

# LINE ON LIFE

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## Perceptions of Pornography \*

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Currently, Congress is considering withholding federal funds from the arts, because some of the supported works have been labeled "*pornographic*." Why are there differences in perceiving pornography?

Because we have a multitude of complex feelings about sex, it is hard to be objective about pornography. With the changes in our society during the last century, our definitions of pornography have also changed. About 150 years ago, Shakespeare's works were considered pornographic. About 100 years ago, classical nude paintings were considered pornographic. A couple of generations ago, D. H. Lawrence's writings were considered pornographic. Today, we study Shakespeare, classical nudes and Lawrence in literature and art classes as part of standard course content.

A possible explanation for our changing definitions of pornography comes from a sociologist, Emile Durkheim. He wrote that all societies regard some behavior as deviant. In fact, Durkheim argued that a society requires deviance as a means of uniting its average citizens through moral outrage. This reaffirms basic values of the society and creates solidarity. This deviance and outrage establish the outer boundaries of acceptable behavior.

In other words, pornography may be viewed as society's way of defending its limits of acceptable sexual behavior. It is necessary to define various behaviors or depictions of behavior as deviant (pornographic) in order to validate the society's sexual standards. Thus as boundaries of acceptability expand, what one generation considered pornography, the next may not. In this way, we have gone from altering photos in old Sears' catalogs – so the belly button was not evident – to having ads for sanitary napkins on daytime TV.

Previously, depictions of nude women were considered obscene. They could only be obtained through underground "*girlie*" magazines or on "*French*" postcards. They were the subjects of outrage by the public as a whole. Today, the boundaries have changed. Nudes are increasingly found in advertising, mass circulation magazines such as *Vogue* and *Redbook*, and motion pictures. Nudity in itself is no longer regarded as obscene or pornographic. To be considered pornographic, females must pose in "*gynecological*" positions – exposing the vulva, vaginal opening, clitoris or anus – use props like whips or leather, or pose in degrading positions or situations such as bondage.

Of course, individuals on the fringe of society repeatedly test these boundaries, and the boundaries are repeatedly defended. As our boundaries expanded, these violations seem more extreme when compared to the earlier boundaries.

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Even though these boundaries are set by society as a whole, there is considerable variation in the responses of individuals to sexual material. "*What I like is erotica, but what you like is pornography*," may be said as a joke, but it also has a serious side. Individual judgments of sexually explicit material tend to be relative to that individual's background. There is no absolute, objective and universal standard of obscenity or pornography.

The differences in evaluation of sexually explicit material seem to lie in the *emotional* responses to the material. In 1974, psychologist Donn Byrne found that subjects' definitions of material as pornographic depended on whether they had positive or negative *feelings* about the material. Byrne noted that "*decisions about pornography are made simply on the basis of how such stimuli make one feel.*" Byrne continued:

*"It seems difficult for most people to indicate that someone or something makes them feel good or bad and... that they simply respond with like or dislike. Instead, the individual's own reactions are attributed to the object itself in terms of its intrinsic qualities. Thus, an erotic depiction is not just pleasing or displeasing to oneself; the depiction itself is good or bad."*

Byrne also noted that individuals attempt to justify their feelings and evaluations in general terms rather than personal ones. Instead of indicating that they personally like or don't like sexually explicit material, they tend to say that the material itself is either beneficial or harmful.

People hesitate to express their personal feelings, especially in an area as controversial as sexuality, because it makes them very **vulnerable to rejection**. If you deny that these are your feelings and attribute the quality of your feelings to the object, you are not taking much risk of rejection.

To give yourself support, you may ask others if they agree with you. Most likely, *everyone* you ask with you for at least two reasons.

1. You will typically ask your closest friends – who became you friends because they share your beliefs, values and feelings.
2. Once you state your position, others may agree with you to avoid risking *your* rejection.

Thus, Byrne's study seems to add to the familiar saying, "*Beauty – or pornography – is in the eye of the beholder.*"

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\* Adapted from Bryan Strong and Christine DeVault's *Understanding Our Sexuality*, West Publishing, 1988, pages 534-535.