



**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:
THE CONTRIBUTION OF CONTEMPORARY PORNOGRAPHY**

CULTURE REFRAMED

SOLVING THE PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS OF THE DIGITAL AGE

Domestic Violence: The Contribution of Contemporary Pornography

Prepared for Culture Reframed

by

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Introduction

The United States of America is one of the most violent countries in the advanced industrial world (DeKeseredy, 2021a). When its citizens do not worry about the economy, terrorist attacks, or debilitating viruses (e.g., COVID), they often lose sleep over the risk of being victimized by random lethal and nonlethal violent crimes committed by strangers on the streets or in other public places. Their exaggerated fear of so-called stranger danger, however, is ill-founded. Of course, small proportions of them, particularly those who are socially and economically marginalized, are robbed, mugged, or murdered by unknown predatory offenders, and their pain and suffering should not be trivialized (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2018). Still, what sociologists Richard Gelles and Murray Straus stated nearly 40 years ago still holds true in the United States: “You are more likely to be physically assaulted, beaten, and killed in your own home at the hands of a loved one than anywhere else, or by anyone else in society” (Gelles & Straus, 1988, p. 18). Many people find this hard to believe because they are socialized to view families primarily as sources of love and safe refuges from the pains inflicted by the outside world. Others do not see family violence as a social problem because they have never indirectly or directly experienced it.

It is true, as sociologist Joseph H. Michalski reminds us, that “families are the universal building blocks of societies throughout the world. As a basic institution, every society contains families in one form or another” (Michalski, 2022, p. 2). As well, in every society, all families have conflicts, but an alarming number of them resolve them in deviant or criminal ways. Moreover, domestic or family violence could happen to anyone (LaViolette & Barnett, 2014). Why is it so common and widespread? It is impossible to simply pick out one reason and announce that it covers all cases at all times. There are, in fact, a number of key *risk factors* associated with domestic violence,¹ one of which is pornography, though it receives scant scientific scrutiny compared to other determinants, such as violent men’s adherence to the ideology of *familial patriarchy*.² The main objective of this paper is to respond to this selective inattention by briefly reviewing the extant social scientific literature on how pornography consumption, production, and distribution contribute to domestic violence in this current era. It is first necessary, though, to define *domestic violence* because, as Australian feminist criminologists Freya McLachlan and Bridget Harris correctly point out, it is “not a term that can be deployed without contention” (McLachlan & Harris, 2022, p. 624).

¹ Risk factors are commonly defined as “characteristics at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that are associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes.” See SAMHSA (2022) for more information.

² Familial patriarchy is a discourse that supports the abuse of women who violate the ideals of male power and control over women in intimate relationships. See DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998) for more information on this powerful determinant of woman abuse.

What is Domestic Violence?

There is considerable disagreement about what injurious acts should be included in a definition of violence in domestic/household settings. For example, many researchers, policy makers, journalists, criminal justice officials, and members of the general public focus only on face-to-face variants of physical abuse (e.g., beatings) or sexual assaults involving forced penetration. Psychological, electronic, spiritual, and economic abuse are absent from their formulations because grouping these types of assaults with physically injurious behaviors is seen as muddying “the water so much that it might be impossible to determine what causes abuse” (*Gelles & Cornell, 1990, p. 25*).

Still, most people who have experienced any type of physical violence often say that it is psychological, verbal, and spiritual violence that hurt the most and longest (*DeKeseredy et al., 2017*). Consider the voice of this abuse survivor interviewed by Linda MacLeod (*1987, p. 12*):

The thing that’s most hurting for me is the way he makes me feel so dirty, so filthy. He treats me like a dog, worse even. He tells me I’m ugly and worthless. He spits on me It’s not enough to hit and kick me. He spits on me. Sometimes I think the hitting is better than being made to feel so low.

There are different types of emotional violence. Some come from a reaction to the physical abuse, but another major component is the nonphysical acts aimed directly at causing an emotional reaction. Unlike conceptions such as the *battered woman syndrome* (*Walker, 1979*), which leaves one thinking of these women as pathologically damaged, this began the process of thinking of battered women, and particularly those who remain in a relationship for a time, as normal people caught in an abnormal and horrible set of circumstances, doing the best they can (*Kirkwood, 1993*).

Consider that all of the 43 rural southeast Ohio survivors of separation/divorce sexual assault interviewed by me and Martin D. Schwartz developed adverse, post-assault psychological conditions, such as depression, sexual aversion, and fear. This is not surprising, because, in addition to being sexually abused in a variety of ways few of us could possibly imagine, 88% were psychologically abused, 70% were economically abused, 12% had pets who were harmed by their abusers, 37% were stalked, and 51% experienced the destruction of prized possessions (*DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009*).

Rita, one of our interviewees, is a prime example of a woman who experienced considerable trauma related to nonphysical forms of separation/divorce assault:

I could care less if I ever have sex again in my life. I could care less if I ever had another relationship with a man again in my life. Oh, it's scarred me for life. I think it's physically, mentally—well, maybe not so much physically—but emotionally has scarred me for life. You know, and that's the reason why I don't socialize myself with people. I isolate myself from people because if I don't, I get panic attacks. And the dreams, they, they're never gone. They're never gone. I mean, I don't care how much you try to put it out of your head, the dreams always bring it back, always. I've been in a sleep clinic where they would videotape me sleeping, being in and out of bed, crawling into a corner screaming. "Please don't hurt me, don't hurt me, don't shoot me, don't" whatever. (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009, p. 83)

Laureen is another interviewee who shared her traumatic psychological abuse experiences:

And years ago, years ago, when I still only had one child, he told me he knew that I wanted out of the relationship and he said, "If I can't have you, I'm gonna make it so nobody can have you." And I didn't understand what he was talking about. And it was many, many years later that I realized he meant psychologically. He was going to destroy me psychologically so I wouldn't be fit to enter another relationship. And it's basically true; I have not had another relationship. I'm afraid to go into a relationship. I don't trust men in general. So, basically, I live a solitary life, not by choice, but because I am afraid that I'm going to end up in a relationship like that again. (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009, p. 84)

All told, many nonviolent, highly injurious behaviors are just as worthy of in-depth, empirical, theoretical, and policy attention as those that cause physical harm. Furthermore, physical and nonphysical forms of abuse are not mutually exclusive. As a matter of fact, psychological abuse almost always accompanies physical assaults in domestic contexts. The gendered nature of domestic violence offending and victimization, too, cannot be ignored. Again, domestic violence can happen to anyone, but when it comes to adult offenses, such violence is typically committed online and in person by men against their current or former intimate female partners and their children (McLachlan & Harris, 2022).

How Does Pornography Contribute to Domestic Violence?

Despite the ubiquitous nature of contemporary pornography, its relationship to domestic violence has not garnered much scholarly attention. Consider that the word "pornography" is nowhere to be found in the indices contained in the widely read and cited third edition of Renzetti et al.'s (2018) *Sourcebook on Violence Against Women* nor

Michalski's (2022) *An Integrated Investigation of Family Violence*. As well, this word only appears five times in the index included in the third edition of Barnett et al.'s (2011) dated, but still popular textbook *Family Violence Across the Lifespan*, a book that is nearly 1,000 pages long. Drawing from the nineteenth century writings of W. E. B. Du Bois (1967, p. 163), this is strong evidence of a "peculiar indifference." He was referring to the health and well-being of Black U.S. citizens generally and stated that there had been "few other cases in the history of civilized peoples where human suffering has been viewed with such indifference" (Du Bois, 1967, p. 163). Similarly, when it comes to physical, psychological, and other harms done to families by pornography, a peculiar indifference still shapes our society's response. Many people involved in the antiporn work done by organizations like Culture Reframed would strongly agree with the claim that the failure to launch a widespread campaign against porn—"our peculiar indifference—is not only socially destructive ... but a profound moral default" (Currie, 2020, p. 17). It is to the damage done to children that I turn to first.

Domestic Violence Against the Children of Male Pornography Consumers

The research and practitioner community is starting to uncover numerous cases of men exposing their children to pornography when their female partners leave them or when they realize their partners are going to leave them (DeKeseredy, 2020). Such exposure is also prevalent in ongoing marital/cohabiting relationships, and research shows that porn is a powerful grooming tool that increases the risk of male consumers sexually abusing their daughters (Johnson et al., 2022). Note, too, these data obtained by an international body of studies:

- A high proportion of people arrested or in treatment for child sexual abuse material (CSAM) offending have intimate partners and families (Jones et al., 2021).
- Collated arrest data for 2010–2011 for CSAM perpetration in Italy, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States reveal that 42% were living with a partner or children, and 31% were living with partners or grandparents (Bouhours & Broadhurst, 2011).
- A recent review of CSAM Australian offender treatment data shows that between 21% and 65% of perpetrators in treatment have an intimate partner and at least one child (Brown & Bricknell, 2018).

Though not many, the studies that have been done on parental porn consumption strongly suggest that a large number of families, especially in Australia, are negatively affected by CSAM offenses. Many children are not only direct victims of such consumption but are also *secondary victims* (Walker, 2019) because they experience vicarious trauma and

other hurtful outcomes of their fathers' offenses (Fuller, 2015). In fact, the extant literature on the families of sex offenders centers mainly on contact crimes like child sexual assault and sidelines the families of noncontact offenders who consume CSAM (Jones et al., 2021).

Consider what this woman told Jones and her colleagues (2021) about the impact of such secondary victimization on her daughter's mental health:

My daughter can't see how her life is ahead of her. I nearly lost her three times. She's not looking to commit suicide, she's looking for a reason to live. Her entire family has rejected her. We've lost every blood relative. And that's because this is not seen as a normal situation. (Jones et al., 2021, p. 38)

Another interviewee told these researchers:

My ex-husband 12 months ago had been arrested for sexually abusing my middle child. ... My daughter revealed to me that this had been going on, and then she took it back and said it was a dream. I confronted him straight away and it became very obvious that—I mean, it's not unusual for kids to disclose in that way—and then as it became more difficult for her to handle that burden it eventually came out. She was able to self-report to a counselor that counselor was then able to start an investigation and then consequently he was arrested and charged. (Jones et al., 2021, p. 39)

The Australian data reported here are not surprising because CSAM is more readily available around the world than ever before, and reports of CSAM on the internet are rapidly increasing, especially in the United States (Jones et al., 2022). Consider these statistics:

- The rate of CSAM reported to the U.S. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) has increased 51% per year since 2008 (Bursztein et al., 2019).
- Reports of CSAM to the Australian eSafety Commissioner have increased by an average of 31% per year since 2016 (Jones et al., 2021).
- The availability of CSAM markedly increased during the COVID-19 lockdown, with NCMEC recording its highest number of reports of suspected child sexual exploitation during 2020 (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2021).
- Public reports of online child exploitation between April and June 2020 increased in Australia by 122% compared to the same period in 2019 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021).

There are other negative effects on children documented in the social scientific literature and listed below, some of which are also examples of psychological abuse and/or secondary victimization:

- finding porn materials that a father owns;
- overhearing a father engage in phone sex;
- increase of parental job loss and financial hardship;
- decreased parental time and attention from a porn-addicted parent;
- witnessing and being involved in parental conflicts related to a father's porn use;
- increased risk of children using porn themselves; and
- a father disclosing his porn addiction to children may distort their sexual development (*Fagan, 2022*).

The research reported here and elsewhere (*Johnson et al., 2022*) shows that male parents' exposure to porn is one of the most robust explanatory variables in the direct and secondary victimization of children. Adult men's exposure to porn is also strongly associated with sexual violence and other types of violence against adult women (*Foubert, 2022*); however, as noted in the next section, much more research on this linkage in domestic contexts is necessary.

Pornography and Violence Against Women in Marriage/ Cohabitation and During and After Separation/Divorce

There is an unsettling truth that many academics and practitioners rarely, if ever, discuss, that is pornography plays a key role in women's experiences of male violence in private places (*DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016*). As well, among the large, international group of woman abuse scholars, very few of them research and theorize the connection between porn and violence against women in domestic/household settings (*DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2018*). What Janet Shope stated 18 years ago exemplifies the current state of social scientific knowledge: "The paucity of research on the effects of pornography on battered women is disturbing in light of the research findings linking pornography to sexually aggressive behavior, particularly among angered men" (*Shope, 2004, p. 66*). More recent empirical validation of her observation is offered by Meagan Brem and her colleagues, who note that "despite the associations reported between pornography

use and physical and sexual violence toward women, minimal research investigated pornography use in relation to intimate partner violence, and no research examined pornography use among men arrested for domestic violence" (*Brem et al., 2021*).

This is not to say that there is a conspicuous absence of research on the gendered violent effects of pornography. There is, in fact, a large literature showing that adolescent, high school, and college males who consume porn commit sexual and physical violence and/or engage in sexting and other forms of digital abuse (*for a review, see Johnson et al., 2022*). In contrast, studies of the correlation between male-to-female domestic violence in marital/cohabiting relationships and during and after separation/divorce are in short supply (*DeKeseredy, 2020*). The relationship between porn and these two types of domestic violence have long been the subject of a peculiar indifference, but hopefully, things will soon change in the social scientific world if researchers adhere to the suggestions made later in this white paper. There is, in the words of path-breaking antiporn scholar Robert Jensen, "a lot of work to do" (*2007, p. 184*).

The limited work that has so far been done on the connection between porn and adult male-to-female abuse in domestic contexts centers mainly separation/divorce violence against women. Research shows that divorce rates double if men watch porn (*Shultz, 2016*), which in turn increases the risk of violence against women during and after separation/divorce. The probability of lethal and nonlethal assaults peaks in the first two months following separation and when women attempt permanent separation through legal and other means (*DeKeseredy et al., 2017*). It thus not surprising to hear that many of Evan Stark's female clients told them that "they were never more frightened than in the days, weeks, or months after they moved out" (*Stark, 2007, p. 116*).

It should also be noted in passing that though Rebecca and Russell Dobash (*1979*) and Susan Schechter (*1982*) were the first feminist scholars to view domestic violence as a form of *coercive control* (*Barlow & Walklate, 2022*), it is Stark's work on the topic that is the most widely read and cited in policy, practice, and scholarship (*McLachlan & Harris, 2022*). Coercive control involves nonphysical behaviors that are often subtle, are hard to detect and prove, and seem more forgivable to people unfamiliar with the dynamics of violence against women. The primary objective of coercive control is to restrict a woman's liberties (*Tanha et al., 2010*). Common examples are stalking, threatening looks, criticism, and "microregulating a partner's behavior" (*Stark, 2007, p. 229*).

Nickie was interviewed by me and Martin Schwartz (*2009*), and her experiences exemplify what it is like to be hurt by coercive control:

I was his property that he wanted to own me. And I was his. That's how he looked at it. I was his property, and that's all that I felt I was to him, was just a lay, you know. But that's all he wanted me for was to satisfy himself. ... He would deprive me. It was more of a mental torture, emotionally, mental torture

than physical except in the sex it was physical. “You’re mine and I’m gonna have you whether you want it or not. I want you.” He was in control. And that’s what it’s all about with men like that. They have to be in control.
(*DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009, p. 72*)

It is beyond the scope of this white paper to repeat the review of the literature on the linkage between porn and male violence against current and former female partners that appears in an earlier piece I wrote for Culture Reframed (*see DeKeseredy, 2020*). Even so, it must be emphasized that the research done so far definitely shows that for men who physically, sexually, and psychologically abuse women, pornography is one more weapon in their arsenal. Gail, one of the rural southeast Ohio women me and Amanda Hall-Sanchez (2017) interviewed, highlights this terrifying reality:

Just degrading like you know, stupid. I got called stupid a lot you know and even if it wasn’t joking around, you know it became serious. “Oh, you’re stupid” and then it just became name calling. ... “Oh you’re a fuckin’ retard,” you know it just got worse and like ... then it was like other things that encouraged me to do. Um, him and his friends watched a lot of porn and encouraged me and his friend’s wife to make out so it was like things that he want[ed] that he was trying to get me to do for his own pleasure you know. It was like, even if it felt uncomfortable, you know, just drink a little bit more and it will be okay, you know. (*DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2017, pp. 842–843*)

Next Steps

Stated previously, we know that pornography consumption is correlated with domestic violence against women and children, but it is time for an interdisciplinary cadre of researchers to broaden their focus to include porn’s contribution to other types of family violence. The ever-increasing media, public, and professional attention given both to wife beating and child abuse leads many North Americans to believe that violence against wives and children are the most common forms of violence in the family. Yet, sibling violence occurs more often than husband-to-wife and parent-to-child abuse. Sibling violence is also the most common and overlooked form of violence experienced by family members in the United States (*Myers, 2015*). The following incident may seem familiar to readers with brothers and/or sisters:

I can’t remember a time when my brother didn’t taunt me, usually trying to get me to respond so he would be justified in hitting me. Usually, he would be saying I was a cry-baby or a sissy or stupid or ugly and that no one would like me, want to be around me, or whatever. Sometimes he would accuse me of doing something, and if I denied it, he would call me a liar. I usually felt overwhelmingly helpless because nothing I said or did would stop him. If no one else was around, he would start beating on me, after which he would stop

and go away. (*Barnett et al., 2004, p. 50*)

Though supported mainly by anecdotal evidence, internet porn is now believed by some professionals to be closely connected to sibling sexual trauma. For instance, therapist Bradd Watts (2020) states:

Many youthful offenders have a problematic relationship with pornography ... in these cases, pornography has led to a shaping of sexually abusive fantasies and a desire to carry out these acts on siblings. In the absence of well-developed decision-making skills, and in the face of heightened sexual arousal, adolescents may decide to act out what they have seen on their computer screens.
(*Watts, 2020, p. 40*)

Watts's work strongly suggests, then, that a richer understanding of sibling violence requires a careful examination of the contribution of porn. Additionally, more rigorous controlled studies of the effects of sibling sexual abuse are necessary. Most of the research on this harm, such as a recent study done in Israel (*Tener et al., 2021*), has thus far examined a small number of clinical case studies of people seeking therapy (*Kaya & Üçer, 2022*). Still, some experts contend that sibling incest is more common than father-daughter incest (*Barnett et al., 2011*).

If sibling violence is common in contemporary U.S. families, the same can be said about elder abuse. In fact, elderly family members have been abused for generations. Yet, prior to the 1980s, this problem received little social scientific attention (*DeKeseredy, 2005*). Today, elder abuse is defined as a major type of domestic violence, and recent interest in this harm is the product of at least four factors. First, there is a rapidly growing number of North Americans aged 65 years or older. Starting in 2030, all baby boomers in the United States, for example, will be older than 65 and they will make up 21% of the population. Note, too, by 2060, nearly one in four U.S. residents will be 65 and older, the number of 85-plus will triple, and the United States will be home to 500,000 centenarians (*Vespa, 2018*).

Second, since people are living much longer than their ancestors, more middle-aged children than ever before look after their elderly parents. Ponder these statistics: a Nationwide Retirement Institute online survey of 1,462 adults aged 50 or older with investable assets of at least \$50,000 who are retired or planning to retire within the next 10 years shows that nearly two in five (38%) have or have had their adult children living with them, and about 16% have or had their parents living with them. Moreover, 21% of older adults are somewhat or very concerned about financially supporting their adult children and/or parents. According to Kristi Rodriguez, vice president of thought leadership for Nationwide Financial, "today's reality is hard for older adults caring for aging parents or adult children, as they will likely be caregiver and need a caregiver themselves in the not-too-distant future" (*Nationwide, 2019*).

Third, higher proportions of the elderly vote in elections than do members of other age groups, and seniors made up 36% of the electorate population in the last U.S. federal election (*Intriago, 2021*). Thus, they have considerable political power, which influences politicians to address their concerns. The fourth factor that contributed to the recognition of elder abuse as a social problem is the growing professional interest in the criminal victimization of the elderly (*Kratcoski & Edelbacher, 2018*).

Two things make it extremely difficult, if not impossible to determine the exact extent of elder abuse in North America. First, unlike young family members, seniors are typically disconnected from many social networks, such as workplaces, schools, and recreational centers. Thus, the elderly are often referred to as *hidden victims*. For example, if a battered child attends her mathematics class with bruises and cuts, her parents' abusive conduct is likely to be recognized by a teacher. On the other hand, a physically abused elderly person may be confined to her home with no one but the abuser observing. Typically, a third party reports elder abuse (*DeKeseredy, 2005*). Despite these problems, some researchers claim that roughly one in 10 Americans aged 60 and older have experienced some form of elder abuse. Some estimates range as high as five million seniors who are abused on an annual basis (*National Council on Aging, 2021*).

A few experts claim that many seniors are forced to view pornography (*see, for example, County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency, 2022*), but, to the best of my knowledge, no studies of this problem are available. Despite this, since domestic violence behind closed doors is multidimensional in nature, there is no reason to believe that coercing seniors to view porn is not a widespread problem. Nonetheless, an important next step is carefully investigating the relationship between porn and elder abuse. Equally important is for society to recognize that forcing seniors to watch porn and subjecting them to other hurtful sexual situations is, in fact, sexual abuse (*cnaZone.com, 2022*).

Other new empirical steps need to be taken, especially collecting data from domestic violence perpetrators who use porn. For example, studies of porn-related male violence against adult women have thus far focused mainly on female survivors, which may not accurately portray the amount and types of porn used by offenders (*Brem et al., 2021*). What is more, regardless of what types of domestic violence researchers choose to examine, to prevent the harms covered in this white paper and other harmful effects of pornography, we must move beyond simply doing correlational analysis because such work does not tell us whether the same factors that cause someone to abuse a loved one also cause this person to consume porn (*DeKeseredy, 2020*).

Conclusions

Millions of North American families are not as safe and loving as many people think and the same can be said about family/household settings in the Global South (*DeKeseredy, 2021b*). Still, the connection between porn and some of the most common types of domestic violence remain largely hidden from society at large and social scientists are largely responsible for this glaring lack of awareness. Since porn is becoming much more accessible and normalized, a larger population will undoubtedly use it, which, in turn, will play a key role not only in the etiology of parental abuse of children and adolescents and women abuse in intimate heterosexual relationships, but also in elder abuse and sibling violence. Efforts to reduce domestic violence, then, entail doing the research suggested here and investing serious resources in the prevention and use of porn use, production, and distribution.

Based on the ground-breaking research and policy efforts of people affiliated with Culture Reframed and other progressive organizations struggling to eliminate poisonous sexual media, a central argument of this paper is that ignoring porn is a flawed strategy for curbing all types of family violence. Failing to recognize the complex connections between porn and family violence “only tells half the story” about an alarming amount of pain and suffering that occurs behind closed doors (*Bates, 2020, p. 24*). Let’s now start telling the whole story and make antiporn work part of meaningful and effective coordinated, collaborative, community-based initiatives to promote the creation and maintenance of peaceful families.

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