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Publication Date

1979-09-01

Citation: Paper presented at the 87th Annual Meetings of the American Psychological Association, New York City, September, 1979.

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Abstract

80 male and female students were exposed to sexually violent, sexually non-violent or neutral stimuli. All subjects then viewed an interview with an actual rape victim and responded to a questionnaire assessing rape-related attitudes and perceptions. Weeks later, subjects indicated their views on rape as part of what was purported to be a general survey of public attitudes. The data indicated that exposure to sexual stimuli, of a violent or non-violent nature, reduced the extent to which subjects perceived that pornography may have detrimental effects but did not affect reactions to rape. Correlational data revealed that sexual arousal to the portrayal of sexual violence, but not to non-violent sexuality, was associated with a self-reported possibility of engaging in rape, a self-report that was strongly related to a callous attitude towards rape and rape victims.

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Depictions of rape, sexual exploitation and sadomasochistic interactions have become more prevalent within the mass media in the past few years (Time Magazine, 1976; 1977; Malamuth & Spinner, 1980; Smith, 1976). It has been suggested that such sexually violent depictions perpetuate myths of women's sexual masochism and subservience (Johnson & Goodchilds, 1973), in some cases lead to actual assaults (Gager & Schurr, 1976) and create a general climate in which "...acts of sexual hostility directed against women are not only tolerated but ideologically encouraged" (Brownmiller, 1975; p.444).

These assertions appear inconsistent with the research of the President's Commission on Pornography (1970) that concluded that there was no evidence of adverse effects of exposure to pornography. In fact, the Commission reported that in several studies it was only found "that after experience with erotic material, persons become less fearful of possible detrimental effects of exposure" (p.26).

The research conducted by the Commission, however, did not adequately test the above hypotheses regarding the effects of exposure to sexual violence, i.e., a clear distinction was not made between material that merely depicted explicit sexual content from those involving violent and/or exploitative portrayals of sexual relations (Davis & Braucht, 1973). This point has been strongly emphasized in criticisms of the Commission's research: "No attention was paid to the problem of pornography-violence or sadomasochism where in pornography and violence are linked together" (Cline, 1973; p.288). The present study was designed to

addresses such criticisms by experimentally studying the effects of exposure to sexual violence in the mass media on attitudes towards rape.

Method

Subjects

42 male and 38 female students at the University of Manitoba participated in both phases of the study.

Materials and Procedure

Ostensibly as part of a pilot study designed to obtain general reactions to a variety of materials, subjects were first tasked to fill out a background questionnaire. Subjects were then randomly assigned to be exposed to sexually violent, sexually non-violent, or neutral non-sexual stimuli. These materials were presented within intact issues of *Penthouse* or *Playboy* magazines for the sexual exposures and within *National Geographic Magazine* for neutral exposure. These sexually violent depictions included portrayals of rape and sadomasochism, whereas the sexually non-violent stimuli did not include any aggressive elements. The neutral stimuli were primarily of scenery.

In each of the conditions, subjects examined the pictorials and narratives designated within issues of the magazines. After examining the materials, subjects completed a Mood Check List. This form consisted of seven descriptors of various moods with a Likert-type scale ranging from "none at all" to "extremely."

About ten minutes after completing their ratings of the magazines, subjects were shown a videotaped interview with an actual rape victim and asked to report their reactions on a questionnaire. This measure, which constituted the first major dependent variable, included items assessing the following areas:

1. Perceptions of the victim and the assailant (e.g., intelligence, attractiveness).
2. Perceptions of the experiences of the victim (e.g., pain, trauma, etc.).
3. Attitudes toward the rape act (e.g., responsibility, possible justification, punishment merited, sexual vs. violent motive).
4. Subjects' beliefs about their own behavior in such situations (e.g., the possibility of engaging in sexual assault).

While the design described heretofore permitted direct experimental assessment of the hypothesis that exposure to sexual violence creates a more tolerant attitude toward sexual assault, the potential effects of "demand characteristics" or social desirability cannot be fully ruled out. To eliminate the contribution of such factors, an assessment of the effects of exposure was also made outside the laboratory.

Within subjects' classes about two weeks after the completion of the first phase of the experiment, a survey of public attitudes was conducted. This survey presented copies of actual newspaper articles dealing with the topics of Quebec separatism, government regulation of auto industry, and rape. Subjects' reaction to the rape article constituted the second central dependent measure. After reading this article, subjects were asked to indicate their opinions in closed-ended questions of a decision by a Colorado judge to dismiss a charge of sexual assault. In addition, they were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt a variety of factors contributed to rape acts. These factors included such possible causes as mental illness, the attitudes of the judicial system, pornography, societal attitudes, and victim behavior. In addition, subjects were asked to provide some background information about themselves. A brief questionnaire designed to insure that subjects were not aware of the relationship between their earlier participation in the experiment and the public survey was also included.

Results

ReactionstotheMaterials

Anova's on the Mood Checklist indicated that there were no significant differences between the sexually violent and the sexually non-violent stimuli, but that both of these generated more sexual arousal, less boredom, and more offense and embarrassment than the neutral stimuli.

ReactionstotheInterview

Multivariate and univariate analyses of variance performed on the questionnaire administered following the videotaped interview with a rape victim did not reveal any significant effects of exposure to the sexually violent as compared with the sexually non-violent or control stimuli.

SurveyofAttitudes

Analyses of the brief questionnaire designed to assess whether subjects were aware of the relationship between the study conducted in the laboratory week earlier and the public survey conducted in classes indicated that none of the subjects recognized the connection. Background data obtained in the laboratory were matched with that obtained in the classroom.

Anova's performed on subjects' reactions to the judge's decision in the rape trial and their perceptions of the causes of rape revealed an effect only on the item inquiring about the extent to which pornography causes rape, $F(2, 74) = 7.17, p < .002$. Table 1 presents the mean values for the three exposure conditions. Planned orthogonal comparisons indicated that the sexual violence and the sexual non-violence exposures did not differ from each other, but that the two sexual exposures significantly differed from the neutral exposure, $F(1, 74) = 14.32, p < .0004$. These data clearly show that exposure to either type of sexual stimulus within the laboratory reduced the degree to which subjects believed that pornography has adverse effects, i.e., is a cause of rape.

Table 1: Mean judgment that pornography is a cause of rapes.

Exposure Condition		
<u>Sexual Violence</u>	<u>Sexual Non-Violence</u>	<u>Neutral</u>
2.3	2.2	3.6
N=27	N=25	N=28

NOTE: High scores indicate greater attribution of harmful effects. "N" indicates the number of participants in each condition

Self-Reported Inclination to Rape

Correlational analyses were performed to examine the relationship between males' beliefs about the possibility that they personally could commit rape if they were assured of not being caught and general attitudes about rape. The self-reported possibility of engaging in rape was found to be associated with a variety of items that taken together reflect a generally callous attitude toward sexual assault. For example, this self-reported possibility was positively correlated with the perception that the interviewee had enjoyed being victimized, $r(40) = .42, p < .01$, was responsible for the assault, $r(40) = .42, p < .01$, with the belief that a high percentage of women would enjoy being victimized, $r(40) = .56, p < .003$ and that men would rape if they were assured of not being caught, $r(40) = .53, p < .003$. Furthermore, this self-reported possibility was associated with a reduced tendency to perceive the therapist described in the interview as a danger to society, $r(40) = -.31, p < .05$. This attitudinal pattern bears striking similarity to the attitudes of many convicted rapists (Clark & Levis, 1977; Gager & Schurr, 1976). These data successfully replicate and extend the findings of other studies (e.g., Malamuth, Haber & Feshbach, 1980) with reactions to actual rape rather than a hypothetical or fictionalized sexual assault.

Abel, Barlow, Blanchard, & Guild (1977) have contended that sexual arousal to the depiction of sexual violence relative to arousal to non-violence serves as an index of the "proclivity to rape." To examine this contention, the correlations between self-reported rape tendencies and the sexual arousal stimulated in the non-violent and the violent sexual stimuli conditions were examined separately. With respect to male subjects exposed to the non-violent sexual stimuli, no relationship was found between the self-reported possibility of engaging in sexual assault and sexual responsiveness as reported on the "sexual arousal" $r(11) = .06$ or "sexually sensuous" $r(11) = .05$ items. With respect to males exposed to sexually violent stimuli, on the other hand, a significant correlation was found between self-reported likelihood of raping and sexual arousal to the stimulus as reflected on both the "sexual arousal" $r(12) = .51, p < .03$ (one-tailed), and "sensuous," $r(12) = .50, p < .04$ (one-tailed) items.

Conclusions

The single exposure within the laboratory to sexually violent stimuli was not found to affect attitudes towards rape victims or assailants either on the immediate measure taken in the laboratory or the delayed measure administered weeks later in the classroom. The only effect of exposure to sexual stimuli (violent or non-violent) was a clear reduction in the degree to which pornography was perceived as a cause of rape. As such, these data are consistent with the findings of the President's Commission on Pornography (1970). The present data extend the commission's conclusions by virtue of having included sexually violent as well as non-violent stimuli, by having utilized actual interviews with rape victims and newspaper articles, and by having included an assessment free of "demand characteristics" or social desirability effects.

Correlational data obtained, however, indicated that sexual arousal to sexual violence, but not to sexual non-violence, is associated with a self-reported possibility of engaging in

sexual assault. These data suggest that further research is needed to examine the causes of arousal to sexual violence and the possibility that repeated, as opposed to single, exposure to such violence may under certain conditions result in antisocial effects.

Reference Notes

1. Malamuth, N. & Spinner, B. A longitudinal content analysis of sexual violence in the best-selling erotic magazines. Submitted for publication.

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