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Anti-pornography Narratives as Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: Religious Variation in the Effect that Pornography Viewing has on the Marital Happiness of Husbands

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Abstract Using a mixed methods design that compares quantitative content analysis of popular religious magazines with statistical analysis of national survey data, we show how the anti-pornography narratives that are predominant within different religious traditions can influence the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands within those traditions. More specifically, we propose a causal chain that explains how meso-level anti-pornography narratives can influence micro-level pornography-effect scripts and, in turn, influence the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands. We suggest, then, that this kind of causal chain can be thought of as a type of self-fulfilling prophecy. However, instead of operating exclusively at the micro-level as self-fulfilling prophecies have typically been theorized as doing, we apply the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy to the meso-level, so that rather than just considering how individual thinking can lead to individual outcomes, we also consider how collective thinking can lead to collective outcomes.

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Introduction

In this article, we show how the anti-pornography narratives that are predominant within different religious traditions can influence the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands within those traditions. More specifically, we propose a causal chain that explains how meso-level anti-pornography narratives can influence micro-level pornography-effect scripts and, in turn, influence the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands.

We begin by clarifying our terms through summarizing a multi-level model of morality that articulates the concepts of moral schemas, moral narratives, and moral scripts in terms of how these concepts correspond to macro, meso, and micro levels of society. Although most of our attention in this article is focused on the meso and micro levels, we think it is important to situate our theorizing in relationship to the broader literature on morality. After doing so, we use this model to develop our proposal, which we subsequently test through a mixed methods design: First, we measure the predominance of the anti-pornography narratives of different religious traditions using quantitative content analysis of popular religious magazines, which, for the purposes of contextualization, we also compare to popular secular magazines. Second, we measure the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands within these traditions using statistical analysis of the nationally-representative General Social Survey (GSS) (2014).

As we detail later, we argue that the correspondence that we find between these two sets of measurements not only supports our particular proposal but also supports our more general claim that meso-level moral narratives can influence micro-level moral scripts and, in turn, influence micro-level outcomes. We suggest, then, that this kind of causal chain can be thought of as a type of self-fulfilling prophecy. However, instead of operating exclusively at the micro-level as self-fulfilling prophecies have typically been theorized as doing, we apply the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy to the meso-level, so that rather than just considering how individual thinking can lead to individual outcomes, we also consider how collective thinking can lead to collective outcomes.

As we elaborate on in our conclusions, our theorizing and findings are important for five reasons. First, our research addresses a long-standing sociological interest in the connection between macro-level norms and values, and micro-level behaviors and outcomes (Durkheim 1915; Goffman 1959; Parsons 1951; Weber 1930). Second, instead though of focusing on how morality can influence individual behaviors, our research focuses on how morality can influence individual outcomes, independently of those behaviors. Third, our research demonstrates how Merton's (1948) notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy can be simultaneously applied to both the micro and the meso levels. Fourth, our research directly speaks to the sociology

of religion and to the ways that religious elites can influence both individual and collective outcomes. Finally, fifth, our research offer important contexts and caveats to the social-psychological framing of how pornography viewing can affect marital happiness.

Moral Schemas, Moral Narratives, and Moral Scripts

While there are many ways to think about the operations of morality (Haidt 2001, 2008; Powell 2010; Stets and Carter 2012), and different academic disciplines have often studied morality using different approaches and definitions (Abend 2008), our theorizing coincides with what Hitlin and Vaisey have called "The new sociology of morality" (2013:53). One of the key aspects of this new sociology of morality is that it focuses less on "morality as a property of entire societies" (i.e., at the macro level) and more on morality as a property of "cross-cutting and competing" groups (i.e., at the meso level). Consistent with this, the new sociology of morality gives less attention to moral "norms and values" and, along with other interests, gives more attention to the kinds of moral "narratives" that we investigate in this article (2013:54). Before we begin this investigation, though, we think is it helpful to clarify how morality can be thought of as operating at different levels of society. Accordingly, we now summarize a multi-level model of morality that articulates the concepts of moral schemas, moral narratives, and moral scripts in terms of how these concepts correspond to macro, meso, and micro levels of society.

Moral Schemas

Scholars have long described the macro-level operations of morality using a variety of concepts including moral cultures (e.g., Kavolis 1988), moral cosmologies (e.g., Starks and Robinson 2007), and moral worldviews (e.g., Beyerlein and Vaisey 2013). Yet, the most frequently used concept has clearly been that of moral schemas (e.g., Firat and McPherson 2010). Drawing on research into cultural schemas (e.g., Sewell 1992; Swidler 2001), moral schemas can be thought of as "nonlinguistic cognitive constructs" that provide overarching orientations and heuristics of moral thought (Vaisey 2009:1686; See Ignatow 2009; Schafer 2014). Moral schemas are "not necessarily tied to any one religious tradition or institution" (Farrell 2011:402) but instead "can be actualized in a potentially broad and unpredetermined range of situations" (Sewell 1992:8). Sociologists have used moral schemas to investigate topics such as family dynamics (Blair-Loy 2001), sexual infidelity (Schafer 2014), and drug use (Hoffmann 2014).

Moral Narratives

While moral schemas describe the macro-level operations of morality, we use the concept of moral narratives to describe the meso-level operations of morality. Although there has been considerably less scholarship on moral narratives, we

combine insights from the work of sociologists (e.g., Smith 2003; Thomas and Whitehead 2015), psychologists (e.g., Haidt et al. 2009; McAdams et al. 2008), and educators (e.g., Narvaez 1998; Tappan and Brown 1989) to suggest that moral narratives can be thought of as collectively-developed stories that groups of persons tell in order to frame the morality of particular behaviors. Unlike moral schemas, then, which are "often evoked intuitively and unconsciously" (Schafer 2014:122), moral narratives are developed and used by specific societal groups—often but not always religious—with the specific intent of not just framing but also regulating particular behaviors. Along these lines, sociologists Thomas (2013, 2016), Thomas and Olson (2012a), and Thomas and Whitehead (2015) have used moral narratives to investigate how American evangelicals have attempted to frame and regulate behaviors related both to pornography and to homosexuality.

Moral Scripts

In comparison, then, to moral schemas and moral narratives, the concept of moral scripts is the most ambiguously defined. While sometimes scholars have used the language of moral scripts in a macro-level manner that appears interchangeable with that of moral schemas (e.g., Vaisey 2009), other times scholars have used the language of moral scripts in a more micro level sense (e.g., Parmar 2014). Consistent with the latter, we use the concept of moral scripts to describe how meso-level moral narratives can become instantiated and personalized at the micro level (see Gioia 1992; Gioia and Poole 1984). One way to think about this is that while moral narratives can be thought of as collectively-developed stories that groups of persons tell in order to frame the morality of particular behaviors, moral scripts take this a step further and can be thought of as individually-developed stories that individuals tell themselves about what will happen to them if they engage in these behaviors. Corresponding to this, scholars have used moral scripts to help investigate topics such as sales work (Darr and Pinch 2013), marital conflict (Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012), and adolescent violence (Schiavone 2009).

Anti-pornography Narratives as Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Using this multi-level model of morality, we show how the anti-pornography narratives that are predominant within different religious traditions can influence the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands within those traditions. As introduced earlier, we propose a causal chain that explains how meso-level anti-pornography narratives can influence micro-level pornography-effect scripts and, in turn, influence the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands.

We develop this proposal in four steps. First, we draw on Thomas' (2013) study of "Evangelicals' anti-pornography narratives" in order to summarize three distinct moral narratives that American evangelicals have regularly used to frame pornography viewing as morally problematic. Second, we focus our attention on a particular one of these narratives that we suggest is especially likely to influence

the pornography-effect scripts of husbands who are exposed to this narrative. Third, we integrate scholarship on sexual script theory and self-fulfilling prophecies in order to explain how these scripts can influence the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands. Finally, fourth, we recap our proposal and clarify how we apply the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy to the meso level.

Three Anti-pornography Narratives

Thomas (2013) showed that in the last several decades there have been three distinct anti-pornography narratives present within American society and that American evangelicals have regularly used these narratives not only to generally advocate against pornography but specifically to discourage individuals and especially husbands from actually viewing pornography (see Kwee et al. 2007). We note that this emphasis on husbands is not incidental but rather corresponds to the ways that pornography viewing has often been problematized as a betrayal of women (see Bronstein 2011), especially in the context of how a husband's pornography viewing may affect his wife and marriage (e.g., Manning 2006). In this article, we match our investigation to this emphasis through likewise focusing on husbands.

The first of the three anti-pornography narratives that Thomas (2013) identified is the narrative of traditional values. This narrative frames pornography viewing as morally problematic because such behavior violates "scriptural prohibitions as well as derivative ideas about God's plan for society" (2013:462). The second is the narrative of public-performer harm. This narrative frames pornography viewing as morally problematic because such behavior harms women both through encouraging the "coercion, exploitation, and abuse" of female performers as well as through promoting the "oppression, subjugation, and objectification" of women more generally (2013:460). The third narrative is the narrative of personal-viewer harm. This narrative frames pornography viewing as morally problematic because such behavior "is addictive" and harms the "individual viewer and his or her close personal relationships," especially relationships with "marital or romantic partners" (2013:461).

Thomas (2013) used qualitative content analysis of the popular evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* to show that although evangelicals have used all three of these narratives in the last several decades and continue to use all three of them today, the relative use of these narratives has varied substantially across the decades. In particular, he found that the narrative of traditional values was predominant in the 1960s and 1970s, the narrative of public-performer harm was predominant in the 1980s through the early 1990s, and the narrative of personal-viewer harm became predominant in the mid-1990s and continues to be predominant in the present day. Importantly for our purposes, Thomas speculated that as these narratives did not find their origins in evangelicalism but rather in broader American society, it is likely that other religious traditions have also used these same narratives, although probably in different degrees and at different times.

From Anti-pornography Narratives to Pornography-Effect Scripts

Of these three anti-pornography narratives, we focus our attention on the narrative of personal-viewer harm, and we consider how this particular anti-pornography narrative is especially likely to influence the pornography-effect scripts of husbands who are exposed to this narrative. We focus on this particular narrative because while the other two narratives frame pornography viewing as morally problematic due to reasons external to the individual, the narrative of personal-viewer harm frames pornography viewing as morally problematic due to reasons internal to the individual. In other words, while the other two narratives provide stories about how pornography viewing either violates scriptural prohibitions or harms women, the narrative of personal-viewer harm provides a story about how pornography viewing harms individual viewers and their relationships. Accordingly, we argue that if husbands are exposed to this narrative—for instance, by participating in congregations and religious communities where this narrative is espoused—such exposure can lead husbands to develop corresponding pornography-effect scripts that personally describe how they and their marriages will be harmed if they view pornography.

From Pornography-Effect Scripts to the Effect that Pornography Viewing has on Marital Happiness

We argue, then, that if husbands develop pornography-effect scripts corresponding to the narrative of personal-viewer harm, such scripts can lead to reductions in the marital happiness of these husbands if they view pornography. In support of this argument, we draw on two sets of literature. First, we draw on Simon and Gagnon's (Gagnon and Simon 2011; Simon and Gagnon 1986, 2003) sexual script theory. Simon and Gagnon theorized that individuals develop sexual scripts that, among other things, provide patterns and templates that guide individuals as they interact with their sexual partners. These scripts not only construct "meaning out of behavior, responses, and emotions" (Wiederman 2005:496), but they also directly contribute to sexual and relational outcomes (Beres et al. 2004; Byers 1996; McCormick 1987). Consistent with this, research has specifically found that sexual scripts can mediate the effect that pornography viewing has on intimacy and on sexual and relationship satisfaction (Braithwaite et al. 2015; Daneback et al. 2009; Štulhofer et al. 2010; Willoughby et al. 2015).

Second, we draw on Merton's (1948) notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy, which is essentially the idea of "an assumption or prediction that, purely as a result of having been made, causes the expected or predicted event to occur" (Watzlawick 2011:95). As applied to sexual relationships, research has found that individuals' assumptions about the future of their relationships are likely to affect their relationships directly according to those assumptions (Caughlin et al. 2000; Downey et al. 1998; Murray et al. 2003; Murray et al. 1996). Consistent, then, with both of these sets of literature as well as with the literature that Thomas (2013) summarized in his description of the narrative of personal-viewer harm (e.g., Bergner and Bridges 2002; Hertlein 2006; Manning 2006), and consistent also with other recent

research (Perry 2016b; Perry and Snawder 2017), we argue that if husbands think that their pornography viewing is going to harm their marriages, such viewing likely will.

A Meso-Level Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

To recap our proposal, we are arguing that meso-level anti-pornography narratives can influence micro-level pornography-effect scripts and, in turn, influence the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands. More specifically, we are arguing that exposure to the anti-pornography narrative of personal-viewer harm can lead husbands to develop corresponding pornography-effect scripts, which, in turn, can lead to reductions in the marital happiness of these husbands if they view pornography. We are suggesting, then, that this kind of causal chain can be thought of as a type of self-fulfilling prophecy. However, instead of operating exclusively at the micro-level—as in the sense that if a husband thinks that his pornography viewing is going to reduce his marital happiness, such viewing likely will—we also apply the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy to the meso-level—as in the sense that if a religious tradition thinks that the pornography viewing of its members is going to reduce the marital happiness of its members, such viewing likely will.

Hypotheses

To test our proposal, we offer two hypotheses. Our first hypothesis derives from Thomas' (2013) speculation that alongside evangelicalism, it is likely that other religious traditions have also used the three anti-pornography narratives, although probably in different degrees and at different times. To address this speculation, we focus our attention on the span of years that corresponds to Thomas' finding that the narrative of personal-viewer harm became predominant within evangelicalism in the mid-1990s and continues to be predominant in the present day. We suggest that this provides an especially ideal period to examine because as Thomas and others have suggested (e.g., Buzzell 2005; Döring 2009), the mid-1990s to the present day represents what is typically thought of as the contemporary Internet pornography era. Accordingly, our focus here allows us to examine how different religious traditions have responded to the increased anonymity, accessibility, and affordability that Internet pornography is frequently thought of as providing (Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg 2000). We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1 In the contemporary Internet pornography era, different religion traditions have varied in their relative use of the three anti-pornography narratives.

Our second hypothesis then builds on this anticipated variation and directly addresses our proposal through testing the causal chain described above. In particular, we test the argument that exposure to the anti-pornography narrative of personal-viewer harm can lead husbands to develop corresponding pornography-

effect scripts, which, in turn, can lead to reductions in the marital happiness of these husbands if they view pornography. We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2 To the degree that in the contemporary Internet pornography era, different religious traditions have varied in their relative use of the anti-pornography narrative of personal-viewer harm, the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands within these traditions has varied accordingly.

Testing Hypothesis 1: Methods and Findings

To test Hypothesis 1, we measure the predominance of the anti-pornography narratives of different religious traditions using quantitative content analysis of popular religious magazines, which, for the purposes of contextualization, we also compare to popular secular magazines. Our approach is somewhat similar to that of Thomas' (2013) earlier described qualitative content analysis of *Christianity Today*. In that study, Thomas used the American Theological Library Association's Religion Database (2011) to identify 82 *Christianity Today* articles that addressed the topic of pornography during the period 1956–2010. Thomas then qualitatively analyzed the 1384 paragraphs within these articles to see if they demonstrated the use of any of the three anti-pornography narratives. When they did, Thomas manually coded these paragraphs accordingly.

Our approach is somewhat similar to this, but instead of manually coding paragraphs, we performed an automated coding process that allowed for a more consistent and systematic analysis of a much wider range of texts. In order to identify these texts, we used EBSCO's Academic Search Premiere Database (2014) to conduct full-text, keyword searches of three popular religious magazines as well as three popular secular magazines. Religious magazines included *Christianity Today*, *The Christian Century*, and *Commonweal*; secular magazines included *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*.

Before describing our analysis, it is important to note that our selection of these particular magazines reflected two constraints. First, our choices were constrained to those magazines for which EBSCO's Academic Search Premiere Database (2014) could provide full-text access for a span of years that would be sufficiently equivalent to the duration of the contemporary Internet pornography era. For secular magazines, we found an appropriate span of years in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. While each of these magazines had different years of full-text access, all three had overlapping availability from 1994 to 2010—which, due to additional limitations among the religious magazines that we discuss next, we ultimately chose as the period best able to represent the contemporary Internet pornography era for the purposes of our content analysis.

Second, for religious magazines, our choices were additionally constrained in that we not only needed magazines with this same availability of full-text access, but we also needed magazines that could adequately represent different religious traditions. In particular, we were interested in the American variants of evangelicalism, mainline Protestantism, and Catholicism—religious traditions that together

make up a majority of the American population. For evangelicalism, this proved straightforward in that we were able to find the appropriate availability in *Christianity Today*, which is generally considered the flagship publication of evangelicalism (see Thomas and Olson 2012b). For mainline Protestantism, this also proved straightforward in that we were able to find the appropriate availability in *The Christian Century*, which is generally considered the flagship publication of mainline Protestantism (see Coffman 2013). For Catholicism, however, the situation was more complicated. To start, there is not a single magazine that is considered representative of all of Catholicism. Additionally, we discovered that of those magazines that are considered representative of different perspectives within Catholicism, EBSCO's Academic Search Premiere Database (2014) only had the appropriate availability for *Commonweal*, which is generally considered representative of a more liberal perspective (see Brett 2002; Johnson 2014). Although not fully ideal, we thus decided that our singular use of *Commonweal* would suffice. Accordingly, and as we discuss in more detail later, our analysis of *Commonweal* should be interpreted with some caution and should not be viewed as representative of Catholicism as a whole.

Continuing then with our analysis, we used EBSCO's Academic Search Premiere Database (2014) to search these magazines for articles containing one or more of the pornography keywords listed in Table 1. The results of this search can be seen in Table 2, which reports findings for the three religious magazines and the three secular magazines for the period 1994–2010. In particular, the second column of Table 2 reports the number of full-text articles in the database for each magazine, while the third column of Table 2 reports the number of these articles containing pornography keywords. As can be seen in the totals at the bottom of the table, this process involved searching the 165,030 full-text articles that appeared within these

Table 1 Keywords

Pornography keywords	Porn, pornography, pornographic, obscene, obscenity, smut
Narrative of traditional values keywords	Bad, badness, blasphemous, blasphemy, evil, evilness, immoral, immorality, moral, morality, morals, sin, sinful, sinned, sinner, sinners, sinning, sins, wicked, wickedness, wrong
Narrative of public-performer harm keywords	Abuse, abused, abuses, abusing, abusive, coerce, coerced, coerces, coercing, coercion, exploit, exploitation, exploited, exploiting, exploits, harass, harasses, harassment, incest, incestuous, molest, molestation, molested, molesting, molests, objectification, objectified, objectify, oppress, oppressed, oppresses, oppressing, oppression, oppressive, rape, raped, rapes, raping, subjugate, subjugated, subjugating, subjugation, traffic, trafficker, traffickers, trafficking, victim, victimization, victimized, victims, violate, violated, violates, violation, violations, violence
Narrative of personal-viewer harm keywords	Addict, addicted, addicting, addiction, addictions, addictive, addicts, affair, affairs, ashamed, cheat, cheated, cheater, cheaters, cheating, cheats, compulsive, disease, diseases, guilt, guilty, hidden, infidelity, obsessed, obsession, obsessions, obsessive, secret, secretive, shame, shamed, sick, sickness, sicknesses, unfaithful

Table 2 Keywords by magazine 1994–2010

Magazine	Full-text articles in database	Full-text articles containing pornography keywords[a]	Paragraphs containing pornography keywords	Paragraphs containing pornography keywords and			
				Any narrative keywords[b]	Narrative of traditional values keywords[b]	Narrative of public-performer harm keywords[b]	Narrative of personal-viewer harm keywords[b]
Christianity Today	8225	213 (2.6%)	529	237 (44.8%)	68 (12.9%)	70 (13.2%)	99 (18.7%)
The Christian Century	14,683	180 (1.2%)	261	127 (48.7%)	48 (18.4%)	43 (16.5%)	36 (13.8%)
Commonweal	6715	138 (2.1%)	176	92 (52.3%)	40 (22.7%)	36 (20.5%)	17 (9.7%)
Time	61,142	929 (1.5%)	1419	461 (32.5%)	106 (7.5%)	196 (13.8%)	159 (11.2%)
Newsweek	41,277	662 (1.6%)	965	356 (36.9%)	91 (9.4%)	162 (16.8%)	103 (10.7%)
U.S. News World Report	32,988	323 (1.0%)	532	173 (32.5%)	36 (6.8%)	74 (13.9%)	63 (11.8%)
Total	165,030	2445 (1.5%)	3882	1446 (37.2%)	389 (10.0%)	580 (14.9%)	477 (12.3%)

[a] Percentages are of full-text articles in database

[b] Percentages are of paragraphs containing pornography keywords

magazines between 1994 and 2010. Of these articles, our search identified 2445 articles containing pornography keywords, ranging from a low of 1.0% for *U.S. News and World Report* to a high of 2.6% for *Christianity Today*.

Having thus identified these 2445 articles, we subsequently downloaded the full text of these articles and cleaned and formatted them in preparation for further analysis. It was at this point that, similar to the methodology of Thomas' (2013) study, we decided to shift our focus from articles to paragraphs in order to more specifically examine those portions of text actually containing pornography keywords. This ended up proving essential, because as we later discovered, there was substantial variation in the use of the anti-pornography narratives within these articles such that some demonstrated the exclusive use of only one narrative, while others demonstrated the use of multiple narratives in varying degrees. Paragraph-level analysis allowed us to obtain an accurate accounting of this variation.

Hence, the fourth column of Table 2 reports the number of paragraphs containing pornography keywords for each magazine. In total, this led to the identification of 3882 paragraphs containing pornography keywords, ranging from a low of 176 paragraphs for *Commonweal* to a high of 1419 paragraphs for *Time*. We, then, analyzed these paragraphs to see if they demonstrated the use of any of the three anti-pornography narratives. To do this, we performed an automated coding process that assigned these paragraphs to narratives based on the potential presence within these paragraphs of keywords corresponding to one or more of the three anti-pornography narratives. In particular, we reviewed Thomas' (2013) study as well as the literature that he cited, and based on this review, we developed three lists of keywords, each corresponding to one of the three narratives. These keywords are listed in Table 1. As can be seen there, the number of keywords corresponding to each narrative does vary. This reflects a saturation strategy of attempting to identify as many words as possible that might correspond to each narrative. In particular, we looked for words that were indicative of the distinct ways that each of the three anti-pornography narratives frames pornography viewing as morally problematic. While we recognize that our approach relies on the use of a somewhat blunt instrument and does not provide the kind of nuanced analysis that Thomas' (2013) qualitative approach provided, the benefit, of course, was that our coding process allowed for a more consistent and systematic analysis of a much wider range of texts.

By means of this automated coding process, paragraphs were assigned to each of the three anti-pornography narratives. The last four columns of Table 2 report the results of this process. In particular, the first of these last four columns reports the number of paragraphs containing pornography keywords and any narrative keywords, while the final three columns report the number of paragraphs containing pornography keywords and keywords corresponding to, respectively, the narrative of traditional values, the narrative of public-performer harm, and the narrative of personal-viewer harm. As can be seen in the first of these last four columns, the number of paragraphs containing pornography keywords and any narrative keywords range from a low of 32.5% for both *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report* to a high of 52.3% for *Commonweal*. Additionally, we note that for each of the three religious magazines, over 40% of paragraphs containing pornography

keywords also contain narrative keywords, while this is true for less than 40% of each of the three secular magazines.

Although these findings are interesting, the most important findings seen in Table 2 concern the relative use of the three anti-pornography narratives within each of the three religious magazines. For *Christianity Today*, we find that of paragraphs containing pornography keywords, 18.7% also contain keywords corresponding to the narrative of personal-viewer harm, 13.2% also contain keywords corresponding to the narrative of public-performer harm, and 12.9% also contain keywords corresponding to the narrative of traditional values. This suggests that *Christianity Today*, and by extension, evangelicalism, has been most likely to use the narrative of personal-viewer harm. For *The Christian Century*, we find that of paragraphs containing pornography keywords, 18.4% also contain keywords corresponding to the narrative of traditional values, 16.5% also contain keywords corresponding to the narrative of public-performer harm, and 13.8% also contain keywords corresponding to the narrative of personal-viewer harm. This suggests that *The Christian Century*, and by extension, mainline Protestantism, has been most likely to use either the narrative of traditional values or, almost as likely, the narrative of public-performer harm. For *Commonweal*, we find that of paragraphs containing pornography keywords, 22.7% also contain keywords corresponding to the narrative of traditional values, 20.5% also contain keywords corresponding to the narrative of public-performer harm, and 9.7% also contain keywords corresponding to the narrative of personal-viewer harm. This suggests that *Commonweal*, and by extension, liberal Catholicism, has been most likely to use either the narrative of traditional values or, almost as likely, the narrative of public-performer harm. Finally, we note that for each of the three secular magazines, the narrative of public-performer has been the most frequently used anti-pornography narrative.

Based then on this variation in the relative use of the three anti-pornography narratives, we find support for Hypothesis 1. In particular, we find an important contrast between *Christianity Today*—where the relative use of the three anti-pornography narratives has been highest for the narrative of personal-viewer harm and lowest for the narrative of traditional values—and *The Christian Century* and *Commonweal*—where the pattern is reversed, and the relative use of the three anti-pornography narratives has been highest for the narrative of traditional values and lowest for the narrative of personal-viewer harm. Together, these findings suggests that in the contemporary Internet pornography era, evangelicalism has been engaging in a moral framing of pornography that is qualitatively distinct from that of either mainline Protestantism or liberal Catholicism.

Testing Hypothesis 2: Methods and Findings

To test Hypothesis 2, we measure whether this variation in these religious traditions' relative use of the narrative of personal-viewer harm corresponds to variation in the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands within these traditions. To do this, we use statistical analysis of the

General Social Survey (GSS) (2014). Consistent with our focus on the contemporary Internet pornography era, we again attempt to select the best available data for accurately examining this era. In the case of the GSS, the most recent version of the cumulative dataset allows us to examine the period 1994–2014. Using the well-known RELTRAD coding schema (Steensland et al. 2000), we use two approaches to measure whether different religious traditions can influence the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands. First, we run separate binary logistic regression models for husbands affiliated with each of the three religious traditions that we have been investigating. Second, we build and run an additional binary logistic regression model that includes all husbands together along with dummy variables and interaction terms for the three religious traditions. Depending on the model, there are between 351 observations (mainline Protestant husbands) and 572 observations (evangelical husbands). In the combined model, which includes all three traditions as well as husbands outside of these traditions, there are 2048 observations. Missing data was handled through listwise deletion.

For all of these models, our dependent variable is a binary measure of marital happiness based on the GSS question, "Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage? Would you say that your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" We transform answers from this question into a binary variable by contrasting "very happy" with the other response options. Similarly, our primary independent variable is also a binary measure, this time based on the GSS question, "Have you seen an X-rated movie in the last year?" While we recognize that the wording of this question is not completely ideal since that the X rating is no longer used by the Motion Picture Association of America (Sandler 2001), nonetheless, we think that the popular meaning of this wording is still clear, and this remains the question that continues to be regularly used in GSS research on pornography (e.g., Doran and Price 2014; Patterson and Price 2012; Wright 2012, 2013).

Consistent then with prior research that has used the GSS to analyze marital happiness (e.g., Corra et al. 2009; Doran and Price 2014; Lee and Ono 2008), we control for general happiness and health as well as for a standard set of demographic indicators including age, black, other race, previously divorced, number of children, years of education, income in constant dollars, population size, and U.S. Census region. In order to correct for skewness, we take the natural log of number of children, income, and population size. Additionally, in light of our theorizing, which argues that the effect that pornography viewing has on marital happiness is related to exposure to anti-pornography narratives as they are espoused by different religious traditions, we also control for frequency of religious attendance and strength of religious affiliation.[1] For all of our analyses, we use robust standard errors to account for heteroscedasticity.

Table 3 reports the results of four models, with the fourth model being built in three blocks. In Models 1, 2, and 3, we report standardized binary logistic regression

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[1] We also explored including other related control variables such as measures of biblical literalism and sexual attitudes. However, because several of these variables only had limited observations and/or proved to be insignificant and did not substantively change our results, we ultimately chose to maintain a more parsimonious set of control variables.

Table 3 Standardized binary logistic regression coefficients for the marital happiness of husbands 1994–2014

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4		
	Evangelical husbands N = 572	Mainline Protestant husbands N = 351	Catholic husbands N = 568	Block 1 All husbands N = 2048	Block 2 All husbands plus religious affiliations N = 2048	Block 3 All husbands plus religious affiliations and interactions N = 2048
Pornography viewing	−.611*	.003	−.274	−.292*	−.288*	−.187
	(.282)	(.356)	(.240)	(.124)	(.125)	(.204)
General happiness	1.543***	2.042***	1.900***	1.695***	1.695***	1.695***
	(.200)	(.333)	(.238)	(.111)	(.111)	(.111)
Health	.078	.432*	.066	.149	.150†	.151†
	(.155)	(.203)	(.160)	(.077)	(.077)	(.077)
Age	.007	.018†	.003	.008†	.008†	.007†
	(.008)	(.011)	(.009)	(.004)	(.004)	(.004)
Black	−1.179**	1.005	.432	−.551**	−.585**	−.564**
	(.459)	(.886)	(.936)	(.198)	(.211)	(.212)
Other race	.380	.702	.321	.434*	.446*	.443*
	(.613)	(.787)	(.329)	(.211)	(.212)	(.213)
Previously divorced	−.287	.410	.183	−.053	−.064	−.054
	(.231)	(.329)	(.289)	(.125)	(.126)	(.126)
Ln. children	−.104	−.705*	−.306	−.309**	−.301**	−.310**
	(.225)	(.290)	(.227)	(.109)	(.109)	(.109)
Education	.090*	.039	−.004	.049*	.048*	.047*
	(.041)	(.052)	(.039)	(.020)	(.020)	(.020)
Ln. income	−.005	−.390†	.164	−.111	−.108	−.110
	(.113)	(.209)	(.161)	(.073)	(.073)	(.073)

Table 3 continued

	Model 1 Evangelical husbands N = 572	Model 2 Mainline Protestant husbands N = 351	Model 3 Catholic husbands N = 568	Model 4		
				Block 1 All husbands N = 2048	Block 2 All husbands plus religious affiliations N = 2048	Block 3 All husbands plus religious affiliations and interactions N = 2048
Ln. population size	−.116†	.008	−.045	−.036	−.033	−.034
	(.063)	(.091)	(.058)	(.030)	(.030)	(.030)
Northeast	.042	−1.163**	−.032	−.305†	−.284†	−.295†
	(.445)	(.452)	(.288)	(.165)	(.167)	(.167)
South	.368	−.352	.120	.096	0.91	.084
	(.253)	(.363)	(.301)	(.142)	(.142)	(.143)
West	.315	−.593	.379	−.008	−.014	−.027
	(.340)	(.401)	(.334)	(.158)	(.159)	(.159)
Frequency religious attendance	−.039	−.051	.046	−.012	−.011	−.014
	(.054)	(0.74)	(.057)	(.027)	(.028)	(.028)
Strength religious affiliation	.204	0.172	.015	.122†	.127†	.124†
	(.147)	(.199)	(.144)	(.066)	(.067)	(.067)
Evangelical					−.011	.135
					(.164)	(.191)
Mainline Protestant					−.003	−.015
					(.172)	(.196)
Catholic					−.119	−.097
					(.156)	(.184)
Evangelical pornography viewing						−.542†
						(.327)

Table 3 continued

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4		
	Evangelical husbands N = 572	Mainline Protestant husbands N = 351	Catholic husbands N = 568	Block 1 All husbands N = 2048	Block 2 All husbands plus religious affiliations N = 2048	Block 3 All husbands plus religious affiliations and interactions N = 2048
Mainline Protestant pornography viewing						.162
						(.376)
Catholic pornography viewing						−.018
						(.300)
Constant	−3.906**	−2.070	−5.707***	−3.058***	−3.042***	−3.028***
	(1.336)	(1.991)	(1.758)	(.765)	(.771)	(.772)
Log likelihood	−282.221	−165.465	−272.745	−1074.101	−1073.697	−1071.599
Chi square	104.210	48.660	76.520	294.640	295.170	300.970
Psuedo R^2	.195	.215	.181	.177	.177	.179

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p \leq .001$; ** $p \leq .01$; * $p \leq .05$; † $p \leq .1$

coefficients for the marital happiness of husbands affiliated with each of the three religious traditions that we have been investigating, respectively, evangelical husbands, mainline Protestant husbands, and Catholic husbands. The primary independent variable in these models, pornography viewing, shows the effect that having seen an X-rated movie in the last year has on the marital happiness of these husbands. This effect is significant in Model 1, where for evangelical husbands, the standardized regression coefficient of −.611 indicates that having seeing an X-rated movie in the last year reduces the odds of evangelical husbands being very happily married by about 46%. In contrast, Models 2 and 3 show that pornography viewing does not have a significant effect on the marital happiness of either mainline Protestant or Catholic husbands. Together, these findings support Hypothesis 2 in that this variation in the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands affiliated with these religious traditions corresponds to these traditions' relative use of the anti-pornography narrative of personal-viewer harm.

In Model 4, then, we seek to find additional support for Hypothesis 2 through including all husbands together in a single model. We build this model in three blocks: in Block 1, we report standardized binary logistic regression coefficients for the marital happiness of all husbands together; in Block 2, we add in dummy variables corresponding to these husbands' affiliations with the three religious traditions; and in Block 3, we add in interaction terms in order to evaluate how the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands is conditioned by these husbands' affiliations with these religious traditions.

In Block 1, we find that pornography viewing has a significant negative effect on the marital happiness of all husbands. Although this effect is not as strong as that seen for only evangelical husbands in Model 1, still, the standardized regression coefficient of −.292 indicates that having seen an X-rated movie in the last year reduces the odds of all husbands being very happily married by about 25%. In Block 2, we find that when we add in dummy variables corresponding to these husbands' affiliations with the three religious traditions, the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands remains significant and only changes minimally. In Block 3, though, we find that when we add in the interaction terms, the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands is no longer significant. At the same time, we find that one of the interaction terms—that for evangelical pornography viewing—is indicated as being significant.

At first glance, this might be interpreted as lending additional support for Hypothesis 2. However, it is important to note that both in general (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006) and especially for nonlinear models like ours (Ai and Norton 2003; Berry, DeMeritt, and Esarey 2010), interaction terms should not be interpreted in the same way as conventional additive terms, and p values alone cannot be used to evaluate the statistical significance of an interaction term (Hamman, Gleason, and DiStefano 2014). Indeed, while conventional additive terms are typically interpreted through holding all other values at their means, the appropriate interpretation of interaction terms requires that their constituent variables be allowed to vary simultaneously (Brambor et al. 2006; Hamman et al. 2014). To this end, we cannot rely on p values to determine statistical significance;

rather interaction terms must be evaluated in a graphical manner in order to assess their statistical significance.

Accordingly, in order to interpret the interaction terms in Block 3, we evaluate the significance of these terms using marginal effect plots that illustrate how the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands is conditioned by these husbands' affiliations with the three religious traditions. In particular, Figs. 1, 2, and 3, illustrate the marginal effects of either having or not having an affiliation with each of these traditions, respectively, an evangelical affiliation, a mainline Protestant affiliation, and a Catholic affiliation. For each of
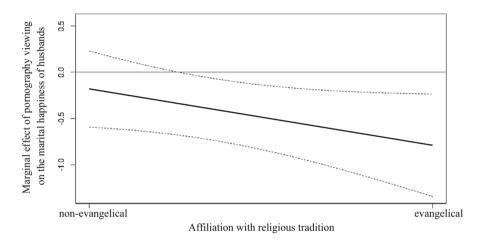

Fig. 1 Marginal effect of pornography viewing on the marital happiness of husbands as conditioned by evangelical affiliation 1994–2014
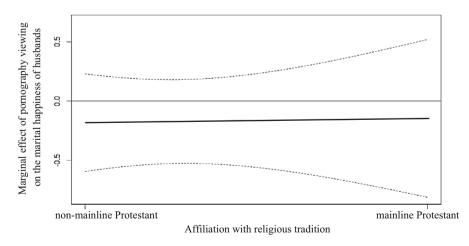

Fig. 2 Marginal effect of pornography viewing on the marital happiness of husbands as conditioned by mainline Protestant affiliation 1994–2014
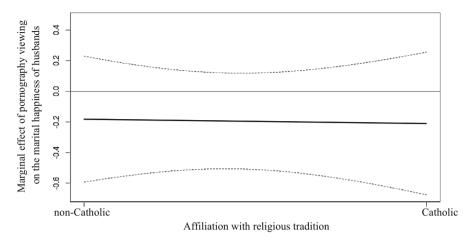
Fig. 3 Marginal effect of pornography viewing on the marital happiness of husbands as conditioned by Catholic affiliation 1994–2014

these figures, the x-axis displays our conditioning variable (affiliation with a religious tradition), while the y-axis displays the marginal effect of our primary independent variable on our dependent variable (the marginal effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands). The solid lines that run across these plots at a moderate to slight angle illustrate how the marginal effects of pornography viewing on the marital happiness of husbands are conditioned by these husbands' religious affiliations. The surrounding dashed lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. If the solid line y = 0 is included within a confidence interval, the corresponding marginal effect is indistinguishable from 0 and that particular interaction is not significant at that particular level of the conditioning variable (Brambor et al. 2006; Hamman et al. 2014). However, if y = 0 is excluded from the confidence bands, we can conclude that the interaction term is significant at that particular value of the interaction.

In Fig. 1, we find that for a non-evangelical religious affiliation, the marginal effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands is not significant because the confidence interval includes y = 0. However, for an evangelical religious affiliation, the marginal effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands is negative and significant because the confidence interval does not include y = 0. This demonstrates that the negative impact of pornography is contingent on an evangelical religious affiliation. This is further buttressed by both Figs. 2 and 3, where we find that the marginal effects that pornography viewing have on the marital happiness of husbands are not significant under any conditions for either mainline Protestant or Catholic affiliations as y = 0 is always inside the 95% confidence band.

To summarize, the findings from the marginal effect plots indicate that only the interaction term for evangelical pornography viewing is ever significant and within that interaction term only for evangelicals and not for non-evangelicals. This, in

turn, is consistent with the findings from Models 1, 2, and 3, and further indicates that the effect that pornography viewing has on marital happiness can be negative and significant, but in terms of religious affiliation, only for evangelical husbands and not for either mainline Protestant or Catholic husbands. Together, then, we find that this variation supports Hypothesis 2. To the degree that in the contemporary Internet pornography era, different religious traditions have varied in their relative use of the anti-pornography narrative of personal-viewer harm, the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands within these traditions has varied accordingly.

Discussion

The support that we find for Hypotheses 1 and 2 is consistent with our proposal that meso-level anti-pornography narratives can influence micro-level pornography-effect scripts and, in turn, influence the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital happiness of husbands. More broadly, we not only find support for our particular proposal, but we also find support for our more general claim that meso-level moral narratives can influence micro-level moral scripts and, in turn, influence micro-level outcomes. While the results of our mixed methods design and the correspondence that we find between our content analysis and statistical analysis should not be interpreted in a definitive manner—and while we recognize that in some ways our results are more suggestive than conclusive—still, our findings do clearly support our theorizing. Evangelicalism, which has been the religious tradition most likely to communicate the message that pornography viewing is harmful to marriages is also the only religious tradition for which we find any evidence that this is true. That being said, three potential critiques should be considered.

First, some persons may have reservations about our mixed methods design. In particular, some might wonder, are our content analysis and statistical analysis really getting at the same thing? Are they actually connected in a meaningful and legitimate manner? On the one hand, we have been investigating anti-pornography narratives as they have been used within religious magazines representing different religious traditions. On the other hand, we have been investigating the marital happiness of husbands also representing these different traditions. Some might wonder, then, whether we are making the unwarranted assumption that these particular husbands have read or at least somehow been influenced by these particular magazines. We are not. Rather, what we are assuming is that the relative use of the anti-pornography narratives within these magazines likely represents their relative use within the congregations and religious communities with which these husbands have been affiliated.

Second, some persons may have concerns about our proposed causal chain. In particular, some might point out that although our causal chain posits three different constructs, we only measure the first and the last. That is, while we measure the predominance of the anti-pornography narratives of different religious traditions, and while we measure the effect that pornography viewing has on the marital

happiness of husbands within these traditions, we do not actually measure the content of the pornography-effect scripts that we theorize as the middle link in this chain. Obviously, our proposal would be stronger if we were able to do this. Unfortunately, such data simply does not exist. Although we are aware of one study that addresses how men think about the ways that their pornography viewing may affect their future marriages (Olmstead et al. 2013), we are not aware of any research that relates pornography-effect scripts to religion or religious affiliation.

Instead, we note that the first author of this article is currently engaged in the preparatory stages of just this kind of research, and we thus hope to be able to revisit our proposal with additional data at a later point. Such data will not only be valuable for addressing our particular proposal, but also for thinking more generally about how it is that meso-level moral narratives can become instantiated and personalized at the micro level. An additional benefit of this kind of data would be the opportunity to bring further clarity to the long-standing debate about the directionality of the relationship between pornography viewing and marital happiness—that is, whether under certain circumstances, pornography viewing is more likely to lead to reduced marital happiness, or whether reduced marital happiness is more likely to lead to pornography viewing. Consistent with the majority of the literature (e.g., Manning 2006; Perry 2016a; see Lambert et al. 2012) our theorizing is in line with the former; however, further clarification is needed (Willoughby et al. 2015).

Third, some persons may have questions about our selection of religious magazines. In particular, some might question our singular use of *Commonweal* as our only Catholic magazine. Along these lines, we recognize that although *Commonweal* does a good job of representing a more liberal Catholic perspective, it certainly would have been ideal if we had been able to obtain the full text of other Catholic magazines. If we had been able to do this, we might have, for instance, discovered that an analysis of other Catholic magazines demonstrated a different pattern of relative use of the three anti-pornography narratives, which, in turn, could have led us to somewhat different conclusions regarding our proposal. However, that being said, the fact that our GSS analysis indicates that there is not a significant relationship between pornography viewing and marital happiness for Catholics husbands as a whole leads us to think that even if we had obtained somewhat different results from other Catholic magazines, such results would have been unlikely to change our overall assessment of our proposal.

Finally, similar to these data limitations, we also note that we would have especially liked to have included Mormon (LDS) husbands in our research. The LDS have a long and vocal tradition of opposing pornography (Sumerau and Cragun 2015a, b), and it certainly would have been interesting to see whether their thinking and experiences with pornography correspond to the expectations of our proposal. Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain full-text access for the relevant LDS publications. Additionally, the comparatively small number of LDS husbands in the GSS would have been prohibitive. Together, these data limitations collectively point to the need for ongoing research, not only in terms of the methods that we have used in the article, but as just suggested, also in terms of other methods that could produce greater insights into how husbands (as well as wives and others) internalize

meso-level messages about pornography and then experience outcomes related to those messages.

Conclusions

Our theorizing and findings are important for five reasons.

First, our research addresses a long-standing sociological interest in the connection between macro-level norms and values, and micro-level behaviors and outcomes (Durkheim 1915; Goffman 1959; Parsons 1951; Weber 1930). However, unlike most research on morality that postulates an ambiguous connection between the macro and the micro (Firat and McPherson 2010), our research demonstrates the central role that meso-level structures can play in both reifying macro-level norms and values while also influencing micro-level behaviors and outcomes. As such, our research helps address what has been increasingly perceived as a gap in the sociology of morality literature (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013).

Second, instead though of focusing on how morality can influence individual behaviors, our research focuses on how morality can influence individual outcomes, independently of those behaviors. In our case, this means that instead of focusing on how morality can influence a husband's pornography viewing, our research focuses on how morality can influence the effect that his pornography viewing has on his marital happiness. This is important because it suggests that some effects of morality may be substantially unrecognized, such that even though different individuals may engage in the same behaviors, they may experience different outcomes.

Third, our research demonstrates how Merton's (1948) notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy can be simultaneously applied to both the micro and the meso levels. On the one hand, our research suggests that if a husband thinks that his pornography viewing is going to reduce his marital happiness, such viewing likely will. On the other hand, our research suggests that if a religious tradition thinks that the pornography viewing of its members is going to reduce the marital happiness of its members, such viewing likely will. The latter is especially important because it suggests that moral narratives can take on a life of their own and actually produce their own outcomes. This, in turn, has implications for topics beyond pornography. For example, if a religious tradition teaches that having an abortion will lead to personal regret, it would not be surprising if members who do have abortions, do indeed experience such regret. One can imagine similar arguments for topics like homosexuality as well as activities like drinking and gambling. In each case, the potential exists that what a religious tradition teaches about these behaviors could lead to outcomes that are independent of the behaviors themselves.

Fourth, our research directly speaks to the sociology of religion and to the ways that religious elites can influence both individual and collective outcomes. While much of the this type of research has looked at how religious elites can shape political opinions (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2003) or influence lifestyle outcomes such as fertility rates (e.g., McQuillan 2004) or health behaviors (e.g., Lumpkins et al. 2013), our research is valuable along these lines not so much because of the

particular outcome that we study (marital happiness), but instead because we propose a specific set of mechanisms that explain step by step how religious elites can actually influence this outcome. In doing so, our research illuminates the need for additional research regarding both similar and different pathways through which religious elites can exercise their influence.

Finally, fifth, our research offer important contexts and caveats to the social-psychological framing of how pornography viewing can affect marital happiness. While much of the debate about marriage and pornography has often been framed in terms of naturalized assumptions regarding whether pornography viewing is either good for (e.g., Benjamin and Tlusten 2010; Grov et al. 2011) or bad for (e.g., Doran and Price 2014; Manning 2006) marriages, our research joins a growing perspective (e.g., Daneback et al. 2009; Maddox et al. 2011; Perry 2016a; Perry and Snawder 2017; Resch and Alderson 2013; Willoughby et al. 2015) in arguing that the assumptions that couples have about pornography viewing can substantially influence the effect that pornography viewing has on their marriages.

In sum, our research supports our claim that meso-level moral narratives can influence micro-level moral scripts and, in turn, influence micro-level outcomes. What religious elites think, say, and teach—it matters. Moral narratives are powerful, and whether people know it or not, moral narratives can have real world effects on their lives.

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