Methodological Issues in Defining Aggression for Content Analyses of Sexually Explicit Material

ABSTRACT

There exists an important tradition of content analyses of aggression in Sexually Explicit Material. The majority of these analyses use a definition of aggression that excludes consent. This paper identifies three problems with this approach. Firstly it does not distinguish between aggression and some positive acts. Secondly it excludes a key element of healthy sexuality. Thirdly can lead to heteronormative definitions of healthy sexuality. It would be better to use a definition of aggression such as Baron and Richardson's (1994) in our content analyses, that includes a consideration of consent. A number of difficulties have been identified with attending to consent but this paper offers solutions to each of these.

KEYWORDS:

- Pornography

- SEM

- Aggression

- Consent

- Media effects

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INTRODUCTION

There exists an important tradition of content analysis of aggression[1] in Sexually Explicit Material (SEM - Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). Researchers have been concerned about whether exposure to SEM might lead to negative outcomes for viewers, including increased levels of aggression towards women and increased acceptance of rape myths (Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981; Malamuth, 1981). In this research an important distinction has been drawn between aggressive and non-aggressive SEM (Malamuth & Centi, 1986). Despite the centrality of this distinction to research on the effects of SEM the question of how to define aggression remains controversial (Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010). This article contributes to ongoing methodological debates about how aggression should be defined in these studies.

Estimates of the amount of aggression in SEM have varied between 1.9% of material and 88.8% of material (see Table 1). Two main factors account for the extreme variation in rates of aggression in SEM. The first is sampling differences. The studies cited refer to a range of media, at a variety of times, in different national contexts. As can be seen from Barron and Kimmel's (2000) study there can be significant differences in content between different media. National context is also important. McKee's (2005) finding of 1.9% emerged from a study of best-selling, legally-available X-rated pornographic videos in Australia. The Australian classification guidelines state that in order to be rated X and legally distributed in Australia, pornography must not contain any aggression (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2008).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The second key difference between these studies is definitions of aggression. It is this point that I wish to explore in this paper. Some researchers conducting content analysis of SEM have included consent in their definition of aggression (McKee), but the majority of studies listed in the Table have excluded it This fact leads to radically different measures of aggression in SEM. For example Barron and Kimmel found that of the 24.8% of magazine scenes that included sexual aggression, 88.5% was portrayed as consensual; of the 26.9% of video scenes including aggression, 91.8% was consensual; and of the 42.1% of Usenet scenes, 42.4% consensual (Barron & Kimmel, 2000). Similarly, while Bridges et al found that 88.8% of scenes in pornographic DVDs included 'aggression', in 95.1% of cases the actions met with 'expressions of pleasure' or neutral responses (Bridges, et al., 2010, p. 1077). In this article, I suggest that excluding consent from definitions of aggression causes difficulties for attempts to understand representations of healthy sexuality in SEM.

CONSENT IN AGGRESSION STUDIES

The question of whether to pay attention to consent in definitions of violence is of ongoing concern across aggression studies. In this article, I focus specifically on including consent in definitions of aggression for the purpose of analyses of SEM. This case study is of particular interest because it has an added layer of complexity – feminist and sexual health researchers have argued that consent must be at the heart of healthy sexual practice, as I discuss below. But the issues are more generally raised by aggression researchers across the field. For example, Elizabeth Stanko's (2001) "often-cited definition of violence" (Ray, 2011, p. 7), described by Ray as "a reasonable working definition" (p. 7), does not address consent:

> any form of behavior by an individual that intentionally threatens to or does cause
>
> physical, sexual or psychological harm to others or themselves (Stanko, 2001, p. 316)

But there exist other intellectual traditions in the definition of aggression. Baron and

Richardson (1994), for example, define aggression as:

> Any form of behavior directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living
>
> being who is motivated to avoid such treatment (Baron & Richardson, 1994, p. 37)

By including motivation to avoid the treatment in this definition Baron and Richardson bring

consent into play, and exclude requested actions from the category of aggression. They

suggests that 'most, although by no means all [social scientists] would find the … definition

to be acceptable' (Baron & Richardson, 1994, p. 7).

Content analyses of SEM have tended to follow the former tradition. Consensual

sadomasochism has routinely been counted as a form of aggression (Dietz & Sears, 1988;

Malamuth & Spinner, 1980; Prince, 1990; Scott & Cuvelier, 1993). Some analyses code all

instances of "hair-pulling, hitting, slapping or kicking" as aggression, regardless of whether

they are consensual or non-consensual (Monk-Turner & Purcell, 1999, p. 62; see also Yang

& Linz, 1990). Cowan et al did not code a scene as physically aggressive if it involved "a

mutual, reciprocal context" (Cowan, Lee, Levy, & Synder, 1988, p. 304) but they did code

"bondage" (even if consensual) as aggression, in a category with "incest and rape" (Cowan,

et al., 1988, p. 304). Barron and Kimmel note whether aggressive behaviors are consensual or

non-consensual but still code both categories as "violence" (Barron & Kimmel, 2000, p. 163).

Prince (1990) notes that, "in a few cases hitting occurred which appeared playful or which

took place within a mutually consenting 'S&M' relationship. This, too, was counted as

abuse" (Prince, 1990, p. 37). Bridges et al also note whether acts are consensual or not, and

report accordingly, but argue that consent is irrelevant and should not be considered in definitions of aggression (Bridges, et al., 2010).

As a general rule, then, analyses of SEM have dismissed consent in their definitions of aggression. In this article I argue that this causes problems for understanding the relationship between SEM and healthy sexual development.

PROBLEMS CREATED BY EXCLUDING CONSENT FROM DEFINITIONS OF AGGRESSION

Problem 1: Removing Consent from our Definition of Aggression Renders us Unable to Distinguish between Aggression and Some Prosocial Acts

There are three key difficulties with removing consent from our definitions of aggression. The first is that it makes it difficult for us to distinguish between aggression and some prosocial acts. The field of aggression studies has been predicated on the belief that aggression is undesirable and ideally instances of aggression should be reduced (Geen, 1990, p. 7; Tremblay, Hartup, & Archer, 2005, p. xiii). Removing consent from our definitions causes problems for this approach. Previous writers have noted a number of liminal areas that could conceivably fall under the rubric of aggression, including surgical procedures, contact sports, and consensual sadomasochism (Baron & Richardson, 1994, p. 11). In order to make meaningful statements about the prevalence of aggression and ways to reduce it we must use a definition that includes the actions we wish to reduce, but which also excludes desirable actions. Unfortunately, if we remove consent, then all of these examples – and others – are brought under the rubric of "aggression". This necessarily changes our relationship to the category. Aggression becomes a value-neutral category, and we can make no blanket

statements about its desirability or otherwise. At this point we would need to devise another meta-level language for distinguishing between desirable and undesirable aggression in SEM.

Problem 2: Removing Consent from our Definition of Aggression Removes a Key Element of Healthy Sexuality

Content analyses of aggression in SEM are part of a larger project seeking to understand the impact of SEM on healthy sexual development (Check, 1985; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981; Fisher & Grenier, 1994; Malamuth, 1981). In order for researchers to produce comparable data on this issue, it is also necessary to agree on what constitutes healthy sexuality. There is no absolute agreement among researchers on this topic (Williams, 2006, p. 333). Some researchers limit their definition of sexual health to simply avoiding disease and unwanted pregnancy (Walsh & Ward, 2010). Others expand it to include "positive" experiences of sexuality (Robinson, Scheltema, & Cherry, 2005). Ongoing debates about the boundaries of healthy sexuality include the point at which sexual enjoyment becomes sex addiction or compulsivity (Giugliano, 2010), when an aversion to sex becomes sexual anorexia (Nelson, 2003), the status of masturbation and the use of pornography (Corley, 2006), casual sex (Ellison, 2001) and sadomasochism (Williams, 2006).

Nevertheless, and despite the lack of an entirely settled definition, many researchers agree that the understanding and practice of consent is central to healthy sexuality (Chrisman & Couchenour, 2002; Family Planning Queensland, 2006; Ryan, 2000). As McKee et al. (2010) articulate this point, healthy sexual development includes an understanding of:

> the nature and complexity of consent – not just their own but also other people's – in sexuality. [Young people] need to learn about the ethics of human relationships and how to treat other people ethically (McKee et al., 2010, p. 16)

A key element of healthy sexuality is ensuring that one's sexual practice is not "coercive" (Carmody, 2009, p. 49), and that one's actions do not take the form of "sexual assault" (Carmody, 2009, pp. 94-95). Kissing or hugging are not healthy if they are done coercively; as Moira Carmody notes, "an unwanted kiss" is just as much a form of sexual aggression as "unwanted sexual intercourse as a result of verbal pressure" (Carmody, 2009, p. 7). A content analysis that ignores consent ends up coding healthy acts – such as consensual sadomasochism - as aggression, while failing to capture non-consensual acts – such as an unwanted kiss - that, from the perspective of sexual health research, count as "sexual assault".

Problem 3: Removing Consent from Definitions of Aggression Can Lead to Heteronormative Definitions of Healthy Sexual Behavior in Analyses of SEM

The third problem with removing consent from definitions of aggression is that it has lead researchers to rely on other ways of defining healthy sexuality, which are often heteronormative. As they cannot rely on consent to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy practices, researchers instead produce a list of behaviors that they think are positive, and a list of behaviors that they think are negative.

For example, Dolf Zillmann's research on the "Influence of unrestrained access to erotica on adolescents' and young adults' dispositions towards sexuality" (Zillmann, 2000) has been influential (see for example Kanuga & Rosenfeld, 2004; Walsh, 2011; Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner, & Irizarry, 2010). In this work, Zillmann establishes a dichotomy between positive and negative forms of sexuality. On the one hand, he is concerned to increase the commitment of young people to "love … [t]he institution of marriage … having a family and raising children" (Zillmann, 2000, p. 42). On the other, he is concerned about the increasing

acceptance of sexual practices such as "sodomy, group sex, sadomasochistic practices" and "promiscuity" (Zillmann, 2000, pp. 41-42). Similarly, Bridges et al. (2010) draw a distinction between "positive behaviors" (Bridges, et al., 2010, p. 1072) such as "kissing, hugging and/or giving one another compliments" (Bridges, et al., 2010, p. 1072) and behaviors that they describe as "nonnormative" (Bridges, et al., 2010, p. 1070), and "unusual and potentially harmful to women in real life" (Bridges, et al., 2010, p. 1080). The latter includes consensual sadomasochism, "ass to mouth" (anal penetration followed immediately by oral sex), double penetration (two penises in one orifice) and simultaneous penetration (two penises in different orifices) (Bridges, et al., 2010, p. 1071). Such an approach risks pathologising minority sexual groups such as gay men, lesbians, swingers, and sadomasochism practitioners who make the consensual decision to partake in such activities.

DIFFICULTIES IN OPERATIONALISING CONSENT

Difficulties with Consent 1: Consent is Never Completely Free

At this point in the argument, it is important to acknowledge that previous researchers have noted that there are difficulties with including consent in definitions of aggression. However the problems they raise are not insurmountable. The first issue is not directly related to content analysis, but asks whether we should ever take account of consent in any research. Feminist researchers have argued that no one is ever entirely free in their choices:

> the compliance/noncompliance distinction is inherently ambiguous because people rarely act as free agents, but instead must usually make choices from a constrained set that has been predetermined by organizational or situational factors beyond their control (Jackman, 2002, p. 397).

Choices are always made from within a socially-circumscribed range of options. For example, it may be difficult for members of minority sexual communities to feel able to consent to practices that are socially stigmatized. Similarly, women in patriarchal cultures live in social contexts where there is pressure on them to behave in certain ways. For women, there may be severe negative "anticipated outcomes" to saying no to a man's sexual advance (A Radical Transfeminist, 2012, p. np), up to and including "physical force or its threat … physical and mental torture" (Baldwin, 2004, p. 298), and "sexist social pressures, abuse histories, economic needs and other factors that constrain and influence" (Whisnant, 2004, p. 23) women as they consider their responses to sexualized situations.

This has lead some feminist researchers to argue that we should abandon the concept of consent entirely as a "neoliberal" fiction (Jeffreys, 2009, p. 26). However this seems to be giving up too easily. There exists a substantial literature on the concept of consent (particularly "informed consent") from a clinical perspective. This work recognizes the complexity of the topic, and takes this as a spur to think through its functioning more clearly rather than to abandon the concept. Discussion continues about the contexts in which informed consent should appropriately be sought (Croarkin, Berg, & Spira, 2003), whether in some lower risk situations it might be appropriate to seek "simple consent" and whether sometimes for situations involving partners of equal knowledge and power it might be better to think about "shared decision making" (Whitney, McGuire, & McCullough, 2004, p. 54).

Researchers have also identified as a key element in informed consent "whether the person being asked to give consent has adequate decision-making capacity (or competency) to give consent and is positioned to make a voluntary decision" (Sugarman et al., 2005, p. 35), and have attempted to work out the boundaries at which people are no longer capable of giving informed consent – for example, when "a mental disorder prevents a patient from choosing decisively"(Van Staden & Kruger, 2003, p. 41). As Erlen notes, "Capacity to decide

is not an all or nothing situation; it exists along a continuum"(Erlen, 2010, p. 277). "A Radical Transfeminist" argues that

> saying that consent is not 100% [free from social factors] is not the same thing as saying you, personally, have no agency or ability to consent; whatever your circumstances, you make the best-seeming possible choice at the time (A Radical Transfeminist, 2012, p. np)

In this context feminist writers have developed "a feminist concept of consent" (Baldwin, 2004, p. 298), insisting that consent must be a more communicative process than simply a "yes"/"no" binary (Busel, 2008, p. 44). In this feminist model of consent, it is still possible to talk about 'choice' – but it is "not used in the liberal sense and does not imply free choice … we can understand 'yes' as the *best possible choice* in the situation" (A Radical Transfeminist, 2012, p. np).

Difficulties with Consent 2: Consent is Difficult to Measure Empirically

Mary Jackman notes of consent that "the compliance/noncompliance distinction is also difficult to observe empirically" (Jackman, 2002, p. 398), and researchers conducting content analyses of SEM echo this point. Ana Bridges et al. (2010) comment that: "although pornography portrays real sexual activity the portrayers remain 'actors' and may not be demonstrating a genuine response to certain acts" (Bridges, et al., 2010, p. 1070).

Bridges et al. (2010) make clear that to a viewer, the large majority of SEM activities appear to be consensual – to the point where 'any touch or position by one actor to another is met with near orgasmic pleasure' (Bridges, et al., 2010, p. 1067). But, they ask, how can we know if the actors are really consenting, or just acting as though they do? This raises an important question: What are the conditions of production of SEM texts? This question can

be answered by research methods such as surveys, interviews, focus groups and ethnographic studies. Such work is beginning to emerge and provides a picture that is not monolithic (Abbott, 2010; Attwood, 2010; White, 2010). SEM actors have a range of motivations for their involvement in the production of explicit texts, and a range of experiences - both positive and negative - from their participation in the area. For her thesis, for example, Angela White (2010) interviewed six female SEM actors and found that their experiences fitted into neither the "canonical narrative of victimization" (White, 2010, p. 4), nor into a simplistic celebration of female sexual "agency" (White, 2010, p. i). However, while it is important to understand the conditions of production of SEM, content analysis is not a suitable method for addressing this issue. The point of content analysis is to analyse the text as it exists. As Bridges et al. (2010) insist, it is fundamental to the vast majority of SEM that the sexual acts presented are shown to be consensual and pleasurable for everyone involved. Our analysis of how the texts affect consumers must therefore proceed on that basis.

This then raises the important question of how to operationalize consent in content analyses. Barron and Kimmel instructed coders to identify "whether each [act] appeared to be consensual, coerced, or nonconsensual" (Barron & Kimmel, 2000), but provide no more detail on how this was measured. Bridges et al. (2010) counted in regard to each sexual act whether the "target expresses pleasure or responds neutrally" or "expresses displeasure" (Bridges, et al., 2010, p. 1073). McKee (2005) provides a more detailed account, measuring as violent any act involving a

> character who states that he or she doesn't want to partake in a particular sexual practice and is then forced to do so; any restraint forcing someone to remain within a sexual scene, outside of obviously consensual sadomasochistic roleplaying; any character who appears to be unhappy performing a given sexual act even if he does not explicitly say so; and any actor who appears to be unhappy performing a given sexual

act even if he does not explicitly say so (McKee, 2005, p. 283)

Learning from feminist approaches requires three main aspects of measuring consent in SEM. Firstly, consent is an ongoing process, not a one-off permission given at the start of a scene. We must pay attention to the entirety of the sexual interaction to see if – *at any point* – a character appears to be undertaking an act unwillingly. Secondly, lack of consent can be expressed physically as well as in words, so we must pay attention to whether the character (in the diegetic world) or the actor (in the real production of the SEM) appears to be unhappy with any of the acts involved. Thirdly, we must pay attention to whether the actor appears to be capable of giving informed consent; in particular, we must pay attention to whether actors appear to be affected by drugs in their performances. As in all content analyses, these three factors are analyzed from the textual information available.

Difficulties with Consent 3: Representations of Consensual Sexuality may lead Viewers to Partake in Non-Consensual Practices

It has also been argued that paying attention to consent in SEM might be a distraction because viewers watching consensual sexual acts might then go on to take part in non-consensual acts. For example, drawing on Bandura's (1994) account of social cognitive theory, Bridges et al argue that:

A crucial element in observed instances of aggression is whether the aggressive act is met with a favorable or an unfavorable response. A favorable response – for instance, one in which a character gets away with being aggressive rather than is punished, or even one in which that character is rewarded after being aggressive – sends a permissive message about aggression to audiences. However, an unfavorable response – in which a character who is aggressive received an admonition or punishment in

which the recipient of the aggression is shown to be harmed – sends a prohibitive

message about aggression to audiences (Bridges, et al., 2010, p. 1068; see also

Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987)

Such arguments misunderstand theories of aggression. Anderson and Bushman (2002)

synthesize a number of domain-specific theories of aggression – Social Learning Theory,

Script Theory, Excitation Transfer Theory, Socal Interaction Theory and Cognitive

Neoassocation Theory - to produce a General Aggression Model. This model takes account

of all known factors in the production of aggressive behavior. The first focus is "Inputs" –

person factors (traits, beliefs, attitudes, values, long term goals and scripts) and situational

factors (aggressive cues, provocation, frustration, pain and discomfort, drugs and discomfort).

The second focus is "Routes", or "internal states" – including cognition (hostile thoughts and

scripts), affect (mood and emotion, expressive motor responses) and arousal. The third focus

is "Outcomes" – the "complex information processes, ranging from the relatively automatic

to the heavily controlled" that lead to any action (Anderson & Bushman, 2002, pp. 34-42).

Anderson and Bushman identify several points in these processes where aggressive media

images may become involved and lead to aggressive outcomes – scripts may have been

learned from the media, aggressive cues may be learned from or delivered by the media, or

violent media may prime hostile thoughts. However, and centrally for this argument, they

insist that "the pain administered in sexual masochism is not aggressive because the victim is

not motivated to avoid it – indeed, the pain is actively solicited in service of a higher goal"

(Anderson & Bushman, 2002, p. 29). This theoretical model speaks to the effects of

aggressive media, but consensual pleasure is explicitly excluded from its account.

This theoretical perspective is consistent with research involving viewers of SEM,

which consistently shows that viewers see consensual sadomasochism as being a different

kind of act from non-consensual sexual violence. It shows that viewers of SEM are very

aware of consent, and value it as important in the material they consume (Loftus, 2002, p. 305). Indeed, in one study, "[i]n describing healthy pornography, several consumers spontaneously used the terms 'consenting' or 'consensual'" (McKee, 2006, p. 38). When asked to nominate what would be unacceptable in pornography, consumers mentioned child pornography, bestiality and "'rape' or 'violence' generally" (McKee, 2006, p. 39). They placed consent at the heart of their definition of aggression. One female interviewee responded that "I think it's OK to act out something non-consensual — but if it really in reality is, then that's not OK." As another woman put it: "When someone is role playing you know that it's a role play when you watch it" (McKee, 2006, p. 39). Although a number of objections have been raised to including consent in our definitions of aggression, none of them are insurmountable. Given the importance of consent to understanding healthy sexuality, we cannot so easily abandon our attempts to include it in our content analyses of aggression in SEM.

CONCLUSION

The question of how to define aggression will never finally be answered. Researchers in aggression studies will continue to debate a range of issues, arguing for the benefits and dangers of different approaches. But excluding consent from our definitions has unacceptable negative consequences, for studies of aggression in general and for analyses of Sexually Explicit Material in particular. If we exclude consent from our definitions, then we are unable to distinguish aggression from a range of prosocial actions. Such an exclusion moves us away from the definition of healthy sexuality used by many researchers. And excluding consent from our definitions of aggression often leads to heteronormative approaches to sexual health.

There are difficulties with attending to consent, but all can be overcome. Consent is never completely free – but it need not logically follow from this premise that it is unimportant. It is difficult to tell if actors in SEM are genuinely giving consent – but this is an issue that can only be addressed through ethnography and interviews, not content analysis. The suggestion that watching consensual actions may lead to non-consensual behavior is not supported by current theoretical models of media effects. Given the importance of consent to healthy sexuality we must not give up on the task of finding ways to include it in our definitions of aggression for content analyses of SEM simply because we face conceptual difficulties in doing so.

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[1] The terms 'violence' and 'aggression' are used by researchers to describe similar phenomena, and often used interchangeably even within a single work (see for example Felson & Tedeschi, 1993; Grimes, Anderson, & Bergen, 2008; Renfrew, 1997, p. 3). In this paper I use the term 'aggression' because of its implication of a human agent; however, I also include previous studies of 'violence' in this category.