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Pornography, Humiliation, and Consent

Rebecca Whisnant¹

Abstract

This article considers the role of humiliation in contemporary pornography, arguing that it constitutes a severe form of harm to many female pornography performers. It further contends that the apparently consensual nature of much humiliating pornography exacerbates its harm to the humiliated performers.

Keywords

pornography, trauma, humiliation, consent, torture

On the cover of a pornographic DVD, a young white woman clad only in skimpy underpants kneels and smiles coyly over her shoulder at the camera. Her name is Jamie, we are told. In her hand is a glass containing a milky substance. The tagline reads “Watch hot sluts drink spoooge out of their asses!” The copy on the back cover gleefully clarifies the mechanics: “Nut in her butt and watch her push it out and swallow!” The film is entitled *Anal Cumsumption 4* (Curtis, 2005).

What is happening to this woman, to Jamie? Many things, no doubt, but prominent among them is that she is being humiliated. But what does that mean?

The Concept of Humiliation

In ordinary conversation, the concept of humiliation is often used interchangeably with that of embarrassment. “I was so humiliated,” one says, “when my child had a tantrum at the grocery store,” or, “when I realized I’d had spinach in my teeth during my presentation.” The notion of unwelcome public exposure is central to both concepts. Torres and Bergner (2012), in fact, make such exposure central to distinguishing the feeling of humiliation from that of shame: humiliation, in their view, “happens (and is felt) when something of a private, shameful nature is publicly exposed . . . this added element of public exposure or ‘unmasking’ renders humiliation far more acutely disturbing and destabilizing than shame alone” (p. 494).

The distinctive core of the concept of humiliation, however, is captured in its dictionary definition. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to humiliate is “to make low or humble in position, condition, or feeling.” The term’s etymological root is the Latin *humilis*, meaning low. Merriam Webster echoes

this emphasis: “to reduce to a lower position in one’s own eyes or others’ eyes: mortify.”

This aspect of being made low not only in others’ eyes, but in one’s own as well, in turn illuminates the Oxford English Dictionary’s (OED) second definition for ‘humiliate’: “to lower or depress the dignity or self-respect of.” Similarly, philosopher Statman (2000), observes that “Humiliation is seen as first and foremost an injury to the dignity of its victims, an injury usually described in figurative language: in humiliation, one ‘is stripped of one’s dignity’, one is ‘robbed of’ dignity, or simply ‘loses’ it” (p. 523). Margalit (1996), who makes nonhumiliation the centerpiece of his concept of a “decent” society, defines humiliation as “any sort of behavior or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured” (p. 9). The theme of compromised dignity or self-respect, then, looms large in philosophers’ understandings of humiliation.

Humiliation in Pornography

Humiliation, then, includes the elements of unwelcome exposure, of being made or brought low, and of having one’s dignity and/or self-respect compromised. *Anal Cumsumption 4* certainly seems to qualify, and this example is far from being an outlier. As feminist critics have emphasized for decades, pornography’s primary ideological message is that however a

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woman is being degraded and humiliated onscreen, she loves it and craves it (Dines, 2010; Dworkin, 1980). In fact, as the most cursory sampling of titles on any online pornography portal will demonstrate, the humiliation of women is a virtual constant in contemporary mainstream pornography (Dines, 2010). Here a woman crawls on hands and knees; there a penis is shoved in her mouth sideways, distending the face, so that she looks ridiculous; and everywhere, she intones, “I’m such a filthy little whore.” Often enough, humiliation is advertised explicitly, as in the various clips offered under the “humiliation” tag on xvideos.com. These include “spiteful food humiliation,” “messy humiliation,” “terrorizing humiliation of [woman’s name],” “extreme humiliation,” “dehumanizing humiliation,” and “facial punishment humiliation” (Xvideos.com, n.d.).

In other cases, particular sexual acts are coded as humiliating. Male ejaculation in a woman’s face, widely read by both consumers and others as a tactic of degradation and ownership, is a common end to pornographic scenes (Dines, 2010). Particular sexual acts are also described in ways that make their humiliating function clear. For example, double penetration (DP)—in which two men penetrate a woman simultaneously, one vaginally and one anally—is advertised as follows in the promotional copy for *DP Nation*:

DP Nation is in full effect, and we’re going to double-stuff some muffs for the next four hours! So come and have some double penetration fun with Sharka Blue, Michelle B., Maya Gates, Katja Kassin, and more! We’ve got all holes covered in this movie, and these girls will have nowhere to run when we stick it to them in the pink and in the stink! (Cduniverse, n.d.)

The reference to “stink” here, like the numerous references to feces in other descriptions of anal penetration, functions to degrade and humiliate a woman. Relatedly, the prevalence of humiliation in contemporary pornography is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that, according to a recent content analysis, 41.1% of the scenes in top-selling and top-renting porn films contained “ass to mouth” (Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010). These are scenes in which a man removes his penis from a woman’s anus and puts it directly, without cleaning, into her mouth or the mouth of another woman. A more total humiliation is difficult to conceive.

The humiliation theme gets an especially vicious twist in the wildly popular *Bangbus* series and its many imitators (Conesa, 2004; Swartz, 2004). In these films, several men are shown driving around a city and coaxing young women into their van by offering them money to perform sexual acts. (Though the scenes are clearly staged, the viewer is encouraged to believe that these are “real girls” rather than paid performers.) The woman often shows some reluctance, but relents fairly quickly. Once she has performed the requisite sexual services, she gets out of the van expecting to receive the money she was promised; instead, the men drive off laughing, leaving her alone by the side of the road. In this series, a scenario of terror for

women—being harassed and propositioned on the street by a group of men trying to lure you into their van—is turned into a joke. The joke’s punchline is that, although all women are really whores under the surface, we are too contemptible even to merit payment. The particular women featured—and, by extension, women generally—are thus revealed to have a lower status than either they themselves or others might have assumed.

A particular title from the *Bangbus* series exemplifies a theme common in humiliating pornography: that of a woman who thinks too highly of herself being taken down a notch. A clip on the site entitled “Protestor exercises her right to take cock” is described as follows:

We come across this blonde babe . . . and she is in full protest mode. Holding up a sign and everything! We offer her a ride, and offer a lending hand . . . or should we say, offer her a HARD DICK!!! Hahaaaa! It’s cool that this babe wants to fight for her rights and all that, but all we care about here at *Bangbus* HQ is picking up fresh gullible pussy. She gets the *Bangbus* treatment just like the other broads. She wants equality? Well, she fucking got it! Hard cock down her throat and up her sweet lil cunt. Her perfect pink snatch got drilled while she thought she was doing it for the right cause. Jokes on her, cause we dropped her off like all the rest. This nympho was no different! (*Bangbus.com*, n.d.)

Interestingly, the clip itself makes clear that the political issue in question is one of race, not gender: The young (white) woman holds a sign reading “I can’t breathe,” a reference to the 2014 police killing of African American street salesman Eric Garner (Baker, Goodman, & Mueller, 2015). She thus assumes the role of a citizen who has both a political opinion and the right to air that opinion in public space. The perspective of the pornographers on this assumption is clarified at a later point in the clip, when a man is shown holding her nostrils closed while she fellates him. Meanwhile, he chants, “She can’t breathe! She can’t breathe!” (*Bangbus.com*, n.d.).

It is thus clear that humiliation is a major theme in contemporary mainstream pornography. Why does this matter? It matters, first of all, for the women who perform in pornography, and that is my main focus herein. What is the impact of humiliating performance on those from whom such performance is extracted?

The Harm of Humiliation

In the spring of 2004, during the American invasion and occupation of Iraq, hundreds of photos were leaked to the press and international human rights organizations. The photos depicted the organized and sadistic abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison. When the Abu Ghraib scandal broke, many noted that, while some of the Iraqi prisoners were physically harmed, the horror of the abuse lay at least equally in their humiliation. Men were made to crawl on the floor wearing leashes, to wear panties on their heads, to masturbate for the camera, to have other men urinate in their

mouths, to climb naked onto a pyramid, all so that pictures could be taken and passed around and crowded over (Clarke, 2004; Hersh, 2004).

Many survivors of torture, in fact, report that the worst element was not the pain but the humiliation (Baer, 2007; Shapiro, 2003; Sussman, 2005). Physical pain ends, but one remains haunted by the image of oneself exposed, soiled, splayed, begging, in abject passivity and helplessness. Thus, as psychologist Shapiro (2003) observes, “shame is a major psychological issue for survivors of torture” (p. 1131). Indeed, Luban (2009) points out that humiliation is central to the evil of pain itself—in general, and especially when the pain is humanly inflicted and watched by others: “acute pain is itself degrading because it collapses our world and reduces us to mere prisoners of our bodies . . . when it happens in front of spectators, the experience is doubly shameful and humiliating” (pp. 223–224). Thus, as I will emphasize shortly, the documentation and distribution of humiliation in pornography likely exacerbates its harm.

Bufacchi (2004) makes a similar point about violence generally, observing that, “What makes violence bad is not only the experience of injury and suffering per se . . . but also the social meaning of *being* harmed” (p. 171). That social meaning, he claims, is largely the sense of degradation, of insult, of being conquered or defeated. And again, this suffering lasts far beyond the violence itself: “From the victim’s point of view,” Bufacchi claims, “one of the worst aspects of violence is that he or she has to live with the violence, that is to say with the awareness of their vulnerability and subordination in a power relationship” (p. 177). Similarly, Shapiro (2003) says of torture survivors that it is not only what is done to torture victims, or what they are forced to do, that produces lasting shame, but rather “their very helplessness and inability to resist It is the fact of subjugation itself that is damaging to self-respect” (p. 1132).

Despite the prevalence of humiliation and subjugation in contemporary pornography, the likely effect of such treatment on women performers goes widely unremarked. As I will suggest shortly, this may be partly because the performers are assumed to consent to such treatment, and their consent is in turn assumed to obviate or at least lessen any psychological harm or trauma. I believe this latter assumption is unwarranted, as I will explain; for now, I simply emphasize that the very nonresistance that normally accompanies consent can be part of the distinctive harm of humiliation.

Exposure and Documentation

In pornography, women are not only humiliated; their humiliation is documented and that documentation is widely distributed. Here, again, we can look to the Abu Ghraib scandal as an analogue. As was widely recognized at the time, the horror of Abu Ghraib lay not only in the humiliation of the victims, but in its gleeful documentation. Both the process of documentation and its results—the taking of pictures, and the pictures themselves—deepened the humiliation. Thus, Laustsen (2008)

observes that, “In Abu Ghraib, the camera literally worked as a weapon of war” (p. 130). The photographs, he contends, “may be seen as part of a particularly cruel form of torture, in which the act of exposure multiplies the feeling of shame” (p. 123).

That picture-taking so often plays a role in humiliation is not surprising, given the dynamics of humiliation itself. Shapiro’s analysis of humiliation emphasizes the central role of exposure therein. According to Shapiro (2004),

there are two core factors to the concept of humiliation: nakedness and degradation. The humiliated person is personally exposed, vulnerable, and essentially naked. That nakedness can take a physical form . . . [or] an emotional form . . . What turns the beauty of physical and psychological nakedness into a gut-wrenching emotional asphyxiation is the experience of degradation. While in a vulnerable posture of nakedness, the victim of humiliation is debased, devalued, and dehumanized. (pp. 1–2)

The role of public exposure in effective humiliation was fully recognized by U.S. forces in Iraq. Laustsen (2008) points out that a pamphlet given to American personnel before their departure for Iraq contained the following passage: “Do not shame or humiliate a man in public. Shaming a man will cause him and his family to be anti-Coalition. The most important qualifier for all shame is for a third party to witness the act. If you must do something likely to cause shame, remove the person from view of others” (p. 127). As Laustsen observes, these guidelines were eventually turned on their heads, treated not as cautionary notes but as “a recipe for how to create as much shame in the prisoners as possible” (p. 127).

The humiliation tactics used against War on Terror detainees, Luban (2009) observes, are “‘Ego Down’ and ‘Futility’ tactics—the Army’s names for tactics designed to break the detainees by making them feel worthless and filling them with despair” (p. 223). It should not surprise us, then, that (again according to Luban), “a recent medical study found absolutely no difference between the traumatic psychological after-effects of physical torture and humiliation” (pp. 222–223). Baer (2007) goes even further, claiming that humiliation tactics “seem to have longer-lasting and more deadly effects on the soul and mind . . . than does physical torture. Humiliation and degradation of the individual may lead to a completely destroyed personality whose recovery is practically impossible” (p. 32).

Torres and Bergner (2012), in their article on the nature and consequences of severe public humiliation, note that such humiliation can result in major depression, suicidal states, extreme rage, severe anxiety, and even psychosis. In their list of conditions that affect how deeply a particular episode of public humiliation is likely to damage its victim, they include how public the humiliation is, and how publicly supported it is. As I have suggested, photographically documenting humiliation makes it highly public, especially when (like pornography or the Abu Ghraib images) the images are then widely disseminated. Unlike the Abu Ghraib images, however—which

were broadly (though not universally) condemned—pornography is widely accepted as part of the cultural mainstream (Dines, 2010) and is used by its consumers as an aid to sexual gratification. Thus, it is fair to say that the degree of public support for its humiliation of women is high, likely exacerbating the trauma to the women humiliated therein.

Pornography and the Role of Consent

In some contexts, like that of Abu Ghraib, we recognize easily that being humiliated is terrible and traumatic, indeed a severe violation of human rights. We recognize further that the harm and trauma are exacerbated by the fact that the humiliation is documented—that pictures and films are taken and circulated.

What, then, of humiliation in pornography? In the eyes of many, the case here is quite different—since, unlike the Abu Ghraib prisoners, the women in pornography are *consenting*. Here is the form where she signed on the dotted line, all grown up at 19 or 21. She's a big girl who knows what she's doing; next topic.

There are two important issues to raise here; I will mark one and set it aside for present purposes, while focusing primarily on the second. The first issue is whether it is true, as many assume, that most or all women in pornography are freely consenting. Feminist critics have pointed out both the conceptual and practical complexities of consent itself (Whisnant, 2004) and the numerous factors—social, cultural, economic, and personal—mitigating the free consent of many women who perform in pornography (Dines, 2010; Jensen, 2007; Simonton & Smith, 2004). In short, there are many women in pornography who do not meaningfully consent to perform therein (at all, or to perform specific acts in specific films), and there are many more whose consent to do so is substantially compromised. Nonetheless, there are many who do at least formally consent, and who, since pornography is their livelihood, seek out opportunities to perform—including opportunities that involve being humiliated on camera. In the ensuing discussion, I mean to call attention to the likely psychological effects not only of the humiliation itself but of their formal consent to such treatment.

This brings me to the second issue: the psychological impact of having consented to humiliating treatment. The tendency to assume that consent makes an important difference to the harmfulness of humiliation is widespread. Some theorists even seem to assume that nonconsent is part of the core meaning of humiliation itself. Lindner (2001), for instance, writes that, “The common-sense, everyday meaning of humiliation . . . is the experience of a punishing exposure to the negative judgment of other people in circumstances that are forced upon the victims concerned” (p. 51).

As Clarke (2004) has observed, public discourse around the Abu Ghraib photos included frequent observations about their similarity to pornography: “Pundit after pundit referred to the Abu Ghraib pictures with evocative phrases: ‘like a bad porno flick,’ ‘the S&M war,’ ‘dirty pictures from Iraq,’ etc.” (p. 204). Such connections, however, were rarely accompanied by any serious criticism of pornography, either as one of many

influences on the Abu Ghraib torturers or as a site, itself, of damaging and humiliating treatment of persons. This “protective shell built around our multi-billion dollar porn industry,” Clarke says, explains what she calls a “howling silence at the heart of US liberal discourse on ‘the Abu Ghraib thing’” (p. 203).

While the connections and disconnections between pornography and the U.S. military's humiliation and torture of Iraqi prisoners are many and complex, it seems likely that the average person, if asked what the key difference is, would say that it lies in the presence or absence of consent. Some scholars make this claim explicitly; for instance, Apel (2005), in her article comparing the Abu Ghraib photos to lynching postcards during the Jim Crow era, takes care to draw a sharp distinction between either one and commercial pornography, observing (among other things) that in both of the former cases, unlike in porn, “the victims are not willing actors” (p. 93).

Thus, the core assumption is as follows: the Abu Ghraib pictures, and the humiliating treatment they depict, are terrible and torturous because those so treated and depicted did not consent (either to the treatment or to the depiction). Women in pornography, by contrast—it is assumed—do consent, and so what is done to them, although no doubt often unpleasant, is not really so bad.

But this gets it exactly wrong, missing just what is so destructive about humiliation in pornography. The presence of consent does not make the humiliation here better, it makes it *worse*—not worse all things considered, but worse in a particular and important respect. To begin explaining why, let me return to the case of torture.

Sussman (2005) has powerfully argued that what is distinctively awful about torture is the way that it engages the victim's active participation in that which harms and violates her. Torture, Sussman says, “forces its victim into the position of colluding against himself through his own affects and emotions, so that he experiences himself as simultaneously powerless and yet actively complicit in his own violation. So construed, torture turns out to be not just an extreme form of cruelty, but the pre-eminent instance of a kind of forced self-betrayal” (p. 4). Following Sussman, Wolfendale (2009) points out that this process need not involve the physical mutilation of a person's body or even the direct application of physical force; in fact, she observes, many of the techniques of so-called torture lite—including extended sleep deprivation, stress positions, isolation, and humiliation—“are designed to make this process of forced self-betrayal even stronger” (p. 58), in that they rely centrally on the victim's active participation. Thus, Wolfendale concludes, “Far from always being more moderate and more humane than other torture methods, torture lite not only can cause extreme suffering but aims to make the victim feel responsible for it” (p. 57).

In a chilling echo of the “Anal Cumsumption” series and related themes in pornography, more than one Abu Ghraib survivor has reported being forced to insert a finger in his anus and lick it (Danner, 2004). If Sussman (2005) is correct, then these men suffer vast and encompassing harm from such

humiliation: “In the most intimate aspects of his agency,” Sussman observes, “the sufferer is made to experience himself not just as a passive victim, but as an active accomplice in his own debasement” (p. 23).

If, as Laustsen (2008) says (following Sussman), “it is the active contribution from the victim that provokes the feeling of shame” (p. 129), then how much worse must the shame and humiliation be when force is absent—when, for whatever complex combination of reasons, one consented or chose to be here and to do this dirty and degrading thing?

Now think back to Jamie: No one else is in the frame, handing her the glass of ejaculate or encouraging her to drink it, let alone forcing her to do so. She drinks ejaculate out of her own rectum all on her own, apparently. We are to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain or behind the camera: the central narrative of pornography is that it reveals the inner truth about women, or at least about this particular woman. And indeed, what we see in the picture or film is not that this low and dirty thing was done to her, but that *she* did it. The pornography thus purports to reveal some essential truth about *her*, not about someone else’s wrongdoing. And the pornography lasts; it is out there; she lives with it, defined by it, both in her own mind and in the minds of others.

Shapiro (2004) writes movingly and insightfully of the complex structure of constraint and choice in standard cases of humiliation, and of the resulting harm. “No one other than the humiliated party,” he observes,

is forcibly moving his or her body parts to masturbate in front of prison guards, to lick urine off the floor as a fraternity hazing ritual, or to admit defeat and sign a truce. . . . On one level, as the humiliated party . . . I am *choosing* to engage in activities that will reduce my sense of self-pride and dignity. Yet at another level, constraints on my situation—whether a gun at my head or a mad desire to join a fraternity no matter the cost—make alternative behaviors extremely risky. Nevertheless, the pain of humiliation comes in part from the fact that I am apparently choosing to degrade myself. I *could* resist—or I could have. Now, all I have is a terrible feeling of degradation and regret. (p. 2)

The analysis herein calls into question not only the psychological sequelae of public humiliation in particular contexts, but its very definition and structure. In their analysis of public humiliation, Torres and Bergner (2012) contend that it standardly involves what they call a status claim. “By this,” they explain, “we mean simply that [the humiliated persons] are either (a) presenting themselves to others as legitimate occupants of certain social positions in relation to other persons, or (b) that they are soliciting others to grant them . . . such positions” (p. 493). The status claimed may be as a member of a particular valued group, or of a social or occupational role, or simply the status of a respected human being. In episodes of public humiliation, Torres and Bergner claim, the status claim fails publicly, due to being rejected by one or more persons who have the status necessary to so reject it. Furthermore, and crucially,

Not only is the status claim or bid rejected, but the *basic standing of the claimant to even make such a bid or claim is rejected*. In these rejections, the individual is branded a pretender; that is, someone who had no business making the initial status bid or claim. With this added element, these messages become humiliating. (p. 494)

Torres and Bergner (2012) offer several vivid examples that illustrate the structure they have in mind: a teenaged boy humiliated by the high school in-crowd, a worker humiliated by a doctor from whom she seeks status as an injured worker entitled to compensation, a previously respected judge humiliated by the exposure of his own use of drugs and prostituted women. In each of these cases, the status claim is clear, and the humiliation lies in its public rejection.

The case of consensual humiliating pornography, however, calls into question whether Torres and Bergner (2012) are correct in making status claims central to the nature and structure of public humiliation. Jamie, for example, makes no status claim; on the contrary, she seems to contract away her entitlement *not* to be treated in a deeply humiliating manner. It is, if anything, the opposite of a status claim; it is closer to being a denial of one’s own status as a respectable human being. By this, of course, I do not mean that Jamie ceases to be worthy of respect, but simply that—contra Torres and Bergner’s model—her treatment as something subhuman occurs not following a status bid for something better, but rather following what seems to be her volunteering for such treatment.

Because Torres and Bergner (2012) do not recognize this kind of case as a variant of public humiliation, they do not say whether consent is a factor rendering such humiliation more damaging to the psyche of the humiliated. Again, my considered hypothesis here is that it does; this hypothesis merits further research.

The Message of Humiliating Pornography

I have suggested that the distinctive and lasting pain of humiliation—a pain that can be severe enough to constitute torture—is likely to be suffered to an extraordinary degree by many women who perform in pornography, precisely because they have consented to the humiliating acts. In what remains, I briefly point to the broader cultural and ideological impact of humiliating pornography.

I wrote above, in a sarcastic vein, that Jamie drinks ejaculate out of her own rectum voluntarily; apparently that is just the kind of girl she is. The next question is, what kind of girl is that? What are the rest of us left to think of Jamie and all the others like her who populate this multibillion dollar industry of images? Such women’s apparent consent leaves us grasping for explanations. The most readily available such explanations make it seem that the women are not really being degraded after all, but simply treated in ways congruent with their own nature and will.

These women humiliate themselves willingly—perhaps (we might speculate) because they place little value on their own personal dignity, or perhaps because they are too stupid even to realize that they are being insulted and degraded. Almost certainly, they are economically desperate (in a culture that sees such desperation, especially in women, as an occasion for contempt rather than empathy and help). Take your pick, mix and match: at the end of the day, they are just “whores” who have it coming.

We cringe at the Abu Ghraib images because in them we see people who have personal dignity to take away, who are being wrongfully brought low. By contrast, Jamie, for instance, is not being brought low; she just *is* low. We can tell, because she does it all willingly. She reaches for the glass of ejaculate, she smiles, she guzzles. What would degrade others does not degrade her; rather, it simply reflects and gratifies her nature. She is not a human being; she is only a woman.

In discussions about pornography, well-meaning people often aver that, however distasteful it may be, we must accept pornography so long as it depicts only consenting adults. That is, the absence of consent is assumed to demarcate the boundaries of the harmful and unacceptable. My analysis here, however, points to the damaging poverty of this approach. Images of women accepting and even welcoming their own debasement and humiliation are profoundly destructive, not only for the particular women so depicted, but for women generally. After all, pornography purports to reveal the down-and-dirty truth—not about men, or capitalism, or patriarchy, but about *women*, who we are and what we are for. And like all propaganda, it uses individuals as stand-ins for entire targeted groups (Jensen, 2011).

Thus, at the level of ideology, Jamie is not just a woman, but Woman. In the world of pornography, and in the world pornography has helped to make, Jamie’s willing humiliation shows that she has no human dignity to lose, that she is only a woman after all.

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