

IDENTITY AND COMPETENCE: THE USE OF CULTURE IN THE INTERPRETATION OF SEXUAL IMAGES

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ABSTRACT: *Cultural sociology agrees that meanings attributed to objects vary depending upon the cultural competencies of viewers, but tends to ignore the role of identities in interpretation. This article argues that both identities and competencies influence interpretation. Through an analysis of how 307 undergraduate students at a Midwestern state university interpreted a black-and-white photograph of an individual masturbating, this article finds that assessments of the degree to which the image should be considered art and/or pornography are associated with self-reported indicators of both cultural competencies and identities. Indicators of religious and conventional identities and of training with regard to photography stand out in this regard. The intersection of the constructions of pornography and art enabled the authors to classify participants as Nonartistic Conservatives, Nonartistic Liberals, Artistic Liberals, and Artistic Conservatives and to show that interpretations are a consequence of how persons are simultaneously situated in relation to both moral and aesthetic criteria.*

In June 1989 the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., canceled an exhibition of the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe after more than 100 congressmen signed a letter denouncing the grants Mapplethorpe had received from the National Endowment for the Arts (Quigley 2005; Vance 1989). Conservative congressmen saw Mapplethorpe's portrayals of homosexuality as "without artistic value" and "pornographic and shocking by any standards" (Quigley 2005). In contrast, within some parts of the art world Mapplethorpe was viewed as "a major American artist" and "one of New York's premier photographers" (Bronski 1989; Danto and Mapplethorpe 1995; Dubin 1992; Eck 2001; Vance 1989).

This stark disagreement about the artistic value of these sex-related photographs is consistent with one of the most robust findings in cultural sociology—meaning cannot be "read off" objects themselves but depends on what readers

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bring to the work (Griswold 1987). Objects do not have one meaning "permanently embedded in them at the moment of creation" (Griswold 1987:1078). Scholarship as varied as Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) and Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) have documented the role of cultural competencies in the interpretation of objects (see also Baxandall 1972; Becker 1982; Devault 1990; Jaus 1982; Liebes and Katz 1990).

Scholars have employed a variety of terms to refer to the frameworks people use to make sense of objects, including "literacy," "period eye," "horizon of expectations," "presuppositions," and "cultural capital." The term *cultural competency* has been used to refer to knowledge of criteria used to classify and evaluate a type of cultural object and the ability to apply these criteria to produce what would be socially validated as a credible interpretation by those considered experts of that culture. This definition borrows from Bourdieu (1984:2), who defines cultural competence as possessing the "cipher or code" needed to decode an object. Cultural competencies enable one to classify objects according to *genre* and to evaluate their quality according to *standards* viewed as appropriate for that genre. Individuals need not be able to explicitly state the criteria they employ; according to Bourdieu, such criteria rarely are stated. Cultural competencies can be acquired through formal education, other forms of training, and in the course of everyday experience. We approach this analysis from a social constructionist perspective: what counts as "cultural competency" is ultimately subjective. Standards of evaluation are objective to the extent that they are taken for granted in a social group (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

A basic set of cultural competencies is universal among functioning members of a society. Other competencies are available only to members of *interpretive communities*. Interpretive communities can be defined as groups that create, share, and reproduce systems of classification and evaluation (Fish 1980). Art worlds create interpretive communities (Becker 1982). Interpretive communities have also been identified along the lines of class, education, occupation, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, and sexuality (Devault 1990; Griswold 1987; Lamont 1987; Shively 1992). For example, interpretations of photography and music vary by class and occupation (Bourdieu 1984, 1990). Similarly, Nichter (2000) has shown that African American and white adolescent girls interpret their bodies differently.

Previous research has assumed, however, that peoples' cognitions are constrained by participation in a single interpretive community (Griswold 1987:1081; see also Kaufman 2004:339). Cultural sociologists now question whether people typically acquire just a single coherent set of cultural competencies as a part of socialization, and point out that people often seem to accumulate a variety of cultural competencies. Swidler argues that the culture that people acquire looks more like "an oddly assorted tool kit containing implements of varying shapes that fit the hand more or less well, are not always easy to use, and only sometimes do the job" (1986; 2001:24). We use the concepts of *tool kit* or *repertoire* to describe the assortment of cultural competencies a person has. A broad repertoire means that one can credibly classify and evaluate more kinds of objects, and that one can classify and evaluate the same objects in different ways, in reference to different criteria.

Thus, because many people may have the capacity to construct different interpretations of an object, identifying gross distributions of cultural competencies may only partially explain variation in interpretation. More often than not, multiple and perhaps conflicting criteria are available to individuals as they seek to make sense of objects they encounter.

We turned to social psychological theory to explain variation in interpretation. Identity theory is of particular relevance because it seeks to explain why people follow one set of expectations rather than another where “alternative courses . . . are reasonably open” (Stryker 2001:26; see also Stryker 1987; Stryker and Burke 2000). Stryker (2001) and other identity theorists presume “a multifaceted self composed of [multiple] identities” (p. 28). Gecas and Burke (1995) view such identities as encompassing self-characterizations related to group memberships as well as to roles. Multiple identities are viewed as organized hierarchically within the self, with some identities being more salient than others. People are more likely to fulfill the expectations of the more-salient identities. From this perspective, we expect that when people can interpret an object in different ways, they will choose to present the interpretation that better signifies and confirms salient identities to themselves and others.

Interpretations have significance for the display of identity to oneself and others because they are loaded with meaning, not just about the object being classified but about the person who is making the interpretation (Bourdieu 1984). As Beisel (1993) argues, “Interpretations of cultural objects [also] gain power by . . . allowing adherents to construct attractive images of themselves” (p. 147). An interpretation implies not only a relationship between an individual and an object but also a relationship between the individual, his or her self-image, and other people. Interpretations connect individuals to some interpretive communities and distance them from others (Erickson 1996). Not only does classification socially classify the classifier, but classifiers are aware of this and attempt to control their classification (Mead 1934). Interpretations of objects reflect what people think of as a desirable classification. People are not only able to construct several interpretations of a particular object, but they understand the implications of these interpretations for their social and self identities.

This generates the question: what do people do when the expectations of one identity suggest an interpretation at odds with the expectations of another? Viewing identities as organized hierarchically, with more-salient identities more likely to be invoked, leads Stryker (2001) to argue that “identities will compete with one another for expression. Although this is not perhaps a zero-sum game, to the degree that such competition involves identities whose meanings are independent, behavior that reflects one will exclude behavior reflecting another” (p. 36). However, people frequently try to locate contexts where they can express multiple identities simultaneously. And it may be easier to simultaneously fulfill the expectations of multiple identities, or to toggle quickly back and forth between them, in the arena of cultural interpretation than in other arenas of social life. This has implications for how we envision people drawing from their cultural repertoires. The notion of the tool kit or repertoire suggests people pulling out one tool at a time, but people may simultaneously apply multiple and even conflicting

systems of classification. Thus, for example, someone might simultaneously classify and evaluate an object as an ugly chair and a family heirloom, simultaneously demonstrating identities as a connoisseur who negates the value of the chair and as a loyal family member who affirms the value of the chair.

We researched reactions to a sexual photograph to examine the role of identities and competence with respect to interpretations. A group of self-identified heterosexual college students at a Midwestern university were shown a black-and-white photograph depicting an individual masturbating. The images shown to the students were selected with the expectation that there would be disagreement on the "artistic" and "pornographic" character of the image. Study participants were not told that the photographs had been displayed internationally in major museums and galleries—a fact indicating that some interpretive communities felt that they had high artistic merit. By studying the participants' interpretive work, we were able to see how participants referenced identities and competencies to produce their interpretations. We developed a two-dimensional matrix to describe how the intersection of relevant identities and competencies was related to the patterns of response.

METHODS

The Photographs and the Interview

The 307 heterosexually identified students who participated in this study were recruited from sociology courses containing 50 or more students. Eighty-seven percent of the students in the study group were white, 5 percent African American, 2 percent Latino/Hispanic American, and 6 percent were of other ethnicities. More than a quarter of the participants reported a social science major (27 percent); about the same number were undergraduate business majors (27 percent); and the remainder were drawn from the humanities (9 percent), sciences (7 percent), and applied programs (20 percent). The remaining 10 percent were undecided or had individualized majors. Women sociology majors from twenty to twenty-one years old with strong academic records conducted interviews with the study participants.¹ The interviewers were carefully trained and monitored throughout the data collection process. As part of the training, interviewers conducted pretest interviews and were interviewed themselves (which also resulted in improvement of the wording of the interview questions). All interviews were carefully reviewed and problems were discussed with the interviewers.

The study participants were shown one of two black-and-white photographs. One image was of a Caucasian man masturbating, and the other image was of a Caucasian woman masturbating. We used separate images for the women and the men because we were also gathering data on the erotic response of the participants to the image. The photograph of the woman was presented to the men and the photograph of the man was presented to the women.² Thus, the logic of the analysis in this article is one of gender replication rather than gender comparison—we examine whether a relationship between identities, competence, and interpretation appears for both genders.

The photograph of the woman was shown to heterosexual men. This photograph, by the French photographer Jeanloup Sieff, showed a nude woman lying on a Victorian couch with an oriental rug in front of it and a large Victorian painting of a clothed woman and child behind it (Sieff 1992). The model's back is facing the camera. There is no view of her face or breasts. Her buttocks are in full view. One leg is spread upward, parallel to her other leg, which is bent at an angle on the couch. Her fingers are between her legs touching her vulva.

The photograph of the man was shown to heterosexual women. This photograph, by the American photographer Nan Goldin, presented a tightly cropped image (cutting off the very top of the model's head and ending just below his forefinger) of a seated man holding his erect penis (Goldin 1986; Goldin, Armstrong, and Holzwarth 1996). No physical objects appear in the picture. The man's head is tilted somewhat down and to the side. Small lengths of wall appear on the sides of the photograph and the background is dark. Nearly all study participants described both photographs as images of masturbation, suggesting that the sexual content of the images was unambiguous.

The interviews included open-ended and closed-ended questions and lasted thirty to fifty minutes, with the typical interview taking about thirty five minutes. Participants were first asked what they perceived in the photograph. They were then asked to "rate on the scale below the degree you think the picture being shown to you is pornography." They were shown a written scale ranging from 0 to 10. The 0 was designated "not at all"; 1, 2, and 3 as "a little"; 4, 5, and 6 as "more than a little"; 7, 8, and 9 as "quite a bit"; and 10 as "extremely." They were asked to explain why they rated the picture as they did, and if they thought most of their friends would rate the photograph in a similar way. If they responded "no," they were asked how their friends would rate it differently, and why. They were then asked the degree to which they thought the photograph should be considered art (with the same written scale presented to them), why they rated it as they did, and whether their friends would rate it the same way. In this way, a study participant would be able to see the image as both "art" and "pornography" and rate it separately on both of these dimensions. Using the question on how they thought their friends would view it, they were able to discuss the similarities and differences in identities and competencies of their friends as a factor in explaining the interpretation they had given. We considered this a good indirect approach to eliciting information about identities and competencies.

Following the elicitation of the ratings, participants were asked to "discuss how any persons or experiences in your life have affected the way in which you have considered the photograph." Interviewers were instructed to probe separately on influences on the study participant's assessment of the degree of pornography and art, and for specifics on both the source of the influence and how this person or experience influenced them. Again, we considered this a useful approach to obtaining self-reports indicating identities and competencies. Background information was also collected. In addition to gender, race, religiosity, year in school, college major, parental education, political affiliation, and sexual orientation, participants were asked whether they identified themselves as conventional or unconventional.

Qualitative Analysis

We employed both qualitative and quantitative data analysis strategies. To conduct the qualitative analysis we loaded the full text of the open-ended responses to all questions into Atlas.ti (a qualitative data analysis program). First, we read the full text of the interviews. We coded inductively, creating categories for all interesting themes and ideas encountered as we read and reread the transcripts (Glaser and Strauss 1967). We noted that participants consistently referred both to identities and to prior training or experiences (or a lack thereof) with pornography, art, and photography in order to justify their evaluations of the photograph. They compared the images with pornography and art viewed previously, and with abstract definitions of pornography and art. In order to construct variables to include in the quantitative analysis and to classify participants according to what we sensed was an emerging typology, we moved to a more deductive stage of coding. We constructed variables measuring cultural competency, which were included in quantitative analysis, by scouring the open-ended material for references to prior training/experiences (or the lack thereof) with photography, art, and pornography. Participants frequently described the relationship between prior experiences and the development of cultural competencies. For example, they explained that photography classes trained them to look for particular features in a photograph, or that looking at pornography led them to see the photograph as unlike those images. We also coded the transcripts for all "identity language" (i.e., self-description). These identity claims occurred both as adjectives and nouns. For example, one participant described herself as "a very conservative woman," while another identified as a "Christian." About one-third of the participants spontaneously used some language of self-description. The ways these independent variable dimensions clumped together led us to sort the participants into groups and look for similarities and differences in their responses to the image.

Quantitative Analysis

Independent Variable I: Identity

In the closed-ended answers, identity was measured by what we considered to be indicators of conservative versus liberal identities: the first had to do with a religious identity. Religiosity has been found to be an important predictor of evaluations of sexually explicit material (Lottes, Weinberg, and Weller 1993; Sherkat and Ellison 1997). This variable was measured by the question: "How religious (in a traditional sense) are you?" with four possible response categories (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = more than a little, and 4 = very). We added the parenthetical "in a traditional sense" because prior research by one of the authors revealed that without this qualification persons would sometimes relate to the word "religious" in a very nontraditional sense—namely, saying they were religious because they were "humanists" or interested in the well-being of the world, even though they said they did not believe in God or participate in organized religion. We found our question wording lessened the ambiguity of the word "religious." In response to our question, we obtained a diversity of responses: 18 percent said they were not

at all religious, 40 percent a little religious, 31 percent more than a little religious, and 11 percent very religious.

A second indicator of what we thought would provide an indicator of conservative versus liberal identities was responses to a question asking: "Do you see yourself as *generally* being a conventional or unconventional person?" We used this as a closed-ended independent variable because in exploratory open-ended research for this project we found that people often invoked an identity as "unconventional" in explaining their openness to seeing sexually explicit images as "art." Thus, we felt that identifying as unconventional would relate to a willingness to consider the photograph as less pornographic and more artistic. Students' ratings of themselves as "generally" unconventional were coded as 0 and as conventional were coded as 1. We obtained adequate variation with respect to this identity also, with 24 percent of the women and 29 percent of the men considering themselves to be unconventional. As we will discuss, this indicator proved to be powerfully associated with assessment of the photograph.

Political identity is often associated with positions on "moral issues" such as pornography (Hargrove and Stempel 2005). In our interview, data on political identity was obtained with the question, "Do you see yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or in some other way?" When the data were analyzed, the effects of political identity were minimal and swamped by the effects of religious and conventional/unconventional identities. Political identity was, therefore, dropped from the analysis and is not included as one of our identity measures.

Independent Variable II: Cultural Competency

Each interview was coded for the presence or absence of mentions of training in and experiences with photography, art, and pornography, producing three dummy variables. Table 1 shows that 21 percent of the women reported photographic

TABLE 1
Means of Variables, by Gender and Photograph

	Range	Women Viewing Photograph of Man (<i>n</i> = 172) \bar{X}	Men Viewing Photograph of Woman (<i>n</i> = 135) \bar{X}
Pornography score	(0–10)	5.11	4.16
Art score	(0–10)	4.07	5.33
Religious identity	(1–4)	2.50	2.26
Conventional identity	(0/1)	.76	.71
Photographic experience	(0/1)	.21	.16
Artistic experience	(0/1)	.11	.05
Pornographic exposure	(0/1)	.48	.69
Year in college	(1–4)	2.62	2.43
Age (in years)	(18–45)	20.17	20.34
Parents' education	(1–3)	2.11	2.16

training as compared with 16 percent of the men; 11 percent of the women reported artistic training as compared with 5 percent of the men; and 48 percent reported exposure to pornography as compared with 69 percent of the men.

Control Variables

Control variables included gender, year in college, age, and parents' education. A dummy variable was used for gender (0 = man, 1 = woman). Year in college was coded from 1 through 4 (1 = freshman, 2 = sophomore, 3 = junior, 4 = senior). The distribution by study participants' gender and year in college was 14 percent freshmen women, 14 percent freshmen men, 11 percent sophomore women, 8 percent sophomore men, 13 percent junior women, 12 percent junior men, 18 percent senior women, and 10 percent senior men (providing a total of 28 percent freshmen, 19 percent sophomores, 25 percent juniors, 28 percent seniors). Age was coded by chronological age; the age distribution ranged from 18 to 45 with a mean age of 20.2 years. Finally, parents' education was coded from 1 through 3 (1 = neither parent graduated from college, 2 = at least one parent graduated from college, 3 = one or both parents received a graduate degree). Twenty-six percent reported that neither parent graduated from college, 33 percent reported a least one parent graduated from college, and 41 percent reported that one or both parents received a graduate degree.

Dependent Variables: Pornographic and Artistic Evaluations

The numerical ratings assigned by the study participants to their interpretation of the image shown to them were designated as the Art Score and the Pornography Score. Table 1 provides means for art and pornography scores (and for all variables included in the regression analysis).

Analysis

Quantitative analysis involved ordinary least-squares regression models to examine relationships between art and pornography scores and the other variables. The degree to which participants identified as religious and conventional served to operationalize identity, while experience with photography, art, and pornography operationalized cultural competency. The control variables entered were gender, age, year in college, and parents' education. Analysis of interaction effects enabled us to test whether variables influenced men and women in similar ways. Despite the relative social homogeneity of the study group, the data provided sufficient diversity with respect to the variables of interest to explore how indicators of identities and competencies were related to interpretation.

RESULTS

Participant ratings of the photograph ranged from "extremely" to "not at all" pornographic and from "extremely" to "not at all" artistic. In general, art ratings were inversely related to pornography ratings ($b = -.45$). While men and women

differed in the *amount* of art and pornography they saw in the images they viewed, both tended to see the degree of pornography as lessening the artistic value of the photograph, and vice versa. This oppositional relationship between the pornography and art ratings was expressed in the qualitative findings by such comments as “This is too pornographic to be considered art” and “Because it is not pornography it can be considered art.” In the sections to follow we demonstrate that identities and competencies together account for variation in qualitative and quantitative assessments of the image.

How Pornographic Is the Image?

Participants’ identities and competencies were related to their assessments of the degree of pornography in the image through influencing constructions of pornography. Participants varied with respect to how sexual they thought images had to be in order to be considered pornography—what we call their *pornography threshold*. The students who exhibited the lowest pornography threshold said that nudity would qualify a photographic image as pornography (although some pointed out that they would exempt pictures of the human form that might appear in medical textbooks). Others said that the portrayal of the naked body is not in and of itself pornographic, but if an image is of an aroused individual, it is pornographic. Some saw depictions of masturbation as defining the threshold for pornography. Others argued that there had to be at least two people in the image to qualify it as pornographic. Many people explained that, in their view, what defined pornography was a focus on genitalia, or the “explicitness” of the image. Others saw an impersonal or nonrelational aspect to the sex portrayed as defining it as pornography. Some thought it would have to include “extreme behavior” such as anal penetration, bestiality, or pedophilia. A few asserted that nothing is pornographic.

People with lower thresholds assigned higher pornography ratings, while people with higher thresholds assigned lower pornography ratings. For example, a man who assigned the photograph a 7 on pornography explained that, to him, “anything naked is pornography,” while a woman who assigned the photograph a 0 on pornography explained that she thought of pornography as involving “little kids, not adults.”

The Role of Identity

Participants saw definitions of pornography as a direct result of “conservative” or “open” approaches to sex, and located themselves in reference to a continuum of sexual values running from conservative to open. Participants used the terms “traditional,” “religious,” and “closed-minded” interchangeably with “conservative” and used “liberal” and “open-minded” interchangeably with “open.” Not one person identified as both religious and open-minded about sexuality. One man explained, in reference to himself and his family, “We are all very conservative and Christian [and don’t appreciate pornography].” Similarly, a woman told us: “I’m Catholic, which means we’re against pornography.” Self-descriptions such as “conservative” and “liberal” reflect identification with groups. While religious

affiliation was the most frequent affiliation generating a conservative interpretation of the image, some individuals referred to geographic or cultural identity, like the woman who said, "I am from a very extremely conservative culture. I come from the Middle East." Disaffiliation from religion was often mentioned as an explanation for an "open" view of sex, but people also mentioned the broadening influence of sexual or college experiences. Both sexually conservative and sexually open students acknowledged that those with different identities might view the photograph differently.

Participants thought about approaches to sexuality simply as being either liberal (open-minded about sexuality) or conservative (closed-minded about sexuality) rather than in more multifaceted or complex ways. We saw almost no evidence of other perspectives (such as feminism) that might challenge this dichotomous system. An absence of concern about whether the images were offensive to women is consistent with the near absence of any discussion of feminism among undergraduate students on this campus.

Those who voiced a "conservative" worldview presented a particular view of sexuality. Sexuality was seen as something *private, sacred, shameful, and powerful*. For example, as one woman explained:

I have grown up religious and for a long time I have been taught that sex is bad. I have learned that it is not bad but for that same reason I still believe it is precious whether it is masturbation or sex. It is not something you portray as everyday.

Similarly, a Christian man explained how he saw his religious and conservative identity as influencing his interpretation of the photograph:

I was raised in a real Christian, strict Lutheran family in the Midwest. My father and brother are Lutheran high school teachers. I went to religious school from nursery school until my second year of college. I consider myself a pretty good Christian person. . . . I think God would find this pornographic. [My friends] would probably rate it higher [on art] because most of them are more liberal. I'm more conservative.

In this passage, the individual asserted his identity as "a pretty good Christian person," explained the source of his identity, made a connection between his identity and his view of the photograph as pornographic, and indicated that he was aware that others who were "more liberal" would evaluate the photograph differently.

An "open" approach, on the other hand, was associated with seeing sexuality differently. In this case, sexuality was viewed as something *normal, natural, everyday, and not to be concealed*. A woman described her "open" background in these terms:

My background, my family, is open. I can talk to my mom about sex. I can say penis or naked in my home. [My friends] would rate it more pornographic because I am more open minded.

This woman asserts her identity as an open-minded person, discusses its origins, makes a connection between her identity and her view of the image, and demonstrates her awareness that others would interpret the photograph differently.

TABLE 2
Unstandardized OLS Coefficients for the Regression
of Pornography and Art Scores

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Pornography Score</i>	<i>Art Score</i>
Religious identity	.48** (.16)	-.20 (.17)
Conventional identity	1.43*** (.33)	-.87* (.33)
Photographic experience	-.94** (.35)	.84* (.36)
Artistic experience	.61 (.51)	.03 (.52)
Pornographic exposure	-.08 (.28)	.31 (.29)
Year in college	-.19 (.13)	.38** (.14)
Age	-.13* (.06)	-.07 (.06)
Parents' education	-.19 (.17)	.13 (.17)
Gender (women = 1)	.76** -(.28)	-1.23*** (.29)
Intercept	5.70	6.22
R^2	.22	.15

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. $N = 307$.

We examined the relationship between identity and pornographic assessment in quantitative analysis through examining the effects of religious and conventional identities on the pornography score (see Table 2). Those who described themselves in the open-ended comments as "conservative" or "traditional" categorized themselves as conventional and "more than a little" or "very" religious in our closed-response questions. Controlling for gender, measures of competence, age, year in college, and parents' education, the OLS regression shows that those who identified themselves as more religious and as conventional viewed the image as more pornographic. Supplementary analysis testing for interaction effects confirmed that there is not a significant gender difference in the effects of religiosity and conventionality on pornographic rating.

The Role of Competencies

When explaining their pornography scores, about half of the participants referred to the influence of prior exposure to sexually explicit images. Three-quarters of the participants who compared the image with pornography they had seen said that, in comparison with other sexually explicit images, the photograph was "mild," "on the lighter side," or "watered down." These respondents tended to identify themselves

as liberal. The following are very typical responses (represented in more than one hundred interviews):

A woman: I don't think it's extremely pornographic. Pornography today can be really extreme like two women together. This is just a man by himself. . . . It's not explicit. You can barely see his private parts. If you look at magazines like *Hustler*, it can make you sick to your stomach.

A man: I've seen pornography before—magazines and videos. In that they show much more than this. They're in color and show off the woman's private parts.

Participants often reflected upon whether they thought the picture fit into the pornographic publications or Internet sites known to them. For example, one liberal man explained: "I've seen pornographic magazines and books with friends and this picture doesn't fit with the rest of those."

However, a quarter of those who referred to pornography they had seen thought the photograph was similar to (or "worse" than) images in pornographic magazines. These tended to be the people with conservative identities. For example, one man said, "Personally I've seen pornographic pictures in magazines and on the Internet with friends, but not to this extent and not with what she is doing. In comparison, this picture is more pornographic." A woman explained that "they have stuff like this in *Playgirl* and they classify that as pornography."

Those who thought the image was similar to pornography they had seen usually referred to milder genres of pornography than those who thought the image was not at all similar to what they understood to be pornography. For example, one man explained that "this is like a picture in *Playboy*. The other two [Internet and *Penthouse*] are more hard-core. This picture just fits in the middle category because it's not as hard-core as *Penthouse* or the Internet." In contrast, another man referred to a more-explicit genre of sexual imagery when he explained, "I don't consider nudity pornography. Only if there are explicit acts of fornication. Chicks getting fucked in the ass. Swallowing cum. That is porn."

While some may see the ability to interpret pornography as "natural," it is a genre with its own conventions that people learn to recognize and interpret. Thus, knowledge of pornography may be viewed as a cultural competency that participants drew upon as they endeavored to classify the image. Those who reported having viewed a lot of sexual images presented a more discriminating and nuanced discussion of where the images fit along a spectrum of pornography.

This cultural competency was not randomly distributed among the participants. Those who reported a religious identity were less likely to report being influenced by exposure to pornography. One woman explained, "I was brought up in a really conservative household. I have never seen a picture like this before." Likewise, a man who describes his upbringing as "religious" explained, "My friends were raised in the same environment so we never had the opportunity to see this." And, because of their conservative views, they indicated that they continued to

avoid such experiences. A number of students commented that, as one woman put it, “normally I would not sit here and look at [a picture like this].”

Also, older individuals provided significantly lower pornography ratings. Given the ages of the study participants, we would expect age to be correlated with more exposure to pornography; we thus attribute this relationship to increased exposure and therefore competency in the classification of sexual images.

How Artistic Is the Image?

The Role of Identity

Study participants were aware that definitions of art differ, just as they were aware that definitions of pornography differ. However, while they saw definitions of pornography as closely linked to whether one was “conservative” or “open” about sex, they were less likely to volunteer a relationship between a particular definition of art and being a particular kind of person. Taking a position on the meaning of the sexual content of the image was more important to the participants than taking a position on its artistic value. Nonetheless, one’s identity as generally conventional or unconventional was significantly related in the OLS regression to artistic evaluation (see Table 2). Those who identified as unconventional were more likely than those who did not to see artistic merit in the image. Supplementary analysis testing for interaction effects confirmed that conventionality is linked to artistic evaluation for men and women. However, religious identity was negatively associated with artistic evaluation for men, but not for women.

The Role of Competencies

Self-reported familiarity with photography was also related to assessment of the image—through the way that photographic training, and other ways of learning artistic conventions, influenced the standards that people used to evaluate whether the image was artistic. While almost everyone agreed that sexual content was relevant for assessing whether the image was pornographic, people disagreed about criteria for assessing art. Disagreement centered on the relative importance of *form* versus *content*.

Participants tended to construct art either in terms of its *attractiveness* or in terms of the *skill* needed to produce it. The first emphasis—the “art is beauty” approach—eliminated from consideration objects that might be considered unpleasant, offensive, or distasteful. For example, one study participant explained that she did not find the photograph “pretty at all. It has no artistic quality at all. Maybe if he were nice looking it would be different.” Her use of the “art is beauty” standard is implicit here, as it is in many of the participant responses. This view of art is often used to defend against “immorality” in art. In the late nineteenth century, Anthony Comstock justified his campaigns against nude photographs on the grounds that, “the closer art keeps to pure morality the higher its grade. Artistic beauty and immorality are divergent lines” (Beisel 1993:154). Art, in this view, should be pretty, pleasant, and suitable for public display to all audiences, particularly

(but not exclusively) on the walls of museums and in the pages of art books. Art should provoke thought, not a prurient gaze. This approach also considered representations of refined, elegant, or “classy” objects as more artistic than representations of crass, vulgar, tacky, or low-class objects.

The other approach—the “art is skill” approach—defined objects as art according to the degree to which they are difficult to create. This approach focused on the imagination, talent, or training involved in achieving particular effects. For example, one participant explained that, in his view, pornography focuses “on the genitals and it’s crudely done.” In contrast, the viewer thought that this picture was “carefully composed. There seems to be a certain craftsmanship in this picture. This picture could be hung on a museum wall.” People assessing art from this perspective look to see if a particular piece adheres to shared formal conventions, particularly those that are difficult to achieve. Individuals focused on skill were more aware than the others that institutionalized art worlds exist and that these art worlds often value originality. Thus, in this view, good art may be, and perhaps even should be, challenging, even offensive. From within this perspective, if an object is experienced as “pleasant” or “comfortable” by all audiences, this is probably an indication that it is not good art.

The “art is beauty” approach focuses attention on the content or subject matter, while the “art is skill” approach focuses attention on form or technique. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu refers to the learned ability to move beyond content, what he described as the “literal” or “sensible” features of the work, as characteristic of an aesthetic disposition (1984:2). Learning to appreciate form as well as content in visual images enables viewers to approach cultural objects with a morally detached gaze. Aesthetic judgments are made in reference to the formal qualities of the object, not in reference to the “morality” or “agreeableness” of the content (Bourdieu 1984:5).

Thus, “beauty” and “skill” standards vary with respect to how relevant sexual content is to the designation of an object as art. In the “art is beauty” view, the content is of central concern. The “art is beauty” standard opposes art and pornography based on the moral value or attractiveness of the image. Depending on one’s view of sexuality, sexual images either are or are not seen as possibly morally uplifting. In the “art is skill” view, the concern is not with the literal content but with evidence of technical mastery and creativity. In the latter perspective, heavy sexual content would not disqualify an object from being art.

Participants who subscribed to the “art is skill” approach often contrasted art and pornography, but on the basis of technique and creativity instead of content. Pornography is presumed to be easy to make, requiring little time, energy, thought, or skill. It is presumed to be repetitive, hackneyed, and stereotypical. And it is assumed to draw on particular widely shared conventions for the presentation of the body and the evocation of a lustful gaze. It is often the case that graphic content coincides with poor technical quality, leading people with differing artistic standards to arrive at the same classification for different reasons.

The standards participants espoused shaped their willingness and ability to assess the *form* of the image and, in general, the importance assigned to the sexual

nature of the image. Those with personal experience *doing* photography or taking courses in art exhibited the most facility with photographic conventions. For example, one man who described himself as “pretty conservative” elaborated on the artistic properties of the image at some length. He explained that because of an art class in high school, he knew

what to look for (contour, light). I can use those basic elements to determine if something has more artistic quality than the next thing. It helped me raise my rating because I did recognize those basic elements of art. I probably would have given an average score if I didn't know what to look for.

His elaborate discussion of the photograph was typical of these more artistically knowledgeable participants:

It does focus on the background. The angle of the shot and where the lady is in relation to the picture make it more artful. Other elements like the chair and rug make it more artful. . . . Art is a means of expression and can be different things to different people. It's based highly on the perception of the artist and the viewers. I think the artist is trying to set a scene with the position of her body on the couch and the fact you can't see her face. There are a lot of shadows and light. You can tell he spent time creating this.

More so than general artistic training, photographic training was strongly associated with the criteria used to evaluate the photograph. Those with photographic experience were likely to look at issues of form, skill, training, thought, and difficulty. Those who did not report photographic training or indicated that they did not know much about photography were more likely to assess the image according to its beauty and good taste. Thus, in the OLS regression, reports of photographic experience are associated with higher art scores and lower pornography scores (see Table 2). Reports of training in art were rare (only 8 percent) and were not significantly associated in the OLS regression with higher art or lower pornography scores. In addition, the further along participants were in college, the more likely they were to interpret the image as having higher artistic value. Many study participants attributed their aesthetic skill to college classes or social relationships formed in college, suggesting that college experiences often offer opportunities to obtain or refine aesthetic skills. Thus, as one woman explained:

[An] art history class in college exposed me to a lot of different kinds of art that I wouldn't have considered art before. My art history professor exposed me to nude pictures and controversial pictures. These are ways people express themselves. They [the pictures] don't have to be beautiful to be considered art.

And, as one man said:

Teachers and friends have taught me to be open-minded and look for a deeper meaning in photography and art. This made me see more than the woman masturbating.

The qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that college can shape interpretation through providing opportunities to acquire interpretive skills.

The negative relationship between photographic experience and the pornography rating (see Table 2) is consistent with our general point that art and pornography ratings tend to be inversely related. More specifically, this finding suggests that photographic experience can profoundly shape the way all photographic images—including ones with sexual content—are viewed. Not all variables that were significantly related to the pornography score were significantly associated with the art score (unconventional identity and photographic experience were the only ones). Further, while the evaluation of art and pornography were related, the correlation between the pornographic and artistic evaluation of the image ($b = -.45$) is far from perfect (1.00). Artistic and pornographic evaluations were, for many of our participants, distinct.

The Matrix: Pornography Thresholds and Constructions of Art

We now examine the intersection between artistic evaluations and the definition of pornography. We detail the characteristic responses produced by Nonartistic Conservatives (low self-reported artistic knowledge, low pornography threshold), Nonartistic Liberals (low self-reported artistic knowledge, high pornography threshold), Artistic Liberals (high self-reported artistic knowledge, high pornography threshold), and Artistic Conservatives (high self-reported artistic knowledge, low pornography threshold).³

Nonartistic Conservatives

The largest group of the study participants (24 percent) had both limited reported knowledge of artistic or photographic conventions and low pornography thresholds. These individuals provided the most predictable of ratings—they almost always assigned the images high pornography ratings and low art ratings. They thought that art should always be beautiful and pleasant, and saw this photograph as dirty, nasty, and vulgar, and, thus, as not art. For example, an Evangelical woman who described herself as “more than a little religious,” Republican, and conventional assigned the image a 10 on pornography and a 0 on art:

I think that showing someone nude and showing something sexual is pornography. He is masturbating in this picture so I rate it a 10. It's not art at all; it's pornography. I don't think that art and pornography are the same things. When I think of art, I think of paintings; I don't really associate art with photographs. . . . I don't agree with the photograph. I don't think it is a good photograph. People shouldn't take photographs of what people do privately and publicly display them.

That she defined all sexual images, even nudes, as pornography illustrates her low pornography threshold. She focused exclusively on the content of the photograph in her assessment—it is not a good photograph because of the inappropriate subject matter. She did not mention anything about the technical features of the photograph. Like the others in this group, she focused almost exclusively on the content of the image and not at all on its form.

Nonartistic Liberals

Another group (19 percent) of the study participants can be considered non-artistic liberals. Like the nonartistic conservatives, this group neither claimed nor demonstrated artistic or photographic knowledge, and adhered to an “art is beautiful” view. Where they break ranks with the previous group is in their response to the content of the image. They had positive or neutral reactions to the content of the photograph. For example, a woman who described herself as “a little religious” and unconventional assigned the image a 0 on pornography and a 9 on art:

I don't see anything wrong with the human body. America seems to think this should be private and hidden. We come into the world naked. I don't think it is a bad thing. . . . I think the human body is a work of art.

She arrived at her high art rating differently than those classified as artistic. This woman attended to the literal content of the image—because she found the human body beautiful and natural, she liked the photograph. People in this group typically saw this photograph as appropriate for public exhibition. The comments of these nonartistic liberals were generally devoid of references to lighting, form, or technique. Like others in this group, she confessed that she “really [hadn't] had any experiences” with photography. She just thought the picture was pleasing.

Some of the nonartistic liberals were just bored by the photograph—rating it low on both pornography and art. For example, a woman who described herself as agnostic assigned the image a 1 on pornography and a 0 on art:

It's not pornographic. I would not be offended if I had children and they saw it. It's not that graphic. Masturbating is something that men do. You can't even tell if he is masturbating; maybe he has an itch. It is not art; it's just life.

This is a logical way for those who did not find the subject matter shocking and who lacked the training to assess the craftsmanship of the photograph to respond. Nonartistic liberals assessed the artistic character of the image according to similar artistic standards as the nonartistic conservatives, but they had a different reaction to the sexual nature of the image.

Artistic Liberals

In contrast to the nonartistic liberals, artistic liberals had high pornography thresholds and reported more photographic training. This group, comprising 20 percent of the participants, espoused the view that art should demonstrate skill, originality, and could even be challenging or offensive. The combination of minimizing content and a high threshold for characterizing a sexual image as pornographic doubly reduced the sexual salience of the image (just as the combination of the content-focused criteria and the low pornography threshold of the nonartistic conservative group worked to doubly increase the sexual

saliency of the images). A man assigned the image a 0 on pornography and an 8 on art explained:

The print quality is really good. . . . It's not an average pornography picture in color. This picture makes you use your imagination. The feeling you get from this picture. It's not straightforward pornography—crotch shots. This is more enticing. She's got her back turned, which makes it inviting. It makes you wonder what's on the other side. The people's faces on the painting look like they enjoy it. . . . In art circles you have to talk a lot more about your pieces and have to support why you took a shot. Being around other photographers and being a photographer, I look at this picture and [can] tell how much work the photographer took to make this picture. I can respect how much time it takes to make a print like this.

For this viewer, consideration of the technical challenges involved in producing the image took precedence over the subject matter of the image. When assessing whether the image was artistic, the viewer mused about *how* the image was shot, not about whether it was good or bad to take a picture of a woman masturbating. Most artistic liberals weighed both the technical features of the photograph and the content (which, in their view, was not very sexual or offensive). A more elaborate discussion of formal properties of the image such as lighting, contrast, grain, tonality, and cropping characterized the responses of the artistic liberals. While this group considered more than content as they assessed the image, a few people went so far as to assert that content was completely irrelevant to their assessment of the degree of art in the rating.

In general, high pornography thresholds and indications of photographic training tended to lead people to assign lower pornography scores and higher art scores. This group shared greater fluency with artistic conventions and comfort with the content of the image.

Artistic Conservatives

Not all of those with photographic training had high pornography thresholds. Artistic conservatives (13 percent) exhibited knowledge of photography and low pornography thresholds. Application of aesthetic criteria suggested that the image might have some artistic properties, but the sexual content, as interpreted through a low pornography threshold, could nullify them. These respondents had to weigh the relative importance of aesthetic and sexual standards, or assert that an image could be both art and pornography. This group produced some of the longest and most elaborate responses. For example, a very religious Catholic woman explained why she gave the photograph a 5 on pornography:

Because I don't think that it is tastefully done. I don't think that sexuality should be captured in this way. It is almost a dirty way. The black and white makes it dark, dirty looking. . . . Basically, I don't understand why this picture would be taken. I don't see a purpose for a picture this private. Not that masturbation shouldn't be talked about, but I don't think that it is something that should be shown or photographed.

She attributed her lack of comfort with the photograph to her religious identity and background. She explained that "my family members are very strict Catholics.

I don't think that the Roman Catholic Church would approve of something like this. I would consider myself sexually conservative. That is why I think I am uncomfortable with this photograph." But in spite of rather serious moral qualms about the image, she assigned it a 10 on art. She did so because

it is someone's work, someone's expression. It has all of the elements. Someone obviously worked to get this atmosphere—the background, the lighting, the shadows, and the expression on his face. Someone obviously did all of this for a purpose to create an effect. It is really effective in creating a mood. It makes the viewer have a first "impression." It makes them feel a certain way.

This reaction is connected to her identity as "pretty cultured," her experiences viewing art, and her work as a photographer for her city newspaper. These experiences taught her that many people are more sexually liberal than she is, that there is a lot of "sexually controversial" art out there, and "that just because you don't like something doesn't mean that it isn't art." Her own efforts at photography were perhaps the most important influence on her assessment of the image as artistic. She explained: "I know how hard it is to create a mood when you are photographing something—to get other people to get the feeling that you did when you photographed something. I think that the photographer did a great job of creating the mood and I know how tough it is." Personal experience provided her with an understanding of the difficulty of achieving photographic effects, which led her to assign the image a high art rating in spite of her queasiness about the content of the image.

CONCLUSION

Indicators of identities and competencies were both related to how college students interpreted a sexually themed photograph. Assessment of the degree of pornography in the image rested on an individual's perception of how much sexual content qualified an image as pornographic, which in the regression analysis was associated with religious and conventional identities and with photographic experience. Assessment of artistic value also rested on identities and cultural competence. Unconventional identity and familiarity with photography were associated with how individuals constructed art (as primarily either in terms of beauty or as reflecting skill). The overall assessment of the image was a result of how individual constructions of pornography and art intersected. This combination produced four patterns of response, which enabled us to classify the participants as Nonartistic Conservatives, Nonartistic Liberals, Artistic Liberals, and Artistic Conservatives.

The research contributes to the sociology of culture by integrating identity theory into the study of cultural interpretation in order to account for *how* differences in interpretation can be produced. When people are capable of developing multiple interpretations of an object, the interpretation process is related to salient identities. Thus, interpretation appears to vary not only according to the competencies of viewers but also according to the identities viewers affirm.

Interpretation was, however, bounded by cultural competencies (cf. Swidler 1986, 2001). Identity theorists do not typically attend to cultural competencies; rather, they take them as a given. Because social location shapes the acquisition of cultural skills, this is often a valid assumption (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau 2003),

although not always, as sometimes people lack cultural competencies to express a salient identity.

A lack of cultural competencies may interfere with the ability to produce an interpretation consistent with a salient identity, and the presence of cultural competencies may influence interpretation even when not linked tightly with such an identity. People with similar identities may produce different interpretations if their cultural skills differ. Likewise, differences in identity create variation in interpretation among people with similar cultural skills. Interpretation is shaped both by what interpretations people *can* produce and by what interpretations they are *motivated* to produce.

This finding has concrete implications for those who, for political or educational reasons, have interests in influencing interpretation. One may influence interpretation by providing training and exposure to new genres and evaluative criteria without making an attempt at influencing identity. Similarly, one may influence interpretation by framing an interpretation as consistent with desired identities.

Second, the study enables us to see how people construct interpretations when distinct and potentially conflicting systems of evaluation are available. In this case, study participants were asked to evaluate an image according to both its sexual content and its artistic quality. Study participants developed interpretations as a consequence of how they were simultaneously situated in relation to these distinct evaluative criteria. They constructed responses in reference to both dimensions of evaluation. Only some study participants—the individuals espousing extreme variants of the nonartistic conservative and artistic liberal interpretations—presented interpretations consistent with the polarization seen in the Mapplethorpe debates. Certain of the others were so unimpressed with the image that they rated it low on both art and pornography. And some of the artistic conservatives found themselves intrigued with the formal properties of the image in spite of their moral objections to the content; these participants seemed to resist selecting between various identities and various competencies, and sought ways to, in effect, “split the difference.” Their use of culture pushed toward compromise rather than polarization. This finding suggests that—at least in this case—a simple aggregation of variation in interpretations does not always generate “culture war.” Active intervention on the part of politicized actors may be needed to produce cultural polarization.

Most everyday interpretation is done in contexts where multiple systems of evaluation are relevant. Future research needs to examine other cases of interpretation to further understand various styles of drawing on complex cultural repertoires. Under what circumstances do people operate as pragmatic multitaskers, integrating their various identities and competencies? Under what circumstances are people purists, drawing exclusively on one system of interpretation? The findings of such research may have broader implications for how people construct meaning as they move through everyday life.

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NOTES

1. The gender of the interviewers resulted from a combination of student interest in our internship positions and a selection of the most qualified students.
2. A handful of students reported lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities when questioned about sexual identity. Because the small numbers precluded a systematic comparison, we excluded these responses from the analysis. An examination of their interviews did not, however, show any apparent differences from those of the heterosexual students with respect to the arguments presented here.
3. While the groups above describe the full range of variation in the qualitative responses, some participants fell in between the categories in such a way as to make it difficult to categorize them into any of the four discrete types. Some were liberal but were not distinctly artistic or nonartistic (9 percent). Another group (14 percent) fell in the middle range in terms of conservatism/liberalism, artistic training/knowledge, and, usually, on art and porn ratings as well.

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