

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Influence of Unrestrained Access to Erotica on Adolescents' and Young Adults' Dispositions Toward Sexuality

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Because consensually accepted programs of sexual education are lacking, erotica have come to serve as the primary agent of sexual socialization. The new media technology gives prepubertal children and postpubertal adolescents ready access to erotica in all their manifestations. However, next to nothing is known about the consequences of the steadily increasing amount of such exposure. A brief overview of what is known and what remains unknown about the effects of pornography on young adults is presented. Thereafter, the focus is on the development of sexual callousness across the pubertal threshold, and on how this callousness might be influenced by extensive exposure to erotica. The erotica under consideration are not so much those explicitly depicting coital behaviors as those that are less explicit and present a fuller social context of sexual engagements. A program of research is outlined that would help provide an understanding of erotica's effects on adolescents' sexual callousness, an understanding that is sorely needed for the construction of effective educational efforts aiming at the removal of callousness and coercion from sexual relations. © Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2000

KEY WORDS:

Adolescents
Media erotica
Pornography

What We Know

The effects of video pornography on young adults' perception of sexuality, as well as dispositions toward sexual behavior (including coercive action to attain sexual access), are well documented (1). Recent meta-analyses in which both corresponding and discrepant findings were considered have demonstrated sufficient consistency in the research evidence and thus strengthened generalizations (2,3).

This brief overview ignores research that ascertained effects immediately after a single exposure to erotic stimuli and focuses only on the ecologically more meaningful findings that involve both frequent exposure to erotica and the delayed assessment of consequences (4).

What can be considered established is that frequent exposure of young adults (i.e., mostly students in their first year of college) to readily available erotica, explicit and graphic, but devoid of coercion, fosters a rapid overcoming of adverse reactions such as feelings of guilt, repulsion, and disgust, and an equally rapid development of unhindered enjoyment reactions. Prolonged exposure leads to habituation of excitatory reactions, however. Enjoyment diminishes as a result, and the consumption of novel materials (i.e., erotica depicting less common sexual behaviors) becomes necessary to sustain enjoyment reactions of acceptable intensity. This excitatory habituation constitutes the first phase in habituation paradigms of sexual deviancy (5).

It has been demonstrated that prolonged exposure to erotica leads to perceptions of exaggerated sexual activity in the populace. This concerns all conceivable sexual activities (e.g., sodomy, group sex, sado-

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masochistic practices, bestiality), except oral–genital contact, the incidence of which is nonetheless overestimated in comparison to those who consume erotica less frequently or not at all. Dispositional changes include diminished trust in intimate partners, the abandonment of hopes for sexual exclusivity with partners, evaluation of promiscuity as the natural state, and the apprehension that sexual inactivity constitutes a health risk. Cynical attitudes about love emerge, and superior sexual pleasures are thought attainable without affection toward partners. The institution of marriage is seen as sexually confining. Increasingly, having a family and raising children is considered an unattractive prospect.

What We Do Not Know

Evidence concerning the effects of erotica on sexual coercion is less compelling, mostly because coercive sexual behavior cannot be ascertained directly. Experimentation cannot place research participants at risk of being sexually coerced. Complementary correlational assessments, moreover, tend to be discounted as not providing causal evidence, and the employment of measures that approximate coercive action is rightly questioned. Assessment of rape proclivity by having research participants answer the hypothetical question of whether they would commit rape if they were sure that they could not be found out (6) does not necessarily assess the proclivity to act coercively. However, the measure can be considered to reflect the research participants' sexual callousness, especially that of men toward women.

The recommendation of punishment for convicted rapists also has been used to assess dispositions toward rape (7). It also can be considered to reflect sexual callousness rather than the inclination to commit rape.

Taking these measures as indicators of sexual callousness, the research findings consistently show increased callousness as the result of frequent exposure to pornography (mostly noncoercive, but also coercive formats). Research in this vein also shows diminishing concern about sexual child abuse, short of the rape of children (8).

The effects of violent pornography have been debated and presumed to be stronger than those of nonviolent pornography. The evidence to that effect is wanting, however. Some investigations have examined sexual coercion in the frame of the so-called rape myth. The pornographic material in those studies depicted initially reluctant women who eventu-

ally take pleasure from the forced sexual encounter, not exactly a convincing representation of the use of violence to attain sexual access. The more pertinent research used material depicting rape and genuine suffering on the part of victims. This material has not been found to produce greater rape proclivity than noncoercive erotica (9). If anything, sexual callousness was less pronounced after exposure to violent pornography than after exposure to noncoercive erotica.

What We Should Know

The fact that erotica's effects on sexual violence have not been established directly in causally compelling research (meaning measured by the actual commission of rape) has been used to argue that there is no evidence for harmful effects of pornography. In turn, the argument has been used to justify a policy of noninterference and inaction (10). The conception of harm is apparently limited to violence and coercion. By implication, other forms of harm are deemed inconsequential. But are they? Is the growing sexual callousness among adolescents inconsequential? Is the deterioration of emotional attachment and commitment to partners in intimate relationships a non-issue? Or, conversely, is growing sexual callousness and exploitation acceptable, perhaps even socially desirable?

As long as the focal effect of pornography consumption is sexual coercion, the call for more research is hollow and, in fact, part of a strategy of inaction. Compelling research with such limited focus is not forthcoming, and policy decisions will have to be made without it. This is especially the case for children and adolescents as consumers. These groups cannot be involved in research concerning sexual coercion. Knowledge about these matters can be derived only from clinical cases in which victimization has occurred: a limited sample of children and adolescents, indeed.

The situation calls for a reconceptualization of harm from exposure to erotica. A redefinition of pornography seems in order as well. Lawmakers have focused on the depiction of male genitals and genital penetration. Is the apparent phobia regarding such portrayals warranted? Should we not concentrate on the circumstances under which sexual access is sought and gained, and on the emotional consequences of sexual engagements, as they are featured in R- and PG13-rated films and similarly rated television programs? Children and adolescents are likely

to acquire their knowledge about sex from these sexually less explicit programs rather than from pornography *per se*.

Strasburger and Donnerstein (11) addressed the effects of this type of erotic fare on children and adolescents when they summarized recent findings on media offerings (p. 129):

Each year, teenagers view nearly 15,000 sexual references, innuendoes, and jokes, of which less than 170 will deal with abstinence, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, or pregnancy. The so-called family hour of prime time television contains more than eight sexual incidents per hours, more than four times as much as in 1976. Nearly one-third of family hour shows contain sexual references, and the incidence of vulgar language is increasing dramatically as well. The Internet offers unparalleled access to hard-core pornography with just a few keystrokes.

What needs to be highlighted is that the pursuit of sexual access is typically presented as relentless and exploitative (the object is to score), that sex is a sporting event that amounts to innocent fun, and that it is inconsequential for subsequent emotions and health.

In the absence of acceptable forms of sex education in the schools, the conventional media, now supplemented by the Internet, are *de facto* providing sex education for our children and adolescents. The Internet, in particular, ensures ready access to all conceivable forms of sexual material, and any effective curtailment of such liberal access is unlikely. Children who are naturally curious about sexual matters are confronted with a barrage of information in which educational messages are bound to be overwhelmed by sexual adult entertainments from the common to the bizarre and aberrant. In view of this situation, few observers would argue that pre-school children and first to fourth graders would have the cognitive and emotional maturity to separate the wheat from the chaff. It would seem foolish to argue that early and premature exposure to the vilest aspects of human sexuality would be without influence. The Internet is here to stay, however, along with staunch legal defense of noninterference with its offerings. Educators are well advised to accept that children's *de facto* sex education in the future will come largely from the Net.

Given those prospects, the time has come to identify the actual consequences of such sex education via the informational and entertainment media. This will require giving up the limited focus on materials involving genitals and genital penetration

in the definition of erotica and pornography. Sexuality will have to be conceptualized in a meaningful behavioral context that includes both motivational and experiential conditions, as well as emotional and behavioral consequences. Such reconceptualization would make possible the collection of pertinent data from children and adolescents.

Perhaps most important is a clear conceptualization of the objectives to be served. What is desirable knowledge about sex, at which age? What dispositions concerning sexual behavior and relationships are desirable? Is there consensus on what is undesirable in those regards? Without a clear conceptualization of what is to be accomplished, research will be unfocused and findings are not likely to assist the changing of knowledge about, and dispositions toward, sexual behaviors.

What We Could Know

Given that sexual orientations and preferences are enormously varied among adults (12) and that what is deemed natural and right is essentially determined by political processes (13), I work from the premise that broad consensus exists only for the disapproval and condemnation of sexual coercion. Moreover, given that research explorations are severely limited in assessing sexual coercion directly, I accept the assumption that dispositions of sexual callousness are the principal mediators of sexual coercion, and therefore concentrate on the formation of sexual callousness.

Taking such a focus, the recommendation for research into the development of adolescents' dispositions toward sexuality, coercive sexuality in particular, is straightforward. It begins with correlational explorations across the pubertal threshold and proceeds to cross-lag investigation and confirmatory experimentation. Specific recommendations are presented in Table 1.

What We Could Do

The findings of those proposed investigations would provide reliable information about the influence of erotica on the formation of dispositions toward sexuality in adolescents and thereby make possible an informed debate about parental and societal concerns regarding that influence. To the extent that concerns are consensually shared (or at least shared by a sizeable majority of citizens), the findings also would provide a basis for the construction of strate-

Table 1. Research Needed on the Development of Dispositions Toward Sexuality

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1. Assess the degree of correspondence between:
 - (a) *exposure* to various television genres providing sexual information
(from primetime sitcoms to cable programs for adult audiences, possible from Internet access to explicit erotica)
and
 - (b) *perceptions of and dispositions toward relevant sex-related behaviors* in prepubertal children and postpubertal adolescents
(e.g., sexual curiosity, perceptions and evaluations of sexuality, sexual readiness, sexual callousness, knowledge of heterosexual and homosexual orientations, conceptions of sexual pleasure, notions of gender differences in pleasure seeking, coercive inclinations to achieve sexual access)
 - using repeated measure in yearly intervals for cross-lagged comparisons
 - supplemented by assessments of emerging personality traits
(e.g., empathy, psychoticism, neuroticism, extroversion, aggressiveness, type A, arousability, impulsivity, shyness)
 - supplemented by assessments of neuroendocrine and related psychological characteristics
(e.g., androgen levels, autonomic functions pertaining to moods and emotions)
 - supplemented by assessments of social mediators
(e.g., involvement in peer groups, adolescent subcultures; family and school context)
 2. Assess the *effects of controlled exposure to specific programming* on perceptions of, and dispositions toward, relevant sex-related behaviors in postpubertal adolescents
 - using experimental paradigm of prolonged-exposure, delayed effect assessment
 - using sex-laden primetime comedies and dramas, adult fare on cable channels
 - supplemented by assessments of the mediating factors indicated under (1)
 3. Assess *selective exposure to sexual themes* and explicit erotica by provision of choices as a function of the mediating factors indicated under (1)
 - sexual exposure measured unobtrusively: sex-laden primetime comedies, adult fare on cable channels, explicit erotica from various forms of video, Net porn, interactive video porn games available with nonsexual programming
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gies to minimize any influence that is deemed undesirable. Both preventive and remedial strategies could be considered.

On the other hand, if the proposed research is not conducted, a highly uninformed and hence counterproductive debate over the effects of erotica on youth is bound to be perpetuated. It would seem unlikely that effective social policy against any ill effects could be advanced and implemented under such circumstances.

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