



An Exploration of the X-Rated World and Its Related Consequences

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Abstract: This paper explores how the widespread use of pornography came to be. It starts with exploring how our bodies influence our genders and that our genders shape our sexuality and finally how we interact with the opposite sex. The paper investigates how expectations for a certain gender can have a direct influence on our relationships with the opposite sex. It stresses that to have a healthy relationship is to have a healthy understanding of sex by gaining information about our body, gender, and sexuality from reliable sources. The investigation touches upon the reasons why individuals cannot obtain reliable information, perhaps because trusted sources were not available during primary or secondary socialization or lack of time to devote to face-to-face relationships in adult life. Finally the paper also introduces a personal reflection sharing why the author feels her relationship has developed into a healthy one and how she deals with the modern influences on her relationship.

During the last semester I have had many big decisions to make—one could say life-changing decisions. I was married, and my husband and I found ourselves at the first fork in the road of our married life; where should we live, France (he is French) or the United States? We had to weigh the pros and cons of staying and leaving; staying here would mean living with my mother, paying \$1,685 in immigration fees, \$2,000 for an immigration lawyer, \$2,214 for my semester, along with other living expenses, and on the other hand we had the option of going back to France, which we both preferred, and which would also mean using the money we saved instead to buy our flights back, rent an apartment, and start our new life. We ended up staying here

and unfortunately we feel that it was a mistake. We feel that we took advice of those around us and in the end feel that we made our decision based on how other people felt about it. We did not make the choice that we felt was right for us.

Consequently, my social roles have increased dramatically in just a few months: from being a student, living in Rennes, France, carefree with a steady boyfriend to revisiting my role as a daughter, becoming a wife, returning as a student, and acquiring a 25-30 hours a week job, among other roles.

Now, perhaps you, the reader, are thinking why am I talking about all these details about my life in an essay named “An Exploration of the X-Rated World and Its Related Consequences”? The key phrase is

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“related consequences.”

In the course “Insiders/Outsiders” for which I wrote this paper, we learned the term, coined by C. Wright Mills, **sociological imagination** which seeks to foster the ability to recognize the relationship between large-scale social forces and the actions of individuals. Although my situation does not seem to pertain to pornography I will show in this paper how my opinion on pornography came to be and eventually explain why I married my husband, bearing its related consequences, including the new social roles I find myself performing.

Why does pornography continue to exist? Online pornography has proliferated so much in recent decades due to the advent of the Internet that lawmakers have been unable to keep up with the regulation of this entity. Now, proponents and opponents alike are trying to rewrite our views on pornography. Proponents claim that the First Amendment protects Internet pornography. In other words, the claim is that pornography is a protected form of free speech. However, the First Amendment does not cover obscenity and the issue of determining whether pornography is obscene and offensive or not continues to be debated. The ambiguity that arises makes it difficult to assign labels, which is how we categorize concrete and abstract subjects. For example, if pornography very broadly encompasses sex, oral sex, group sex, homosexuality, sexual torture, mock rape scenes, child pornography, and bestiality among others, how are we supposed to categorize these types into good and bad categories? And if the categorization is done for us, which is what usually happens, we sacrifice our right to do it for ourselves and thereby lose our identity.

Reflecting on the question “Why does pornography continue to exist?” but in a sociological context gives us another point of view on the whole situation. UMass Boston student Jacquelyn Knoblock, in her

essay “Gender and Violence: A Reflective Sociology of How Gender Ideologies and Practices Contribute to Gender Based Violence,” points to how much of our behaviors are results of our **primary** and **secondary socializations**.

Primary socialization occurs when we are young and, for the most part, take what we are taught as a given and accept it as the way of life without much questioning. It occurs during childhood when we might hear commentaries on our gender and what it means to a girl or a boy. For example, most children have heard, “boy will be boys” in answer to boys’ aggressive behavior or tendency to fight, challenge, and question authority. A classic example of gender stereotyping can be found in *Billy Elliot*, where Billy, an aspiring ballet dancer, is ridiculed by his father who offers the view that, “Boys do boxing. Girls do ballet.” His father reinforces typical gender behavior but as we find out later in the movie Billy succeeds in resisting this gender stereotype. However, examples do not only have to be expressed aloud such as in the sayings “boys will be boys” or “girls are fragile,” but they can be subtle and implied as well, as in how girls are expected to sit and walk or interact in public.

Secondary socialization occurs in environments other than home, like school and work, and continue during the rest of our lives. It is outside the home where the implications of how you should act based on your gender are confirmed, when the way you are taught to act turns into how you *must* act. “The harm, in other words, can be indirect, subtle, and delayed,” (Schwalbe 2005:3). We might not realize how these seemingly small social interactions affect our sexuality in the long run.

Regarding how “real men” must act, quoting John Stoltenberg, Knoblock writes,

“Violence and hostility in sex help the lie a lot too. Real men are aggressive in sex. Real men get cruel

in sex. Real men use their penises like weapons in sex. Real men leave bruises. Real men think it's a turn-on to threaten harm. A brutish push can make an erection feel really hard. That kind of sex helps the lie a lot. That kind of sex makes you feel like someone who is powerful and it turns the other person into someone powerless. That kind of sex makes you feel dangerous and in control ([Stoltenberg] 2006:270)." (Knoblock 2008:97-98)

... Many men that I have been with have felt this way or acted in these ways during sex, and I have heard many male friends recall incidents (and probably exaggerate) times in which they have acted like this. I know that personally, I generally don't enjoy this type of sex as it makes me feel used, disposable, and takes away a sense of power over my own body (Knoblock 2008:98).

The majority of pornography implies that the men depicted control the situation, control the nature of the sexual act, and control the women in the sexual act. But where does this implication that men control sex come from? It comes from what we have been taught and what has been confirmed to us in primary and secondary socializations. In order to change our views on sex and eventually on pornography we must alter our primary and secondary socializations.

In "Risky Lessons," (2011) Jessica Fields reports on a comparative study of how children learn about sex in two different settings; one is a tense and wholly science-based classroom and the other is an open discussion about the functions of sex as well as its pleasurable aspects. Fields recognizes that even with the strained efforts of the teachers to rid sexual education in the class-

room of bias, they arise despite their efforts: "Even apparent 'facts' about body parts are infused with social meaning. Images of 'natural' bodies reinforce and build on social ideals about thin, white, able-bodied women and men. The consistent pairing of female and male affirms heterosexuality" (Fields 2011:129). Reinforcement of gender qualities occur in both classrooms, no matter how the students are informed about sex.

If there is no guarantee that we can obtain unbiased information about sex in school perhaps we can be more fortunate at home—or perhaps not, judging from a study on "Women and Their Clitoris" by Dennis D. Waskul, Phillip Vannini, and Desiree Wiesen (2011). "Women generally reported equal (comparing to school) silence from parents. Vicki wrote, 'I was actually never told anything about it (referring to the clitoris) from my parents.' For Jill, 'it was never something that was talked about in my house, not even between my mom and I.'" (Waskul, Vannini, Wiesen 2007:99). Sex, gender, and our bodies work together in forming our sexuality. When we are young our bodies influence our gender and then our gender shapes how we act towards the opposite sex. If our bodies begin this cycle of interaction then how we view them is extremely important. "Gendering of the body in childhood is the foundation on which further gendering of the body occurs throughout the life course" (Martin 1998:111). The view that we develop during childhood will be carried with us throughout life.

Every time you look at an image of the "perfect" man or woman you subconsciously reinforce your idea, and the ideas that have been relayed to you, of the "perfect" man or woman. As Sharon Carere states, if you let someone control your view or experience of your body you let someone control your mind, "It reworks the students from the outside in on the presumption that to shape the body is to shape the mind"

(Carere 1987:120). By letting our information about sex be received from distrustful sources we risk the distortion of our bodies. If, however, our information about our bodies, and therefore our gender and ideas about sex, were from reliable sources we would be prepared to deflect misinformation. Our sources of information must include all aspects of sex such as: abstinence, pleasure, passionate sex and love, masturbation, heterosexuality, homosexuality, pornography, oral sex, contraceptives, STDs, and AIDS. The solution therefore must be to rely on our primary and secondary modes of socialization of family and school as suggested by James Pennebaker, "The second approach is to encourage a more open and accepting view of sexuality in the family and other social institutions such as schools, churches, and the like" (1997:126). Even if one thinks that sex and sexuality are personal and private aspects of our lives we must be able to openly talk about it. Pennebaker stresses throughout his book, *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, that expressing emotions can help us better understand them and the mere act of talking about our emotions and concerns make us healthier. "Without talking to others about strong sexual drives, individuals can never gauge if their urges are normal or healthy" (1997:126). Pennebaker notes that the only way to understand the new sexual feelings when we are during the primary and secondary socialization stages is to talk about them with those we trust most.

If individuals do not receive healthy information about sex, gender, and how they work together, where are they getting it from? The individuals who do not receive information from their primary and secondary socializations are a blank canvas that the media paints on. We are constantly bombarded with all kinds of media; commercials, magazines, television shows, and films, all with images of Photoshopped models and airbrushed faces. If we are

susceptible to petty images such as these, what happens when we are exposed to the stronger images like pornography? We react the same way as if it was "mainstream" media, so we imitate and strive to be like those radiant individuals and sexy porn stars.

Now we have established that body influences gender and gender shapes sexuality. We have also established that how we view the body eventually influences how we interact with the opposite sex on a sexual level. But how does one easily identify with a gender when there are terms like "butch," "effeminate," "boyish," and "girly" to describe people of one sex having characteristics of the opposite sex. For example, calling a girl "butch" or "boyish" leads one to think that she is physically strong and calling a boy "effeminate" leads one to think that he is physically weak. The fact (itself socially constructed and reinforced through socialization) as perceived by many is that physically women are weaker than men; it is regarded as "the nature" of our bodies. And, it is taught that we cannot change our body strength immediately (although one can change one's strength with training and time). Both of these perceptions, and the resulting labels that arise from it, are social constructions and received notions through our primary and/or secondary socializations.

The media constantly reinforces ideas about the "perfect" body, especially for women. UMass Boston student Rebecca Tink (2004) makes note of this in her essay, "Beyond Bifurcation: Femininity and Professional Success in a Changing World": "Women learn through magazines, TV, and just about every other form of media that they should constantly strive for society's definition of perfection, at the cost of their own identity, and at the all-too-common realization that they are never going to be up to standard" (Tink 2004:6). Our own body image should be determined on our own and only influenced through trusted

sources; if not, as Tink states, our “own identity” is the price we pay. The constant barrage of picture perfect images has continually distorted our images, and realities, of our bodies. Each choice we make to alter our bodies has been shaped by how we want to imitate an image that has been presented to us. Celebrity bodies are now our standards for beauty and we have lost our individual concept of what beauty is for ourselves. “Disciplinary practices have made the body a site for power struggles and, potentially, for resistance, as individual choices about the body become laden with political meanings” (Weitz 2001:352). Bodies are now saturated with meanings; bigger breasts are better, bigger penises are better, blonds have more fun, big lips are sexy, only real men have toned abs, and the list goes on and on. But the influences do not stop at the body, they even shape how we act based on our gender. According to Pennebaker, “In general, women in our society are more likely to openly express their emotions for longer periods of time than are men. Perhaps because of our cultural beliefs that men should be tough, men are far less likely to cry or, following a major loss, to talk about their feelings of sadness” (1997:108). Again we see the issue that if one controls the body, one controls the mind and here we see that emotions can be controlled as well based on our gender.

The concept *body disciplines* refers to how we internalize and act on the ideologies that have been presented to us and consequently we aid in the subordination of our own bodies. When we lose the ability to protect our bodies we lose protection for our emotions, our gender, our sexuality, and finally our ability to relate to the opposite sex in a healthy way. For example, even a simple interaction at a restaurant can be used as an opportunity to exhibit power over the opposite sex:

“They had been sitting at the table for a few minutes when I finally

got to their table. They looked unhappy. ‘You’re all sparkly!’ said the man, commenting on how the glitter make-up on my eyes, arms, and neck. ‘Leftover from work last night?’ ‘Yeah,’ I stated sarcastically. ‘At my other job I’m a third-grader.’ This statement and a wink induced a red face in the man and a grudging laugh from the women, who had said, ‘Jesus Jim, she probably borrowed it from her little sister,’ under her breath in response to his insinuation.

“His impl[ication] that, in addition to engaging in a sexualized performance of low-prestige labor, I may also engage in sex work itself might have been directly linked to the affront he felt at not receiving ‘good service.’” (Tibbals 2007:391)

In this example, during the *interpretative process* or the process taken by participants making indications to one another in a particular context, Jim attempts to exert gender control over Chauntelle Anne Tibbals, the author, by commenting on her gender appearance and what the appearance implies, in this case that she is a stripper, clearly a “low prestige” profession. Despite the trivial nature of this interaction women and men alike know that unsolicited sexual attention, either positive or negative, can make one feel uneasy and exposed. It is when we let these small interactions go unchecked that they have a snowball effect and we effectually have deep-rooted communication problems between genders. “Individuals assign meanings in general, and identities in particular, through interaction” (Marvasti 2009: 411). Although Amir Marvasti’s situation of having Middle Eastern features during wartime is different from the other example, he nevertheless explains that through each interaction we learn how we

are supposed to react to certain circumstances and we eventually construct rules of conduct in reality based on those interactions. No matter how much we think we are not affected by these implications, we are at a point where we actively give expected reactions.

In gendered *human interaction* the individual, instead of responding to environmental stimuli in a blind way, interprets an appropriate action based on the action taken towards him. A person's reaction then is based on whether he/she is male or female, attractive or not, etc. These individual human interactions then shape collective actions, which are outcomes of interpretative interactions and consists of individuals fitting their lines of actions to one another (Blumer 2011). If human action is based on collective action the risk of stepping out of line can be stressful because one risks alienation of others who follow collective action. "Working with other people can sometimes be a daunting psychological task. The more emotional stress you are under, the more draining it can be to work with others" (Pennebaker 2004:9). If interacting with one another is "draining" how else can we socialize? We cannot and perhaps it is here that pornography steps in, via perpetuating sexual borderwork. The constant *borderwork*, as Barrie Thomas (2011) defines it, is interaction based on and strengthening gender boundaries. And when boundaries are activated genders are consolidated as separate groups. Groups then sometimes take part in interactions with one another that strengthen their borders. If we are constantly setting up borders between each other we cannot be expected to interact in a healthy way. For example, borders that separate us can be physical characteristics that have been given more emphasis, such as the superior physical strength of men vs. women.

"I think it's made me more picky," he says. "These girls on the

computer are just so hot. Obviously, you want to get with a girl like that. So you may be at a bar with a girl, and she's really cool, but she's not a '10,' you know? She's cool, she's cute, but you quickly start to notice flaws." Meanwhile, the women who manage to come off as relatively flawless are curiously categorized in his mind: "Say I see a girl who's hot, I'll think, *That girl is like a porn star!*" (Amsden)

The borders that have been put up for us by the implications of gender during primary and secondary socializations and reinforced by media are then turned into habits and habits turned into the accepted norms and ways of acting within and across genders. This chain of events has effects that start out innocently small and then snowball. **Sociological mindfulness** (Schwalbe 2011), which builds on the sociological imagination, is the practice of tuning-in to how the world works. If we truly understood this sociologically, we would not engage in damaging behavior to our sexual relationships. In an article by David Amsden in the New York Magazine, Rick enlightens on how his past pornographic views distorted his view of women,

Amsden also states that Rick has never had a real girlfriend. Seeking out relationships no longer requires face-to-face interactions. It involves images on a screen, be it on pornographic sites or in Facebook. These "new and improved" ways to communicate have only hindered our ability to relate to each other. Now when the rare chance of creating an intimate relationship with someone face-to-face arises we are either completely clueless or practice our "advanced understanding" of how to handle such a situation. "In most situations in which people act toward one another, they have in advance a firm understanding of how to act and of how other people will act. They share common and pre-estab-

lished meanings of what is expected in the action of the participants, and accordingly each participant is able to guide his own behavior by such meanings” (Blumer 2011:285). Online interactions, however, have taken this sign or requirement of human interaction to the extreme. Perhaps such advance knowledge of our “moves” has made the experience of meeting someone new lose its mystery and the allure of getting to know him or her. If everyone acts alike we know what to expect and there is no fun in that.

It seems that many have **identity branding** where they have identified themselves as consumers and by consummation create a social identity and lifestyle. Basically, by “buying into” the idea that pornography and related issues have no consequences and that looking at these images is considered modern and liberating we buy into the sexualized lifestyle. If those who practice identity branding are part of a lifestyle then it is easier to identify with those who are part of the same lifestyle or you can easily point out those who follow a certain identity because of their appearance. **Gender characterization** is a classification of genders based on what we see. For example, in an aforementioned quote, a waitress (and author) receives a comment made about her based on her appearance, which included glitter. Glitter, according to the male customer is also associated with strippers, a classification that was offensive to the author, Chauntelle Tibbals. This is an example of how gender characterization can lead one to create stereotypes, like all women who wear glitter are strippers. Gender characterization does not just have to include details about your appearance; characterization can be made with just your gender. As reported again by David Amsden in his New York Magazine article:

“...his once-a-day habit was having some peculiar effects on his relationship with his girlfriend. He

was in love, yes, and had been committed to her for over four years, but their sex life remained, for him, let’s just say, “missionary.” However, the thought of discussing this with her made him jittery—after all, in all other respects, the relationship was working—and so, he says, “I’d use Internet pornography to get what I wasn’t getting sexually. Say I was really horny. Well, I’d go out with my girlfriend, and then, after, I’d look at it.” On other occasions, he’d peek at it beforehand, much the way certain men rely on Viagra, “and then I’d be like an animal with her, trying to superimpose her with all these images in my head.” Then, during a “break” from the relationship, he found himself in bed with another girl and inquiring, out of nowhere, if he could photograph her nude and post it on the Internet. (No thanks, she said.) “It was like a drug,” Dan says. “I just started to feel so bad about it. I’d think about how these girls I looked at were being exploited, but then I still couldn’t stop. It was totally screwing with the way I thought I should be seeing women.” (Amsden)

Unfortunately gender characterization can lead to extremely unhealthy ways of viewing the opposite gender like mentioned above. Dan had altogether stopped viewing women as “ends in themselves” and viewed them as something to be used as “means to an end.”

Stopping this destructive behavior will take time and stopping cold will not immediately erase everything one has learned by practicing this behavior. “The biggest danger of unwanted thoughts is that they can become larger and more threatening the more we dwell on them” (Pennebaker

1997:58). In other words, the more we become saturated in a sexually based lifestyle the more we actually have less of it because seeking out distrustful sources about “unwanted thoughts” or sexual desires only distorts sex and everything it encompasses even more.

Sexual desires are natural biological phenomena and they should be addressed but first, we should be laying the groundwork for proper interpretation and eventual practice of sexual desires. I believe that society is starting to become enlightened about what is and what is not possible about the human body. Women are starting to realize that beauty is not airbrushed faces with perfect skin, beauty is natural and unaltered by human hand. Beauty is given to us in the form of our bodies. The beauty is there if we just take the time to find it.

Lately, I had been falling into a slight depression because my time was always limited for everything and I could not find the time to even take care of myself. I would leave the house without makeup, hair in a messy bun, baggy pants, and a puffy coat. Even at home, I would wear old tattered clothes because I did not “feel pretty,” my husband, Alan noticed this and he told me that he did not love me for my clothes or my makeup but for the natural beauty he sees in me. This remark lifted my spirits and made me feel better about myself. I think if more couples learned how to lift each other’s spirits rather than ridicule for not looking like a model, relationships could be so much healthier. If we could learn to break down borders between genders and unite our “ying” and “yang” that comprise genders, relationship could work as in a team and not via a power struggle. Alan and I work as a team and somehow it comes naturally to us because there is a great mutual respect for each other. For example, typically gender roles would have me cooking and cleaning our apartment; however, Alan, at this time does not work as much as I do and he does most of the cooking and

cleaning. It is not so much a compromise as it an understanding of each other. He understands that I work and go to school and he knows that takes up 80% of my time. I need not ask for his support, he is there for me. Of course we are not a perfect couple, we have our struggles but our struggles do not consist of disrespect or considering each other only as sexualized beings.

I think what attracted us most to each other was when we realized, or rather when I realized, that Alan makes love rather than has sex. It was Alan who taught me so much about respect and making love that made me fall for his pure nature. Although in the past, we both have seen pornography it has not intoxicated us into saturated sexualized beings. We find it offensive because it depicts sex as a power struggle and uses people as “means to an end.” Of course that is not to say that if we see it we are not, at times, aroused by it but the difference is that we understand that it is a crime against love-making because it distorts it. I chose to marry Alan because he, above all else, respects me and loves me. I believe that one must respect someone first before one can ever love him or her; everyone should look for this quality in the person they want to spend their life with.

The solution that I offer to prevent saturated sexualized beings is to use trusted sources of information, like family and school, that can prepare one to deflect misinformation about sex, like pornography, and use healthy social practices between genders. In the film, *Tuesdays With Morrie*, the late sociologist Morrie Schwartz continually says that we must, “love each other or die.” Morrie does not mean we will literally die without loving someone but that we will never fulfill our need for love if we do not do so. Not loving and respecting someone will kill your relationships because that is what a relationship is all about; love and respect. Pornography does not show love or respect. Imitating pornographic behavior in sex is not practicing

love-making. In a relationship, love-making is a mutually respectful act with consent and done so for the pleasure of both parties. However, one aspect that I am concerned with is how people can change—whether or not they have time to change. As we saw in the film, *Running Out of Time*, people do not have time to form relationships. For example, the couple living in L.A. never saw each other and had to move and quit their jobs just to keep their relationship going. When we lose our time to cherish our relationships and loved ones, is it possible to say that we have also lost the respect towards sex as a sacred act between two people? Another concern could be that we may be too damaged to be in a mutually respectful and loving relationship, like Will Hunting in the film, *Good Will Hunting*, where Will struggled to love his girlfriend back because his past trauma was so great.

Our modern society is preoccupied with **individualism** and the focus is brought to the individual rather than the society as a whole. This makes people more concerned with making more money and gaining or preserving their status than working together to make the society a more fulfilling place. Another concern of society is **instant gratification** which creates impatience as a habit. No one has time to invest in a relationship that takes time to build a solid foundation for. Impatience for building a relationship could be one of the main reasons for widespread use of pornography:

“It makes sense in a way, because, especially in urban environments, our professional lives are very much go-go-go! and we put our emotions to the sides,” he explains. “Porn can provide an instant soothing to emotional stress.” Ursula Ofman, the Manhattan-based sex therapist, agrees: “The Internet provides such an easy way out that you can manage without any real-

life contact for a long time,” she says. (Amsden)

Denying emotions is a dangerous act because we risk being inhibited and eventually unwilling to share them with anybody. If we want to change the modern environment of time-constrained saturated sexual bodies lacking respect and love we must practice **corporate resistance** which is resisting the norms of identity branding and resisting the lifestyles that come with that branding. We must also practice **resistance** in which we reject subordination of our body and gender by challenging ideologies that support subordination. For example, ideologies that support subordination about what is attractive in a woman; is it her breasts, her hair, her sexuality, her ability to seduce as opposed to her laugh, sense or humor, quirks, smile, hobbies and interests? Above all we must reject **accommodation** which are acts that actively accept subordination.

Although I focused on pornography and its damages to our body, gender, and sexuality I think that choosing to follow the media and their portrayal of what beauty is—which seems to be a synonym for sexy—is not the right path to take. I believe that by continuing to question behavior around me and my own behavior I can change my compartment if I see that in the long run it can be damaging to me. Even if at times I feel as though I do not have the time to fulfill my duties to myself, I believe that if I ever want to see a change in the society that I live in, it must begin with me. Like Gandhi said, “We must be the change we wish to see in the world.”

My choice to become married and take on new social roles associated with it, is simultaneously an act of love as well as of resistance to the related consequences of a culture bent on depriving bodies, genders and sexualities of true love.

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