

Although much has been learned about how social forces such as pornography can shape or direct men's sexual violence against women, few empirical data exist on how these forces impinge on women's attitudes and behavior. In the present study, 187 female university students responded to a questionnaire regarding childhood exposure to pornography, current sexual fantasies, and endorsement of rape-supportive attitudes. Early exposure to pornography was related to subsequent "rape fantasies" and attitudes supportive of sexual violence against women. Findings were interpreted in the context of women's socialization to accept sexual aggression as a sexual/romantic event.

Women's Attitudes and Fantasies About Rape as a Function of Early Exposure to Pornography

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Writers such as Brownmiller (1975) and Russell (1984) contend that sexual violence is an integral, if not normative, aspect of our culture. Recent research offers some support for this position, indicating that between one quarter to nearly one half of North American women have been raped or sexually assaulted at some point in their lives (Brickman & Briere, 1984; Russell, 1983). Further, it appears that at least 10% to 23% of college men will admit to having raped a woman in the past (Briere, Corne, Runtz, & Malamuth, 1984; Koss & Oros, 1982; Rappaport & Burkhart, 1984).

Given such prevalence, Burt (1980) defines rape as a socially supported event—in fact “the logical and psychological extension of a dominant-submissive, competitive, sex-role stereotypic culture” (p. 229). Burt specifies a number of social beliefs and attitudes that she links to sexual violence

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against women, including rape myths, acceptance of interpersonal violence, and adversarial sexual beliefs. Several researchers have related men's scores on Burt's attitude scales to self-reported likelihood of raping and actual admissions of having raped (e.g., Briere & Malamuth, 1983; Briere, Malamuth, & Check, 1985; Briere et al., 1984; Malamuth, 1981a, 1984; Teiger, 1981), as well as to other forms of aggression against women and children (Briere, 1987; Briere & Runtz, 1989).

Although considerable attention has been paid to how social forces shape and direct men's sexual violence against women, there are very few data on how these same forces affect women's attitudes and behaviors. For example, although Burt (1980) indicates that a significant proportion of women in the general population endorse the same rape-supportive beliefs held by many men (but typically to a considerably lesser extent), there is almost no empirical literature from which to explain this phenomenon or to predict its effects.

In contrast to the experimental literature, feminist writers have often discussed the psychological impact of a male-oriented society on its female members. Theorists in this area posit that our culture socializes women to accept the feminine sex role and to define themselves in terms of male values and expectations. As stated by Brownmiller (1975), "Given the pervasive male ideology of rape, . . . a mirror-image female victim ideology could not help but arise" (p. 359). Similarly, in her analysis of pornography, violence, and women, Russell (1980) hypothesizes that "rape and other masochistic female fantasies are a reflection of women's powerless role in society, the intense socialization they receive to accept that role, and their sexual repression" (p. 229).

Among the most cited examples of social support for aggression against or exploitation of women is pornographic media (Malamuth, 1984; Malamuth & Briere, 1986). Although the actual definition of pornography ranges from sexually arousing media to "the degrading and demeaning portrayal of the role and status of the human female . . . as a mere sexual object to be exploited and manipulated sexually" (Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, 1979, p. 239), it is clear that such materials often contain antifemale themes (e.g., Malamuth & Spinner, 1980; Smith, 1976) and are quite prevalent in North American society. A recent study, for example, indicated that 81% of a male university sample had used nonviolent sexual materials in the last year, and 35% had viewed or read sexually violent depictions (Demaré, Briere, & Lips, 1988). Although data are not available for women, research suggests that sexually violent pornography use by males is associated with more negative and callous views of women (Malamuth,

1984) and greater willingness to aggress against women (Demaré et al., 1988; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981).

The present study was devised to test the notion that, as has been hypothesized for men, women's attitudes and fantasies about rape are partially a function of their socialization to accept sexual aggression as normative. Extrapolating from the above, it was hypothesized that exposure to pornography, especially beginning early in life, might increase the likelihood that women would internalize social messages regarding the appropriateness of sexual aggression, such that they would evidence greater acceptance of rape myths and other beliefs supportive of sexual violence. Additionally, although there are few empirical data on this phenomenon, it was thought that to the extent that women report "rape fantasies," these fantasies would be more frequent among women exposed to pornography as children. Finally, it was hypothesized that such women might be supportive of nonsexual violence against women as well, and might be more likely to see sexual relationships as adversarial, although perhaps to a lesser extent than might be true for rape-specific attitudes.

METHOD

One hundred eighty-seven female undergraduate psychology students completed a questionnaire containing (a) Burt's (1980) 19-item Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA), 6-item Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence (AIV), and 9-item Adversarial Sexual Beliefs (ASB) scales; (b) an item inquiring whether the subject was exposed to pornographic materials as a child (age unspecified), with pornography defined on the questionnaire as "a portrayal of erotic behavior designed to cause sexual excitement"; and (c) two items from Henderson's (1982) Female Sexual Fantasy Checklist (FSFC).

The RMA, AIV, and ASB scales are reasonably reliable measures of attitudes supporting sexual aggression (α s of .88, .59, and .80, respectively, in Burt's [1980] sample), and, as noted earlier, have been widely used in research on the social etiology of rape (Malamuth, 1984). Items in each scale are rated from 1 to 7 (*strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*), except for six items of the RMA that are rated from 1 to 5. Because these scales are research measures (as opposed to clinical ones), no standardization data are available.

The FSFC consists of 14 fantasy themes, each rated according to its frequency in the previous 3 months, ranging from 1 (*never fantasize about this*) to 6 (*almost always fantasize about this*). Among these themes were the two items used in the present study: "I imagine myself being overpowered and forced to surrender into having sex" (Rape Fantasy 1), and "I have

TABLE 1: Discriminant Analysis of Rape-Supportive Attitudes and Rape Fantasies According to Childhood Exposure to Pornography

Variable	Exposure			No Exposure			c ^a
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD	
Rape Myth Acceptance	86	3.92	0.35	101	3.82	0.50	<u>.42</u>
Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence		2.59	0.79		2.59	0.88	.01
Adversarial Sexual Beliefs		5.24	0.77		5.19	0.87	.10
Rape Fantasy 1		2.37	1.25		2.16	1.21	<u>.32</u>
Rape Fantasy 2		2.03	1.26		1.58	0.84	<u>.78</u>
(centroids)		(0.30)			(-0.25)		

a. Discriminant structure coefficients, considered meaningful (underlined) when $|c| \geq .30$.

thoughts about being dominated to the point of being physically coerced into having intercourse” (Rape Fantasy 2). Reliability and validity of the FSFC are not reported here because only two individual items from that checklist were used in the current study.

After data collection, subjects’ scores on the three Burt scales and two rape fantasy items were entered into a simultaneous discriminant function analysis, with the outcome variable being childhood history of exposure to pornography.

RESULTS

Of 187 women, 86 (46%) reported direct exposure to pornography as a child. Discriminant analysis indicated that this exposure was significantly related to subsequent adult rape fantasies and rape-supportive beliefs, $R_c = .27$, $\chi^2(5) = 12.33$, $p \leq .02$. Inspection of the discriminant structure coefficients, using Tabachnick and Fidel’s (1989) suggestion of $c \geq .30$ as a minimal level of statistical meaningfulness, reveals that exposure to pornography was primarily associated with rape fantasies (especially Rape Fantasy 2) and Rape Myth Acceptance (see Table 1).

DISCUSSION

As hypothesized, self-reported, early exposure to pornography was associated with women’s later attitudes and fantasies about rape. Rape Myth Acceptance, involving beliefs such as “Many women have an unconscious

wish to be raped” and “In the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation” (Burt, 1980), was especially predictive of childhood exposure, as was the fantasy of being dominated to the point of physical coercion into intercourse. The connection between pornography and rape-supportive attitudes parallels similar findings for males (Malamuth & Briere, 1986), whereas the association with fantasies about forced sex may be more specific to females. Interestingly, especially vis-à-vis Brownmiller’s (1975) “mirror image” hypothesis, Malamuth (1981b) and Malamuth and McIlwraith (1988) have shown that exposure to certain forms of pornography increases males’ sexual and aggressive fantasies, including, in the former study, specific fantasies about raping a woman.

It does not necessarily follow from these data, however, that childhood exposure to pornography directly or uniquely causes rape-supportive attitudes or fantasies. It is more likely that early contact with pornography exemplifies a broader socialization process for some women that portrays sexual aggression as, to some extent, culturally desirable. For example, parents in families where children are allowed or encouraged to view pornographic materials may engage in other activities that might also promote acceptance of sexual aggression, including direct statements or actions supporting the appropriateness of male sexual dominance or even intrafamilial sexual abuse (Briere, 1989). The current findings may not be explainable solely on the basis of a concomitant sexual abuse history, however, given research by Runtz (1987) and others who report that sexual abuse victims are no more likely than others to endorse acceptance of rape.

We suggest two factors that might specifically underpin a relationship between childhood exposure to pornography and women’s subsequent acceptance of rape. First, pornographic stimuli may model sexual aggression or dominance in male-female relationships, potentially teaching girls that submission is the correct and appropriate sexual role of women. Second, pornography may support rape fantasies by encouraging the “eroticization, via romance, of violence” (Morgan, 1982, p. 126). In this regard, the common pornographic portrayal of women as “secretly desiring the assault and as eventually deriving sexual pleasure from it” (Malamuth, 1984, p. 31) may create confusion between sexual gratification and submission to sexual aggression for some young women—especially if such depictions originally produced a degree of sexual arousal.

The absence of a clear relationship between childhood exposure to pornography and Burt’s Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence or Adversarial Sexual Beliefs scales suggests that pornography (and related phenomena) may specifically impact women’s attitudes and beliefs about rape, as opposed

to other forms of violent or coercive interactions. This specificity further supports the hypothesis that pornography heightens the sexual/romantic associations to rape while downplaying its violent characteristics such that, for example, women could be supportive of rape myths yet paradoxically not endorse interpersonal violence.

Further research is clearly indicated in this area given the exploratory nature of the present study and its reliance on retrospective, cross-sectional data. Childhood exposure to pornography should be studied in greater detail, including more specific information on the amount and type of pornography involved, subject age at first exposure, and chronicity of that exposure. Future investigators might also examine specific sex differences in the impact of pornography, and might use a range of subject age groups to determine the developmental aspects of this phenomenon. The importance of such research endeavors is clear: If replicated, the current data suggest that pornography may not only support sexual violence in men but may contribute to a socialization process that fosters acceptance of sexual victimization of women.

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