

Podcast #27: Let's Talk Seriously About Pornography

Porn is not harmless. But neither is it an important cause of sexual violence or misogyny. Partisans on both sides of this debate have littered their arguments with distortions, hyperbole, and cheap rhetorical tricks. We have to wade through a lot of bullshit to get to the truth.

First of all, the porn industry degrades the women who star in it and recruits women who already feel degraded. Unfortunately, some people argue that, in heterosexual pornography, these women stars have free choice and are providing nothing more than “harmless” entertainment to male consumers. I think they’re making a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. The performers in these films are degraded, underpaid, and used-up by an industry with the morals of a slaughterhouse. The women come into the industry with the self-esteem of earthworms, histories of physical and sexual abuse, and are often plunged into alcohol and drug abuse as a way of coping with their jobs. When the apologists from the porn industry point to the “voluntary” nature of this work, they are using a legal technicality as a fig leaf to cover up the everyday pathology and exploitation in this industry.

Furthermore, with the near-universal availability of porn, there are now untold thousands of men who have become addicted to it. Spending hours each day glued to their computer or TV screens looking at porn, talking dirty in chat rooms, seeking out greater and greater taboos to violate, these particular men are too often tormented, their relationships betrayed, and their families and friends cheated of their emotional presence. The presence of a casino doesn't *cause* the tragedies that sometime result, but neither are casino operators morally innocent.

So much for porn being so harmless.

On the other hand, anti-porn critics and activists are often way too literal and concrete in their analysis. Here's what I mean: They watch some pornography, note what often appears to be a sordid and misogynistic *story line*, and then assume that the man aroused by it must really hate women and secretly wants to dominate and devalue them. After all, if some guy gets off on objectification and degradation, he must be either a misogynist watching his wishes come true or he's one in the making.

Except that he's not necessarily either. I've treated dozens of guys who might get aroused by domination scenarios who don't hate women at all. They have decent and loving relationships with

women. And, most important here, they are able to distinguish between a fantasy and reality.

This is absolutely crucial to understand. Fantasies operate under a different set up psychological “laws,” if you will, than real relationships. Let me give you a non-sexual example, this one involving daydreams. I once had a patient who used to daydream about her husband dying. In her fantasy, people responded to her grief and loss by flocking to her aid, taking care of, sympathizing with, and loving her. The thing is, she loved her husband very much and didn’t harbor any aggressive feelings toward him, much less a death wish. Instead, the daydream expressed her belief that she couldn’t expect to get empathy or love in ordinary every day life. It was as if she had to have experienced a traumatic and devastating loss in order for people to want to take care of her. Her daydream helped her momentarily overcome a grim view of herself and the world. This is an example of how fantasies help us overcome inhibitions.

See, fantasies are not the same as reality. They have complicated meanings.

Sexual fantasies are no exception. They are unconsciously constructed in order to create arousal. When they depict women being used or objectified, a key part of the script is the fact that the

women are invariably shown to be excited themselves. It's just a fact, like it or not, that in the overwhelming majority of heterosexual porn, the women are depicted as aroused and excited. It doesn't matter if in real life, such excitement would be the last thing that a woman would feel, because sexual fantasies have a different aim. And herein lies the paradox: They achieve their aim of arousing the man by reassuring him that he is *not* hurting women. That's how sexual fantasies are designed to work. For a man who grew up feeling worried, responsible, and guilty about women, as many men have, the fact that women in pornography are turned on and not hurt makes it safe enough for the man to get aroused. In the real world, such men would be positively allergic to doing things that would hurt or humiliate women.

The same thing would apply to male sexual fantasies that involve depictions of women as powerful and dominant. A man might very well avoid such women in real life, but in his sexual fantasies, the fact that she's powerful and dominant reassures him that he can't overwhelm or hurt her.

All sexual fantasies, including those enacted in pornography, function to correct some feeling or belief that otherwise inhibits the viewer's libido. A man who gets aroused by a scenario of sex with a couple is excited because the presence of another man reassures

him that it's not just up to him alone to please the woman. A man getting excited by images of women with big breasts is often a man who might have grown up feeling that women didn't want to give much to him, or didn't have much to give. The fact that the women in his preferred pornography have big breasts is arousing because, in his fantasy life, these women have a lot to give and like giving it to men. The sexual fantasies that are enacted in pornography are unconsciously intended to correct and overcome an inhibition—just long enough to allow arousal to be experienced.

So the sexual fantasies constructed in pornography do not predict what a man would like to do in real life. Now, I want to be clear--it's entirely understandable and reasonable that a woman watching pornography would assume that if it arouses a man, that that man must want to do that with real women in the real world. My point is that this isn't necessarily true at all. We all have sexual inhibitions that hold us back in the bedroom, and we all use sexual fantasies and special preferences to overcome them.

Now, I'm not naïve enough to argue that some men who like to watch especially violent pornography aren't sometimes men who like to be sexually aggressive or even violent in their day-to-day lives. But I am arguing that pornography doesn't necessarily cause such real world violence and that one can't infer

from a fantasy the true nature of a man's personality. Sometimes, in fact, such violent men get off on making women helpless and degraded as a way to momentarily overcome their own feelings of helplessness that they've carried around inside since childhood. Obviously such violence is horrific and its perpetrators should be held accountable. But it's also true that instances where genuine cruelty is arousing are not the norm.

Pornography is the visual enactment of a sexual fantasy. That's fantasy--to be distinguished from reality. That's fantasy—to be distinguished from an intention, wish, or even attitude. A fantasy occurs in the imagination. The imagination is creative, capable of all sorts of tricks and distortions. You can't infer from his sexual fantasies what a man will want to do with his girlfriend or wife. This fact accounts for the absence of any reliable, repeatable studies that prove that exposure to pornography increases the likelihood that the men consuming it will act badly toward women.

Now I will say this in the way of a warning. Porn is becoming more extreme and that's potentially problematic. Female performers are increasingly being hurt as a crucial part of porn scenarios. It's problematic not because it will make men more sexually extreme in their real lives with women, but because

it shows that violence in general in our society, including in the media, is becoming more and more normalized. The fact that men can become sexually violent under extreme conditions is a fascinating and troubling fact, but I see no evidence that porn has ever been causally linked to such transformations. Instead, I think that other factors are much more important, including various types of deprivation, the creation of paranoid identity myths, messianic leaders and propaganda, economic competition, cultural scapegoating, and ignorance. Societies in which porn is prevalent, like in Scandinavian countries, have low rates of sexual violence. And we hear of the most violent sexual abuse happening in countries (like Bosnia, Rawanda) in which there is little pornography.

In the absence of evidence, to argue that such sexual violence, much less male violence in general, is caused or even exacerbated by porn is simply to substitute our own fantasies for reality. Since men who watch porn don't make such a mistake, we shouldn't either.