Is pornography the key to the sex education of teenagers?
Alfredo Morabia

Emily and I kind of looked at each other and realized that we were losing their attention, and so I mentioned that Emily is also researching porn.

This Isa-a on the mic, and it goes back to, you asked like can you get answers from watching porn, and I think yeah you can get answers about sex but they’re the wrong answers, often. Um, [sort of] like learning how to be president from watching House of Cards. Not going to help and it’s going to send you the wrong message.

For me, one of the interesting things about being in public health and studying pornography is that for the most part people want to make these big blanket statements, just, how does pornography influence kids or something like that. And, pornography is such a varied media. I mean, there’s so many different types and it really matters how long you watch it and for what reasons and where and in what context. I mean, there are so many ways to enrich what that exposure is, and then, you know in terms of the, does it affect kids, kids are a diverse group of people too. And so, we can really add a lot to the public discourse about pornography by bringing in that sort of public health perspective of it matters how we stratify what we’re looking at.

(musical interlude)

Hello and welcome! This is the February 2020 podcast of the American Journal of Public Health. In this issue of the Journal, Editors Stewart Landers and Farzana Kapadia have assembled a series of articles about the role of pleasure as opposed to disease and pain as a legitimate goal for public health. The articles discuss sex education, clinical practice, HIV transmission control, and more; but in this podcast, I focus on one original
experience that takes places in Boston which consists of developing a course for teenagers which uses pornography as a lead to prevent teen dating violence, promote healthy relationships and consent, and encourage critical thinking and healthy communication. My interviewees are Emily Rothman, she’s a Professor of Community Health Sciences at the Boston University School of Public Health; Jess Alder, she’s the Director of Start Strong, a program housed at the Boston Public Health Commission which offers a porn literacy training for young people. And I also interview collectively several peer leaders of the course. I was particularly interested in understanding what could motivate educators to combine two apparently diametrically opposed aspects of human sexuality: pornography and health relationships. In other words, is pornography the key to the sex education of teenagers. I am Alfredo Morabia, Editor-in-Chief of AJPH and we are January 7, 2020.

Let’s start with Professor Emily Rothman. She does research, teaches, and consults on sexual violence prevention, intimate-partner violence prevention, and sexually explicit media.

When I look at those results of the evaluation of your course, I see that four out of five of the students have been exposed to pornography. I mean, this is by far most of them. Would you say that pornography is a key component in the development of American sexuality?

ER Yeah, you know, I think you’re right, so a lot of kids, most kids I think, by the time they’re 13 years old have seen pornography, and the estimates sort of vary depending on what survey you’re looking at and what sample, but the long and the short of it is we know by the time people are 18 years old it’s virtually very close to 100% of people who
have seen pornography either by accident or on purpose. And the question about how
does that influence their sexuality and is the way that it is influencing sexuality changing
over time, we don’t know for sure, which I realize is an unsatisfying answer. People are
starting to uncover pieces of this and understand, you know, what types of behaviors may
be affected or what types of thoughts may be affected. And I guess, what it looks like is
that there are subgroups of adolescents who are more vulnerable to being influenced in
negative ways by pornography.

AM Yeah, and I agree. I mean, there are many forms of pornography, but in my view, in its
blandez forms it’s a kind of sad parody or sad caricature of the potential of human
sexuality. And, in its hardest form, it’s a criminal behavior; so, what can be good about
pornography and why would you teach it?

ER Yeah, well that’s a fair question, and part of this is it gets really complicated really fast
because we all want to project our own stuff onto what sex is or what it should be. So, I
have my own ideas about what good sex is and what it should feel like and what it should
look like; but you have to, as a scientist, you sort of have to say, like, I don’t have a right
to project that onto everybody else and maybe there are some people who enjoy having
sex this way or that way that’s completely different, and it looks completely different,
and there’s nothing inherently wrong with that, potentially. So, I sort of start there from a
very judgement-free perspective; and we have to ask the question, is that harmful and if
so in what ways. So, there’s a subset of it where, you know, if people are coerced to
participate in pornography if they are too young, if they are underage—so if they’re
under the age of 18—or of there are things happening in the pornography that are illegal
and non-consensual behaviors, that’s absolutely a problem and needs to be addressed.
There is also stuff that I would say is very tame and is the far opposition end of the spectrum, and there’s evidence that seeing naked bodies, seeing people experience pleasure—which some pornography features, both men and women experiencing pleasure—but that can have a positive effect on the way people view their bodies or the way that they’re able to communicate with their partner about what they want, but there is actually, can be a positive role for some people of having had the opportunity to see positive sexuality. What’s complicated is there are ways in which pornography may be harmful and may be particularly harmful to certain subgroups of people; but on the other hand, some of those claims really go overboard and go too far.

AM  But explain to me in which way do they go too far?

ER  Well, there are claims about, for example, pornography being related to the dissolution of relationships, like being bad for marriages or causing break-ups. And the evidence really doesn’t support that. You know, there’s been a number of studies on it, and the evidence doesn’t support it strongly. There is really mixed results about body image, same as in the resolution claim that people who see pornography then some body image problems are going to develop—eating disorders—and people have done studies to investigate that, and there’s really mixed evidence on this. It is not a clear-cut case at all. And, you know, there’s the whole issue of, is pornography addictive. This gets into a really controversial sub-area of this whole field where the word, addictive, and what counts as an addiction is being hotly debated. Because some people are compulsive about their pornography; they’re not able to control their own use, and that feels problematic and gets in the way of their ability to do things in their life. But the idea that pornography is operating in a similar way as an addictive substance doesn’t sit right with a lot of other
people who are neuroscientists or who are looking into addictions and addiction medicine; and so, that one is sort of debated.

AM  So, we should not make an analogy between pornography and cigarettes or alcohol?

ER  You know, I guess, well, it would depend. What kind of analogy are you thinking or what would the analogy be, exactly?

AM  Well, you told me that there is a fraction, only, of the people exposed who become addicted to pornography. Most of the people don’t, but still we limit access to tobacco to age 21 in some states. So, why wouldn’t we do that for pornography?

ER  Well, so you raise a good point, and I, I’m not saying that there aren’t reasons to consider regulations or put regulations in place. I think, we could think about and talk about whether it makes sense to strengthen to regulations that are in place that permit people who are under the age of 18 to see pornography as easily as they do. So, mostly you go to websites and you just have to say yes, I’m 18 and click a box and then you can see the pornography. So, maybe there are ways of making that a little bit more stringent and really protecting the people who are under 18 from seeing pornography. So, there may be lots of good reasons for wanting to do those things. It’s not that pornography is not harmful for everybody and is never causing any problems. That’s not true either. It’s just a slightly more nuanced and complicated story than it’s all bad for all people all the time in all situations, and there are folks who are calling for bans, and there are also folks who are saying that this is a public health crisis. And, what I am more comfortable saying is, you know, it’s a public health question of interest.
But, do I understand you well, Emily, that in some sense you say more research is needed about pornography before we start doing something, or do you have a vision of what would be an ideal situation in the way we deal with pornography in society?

It really depends on the subpopulation. So, when it comes to youth, when it comes to teenagers, I feel comfortable saying that there is enough evidence, I think, to suggest that youth need both better protections from seeing pornography, like mainstream internet pornography, especially in the context of not being provided with comprehensive sex education in school. It’s a both, together. The problem is what kids are learning about sex may primarily coming from pornography, and what pornography is teaching them does worry me, doesn’t seem good, but it’s not enough to just try to shut down pornography without this wider, strategic approach that has to do with making sure that they’re getting access to accurate information and a complete set of information, not just the mechanics of how do people get pregnant or what’s an STI but the full range of human sexuality and how people communicate and how they, how they become who they are as sexual beings. That information isn’t being provided, and that’s just as much a crisis as the fact that they’re seeing pornographic images.

I will now discuss with Jess Adler, the Director of Start Strong, how the idea of a pornography literacy training came to be.

Many moons ago at this point, probably eight years ago, maybe a few, maybe a couple more, Emily came to talk to the Start Strong peer leaders, and the Start Strong peer leaders are essentially young experts in the field of dating violence prevention, healthy relationship promotion. And Emily went to talk to them about the wonderful world of
public health and researching public health topics. She put on her coolest outfit, thinking that would help engage our young people, and, unfortunately, they weren’t really interested in the research side of public health. And Emily and I kind of looked at each other and realized that we were losing their attention, and so I mentioned that Emily is also researching porn.

AM Let me interrupt [you]—how did you know that they were not interested? How did you know that this approach was a failure?

JA We just saw their eyes kind of glazing over, maybe some side conversations were starting or maybe some of them kind of gave me the look, what do you expect us to do with this information. Those sort of cues indicated that they were interested in a new topic, and porn ended up being the ignition that we needed. Their faces lit up, they started to share some stories, we learned a lot very quickly, and it became very clear that this would be a unique way of continuing the conversations around gender-based violence, gender norms, healthy relationships.

AM What did you learn—you said we learned immediately lots of things—what did you learn?

JA It sparked their interest, and as soon as you have kind of a current of enthusiasm run throughout the room, you want to latch onto that, and we could tell from the energy that it sparked that this would be a wave we’d be able to ride for a pretty long time and connecting and exploring conversations to promote healthy relationships using a porn literacy lens. What we do is we approach all of our content using critical thinking skills so that we ask our young people to listen to what they want and watch what they want but to explore the messages that are being promoted. And we took that same concept and
applied it to the porn literacy curriculum. So, the porn literacy curriculum really explores what we call the three Cs: Consent, communication, and critical thinking. If you just look at our TV shows or movies or video games that are out there or if they browse social media late at night, they will unintentionally stumble upon something that is porn-esque. [I mean], TV shows like Shameless, for instance, they’re all consider soft pornography which some of the scenes that they show, just asking them again to think about their relationships and how they might approach physical intimacy. Was consent used? How did the person respond to it? And it’s asking them to critically examine those messages in some of the scenes that are being portrayed and how those scenes align with their own [values].

[musical interlude]

AM Let’s ask now some of the peer leaders of the course for their opinion. Isa-a and Meirit (pronounced may-d) are second-year peer leaders; and Ross and Elyz’sa (pronounced alyssa) are first-year peer leaders.

Can you explain to me what pornography is?

R? Um, I guess it’s sexual media, yeah, that’s pretty much it. [laughter]

AM How many around you—I’m not talking about yourself, but about your friends and—how many of them do you think are familiar with pornography or exposed to pornography?

M This is Meirit talking, speaking—I would say the majority of my friends know about pornography; they’re pretty much exposed to [them], especially around my age group, high school students, basically, so yeah, I feel like majority of them know about pornography.

AM And how are they exposed? What are the ways through which they are exposed?
M This is Meirit speaking again. I feel as if a lot of times when they’re exposed to pornography, that it’s either by movies—I mean rated R movies or even PG-13 movies you see at a young age—any jokes about pornography on there or in middle school when the kid next to you is watching pornography and you’re just very confused. So, I feel like at a very young age you’re, you see these things but you don’t really understand what it is until you’re a little bit older, and even when you’re older you kind of don’t understand it either, so, yeah.

AM So can you explain to me what you don’t understand? Now that you’ve taken these courses, what do you feel you didn’t understand that now you understand about pornography?

I This is Isa-a on the mic. I think that before taking the course, I didn’t really understand the social implications, I guess, the subliminal messaging behind porn and what that teaches kids and viewers who learn about sex from watching porn.

AM So, what was this subliminal message?

M This is Meirit speaking. The subliminal message is that the sex that you see on porn is the reality of it, and it doesn’t teach you what the safety that you should take, on, when you’re participating in sexual intercourse.

AM You think some of your friends consider this a form of sexual education?

E This is Elyz’sa. I think some teens do but that isn’t really good, because like Meirit said, porn doesn’t always show what actually happens in sex, like consent in other things like that. I learned that after taking the course. I just assumed that consent was given.

AM Is pornography a topic that you talk a lot about when you are together at school?
Okay, Elyz’sa. With my friends, we don’t really talk about porn or sex, but if we’re talking about someone’s relationship and sex happens then we’ll talk about it. But, it’s not [we’re] like oh, you guys watch porn or do you guys know this and this, okay, my boyfriend wanted to do this, what should I do.

Do you think that or did you think that pornography movie or any form of media could provide some answers?

Meirit speaking—it could be informative, but I feel like more of the majority of the time there really isn’t, especially like old movies. Back then, people were more conservative and they don’t really speak about the safety on, on sex consent, protection and if people displayed their [media] pornography more appropriately and more informatively, I feel like it would be very healthy for viewers.

Would you recommend this course to other students?

Ross, and yeah, I would recommend the course.

I would recommend this to my friends if they get into a relationship, they know how they should be treated compared to what they’re shown in media. I also would just recommend it to anyone because you might feel uncomfortable a little bit, you’re learning information that could be valuable for later on down the road to keep yourself safe and also other people safe.

This is Meirit, I also want to insert to that question. Now that more differently, if I was to speak with my friends on porn with what I know now after taking the pornography class, I would like tell my friends [alongside] pornography that sometimes you’re forced to do pornography and a man and a woman don’t get as much as you think they would have,
and most of the time they’re not provided safety within like the—those are some things that I would like tell my friends if they were asking about pornography.

AM  Okay, take care, everybody, thanks again!

ALL Happy new year, thank you!

AM  Bye bye.

[musical interlude]

AM  Alright, these interviews stressed an aspect of the exposure of young persons to pornography which I did not value before. These conversations confront what we all know, that most of not all teens are exposed at some point in time to scenes of human sexuality. However, what is less known is how teens are interpreting what they see. They may well consider them as expressions of the sexuality most adults have and therefore use them as substitutes to the sex education only a minority receive at school. Thus, a course building on this genuine interest of teenagers to pornography and which demystifies its content, explains what people can expect from it, and why it may help some people but affect others, such a course can be an effective way to get the attention of middle- and high school teens. Once the connection is established, the conversation can be extended to related topics such as teen dating violence, consent, and healthy relationships. Rothman and the Start Strong team may well have a model that could be easily replicated elsewhere.

I’m grateful to all my interviewees for their time and willingness to share their ideas. I also thank Emily D’Agostino and Michael Constanza for comments and edits on an earlier version of the podcast; Francis Jacob composed an interpreted the pastiche of a song which is rated one of the 50 sexiest songs of all time. This is Alfredo Morabia at
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[musical postlude]