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Morals Versus Evidence: The Role of Pornography

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It has now been ten years since Drew Kingston, Neil Malamuth, Paul Federoff and Bill Marshall (2009) published a study finding that pornography usage was a risk factor for people who had sexually abused primarily only among those already at high risk and who used pornography frequently. Perhaps most significantly, the authors emphasize that research and practice highlight the importance of individual differences between people when considering the impact of pornography on violence. To date, this is the most authoritative study of its kind on this topic. In addition, these findings have played out with respect to the complexity of individuals who view indecent images of children and whether or not they go on to commit a contact offence (Meridan et al, 2018).

Meanwhile, we are at a loss as to what, if any, impact the extant research has had at the front lines of treating or supervising people who have sexually abused. Pornography is a complicated area, especially in terms of public perception. It has been the focal point of several moral panics over the years and there is a perceived link in the socio-political sphere between viewing and doing in the public's eyes. This was the case when considering watching hardcore pornography and rape in the 1980's and now the perceived link between viewing child sexual abuse imagery and committing child sexual abuse here in the 2000's. The increase in the accessibility and variety of pornographic material since the advent of the internet has led to conversations about its role in the normalization of sexual violence in our communities and the reinforcement of cognitive distortions.

In short, pornography is a problematic and loaded conversation that crisscrosses social norms, stereotypes, vulnerability, and exploitation. Readers of this blog and our other works will know that we are not advocating the use of pornography, although we believe very strongly in evidence-based supervision,



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We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

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assessment, and treatment. Pornography is freely available, via the internet, in modern society and therefore clients will encounter it. Therefore, how we manage their expectations around it with respect to their potential to re-offend is a serious consideration. In the same way that desistance from sexual offending is manageable in prison because of the reality of the institution getting clients to avoid pornography helps them not get aroused by it, but it does help them manage their response to it should they encounter it? We are not saying that all forms of pornography are equal and that it is not harmful, rather we are saying we need to understand its role in the desistance and management process. Therefore, the question that we must ask is how we get individuals to manage their problematic sexual behavior in a way that is safe, exploitation-free and emphasizing no more victims, but is nonetheless relevant to them. Is there a place for ethical, exploitation-free pornography which models pro-social sex and relationships?

Just the same, viewing any kind of sexually explicit media is prohibited in most programs treating people who have sexually abused and is a common prescription in rules of supervision, despite the limited risks in evidence. Meanwhile, some authors have proposed that accessibility to pornography is associated with a decrease in sexual violence. As expressed by Brandt, Prescott, and Wilson in this blog in 2012:

Two additional facts are worthy of consideration. First, both biased and impartial groups have been funding research for more than 50 years to find a connection between pornography and sexual offending, and none have been able to find any definitive link. Second, despite the explosion of sexual media since the advent of the Internet and rapid transfer of visual imagery, there has been no increase in rates of sexual offending—everywhere it has been studied, around the world. Arguably, the same information superhighway that provides access to pornography has also brought attention to the numerous media outlets that remind us that true sexual violence is intolerable.

The case of pornography usage calls into question to what extent our practices are hindered by our own morals, attitudes, and beliefs. Our field demands evidence-based public policies, but are we willing to examine our own processes?

Again, there are many reasons to find pornography offensive. Nonetheless, the question remains: What are the goals of our supervision and treatment? If the answer is to reduce the risk of future crime, then it seems clear that curtailing access to pornography is not an evidence-based intervention. This, in turn, leads to other questions: What really is our goal when we limit the otherwise legal behavior of our clients? Is it wise to apply rules across the board without regard for risk or treatment/supervision need? There is a saying within some criminal justice circles that “It is always easier to say no than to say yes”. Is that really the most effective way forward? Is it possible that we may increase the risk for some clients? For example, by routinely prohibiting access to pornography do clients take on the belief that they are irredeemable or have no right to even normative sexual interests? Do they view all evidence of their sexuality as bad, wrong, or harmful? Do they then return again and again to fantasize about past abusive experiences instead of arguably more healthy scenarios? Once again, it seems that the characteristics of the individual client need to be considered.

Given the historical challenges in defining pornography and legislating its use, perhaps the place to start in understanding the difference between morals and the available evidence is ourselves.