



Theorising sexual media and sexual violence in a forensic setting: Men's talk about pornography and offending



Dave Mercer ^{a,*}, Liz Perkins ^{b,1}

^a The University of Liverpool, The Whelan Building, The Quadrangle, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool L69 3GB, England, United Kingdom

^b The University of Liverpool, The Eleanor Rathbone Building, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool L69 3GB, England, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This article reports findings from a discourse analytic study which critically explored the language of mental health nurses, and detained sexual offenders, in relation to pornography in one high-security hospital. It recognised previous empirical investigation, and pro-feminist theorising, into mediated representations and male sexual violence, but situated the research process in a forensic nursing context. Decision-making about access to, or restriction of, commercial sexual literature, as a component of therapeutic intervention and offender management, reveals tensions between service-user rights and treatment goals. The aim was to access nurse and patient talk in a specific culture. Semi-structured interviews with eighteen nursing staff, and nine patients, were used to co-construct accounts of pornography, sexual offending, and treatment. Analysis and data collection were undertaken concurrently. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Data was coded to identify theoretical/conceptual themes and sub-themes representing discursive repertoires. Attention was given to how textual variation positioned respondents in relation to each other and the institution. Findings suggested collective male talk textured the environment, promoted gendered inequality, marginalised female nurses, and undermined rehabilitation. Shared discourse enabled male staff and patients to relate to each other as men, while maintaining distance through constructions of *otherness*. Discussion focuses on discriminatory discursive-practices, where men's talk about pornography and sexual violence embodied gendered knowledge/experience and contributed to a toxic culture. Consideration is given to ways of resisting institutional impediments and promoting positive therapeutic relations.

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1. Introduction: locating pornography in the cultural context of forensic provision

This research-based paper explores the subject of pornography in the context of one forensic unit for the treatment of personality disordered sexual offenders. Study design acknowledged larger debates, or discourses, about the relationship between sexual imagery and behaviour, but the rationale was situated in the practice domain of mental health nursing. The first author [DM] was previously employed in the high-secure system, and spent a number of years facilitating cognitive-behavioural therapy groups (e.g. Cowburn & Wilson, 1992; Laws, 1989) for men with a history of sexual offending. The focus of this treatment programme was directed at challenging individual and institutional denial, and promoting non-offending lifestyles through identification and management of risk factors (Marques, Wiederanders, Day, Nelson, &

van Ommeren, 2005; Marshall et al., 2005). Despite the motivation of staff and participants, the group struggled to survive within a traditional custodial setting.

There was a sense that any therapeutic advances, made in the brief period of intervention, were offset by the institutional environment to which patients were returned. If the therapeutic message emphasised ways of understanding women as other than 'sexual object', it was undermined by an institutional culture that reinforced denigratory and discriminatory practices. One dimension of this was the widespread display of pornographic imagery on hospital wards, which symbolised a lack of sensitivity toward females. Some therapists have argued pornography is instrumental in developing and reinforcing fantasy as a prelude to offending (Wyre, 1992), while others have attributed a cathartic function in reducing dangerousness (Abel & Becker, 1984). Evidence regarding pornography-use by sexual offenders is less convincing (Langevin & Curnoe, 2004; Langevin et al., 1988).

There is a vast body of literature documenting attempts to identify a causal link between pornography and sexual crime (e.g. Malamuth & Huppert, 2005). Much social scientific inquiry developed as a response to the centrality that pornography assumed in feminist theorising, and

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 151 794 4742; fax: +44 151 794 5719.

E-mail addresses: dmercer@liverpool.ac.uk (D. Mercer), e.perkins@liverpool.ac.uk (L. Perkins).

¹ Tel.: +44 151 794 5503; fax: +44 151 794 5434.

political action, about male sexual violence (Cole, 1989; Dines, 1998; Dworkin, 1981; Morgan, 1980; Russell, 1988; Semonche, 2007). The bulk of work adopted an empirical approach to the measurement and quantification of negative variables (e.g. hostility toward women) following exposure to sexual media. Attention has been directed at two categories of sexually explicit material [SEM], the 'violent' and 'non-violent' (Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987) in relation to anti-social variables seen as predictive of future offending (Bohner, Siebler, & Schmelcher, 2006; Kingston, Fedoroff, Firestone, Curry, & Bradford, 2008; Seto & Eke, 2005; Zillmann & Bryant, 1982). Research participants in experimental design studies have, typically, been recruited from non-offender populations such as undergraduate students (Carter, Prentky, Knight, Vanderveer, & Boucher, 1987). Ambiguous findings allow only tentative conclusions to be drawn, and invite narrative design studies (Jensen, Dines, Jensen, & Russo, 1998).

An alternative approach to polarised perspectives on pornography and harm is contained within a critique of new cultural forms, accompanied by the fragmentation of established categories of meaning. This includes debate about the sexualisation of late modern society (Evans, 1993), where the power and prominence of the 'sexual story' turns personal narratives into public property (Moorti, 1998). Representing mass-produced stories and images, pornography is cited as exemplary of this social trend, a genre constructed specifically by the erotic (Beaver, 2000; Plummer, 1995). Such theorising is prominent in the work of McNair (1996) where pornography as sexual discourse, rather than reified commodity, invites both positive and negative interpretations. Inquiry shifts toward the 'meaning' of mediated images of sex and the 'uses' made of them by consumers, rather than on measuring what images 'do' to people (McNair, 1996). Dominant traditions in defining pornography, and understanding its effects, can be understood as competing discourses, with shifting ideological and political allegiances (Russo, 1987).

There have been few attempts, by qualitative researchers, to access the institutional domain of prisons or high-security hospitals to engage with male sexual offenders specifically in terms of pornography. From a feminist perspective, Scully and Marolla (1984, 1985) presented early insights into the experience of undertaking critical inquiry with sexual offenders in the American penitentiary system; pornography emerging as an unanticipated theme in relation to men's talk about offending. They offer an understanding of sexual crime as learned behaviour where cultural and social scripts enabled offenders to negotiate a 'non-deviant identity' and diminish responsibility, calling for social inquiry to move from the laboratory into broader social contexts.

Recent work by Mann and Hollin (2007), in the UK, exploring sexual offenders' explanations for their crimes replicated findings that sexual gratification is a 'reward of rape', though it relied on content analysis of written responses, coded according to pre-existing categories, and related to dynamic risk factors such as 'schema-driven thinking' or 'cognitive distortion'. Auburn (2005) using a discourse analytic approach to explore language-use in a prison sex offender treatment programme [SOTP], describes 'cognitive distortion' as a 'social resource' rather than a 'pathological mental entity'. Here, therapeutic concepts and categories are understood in terms of a discursive practice that positions people in terms of identity and pathology. It is noted: "By focusing on the interaction of those involved in prison institutional life, a richer understanding of how such regimes are accomplished can be gained" (Auburn, 2005: 698). Similarly, problems with a 'binary' definition of pornography in terms of 'misogyny' and 'harm' have led to contemporary feminist calls for inquiry to be re-situated in social settings where *pornographies*, rather than *pornography*, are produced and consumed (Attwood, 2002, 2004). Accessing narrative and discourse is recommended as a culture-textual way of exploring meanings, as opposed to proving effects (Allen, 2006; Benwell, 2005; Wilkin, 2004). The project outlined in this paper draws on the intellectual territory of this body of knowledge.

1.1. Study rationale: exploring pornography in the cultural context of forensic provision

Pornography as a clinical issue for secure services in the UK was highlighted by a high-profile investigation (Fallon, Buglass, Edwards, & Daniels, 1999) set up, in February 1997, by the Secretary of State for Health. Related issues of oppressive, and densely masculine cultures, had been signalled almost a decade earlier (Blom-Cooper, Brown, Dolan, & Murphy, 1992). The Fallon Inquiry report supported allegations of improper conduct in the Personality Disorder Unit [PDU] of a former 'special hospital'. Specific concerns related to trade in sexual materials, unsupervised patient access to VCRs and technology that permitted illicit materials, including child pornography, to be copied and circulated (Warden, 1999). This unfortunate episode led to accelerated structural change and reorganisation focused on the dual functions of rehabilitating disordered offenders, and maintaining public safety. Integrating into National Health Service provision, and adopting an agenda of citizenship (Department of Health, 1999, 2006), was accompanied by a security review (Department of Health, 2000).

Forensic nursing embodies the tension between therapy and custody, including frontline surveillance and policing of ward environments (Mercer, 2010). With few exceptions, nursing generally (Orr, 1988; Regan, 2005) or psychiatric practice in particular (Drake, 1994; Duff, 1995), has paid little attention to health risks, or training needs, associated with pornography. Literature [see Section 1] suggests a relationship between male violence and certain types of mediated sexual representations (Diamond, 2009; Dines, 2010) but accessibility, and application, of these ideas in forensic practice is unclear (Steward & Follina, 2006). Less ambiguous, is a duty of care and therapeutic engagement with detained sexual offenders, where managing pornography represents an element of care-planning and risk assessment. Institutional restrictions fulfil a security function but take little account of individual treatment needs, where an important issue relates to legally available materials with 'embedded' sexual content (Kelly, 1992; Kingston, Malamuth, Fedoroff, & Marshall, 2009). Increasingly, professionals are involved in case-management of individuals entering services as a result of internet-use for sexual purposes (Hynes, Taylor, & Lenihan, 2007), where addictive behaviours are diagnosed as variants of pathological sexuality (Fitzpatrick, 2008; Stein, Black, Shapira, & Spitzer, 2001).

Derived from a critique of traditional social science methods is the idea that behaviour patterns can be understood through 'stories' people tell about their lives (Dines, Jensen, & Russo, 1998). This approach complements the philosophy of offender-focused therapy (e.g. Marshall & Serran, 2000; Marshall et al., 2005) with pornography implicated at key stages of offending behaviour, from fantasy to grooming, planning, and commission of sexual crime (Wyre, 1992). This article attempts to theorise *sexual media* and *sexual violence*, reporting findings from a study, completed in 2010, that relocated debate about pornography to a clinical setting for the treatment of male sexual offenders.

1.2. Study aim

To explore the language/discourse of mental health nurses, and personality-disordered sexual offenders, in relation to socially-generated talk about pornography and offending in one high-secure forensic hospital.

2. Discourse analytic design

Discourse analysis is described as a 'heterogeneous range of social science research based on the analysis of interviews and texts (Silverman, 2001: 177), which treats the social world as a series of texts that exist independently of those who use them; an understanding of social voices as collective ways of talking that make social life possible (Cameron, 2001). The development of discourse analysis across a

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