

## **Are there disciplinary differences in writing about pornography? A trialogue for two voices**

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In 2016, Professors Alan McKee (a humanities researcher) and Roger Ingham (a psychology researcher) submitted a successful grant application for a project entitled ‘Pornography’s effects on audiences: explaining contradictory research data’ (DP170100808). We were approached by Feona Attwood, who knew of the grant and asked if we could provide a piece for this special issue that explored ‘writing about porn across disciplines’. The process of writing the grant application had already provided us with plenty of rich data about differences in disciplinary vocabularies and the ways in which various words implied different objects of study and different relationships to objects of study. Rather than trying to hide these differences we decided to make them the focus of the article. This piece presents three voices – Alan (AM), Roger (RI) and the original grant application (GA) – in trialogue, as a tentative beginning to the exploration of some potential differences between academic disciplines in conceptualising, researching and writing about pornography.

**AM:** My undergraduate training was in literary studies and film studies with a strong focus on psychoanalytic film theory. In the course of my doctorate I moved towards cultural studies, and ended up positioning myself in media studies. The latter is a supremely slutty discipline, welcoming with open arms researchers from sociology, political science, philosophy and history among others. I now regularly publish in academic journals that Scopus categorises as psychology. My interest in pornography emerged from interests both cultural and queer – the aesthetics of pornography and the uses made of gay male pornography. As I moved more into media studies I became interested in concerns about the ‘effects’ of pornography on consumers – which I found fascinating because such concerns sounded so alien to me, being part of neither my original disciplinary training nor my personal experience. I met Roger Ingham at a conference in London where I was immediately impressed with his generous, enthusiastic, good-natured and non-judgmental engagement with issues around healthy sexual development and the media.

**RI:** My background is social and health psychology, with a strong leaning towards qualitative approaches and a fairly strong antipathy to the rational social cognitive approaches to health psychology (although I can just about understand why many of my colleagues feel safe in

those spaces). My research and policy-related work for the past 30 years has been on various aspects of young people's sexual health, broadly defined, and the policy implications in the UK and globally (see, for example, Vanwesenbeeck et al., 1999; Ingham and Aggleton, 2005; Ingham, 2005; Hogarth and Ingham, 2009; McGinn et al., 2015; Hadley et al., 2016). Like many in my position, I have had longstanding ambiguities about pornography in many respects. Hearing Alan McKee's talk at an event in London (on the potential value of sexually explicit material as a teaching aid for young people about sexual literacy and competence) opened up new ways of thinking about it all, albeit ways which would be difficult to talk about within the narrow protection-focused agenda with which I had been more frequently confronted. Subsequently, Alan and I obtained the funding from the Australian Research Council, mentioned above, to explore these tensions and disciplinary approaches; this piece is an attempt at an initial capture of some of the challenges we face.

*GA: Within 'social scientific' research into the effects of pornography there is consensus that pornography is harmful to its audiences and that '[i]t is difficult to find a methodologically sound study that shows a lack of some kind of harm when men view pornography' (Foubert, Brosi & Bannon 2011, pp. 213-214). As far back as 1987, social scientists in this area felt able to conclude that:*

*studies ... have found that individuals exposed to [pornography] respond with blunted sensitivity to violence against women, calloused attitudes about rape, and sexual arousal to rape depictions and 'laboratory simulations of aggression against women, among other antisocial effects' (Donnerstein, Linz & Penrod 1987, p. 5)*

**RI:** I already feel uncomfortable about two aspects of this; first, the use of the generic term 'social scientists' (in particular, 'psychologists' as if they/we are an homogenous bunch). We are not. There are probably as many internecine divisions within psychology as there are between psychology and others. Secondly, this offence is perpetuated when a few psychologists writing years ago are put forward as somehow representing the discipline. If I am honest, I guess I have to admit that - even though I completely agree with Alan on his points here - that little ingroup/outgroup monitor inside me feels aggrieved at being typecast in this way. Not the best of starts to inter-disciplinary collaboration and I hope we can work through this. In fact, reading the article that he cites here reveals that the authors were specifically talking about exposure to certain types of sexually violent material, not sexually

explicit material in general, a point they make strongly in responding to the Attorney General's Commission report on Pornography in 1987.

**AM:** Roger is quite correct – and I have high hopes that this kind of interaction will be one of the most productive aspects of our interdisciplinary collaboration. And inspired by this point – as well as by email interactions some years ago with Robert Weitzer – before we go any further I'd like to offer a retraction. In 2009, I published an article called 'Social scientists don't say titwank' in the journal *Sexualities*. I would now like to retract it, in its published form, and offer a more modest version in its place. The article was a response to a series of referees' reports I received on an article presenting the results of a content analysis of fifty of the best-selling porn videos in Australia. One of those reports noted that 'Certain language used in this study is unnecessarily vulgar and unscholarly .... eg ... "wanking" instead of masturbating ... "tit rubbing" instead of breast rubbing or fondling ... "turkey slapping" [and] "titwanking"' (McKee 2009, p. 629). This spurred me on to review and write about differences in language and argumentation between the humanities research on pornography I was familiar with and the social scientific research I was beginning to explore. I claimed that social scientific research laid claim to objectivity in a way that humanities research did not; it assumed that pornography must have primarily negative effects; that it was less open to new approaches to an object of study; and that it was heteronormative. In retrospect, it is clear that, as Roger says above, I was not really talking about 'social science' in that article; I was in fact talking about 'a few psychologists writing years ago' – and the referees of the journals I was seeking to publish in - and generalising from there. This raises a challenge that I also faced some years ago when trying to write about differences between cultures for my book *The Public Sphere*; how can we acknowledge that there are differences between cultures without falling into an essentialist trap of saying that every individual member of a given culture behaves in a particular way? I still believe that there are differences in the cultures and histories of humanities research into pornography and social scientific research into pornography. How can one talk about those without claiming – or even, being thought to claim – that every individual within the categories behaves and thinks in particular ways? In the rest of this article you will notice that the quotations from our grant application refer to 'social scientists', whereas the current voice of Alan McKee – who has learned a lot from the process of writing this article that he did not know even a few months ago when we crafted the application – refers more precisely to 'psychologists'.

**GA:** *By contrast, humanities research in this area has come to very different conclusions. For example, The Feminist Porn Book, edited by the filmmaker Tristan Taormino and academics Celine Parreñas Shimizu and Constance Penley (Film Studies) and Mireille Miller-Young (Cultural Studies) suggests that pornography can lead to positive feminist outcomes for its audiences:*

*Feminist porn uses sexually explicit imagery to contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, body type, and other identity markers. It explores concepts of desire, agency, power, beauty and pleasure at their most confounding and difficult, including pleasure within and across inequality, in the face of injustice, and against the limits of gender hierarchy and both heteronormativity and homonormativity (Penley et al. 2013, pp. 9-10)*

**RI:** The use of ‘By contrast, humanities research ...’ again runs the risk of reinforcing divides and risks setting up a discourse of Psychology/Social Sciences equals bad and Humanities equals good. I know this is not the intention – at least I think I know this - but what does ‘knowing’ mean these days? Further, if I am being perfectly honest as a humble psychologist of very little brain, I really don’t understand much of this quotation. I do hope that someone can unpack it for me sooner rather than later.

**AM:** I’ll unpack that quotation during our next Skype meeting.

**GA:** *Writing on traditional male-oriented material, Professor of Literature Jane Juffer argues that pornography in the 1980s had an important role in ‘teaching women that masturbation was an accepted activity’ (Juffer 1998, p. 73), a vital part of second wave feminism. Media studies professor Clarissa Smith’s analysis suggests that pornography can offer ‘to women the possibility of joining other women in discussing sex and imagining sex’ (Smith 2007).*

**AM:** By comparing Juffer and Smith’s approaches with the psychological research quoted above I would argue that we can see that different academic disciplines have different ways of conceptualising pornography and its harms or benefits. These differences have important implications for how we think about and write about pornography.

**RI:** I completely agree with the general point here but I question the placement of dividing line – if I said (for example, in a different domain) ‘It is clear that different genders have different ways of conceptualising ...’ I would get crucified, if not worse. We will need to be somewhat smarter in how we divide up the world, I hope. [Further, and by the way, at the

time about which Juffer was writing (the 1980s), I wonder how many women actually had regular access to pornography (quite apart from the issue of the basis on which she feels she can claim that attitudes were changed as result of such access)?]

**AM:** This goes to my point above – how can we describe existing patterns of behaviour without (being accused of) falling prey to essentialism? One might get crucified if one wrote ‘different genders have different ways of conceptualising ...’: but one still has to find ways to describe the real differences in the way that men and women are socialised and the different cultures in which they live, yes? One can still write about masculine and feminine cultures? And the ways in which humanities and social science researchers are trained differently, with very different ideas about what counts as interesting or meaningful data, or how an article should be structured – we can acknowledge them? Humanities researchers do not write ‘methods’ or ‘limitations’ sections in their articles, for example. That is not an unimportant distinction.

**GA:** *In Australia and in many other countries, policymakers, educators, parents and young people are concerned about possible negative effects of using pornography on the sexual development of its audiences - effects such as becoming violent towards women, or becoming more accepting of violence towards women (Partridge 2014), losing interest in sex (Borzillo 2015), having difficulties sustaining erections (Zukerman 2015), becoming addicted, having unrealistic expectations or losing the ability to have relationships (Moulton 2015).*

**RI:** During the development of our grant proposal, we spent some time trying to settle on a term to describe the process whereby people are ‘exposed’ to pornography. By using a term like ‘using’ there is already some pre-judgement of the situation; for example, we would not say that people ‘use’ westerns, or science-fiction material, or other genres. Similarly, ‘accessing’, ‘being exposed to’, ‘consuming’, and other terms may have equally pointed implications. I suspect we will need to be smarter on selecting terms that do not lead down certain restrictive discursive paths, as well as recognising that the specific social (or anti-social) contexts in which people and porn do come together may govern the selection of appropriate terminology.

**AM:** Whereas I suspect that it will be impossible to find terms that do not lead down certain restrictive discursive paths.

**GA:** *Recent overviews of social scientific research into the effects of pornography agree that [t]here is ... a strong body of evidence ... establishing a link between exposure to sexually*

*explicit material and engagement in aggressive or violent sexual practices’ (Guy, Patton & Kaldor 2012, p. 546), and that ‘pornography has been linked to unrealistic attitudes about sex, maladaptive attitudes about relationships ... belief that women are sex objects .. and less progressive gender role attitudes’ (Horvath et al. 2013, p. 7).*

**RI:** Politicians need to make policies and be seen by their constituents to be addressing their concerns. Sometimes, psychologists are complicit in this dumbing down since they like to see their names in the media, and the funders are keen that they have impact. Hence, there is insufficient attention paid to the complexities of the whole area, the different types of material, the different motivations, the different possible cause-effect pathways – and, perhaps of utmost importance – what societal reactions will be appropriate in, for example, school-based sex education, parental and carer policies and issues relating to access for young people.

*GA: How do we explain the very different accounts of the effects of pornography in these different disciplines?*

**RI:** To the extent to which these exist, to what degree are these differences unique to pornography or reflecting a more generic Two Cultures (Snow, 1959) situation (Humanities versus Science), with psychology still trying really very hard to align itself with the proper sciences?

*GA: It could be that researchers are in fact looking at different objects of study (what is included in the category ‘pornography’?) or are asking different questions (maybe pornography’s effects are both good and bad simultaneously): however, the uncompromising tone of much social scientific research insists that it is speaking about the effects of a homogenous category (Smith, 2007, p. 19) and asking the only relevant questions about pornography (McKee, 2009).*

**RI:** Quite so. But we also need to look beyond simple disciplinary binaries...

**AM:** ... while not denying that differences between cultures exist. This is clearly going to be an ongoing theme in our collaboration.

*GA: This project proposes that one important explanation lies in disciplinary differences in research method. David Gauntlett’s influential 1998 article ‘Ten things wrong with the media effects model’ (Gauntlett 1998) identified important disciplinary differences between humanities and social scientific studies of the media’s effects on audiences. Among these were differences in the ascription of agency, differences in assumptions about what counts as*

*desirable social behaviour, different models of the coherence of human subjects across social contexts, and different attitudes towards the nature and importance of 'meaning' in the process of consuming media texts. McKee has built on this work with a series of articles exploring the differences between humanities and social scientific research into pornography's effects on its audiences (McKee 2009, 2014, 2015; McKee, Bragg & Taormino 2015). These include the fact that social scientific research into pornography's effects on its audiences reached a stable consensus on what are the most important effects, and agreed that these effects are negative; that it is difficult to introduce new research questions into social scientific research in this area; that the social scientific research on this topic favours unemotional disembodied language in its description of bodily pleasures (McKee 2009); that it focuses on finding common responses across groups rather than unique responses, using statistical measures of central tendencies, or averages, or means, for example, and thereby making individual variation relatively invisible; that it favours exhaustiveness and representativeness as epistemological virtues (McKee 2014); and that it has often employed heteronormative paradigms that insist that only monogamous binary sex within committed relationships is healthy (McKee 2009).*

**RI:** These are all claims/assertions/tentative and gently spoken suggestions that will repay further careful analysis from differing perspectives. I note, by the way, that Alan has slipped here from using 'psychologists' to the more nebulous concept of 'social scientist', thereby casting his oppositional lens in even broader directions.

**AM:** Yes, as noted above, I withdraw my use of the term 'social scientist' – used in the grant application, but replaced now in my more nuanced understanding by 'psychologist' (which I accept still worries Roger).

**GA:** *By contrast, humanities research into the effects of pornography on its audiences has little consensus on important questions, but is more varied and even scattered; has proven open to positive effects of pornography; can use vulgar, bodily language (McKee 2009); is often interested in the unique or unusual case study; favours idiosyncratic creativity on the part of the researcher as an epistemic virtue (McKee 2014); and has embraced queer forms of sexuality (McKee 2009).*

**RI:** Yes, indeed. But as a psychologist/quasi-scientist, I am bound to ask on what bases are outputs from humanities research judged? Originality? Shock value? Personal agreement? Recognition and acceptance of diversity? Punctuation? One of the reasons why policymakers

ask psychologists (as opposed to humanities researchers) to work towards developing policy might be because they know that they will get some suggestions – even if they are way off beam and/or just plain wrong; their audience probably won't know they are wrong. On the other hand, asking 50 humanities researchers and getting back 51 answers will not help the policy-makers to sleep at night, even if these researchers had a whale of a time in devising their suggestions. On Alan's third point, I may be wrong here, but I cannot imagine a psychology journal being happy to publish an article containing the term 'titwank'; the reviewers would almost certainly ask for an operational definition of the term, alongside its test-retest and alpha coefficients.

**AM:** I think here the interdisciplinary nature of our project begins to bear fruit. Exciting fruit if one can imagine such a thing. A psychologist asks a humanities researcher, so how do you judge the quality of research in your disciplines? Roger is quite right: the concepts used in psychological refereeing – validity and reliability – aren't typically applied in the humanities. 'How convincing is your argument?' is certainly one criterion that might be applied by referees. 'Does your evidence back up your argument?' is another: this is something that might be close to validity, and is used sometimes in the humanities but certainly isn't a requirement – there's a strong tradition in humanities research of anti-empiricist, theoretical research that sees 'evidence' as not only unnecessary but, more than that, deeply suspect. And then a referee might ask – 'how original is your argument?' Are you presenting a new way of understanding familiar data, one that hasn't been seen before? New interpretations of existing data don't require 'evidence' *per se* - what would constitute 'evidence' in a new interpretation of a poem? And while 'punctuation' might not be a criterion (are you taking this entirely seriously, Roger?), felicity of expression certainly could be (I feel here that Roger is getting close to being as insulting to Humanities researchers as I have in the past been to psychologists ...).

**GA:** *Feminist standpoint theorists (Harding 2004) point out that the concept of objectivity has been taken to mean both neutrality and the possibility of a totality of knowledge, neither of which is epistemologically justifiable. For example, Mark McLelland writes about the way in which his 'own role as a sexual player in interactions with Japanese men has shaped my research' (McLelland 2002, p. 388). Thomas and Williams provide an overview of the way that sex researchers have claimed 'quasi-neutrality' in excluding their own beliefs and identities from their research, and argue that an understanding a researcher's beliefs and*

*identity can be related to their research project choices, methodological choices and conclusions (Thomas & Williams 2016).*

**RI:** Some very fascinating possibilities for research here that might, however, struggle to get through ethics committees and face other barriers. So, am I a boring psychologist because I am a straight man, I wonder? Indeed, am I assuming these might be causally related because I am boring, or because I am a psychologist, or because I am a straight man, or none of the above? There are, of course, feminists who will stand no truck with the idea of pornography being anything other than outrageous and, by its very nature, abusive to all women.

**AM:** The fact that you are a straight man is definitely relevant. The fact that you are a straight man who is open to queer possibilities (I mean epistemological rather than physical) makes you very interesting.

**GA:** *In relation to sex research 'heteronormativity' is a key concept for making visible the partiality of existing research. Developed within queer theory - a humanities-based project drawing on cultural studies, literary studies, and philosophy – this concept draws attention to the ways in which dominant modes of sexuality are presented as not only normal and healthy but as 'the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community' (Warner 1993, p. xxi). This is true not only of heterosexual modes of sexuality, but every mode of sexuality that presents itself as 'the normal' (Warner 1993, p. xxvi). This is the 'charmed circle' (Rubin 1992, p. 281) of monogamous, vanilla, non-commercial, procreative sexuality. It excludes queers who are polyamorous, kinky or BDSM, sex workers or those who have casual sex. Note that this means that heterosexual sex can be anti-heteronormative; while gay men and lesbians (in coupled, committed, monogamous relationships) can be heteronormative.*

**RI:** There is certainly a great deal of lazy confusion between 'normative' as in statistical terms (that is, reflecting probability of occurrence – or at least of what people tell us) and 'normative/normal' as in preferred and acceptable.

**GA:** *An anti-heteronormative approach reveals the partiality of existing social scientific research into the effects of pornography on its audiences. Much of the social scientific research in this area assumes that consensual BDSM, casual sex, having more than one lifetime sexual partner, or even talking openly about sex (McKee, Bragg & Taormino 2015, p. 452), are negative sexual outcomes, or 'harms'. The concept of 'risk' is used in these articles to suggest that only non-risky sex (that is, lifetime monogamy) is healthy.*

**RI:** To be honest, this is not a caricature of social science research that I recognise. There are indeed operational definitions of ‘risk’ (although I prefer the term ‘vulnerability’ for all sorts of reasons) – but these are not necessarily as value-laden in the way implied. Some articles will include casual sex in conjunction with condom use as an index of the extent of ‘safe’ behaviours. I cannot recall one article that uses ‘one lifetime sexual partner’ as a measure (other than ideological pieces from the religious moral right, who cannot be regarded as social scientists, surely?).

**AM:** ‘Among 986 sexually active men, 14% had had more than one sexual partner in their lifetime ... Risk-factors that correlate with having multiple sex partners included having seen pornography’ ... Na He is with the Department of Epidemiology, School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles ... This study was funded by U.S. National Institute of Health Fogarty International Center’ (He et al. 2006, p. 176). This may well be an outlier – but it is easy to find psychological research on pornography naming extramarital sex as an undesirable risky effect.

[**RI:** Although Epidemiology is not psychology nor, indeed, a social science].

**AM:** Like Roger, I worry about the term ‘risk’, for two main reasons. At least some of the research sees risk as automatically undesirable, whereas I see risk as value-neutral – risk can be good, and all learning involves risk. Secondly, the understanding of risk in the research can be too focused only on medical risks and not on, for example, the risk of being stuck in a patriarchal heteronormative relationship.

**GA:** *Indeed, because heteronormative attitudes see explicit representations of sex as being, in and of themselves, negative (Sullivan & McKee 2015, p. 4) social scientific researchers often start from the assumption that pornography is negative; the effects of this assumption can be seen in the tendency in much social scientific research into the effects of pornography to confuse correlation and causality. Even when these researchers admit in relation to their cross-sectional surveys that they can make no statements about causality they often then go on to make claims about ‘the Internet’s impact on adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviors’ (Braun-Courville & Rojas 2009, pp. 156, emphasis added) or that ‘prolonged exposure [to pornography] can lead to ... sexually permissive attitudes’ (Braun-Courville & Rojas 2009, pp. 158, emphasis added), for example.*

**RI:** I fully accept this point about the frequent confusions of correlation and causality, and the not uncommon conflation even within the same article. Indeed, the compulsory sections on

'limitations of study' - so beloved of journal editors and reviewers - do sometimes appear to have been written by authors without the advantage of having read the rest of their own article. Here again, however, there is sometimes a confusion between different usage of certain terms; for example, the term 'predict' is often used in a statistical sense without any implication at all of a real life causal link being assumed – it can point to a possible association, but no more than that. These confusions certainly spill over into everyday journalism – it is not uncommon after cases of serious sexual assault to read that the perpetrator had access to pornography sites before committing their crime. This may well be the case, but one certainly cannot assume that, without having had this access, the crime would not have been committed. Gender-related power and aggression goes much deeper than this. In conclusion, there is no doubt that there are some important and urgent issues to address in the context of the changing social and sexual worlds that young people are needing to navigate. But we will need to be rather more sophisticated in both demarcating and merging boundaries and divisions between academic approaches and disciplines and between types of material, if we are to make genuine progress in theoretical and practical directions.

**AM:** Writing this article reminds me of why I'm so excited about working with Roger on a project that I think is genuinely innovative. Roger and I do not speak each other's languages with total fluency – and that makes this a risky endeavour (that word again). We will, I am sure, continue to accidentally insult each other, as everyone does when learning about a new culture and language. But Roger has consistently proven himself to be generous and forgiving and interested in making this translation work – and I aspire to be more like him as we move forward. And when you're working with a colleague who has a sense of humour ('do sometimes appear to have been written by authors without the advantage of having read the rest of their own article') it makes it easier to take risks. Working on this project we will learn a lot about each other, our disciplines – and how we can write about pornography.

**RI:** I am excited as well, but also more than a little apprehensive. I will decide if I want to be more like Alan in a couple of years' time but, at the moment, all the indications are very positive.

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