondents gave for having such sex was that men wanted to imitate what they saw in pornography, and it often appeared, especially for women, "painful, risky, and coercive." Consider, too, that a more recent longitudinal study (between 2006 and 2012) of 1,586 youth between 10 and 21 years of age found that current exposure to violent pornography is strongly associated with sexual violence perpetration.¹³

These studies demonstrate an ongoing trend first discovered by social scientific work done in the early 1980s to the late 1990s.¹⁴ These inquiries show that many women were harmed or upset by their male partners' requests or demands to imitate pornographic scenarios. More recently, based on interviews with 55 rural Ohio women, it was found that 41 had male partners who viewed porn, and imitation was a major theme that emerged from talking to them.¹⁵ Alison, for instance, knew her ex-partner viewed violent porn and describes the familiar language and demeaning behaviors often featured in violent porn videos:

I remember him making me give him oral sex and holding me by the hair and I don't remember if it was after a fight or what. He's done that I don't know how many times. He used to urinate on me and then want sex, I mean after getting hit and stuff.... He would talk the whole time he was doing that and saying things like uh, "you're my bitch" or "you like it bitch don't you." And stuff like that. Um, "this is my ass, you know I'll kill for my ass." Stuff like that and it would be just as violent as the beating and basically you just lay there and let it happen.

Porn transcends videos, pictures, and adult novels. On top of living in a "post-*Playboy* world,"¹⁶ we exist in what McNair defines as a "striptease culture."¹⁷ The sexual objectification and degradation of women occurs in a wide range of contexts, including strip bars, live sex shows, television shows, mainstream movies, and even advertising. McNair rightly states on the back cover of his book that "sex and sexual imagery now permeate every aspect of culture." Unfortunately, much, if not most, of what he is referring to is harmful and, in many cases, contributes to much pain and suffering.

In response to the common statement "What's next?," some sociological criminologists direct us to the rapid emergence of the *gorno* or *gore porn* genre of movies, such as *Hostel* and *Saw*.¹⁸ These films combine sadism, torture and porn, and they generate

¹² Lewis, 2014, p. 1 <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/4/8/e004996>

¹³ Ybarra & Thompson, 2017 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28685211>

¹⁴ DeKeseredy, 2015 <https://www.crimejusticejournal.com/article/view/776>

¹⁵ DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2017 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1077801216648795>

¹⁶ Jensen, 2007 <https://www.amazon.com/Getting-Off-Pornography-End-Masculinity/dp/089608776X>

¹⁷ McNair, 2002 https://books.google.com/books/about/Striptease_Culture.html?id=JaLEKlIB2bEC

¹⁸ Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016 <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/56/6/1291/2415118>

huge revenue for their producers and distributors. That there are sequels to some popular *gorno* movies is a powerful commentary on how violent pornography has seeped into mainstream popular culture.

Torture and porn are now also combined in a subgenre of heavy metal rock music. Known as *pornogrind*, it includes themes of sexual violence against women and necrophilia. Pornogrind recently gained much international attention because Connor Betts, the mass shooter who killed nine people and injured 27 others in Dayton, Ohio, on August 4, 2019, was a member of the Menstrual Munchies, a three-person pornogrind band. One salient example of the band's song titles is "Cunt Stuffed With Medical Waste - Sexual Abuse of a Teenage Corpse." To make matters worse, one of the band's album covers shows a woman consuming feces.¹⁹

Racism is another central element of much of today's pornography. Men and women of color are routinely racially exploited by pornographers and there is much demand for videos featuring Latinas and Asian women. Most, if not all, anti-pornography researchers, activists, and practitioners would agree with Dines' claim that, "Irrespective of the ethnic group, the framing of the narrative is the same – the women's race makes them that bit sluttier than 'regular' white porn women."²⁰

One more common theme is *revenge porn sex*. A Google search using this term, conducted by DeKeseredy and Schwartz,²¹ uncovered 2,730,000 results on April 4, 2016, with numerous videos also being freely and easily accessible. A few examples of the titles uncovered in this search are *Submit Your Bitch*, *Cheerleader Revenge*, *Hubbie Revenge*, and *Revenge Time*.

There are other variants of violent porn and probably more are currently being developed. The rapid growth of the Internet has globalized access to violent and degrading depictions of women and other potentially vulnerable groups (e.g., children) in online and off-line environments. Such media can be diffused to millions of people in only seconds, and the Internet facilitates access for those seeking pornographic content, whether it is legally recognized or not. What used to be rather difficult to obtain and a secret phenomenon is now accessible to virtually anyone and is a huge business with operations around the world. The Internet not only facilitates accessing previously inaccessible materials, but it also buttresses gender and racial inequality and helps create an environment that normalizes hurtful sexuality, racism, and even seeking revenge on female ex-partners. What Dines stated nearly 10 years ago in her 2010 book *Pornland* still holds true today: Violent and racist porn have "come to dominate the Internet."²²

¹⁹ Hall, 2019 <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ellievhall/dayton-shooter-pornogrind-band>

²⁰ Dines, 2010, p. 131 <https://www.amazon.com/Pornland-How-Porn-Hijacked-Sexuality-ebook/dp/B005OS3AJQ/>

²¹ Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016 <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/56/6/1291/2415118>

²² Dines, 2010, p. xiii <https://www.amazon.com/Pornland-How-Porn-Hijacked-Sexuality-ebook/dp/B005OS3AJQ/>

WHAT DOES SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF PORN?

Early Studies

Some social scientific research on pornography was described in the previous section, but those contributions constitute the tip of the iceberg. While pornography harms people on many levels, the bulk of the social scientific research done to date centers on pornography's relationship to men's sexual and physical violence against women, as well as porn's contribution to male attitudes supportive of these behaviors.²³ Nonetheless, there are some new research trajectories indicating how porn causes people to behave unethically in business, such as abusing corporate policies and lying about workplace tasks performed.²⁴ There is also large-scale sociological research showing that the likelihood of divorce doubles for married Americans who used porn partway through their marriages.²⁵

Since social scientific research on the harms of porn focuses mainly on male violence against women and attitudes supportive of the abuse of women, this report concentrates primarily on this issue. Such research started in the late 1970s and as noted earlier, most of the early studies were done by social psychologists who employed experimental designs in laboratory settings.²⁶ These experiments centered mainly on stranger rape or paper-and-pencil measures of attitudes toward women, attitudes toward rapists, and attitudes toward sexual behavior generally. A significant portion of these experiments found that exposure to graphic and violent images changed people's attitudes toward women and rape.²⁷

Interestingly, few lab studies took on the problem of the potential for rebound effects. Simply put, men enter the experimental labs with relatively good attitudes toward women. They watch a sexually graphic and violent video, and then are shown to have troublesome attitudes toward women. The problem is that this was not the first time that these men were exposed to porn. Garcia,²⁸ for example, found that an overwhelming majority of undergraduate men have read pornographic books and seen pornographic movies that include forced sex and sex with violence, with 95.7% having seen movies featuring sexual intercourse, 83.55 oral sex, and 68.7% forced sex. Within one previous year alone, another group of undergraduate males reported that 81% had used porn, with 41% and 35% using violent and sexually violent porn,

respectively.²⁹ So, if exposure to such media lowers one's opinions of women and legitimizes or at least desensitizes one to rape, how is it that researchers continued to find subjects who begin the study with high scores on tests measuring attitudes toward women, and a high sensitivity toward rape?³⁰ Wouldn't their previous exposure to this media have affected them enough to lower their pre-test scores dramatically?

One possible explanation for the problem is that there is some sort of rebound effect, where the worsened attitude toward women is short-lived. Until the late 1980s, there was little information on the extent to which porn affects men's violent behavior outside the lab setting. Stated before, most of the evidence produced before this time came from "artificial" lab studies leading critics to claim that there was little link with the "real world." Keep in mind that many of the lab scientists who conducted the best-known studies said that politicians went too far in suggesting that experimental lab findings are equivalent to the same effects taking place in society.

It is problematic to argue that there is an automatic direct connection between porn and violence against women. Some unknown but presumably large numbers of porn consumers do not abuse women. Moreover, some women purport to enjoy acting out behaviors learned from sexually graphic media. However, what contemporary researchers who conduct studies outside the lab are finding in this online age is that many women report that pornography is related to their current and/or former male partner's abusive behavior. In fact, in the words of Bridges, Sun, Ezzell, and Johnson,³¹ "Research on pornography and violence against women in particular is long-standing, robust, and generally points to a positive association between the two...."

There is now sound empirical evidence derived from studies done outside the realm of labs showing that violent and racist porn is definitely a component of the abuse of women and that many men are graduates of what Lundy Bancroft refers to as "the pornography school of sexuality."³² As Sun, Bridges, Johnson, and Ezzell recently discovered in their study of 487 college men, "the more pornography a man watches, the more likely he was to use it during sex, request particular pornographic sex acts of his partner, deliberately conjure images of pornography during sex to maintain arousal, and have concerns over his own sexual performance."³³

Diana Russell sparked a movement to conduct large-scale, representative sample surveys of violence against women that included this question: "Have you ever been upset by anyone trying to get you to do what they'd seen in pornographic pictures, movies, or books?"³⁴ Based on data gleaned from 930 women in San Francisco, Russell found that 10% of the adult women in her sample answered "yes" to this question. Similar results were uncovered by three subsequent surveys that asked a similar

²³ Wright & Tokunaga, 2016 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26585169>

²⁴ Mecham et al., 2019 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-019-04230-8>

²⁵ Perry & Schleifer, 2018 <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Till-Porn-Do-Us-Part-A-Longitudinal-Examination-of-Perry-Schleifer/7b42bf4b9bddbe4e016e7fc31f3a1a8872e44458>

²⁶ (for a review see DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016)

²⁷ Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1998 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/016059769802200202>

²⁸ Garcia, 1986 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00224498609551316>

²⁹ Demare et al., 1988 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/222334868_Violent_pornography_and_self_reported_likelihood_of_sexual_aggression

³⁰ Schwartz, 1987 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/016059768701100206>

³¹ Bridges, et al., 2016, p. 1 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2374623816668275>

³² Bancroft, 2002, p. 231 <https://www.amazon.com/Why-Does-He-That-Controlling/dp/0425191656/>

³³ Sun et al., 2016 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25466233>

³⁴ Russell, 1990 <https://www.amazon.com/Rape-Marriage-Diana-H-Russell/dp/0253205638/>

question.³⁵ And, like Russell's project, these surveys found a significant relationship between being upset by a men's attempts to imitate pornographic scenes and physical and/or sexual assaults. What is more, though she asked a somewhat different question than Russell's and did not administer a large-scale survey, Bergen found that about one third of the marital rape survivors she interviewed had husbands who viewed porn and forced them to act out what they had seen.³⁶ Using a modified version of Russell's question in their Canadian national survey of the abuse of women in university and college dating, DeKeseredy and Schwartz found that of the women who were sexually abused, 22.3% had also been upset by attempts to get them to imitate pornographic scenarios. Only 5.8% of the women who were not victimized reported being upset by porn.³⁷

There are similar recent quantitative data, with Bridges, Sun, Ezzell, and Johnson's finding that men who consume pornography are more likely than women who view it to engage in degrading and aggressive sexual behaviors, such as spanking, pulling hair, slapping a partner, choking, tying up a partner, and role-playing rape.³⁸ As well, a recent survey of 19-30-year-olds found that over 90% of those who were exposed to rough sex porn desired to engage in these behaviors: spanking, hair pulling, biting, spanking, bondage, and double penetration. Close to half (49.5%) had engaged in four or more of these behaviors.³⁹ There are also comparable recent qualitative findings like those discussed in a previous section of this report.⁴⁰

Recent Research

The Internet as we know it today did not exist when Russell and those who followed in her footsteps conducted their research in the late 1980s and in the 1990s. As well, porn did not have anywhere near the degree of racism and violence that now exist. It is also unclear whether men who watch contemporary porn are more likely to abuse current or former intimate female partners than men who consumed violent sexual material before the advent of the Internet. Nonetheless, there is much evidence showing that porn consumption is a key risk factor associated with a myriad of abusive experiences in the lives of many adult and young women and it is strongly associated with sexual behavior in general.⁴¹

Contemporary researchers like Dines were among the first to reveal that most boys who first view porn do so at the age of 11 and many grow up to victimize their current and former intimate female partners.⁴² However, a growing body of international research shows that some pre-adolescent, adolescent and high school boys who consume porn commit sexual and domestic violence and/or engage in sexting and

sexual harassment at those stages in their lives (for reviews, see DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016⁴³ and Stanley et al., 2018⁴⁴). What is more, there is a growing social scientific literature showing that porn consumption is strongly associated with college men's abusive behavior and attitudes accepting of physical and sexual violence against women.⁴⁵

The correlation between porn consumption and male youth and emerging adult violence against women in many parts of the world is related to *male peer support*.⁴⁶ Originally developed by DeKeseredy in 1988,⁴⁷ this concept is defined as the attachments to male peers and the resources that these men provide that encourage and legitimate the abuse of women. Consider what Kimmel found in his research on "guys" (men between the ages of 16 and 26): "Guys tend to like the extreme stuff, the double penetration and humiliating scenes; they watch it together, in groups of guys, and they make fun of the women in the scene." Additionally, Kimmel is correct to point out that, "Violence and aggression in pornography is more likely to be skewed toward the younger consumer."⁴⁸

Numerous North American college men belong to subcultures in which members have high expectations of having sex and then end up feeling angry or disappointed if women reject their advances.⁴⁹ In other words, these men are taught by their peers to expect to engage in a very high level of consensual intercourse or what to them is sexual conquest. The problem, of course, is that for most men such goals are impossible to achieve. When they fall short of what they see as their friends' high expectations, and perhaps short of what they believe their friends are actually achieving, these men experience relative deprivation. This sexual frustration, caused by what Kanin refers to as a "reference-group-anchored sex drive" can result in predatory sexual conduct.⁵⁰ These men are highly frustrated, not because they are deprived of sex in some objective sense, but because they feel inadequate or unable to engage in what they have defined as the proper amount of sex.⁵¹

Such subcultures on college campuses have existed for decades, but they are now heavily influenced by a combination of the relatively new "hook up culture" and porn. According to Dines:

Given the increasing presence of hooking up in the culture, especially on college campuses, these men's perceptions that other guys seem to have no problem finding sex is not completely inaccurate. Where they seem to lose touch with reality is the degree to which they assume this is the norm. In the porn world of

³⁵ DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016 <https://www.amazon.com/Violence-against-Pornography-Walter-DeKeseredy-ebook/dp/B0187PH90I/>

³⁶ Bergen, 1996 <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/wife-rape/book5654>

³⁷ DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998 https://books.google.com/books/about/Woman_Abuse_on_Campus.html?id=oy4IAQAAIAAJ

³⁸ Bridges et al., 2016 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2374623816668275>

³⁹ Vogels & O'Sullivan, 2019 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30229516>

⁴⁰ DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2017 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1077801216648795#articleCitationDownload-Container>

⁴¹ Wright, 2018 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0093650218796363>

⁴² Dines, 2010, p. xi <https://www.amazon.com/Pornland-How-Porn-Hijacked-Sexuality-ebook/dp/B005OS3AJQ/>

⁴³ DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016 <https://www.amazon.com/Violence-against-Pornography-Walter-DeKeseredy-ebook/dp/B0187PH90I/>

⁴⁴ Stanley et al., 2018 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26951609>

⁴⁵ Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2017 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29333966>

⁴⁶ DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016 <https://www.amazon.com/Violence-against-Pornography-Walter-DeKeseredy-ebook/dp/B0187PH90I/>

⁴⁷ DeKeseredy, 1988 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF00994662>

⁴⁸ Kimmel, 2008, p. 181 <https://www.amazon.com/Guyland-Perilous-World-Where-Become/dp/0060831359>

⁴⁹ DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013 <https://www.amazon.com/Male-Support-Violence-against-Women/dp/155538339/>

⁵⁰ Kanin, 1967 <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1967-15474-001>

⁵¹ DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013 <https://www.amazon.com/Male-Support-Violence-against-Women/dp/155538339/>

never-ending sex, every interaction with a woman – be it a student, a doctor, a maid, a teacher, or just a stranger – ends up sexualized. Add to this the stories that men regale each other about their latest conquest, stories that often sound like the porn movie they just watched, and you have constructed a world of constant male access to every woman a man meets. When the real world doesn't play out like this, then disappointment and anger makes sense.⁵²

Male peer support is also identified by some studies as a key correlate of college men sending women sexual pictures or messages (including porn) that the female recipients did not want.⁵³ Further, there is now evidence that male peer support influences many vindictive men to distribute sexual pictures of their former female partners on the Internet without their consent (revenge porn, sometimes referred to as Image-based Abuse).⁵⁴ And, there are male sexist online communities with members who never come into face-to-face contact with each other but frequently exchange violent pornographic written, audio, and visual communication with their peers. Kimmel's research into these online communications, summarized below, provides evidence of one variant of this subculture:

Online chat rooms are, by their nature, spaces of social interaction among men. These chat rooms are the closest thing to a pornographic locker room in which bonding is often accomplished by competing with the other guys. In the online chat rooms, a description of a violent sexual encounter might be followed by another user's "Oh yeah, well last night I did this to the woman I was with..." which would be followed by another response designed to top even that. The competition can become heated – and violent – rather quickly. What we had stumbled on was the "homosocial" element in heterosexual porn viewing, the way in which anything, including intimacy with a member of the opposite sex can be turned into a competitive moment with other guys.⁵⁵

The correlation between porn consumption and violence against women is not restricted to young men and male college students. However, "real world" studies of adult experiences with porn use and its violent consequences are in short supply. Most of the empirical work done so far are the aforementioned surveys and studies involving researchers gathering data from rape crisis workers who conducted face-to-face and phone interviews with female physical and sexual assault survivors, and from abused women who sought support from battered women's services.⁵⁶

One exception to this trend is the work done by DeKeseredy and colleagues in rural Southeast Ohio.⁵⁷ Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 43 women who were abused while they either wanted to end, were trying to end, or had ended a relationship with a husband or male live-in partner. Sixty-five percent of these

⁵² Dines, 2010, p. 89 <https://www.amazon.com/Pornland-How-Porn-Hijacked-Sexuality-ebook/dp/B005OS3AJQ/>

⁵³ DeKeseredy et al., 2019 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2158244019828231>

⁵⁴ DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2016 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2374623816684692>

⁵⁵ Kimmel, 2009, p. 187 <https://www.amazon.com/Guyland-Perilous-World-Where-Become/dp/0060831359>

⁵⁶ DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2018 <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Handbook-of-Critical-Criminology-2nd-Edition/DeKeseredy-Dragiewicz/p/book/9781138656192>

⁵⁷ DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009 <https://www.amazon.com/Dangerous-Exits-Escaping-Relationships-Critical/dp/0813545196>

women's estranged partners viewed porn and 30% of the sample stated that porn was involved in their sexual abuse. One man did this to a respondent after discovering that she was on the verge of exiting the relationship:

I walked into him masturbating in front of my children to *Penthouse*... There were naked pictures, well not naked, but pictures of men in a bra and underwear that he had stolen and had developed.

DeKeseredy and colleagues were told many other alarming stories. Another woman they interviewed provides an additional vivid example of porn-related abuse:

I think he's got a serious, sick problem. Because he would laugh about it the next day. He would ejaculate in my hair, on my body. He would take certain clothes and clothing items out of the dresser if I wouldn't give him sex. He would, um I don't know exactly what he did with it. He had this one real like, um, satiny spaghetti strap shirt and um, I found it between the bed and the box springs, with a girly book, and a porn tape....

Another exception to the above trend in adult research is the work done by DeKeseredy and Hall-Sanchez.⁵⁸ Their qualitative study of separation/divorce violence against women in rural Ohio involved interviews with 55 women and 34 of them experienced porn-related sexual abuse. They also identified five key themes related to men's porn consumption and their violent behavior, one of which was addressed in a previous section of this report: learning about sex through pornography; comparison and imitation; the introduction of other sexual partners; surreptitious videotaping; and the overall culture of porn.

Gutierrez reminds us, "it is important to remember that the woman behind the screen is also experiencing abuse at the hands of men."⁵⁹ Female porn performers are routinely coerced to engage in behaviors that they did not initially consent to do.⁶⁰ Even so, rigorous studies of the physical and psychological abuse experienced by adult women in the porn industry are also in short supply. To the best of my knowledge, Grudzen et al. are the only highly experienced researchers who have studied this problem.⁶¹ The participants in their study were women porn performers based in California and their responses were compared to those women of comparable age who participated in a larger statewide health study. Grudzen et al. found that, compared to women in general, women in the porn industry:

- had 1.5 more poor mental health days;
- had three times more depressive disorders;
- were 1.5 times more likely to be currently living in poverty;
- were five times more likely to be survivors of domestic violence;
- were roughly three times more likely to have been sexually abused as children;

⁵⁸ DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2017 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1077801216648795>

⁵⁹ Gutierrez, 2013, p. 16 <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/eurj/files/2013/10/Gutierrez.pdf>

⁶⁰ DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016 <https://www.amazon.com/Violence-against-Pornography-Walter-DeKeseredy-ebook/dp/B0187PH90I/>

⁶¹ Grudzen et al., 2011 https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/ps.62.6.pss6206_0639

- were two times more likely to have grown up in poverty; and
- were five times more likely to have been in foster care.

Below are Grudzen et al.'s data about the work-related problems of women porn performers compared to women in the general population:

- only 10% of porn performers consistently used condoms;
- porn performers had eight times more sexual partners in the previous year;
- porn actresses were four times more likely to smoke cigarettes and twice as likely to drink alcohol;
- porn performers were less likely to have health insurance; and
- they were more likely to be unable to meet their basic needs in the past 12 months.

These data reveal that there is nothing glamorous about being a “porn star.” Nonetheless, further in-depth quantitative and qualitative research on the damage done to women in the porn industry is required to conclusively validate Grudzen et al.'s findings.

In sum, two of porn's most significant harms are the abuse of women, and men's attitudes supportive of physical and sexual violence against women. This is not to say, though, that other harms warrant more or less attention. In addition to those discussed previously (e.g., divorce), porn consumption can increase involvement in risky sexual behavior, lower sexual satisfaction with intimate partners, lower people's self-esteem, and discourage male bystanders from helping those who are potential targets of sexual assault.⁶² As the social scientific porn research community grows, it is likely that even more harms will be identified and be included in subsequent reviews of the extant literature.

New Directions in Social Scientific Research

More longitudinal research is needed to more accurately determine porn's causal impact. Perhaps, then, researchers should consider conducting *life course studies*, which are popular in some criminological circles. Following social psychologist Glen Elder,⁶³ the life course is defined here as “the interweave of age-graded trajectories, such as work careers and family pathways, that are subject to changing conditions and future options, and to short-term transitions from leaving school to retirement.” Applying the life course approach to the study of porn allows for a richer understanding of porn use, porn's relationship to a myriad of harms, and the continuation or termination of porn use across the lifespan.⁶⁴

Many questions about porn and its impact are difficult to answer with anonymous, self-report questionnaires administered to respondents one time, in one place, to

⁶² Foubert & Bridges, 2017 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27216476>.

Also see Funk, 2018 <https://nearipress.org/press/product/whats-wrong-with-this-picture-the-impact-of-viewing-pornography>

⁶³ Elder, 1994, p. 5 https://www.jstor.org/stable/2786971?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

⁶⁴ DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016 <https://www.amazon.com/Violence-against-Pornography-Walter-DeKeseredy-ebook/dp/B0187PH90I/>

one group of people. This “one shot” approach is excellent for documenting the correlation between porn use and particular harms, such as violence against women. But, it tells us little, if anything, about the trajectory of individuals who use porn. Life-course research has one more benefit. Many critics argue that surveys can misrepresent people or be misinterpreted. A longitudinal study that examines a large number of people over a long period of time with multiple measures of porn use mitigates this and other criticisms.⁶⁵

Another alternative to simply using “one shot” surveys is *participant observation*, a technique often used in male peer support research on violence against women. Participant observers are researchers who actually participate, albeit to varying degrees, in the lives of the small community or group they are studying. They value the collection of valid data that reveals meanings, feelings, conduct and codes that constitute the lived experience of the people they are studying. Described earlier were some of one researcher's observations of men in groups,⁶⁶ but at the time of writing this report, no one has published the results of a participant observation study specifically designed to examine porn use and its effects on people's behavior.

Most porn research is done by college professors who collect data from students in lab settings or who administer surveys to undergraduate students online or in classrooms. There is also, as reviewed earlier, research on the impact of porn use on adolescents and young adults.⁶⁷ Are there differences between younger consumers and older ones? Kimmel asserts that there are:

Adult men watch by themselves, or sometimes with a partner, and they tend to like the ones where the women look like they are filled with desire and experience pleasure. This is a significant counterpoint to those who feel called to mind the public's morality: It turns out pornography over time does not up the ante and lead men toward increasingly violent and extreme images. Quite the opposite. Violence and aggression in pornography is more likely to be skewed toward the younger consumer.⁶⁸

Kimmel does not offer any valid scientific evidence for his claim. There are studies showing that adult men's porn consumption is related to violence against their current and former female partners,⁶⁹ some of which were mentioned previously. Yet, much more research on adults is sorely needed to accurately determine similarities and differences between young and older porn consumers.

Last, but certainly not least, replicating or slightly revising interviews with adult male porn users, such as those done by Robert Jensen⁷⁰ and Sun, Ezzell, and Kendall⁷¹ would be fruitful. Thus far, the bulk of the rich interview data on the hurtful impacts

⁶⁵ White & Humphrey, 1997 <https://www.amazon.com/Researching-Sexual-Violence-against-Women/dp/0803973691>

⁶⁶ Kimmel, 2009 <https://www.amazon.com/Guyland-Perilous-World-Where-Become/dp/0060831359>

⁶⁷ Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2017 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29333966>

⁶⁸ Kimmel, 2009, p. 181 <https://www.amazon.com/Guyland-Perilous-World-Where-Become/dp/0060831359>

⁶⁹ DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016 <https://www.amazon.com/Violence-against-Pornography-Walter-DeKeseredy-ebook/dp/B0187PH90I/>

⁷⁰ Jensen, 1995 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12346571>

of male porn use are derived from women. Certainly, we obtain a great deal of information by asking the women who share or who have shared their lives with porn consumers. All the same, men can provide rich information on the reasons and contexts of their consumption that their female partners may not be aware of.

Regardless of which groups of people we choose to include in research projects, to prevent violence against women and other harmful effects of pornography, we must move beyond correlational research and provide scientifically informed answers to questions like these raised by Katz:⁷²

- How does heterosexual men's use of pornography as a masturbatory aid help to shape not only their view of women and girls but also their own manhood and sexuality?
- What is the influence on boys' sexuality of early and repeated exposure to the pornography industry's particular representation of "normal sex?"
- What is the relationship between the sexual abuse of children and the proliferation of media products that deliberately sexualize young girls – and, in some cases, boys?
- What can be done about what seems to be a steady movement away from the idea of sex as mutually respectful?

Conclusions

An integral part of the progressive movement to recognize and counter the harms of pornography is high-quality social scientific research documenting the link between hurtful sexual media and their negative impacts. Where do we go from here? First, it is time to move beyond going down the well-worn path of conducting laboratory studies because the artificiality of the laboratory experimental situation decreases its *external validity*. External validity refers to the generalizability of the findings obtained from a specific study to individuals, groups, and populations.

Surveys of random samples of people like those reviewed in this report have higher external validity than laboratory experimental studies because the data collected refer to behavior in natural settings. And, the new directions in social scientific research suggested in this report are destined to help provide detailed answers to questions such as Katz's. Whatever empirical step is taken, however, it is impossible to prove that any type of pornography alone causes the harms examined in this report and elsewhere. What we can definitely conclude is that there is a very strong relationship between porn and a variety of negative consequences of its consumption and distribution. We also know, without a doubt, that the porn industry is damaging many people's lives and that anti-porn researchers, activists, policymakers and practitioners have, in the words of Robert Jensen, "a lot of work to do."⁷³

⁷¹ Sun, et al. 2017 <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-51126-003>

⁷² Katz, 2006 <https://www.amazon.com/Macho-Paradox-Some-Hurt-Women/dp/1402204019>

⁷³ Jensen, 2007 <https://www.amazon.com/Getting-Off-Pornography-End-Masculinity/dp/089608776X>

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