

in some way; and b) being somewhat more distant and less real or congruent with their clients' experience, as the student sees their own filtering processes as less relevant to therapeutic effectiveness, and hence are unwittingly overly influenced by it.

However, I have also worked with graduates who, while having had no personal experience of therapy, have still been able to demonstrate high levels of empathy and compassion for their clients, and others who appear to be able to make immediate use of supervision effectively to enhance their own reflective practice - which is why I don't see this question as having a simple answer.

**Keith:** I agree – and think that Anton has covered this well. Your question, however, sounds like one of those questions that has a statement behind it – it reads as if you think that psychology students do need to be in personal therapy. If you do, I think this raises – and confirms – the importance of peer feedback, that is, that students may be concerned about other students and their capacity for the work.

**Anton and Keith:** Thank you, Kelly, for inviting us to share our thoughts on what we hope will be of interest to your readers, and especially psychology students. For ourselves, we are continuing to research and reflect on this subject and are planning at least one journal article on the topic. We'll keep you posted! Best wishes in your work and continued training.

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## The problem with problematic

Luke Sniewski



A former professional football player and Certified Public Accountant, Luke Sniewski found his passion for life diving into the diverse realms of healthy living. With credentials in personal training, soft tissue therapy, nutrition, and cooking, his client-

centred approach empowers people to make productive changes in their life via movement, lifestyle and mindfulness strategies. He has over a decade of experience in the health and wellness industry working with a variety of clients and travelled around the world making a documentary series on healthy living in different cultures. Luke currently lives in Auckland, where he recently completed his Post Graduate Diploma in Health Science, with an emphasis in Drug and Alcohol Studies. He keeps himself busy balancing being a father and a PhD student at AUT, where he is examining the experiences and effectiveness of mindfulness meditation as an intervention for adult heterosexual men with self-perceived problematic pornography use.

I began my PhD journey exploring how meditation might work as an intervention for men with problematic pornography use at the Auckland University of Technology nearly two years ago. Quite quickly, it became the humbling experience I probably should have expected. What I thought was going to be a simple, straightforward project, turned into an important lesson in what it means to be a competent and capable researcher. My Postgraduate Diploma, Master's Degree, and cumulative life experiences did not stand a chance against the nuances, complexities, and the humanistic realities of the subject matter I was diving into. After all, when you consider the currently stigmatised and shame-ridden nature of problematic pornography use, the last thing I should have expected was simplicity. What I have learned during my study, and what will be discussed in this article, is the importance of contextualisation, and integrating quantitative and qualitative data in order to improve the validity and rigour of academic research.

Naïve confidence is often the seed of inspiration that fuels the brave souls that decide to venture down the path towards a

## pornography use: A researcher's reflection

doctorate degree. I surely had plenty of it. And probably like every person reading this article, I wanted to help people that needed help. But it was pure naivety that made me think I already knew enough about pornography, about how men talk about and experience their use, about why men identify their use as problematic, and which interventions would work best. This PhD was going to be a breeze.

Over the last two years of my PhD, however, I have found myself continuously amazed by new, fresh, and thought-provoking perspectives; most of which have come directly from the first-hand experiences and insights offered by research participants. The research process has transformed my emotionally-charged, dogmatic beliefs about problematic pornography into a grounded, practical, and realistic worldview that takes into account the myriad of variables that make each case unique and different. Nothing is ever as simple as sensational media headlines can make it seem, especially problematic pornography use.

Self-perceived problematic pornography use (SPPPU) has become a heated topic within academic and clinical settings (Duffy, Dawson, & das Nair, 2016). SPPPU refers to the extent to which an individual feels they are unable to regulate their pornography use and relies overwhelmingly on the user's subjective self-perception and experiences (Grubbs et al., 2015). Individuals who perceive their relationship with pornography as problematic, however, classify their use as such for a myriad of reasons, including religious, moral or ethical, social and relationship, quantity of time spent viewing, or viewing in inappropriate contexts (Twohig & Crosby, 2009). Because of the variety of quantitative and qualitative factors that play a part in determining if and how pornography use is problematic, it would be unrealistic to assume that a single scale or questionnaire could accurately capture or assess each type of pornography user. This is why the main problem with SPPPU is likely the same problem that exists within most psychological contexts, fields, and phenomena: contextualisation.

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In the clinical world, contextualisation and looking at the bigger picture is likely standard practice. Clinicians dig into the life of their client in order to understand their behaviours and circumstances. In the critical world of sexuality studies, the context of the individual is taken into

account as well as the broader social, cultural and economic context of a given society. Utilising both these approaches and applying them to problematic pornography research would greatly improve mainstream pornography research. It would allow researchers to understand pornography in a more nuanced manner; along with a greater degree of contextualising, both in terms of the person and in terms of society. In conducting my interviews, for example, it was surprising that this was the first time many of these men had ever spoken about pornography to anyone. Uncovering and exploring the reasons for the lack of communication and opening up would provide meaningful insights for the field of problematic pornography use.

One of the immediate takeaways (and definitely an unanticipated insight) from my research is that whether or not a man perceives his pornography use as problematic does not correlate well with the existent scores of scales and questionnaires related to porn use. One participant might watch porn very infrequently but consider their viewing to be extremely problematic, while another watches it every day and only feels he needs to tone it down a bit. Additionally, and not surprisingly, every participant identified very different and very specific reasons (i.e. specific content went against moral values, porn was the only coping mechanism for loneliness, violation of religious beliefs, felt unable to control the urge to watch, incapable of proper intimacy with real women, neglects childcare responsibilities in order to view) as to why they perceived their pornography use to be problematic. These first-hand experiences broke through some of the stereotypical myths and expectations around what is perceived as problematic pornography use. The continued challenge is the current lack of criteria for problematic pornography consumption, which means that determining whether or not consumption is problematic in a standardised way is difficult, and arguably impossible because of the many contextual layers involved. The raw numbers and questionnaire scores do not tell the full story.

On the surface, my own research seems fairly straightforward; examining meditation as an intervention for men with SPPPU. The research has been investigating the implications and experiences of an intervention which allows participants to practise sitting and observing their internal experience with non-reaction and acceptance, with the principal hypothesis that the consistent practice of 'being with self' will develop the participant's capacity to respond to cravings and urges to use pornography, and unwanted ruminating thoughts, in more productive ways. The research methods and methodology used,

however, had to be carefully selected and designed in order to adequately address contextualisation. Quantitative measures such as scales, questionnaires, and logging sheets were used to assess and analyse the effectiveness of meditation, but in-depth qualitative data in the form of pre- and post-study interviews provided the much-needed contextualisation.

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One of the primary reasons for using such a mixed methods approach was in large part due to previous research acknowledging that qualitative factors were often better indicators of problematic pornography use than quantitative factors (Sniewski, Farvid, & Carter 2018). Indeed, the frequency of pornography use is not always the underlying issue with pornography use as negative symptoms experienced by the individual more strongly predict the individual seeking treatment (Gola, Lewczuk, & Skorko, 2016). This made a mixed methods approach the most useful way forward for generating a thorough understanding of the issue.

The initial data from the participants' actual pornography use confirmed suspicions. Self-reported use was well below thresholds that would be classified as problematic within research settings. For example, the Pornography Craving Questionnaire (PCQ) attempts to predict the likelihood of relapse following therapy by measuring subjective craving for pornography (Kraus & Rosenberg, 2014), while the Problematic

Pornography Use Scale (PPCS) helps distinguish between non-problematic and problematic pornography use (Bóthe et al., 2018). Although both of these scales are scientifically validated, scores from neither would have categorised the majority of the participants' pornography use as problematic even though they identified themselves as having a problem for this research. Additionally, Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg (2000) quantified problematic pornography use as spending at least 11 hours viewing pornography per week; a threshold that no participant in my research came within 50% of reaching. While the quantitative data provided by the scales and questionnaires can provide some information, it was the in-depth qualitative exploration of each participant that provided a rich, detailed and contextualised account of what these numbers actually meant.

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When you combine these methods to match the intention and aim of the study, you get richer data and a much clearer picture of what is actually going on in the lives of the respective participants, and certainly data that is less encumbered by research assumptions. This kind of data would help push the field forward. The results more closely resemble the participant and the many contexts that make him unique. There is more meaning behind the numbers. And this is why contextualisation matters.

In terms of pornography use, and likely many other psychological contexts, contextualisation further reinforces the notion of finding the uniqueness of the client's

experience and focusing on the bigger picture context of their life, and not just aspects, markers, scales, and quantitative assessments. The quantitative data is important, especially when the scales have been validated, but information needs to be contextualised with in-depth qualitative discussions. While the literature and data on pornography continues to mount, it will greatly benefit the field to integrate mixed methods that support and build a richer story beneath the scores. It is also this researcher's belief that much of the sensationalism, stigma, and shame would disintegrate if the participant's pornography use were viewed from the contextual reference point of their life.

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