

## **Social Scientists Don't Say Titwank**

**Alan McKee**

### *Abstract*

Drawing on the textual evidence of a number of referees' reports, this article maps key differences between the humanities and social sciences approaches to the study of pornography, in order to facilitate better understanding and communication between the areas. 1. Social scientists avoid 'vulgar' language to describe sex. Humanities scholars need not do so. 2. Social scientists remain committed to the idea of 'objectivity' while humanities scholars reject the idea – although this may be a confusion in language, with the term in the social sciences used to mean something more like 'falsifiability'. 3. Social science assumes that the primary effects of exposure to pornography must be negative. 4. More generally, social science resists paradigm changes, insisting that all new work agrees with research that has gone before. 5. Social science believes that casual sex and sadomasochism are negative; humanities research need not do so.

### *Keywords*

Pornography, objectivity, casual sex, sadomasochism, paradigms.

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## **S O C I A L S C I E N T I S T S D O N ' T S A Y ' T I T W A N K '**

### **1 . T H E P R O B L E M O F L A N G U A G E**

In 2004 I submitted a manuscript to a leading journal of social science. It was accepted for publication; but the referees asked for a number of revisions, including the following:

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'.<sup>1</sup>

Receiving this report gave me pause for thought. I am indeed a 'vulgar' person (OED, 'Of language or speech: Commonly or customarily used by the people of a country; ordinary, vernacular'; 'Of or pertaining to the common people'). I had not realised that this rendered me or my work unscholarly. I rewrote the article to remove all the 'rude' words (OED, 'lacking in knowledge or book-learning') and it was published.

The manuscript was one that emerged from a three year project funded by the Australian Research Council entitled 'Understanding Pornography in Australia'. The project employed both humanities and social science research methods – interviews, surveys, content analysis, textual analysis and philosophical exegesis – to provide an overview of the production, consumption and content of pornography in Australia.

The mixture of humanities and social science methodologies is not revolutionary. My background is in Cultural Studies. One of the most attractive aspects of that approach is that it has brought together practitioners from a number of disciplinary backgrounds, including Literary Studies, Sociology, Political Science and Philosophy, to address common questions of culture and power. The key texts of Cultural Studies favour humanities methods, but they also include quantitative work such as that of Bourdieu (1986). The majority of my previous work has gathered data using traditional humanities methods such as textual analysis and exegesis as well as crossover methods such as interviews (McKee, 2004). Despite this fact, the methods I have favoured have been, if not quantitative, then at least strongly empirical<sup>2</sup>. My interest has mostly not been in the philosophical work of cultural Theory, but more in archival and historical work which draws on evidence that can be sourced and checked by independent observers in order to weigh up my claims (McKee, 1999;

McKee, 2004b). I have also explored in my work the difference between the kinds of knowledge produced by quantitative and qualitative methods, and the value they hold as complementary ways of understanding an object of study (McKee, 2003: 3).

But moving increasingly into social science methods for this research project on pornography made me realise that there is more to being a social scientist than simply employing the methods of social science data gathering. There is also a performative element. There are some things that no introductory textbook will tell you. Why does a social scientist have to say 'stimulation of the penis with the breasts' rather than 'titwank'? It is clearly not a matter of imprecision – there's no suggestion that 'titwank' describes the act any less precisely. And it can't simply be a matter of elegance – the single word and two syllables of 'titwank' is more euphonious than the staccato polysyllabism needed to describe the action in less 'vulgar' language.

Susanna Paasonen, who similarly moved from humanities to social science methods in her work on pornography, has described the strange feeling of distance from the data she was producing – in this case, a content analysis of pornographic spam:

While I found this approach rather unimaginative, it did help in mapping out the general gendered choreography of commercial heteroporn. Content description ... made it possible to produce pie charts visualizing the material. I found the charts simply mesmerising: they made strikingly visible the generic conventions of porn spam ... I experienced the charts as somewhat absurd in the sense that they transformed explicit representations into neat graphic charts, wedges and percentages, thus effectively creating a sense of distance. The charts summarised the material but also rendered invisible those examples that did not quite fit in (Paasonen, 2007: 44).

I recognise Paasonen's sense of discomfort with her methods. In the humanities there is no longer a problem with the use of vulgar language. Here was my first lesson – social scientists don't say 'titwank'. The language to be used is not the language of the 'vulgar' common people. It is the language of the middle classes – language that wants to remove pleasure, humour and the body from the object described. This is language that creates a distance from the object of study. It is the language in short – following Norbert Elias's history of the development of 'good manners' and the class struggles that they embody (Elias, 1994) - of the clerical bourgeoisie, and their descendents, the middle classes. By contrast, in the humanities – and particularly in

Queer Theory, an area in which I have researched and published – this is not the case. There are many ‘fucks’ in Queer Theory.

The process of being refereed by social science journals was fascinating. The papers were accepted for publication, so there is clearly enough shared method and language across humanities and social sciences for communication to take place. But I was genuinely surprised by some of the feedback that pointed to the very different habituses in different academic disciplines. This paper takes a slightly unusual methodology – an exegesis of the referees’ reports that I received during this process – to explore some of these differences. The aim is not to claim that, where differences exist, between Humanities and Social Science approaches to studying pornography, that the Humanities are correct and Social Science is wrong. Rather I hope that this paper can identify (and empirically illustrate) these differences in a way that both Humanities and Social Science readers can recognise and accept; and that this can serve as a preliminary move in an ongoing dialogue. If each side can understand the other and – utopian vision! – learn from the other, how might this impact on future research into pornography?

## 2. THE PROBLEM OF OBJECTIVITY

In another article from the ‘Understanding Pornography’ project, submitted to another prominent social science journal in 2005, reporting on the results of a survey of consumers of pornography, I made the following observations about the tradition of pornography research:

There are ... important ideological issues about the interpretation of evidence. For example Lahey has argued that any decrease in reported rapes in societies which have liberalised access to pornography should be interpreted as signifying an actual *increase* in the rape rate, working on the assumption that women will be less likely to report rape in a society where pornography has made it seem more acceptable (Lahey, 1991: 123). Conversely, Baron and Straus argue that increases in the reported rate of rape could be seen as signifying an actual *decrease* in the rape rate as, in a liberalised society, women will be more likely to report rape (Baron and Straus, 1984: 206).

In a context of such ideological disagreement it is difficult to make confident statements about the usefulness of information provided by [aggregate] studies. It is clear from reviewing the material that pornography researchers tend to interpret evidence in ways

that best suit their own personal beliefs (see for example Christensen 1986; Zillmann and Bryant, 1986; Brannigan, 1987; Zillmann and Bryant, 1987; Mould, 1988a; Mould, 1988b; Donnerstein and Linz, 1988; Malamuth, 1988; O'Grady, 1988; and comments in Fisher and Barak, 1991: 79; Brannigan, 1991: 2; Lahey, 1991: 119).

...

Partly we can explain [discrepancies between research results] through the ideological positioning of researchers (Donnerstein, Linz and Penrod, 1987: 35; Mould, 1988a: 326-327). One group's understanding of what counts as 'negative' effects may seem to other researchers to be 'positive' (Christensen, 1986: 178). For example, some researchers have found that in laboratory settings, exposure to pornography can make people more tolerant of sexual diversity: they argue that this is a negative effect as it challenges conservative family values: 'The nuclear family is generally considered vital for societal welfare' (Zillmann, 1989: 140). Other researchers would disagree with this position (see for example Lehr, 1999; Sullivan, ed, 1999; Quinn, 2000).

The article was rejected (a version was ultimately published in *The International Journal of Sexual Health*, McKee 2007b). One of the referees gave as a reason for rejecting the manuscript the material quoted above. S/he rejected the suggestion that there was an 'ideological' dimension to the tradition of pornography research, noting that there was 'no support provided' for the claim. Despite the fact that the examples I gave showed that researchers interpret evidence differently depending on their personal beliefs, and that several of the authors I cited had explored that point explicitly, the suggestion that social science research might not be simply objective was – in 2005 – still offensive enough to require comment and contribute to a recommendation to reject from a social science journal.

Again, this brought me up short. For readers in Cultural Studies or other areas of the humanities, the suggestion that anybody might still believe that scientific research is objective might seem to be a straw man. It is, after all, a given in Cultural Studies that all knowledge is created within culture, and that the kinds of knowledge created will depend on the cultural context within which it is produced. Historians and philosophers of science have made a number of claims that seem to me to be uncontroversial, and which I would think are widely accepted - certainly within the humanities. Four of these are worth sketching out quickly.

Firstly, scientific traditions and disciplines tend to limit the areas that are seen as suitable for investigation; and the questions that are suitable to ask. Or, to put it another way, science doesn't investigate everything. There are large areas of human experience which are taken to be unimportant, or uninteresting, or so obvious as to not need investigating. An obvious example is that there has been very little research into the gene that causes heterosexuality; compared with work investigating the possibility of a gene that causes homosexuality. In Thomas Kuhn's history of science he points out that there are always other questions that could be asked at any given time, and that the decision about what areas are seen to be important, and what questions should be asked of them, is decided by the scientific community (Kuhn, 1970: 26-28). Measurements are never 'undertaken for their own sake ... without theoretical commitment' (Kuhn, 1970: 28).

Secondly, a central point for historians and philosophers of science is that there is a key moment in scientific procedure when data are gathered which challenge a hypothesis. There are at least two broad responses to such data. One is to immediately accept that the hypothesis is wrong, and to abandon it. The other is to find some way to retain the hypothesis – either by rejecting the data as flawed; by expanding the initial hypothesis to include an as yet unknown factor which, it is projected, will in time explain the ill-fitting data; or by simply ignoring the problematic data. Thomas Kuhn claims that: 'If any and every failure [of results] to fit were ground for theory rejection, all theories ought to be rejected at all times' (Kuhn, 1970: 146); while Paul Feyerabend suggests that: 'No theory ever agrees with all the facts in its domain' (Feyerabend, 1975: 55). Kuhn gives the example of the failure of the moon's motion to match the predictions of Newton's laws of motion and gravitation:

Throughout the eighteenth century those scientists who tried to derive the observed motion of the moon from Newton's laws ... consistently failed to do so. As a result some of them suggested replacing the inverse square law with a law that deviated from it at small distances ... In the event, scientists preserved the rules until, in 1750, one of them discovered how they could successfully be applied (Kuhn, 1970: 39).

Michael Polanyi makes a similar point, using the example of Michelson-Morley's 1887 experiments measuring the speed of light in different directions, replicated by D C Miller between 1902 to 1926. The results of these experiments contradict Einstein's Theory of Relativity. And yet the scientific community did not abandon Einstein's

theories. Rather the evidence was ‘set aside in the hope that it would one day turn out to be wrong’ (Polanyi, 1962: 13). As the President of the British Association said in 1938: ‘Nobody doubted relativity. There must therefore be some unknown source of error which had upset Miller’s work’ (Darwin, quoted in Polanyi, 1962: 13). The question of which approach to take – to accept contradictory data as disproving a theory, or to hold on to the theory and look for an explanation for the ill-fitting data – cannot be predicted by scientific protocols (Kuhn, 1970: 200). It is a personal, human – subjective – response.

Thirdly, historians and philosophers of science have pointed out that the various branches of knowledge brought together under the title ‘science’ are contradictory. They represent different ways of making sense of the world:

An investigator ... asked a distinguished physicist and an eminent chemist whether a single atom of helium was or was not a molecule. Both answered without hesitation ... for the chemist the atom of helium was a molecule because it behaved like one with respect to the kinetic theory of gases. For the physicist, on the other hand, the helium atom was not a molecule because it displayed no molecular spectrum. Presumably both men were talking about the same particle, but they were viewing it through their own research training and practice (Kuhn, 1970: 50-51).

Feyerabend similarly notes that: ‘Newton’s theory is inconsistent with Galileo’s law of free fall and with Kepler’s laws ... statistical thermodynamics is inconsistent with the second law of the phenomenological theory ... [and] wave optics is inconsistent with geometrical optics’ (Feyerabend, 1975: 35).

And fourthly, scientific knowledge can never remain exclusively in the world of numbers and statistics. In order to communicate results, it is necessary at some point to use language. And the use of language leads to the use of metaphors – both those that are used explicitly, and those that have become so familiar as to no longer be noticed as metaphors. This imposes ways of interpreting data that emphasise certain aspects of it and marginalise or ignore others. Historians and philosophers of science have shown that, for example, the models for understanding nature that are employed in biology (Scheibinger, 1993) and molecular biology (Spanier, 1995) use metaphors drawn from cultural assumptions about male/female relations, and impose particular ways of understanding things and the relations between them based on those metaphors. Spanier shows, for example, how our binary cultural system of two



opposite genders is imposed onto scientific research into molecules so that some hormones are called 'female' and others 'male', even though all hormones are present in all people in various amounts, and:

women after menopause [actually] have lower levels of the major estrogen and progesterin than do men of the same age ... The error of assuming that male and female exist as bipolar sexes and natural sexual complements, compounded by superimposing two sexes onto certain hormones, projects ideologies of maleness and femaleness onto metabolism and other biological functions, distorting our scientific understanding of the molecular level of life (Spanier, 1995: 68).

These points can certainly be seen in the tradition of social science research on pornography, which has:

1. focussed strongly on certain questions about pornography, and ignored others (for example, on the positive effects of exposure to pornography)
2. responded to results which contradicted dominant theories not by abandoning those theories, but by retaining them and focussing research energy on attempts to find explanations for the lack of coherent data that would fit the dominant theories.
3. relied on certain assumptions about what was positive and negative about human sexuality which not every rational, informed and ethical person would agree with.

This is the background I write against, in the humanities. And I would presume that none of these points would seem unreasonable to social scientists. For example, feminist scholars in the social sciences have investigated whose knowledge is counted as worthwhile, and whose is excluded. But when, from the humanities, you take this evidence as suggesting that science isn't 'objective' ... well, that is an unacceptable claim within social science.

But I suspect that what is going on here is in fact a matter of differing terminology. Indeed, this may prove to be a subset of my first point – a further problem with language. Science prides itself on its 'objectivity' (Popper, 1979), and the points discussed above do not (the referee's report would suggest) compromise that claim to objectivity. It appears that, for scientists, the word 'objectivity' makes a claim about procedure - knowledge characterised by falsifiability. That is not how I use the word. For me, from the humanities, my suggestion that social scientific knowledge about pornography is not objective, but is rather ideological, gestures towards the points

raised above. By it I mean that science is always, necessarily, partial (in both senses of the word). But for a referee for a social science journal, the claim means something quite different. It is, I suspect, a charge of malpractice – a failure to follow correct scientific procedure, a charge of doing bad science. ‘Ideology’ in public debate means the position of the ‘ideologue’ – one whose mind is closed to evidence, the very opposite of scientific good practice.

This is not to say that social science is naïve. This is why I suggest there is a problem with language. Social scientists do not believe that the data they produce in their research is simple, uncomplicated ‘truth’ or ‘facts’. There is an explicit acknowledgement in scientific practice that research is necessarily partial. It is standard practice in reports of social scientific experiments to report – as well as the ‘Method’, ‘Results’ and ‘Discussion’ – the ‘Limitations’ of the research. In this section of their writing, social scientists will acknowledge the questions they did not ask, the work they have not done, the perspectives they have not considered, and what the data they have gathered cannot reveal. For a humanities researcher, this could be described as demonstrating the lack of ‘objectivity’ of social science – an acknowledgement of partiality. But as I say, the languages of humanities and social science differ markedly on this point. For a social science researcher, the discussion of the limitations of the research does not compromise their claims to objectivity: rather it strengthens them. By contrast, I would imagine that many scholars working in the humanities would admit quite cheerfully that their work is not ‘objective’ without seeing that as lessening its value.

### **3. THE PROBLEM OF THE ASSUMPTION THAT PORNOGRAPHY MUST HAVE PRIMARILY NEGATIVE EFFECTS**

One of the articles emerging from the ‘Understanding Pornography’ project presented a content analysis of fifty of the bestselling pornographic videos in Australia (McKee, 2005). A referee for this paper insisted that before it could be published, it should be written explicitly into the tradition of what had gone before, accepting and restating familiar assumptions:

This study fails to address much relevant literature regarding the theoretical rationale for undertaking such an investigation ... The author gives only a cursory mention of

'children and pornography', 'free speech' and 'the degree to which pornography objectifies women' ... Any study focussing on any part of the potential impact, content or regulation of pornography should really begin with an analysis of the interrelationship between these various dimensions ... Perhaps most troubling in the page and half introduction/literature review is the general lack of discussion of the empirical research regarding the effects of exposure to various kinds of sexually explicit materials ...

Our study was a content analysis – it was not looking at the 'effects of exposure'. But the referee was emphasizing that within the Social Sciences it is unacceptable to do any kind of study of pornography – whatever the focus or interest - without beginning with the standard concern: 'the effects of exposure' to pornography. And there is absolute agreement in the literature that 'the effects of exposure' are negative ones.

From researching the previous tradition of social science research into pornography it became clear that there were two fundamental assumptions underlying that work. The first was the assumption that the key and most important effects of exposure to pornography were negative. There is no experimental work supporting this belief. It was rather an example of the tendency noted above by Kuhn – science asks only certain questions and ignores others. What are the possible positive effects of exposure to pornography? Although they have been mentioned in passing in other studies (Flood and Hamilton, 2003: 24; Duggan, Hunter and Vance, 1998: 82; Winick, 1985: 209; Kimmel, 1990), they have never formed the basis of any data-gathering.

The second assumption is that of all the various factors in our society which might cause negative attitudes towards women, pornography is, if not the most important, at least a key component - to the extent that it justifies the most extensive tradition of social science research into a form of mediated culture and its effects on negative attitudes towards women.

We surveyed over 1000 consumers of pornography as part of our research. In the correct social science manner, I will now claim this data as objective – although I am very aware of its limitations and its partiality. In regard to the latter point, I acknowledge that we recruited self-nominated consumers of pornography – those who were willing to be tell a social science researcher about it, which results in certain kinds of data being gathered. And we must always remember the limitations of

surveys as means of data gathering. In particular, our written survey produced a population of consumers that skewed towards those with disproportionately high levels of formal education. There is also a limit to the nuance and subtlety of the data that can be captured by such an instrument (an issue we tried to address by conducting detailed follow up interviews with 46 consumers of pornography around Australia). Nevertheless, acknowledging these limitations, the data produced was objective, in the social science sense of that word. And the majority of these consumers of pornography felt that exposure to pornography has had a positive effect on their attitudes towards sexuality. Only a tiny minority felt that it has had a negative effect. We asked the consumers:

What effect has pornography had on your attitudes towards sexuality?

- A large negative effect (please provide brief details)
- A small negative effect (please provide brief details)
- No effect at all
- A small positive effect (please provide brief details)
- A large positive effect (please provide brief details)

56.8% of respondents felt that exposure to pornography had a positive effect on their attitudes towards sexuality (25.5% large, 31.3% small). 34.6% felt it had no effect; while only 6.8% thought it had a negative effect (1.1% large, 5.7% small) (McKee, 2007). The top nine most common effects nominated by consumers were, in order from the most common:

- Becoming less repressed and more comfortable about sex (13.8% of all respondents)
- Becoming more open minded and willing to experiment sexually (9.7%)
- Becoming more tolerant of other people's sexual pleasures (6.6%)
- Pleasurable arousal and stimulation (6.4%)
- Education about bodies, ideas and techniques (5.6%)
- Maintaining sexual interest in long term relationships (4.6%)
- Becoming more attentive to a partner's sexual pleasure (2.8%)
- Helping to find an identity or community (eg, gay or bisexual) (2.3%)

- Helping to open discussions with a partner about sex (2.1%).

The tenth effect, mentioned by 1.8% of consumers, was a negative one - that pornography had led them to 'objectify' sexual partners. An interesting point that emerged from this survey of effects was the very small number of consumers of pornography who reported problems with addiction. Only 4 consumers - 0.4% - reported a problem with addiction to pornography.

A second interesting finding related to negative attitudes towards women. We surveyed respondents' attitudes towards women using a six item Likert scale instrument (drawing on the work of Spence and Helmreich, 1972; Peters et al, 1974; Burt, 1980; and Dreyer et al, 1981), asking them to tick whether they would 'Strongly disagree', 'Disagree', 'Have no opinion on this issue', 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' with a number of statements:

- Women should get equal pay for equal work
- Women should have access to abortion on demand
- It is acceptable for women to continue to work outside the home after they have children, if they want to
- It is acceptable for a woman to stop a sexual encounter at any point, no matter how keen she may have been initially
- It is acceptable for women to be sexually assertive
- I would not mind working for a female boss.

We then ran tests for statistical significance between the respondents' attitudes towards women and a number of demographic features from the survey. Again the results were surprising.

There was no statistical correlation between how much pornography respondents consumed and their attitudes towards women.

However, there were a number of clear correlations with other factors. Older respondents had worse attitudes towards women than younger respondents. Right wing voters had worse attitudes towards women than left-wing voters. Christians had worse attitudes towards women than atheists or Buddhists. Those who lived in rural areas had worse attitudes than those who lived in urban areas. And those who had not

completed formal secondary education had worse attitudes than those who had completed further formal education (McKee, 2007b).

Again, the results were interesting for comparing with the tradition of social science research. I am not aware of any work which has been done of the potentially negative effects of exposure to the Bible, or to right wing political materials – but our results suggest that both of those might be more fruitful avenues of investigation for researchers concerned about the creation of negative attitudes towards women than a study of the effects of exposure to pornography.

#### **4 . THE PROBLEM OF NEW IDEAS**

The referee's insistence that I start from the same place that social science research into pornography always starts from – the potential negative effects of exposure to the genre – is an example of a more general rift between humanities and social sciences approaches to the production of knowledge.

In the humanities, there is an expectation that when you as a researcher approach a topic of investigation, you will have something new to say about – a new insight, a new idea, a new way of thinking about it. By contrast, reading the literature of social science research into pornography it became clear that there were standard questions and standard approaches to answering those questions, to be dealt with through standard models and standard methods. There was less emphasis on innovation. As Immanuel Wallerstein has pointed out, the presumptions that underlie social science have a strong hold on the way in which we think about our areas of study (2001). This may link to the idea of 'objectivity' – there is only one acceptable approach to take to any object of study. In this, social science research on pornography is part of the wider scientific process that sees itself as an accretion of unchanging facts, which build on top of each other to produce a store of stable knowledge about the world. By contrast, the humanities tend to favour innovation, idiosyncrasy and new ways of seeing objects of study.

In the 'Understanding Pornography in Australia' research project we used social science methods to ask new questions – such as whether exposure to pornography might have positive effects. When I did this, there was a breakdown in the consensus of objectivity. Many social scientists, who did not like the questions that we were

asking, attacked the work. But rather than working in the language of 'limitations', the traditional social scientific way of addressing such differences of focus, they started to attack the work itself. It is only possible for social scientific research to maintain its presentation of objectivity so long as social scientists don't ask different questions, and don't have new ideas. The sociologist Professor Michael Gilding wrote in a review of the work, that 'just because a self-selecting group of pornography consumers say that pornography is good for their mental health and marriages does not make it so' (Gilding, 2004). Economist Clive Hamilton said that:

I think this is dodgy research. The research is based on a sample of 1,000 pornography users, who are self-selected over the internet, so they asked people to fill out a survey. So it's really the people who are likely to have positive attitudes towards their use of pornography who are going to fill in such a survey. But those who are disturbed by it or feel guilty about it, aren't going to respond to that sort of a survey (Hamilton in Grimm, 2004).

Hamilton went even further, raising the possibility that the ways in which social science questions are framed, and the attitudes that researchers hold personally towards the area under investigation, may inform the results that are produced – even if they are reliable and valid:

I don't attach much credence to those results ... if you look at the way the researchers in question talk about pornography, the whole sort of tone of it is you know, this is light, this is playful, this is fun. But I think many parents of teenagers who had to deal with this problem with you know, 14 or 15 year old sons trawling the internet for pornographic images, have a more discerning attitude towards pornography and its potential harms (Hamilton in Grimm, 2004).

The implication is that if researchers are looking for potential harms, they will find them – but if they are looking for positive effects, they will find them. This is obviously true to the extent that the questions asked will limit the data that can be uncovered. Again, it is an important point for making clear in public debates that adherence to scientific method does not lead simply to 'the truth' in the way that much media discussion of what 'studies have shown' would imply. Indeed, the implication that the tone of voice used by researchers can influence the data that is produced comes close to a postmodern humanities position that knowledge is related to the social positioning of the person who discovers it.

## 5. THE PROBLEMS OF CASUAL SEX AND SADOMASOCHISM

From researching the tradition of social science research into psychology one point stood out as a clear fault line between the assumptions held by this tradition, and the ways of seeing sex within the humanities. Professor Dolf Zillmann is widely regarded as one of the key figures in research into the effects of pornography (and was indeed referred to by one of the referees who responded to my work as a figure whose work must necessarily be acknowledged as a starting point for my own research). Zillmann has written about the dangers of 'sexual callousness', and the possibility that exposure to pornography may lead to such callousness. This is presented in his work as a negative thing – as an inability to empathise that may lead to rape.

The concept of sexual callousness was developed by Donald Mosher. In measuring it he uses a survey instrument including questions such as 'That old saying "variety is the spice of life" is particularly true when it comes to sex' and 'You never know when you are going to meet a strange woman who will want to get laid' (Christensen, 1986: 178). If a man agreed with either of these statements, he was counted as being sexually callous towards women. In Zillmann's discussion of the importance of sexual callousness, he notes that pornography promotes such negative dispositions because it suggests that: 'Sexual satisfaction does in no way depend on positive dispositions (ie, liking, loving, caring) toward female partners' (Zillmann and Weaver, 1989: 104). Indeed, he observes that: 'pornography makes men lose respect for women ... Once fallen from grace, branded as promiscuous, women become "public property" ... Pornography ... deglorifies women in the eyes of men' (121).

Zillmann is concerned with trying to lower rates of rape. His argument is that the best way to do this is to maintain a public image of women as sexually modest. And so good sex is caring and loving. Casual sex is bad. Similarly, in their research, Donnerstein et al provide a definition of 'high-degradation' pornography as that which shows: 'debasement depictions of women as ... oversexed or highly promiscuous individuals with insatiable sexual urges' (Donnerstein et al, 1987: 3-4). In their content analysis of 'Sexual violence in pornography', Monk-Turner and Purcell (1999) counted 'Degrading/Dehumanizing themes' (62). These included 'Casual sex: refers to the indiscriminate availability of the female sex' (63). Smith notes in his



analysis of pornographic novels that: 'sixty per cent of the sex episodes are characterised by sex for sex sake – sheer physical gratification' (Smith, 1976: 22).

Once again, discovering this tradition brought me up short. I have no problem with casual sex, with sex for sex sake, with sex for sheer physical gratification. Neither do many other people – including many women. For example, the number of people in the general population of Australia who think that casual sex is always wrong is small and decreasing (Smith et al, 2003: 188). Mental health professionals do not see casual sex as either a cause or a symptom of any mental difficulties. And yet social scientists researching pornography continue to classify casual sex as negative – indeed, as a form of degradation of women.

To return to Zillmann's work on sexual callousness, as well as condemning pornography's presentation of casual sex, he also condemns pornography for suggesting that 'women enjoy sexual roughhousing (ie, in connection with coition, the use of physical force is accepted, if not desired and expected)' (Zillmann and Weaver, 1989: 104).

This is a key faultline that still runs between social science and humanities research. Perhaps the most common tradition of social science research on pornography now works on the issue of violence in pornography. And this key tradition insists that sadomasochism is a version of – perhaps even, the worst kind of – violence against women. Content analyses of pornography count sexual violence, including elements such as: 'hair pulling' and 'slapping' (Monk-Turner and Purcell, 1999: 62). Lists of violent or dominating sexual practice commonly include bondage (Cowan et al, 1988: 299). The definitions of aggression used in social scientific research on pornography can be so broad as to include all possible human action or interaction. For example, an article I was recently asked to referee for a major social science journal used the following definition of aggression, developed by Mustonen and Pulkkinen:

any action causing or attempting to cause physical or psychological harm to oneself, another person, animal or inanimate object, intentionally or accidentally whereby harm is understood as assaulting another verbally or non-verbally

Such a definition rules out intent so that consensual sadomasochistic sex is included. That article argued – as is commonly the case in social scientific research into pornography – that sadomasochistic practice is actually worse than rape. It is

acknowledged that sadomasochistic sexual practice is consensual – but this is often understood as making the representation even more negative. The fact that the victim is enjoying their abuse suggests: ‘“positive victim outcomes’ ... rape and other forms of sexual assault are depicted as pleasurable, sexually arousing and beneficial to the female victim’ (Donnerstein et al, 1987: 4).

In my own content analysis of pornographic videos I explicitly did not count as violence ‘consensual sadomasochistic practices’. One referee commented that:

This again seems to be a huge mistake. The entire social learning argument suggests that antisocial acts that are shown as being pleasurable and rewarding are likely to result in those acts later being replicated. Thus if an individual is shown to enjoy being spanked, it is potentially even more important than an individual who appears not to enjoy it. Only a sociopath would likely learn that doing something to someone that they [the other person] don't like will be a pleasurable behaviour. However, it is far more likely that a 'normal' individual would learn that a behaviour that appeared to result in pleasure was worth repeating ... if the authors are investigating objectification, shouldn't a scene in which a person is treated as a victim, yet seems to enjoy it, be a prime example of treating an individual as an object and not a person?

That is to say, representations of consensual sadomasochistic sex are worse than representations of rape. This is one perspective – but it is not the only reasonable one. For example, my own referee's report on the article I was asked to referee made this point when I asked for a rewrite of the paper:

There are two key problems with [Mustonen and Pulkkinen's] definition that render it unsuitable for studies such as this. The first is the lack of attention to the question of whether the recipient is motivated to avoid the harm; the second is the lack of attention to intent. Without these two factors in place, Mustonen and Pulkkinen's definition includes all possible human actions (including human inaction) – and therefore fails to serve the basic function of a definition, which is to distinguish between different kinds of action ... The question of consent is clearly crucial in understanding aggression. It is necessary for any definition of aggression to insist on this in order to exclude acts which may cause harm, but which are beneficial – for example, surgery. Surgery clearly causes immense harm – severe physical trauma – for the patient. But all parties involved judge that its positive outcome outweighs this concern, and so we do not categorise the act of cutting someone open on the operating table as aggression. When

all parties consent and welcome the action, it is not normal practice to characterise the behaviour as aggressive, nor the action as violence.

Humanities research has presented positive understandings of sadomasochism – for example, as a transgressive practice that challenges dominant gender and sex roles (see Hart and Dale, 1997). The medical community also offers alternative approaches. Sadomasochism is not defined as a mental illness in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Sexual masochism is defined as a disorder only when: 'The fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning', while Sexual sadism becomes a disorder when: 'The person has acted on these sexual urges with a nonconsenting person, or the sexual urges or fantasies cause marked distress or interpersonal difficulty'. In the medical model, people who practise consensual sadomasochistic sexual fantasies are within the definitional range of healthy and normal sexual practice (see Richters et al, 2007). Extensive writing exists by practitioners of consensual sadomasochistic practice explaining the mutual respect, attention to mutual pleasure, and communication between partners who are taken to be consensual equals (Easton and Liszt, 1998). And yet social science research on pornography treats sadomasochistic sexual practice as worse than rape.

Again, coming from a humanities background, I can see why social scientists studying pornography might see consensual sadomasochistic practice in this way.

Traditionally, the humanities have been concerned with the *meaning* of a text – much time and effort is put into understanding what a book or film means, how people make sense of it, what interpretations are likely, valid or useful. By contrast, social scientific theories of the media aren't interested in meanings – they are interested in *effects*. While there may be many different interpretations of a film, social science is interested only in a single effect (which is why we have never seen a tradition of social scientific research into the effects of massive exposure to Shakespeare, for example). So it is difficult for social scientific research into pornography to understand that a representation of a sexual act such as bondage may have very different meanings depending on context. I would argue that there is a difference between being tied up by a lover because you have asked to be tied up, for the

purposes of sexual pleasure; and being tied up by a kidnapper who is about to torture you to death. In social scientific content analyses, these are taken to be the same thing. If any distinction is made it is, as noted above, that the pleasure taken by the victim in the first situation – because they are enjoying it – makes it worse. They should not be enjoying it. It is wrong to take pleasure in such things. Sex should be gentle, loving, between two committed partners. It is wrong for it to be casual, rough or sadomasochistic – even if it is consensual and pleasurable for everybody involved.

### **C O N C L U S I O N**

As I suggested above, in writing this paper I have not sought to show that the humanities approach to pornography is correct and the social science approach is wrong. It is true that it will be clear to the reader that the humanities are my home – thus the touristic mode of writing, as I've travelled through the social sciences, pointing and staring at odd customs: 'Why look at that – that's not how we do it back home'. (And I apologise for my rudeness). But while acknowledging my positioning, I have also tried to resist the insular impulse to insist that the humanities' ways of doing things are better. Rather, I've tried to produce an account of some of the specific differences between the two traditions, and specifically their study of sexuality, that will be comprehensible, recognisable and acceptable to scholars working both in the humanities and in the social sciences.

Because if we can do that – acknowledge the differences without using language that already implies that one is correct and one is wrong – perhaps we can begin to think about how each can learn from the other. I do not have a social science degree; but I have now been successfully refereed and published by a number of reputable social science journals. Although it would perhaps be too much to call myself a social scientist, at least I can say with some conviction that I can *speak* social science, as it were (to continue the touristic metaphor). I can offer to work as a translator.

As I say, this is not a new idea. It is built into the very foundations of Cultural Studies. And in studies of pornography, this has real potential. The 'Understanding Pornography in Australia' project did things that had never been done before – for example, systematically investigating, as I mentioned above, the possible *positive*

effects of exposure to pornography. How might we bring together the differing approaches to produce new knowledge about sexuality?

Some ideas. From the social sciences, the humanities could learn (or remember? As we have learned before) the value of such empirical work. Instead of endless theorising about whether pornography has politically progressive potential, or is necessarily reactionary, studies could explore empirical approaches, mapping links between the pornography that people consume and their political beliefs and actions.

Or social science scholars could explore the possibilities of new ideas that could move research traditions in interesting directions. Rather than endlessly replicating experiments to attempt to discover negative effects from exposure to pornography, how about some experiments into possible negative effects from exposure to religious teachings? Or the possibility of taking the humanities' insistence on 'meaning' into account, and exploring how the effects of exposure to texts changes depending on the context of consumption. For example, how would the effects of exposure to pornography change if laboratory experiments replicated key elements of real-world exposure to pornography? Recruit only subjects who choose to consume pornography in their own lives; let them choose what they want to watch; watch only as much as they want to watch; where they want to watch it; with the people they want to watch it with; and doing what they want (probably masturbating to the point of orgasm) while watching it.

There are many possibilities. I can work within the humanities, and use quantitative and statistical methods for gathering data. And so I wonder - would it be possible to be a social scientist, and to say 'titwank'?

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<sup>1</sup> The referees have given their permission for their comments to be quoted in this paper.

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