



# Rejecting the Objectification Hypothesis

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## Abstract

The last decade or so has witnessed a wave of empirical studies purporting to show that men’s sexual focus on the female body leads to increased hostility and aggression against women. According to what I call “The Objectification Hypothesis”, the explanation for this phenomenon has to do with the fact that, in such circumstances, men “objectify” women, that is, regard them as mere objects or as means only. The paper rejects this hypothesis and offers an alternative explanation for the connection between men’s sexual gaze and their aggression against women. This explanation makes no reference to the notions of seeing-other-as-object or of treating-as-means-only. Instead, it locates the dynamic at hand within the theoretical framework of misogyny along the lines developed by Kate Manne.

## 1 Introduction

How can people be so cruel, at times murderously so, towards other human beings? A widespread answer is that such treatment is triggered or made possible by the fact that perpetrators of such evil acts *dehumanize* their victims, which is taken to mean that they deny their humanity; that they believe their victims to be non-human (or, at any rate, not “fully human”).<sup>1</sup> A similar explanation applies to a conspicuous category of intra-group violence, namely, the oppression and aggression meted out by men to women. Such aggression, it is often said, is triggered or made possible by the

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<sup>1</sup> This answer has been developed at length by David Livingstone Smith (2011, 2020, 2021). See also Haslam 2006 and Haslam & Loughnan 2014.

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fact that men objectify (or *sexually* objectify<sup>2</sup>) women.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, the immorality is assumingly triggered by a mistaken view of the victims, namely, the belief that they are non-human (or, again, not fully human). As Gervais et al. (2013, 1) put it, in both cases, “people are perceived in ways that are fundamentally inaccurate”.

This type of explanation for immorality is made up of two claims: the first ascribes a certain belief to the perpetrators (e.g. the Nazis, the Hutu, or the abusive men), while the second points to a causal relation between this belief and a host of immoral attitudes and behaviors. The combination of these two claims in the domain of inter-group relations has recently been named ‘The Dehumanization Hypothesis’ [DH] (Over 2021a). By analogy, I shall be referring to the combination of these claims in the domain of male and female relations as ‘The Objectification Hypothesis’ [hereafter ‘OH’].

Condemning A for failing to treat B “as a human being” is often just a way of expressing moral disapproval for A’s behavior; an evaluative statement rather than a descriptive one. In contrast, both DH and OH are comprised of descriptive claims regarding perpetrators of wrongdoing, i.e. claims about the perpetrators’ beliefs vis-à-vis their victims. For instance, within DH, to say that the Hutu failed to treat the Tutsi as human beings is to ascribe to them a certain belief about the Tutsi – that the Tutsi were, quite literally, not (or not fully) human beings. As Smith puts it (2020, 28), “dehumanizers aren’t just pretending, they sincerely believe that those whom they persecute are less than human”.<sup>4</sup>

The same applies to OH. Within this hypothesis, when men are said to objectify women, this is not a moral evaluation but a descriptive one. (Male) objectifiers are assumed to have certain beliefs about women (or about *some* women) which allegedly underlie their aggressive behavior towards them. DH and OH are then *empirical* hypotheses, not evaluative or normative ones, and it is precisely this descriptive component that makes possible empirical research in this area, research which explores the relation between two kinds of *facts*; facts about the beliefs of the perpetrators vis-à-vis the humanity of their victims, and facts about their attitudes and behaviors towards them. Indeed, the last decade or so has witnessed a wave of empirical studies exploring the effects of dehumanization and of objectification on the troublesome attitudes and behaviors of dehumanizers and objectifiers.

However, this “explosion of dehumanization research”, as Haslam and Stratemeyer (2016, 25) put it, and the theoretical conceptualizations that followed have recently faced serious criticism (Rai et al. 2017; Manne 2018; Lang 2020), the most systematic one by Harriet Over (2021a).<sup>5</sup> I find this criticism convincing and have

<sup>2</sup> ‘Sexual objectification’ is often used as synonymous with ‘objectification’ simpliciter. Nussbaum’s classic paper (1995) is entitled “Objectification”, but she opens by saying: “Sexual objectification is a familiar concept” (249).

<sup>3</sup> Many writers remark that objectification is also directed from women to men, from men to men, and from women to women (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997, 198; Vaes 2014, 193), but the main use of the term and the lion’s share of empirical studies deal with the objectification of women by men.

<sup>4</sup> For Mikkola (2016), by contrast, dehumanization is not a descriptive notion but a normative one (8), which is not “about reducing someone to something” (9).

<sup>5</sup> *Perspectives on Psychological Research* solicited four comments on Over’s paper to which she responded in Over 2021b. For a follow-up empirical study that supports Over’s view, see Enock, Tipper and Over (2021).

little to add to it. What hasn't been noticed is that much of this criticism applies to OH as well. The purpose of the present paper is to fill this gap by offering a criticism of OH, a rejection of the experimental evidence that is thought to support it, and an outline of an alternative explanation of this evidence.

I should clarify at the outset that the controlled experiments I have in mind do not manipulate the effects of objectification on *real* violence against women, but rather its effects on the increase in aggressive and hostile *attitudes* against them. Whether or not such attitudes lead to an increase in real violence towards women is a long debated question, especially in the context of pornography, which I shall bracket for the sake of the present discussion.<sup>6</sup>

I start in Section II by discussing some differences between DH and OH. I then turn, in Section III, to illustrate the role played by OH in contemporary research on sexual objectification and aggression. In Section IV, I offer a brief summary of Over's criticism of DH and then use her arguments in Section V to criticize OH. The explanatory weakness of OH leaves me with the task of offering an alternative explanation for the empirical findings in the field, a task I turn to in Section VI. My tentative proposal is that this explanation has little to do with the perception of women as nonhuman or with regarding them as means-only, and much to do with male expectations from women in patriarchal societies, as analyzed by Kate Manne (2018). I end, in Section VII, with some concluding remarks.

The notion of objectification is so central to feminist writing that any criticism of it might be taken as an anti-feminist move. Needless to say, this is not the case. The treatment of women by men is troublesome and damaging in multiple ways which I take here for granted. It is just that the notion of *objectification* does not do a good job in illuminating them, in particular in illuminating the connection between the focus of men on the bodies of women – which, following others, will serve as my paradigm case of objectification<sup>7</sup> – and attitudes of aggression and hostility against them.

## 2 DH and OH

Since DH and OH assume the same kind of mistake – i.e. the belief that some entities that *are* human are not so – it is natural to think of them as the same phenomenon, or, more plausibly, to see objectification as a subset of dehumanization (e.g. Bevens & Loughnan 2019, 714). To wit, dehumanization occurs whenever people deny the humanity of others, while objectification occurs when such denial is (typically) made on the part of men vis-à-vis women.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The literature on this question is huge. See for now the recent meta-analysis by Ferguson and Hartley 2022.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Nussbaum 1995, 272; Fredrickson & Roberts 1997, 175 (“The most subtle and deniable way sexualized evaluation is enacted – and arguably the most ubiquitous – is through gaze or visual inspection of the body”), Vasquez et al. 2018, 6 (“gazing at a woman is a key aspect of objectification”), and Hollett et al. 2022 (“Body-biased gaze has long been recognized as an important feature of sexual objectification”). A sexual gaze is often also referred to as an “objectifying gaze”.

<sup>8</sup> See Gervais et al. 2013, 6–7, for a helpful taxonomy of the different views about the relation between dehumanization and objectification.

Yet, in spite of this close connection between DH and OH, they tend to assume different forms of denying humanity. Nick Haslam famously distinguished between two such forms:

The first is animalistic dehumanization, the attitude of denying the features that distinguish people from animals, such as high cognitive capacity, niceness, and ethical sensitivity. The second is mechanistic dehumanization, the attitude of denying the features that distinguish people from non-living things, such as robots (2006, 32).

Although these two forms of dehumanization can be found both in the way the Nazis described the Jews and in the way some men perceive women, the former tends to take the form of animalistic dehumanization while the latter tends to take the form of mechanistic dehumanization. The Nazis treated the Jews more like rats (and other seemingly disgusting or frightening animals) than like *objects*, while men are more often described as perceiving women as objects – hence the notion of *sexual objectification* – rather than as perceiving them as animals.<sup>9</sup> Here, for example, is how Gervais et al. summarize the common wisdom about objectification (2013, 2):

Scholars across many disciplines have argued that people are sometimes seen and treated as objects. This process is called objectification and occurs when people are treated as things instead of people. Specifically, when a person’s body parts or functions are separated from the person, reduced to the status of instruments, or regarded as capable of representing the entire person, he or (most often) she is said to be objectified.

Thus, on OH, the main mistake that (many) men make about women, and the one responsible for much of the aggression against the latter, is the belief that (in Haslam’s words) women lack the features that distinguish people from non-living entities. Under certain conditions, men tend to perceive women as nothing more than bodies, as mere “things” or “objects”. Objectification, as Bevens & Loughnan (2019, 714) put it, involves “equating a person with a thing”, and this understanding abounds in the literature.

Although non-living things too might have intrinsic value (Nussbaum 1995, 258), in the present context it is generally assumed that if something is a “mere thing”, its value is at most instrumental. That’s why writers move easily from claims about women being seen as objects to claims about them being instrumentalized, mainly for sexual purposes: “A fact of life is that men often objectify women, attending more to their bodies than their intellect or personality, usually for sexual purposes” (Rudman & Mescher 2012, 735).<sup>10</sup> In the next section, I turn to illustrate how this understanding of objectification figures in explanations proposed for empirical findings about the relation between objectification and aggression against women.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Bitch’ would probably be an obvious exception to this generalization.

<sup>10</sup> Some writers go further and say that in sexual objectification women are treated “as mere sex tools” (Poon 2020, 11).

### 3 OH in Empirical Research

For years, feminists have claimed that objectification is a major cause of violence against women, but only in the last decade or so can we see the beginning of controlled studies seeking empirical confirmation for this claim. As indicated above, such studies don't investigate the effects of objectification on real assaults against women, only its effects on the tendency to develop a variety of aggressive attitudes or feelings towards them. But this tendency is supposed to indicate the effects of objectification in the real world, namely, outside the lab. If objectifiers incline towards aggression against women (or tolerance thereof) in the lab, this can plausibly be assumed to partly shape their actual moral relations with them.

As it is impossible to measure directly properties like "treating women as objects" or "treating women as means-only", the studies to which I'll be referring utilize a host of indirect tools that are assumed to indicate the extent of objectification, cashed out in terms of these properties. Such tools then enable researchers to investigate the relation between objectification and various forms of aggression against women (or tolerance thereof).

The tools measuring objectification are of two types. The first makes subjects in the manipulation group focus their attention on some woman's body, while having subjects in the control group focus on her face or on her non-physical properties. For instance, one study used a story about a female model raped by a stranger (Bernard et al. 2015). Sexual objectification was manipulated by adding a picture in the newspaper article reporting the rape, highlighting either the body of the model wearing underwear (in the "sexual objectification" condition), or her face (in the "personalized" condition). A similar manipulation was utilized in a different study (Beven & Loughman 2019), in which participants in the control condition viewed an image of a woman in everyday dress, while participants in the objectification condition viewed an image of the same woman in a bikini.

While in both these studies the woman in the objectification condition was sexualized, a third study measured objectification by focus on the participant's physical appearance without her wearing any provocative clothing. Those in the objectification condition were asked to focus on the participant's physical appearance, while those in the non-objectification condition were asked "to focus on the participant as a person" (Vasquez et al. 2018). In all of these studies, then, objectification was triggered by making male subjects focus on some woman's body in a way that probably made them pay attention to her sexuality.

The other way of empirically measuring objectification was by the use of questionnaires. For instance, in the Other Objectification Questionnaire, participants were asked to rank the relative importance of appearance and competence attributes on their evaluation of women's bodies. The scale consists of ten items: five appearance-based (i.e., sex appeal, physical attractiveness, weight, measurements, and toned muscles) and five competence-based (i.e., health, physical fitness level, strength, coordination, and stamina). Participants' scores are calculated by separately summing the appearance and competence ranks, and then subtracting the sum of the competence ranks from the sum of the appearance ranks. This produces a score ranging from -25 to

25, with higher scores reflecting more importance assigned to the appearance of the women, hence (assumingly) more objectification.

Other questionnaires ask subjects to indicate their level of agreement to a set of propositions that express what is conceptualized as objectifying attitudes or practices. For instance, in Vasquez et al. 2018, participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements: “Girls are only good for their body,” “It’s OK to treat girls as objects,” and “Girls are only used for pleasure.” Similarly, Seabrook et al. 2018 modified the Sexual Objectification Scale (Morse 2008) to include items such as “It is okay for a guy to stare at the body of an attractive woman he doesn’t know” and, “It is fun to rate women based on the attractiveness of their bodies.” Again, subjects were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with these statements.

So far regarding tools measuring objectification. To measure aggression against women, the studies relied on various questionnaires testing rape proclivity, level of sympathy with rape victims, acceptance of interpersonal violence and acceptance of various myths about rape, e.g. that any healthy woman could successfully resist a rapist if she really wanted to.

Unlike these ways of measuring aggression, one study used a tool that measured (perceived) *real* aggression, which was measured by asking participants to decide how long the confederate should submerge her hand in iced water (Vasquez et al. 2018, 7–8). In reality, no hands were submerged in iced water, just as nobody suffered electric shocks in Milgram’s famous experiment. But the subjects didn’t know that, and as far as they were concerned, the confederate suffered real pain as per their recommendation. The main question explored by this experiment was whether the level of recommended aggression would differ between subjects who, prior to this manipulation, had been asked to focus on the confederate’s physical appearance during some bogus task and those who were asked to focus on her personality. The results showed that being in the body-focus group increased the level of aggression against the confederate in comparison to being in the personality-focus group. The very focusing on a woman’s body increased aggression against her, even though she wore no provocative clothing.

Other studies yielded similar results although aggression was measured more indirectly. For instance, in one study (Bevens & Loughnan 2019), participants were randomly assigned to either a control condition in which they viewed an image of a woman in everyday clothing or a sexualized condition in which they viewed an image of the same woman in a bikini. They were then instructed to write briefly about the woman they had viewed. Participants in the control condition were asked to write about the positive and negative aspects of the woman, whereas those in the sexualized condition were asked to write about her appearance. Following the manipulation, participants completed three questionnaires measuring sexual aggression (or acceptance thereof); A Rape Behavior Analogue, a modified Attraction to Sexual Aggression Inventory, and modified Attitudes toward Rape Victims Scale. The results showed that when men focused on “sexualized” women and paid attention to their appearance, that significantly increased the likelihood of them seeing her as a potential victim of sexual aggression.

These studies seem to establish the existence of a causal relation between men's focus on a woman's body and various forms of aggression (or tolerance thereof) against her. Other studies established a *correlation* between these two phenomena by having subjects fill in questionnaires measuring objectification of the kinds mentioned above, and then fill in questionnaires measuring aggression against women or tolerance thereof. These studies established the required correlation, namely, that the more men "objectify" women (in the sense defined by the various questionnaires), the more likely they are to license or to tolerate aggression against them.<sup>11</sup> In light of the studies establishing a causal connection between the focusing by men on the female body and aggression against women, one may conclude that it is this connection that explains the above correlations.

I went into some detail in describing these studies to give the reader a sense of what I mean by OH. In all of these studies, the theoretical framework which was offered to explain the results had to do with the notions of dehumanization and, more centrally, objectification. The studies assumed that men tend to be aggressive against women *because* they objectify them, just as the Hutu murdered the Tutsi *because* they dehumanized them. And what psychologists mean when they talk in these studies about objectification is what philosophers like Martha Nussbaum (1995) have in mind, namely, reducing women to their bodies, seeing them as mere objects to be used (mainly sexually used) by men.<sup>12</sup>

OH's explanation for the hostility and aggression against women is tempting as it is prevalent, yet I believe it is flawed. To see why, let me start by pointing to the shortcomings of its close relative, DH.

## 4 Challenges for DH

In this section, I reconstruct what I see as the two main claims against DH in Over's criticism.<sup>13</sup> The first is that when people say that the members of some group (Jews or Tutsi) are nonhuman, or when they portray them in words or in graphics as animals, they should not be taken literally. They don't genuinely believe that members of these groups constitute a distinct type of animal, alongside dogs and rats, definitely not that they are sub-types of these animals. The second claim is that even if perpetrators did perceive their victims as nonhuman, that would fall short of explaining the aggression that they mete out to them.

Let me go through the main arguments Over develops to substantiate the first claim:

<sup>11</sup> For such correlational studies, see, for instance, Wright & Tokunaga 2016; Samji & Vasquez 2019; Seabrook et al. 2019; Cheeseborough et al. 2020; and Poerwandari 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Many empirical studies in this field refer to Nussbaum in introducing the notion of objectification. For some illustrations, see Morris et al. 2018, 1303; Anderson et al. 2018, 467; and Samji & Vasquez 2020, 386.

<sup>13</sup> *Perspectives on Psychological Science* published four brief responses to Over 2021a, to which she responded in Over 2021b. I won't be able to go here into the details of this exchange.

- a) “Animalistic” descriptions are used in the case of in-group members as well, e.g. when referring to a toddler as a “little monkey”. Obviously, such use does not indicate a denial of the toddler’s humanity.
- b) Neither animalistic descriptions nor mechanistic ones are compatible with other features that are ascribed to certain people by dehumanizers, such as deceitfulness, hypocrisy, greediness, and so on. These features are uniquely human, so when they are ascribed to members of some group their humanity is confirmed rather than denied.
- c) Relatedly, perpetrators often use the rhetoric of retribution and punishment when they talk about their perceived enemies, but these concepts make sense only when applied to human beings. We don’t regard machines, and usually not even animals, as deserving punishment for their assumed wrongful behavior.
- d) If those involved in crimes like genocide genuinely believed that their victims were nonhuman, they would not bother to *humiliate* them.<sup>14</sup> But they do, often in creative and chilling ways.<sup>15</sup> Such humiliation seeks to manifest the total power of the perpetrators over their victims, but at the same time confirms the latter’s humanity in a master-slave dialectic (see Margalit & Motzkin 1996). Nobody tries to humiliate rats, definitely not to humiliate “things” like stones or washing machines. As Appiah puts it (2008, 144), “the persecutors may liken the objects of their enmity to cockroaches or germs, but they acknowledge their victims’ humanity in the very act of humiliating, stigmatizing, reviling and torturing them”.

To conclude, then, assumed dehumanizers who treat their enemies cruelly and “inhumanly” do not genuinely believe that they are nonhuman.<sup>16</sup> Rather, they believe that they are evil or corrupt human beings, which is precisely why they are seen as so dangerous, as creatures who ought to be harshly punished, at times completely eliminated.

Now to the second claim against DH, namely, that even if it were true that perpetrators perceived their victims as nonhuman, that wouldn’t explain their (the perpetrators’) behavior. Young babies are clearly not “fully human”, but they typically evoke tenderness and love rather than violence and dislike. The same is true of some animals, such as kittens and pandas. So the fact that A believes that B is not a human being (or, again, not a “full” or a “complete” human being) falls short of explaining A’s aggression against B. In spite of its initial attraction, then, DH seems to offer the wrong kind of explanation for atrocities such as the mass murder of the Jews or the Tutsis.

<sup>14</sup> See Martin 2019 for the claim that most animals “cannot actually be humiliated or exposed to ridicule” (93).

<sup>15</sup> See Glover 2001, 36–37 (“the cold joke”), 247–248, 291–292.

<sup>16</sup> The fact that some people treat others cruelly although they don’t subscribe to the belief that their victims are non-human raises the suspicion that they do so just because they take delight in causing – and watching – suffering. See recently Statman 2022.



## 5 Challenges for OH

I turn now to the heart of my paper, namely, my criticism of OH. As with DH, I first argue against the claim that women are sometimes perceived as things or as objects and then against the assumed link between this perception and forms of aggression against them.

First, then, the fact that at a given moment – or even regularly – somebody focuses on one feature of some complex object doesn't mean that she “reduces” the object to that feature, if, by that, one means that she believes (consciously or half-consciously) that, literally, this feature exhausts the nature of the object. When Jill focuses on Michael's incredible swimming ability, she typically disregards other features, like his intelligence or his political orientation, but that doesn't mean that she believes that he is “nothing but” a swimming machine, with no internal life, no political views and so on. This applies not only to (focusing on) bodily parts or functions. Suppose Bill admires some professor for her brilliance and scholarship. Because of this admiration, he completely disregards her other features, in particular her bodily, *a fortiori* her sexual properties. That doesn't mean that, in any interesting sense, Bill “reduces” the professor to her intellectual features, genuinely denying the existence of her other features.<sup>17</sup>

If, then, sexual objectification means actually “reducing” women to their body parts or “equating” them with their bodies, it rarely (if ever) takes place. I should add that often a woman is objectified, in the paradigmatic sense of being the object of a “sexual gaze”, by a man who knows her well – say, a colleague from work – who evidently doesn't think that she's “just a body”; he *knows* that she's professional and creative and that she's fun to talk to, and she knows that he knows all this. He obviously doesn't believe for a second that she's “just an object” with no inner life and so on.

Second, the sexual attraction involved in the male focus on the female body is intimately connected with the recognition that the object of such focus is a living person, not just an assembly of organs. Insofar as the focus leads to sexual fantasies about the woman stared at, they are typically fantasies about having sex with *her*, not about having sex with isolated body parts.<sup>18</sup> It is telling that even owners of sex dolls tend “not to reduce the dolls to mere sex toys but to create rich narratives (in both text and photographs) about their dolls' personalities, backstories, and experiences” (Döring 2020).<sup>19</sup> Men, therefore, tend to *personify* the objects of their sexual desire rather than to *objectify* them.

Moreover, sexual fantasies typically refer to the woman's inner world, not only to her body. She is imagined as enjoying the sexual contact and as aroused by the male's desire. This has to do with the relational character of sex, as explicated e.g. by

<sup>17</sup> For the obscurity of the idea that focusing on a woman's looks “reduces” her to her bodily parts, see also Frederick 2016, 179.

<sup>18</sup> On similar lines, Cahill 2014b, 842, rightly rejects the standard objection to sex work as objectifying. As she notes, “in many cases, sex work requires workers to function precisely as subjects (being with emotions, desires, and sensations), and not as objects”.

<sup>19</sup> This conclusion gains some support from a recent study by Desbuleux and Fuss (2022) that provides initial evidence that the tendency to anthropomorphize dolls is related to negative attitudes toward women.

Nagel (1979, 47), arguing that “sex has a related structure; it involves a desire that one’s partner be aroused by the recognition of one’s desire that he or she be aroused”.

Third, sexual aggression too typically assumes its victim’s humanity rather than denies it (see LeMoncheck 1997, 134 and Cahill 2014a, 315). This is the same point, inspired by the master-slave dialectic, which I made earlier about dehumanization. Typically, the harasser or the rapist doesn’t merely want to use his victim’s *body*. He wants his victim to acknowledge his power over her; he *depends* on this acknowledgement (see esp. Nussbaum 1995, 253).

To conclude, there are good reasons to think that men never, or hardly ever, genuinely deny women’s subjectivity, believing that they are mere “objects” like chairs or computers. The same is true for the use of animalistic language; to the extent that men use such language to refer to women, it should not be taken literally but metaphorically.

I turn now to the second part of OH, according to which this perception is causally connected to increased aggression and hostility against women. Does this causal connection make sense? I doubt it. Like with DH, even if it were true that women are perceived by some men as “mere things”, it remains unclear why this should lead to aggression against them. Rudman and Mescher mention the seven different meanings of ‘objectification’ proposed by Nussbaum (1995, 257) and then say that “if men’s objectification of women reflects any or all of these factors, it would seem plausible to expect a link between men’s tendency to objectify women and sexual aggression” (Rudman and Mescher 2012, 735). But this link is actually quite mysterious. Take, for instance, interchangeability, which is one of the meanings of objectification in Nussbaum’s analysis. Why should seeing somebody as “interchangeable with similar others” lead to aggression against her? When I call a taxi, I’m usually indifferent as to the identity of the driver who will get the ride. As far as I am concerned, she is “interchangeable” with other drivers, but this in no way pushes me to aggression towards her. Similarly with treating something or somebody as a means for my purposes. I treat my computer as such a means, but that doesn’t make me feel aggressive towards it.

To say, then, that men treat women as (“mere”) things is insufficient to explain their aggression against them. Haslam’s other notion of objectification – the animalistic notion – fares no better. Unless they feel threatened, people are not usually aggressive towards the animals they encounter, and they usually treat their pets pretty well. It is therefore unclear why “men who implicitly animalized women were more willing to rape and sexually harass them, and to report negative attitudes toward female rape victims” (Rudman & Mescher 2012, 742).

To recap. Inspired by Over’s criticism of DH, I offered two lines of argument against OH. The first aimed at showing that even in the paradigmatic case of sexual objectification, namely, when men focus on a woman’s body, they don’t genuinely believe that she is a “mere object”. The second aimed at showing that even if women were perceived as mere objects, there is no reason why this perception should provoke hostility or aggression towards them.

Rejecting OH reopens the question of what does explain the causal connection between what psychologists refer to as ‘objectification’ and the increase of hostility and aggression against women. I propose that the way to answer this question

involves more emphasis on the ‘sexual’ component of ‘sexual objectification’. In the next section I have a first go in this direction.

## 6 An Alternative Hypothesis

Let me start by proposing that we stop utilizing the notion of objectification as a part of the explanandum, roughly conceived to be the fact that objectification increases aggression against women. Instead, I propose we talk about (male) sexual gaze or men’s sexual focus on the bodies of women. Accordingly, the explanandum would be the fact that when men engage in such sexual focus, that tends to increase their aggression against the women at whom they stare – and against women in general. To explain this fact is the challenge on the table.

The challenge also applies to the relation between the consumption of (non-violent) pornography and aggression. Here, too, there are studies indicating that such consumption increases aggressive attitudes and hostility against women and tolerance thereof (e.g. Yanyan et al. 2021). And, in this context too, the explanation is often given in terms of OH, namely, since pornography objectifies women and since such objectification is a failure to acknowledge their humanity, the consumption of pornography tends to increase aggression against them. There is no need to repeat the arguments against OH in this context too. Let me just point again to its weak explanatory power: Why should watching people having sex or watching women in sexualized postures lead to *aggression* against women (or tolerance thereof) rather than to love, warmth, longing for intimacy and other positive emotions and desires?

Watching pornography is, of course, more than just “focusing on women’s bodies”. It is focusing on them *sexually*, and involves sexual fantasies, desires, and arousal. This helps us to see that in the studies referred to in Section III this is also the case, though to a lesser degree. The focus manipulated in these studies involves some kind of sexual fantasy or desire, albeit short-lived, of low intensity, and often not fully conscious. In some studies, the object’s sexuality is more explicit (e.g. Bernard et al. 2015), while in others (e.g. Vasquez et al. 2018) less so. Regarding the latter, think particularly of the manipulation that asked subjects to focus on the appearance of a woman who wore no provocative clothing (Vasquez et al. 2018). I presume that even this focus was sufficient to provoke some level of sexual desire among male participants. The question, then, is why such forms of sexual stimulation tend to increase aggression against women or tolerance thereof.

A natural answer would be that men’s aggression in the context of sex is instrumental, namely, they use (or are more willing to consider using) aggression in order to obtain the women they seek. Indeed, it has been shown that sexually aroused men are more likely to engage in sexually aggressive behavior than men who are not sexually aroused (Loewenstein, Nagon & Paternoster 1997), and that sexual arousal decreases men’s commitment to morality (Ariely & Loewenstein 2006). The explanation offered by these researchers is that sexual arousal narrows the focus of moti-

vation, “creating a kind of tunnel-vision where goals other than sexual fulfillment become eclipsed by the motivation to have sex” (ibid. 95).<sup>20</sup>

These explanations for aggression are helpful but insufficient. Their main shortcoming lies in their failure to account for the effect of the sexual gaze on hostility against women *in general*. Why should one’s sexual attraction to some particular woman, accompanied – let’s assume – by frustrated fantasies about her, lead to hostility towards *other* women, expressed, *inter alia*, by increased support for propositions like “It’s OK to treat girls as objects,” or “Generally it is safer not to trust women” (Samji & Vasquez 2020, 388)?

This puzzle is related to the theoretical reflections on OH in Section V above, in particular to my claim that objectification fails to make sense of male aggression and violence against women. Had the violence been merely instrumental, in the sense just explained, it might have made sense (which obviously does not mean that it would have been *justified*), but clearly it is not. First, the violence we are looking at is not only sexual. For instance, in Vasquez et al. 2018, the aggression took the form of (agreeing to) submerging the hand of the objectified woman in iced water, certainly not a case of *sexual* violence.<sup>21</sup> Second, as feminists have long argued, even sexual violence is much more a matter of *violence* than of sex, namely, it is not simply a way of satisfying a burning sexual desire. The aggression and violence triggered by what is called objectification seem, therefore, much more punitive than instrumental.

But what is an objectified, namely, a sexually gazed-at woman, being punished *for*? Maybe, in some cases, it is for allegedly “playing games”; seducing men, as it were, and then frustrating their burning desire for her. But this answer, even if accepted, would again fail to explain why men’s sexual gaze at some woman leads to aggression, or tolerance thereof, towards other, maybe all women. Why, for instance, should men’s frustrated sexual desire result in blaming rapists less (Bernard et al. 2015) or in an increased tendency to accept rape myths “that down-play, deny, or minimize victim injury and justify the perpetration of various forms of sexual aggression, such as rape and sexual harassment” (Samji and Vasquez 2020)? That is the puzzle that needs to be resolved.

I think we can make some progress by relying on Kate Manne’s theory of misogyny (2018). According to Manne,

Misogyny is primarily a property of social systems or environments as a whole, in which women will tend to face hostility of various kinds *because they are women in a man’s world* (i.e., a patriarchy), who are held to be failing to live up to patriarchal standards. (33)

What are these standards which underlie the expectations from women? Women are supposed to take the lion’s share in “feminine-coded goods and services” which include “simple respect, love, acceptance, nurturing, safety, security and safe haven” and also “kindness and compassion, moral attention, care, concern, and soothing”

<sup>20</sup> The instrumental connection between aggression and sex might have its origins in our evolutionary ancestors. Baniel et al. 2017 have found that male baboons who are more aggressive toward a certain female weeks before she is able to produce offspring have a better chance to mate with her later on.

<sup>21</sup> Drawing attention to non-sexualized forms of aggression that result from what’s usually called objectification is an important contribution to the literature on objectification that tends to tie objectification exclusively with *sexual* aggression and violence.

(110). When women provide these goods and services, they are rewarded and valorized, e.g. when they are “loving mothers, attentive wives, loyal secretaries, ‘cool’ girlfriends, or good waitresses” (72). When they don’t, they are punished, sometimes by mere hostility, other times by more serious measures. After all, “what could be a more natural basis for hostility and aggression than defection from the role of an attentive, loving subordinate?” (49).

Since misogyny is about policing and enforcing a patriarchal *order*, it is often the case that when women fail to comply with its norms, the number of men who feel threatened goes way beyond those who are directly touched by some women neglecting to provide the love, care and attentiveness expected from them. The policing of patriarchal norms is a task in which many men in patriarchal societies are invested in one way or another, and the objects of this policing are virtually all women; “almost any woman will be vulnerable to some form of misogynist hostility from some source or other”.<sup>22</sup> The law enforcement model of misogyny also explains why the violence meted at women who are perceived as threatening the patriarchal order need not be sexual, and, for the most part, is probably not. There are many and diverse ways of enforcing a social order.

Obviously what incites aggression and hostility against women is not the very fact that they violate patriarchal norms, but that they are *perceived* as doing so, or as being supportive or sympathetic to such violations. Such perceptions might be completely irrational, which doesn’t make them any less dangerous. The 2014 Isla Vista killings by Elliot Rodger are a chilling reminder of how a man can see all women as enemies for “giving their affection, sex and love to others rather than to himself”, as he put it, adding, in his last video, “I’ll punish you all for it” (cited by Manne 2018, 35).

Here, then, is my proposal. When a man watches pornography, he is sexually aroused and sometimes feels – fortunately on a much lower scale – the same feelings as those expressed by Elliot Rodger: Here are these gorgeous young women “giving their affection, sex and love to others rather to himself”. In some cases, the feelings are a response to watching women do precisely that, namely, giving their sex and affection to others. In other cases, the actresses look at the spectator (the camera) seductively, delivering a message of availability or permissiveness. The spectator then feels he’s entitled to their sex and love, and is frustrated when he realizes that he won’t be getting them. His frustration is intensified by jealousy towards the actual or imagined men who do receive these goods and services. Comparing himself to them reinforces his sense of rejection. The result of this process, which is mostly unconscious, is hostility both against the direct objects of his frustrated sexual desire and against women in general who are perceived as complicit in the violation of patriarchal norms. This hostility is not instrumental (a way of getting sex partners) but punitive and, consequently, does not lead only to sexualized violence, but to non-sexualized violence as well, just as in the case of Rodger.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Manne 2018, 68. In line with my criticism of OH, Manne emphasizes that misogyny is not grounded in men’s failure to recognize women as fellow human beings (22).

<sup>23</sup> Note that, in my account, aggression against women is not “displaced,” an expression that refers to cases in which innocent substitute targets become the victims of aggression (Bushman & Huesmann, 2010). For the misogynist, these women are complicit and hence *blameworthy*.

In other words, when a man is even mildly sexually aroused by e.g. focusing his attention on some woman's appearance, he unconsciously tends to develop a kind of sexual interest in her which is sometimes bound up with the expectation that she will cooperate and will give him the "affection, sex and love" to which he feels entitled. When she does not, he becomes frustrated and hostile towards her and towards women in general.<sup>24</sup> I'm obviously not talking about real refusal because the object of the sexual gaze is often unaware both of the gaze and of its effects on the gazer. All this process takes place within the mind of the male gazer: the sexual attraction and desire, the expectation that its object will cooperate, the frustration from realizing that she's not going to, and the hostility that follows.

Note the precise role of misogyny (as defined by Manne) in this explanation. If Paul wants to meet Bill but this does not work out for reasons unrelated to Bill, Paul will be disappointed but will not feel anger or hostility towards *Bill*. If such feelings arose, they would be directed at those whom Paul saw as responsible for the fact that his plan did not materialize. Similarly in the present context. What provokes the gazer's aggression is not the mere frustration of his (mild and undeveloped) sexual desire, but his perceived identification of those responsible for it, namely, the woman gazed at, or wider circles of women, who are seen as rejecting him, denying him what he's entitled to and in general threatening patriarchal norms.<sup>25</sup> In the mundane cases we are talking about, this sense of rejection leads to only mild hostility towards women. When the rejection is more explicit, the results are more destructive, at times lethal (see Blake et al. 2017 and Adinkrah 2021).<sup>26</sup>

That sexual focus on women's bodies increases hostility against them is related to the fact that a certain level of such hostility is a permanent property of misogynist societies, especially those with a significant number of "rebels" challenging the patriarchal order and, consequently, a perceived need to keep women "in their place". Against this background, mistrust and suspicion against women are natural, and hostility against perceived violators of the patriarchal order is easily triggered. The punitive aspect of this hostility fits well the findings we mentioned in Section III, for instance that men in what researchers called the 'sexual objectification condition' tend to feel less sympathy with rape victims, probably because they are seen as having gotten what they deserve.

If misogyny is indeed part of the explanation for the relation between sexual gaze and aggression, we should expect to see a difference between the effect of the sexual gaze of men at women and that of women at men, men at men and women at women. To date it is hard to confirm this expectation because the relevant studies have been

<sup>24</sup> Most probably, hostility and aggression in such cases are intensified in the case of men who already feel lonely and rejected by women, or who struggle with a low sense of self-worth. However, more research is needed in order to determine the exact role of these factors. Whether low self-worth contributes to aggression is not as obvious as one would like to think. See, for instance, Baumeister et al. 1996 and Bushman et al. 2019.

<sup>25</sup> For the view that a sense of entitlement is one of the factors that explains rape, see Polaschek and Gannon 2004.

<sup>26</sup> That misogyny enables and even encourages violence against women doesn't mean that it will typically manifest itself in violence or even in violent tendencies. See Manne 2018, 76.

conducted only on male participants focusing sexually on *women*.<sup>27</sup> If future research shows that sexual gaze leads to the same aggression and hostility in all the above contexts, the misogyny thesis would have to be replaced by a different thesis, along the following lines: Objects of sexual gaze – of all kinds – tend to be seen as denying the gazers what they desire (in contrast to what they feel *entitled* to), which leads to frustration, which then blends with low self-esteem and a more general sense of frustration, which then results in aggression against men or women (respectively) in general. I confess my skepticism about the results of such future research (and the alternative thesis required to make sense of them). My own guess is that sexual gaze tends to lead to more intense aggression when directed from men to women than when directed from men to men, women to men and women to women, and, most importantly, that it is directed to many more women – in a sense to women in general. For instance, I doubt whether lesbians sexually gazing at other women would tend to become more aggressive, but even they do, I don't expect the aggression to be directed at *other* women, or at women *in general*. Consequently, I would be very surprised if such sexual gaze by women at women would lead to a decrease in the gazers' sympathy with rape victims, or would increase their acceptance of the myth rape, results that were established among men sexually focusing on women. In other words, my hypothesis is that it is not the sexual gaze per se – more accurately the perceived frustration of the sexual desire aroused by it – that is responsible for the increased aggression (or tolerance thereof) of men vis-à-vis women, but the social context in which this gaze takes place. But, as I commented earlier, more research is needed.

## 7 Concluding Remarks

The last decade or so has witnessed a wave of empirical studies purporting to show that the sexual focus of men on the female body leads to increased hostility and aggression against women. The question is how to explain this relation. According to a widespread answer – “The Objectification Hypothesis” – male aggression against women is explained by the fact that its perpetrators perceive women as mere objects. Inspired by Over's criticism of “The Dehumanization Hypothesis”, most of my paper was devoted to a rejection of this explanation. This rejection places me in the growing camp of critics who are dissatisfied with the notion of sexual objectification and the way it is typically used.<sup>28</sup> Note, however, that for the sake of the present paper I am not committed to the claim that the concept of sexual objectification is completely useless for feminist philosophy, and I am aware of philosophical attempts to offer more nuanced accounts of it.<sup>29</sup> My main target here has been *descriptive* uses of objectification, within the context of The Objectification Hypothesis, uses which I find rather unhelpful.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Wright & Tokunaga 2016; Samji & Vasquez 2019; Bevens & Loughnan 2019; and Seabrook et al. 2019.

<sup>28</sup> See Cahill 2012; Frederick 2016; and Manne 2018.

<sup>29</sup> See especially Jütten 2016.

Rejecting OH leaves me with the task of offering an alternative explanation for what seems to be an empirically confirmed connection between the sexual gaze and aggression against women. The explanation I propose makes no reference to the notions of seeing-other-as-object or of treating-as-means-only. Instead, it locates the dynamic at hand within the theoretical framework of misogyny along the lines developed by Kate Manne. This is only an initial proposal which requires further empirical research for confirmation.

Finally, while in some cases the sexual gaze leads to increased aggression against women, in others it does not. In the latter, is there anything morally bothersome in such a gaze? If my arguments are sound, it won't help much to say that the gaze is inappropriate because it "objectifies" women. The question of whether it is nonetheless morally flawed will have to wait for another day.

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## Declarations

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