

young offenders are not just naughty boys, they are also potential, or actual, fathers. Are these the young men whom Halsey and Michael Howard are so anxious to reunite with the women for whose lone motherhood they are responsible? Will they then steer their sons along a more useful path to manhood? It seems unlikely.

A New Image of Masculinity

Men who measure their personal worth only by the money they earn will be devastated by unemployment. And they will be unable to inculcate a sense of worth in their sons. Industrial and economic change and the changing role of women have had a devastating effect on male morale. There are adjustments to be made, but to make those changes our boys need to have men around them who are not cardboard cut-out figures like Captain Planet or Superman. Nor do they need

those strong silent men who leave the house every morning and shut the door on their families. They need fathers who will teach their sons that family life is something that they can participate in, on equal terms with women. It will take a long time to produce a generation of fathers like that. In the meantime something has to be done to provide today's boys with a new image of masculinity to capture their imagination at the crucial point when they realise that they are not going to grow up to be like Mum.

The mother whose son joined the Nazis told me: 'When I realised what was happening I was desperate, crying out for advice from anyone — doctors, teachers, psychiatrists, therapists, friends or family. I went everywhere, obsessively asking for help to stop the nightmare getting worse.' She did not get that help then, and probably would not get it now; and that is the problem which we need to address.

Men and Porn

Peter Baker

Pornography is one of the most divisive issues in contemporary sexual politics. While the manufacturers of top-shelf magazines continue to sell some 27 million copies of over 200 titles a year in the UK alone, feminists, civil rights' activists, media pundits and even therapists argue over the definitions, causes and conse-

quences of this multi-million pound trade in sexually explicit words and images.

Some of the bitterest controversy concerns the so-called 'evidence of harm': whether men's use of pornography affects their behaviour, particularly towards women and children. Some have no doubt that repeated exposure to pornographic

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images — especially if they contain violence — encourages men to behave callously, even aggressively towards women. Others, equally vigorously, believe research on the effects of pornography, whether soft-core or violent, is either inconclusive or reveals no changes in men's behaviour. Censorship is another highly contentious issue — some want more, some less or none, and some argue for legal measures that avoid censorship but hold pornographers accountable for any harm caused by their products. There is even heated disagreement about what pornography actually is — some define it as virtually any sexually explicit image, for example, while others contend it must be premised on inequality or contain violence.

Wherever one stands on these debates — and it is certainly difficult to be neutral — one key issue is consistently overlooked. We still lack a sufficient understanding of why men use pornography in the first place. What is it that drives a man (or boy) into his local newsagent's to seek out the latest Penthouse, Fiesta or Escort? Why do so many men feel compelled to visit sex shops replete with pornographic magazines and videos? Exactly what is so attractive about watching 'blue' movies in hotel rooms, from Hull to Hamburg to Honolulu? Until these questions have been answered, it is surely premature to start prescribing 'solutions' to the problem of pornography.

It was an interest in better understanding the phenomenon of men's desire to use pornography that, in part, led Marc Pigeon (a qualified group facilitator), John Jordan (an artist) and myself to set up and co-facilitate the Men and Porn Group. We

also wanted to help men gain insights into the effects pornography has on them and, hopefully, enable them to change their relationship with pornography in a way that would bring about an improvement in the quality of their lives. We hoped, too, that the profile offered by the group would allow us (and other men) to begin to make a legitimate and positive contribution to the pornography debate.

The centrepiece of this ambitious project is a structured ten-week programme for a small group of men, but it also includes the broader goal of encouraging public discussion of these issues through the facilitators' own writing and broadcasting, as well as by stimulating the interest of others in the media and relevant professions, including, of course, therapists and counsellors, as well as psychiatrists, social workers, probation officers and teachers.

The first full programme ran from October 1994 to January 1995. Six men attended, all white, aged from early 20s to late 40s, with jobs ranging from bus driving to dentistry. They had heard about the group either through newspaper coverage (it was mentioned in *The Guardian* and the London listings magazine *Time Out*) or through direct mailing of a promotional leaflet to men we thought would be interested (e.g. subscribers to the men's magazine *Achilles Heel*, members of men's groups or networks). Our literature stated we could offer the group only to heterosexual men — we felt, at this stage, we lacked the necessary experience of working with gay men and of gay pornography. Before admission to the group, each man was asked to complete a questionnaire which asked

about his reasons for wanting to attend and attempted to assess his suitability for group work. It was also made clear that the group was unsuitable for men who have committed a sexual offence or who use child pornography.

The group combined a mixture of therapeutic approaches — psychodynamic, cognitive and behavioural — but the approach was generally more pragmatic than explicitly theoretical. It was also highly experimental — we know of no previous group which has worked with men on their use of pornography — and, although some of the exercises and topics for discussion had been tested on volunteers in pilot workshops, many were new and untried. Consequently, and inevitably, some sessions worked well, while others were found to be in need of amendment or even wholesale revision.

Understandably enough, the men who came to the first session were very, very scared. Only a couple had previously discussed their use of pornography with others and for all it was overwhelmingly a hidden and shameful part of their lives.

But all the men expressed profound relief at finding a place where they could deal with this issue — one said he felt he had been 'waiting all his life' for the opportunity. We explained that our approach was non-judgmental and that there would be no attempt to encourage or force men down a particular path (e.g. to stop using pornography) — this lack of prescription was crucial in building trust and confidence, as were the 'ground rules' we asked the men to agree to. These included a requirement of total confidentiality, to listen to each other without interruption, to be as honest as possible

and not to exchange pornography within the group.

The group began with exercises designed to enable the men to make links between their use of pornography and their emotional states. A 'life graph' was used — with the horizontal axis representing time and the vertical frequency of use — to plot men's experiences over their lifetime. Most drew a zigzag line indicating varying frequencies of use at different periods in their life. They were then asked to write on the graph their experiences at each of the high and low points. The conclusions, although perhaps obvious to therapists, were seen as very revealing by the participants. Periods of high use of pornography were generally associated with difficult life experiences (perhaps unemployment, ill-health, relationship breakdown) while periods of low use were linked to more positive experiences (e.g. success at work, being in love, being busy).

The men were then asked to focus on a particular instance of use in much greater detail. The episode was divided into five stages: 'the trigger' (the moments before the thought of using pornography becomes conscious), 'the preparation' (obtaining or seeking out pornography and getting ready to use it), 'the doing' (looking at the pornography), 'the climax' (the moment of orgasm) and 'the aftermath' (the period immediately after orgasm to a few minutes later). For each stage, the men were asked to describe what was happening and what they were thinking and feeling.

Although experiences were by no means uniform, certain patterns nevertheless emerged. The trigger feelings

tended to be stress, boredom, anxiety, tiredness, sexual frustration, anger, unhappiness and loneliness. There then followed a period of mounting tension and excitement. In the preparation phase, there were feelings of fear, trepidation and anticipation. These changed, in the doing phase, to feelings of release, power, ruthlessness, strength, potency, joy and escape. One man described himself as feeling 'off the planet' while he masturbated with pornography; another said he felt 'switched off from real life'. The climax itself was described as containing a wider mix of emotions, from ecstasy to relief to sadness. In the aftermath stage, some men said they felt relaxed and sleepy, others guilty, ashamed or even worthless.

What was particularly striking about this exercise was the intensity of feeling revealed in the preparation, doing and climax stages. Given the uncomfortable feelings of the trigger phase which they displace, it is not hard to see how pornography can come to be used compulsively or addictively. We built on the insights gained through this exercise by encouraging the men to think of alternatives to pornography use that they could employ when experiencing their triggers. (Again, the aim was not to say they should or must employ alternatives, but to make clear that they do always have a choice.) The alternatives they suggested included masturbating without pornography, having a bubble bath, listening to music, going for a walk or to the gym, spending money on a luxury and drawing with pastels.

One session of the group was devoted to the pornographic image itself. We presented the men with a range of pictures

cut from two top-shelf magazines. They were each asked to select one picture which particularly attracted them. By focusing on the details in the image, we hoped to help men understand that their desire is shaped by their own particular experiences. One man believed, for example, that his preference for images of couples having sex was related to his own strong wish to form a permanent, stable relationship. Another realised the type of woman he desired in pornography reflected how he felt about himself — the worse he felt, the sleazier the image he wanted. Another connected his choice of images of women's bottoms — preferably with the anus as well as the vagina revealed — to his own humiliating childhood experience of having a suppository inserted into his own anus by his mother.

Other exercises in the programme looked at the relationship between pornography use and men's sense of their own masculinity (in particular exploring the idea that what men desire in the pornographic image is in fact a projection of how they wish to be — i.e. attractive, desirable and sexually powerful), how pornography relates to men's relationships with women and how it connects to actual and imagined sexual experience. There was also one open session — which the men used to discuss a wide range of thoughts and feelings — and a concluding, review and goal-setting session. Given that each session lasted just two hours, it was a very intensive ten weeks, covering a large number of issues. Inevitably, many important topics were left either unexplored or covered only very superficially. Experience of sexual abuse

was one such area.

A follow-up session was held one month after the last meeting. All the men felt the group had been a positive and helpful experience and wanted it to continue, in the form of a non-facilitated support group meeting monthly. The increase in self-esteem and self-confidence they all experienced, through sharing intimate and hitherto intensely private aspects of their lives with peers, seems to have been crucial. They all felt less obsessed about pornography and much more in control of their use of it, although some had not achieved their self-set goal of complete abstinence. All felt less guilty or ashamed about using pornography — indeed, it seems as if this was a key step in the process of change for many of the men. So long as they felt bad about using pornography, it was very difficult for them

to change their pattern of use.

The group is still in its infancy and it would be presumptuous to build grandiose theories about men's use of pornography on its work to date. Nevertheless, it does appear possible to conclude that, for some men at least, pornography use is rooted in emotional distress, feelings of powerlessness, inadequacy and low self-esteem as well as a sense of not being manly or attractive enough. A fear of expressing sexual needs or desire to real women may also be an important factor in some cases. It also seems that providing men with the opportunity to acknowledge and explore their vulnerability, rather than expecting them to maintain the illusion of male omnipotence, is perhaps an essential precondition to changing their relationship to pornography — and much else besides.

For details of The Men and Porn Group, write to PO Box 3677, London N15 6SQ, or phone 0181 690 7512. The next 10-week programme starts on 17 October 1995.

