

Reaction to the BBC3 programme "Porn, where's the harm?", 10/4/14

I approached this programme with scepticism because I have detected in the press recently that porn is the latest wheeze for shaming males. The message is already circulating that boys these days are wanting to emulate porn in real life, even on the first date according to one Guardian columnist. But is this true? Or is it just the latest man shaming strategy?

One of the central features of this programme was a survey of ~1000 young people regarding their exposure to, and opinion of, porn. I tried to find the actual survey details on the internet but failed. How many of the 1000 were girls and how many boys? Over what distribution of ages?

Surveys of intimate behaviours are fraught with difficulty. It is well known that subtle differences in the wording of the questions will elicit very different responses. Also, the manner in which the questions are asked and recorded can make a huge difference. For example, whether an interviewer asks the questions as opposed to the interviewee being left alone with a laptop to answer in private.

To judge how representative the survey might be it is necessary to see the complete list of questions. I haven't, unfortunately. The viewer should be aware that the choice of questions can be used to skew the results to an amazing degree. For example, there might be a question "do you think that porn creates anxiety in girls about having to live up to the female porn star's performance?". But if there was no equivalent question for boys, "do you think that porn creates anxiety in boys about having to live up to the male porn star's performance?" then you cannot get a balanced picture from the survey. This sort of biased questioning has become common in gender issues, for example discussions in schools on partner violence. These commonly use a list of questions which only consider male perpetrators and female victims, falsely promoting the impression that victimisation in the reverse direction does not occur. In fact, it is equally common, see for example <http://www.avoiceformen.com/men/shaming-male-high-school-students-aussie-style/>). There is every indication that the survey did suffer from this bias. The TV programme failed to even consider that an adverse impact on boys was possible. The concern was exclusively related to the objectification of girls.

This is the nub of my concern. The very possibility that porn may be misrepresenting male sexuality is not mentioned. Instead we are encouraged to believe that porn is indeed just what men would like to do - that it is a true rendering of male sexuality. Porn is degrading to women, yes. But it seems not to matter that men are being represented as mindless fuckbots. An interesting survey question might have been, "do you think that porn degrades men?".

The organiser of the survey was one Maddy Coy. My suspicion deepened when I looked up her credentials. She is the deputy director of CWASU, the Child & Woman Abuse Studies Unit, described as being a centre for independent research, evaluation, training, consultancy and networking *from a feminist perspective*. She has worked in a range of specialised services *for women and girls* experiencing violence. Her published work includes titles like, "Troubling Notions of Male Entitlement: Men Consuming, Boasting and Confessing about Paying for Sex" and "A feminist 'epistemic community' reshaping public policy: a case study of the End Violence Against Women Coalition". Hmm.

The programme gave a clear account of the extent of boys and girls exposure to porn, and at what age. But it was very weak on addressing the question posed by its title: what is the harm? There was an interview with a rape victim. But the connection between this and porn was tenuous at best. There was also an interview with a girl who had sent her boyfriend a naked picture of herself by text - only to find that he shared it around and she became infamous. But this was nothing to do with porn either. These attempts to find "harm" seemed rather desperate to me.

I found the interviews with young men on the programme to be encouraging rather than the opposite. They seemed well aware of the dangers of regarding porn as real. It was noticeable that a significant proportion of both boys and girls first looked at porn for educational reasons. This is understandable. It is easy for adults to forget the anxiety about sexual performance that is natural when still inexperienced. Another interesting finding was the very high proportion of exposure to porn when not actively looking for it.

What was not in the least surprising - to anyone, surely - was that boys were more frequent consumers of porn than girls. There are good reasons for this which it would be off-piste to go into here. Actually I was rather surprised that as many as 52% of girls do look for porn online at least sometimes.

One of the headline results was, "the majority (74%) say porn effects men's attitude to sex". But what does that mean? Was this predominantly the girls' answer? If watching porn answered questions which were worrying a boy, that would change his attitude to sex - in a positive way. The response to this question appears to be concerning - but is it? And what have we been told about the girls? What proportion of girls had their attitude to sex changed by porn? Were they asked this question? And if, say, we were told that, "the majority (74%) say porn effects girl's attitude to sex" what would we make of that?

But by far the most important outcome, I think, was that "almost 10% said porn made men expect women would be their sex objects". This is an object lesson in how to express results in a manner which best supports your cause. The same result can be expressed in the following, positive, manner, "more than 90% said porn did not make men expect women to be their sex objects". This is well worth emphasising since the programme aims to give quite the opposite impression.

The atmosphere engendered by the programme is one of moral panic and a deliberate intimation that harm is indeed being caused by porn. Being somewhat prudish myself I agree that it is very unfortunate that young people are being exposed to this nasty stuff. But was actual harm demonstrated? When you examine the evidence presented I don't see that it was. Just as with violent films, boys distinguish very clearly between fantasy and reality. Perhaps I have more confidence in the boys' good sense than the programme makers? Do boys really expect a porn experience with their girlfriends? I don't think we found out, did we? It is debatable which is more harmful: porn or this BBC3 programme. Both denigrate male sexuality, and the latter is arguably part of an industry which demonises men generally.