

Statement of Karen E. Dill, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Psychology
School of Social & Behavioral Sciences
Lenoir-Rhyne College

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The Business of Stereotypes and Degrading Images*”

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Chairman Rush, Ranking Member Stearns and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today. I am Dr. Karen Dill and have been conducting research in the field of media psychology since 1994. My specialization is in media violence, violence against women, video games, and stereotyping of women and minorities in the media. In this capacity, I have co-authored a statement on interactive media violence which led to the American Psychological Association's (APA) Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media, adopted in 2005. In addition, I currently serve on the APA committee on Interactive Media and have published in the field of media psychology with an emphasis on video games, violence and gender stereotypes. My dissertation, *Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviors in the Laboratory and in Life*, co-authored with my mentor Dr. Craig Anderson, is the single most-cited research paper on video game violence effects.

Americans spend two-thirds of our waking lives consuming mass media. Be it television, movies, music, video games or the internet, media consumption is the number one activity of choice for Americans – commanding, on average, 3700 hours of each citizen's time annually¹. The average American child devotes 45 hours per week to media consumption, more time than she spends in school².

Since culture is our shared reality, created and sustained through common experience, American culture is now largely that which is shaped and maintained by the mass media. Television, video games, music and other forms of media create meaning including shared beliefs, values and rules. Television, games, songs and movies tell stories, project images and communicate ideas. Since we are social creatures, it is natural

for us to learn who we are, how we should act, feel, think and believe through the stories of our common culture.

This creation of culture through popular media was sadly exemplified recently when radio personality Don Imus referred to a college women's basketball team as "nappy-headed ho's." Sadder still, many responded that the racist and sexist language was acceptable because that type of language is used by minorities in rap music. Unfortunately racist and sexist slurs influence real people, for example sending the message to girls that this is how our society views them and causing issues with self esteem and identity.

When people say that media messages do not matter, they do not understand the psychology behind the media. For example, research on the third person effect³ has shown repeatedly that people believe that they themselves are immune to being affected by negative media content such as media violence, but that they believe other people, especially children, are affected. A recent study showed that the more violent video games you play, the less likely you are to believe that you are affected by video game violence. Reasons for these misperceptions include 1) the natural tendency to reject the notion that our habits are harmful 2) a mistaken view of how media effects work⁴ (e.g., that media violence effects are always immediately observable and extreme such as murder) and 3) that media are produced primarily to entertain us⁴ (rather than to make a profit) and 4) that media do not affect the viewer (including the tendency to believe that important effects such as violence must have an important cause, not a trivial cause such as watching television⁵).

Research on music has demonstrated that exposure to violent rap videos increases adversarial sexual beliefs (viewing men and women as enemies in the sexual sphere), negative mood, and acceptance of relationship violence⁶ (for example, believing it is acceptable for a boyfriend to shove his girlfriend out of jealousy). Additionally, violent music lyrics have been shown to increase aggressive thoughts and feelings. Across a number of studies in which researchers controlled for artist, style and other relevant factors, results showed conclusively that it was the aggressive content that caused the observed changes⁷.

APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls

In 2007, the **APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls** found that when girls are exposed to images in the media of females as sex objects, a variety of negative outcomes follow (see attached APA press release). Sexualization is linked to negative consequences for cognitive and emotional functioning (including impaired performance on mental activities), mental health (including eating disorders, low self esteem, and depression), physical health, and healthy sexual development.

Media Violence Research and Issues Relevant to Women and Girls

To understand the psychological research on media and women's issues, it is important to keep in mind that one major motive for aggression is a desire for power, control and dominance⁸. For example, current research characterizes domestic violence as motivated primarily by a man's desire to dominate and control his wife⁹. Theoretically, both sexism and racism in the media are examples of social influence – degrading women and minorities through sexist and racist language and imagery is a way to keep women and minorities “in their place.”

Research spanning different forms of media has clearly demonstrated that sexist content causes negative effects on girls and women¹⁰. What follows is representative of research findings that relate to media and aggression against women:

Those who watch more TV are more likely to hold dysfunctional beliefs about relationships and are more accepting of sexual harassment against women¹¹. Seeing ads where women are portrayed as sex objects increases rape-supportive attitudes in men¹². Similarly, violent video game players are more likely than non-players to believe “rape myths” such as the idea that sometimes women “deserve” rape and to hold sexist beliefs such as the idea that men are more capable as leaders and professionals, and that women deserve less freedom than men and are subservient to men^{13,14}.

Detailed Research Examples

My colleagues and I¹⁴ exposed young people to either sexist stereotypes – violent, “macho” males and sexually-objectified women – or to professional men and women (members of the US Congress). Next, participants read a true story where a male college professor sexually harassed a young, female college student – he put his hand on her thigh and she protested. Young men who had seen the sexist images were less likely to say the event really was sexual harassment, to say it was serious and damaging, and to show empathy for the victim. They were more likely to blame the victim and to choose less severe punishments for the perpetrator. In another phase of the study, males and females who were exposed to the sexist images were more likely to endorse rape-supportive beliefs such as the ideas that women like sexual force, that men should dominate women and that leading a man on sexually justifies sexual force. These findings are especially relevant given that recent research¹⁵ shows that the overwhelming majority

of video game characters are presented in stereotypical ways, and that general youth audiences are aware of these stereotypes.

A Word on Racist Media Content

Similar to representations of women, media representations of minorities have traditionally been stereotypical. Recent research on common depictions of popular video game characters shows blatant stereotyping^{15,16}. Black males are more likely than other characters to carry guns (especially extreme guns) and to fit the definition of a “thug” or “gangsta,” and much more likely to be depicted as athletes¹⁶. This is troubling given that research shows that simply knowing a society’s endorsement of a “Black criminal” stereotype is enough to make video game players shoot more unarmed Black targets than unarmed White targets¹⁷.

Conclusions

We enjoy freedom of expression in this country, but no country can grant us freedom from consequences. Scientists call it cause and effect. To put it more poetically, you reap what you sow. If you want peace, plant peace. If you want justice, grow justice. If we plant the seeds of violence and hate, we, as a culture, will reap what we have sown.

My message today is that violence, hatred, racism and sexism in the media do matter. One way our government can ameliorate this situation is to act on the research findings by planning legislation and regulation accordingly. Beyond that, we have a dire need in our schools to implement a curriculum that teaches how the media work (known as *media literacy* training) so that if a child hears these messages she is better equipped to deal with them. We need to make our priorities protecting and empowering children and all people rather than placing emphasis on protecting the rights of special interests to

profit from selling messages of hate and injustice. We also need to recognize the deception involved with defending these harmful messages as freedom of expression. Thank you, again, for the opportunity to present this testimony. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

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