

Picture Poison

Viewing Pornography for a Living Can Be Deadly



In *Cries in the Desert* (2007), John Glatt reported the tragic suicide of FBI Agent Patty Rust. In 1999, Rust was tasked with preparing “detailed drawings and diagrams of every item inside” the torture collection of David Ray, a pornography-addicted killer. Officer Rust was a “former Captain in the U.S. Army [and] an experienced FBI agent with a degree in criminology.”

After spending five days in a trailer viewing the sado-sexual evidence, Agent Rust “walked out of the TOY BOX and shot herself in the head with her service revolver, dying instantly.” A state official involved in the investigation stated, “She most probably

couldn’t handle what she had seen and was exposed to in that trailer.” The FBI, however, officially ruled that her suicide was unconnected to her isolated week of viewing and re-drawing the grisly scenes.

The FBI disclaimer was hasty

and ignored the impact that images have on the mind. Art historian David Freedberg has documented people being “sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures”; they “mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them,” he writes. Sir Kenneth Clark notes that all nudes arouse “some vestige of erotic feeling” in viewers. Neurologist Richard Restak points out that “the more bizarre the visual image, the more likely we are to see and remember it.”

Perhaps the FBI forgot my presentation to its Quantico behavioral science unit in 1983. After my briefing on the child pornography, crime, and violence depicted in *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, the agency purged both magazines from its commissary—the FBI behavioral science director had grasped the *causal role of sexual images on behavior*.

Aristotle likened mental images to “tracing with a signet ring on wax.” Neuroscientists now define this brain-body response as “mirroring.” Could Patty Rust sleep at night with those bizarre images of torture cruising through her brain, her body, and her memory?

Viewers at Risk

Although the FBI may now claim that there is no causal link between pornographic images and behavior, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) has faced reality. It has established a “Safeguard” program to alleviate job trauma resulting from visual exposure to sado-sexual materials. NCMEC’s Director of Family Advocacy Services, Marsha Gilmer-Tullis, said, “Law enforcement and the legal profession have come to understand the importance of ensuring that staff involved in this work must be taken care of emotionally and psychologically.” “This work” refers to pornography, especially, but not only, child pornography.

NCMEC's Child Victim Identification Program (CVIP) is the US clearinghouse "for child-pornography cases and also serves as the main point of contact to international agencies for victim identification," Gilmer-Tullis explained. For a long time, she noted, people in law enforcement, the military, social work, and similar professions whose job included viewing images of child pornography *were afraid to admit they needed emotional help*, lest this reveal "an inability to perform one's job or prevent one from advancing in their career."

Fortunately, that fear has been diminishing, she said, as "level minded professionals understand that this work . . . could create incredible psychological challenges for the viewer at present and possibly in the future."

In other words, viewing pornographic images, especially of abused children, is toxic, what is termed an "erototoxin." Such images distress even "level-headed professionals," including FBI agents. NCMEC now has a psychologist on duty to help staff who must view this material. The April 23, 2009 edition of the *NCMEC Quarterly Progress Report* noted that most agencies now offer or even mandate counseling for their affected staff members rather than moving them to other jobs. In detail:

The CyberTipline Safeguard Project is a multi-focused program . . . designed to provide job-specific training and consultation to ECD [Exploited Children Division] staff

members to minimize potential harm *as a result of viewing objectionable material*.

This quarter 88 hours of direct psychological consultation were provided through individual and group sessions with a cumulative total of 971 hours during this 27-month OJJDP [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention] grant period.

Through these sessions 91% of all ECD staff members and 100% of staff members with less than 1 year of experience in the division reported they were able to identify and manage potential negative issues that could



Porn Buzz

“When it comes to lust, neuroimaging confirms that the prurient urge is all-encompassing. Watching pornography calls upon brain regions associated with reward, sensory interpretation, and visual processing. It enlists the amygdala and the hypothalamus, [two structures in the brain] which deal with emotional information; it also stimulates the reward-processing ventral striatum, probably due to the satisfying nature of watching erotic stimuli. All said, the most notable thing about lust is that it sets nearly the whole brain buzzing, [Adam] Safron says.” Safron is a research consultant at Northwestern University who has conducted neuroimaging studies focusing on sexual behavior.

“These responses are so unique and distinctive that, in the context of an experiment, it is possible to determine whether a man is aroused just by looking at an fMRI brain scan. ‘These are huge effects,’ Safron says. ‘You’re looking at the difference between something that elicits intense desire and something that does not.’”

—from Kathleen McGowan, “Seven Deadly Sins,” *Discover*, September 2009, p. 50

arise as a result of viewing objectionable materials on the job. . . .

These goals are accomplished through the use of in-house professional social workers in the Family Advocacy Division and weekly visits by a private psychologist. This quarter the project team continued holding individual sessions with new staff members . . . in an effort to provide necessary support to help them manage possible concerns that may arise. [Emphasis added]

The NCMEC study recommends interventions for child-exploitation investigators who must view objectionable material. "Monitoring employees' well-being" should be proactive, the report states, to prevent "severe secondary traumatization." Further, analysts need "support resources . . . safeguard programs, counseling, [and] peer support" to create "awareness of secondary trauma and compassion fatigue" and to mitigate their effects.

In 2007, Juliet Francis, an NCMEC psychologist, published "Helping the Helpers: Minimizing the Psychological Impact of Investigators Viewing Objectionable Material." This analysis defines "objectionable materials" as the toxic form of eros, or erototoxins. The report concluded that, although "investigators of exploited children often experience satisfaction in their work to prevent child victimization . . . viewing child pornography may increase one's risk of exposure to the effects of secondary trauma." Exposure to pornography fits the definition of "secondary traumatic stress disorder" given in *Medical News Today* as "repeated and unwanted memories of the event, avoidance responses such as emotional numbness, and so-called

arousal responses such as hypervigilance or difficulty concentrating" (www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/60266.php).

Dangerous Denial

Dr. Francis warns that "if denied or ignored," this trauma can so change a person's perspective that

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it "may impede professional judgment and interfere with one's personal life." It could well be argued that executive, judiciary, and legislative denials of the toxic effects of pornography have not only put the immature brains of juveniles at risk, but also those of adults, including public servants. Vernon J. Geberth, former Commanding Officer of the Bronx Homicide Task Force, which handles over 400 murder investigations a year, stated, "This proliferation and access to pornography via the Internet in the privacy of one's home is a catalyst for copy-cat crimes and disaster. We are in a sad state and it will get worse." During one recent week, an FBI agent, a sheriff's deputy, and a mayor were all arrested for child sexual abuse and/or child pornography.

The elephant in the middle of the room that no one wants to acknowledge is that viewing "objectionable materials," once diagnosed as a form of "peeping," is deviant conduct; and that viewing such materials has actually led some investigators into perpetrating copycat sexual crimes against the very children they pledged, and planned, to protect. How

many jury members, judges, police officers, and social scientists have been and are now being traumatized in the line of duty, their brains neuro-chemically restructured by erototoxins unleashed by the viewing of pornography?

If NCMEC staff had not experienced emotional and psychological harm from seeing porno-

graphic images, there would have been no justification for the costly investment of time, money, and resources used to put the Safe-guards program in place. But inquiries NCMEC has received from other protective organizations about their own traumatized staffs demonstrate the far-reaching impact of these stimuli among professionals.

I am often asked about the children and teenagers, women and men who are consuming "objectionable material" at home, in the office, or at school, or in prisons, hospitals, and other institutions. Do they all have a full-time psychologist available with whom they can share their "so-called arousal responses," sexual trauma, lust, fear, and shame?

If the NCMEC needs to safeguard *its trained adult staff* from the *known toxic effects* of pornography, how much more vulnerable are ordinary citizens, and especially children, to these materials? If an experienced FBI agent like Patty Rust couldn't handle her exposure to this poison, isn't it time to provide public protection from this modern deluge of erototoxic pollution? ☉