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Erotica, Aggression & Perceived Appropriateness

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Erotica, Aggression & Perceived Appropriateness

Malamuth, Feshbach, & Jaffe (1977) recently outlined a model designed to integrate some of the findings in the sex and aggression literature. The purpose of the present paper is to elaborate upon some aspects of that model, to discuss a recent experiment designed to directly test its predictions, and to consider additional directions for the model's development and for research.

Gagnon & Simon's (1973) theory of sexual scripts² aptly serves as a general theoretical approach within which the present model may be described. These theoreticians suggest that social learning experiences provide individuals with behavioral scripts, similar in many respects to those of a drama play. A script "defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behavior" (p. 19). With respect to research on sex and aggression, we suggest that the experimenter, verbally and nonverbally, is the primary source communicating the range of appropriate scripts. While we recognize that sexual stimuli possess arousal (Baron, 1974a), distraction (Donnerstein, Donnerstein, & Evans, 1975) and valence (Zillmann & Sapolsky, 1977) properties comparable in many respects to those of other nonsexual stimuli, we suggest that the effects of sexual stimuli cannot be understood exclusively in terms of such "general" processes; it is necessary to consider the script transmitted by the subject's interpretation of the social meaning of the situation.

A subject may perceive a script communicated by sexual stimuli even prior to examining their specific content. The primary reason for this lies in the "taboo" status sex has acquired in many societies, including to some degree our own even in these comparatively liberal times. To the extent that sexual stimuli are perceived as "taboo",

their presentation by an authority figure (i.e. the experimenter) may communicate the relative appropriateness of engaging in ordinarily prohibited behaviors. This may suggest to the subject the possibility of his/her engaging in restricted responses, such as sexual and aggressive activities.

Entertaining such a possibility, we suggest, is associated with increased sensitization to additional cues (environmental or personality) signaling whether indeed such responses are likely to be approved of or not. A subject exposed to an initial set of stimuli perceived as "taboo" would be expected to become more responsive and show a more pronounced reaction to other discriminative cues relevant to the acceptability of prohibited behaviors. This model would thus predict that in the context of disinhibitory cues, exposure to sexual stimuli would result in a disinhibitory effect on aggression relative to a neutral exposure. Exposure to sexual stimuli in the context of inhibitory cues, on the other hand, would be expected to result in an inhibitory effect relative to a neutral exposure in the same context.

An analogy may be useful for clarifying this model. Consider the situation in which two students enter a professor's office. One student begins to use "foul" language in the presence of the instructor. If the professor seems to react favorably to such "taboo" behavior, the other student would be expected to become disinhibited by his observation and to be more likely to use similar language. What if, on the other hand, the instructor seems to disapprove of the first student's swearing? The other will probably be more inhibited in engaging in such behavior than he would have been to begin with, prior to observing the first student's actions. Moreover, consider what may happen if the professor leaves his office and the students have an opportunity for a "sneak

preview" of an upcoming exam. To the extent that swearing were truly perceived by the students as a prohibited behavior, the model would predict that the students would be more likely to engage in other "taboo" behaviors such as looking at the exam.

While a comprehensive consideration of this model's predictions outside the laboratory should await more direct testing within the laboratory context, I would like to briefly consider one direct implication. The model would suggest that for individuals reared with a relatively liberal attitude towards sex, exposure to pornography would have little or no impact on antisocial behavior. However, for individuals reared within a highly restrictive atmosphere wherein the topic of **sex** was a definite "taboo", exposure to pornography in combination with other factors could result in antisocial effects. The finding that rapists typically had been reared within sexually restrictive environments and were exposed to pornography later in life than controls (Walker, 1971; Goldstein & Kant, 1973) may be interpreted in light of the present model to suggest that for such individuals their childhood "taboo" attitudes towards sex and their exposure to pornography may have been related to their crimes. Furthermore, recent experimental data (Fisher & Byrne, in press) showing that individuals who have had restrictive sex socialization reveal more negative reactions to pornography but are more behaviorally affected by it than individuals with more liberal socialization is consistent with the model's predictions.

Before proceeding to discuss an experiment designed to directly test a prediction of this model, I would like to focus on an area in which this model and others would make clearly differing predictions. This issue concerns whether exposure to sexual stimuli may affect the aggressive responses of nonangered as well as angered subjects. While the present model would predict similar effects, although not necessarily

to the same degree, the models proposed by Tannenbaum & Zillmann (1975) and by Donnerstein et al. (1975) presuppose the existence of anger as mediating the effects on aggressiveness of exposure to sexual stimuli. In considering the utility of the present model, I will therefore first examine the data bearing upon this issue.

In the varied sex and aggression studies using electric shock as the measure of aggression, a potentially crucial difference exists in the *way* investigators operationalized the "nonangered" experimental condition. Some studies (Jaffe, Malamuth, Feingold, & Feshbach, 1974; Jaffe, 1975; Jaffe & Berger, 1977; Baron & Bell, 1973; Donnerstein et al., 1975) defined this condition by having the confederate behave in a neutral manner towards subjects. Others (Baron, 1974a, 1974b; Donnerstein & Barrett, 1977; Baron & Bell, 1977; Frodi, 1977) operationalized this condition by having the confederate express a favorable evaluation of the subject (as contrasted with a negative evaluation in the "anger" condition) via the administration of very low shocks and through written communications. It would seem that the latter operationalization should more appropriately be labeled "favorably disposed" than nonangered, creating a state largely incompatible with aggression.

While some of the studies employing this operationalization have reported significant effects for nonangered subjects (e.g. Baron & Bell, 1977), it is the data of studies using truly "nonangered" rather than "favorably disposed" subjects that should be examined in addressing this issue. Table 1 lists the studies using "nonangered" subjects, indicating the size of the relevant sample used, the magnitude of any difference observed, and whether a significant effect on aggression of exposure to sexual stimuli was reported.

Insert Table 1 about here

The first such experiment (Jaffe et al., 1974) used a relatively large sample and reported clearly significant effects. While constituting about a 20% increase over the aggression of nonaroused subjects this effect **was** consistent across experimenters and confederates. Subsequent studies yielded data that generally corresponds well to the effects reported by Jaffe et al. The only study that did not report a significant effect (Donnerstein et al., 1975) used a relatively small sample of nonangered subjects i.e. only cells with nine subjects each were compared in each of the relevant analyses. The magnitude of the effects for the two types of stimuli employed in this experiment were .4 and .6, the latter value being fully within the range of the differences reported by Jaffe et al. A power analysis (Hayes, 1963) on the basis of the data of these two studies indicates that if a significant effect of the magnitude reported by Jaffe et al. existed for nonangered subjects, the size of sample used by Donnerstein et al. yielded a probability of only about 40% of detecting this effect.

Overall, then, the data suggest that exposure to sexual stimuli may affect the aggressive responses of nonangered subjects. Additional as yet unpublished research (Feshbach, Malamuth, & Drapkin, Note 1; Malamuth, Jaffe & Feshbach, Note 2) support this conclusion.

A very recent experiment was designed to directly test the predictions of the model outlined (Malamuth, Note 3). Male subjects were first exposed to sexual or non-sexual stimuli. It was expected that the sexual stimuli would indirectly provide a script by virtue of their "taboo" nature. In order to also study the effects of the

script communicated by the specific content of the sexual stimuli, two types of sexual stimuli were chosen: One depicted a very loving interaction between a man and a woman whereas the other a rape of a woman by a male pirate. Both stimuli were presented in their original form within issues of Penthouse magazines and consisted of pictorials and narrative. It was expected that the non-violent sexual stimulus would provide a disinhibitory cue by virtue of its "taboo" nature only, but that its content would be inconsistent with aggressive responding. The sexually violent stimulus was expected to result in a disinhibitory effect on aggression both by virtue of its sexual nature and the specific script communicated by the rape content.

The model would predict that while a tendency to behave in "taboo" ways may be suggested by exposure to sexual materials, particularly the sexually violent stimuli, the actual behavioral manifestation would directly vary with the presence of other inhibitory or disinhibitory cues. To examine this aspect of the model, following exposure to either sexually non-violent, sexually violent, or neutral stimuli, all subjects were insulted³ by the female confederate and given the opportunity of delivering electric shocks to her under one of two differing communications. Half of the subjects were given a written communication that suggested that it was "okay" to behave as aggressively as they wished whereas the other half were given a communication that was designed to make the subject slightly self-conscious about aggressing. The experimental design thus consisted of a 3 (Exposure) by 2 (Inhibitory/Disinhibitory Cues) factorial design.

The results, presented in Table 2, indicated that only subjects exposed to the sexually violent stimuli showed significant differences as a function of the inhibitory/disinhibitory cues. These data provide some support for the model's predictions regarding sensitization to inhibitory/disinhibitory cues. They suggest,

however, that the notion of a script communicated solely by the "taboo" nature of sexual stimuli requires re-examination and that the script communicated by the particular content of the sexual stimulus may be of overriding importance.

Insert Table 2 about here

These data also raise the possibility that exposure to certain types of sexual stimuli in an environment that is relatively tolerant of aggressiveness may have antisocial effects. Feminist writers (Brownmiller, 1975; Johnson & Goodchilds, 1973; Gager & Schurr, 1976) have forcefully argued that sexually violent materials in the media, particularly pornography, constitute "hate literature" against women that has clearly undesirable effects on attitudes and behavior. This assertion has not been adequately investigated, either by research of the President's Commission on Pornography (1970) or by the recently emerging literature on sex and aggression (Malamuth, Haber, & Fishbach, in press). A recent content analysis (Malamuth & Spinner, Note 4) of the amount of sexual violence depicted in the pictorials and cartoons of the best-selling erotica magazines, Playboy and Penthouse, between 1973 and 1977 revealed a significant linear increase in the inclusion of such stimuli, particularly in sexually violent pictorials. This finding as well as the experimental data presented above and elsewhere (Malamuth et al., Note 4) point to the importance, for both theoretical and societal concerns, of studying the effects of mass media stimuli that fuse sexuality and aggression.

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2. Malamuth, N., Jaffe, Y., & Feshbach, S. Effects of sexual vs. nonsexual arousal on behavioral aggression. Paper presented at the 54th annual meeting of the Western Psychological Association, San Francisco, April, 1974.
3. Malamuth, N. The relationship between exposure to sexual violence, disinhibitory cues, and male aggression against females. In preparation.

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Footnotes

1. This paper was completed while the author was on the faculty of the University of Manitoba, Canada. The author's current address is: Communication Studies, 3130 Hershey Hall, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1538, email: nmalamut@ucla.edu
2. I would like to thank Dr. Yoram Jaffe for calling my attention to the relevance of this theoretical approach and for fruitful discussion contributing to the formulation of some of the ideas in this paper.
3. While similar effects would be anticipated for nonangered subjects, the present experiment involved an angering procedure in an expectation that this would increase the magnitude of effects and in an attempt to simulate in the laboratory certain processes that may contribute to rape acts in the "real" world.

Table 1

Experiments on the Effects of Sexual Stimuli on the Aggressivity of Nonangered Subjects

Experiment	Difference between sexually stimulated and non-stimulated subjects	N	A significant effect reported?
Jaffe et al. (1974)	.71	84	Yes
Donnerstein et al. (1975)	.50	27	No
Jaffe (1975)	.91	80	Yes
Jaffe & Berger (1977)	1.62	29	Yes
Baron & Bell (1973)	means not reported	40	Yes ("early in the experiment")

Table 2. Mean intensity shock directed against the confederate as a function of Media Exposure and Communication of appropriateness (Disinhibitory) vs. inappropriateness (Inhibitory) cues.

		Media Exposure		
		Sexual Violence	Sexual Non-violence	Neutral
Communication	Disinhibitory	4.20 ^a (N=10)	2.75 ^c (N=10)	3.44 ^d (N=11)
	Inhibitory	3.05 ^b (N=11)	3.44 ^c (N=10)	3.99 ^d (N=10)

Note: Within each exposure, means not sharing a common subscript differ significantly at the P<.05 level

