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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

ADDRESSING PORNOGRAPHY THROUGH THE CHURCH

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“Addressing Pornography through the Church”

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Abstract

Ample evidence documents that the pornography industry is alive and well in the U.S. with sexually explicit images readily available through a variety of venues. Significant proportions of adults report using pornography, although there is some evidence that some groups, including persons of faith and colleges student may consume such sexually explicit materials at rates higher than the general population. Despite some commonly held misperceptions that pornography is victimless and harmless, research has documented there are often negative effects resulting from the use of pornography. Most church leaders have traditionally addressed the issue of pornography from a biblical perspective of morality or not at all, although some bodies of faith are developing new strategies to tackle this issue. Opportunities exist for social workers to partner with churches to strengthen responses of congregations in dealing with this controversial issue.

“Addressing Pornography through the Church”

Introduction

Pornography is certainly not a new phenomenon in this country, but major technological innovations have all fueled the growth of this industry. Research suggests significant numbers of adults consume pornography despite potentially harmful effects. Despite the prevalence of pornography in our culture and its potential harm to clients, the topic has received little attention in the literature. This article will discuss the extent of the market in the U.S., the consumers of pornography, and the potential dangers of pornography use. The ways that this often controversial or taboo topic is handled in the church will be covered, as well as several suggestions for social workers to partner with communities of faith to provide education and counseling on pornography.

Pornography in the U.S.

The U.S. Pornography Market

In the U.S., pornography is a 13.3 billion dollar industry, garnering more profits every year than the National Football League (NFL), the National Baseball Association (NBA), and major league baseball (MLB) combined (Bashir, 2007; Martindale, 2009). Every 39 minutes a new adult video is created in the U.S. (Ropelato, n.d), with the commercial sex industry producing approximately 12,000 porn movies every year (Tanner, 2008) compared to 600 by Hollywood (Motion Picture Association of America, 2008). Americans rent over 800 million pornographic moves annually (Corliss, 2005), spending over \$3,000 every second on pornographic materials (Ropelato, n.d.). According to a report in PC magazine, the adult entertainment industry made \$3 billion more (\$12 billion versus \$9 billion) in 2006 than mainstream entertainment (Gardiner, 2007).

Forms of Pornography

Pornography is marketed in a variety of products, including movies, magazines, television shows, and phone calls – a.k.a “Dial A Porn” (Anderson, 2003), but the graphic and violent content of all

pornography is not the same. During his administration, President Ronald Reagan ordered an investigation into the effects of pornography, which resulted in the publication of the *Attorney General's Commission on Pornography* (U.S. Attorney General, 1986). In this report, the Commission noted three distinct categories of pornography. The first is non-violent and non-degrading pornographic materials in which the people appear to be voluntary participants in somewhat equitable roles "in a setting devoid of actual or apparent violence or pain" (p. 335). The Commission noted that a relatively small proportion of materials fit these criteria.

The second form of pornography identified by the Commission is non-violent materials depicting degradation, domination, subordination, or humiliation (U.S. Attorney General, 1986). This form of pornography "depicts people, usually women, as existing solely for the sexual satisfaction of others, usually men, or that depicts people, usually women, in decidedly subordinate roles in their sexual relations with others, or that depicts people engaged in sexual practices that to most people would be considered humiliating" (U.S. Attorney General, 1986, p. 331). The commission found this form of pornography to be the most prevalent at the time of their report was published.

Finally, there is sexually violent material which "features actual or unmistakably simulated or unmistakably threatened violence presented in sexually explicit fashion with a predominant focus on the sexually explicit violence" (U.S. Attorney General, 1986, p. 323). The Commission noted this form of pornography was becoming more readily available, with a recurring theme "of a man making some sort of sexual advance to a woman, being rebuffed, and then raping the woman or in some other way violently forcing himself on the woman" (U.S. Attorney General, 1986, p. 324). Almost inevitably, the woman would become aroused and end up "begging for more". Although completed in the 1980's, findings from recent research confirm that the most commonly viewed pornographic films have become more violent and degrading, making consistent with the latter two categories (Delaney, 2008; Media Educational Foundation, 2008).

Consumers of Pornography

Estimates of the number of U.S. adults who view or purchase pornography vary, but the General Social Survey (GSS) contains some of the most reliable statistics on this topic, as it is based on population level data. Based on analysis of the 2008 survey data, 24.6% of adults reported seeing an X-rated movie in the last year (file available at <http://sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm>). Additionally, data from the 2000, 2002, and 2004 surveys revealed that an average of 24.4% of adults visited a website for sexually explicit materials in the past month.

Results of other studies suggest that certain groups may consume pornography at higher rates than the general population. In a recent study of over 800 university students from six sites across the U.S., 87% of young men and 31% of young women reported using pornography (Carroll, Padilla-Walker, Nelson, Olson, Barry, & Madsen, 2008). In another study of 305 college students, 99% of the men and 88% of the women reported using pornography, with 32% of the men compared to 4% of the women using it 3-5 times a week (O'Reilly, Knox, & Zusman, 2007).

Other studies suggest that persons of faith also frequently use this market. The mission of Promise Keepers (2008), a Christian organization for men, "is a is to ignite and unite men to become passionate followers of Jesus Christ through the effective communication of seven promises to God, their fellow men, family, church and the world". According to a Promise Keepers survey, 53% of the men indicated they had used pornography within the last two weeks (Frykholm, 2007; Subritzky, 2008). In 2002, 30% of 6,000 pastors surveyed – e.g., 1,800 clergy – reported they had used pornography in the past month (Frykholm, 2007; Bergin, 2005).

Finally due to technological innovations, exposure and access to pornography is happening at an early age, although often unintentionally. The birth of the internet, the increase in the number of personal home computers, the expansion in the number of pornographic websites, the accessibility of pay per view movies at home and in hotels, and the development of items prized by youth such as iPods

and cell phones that allow for the simple transfer of photographs, the pornography industry has grown, making sexually explicit materials increasingly at the fingertips of younger members of society (Carroll, et. al., 2008, Greenfield, 2004). Over 10 years ago, the average age of first exposure to pornography, usually unintentional, was 11 years of age (Johnson, 1997). In a more recent study examining exposure to online pornography among 1500 U.S. youth 10 and 17 years of age, 42% (n = 603) had been exposed in the prior year and 66% (n = 400) of them indicated that the exposures were unwanted (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007).

The Consequences of Pornography

Consequences to Consumers and Families

Bergen and Bogle (2000) note that a Danish study published in the early 1970's suggested there were "cathartic effects" associated with using pornography that could actually decrease sexual violence against women. However, the findings came under significant criticism and the need for more research in the area became clear. More recent evidence suggests there are often more harmful, rather than positive, effects associated with pornography consumption, including consequences that often extend beyond the intentional consumer. Of interest is that according to analysis of the 2008 GSS survey data, almost two-thirds of adults (66.4%) of adults believe that pornographic materials provide an outlet for bottled-up impulses.

Men who use pornography, along with their wives and children, may be impacted by this behavior. According to Shared Hope International (2006), "there are countless ordinary men with families who get caught up in the use of pornography/prostitution only to find that, after time, there are serious consequences to themselves and their family" (p.12). In her testimony before the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Property Rights Committee on Judiciary of the United States Senate, Jill C. Manning summarized the research regarding the impact of pornography on marriages and family (2005). Based on her review of decades of empirical study on this topic, Manning

stated that “marriages are easily destabilized by sexual influences outside the marital contract” and that six trends are distinctly associated with pornography usage, including:

- increased marital distress, and risk of separation and divorce;
- decreased marital intimacy and sexual satisfaction;
- infidelity;
- increased appetite for more graphic types of pornography and sexual activity associated with abusive, illegal or unsafe practices;
- devaluation of monogamy, marriage and child rearing; and
- an increasing number of people struggling with compulsive and addictive sexual behavior.

Over half (56%) of the 350 attorneys at a 2002 American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers indicated that “excessive interest in online porn contributed to more than half of the divorces they handled that year” (Dedmon, 2002).

Although sexual addiction is currently not a recognized disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Disorders-IV and remains controversial among therapists, it was recognized in the DSM III and is being considered for inclusion in the DSM V (Beck, 2008). However, Dr. Patrick Carnes, clinical director of sexual disorders services at The Meadows, a multidisorder addiction treatment center, and noted author and speaker on sexual compulsion, believes that many individuals actually develop sexual addictions. He estimates of the number of individuals with sexual addiction, defined as “any sexually-related, compulsive behavior which interferes with normal living and causes severe stress on family, friends, loved ones, and one’s work environment” to range between three and six percent of the general population (2009). Furthermore, according to Dr. Carnes (2009):

“Sexual addiction has been called sexual dependency and sexual compulsivity. By any name, it is a compulsive behavior that completely dominates the addict’s life. Sexual addicts make sex a priority more important than family, friends, and work. Sex becomes the organizing principle of

addict's lives. They are willing to sacrifice what they cherish most in order to preserve and continue their unhealthy behavior.”

In his book, *Out of the Shadows*, Dr. Carnes (2001, p. 66-67) describes three levels of sexual addiction (see Table entitled “Levels of Addiction”). Although some of the behaviors included in the first level of addiction may be socially accepted, most individuals engage in multiple behaviors, which after time, become the most important part of the addict’s life. In the next level, all the behaviors violate cultural norms. The addict in the third level engages in behaviors that involve social and legal risk. Notably, pornography use is in the first level of addiction, where Dr. Carnes suggests that most addicts believe they can control their behavior, often because most do not face any significant consequences.

LEVELS OF ADDICTION					
LEVEL OF ADDICTION	BEHAVIOR	CULTRUAL STANDARDS	LEGAL CONSEQUENCES/ RISKS	VICTIM	PUBLIC OPINION OF ADDICTION
Level One	Masturbation, compulsive relationships, pornography, prostitution, and anonymous sex.	Depending on behavior, activities are seen as acceptable or tolerable. Some specific behaviors such as prostitution are sources of controversy.	Sanctions against those behaviors, when illegal, are ineffectively and randomly enforced. Low priority for enforcement officials generates minimal risk for addict.	These behaviors are perceived as victimless crimes. However, victimization and exploitation are often components.	Public attitudes are characterized by ambivalence or dislike. For some behaviors such as prostitution there is a competing negative hero image of glamorous decadence.
Level Two	Exhibitionism, voyeurism, indecent phone calls, and indecent liberties.	None of these behaviors is acceptable.	Behaviors are regarded as nuisance offense. Risk is involved since offenders, when observed, are actively prosecuted.	There is always a victim.	Addict is perceived as pathetic and sick but harmless. Often these behaviors are objects of jokes that dismiss the pain of the addict.
Level Three	Child molestation, incest, and rape.	Each behavior represents a Profound violation of cultural boundaries.	Extreme legal consequences create high-risk situations for the addict.	There is always a victim.	Public becomes outraged. Perpetrators are seen by many as sub-human and beyond help.

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Regardless of whether one believes that pornography can become an addiction, social workers should understand many individuals have reported harmful effects associated with its use.

Furthermore, there is some evidence on the potential negative impact of viewing pornography unintentionally. Greenfield (2004) suggests that such exposure can “influence sexual violence, the sexual attitudes, moral values, and sexual activity” in negative ways. In recalling sexual media experiences that impacted them during adolescence, college students reported overwhelmingly negative reactions, such as disgust, shock, embarrassment, and anger, to exposure to pornographic or other sexual video, particularly when viewing was unintentional (Greenfield, 2004). Furthermore, in a documentary discussing their personal struggles to overcome problems with pornography, several adults noted they accidentally stumbled upon, or were introduced to sexually graphic images, by others (Music for the Soul, 2008). One man who recounted his struggle with pornography after being exposed to it by a friend in high school stated (Music for the Soul, 2008):

“In high school, I remember being with a friend on a trip to a summer sports camp and that friend stole, actually shoplifted, a Penthouse magazine and it felt like gold. It felt like this person had just lifted the Hope diamond out of that store and we were carrying around the most valuable possession that we had. What happened was that pornography started to feed and nurture my heart, my emotions and I could not live without it. Never in my wildest dreams did I, or could I, imagine that years later, 20 years later, 25 years later, that I would be engaged in all kinds of sexual acting out that I did not want to do.”

The Consequences of Pornography to Women and Girls

The products of the commercial sex industry, which are largely designed to sexually arouse men, can also have harmful effects on women. Susan Fiske, a psychologist at Princeton University, recently completed research examining brain scans and reactions of straight men following their exposure to clothed and scantily clad images of women (Sample, 2009). Findings revealed that following exposure to sexy images of women, straight men were more likely to think of women as objects rather than whole persons with whom to be in relationship.

In an earlier study designed to investigate the experiences of 59 women with pornography, (Senn, 1993) found that “women’s experiences and attitudes towards pornography cannot easily be collapsed into a universal category of *female*” (p. 337). However, these women overwhelmingly viewed

pornography in a negative light, with many believing it is harmful to women and some having actually been hurt from it, including impact on their personal body image and lost relationships. The use of pornography by a partner or spouse can leave some individuals feeling inadequate and threatened by the other person's use of pornography as reflected in the words of this female partner: "He does not have an actual human mistress from the Internet, but the Internet pornography is his "mistress" that is becoming between us. The idealized images of the perfect woman make me feel inadequate". (Schneider, 2000 in O'Reilly, Knox, & Zusman, 2007).

Such feelings of inadequacy are actually being translated by some women into physical transformations. Physicians are noting an increase in requests for labiaplasty, which involves the reshaping of female external genital structures (Krobin, 2004). Once the "domain of sex workers, nude entertainers, nude models, swimsuit models and the occasional woman who needed her labia reduced for medical reasons such as infection or pain" (Krobin, 2004, p.2), this procedure is now being sought out by women who "are ultimately being pressured by men who want them to conform to a idea of beauty most often seen in the porn industry" (Krobin, 2004, p.2). The primary reason women are seeking this surgery is due to negative comments from their male sex partners. One physician suggests "that women who aren't sex workers are getting this kind of thing because there's pressure from someone who's telling them they're not perfect. There's often pressure from a man who tells them they need it [and] I assume that their standards for labial beauty were set by a combination of the porn industry, sex-oriented magazines and the Internet" (Krobin, 2004, p.2).

Violence in pornography and women

In addition to negative views of selves experienced especially by women, the harmful effects of pornography may go much further for others. In a study examining acts of aggression in the most popular pornography rentals, researchers found that pornographic films are becoming more violent toward women (Delaney, 2008). The researchers specifically observed the videos for acts of aggression,

defined as “any action causing physical or psychological harm to oneself or another person, verbally or physically”. An overwhelming 94.4% of the aggressive acts were aimed at women and 95.5% of the women who were the objects of the aggressive acts “actually expressed enjoyment or had no response at all” (Delaney, 2008). For the researchers, findings from this study raise questions about a market system that pays women more to be subjected to violence and humiliation than to work in a mainstream industry, that encourages the making of extremely violent pornographic movies, and a consumer market that supports the making of such products.

While there is no research documenting that “pornography leads to rape”, some researchers have noted an association between the two phenomena. In an investigation of sexual violence experienced by 100 women, although the use of pornography by perpetrators was unknown by 58% of the women, Bergen and Bogle (2000) discovered that pornography had been used by 28% of the perpetrators. Among the women who indicated their assailants had consumed pornography, 40% reported pornography was part of the actual sexual violence incident. No women reported any positive influence of pornography on the violence they underwent. Bergen and Bogle concluded that there is a “relationship between pornography and violence against women” (2000, p. 232).

Faith and Pornography

How Pornography is Addressed in the Church

“But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28, New International Version). The sheer size and reach of the pornography industry present a strong challenge for the church to assist individuals in keeping this biblical principle. However, because of the very real consequences associated with pornography use, including the breakdown of marriages and objectification of women, it seems important to understand how the church is responding. According to Bergin (2005), in some places of worship, the topic of pornography is simply ignored because pastors are too hesitant to broach the topic or simply

unaware of its reach and impact. One individual battling pornography said that because “nobody was talking about it in churches; I thought perhaps I was the only one that was struggling” (Music for the Soul, 2008).

The issue will occasionally be addressed by leaders of youth and young adults in the context of a broader topic, such as the True Love Waits program, which encourages sexual abstinence until marriage (A. Jacober, Associate Professor, George. W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University, personal communication, April 9, 2009). Others church leaders choose to treat pornography use as simply as moral failing – e.g., sin – and focus their efforts on “producing an immediate emotion-filled moment of deliverance” (Bergin, 2005). However, Mark Laaser, Director of the Institute for Healthy Sexuality of the American Association of Christian Counselors, suggests “to think God is going to just zap part of your brain so you’re only attracted to your wife from that moment on is not realistic” (Bergin, 2005). Furthermore, David Delmonico, Professor of Counseling Education at Duquesne University, reports that the dynamics of sexual addictions are similar to other addictions, making therapeutic treatment an important part of recovery for most individuals. Additionally, treating pornography as a moral issue can actually make people of faith feel even more shame and make it less likely for them to seek help (Frykholm, 2007). Therefore, more options are needed for individuals to gain accurate information and to feel safe in seeking help.

Some churches have developed new venues to address the controversial topic in their congregations, such as hosting Twelve Step or other support group programs for persons struggling with pornography and other addictions. Celebrate Recovery, a support group program for persons struggling with any type of addiction that started in the early 1990’s at Saddleback Church, is now available at multiple locations, including many churches (Celebrate Recovery, 2008). More recently Willow Creek Community Church, the fourth largest church in America, held an open discussion about pornography

with their young adults. On their website, information about the forum states (Willow Creek Church, 2009):

“In a day when we are constantly bombarded with sexual images in advertisements, television, and movies, Axis, Willow Creek’s ministry for 20-somethings is opening the door for discussion about it. The voice of the church must speak into what it means and looks like to follow Jesus in days like this. Followers of Jesus have to dialogue in honest conversation around our own temptations and brokenness.”

Although not a typical church with a building and Sunday morning worship services, one community of faith believers has created what to some may seem the most innovative – and to others rather inappropriate - approach to addressing this issue. XXXchurch “is the #1 Christian pornsite designed to bring awareness, openness and accountability to those affected by pornography” (Fireproof Ministries, 2009). In addition to their website that offers video clips of their work and resources for those struggling with pornography, those involved in XXXchurch engage in outreach on the Las Vegas Strip handing out Bibles and water, host a booth at the Adult Video News awards (e.g., adult pornography), and speak regularly at universities and churches. This ministry reaches out to those both impacted by pornography, as well as those actually in the industry.

Finally, on a policy and education level, in 2006, the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women (GCSRW, 2008) of the United Methodist Church recommended adding the Prevention of the Use of Pornography in the Church to *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008*, which is a collection of the social policies of this church. This resolution states: “We recognize that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. ...We reject all sexual expressions that damage or destroy the humanity God has given us as birthright” (GCSRW, 2008). However, this governing body did not stop with only a stance on the matter, but actually recommended that seminaries include education on pornography in ethics and ministries courses and training for all students.

Suggestions for Social Workers to Partner with Churches to Address Pornography

Pornography negatively impacts the lives of many people and destroys marriages and families; people of faith are not exempt from such outcomes. Although there are exceptions, many communities of faith are either not dealing with pornography or addressing it largely from a moral perspective, thus creating several unique educational and counseling opportunities on which social workers could partner with churches. These collaborations could be formed in places where social workers are employed, in the congregations to which they belong, or with churches in their communities.

One relatively simple and pragmatic response would be for social workers to develop resource lists or web pages for churches that provides basic information about pornography, including statistics and links to reputable sources for more information on the issue. Recommended sites include the Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health (www.sash.net), the Sexual Recovery Institute (<http://www.sexualrecovery.com/>), and Codependents of Sexual Addictions (www.cosa-recovery.org). Recognizing that some individuals may need help with personal struggles, the list or website should encourage anyone who believes that s/he might have a problem with pornography to seek help from a licensed professional counselor.

Social workers who have sufficient knowledge on the topic could offer to lead, or partner with a spiritual leader, to co-lead discussion groups about pornography. While convening meetings for young adults, such as the one held by Willow Creek Community Church, is appropriate, specifically targeting college students and youth for such discussions is also recommended. Providing accurate information about the potential negative consequences of pornography consumption before problematic behaviors begin to plant roots is critical. With pornography accessible in multiple venues and exposure occurring so early in life, such forums will not be introducing something new to youth (and forums should not include any sexually explicit material), but initiating educational dialogues that many young people desperately need. Sessions with parents of youth are also recommended, so that parents are aware of

the information their children are receiving and can engage in appropriate follow-up dialogue with them.

A search for existing resources for churches to use that address pornography revealed little. However, *Somebody's Daughter* is a powerful DVD that documents the struggles that 3 men and a couple, all persons of faith, faced with pornography (Music for the Soul, 2008). This documentary provides first-hand accounts of how destructive pornography can be even to persons with strong faith convictions; it also offers hope that can be found through Christ and includes several contemporary Christian songs on the topic that could be useful in reaching younger populations. Celebrate Recovery, support groups for those with any addiction, also has available materials for support groups, including an eight step adaptation for recovery based on The Beatitudes (Celebrate Recovery, 2008). Due to the limited quantity of tools available for churches to access, it is recommended that social workers work alongside churches to design age-appropriate materials on the topic that could be utilized in Sunday School classes, study or discussion groups, and sermons.

Relationships and marriages are broken because of pornography. Many churches have overcome the stigma once associated with other addictions and now proudly offer or house groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous in their buildings. Rather than feeling more shamed by the church, a person of faith with a pornography struggle should be able to turn to their church to share their burden and find love, support, and help. Social workers are encouraged to reach out to churches and offer to establish support groups for both individuals with pornography and other sexual struggles and the persons affected by those issues. Both Celebrate Recovery (www.celebraterecovery.com) and Music for the Soul (www.musicforthesoul.org) have developed materials that would be appropriate for starting such groups.

Finally, many pastors and church leaders simply have not been trained on how to address pornography. Following the recommendation of the GCSRW, social workers are encouraged to reach

out to seminaries and suggest that content on pornography be included in course offerings. Because substantial proportions of pastors participate in some form of continuing education (McMillan, 2003) developing a presentation on the pornography and offering training through entities that provide these educational opportunities is also encouraged. Finally, working with denominational leaders to develop strategies for the dissemination of accurate information on this issue to church leaders is also an appropriate role for social workers. A listing of theological seminaries in North America can be found at <http://documents.fuller.edu/cio/seminaries/>; the listing is alphabetized, but does provide the geographic location of each institute.

Conclusion

Pornography is a multi-billion dollar industry that destroys individuals and families. However, because of its controversial nature, it often remains the elephant in the sanctuary. Social workers are encouraged to work with churches to develop new strategies to educate congregants on the issue and assist individuals and families struggling with this problem.

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