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Negotiating opposition to positive sexuality research, practice, and education: Insights from personal reflection

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Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on my academic career to share insights on dealing with challenges arising from specializing in positive sexuality. The current American bimodal political climate, a focus on consumerism in higher education, and an undervaluing of actual expertise are important contemporary social contexts that should be realized when anticipating opposition to positive sexuality research, practice, and education. Positive sexuality researchers, practitioners, and educators are encouraged to anticipate opposition, build strong support networks, apply rigor to their work, focus on common societal values, and prioritize their personal self-care.

Introduction

Western society has a long, largely unrecognized history of cultural sex-negativity. Despite recognition by social scientists and anthropologists that sexual norms vary considerably by culture (e.g., Bughra et al., 2010; Bullough, 1976; Popovic, 2006), many scholars, professionals, and laypeople remain unaware that much common sexual knowledge, scientific and otherwise, remains situated within broad sex-negative assumptions. The good news is that more academics and professionals are becoming increasingly aware of common sex-negative assumptions. Unfortunately, widespread social change usually occurs much more slowly than many of us would prefer.

In this brief personal essay, I reflect on opposition to positive sexuality research and education, drawing on my own personal experience in academia, along with numerous relevant observations and interactions with fellow positive sexuality experts. My hope is that insights shared here may be valuable for young academics, clinicians, and educators who are passionate about positive sexuality and who plan to develop a career centered on this topic. Because an awareness of positive sexuality, conceptualized in various ways, seems to be growing rapidly and now has a certain amount of momentum and perceived academic and professional legitimacy, the future appears to be bright for young academics and professionals who turn their careers toward this topic. However, at the same time, whenever commonly held assumptions are substantially questioned or challenged, including but not limited to those around sexual behavior, then we should expect to face a considerable amount of opposition and resistance.

Although I strongly believe that positive sexuality has a bright future, it is important to remember that opposition to change seems to happen most intensely as momentum supporting

¹ Acknowledgements: The author expresses gratitude to the many individuals who engage in positive sexuality research, practice, and education. A career in positive sexuality is rewarding but not always easy. Special thanks is extended to those who have offered support to the author, personally, throughout particularly challenging times.

new ways of thinking builds, thus gaining traction within the mainstream. Also, current societal conditions further complicate the specific nature of contemporary opposition to positive sexuality research and education—specifically, the polarization of American politics; the functional shift in higher education to a consumer model; and the common failure to understand epistemological differences, and thus outcomes, related to research methods and knowledge production. As Nichols (2017) recently documented, there is widespread ignorance of, and worse, disregard for, formal expertise. In other words, there is a large percentage of the population that does not understand research processes and how to evaluate critically various types and sources of information (Nichols, 2017).

Politically, there seems to be a battle, unfortunately, between American extremes (right vs. left) on a wide range of social issues; thus, moderates seem to be drawn increasingly toward one side or the other. However, opposition to positive sexuality potentially can arise from anywhere on the conservative-liberal continuum, and “fighting battles,” in contrast to peacemaking, is the current norm (Williams et al., 2019). Also, higher education has changed dramatically in recent decades and has adopted a consumer model (Nichols, 2017); thus students (as paying consumers) seem to have more political power within educational institutions than ever before. Finally, postmodern and poststructural theoretical orientations, which emerged as an important methodological critique of positivist science as the only legitimate method of inquiry (Gergen, 2001), have instead functioned for many as a replacement for rigorous scientific process and has given rise, unfortunately, to an all-too-common attitude that any opinion is just as valid as any other opinion. Such a simple irrational attitude not only lacks sophistication, but it can lead to dangerous outcomes. Of course, while diverse rigorous methods for obtaining knowledge have value, some research methods are much better suited to answer particular questions, while other methods can help answer different questions. While it is beyond the focus of this paper to delve into the above issues in depth, suffice it to say that the above issues within the current social and political world seem to shape, at least in some substantial part, opposition to positive sexuality research and education.

Reflecting on an Academic Career: Insights for Navigating Opposition

When I began my Ph.D. studies two decades ago, much of my research program focused on sexual crime. I quickly discovered that while an accumulating body of scientific research on sexual offending issues moved in one direction, sexual offending policy had quickly progressed in the opposite direction. It has been well documented that contemporary U.S. sexual offender policy is based almost entirely on myths and moral panic, not science and research (Quinn et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2015a). As I became familiar with the research literature on sexual behavior more broadly, I further discovered that common attitudes on other sexuality topics, such as sex education, alternative sexual identities, and sex work, were also rooted in myths rather than actual research and scholarship. As a doctoral student, I discovered that learning about sexual behavior was fascinating. After reading study after study, I became more uncomfortable with the everyday injustices that occur directly due to mismatches between rigorous sexuality research and common social attitudes rooted in sex-negative myths. Dominant social discourses in western culture have produced largely unchallenged assumptions about sexual behavior and subsequently exerted increased political control over those who engaged in supposedly “deviant” behavior, yet an accumulating body of scholarship continues to challenge

such assumptions. A combination of (a) the biopsychosocial complexity of sexual behavior and (b) the everyday social injustice due to mismatches between research and practice sparked a new research interest, consensual bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism (BDSM) that has spanned my entire academic career from Ph.D. student to full professor.

“Follow Your Bliss”—Carefully!

While conducting initial research, as a participant, on (BDSM) as a postdoctoral fellow, I was warned by a thoughtful professor to carefully consider the problems that may arise simply by researching alternative sexuality topics. Researching alternative sexuality and BDSM might be “career suicide,” she had wisely explained. She stated that higher education is not as open as many people think and that researching taboo topics brings intense stigma, including by academic colleagues. This observation has been documented over the years by several sex researchers (i.e., Attwood, 2010; Hammond & Kingston, 2014; Israel, 2002; Thomas & Williams, 2016). Early scholars studying BDSM faced significant stigma by academic institutions and colleagues due to their chosen topic (Jobson, 2020; Weinberg, 2020). Decades later, federal granting agencies in the U.S. are not yet willing to fund positive sexuality research; thus, faculty positions at research universities where securing federal funding is a tenure requirement may not be the best fit for young positive sexuality scholars.

However, after carefully considering the likelihood that some career opportunities would not be available due to researching taboo topics - including BDSM and alternative sexuality - I remained fascinated with trying to understand diverse sexual behavior. I personally felt strongly that both common social attitudes and policy should be based primarily on sound research and scholarly analysis, not historical myths and popular opinion. I decided that following my research passion, as numerous other brave scholars in the field of human sexuality have done, was the right course for me. I feel fortunate that my professors in graduate school were encouraging and supportive while also acknowledging and advising me to be prepared for potential problems that might arise simply due to my choice of research topics.

Anticipate Opposition

In 2006, I accepted a tenure-track faculty position. As a new assistant professor, I reached out by email to two senior professors at other institutions who had enjoyed very successful careers focused on understanding diverse sexual behavior. I asked for any advice they would be willing to share regarding starting an academic career and, hopefully, my following in their large footsteps. Both were very supportive and shared excellent advice, including a clear warning that strong opposition inevitably would come—in other words, it was not a matter of if, but when. They emphasized the importance of expecting opposition and being prepared for it. Both had observed that it is impossible to keep everybody happy when conducting research on human sexuality and other sensitive topics. These two wise scholars, who both had received prestigious awards for their teaching and research, had faced fierce opposition in their own careers. One dealt with systemic public outcry for him to be fired, and he was sent numerous death threats by anonymous people who apparently were not pleased with his topics of expertise.

For the first five years or so following my entrance into academia as a faculty member, things went reasonably smoothly. I heard about various gossip about me that apparently circulated within the conservative regional area where my university is located. I expected gossip, of course, but did not think too much of it. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, on a sunny spring morning in 2011, I was instructed to report to my dean's office immediately for an emergency meeting. Present at the meeting were the dean, associate dean, department chair, and me. Apparently, a powerful state senator was not pleased about my expertise on sexuality and had called the university administration demanding that I be fired. I was accused of conducting a "salacious" and "inappropriate" teaching activity during an upper division/graduate level criminology class. The supposedly intolerable class activity, as part of a module on sexual offender supervision, focused on dealing therapeutically with offenders' sexual fantasies in treatment and involved students anonymously creating a sexual fantasy while also being able to read such material written by others in a professional, matter-of-fact manner—just as a therapist or law enforcement officer would do in a clinical or legal setting. This educational activity is important preparation for developing professional competence to work with sexual offenders. In the end, all my syllabi, course materials, and class evaluations were reviewed and thoroughly scrutinized. I provided additional material to support my scholarship on sexual behavior, including copies of emails with advice from the two senior sexuality scholars that I had reached out to when I began my career. My preparation was essential in me keeping my job.

Apparently, I was watched very closely for several years by those who continually sought my job termination. These years were stressful, to say the least. Fortunately, I had outstanding support from my dean, associate dean, and numerous internal and external colleagues. I was still able to achieve tenure and promotion to associate professor on time, as well as a recent promotion to full professor by a new university administration. Although I withstood administrative scrutiny and continued to succeed academically, I was not as prepared as I should have been for that experience and the emotional toll that it has taken. I still refuse to use an office phone due to post-traumatic reaction from seeing that a threatening message may be waiting. Thankfully, the current administration is far more supportive and protective of academic freedom than the previous one. I still cannot help but be cautious, however.

Network and Build Support

Due to both stigma and the likelihood of opposition to positive sexuality education and research, it is important for those pursuing a career in positive sexuality to connect with other scholars and professionals, both within and outside of one's academic institution, if possible, who do similar work. In other words, both internal and external academic support is needed. I started to network early in my career but would have benefited from additional mentoring and career support. Connecting with supportive positive sexuality colleagues can be extremely valuable, of course, in dealing with both blatant and also more subtle forms of opposition that may arise. It also may be wise to connect with campus programs (and faculty) that focus on diversity resources, LGBT studies, and social justice. Strong mutual support offers strength and protection that may be needed should significant opposition arise. Furthermore, strong professional networks help sustain motivation over time while reminding us that although our work may be difficult, it remains important and valuable.

Several nonprofit organizations do outstanding professional work related to positive sexuality, including the Center for Positive Sexuality (CPS), National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF), Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities (CARAS), The Alternative Sexuality Health Research Alliance (TASHRA), and the Woodhull Freedom Foundation (WFF). These organizations often work together and support each other while providing opportunities for various professionals to obtain more knowledge, skill, and support. Not surprisingly, several leaders in these organizations have experience successfully navigating various experiences of opposition to positive sexuality.

Emphasize Professional Ethics and Common Social Values

Opposition to positive sexuality typically is rooted in common sex-negative attitudes about specific sexual behaviors (and people who engage in such behaviors). However, when defending positive sexuality research and education, it may be particularly beneficial to focus primarily on professional ethics and common social values. Formal codes of ethics across the helping professions (i.e., counseling, medicine, nursing, psychology, social work, etc.) explicitly promote client self-determination, human diversity, cultural sensitivity (including an awareness of one's own biases), and social justice. The helping professions also emphasize the importance of research-informed practice. Positive sexuality, of course, should reflect these same basic ethical principles (Williams et al, 2015b). Negotiating opposition, then, may be more successful by gently addressing standard ethical issues relevant to human diversity, social justice, cultural bias, and so forth, rather than defending topics—including specific behaviors, subcultures, communities, or assumed outcomes. Depending on the opposition, it can also be helpful to mention, as examples, more familiar historical movements around human rights where false assumptions once reigned but substantial progress has since been achieved. In other words, the process of stereotyping, marginalizing, and discriminating against a particular group of people is generally the same. Various individuals and communities, now assimilated into the mainstream, have been (mis)labeled historically as “dangerous” and/or “deviant” until much more knowledge became available.

Apply Rigor

Critics of positive sexuality issues often seem to focus on restricting professional work (i.e., research, teaching, practice) dealing with taboo topics. In addition to emphasizing ethics, researchers, practitioners, and educators should also highlight that scholarly rigor is present in their work. Researchers should strive to conduct methodologically sound investigations, acknowledge limitations, and not overstate or overgeneralize findings. The work of educators and practitioners should be rooted in current, relevant scholarship that can highlight the potential contributions of a positive sexuality approach. Rigor also should be applied to critique various studies, theories, and common assumptions about all sorts of sexuality topics. When considering the application of “evidence” to one's academic and professional work, it is worth remembering that evidence can be scientific, historical, and cultural, though each of these types of evidence has limitations. My experience has been that professional engagement in positive sexuality topics is not difficult to defend when discussions focus on ethics and scholarly rigor.

Create a Self-Care Plan—and Follow it!

A career in positive sexuality, whether as an academic or other professional, can be rewarding but also stressful, especially when the potential for encountering negative appraisal from others is likely. It is valuable, then, to create and follow a basic self-care plan. Incidentally, the need for regular self-care among practitioners across the helping professions continues to be recognized—so much so that the American Nurses Association (ANA, 2015) explicitly included self-care in the latest edition of its Code of Ethics. Under Provision 5.2: Promotion of Personal Health, Safety, and Well-Being; nursing professionals “should eat a healthy diet, exercise, get sufficient rest, maintain family and personal relationships, engage in adequate leisure and recreational activities, and attend to spiritual or religious needs” (ANA, p. 35).

For many professionals, practicing regular self-care is quite difficult due to occupational time demands. Of course, some positive sexuality scholars and professionals participate in BDSM or fetish activities as a part of their self-care, and the decision to out oneself or not should be well thought out (Williams et al., 2021). However, all academics and professionals should have the right to self-determination in their private lives, just like everyone else, so long as formal laws and professional ethical requirements are followed. Wisdom should be applied, of course, but personal preferences to engage in positive sexuality activities should be defensible according to relevant research and professional ethics.

Reflecting on my own career, I have been quite successful at setting boundaries around professional demands in order to nurture self-care and sustain some degree of life balance. Although I initially underestimated the intensity of opposition I would encounter, my consistent, basic self-care probably got me through the incredibly stressful experience of facing serious threats to my job. Today, I insist that students I supervise create and follow a basic self-care plan, which includes salubrious recreation and leisure activities, whatever these may be, during personal time.

Conclusion

The positive sexuality movement is growing rapidly worldwide, thus producing new ways to approach research, education, and professional practice. Communities of specialized positive sexuality practitioners also collaborate with scholars and professionals (such as CARAS) to share knowledge and provide mutual support. However, while this rapid growth is exciting, it also can result in sometimes fierce opposition by various individuals, communities, and institutions that reflect attitudes and assumptions still thoroughly immersed in sex-negativity. Thus, there remains a strong need for positive sexuality researchers and professionals to be prepared to encounter professional marginalization and intense political opposition. In contemporary American society, there seems to be political polarization rooted in ubiquitous war-making, a widespread consumer-driven approach to higher education, and a lack of general literacy regarding understanding and critiquing knowledge production and application (see Nichols, 2017). In contrast to common political strategies of fighting various wars and weaponizing opposing beliefs, I believe positive sexuality should reflect peacemaking as much as possible, yet peacemaking sometimes requires defense against attacks (Williams et al., 2019). The crux of this paper is about insights that may be useful for positive sexuality researchers, educators, and practitioners to defend against potential opposition.

I believe it is important for young academics and professionals to follow their bliss (carefully) despite potential career difficulties—but to be sufficiently prepared by anticipating opposition, networking and building professional support, emphasizing ethics and rigor, and consistently following a self-care plan. I have learned that while an awareness of potential opposition is obvious, it is easy to become complacent and subsequently underestimate the psychological difficulty of having to deal with such an experience. I am now at a point in my career, as a full professor with tenure, to speak more openly about professional experiences that have significantly impacted me, personally, and vice-versa (see also Williams et al., 2021). I have been fortunate to have received strong support from many colleagues and friends through difficult times. Upon reflection, I am still pleased that I made the career choices that I did. I continue to applaud the pioneers of positive sexuality—many of whose work I drew from in building much of my career—for their courage, perseverance, and commitment to work that has produced numerous benefits to both current and future generations.

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It's (probably) not about sex baby, but it is about you and me: A quasi-ethnographic exploration of consensual corporal punishment

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Abstract

Corporal punishment (CP) is one aspect of BDSM play. While enjoyed by many at a low level, some players indulge in heavier play, with the potential for skin and tissue damage. This paper presents the results of an exploratory quasi-ethnographic study into CP, examining the motivations and potential benefits and risks of playing in this way, with the aim of increasing understanding of why individuals engage in heavy CP. Data were gathered from scene observations and semi-structured interviews with participants, including three professional Dominatrices with a reputation internationally for CP. Thematic Analysis was used to assess the data. While sexual arousal was a motivator for some participants, it was not the motivator for the majority. The importance of the marks left on the body was a common theme, as was challenging oneself to increase the amount of CP received or given. This was either to demonstrate a progression along a journey of increasing severity, or to enhance the experience either sexually, bruises / marks wise, or psychologically. Despite allusions by participants to addiction, psychological benefits in mood and mental health were reported by all participants. The main negative aspect of participation was fear of stigma and the perceived inability to be open with others about their interests. Participation in CP is a positive experience for those involved. The importance of bodily marks is a new finding, as is the positive impact on mental health.

Introduction

BDSM (bondage/discipline; domination/submission; sadism/masochism) can involve a range of potential activities and 'play,' usually incorporating one or more of the above elements. Individuals engage in these activities across a spectrum from an ad hoc basis to a lifestyle (Kolmes et al., 2006). BDSM awareness is perhaps growing thanks to the popularity of fiction such as *50 Shades of Grey* (Holvoet et al., 2017) and the increasing use of fetish imagery in popular culture (Weiss, 2006), but it is still not 'mainstream.' One form of play commonly incorporated into BDSM is corporal punishment (CP). Alison et al. (2001) developed a 'BDSM taxonomy' where CP would fit into the 'administration of pain' category, though other elements such as physical restriction (bondage or restraint) or humiliation are often co-present. There is an active 'scene' for players within the BDSM community, for both those assuming the dominant (Top) or submissive (Bottom) roles. In this paper, the 'giver' of the punishment will be referred to as the 'Top'; the receiver the 'Bottom.' Individuals who change between roles are referred to as a 'Switch.'

A CP scene might comprise exposing the Bottom – particularly the area/s to be punished – before being positioned and perhaps secured in place. A 'warm-up' punishment such as a spanking at a lighter level than what will be received later may or may not be administered, before the main element of the punishment is delivered. The aim of a warm-up is to enable the

Bottom to take more or alleviate the discomfort of the main strokes. However, many scenes do not incorporate a warm-up, and readers may well immediately spot a flaw in this description, i.e., this is just one of a thousand possibilities for play and is not representative of all CP interactions. ‘Corporal punishment’ in this paper will be defined as the striking of one individual by another, using either the hand or various implements, where both parties have consented to that activity. CP ranges in severity from a mild ‘playful’ spanking to a judicial-type caning with substantial tissue damage. This paper will discuss the findings of a small, quasi-ethnographic study into the motivations and experiences of a group of CP practitioners, predominantly in the United Kingdom (UK). It will consider the psychosocial aspects of CP from the participant’s perspective, particularly at what might be termed the ‘heavier’ end of the spectrum, i.e., where marks lasting for days if not weeks are made, bleeding might occur, or longer-term skin / physical damage caused.

Most papers consider BDSM activity as a whole and discuss CP — if it is discussed as a specific activity at all — within that context (e.g., Silva, 2015). Play at the level discussed in this paper can lead to long-term injury (Pinson, 2019) and is illegal in the UK. In UK law, an individual cannot consent to harm/assault. The legal position is based on the 2007 case of *R vs. Brown*:

“while consent may be a defense to injury short of a wound or amounting to common assault, an individual cannot consent to intentional injury that amounts to actual bodily harm or worse” (Paul, 2015)

The 2007 case follows the precedent set in 1934 (*R vs Donovan*) in which marks which were deemed to be more than ‘transient and trifling’ – they need not be permanent – would be charged and prosecuted as actual bodily harm (CPS, 2018). Bruises that last for days or weeks are not considered to be transient or trifling. Klement et al. (2017) alluded perhaps to heavier play in their paper on extreme rituals, where they considered the incorporation of a piercing/hook pull ritual into BDSM play and described sexual arousal and positive psychological effects, but this involved hook insertion/pulling rather than CP.

Given the apparent risks inherent in CP play from a legal and injury perspective, the aim of this study is to discover the motivations and desires of players involved in CP, both giving and receiving, before considering potential risks (for example physical in the form of injury or psychological including concerns about social stigma, feelings of guilt or adverse impact on psychological health and well-being) and benefits. The concept of stigma and openness about one’s participation in CP was an issue that arose from the first respondent interviewed, and observations of the discretion and privacy procedures in place at the play events. Bearing in mind the potential adverse effects that stigma can have upon an individual (Bezreh et al., 2012; Waldura et al., 2016), further interviews were adapted to include this route of questioning. Other studies have considered motivations and desires from a pain perspective (Dunkley et al., 2020); BDSM as a whole (Newmahr, 2008); or the psychological benefits and risks of BDSM play (Silva, 2015; Wismeijer & Assen, 2013). These studies have identified motivations for BDSM including sexual arousal, short and long term benefits to mental health or mood, or the identification of self, but none have focussed explicitly on CP.

Method

The study's ethical approval was sought and granted by DeMontfort University's Health and Life Science Ethics committee. The approach adopted was 'quasi ethnographic' (Murtagh, 2007), e.g., not an ethnography in the classical sense of prolonged time immersed in a culture, forming opinions based on observations, field notes, and interviews (Jones & Smith, 2017) but rather dipping in and out, forming conclusions based in part on observation but predominantly on the data gathered from interviews, using partial immersion as a route of entry into a closed world.

A convenience sample of potential participants was identified via three different media: personal contact of three professional disciplinarians based in the UK and South Africa, attending a CP event in the U.K., and internet forums. There was an element of snowball sampling, in that individuals were approached or recommended for potential inclusion in the study by existing participants, particularly the professional disciplinarians. Some potential participants were not included as their engagement in CP was a minimal part of their BDSM activity. The internet was used in the early stages to recruit but was abandoned as changes to digital law (either perceived or real) forced the main UK-based website focusing particularly on CP to close, and no participants were forthcoming from invitations to participate sent via Fetlife – a large Canada-based fetish website. Participants were provided with an information leaflet about the study, and any questions they had were answered prior to consent being obtained.

It cannot be said that there was no selection bias at this stage. Participants were individuals identified by the pro-dominants who could be approached or those the author identified from Fetlife as possible candidates based on their profile and amount of engagement with the platform – an entirely subjective process. At the event, at least one participant who may have yielded very interesting data was excluded due to intoxication and a poor reputation within the scene. As Infante-Rivard and Alexandre (2018) explain, selection bias (in this case endogenous bias) reduces validity of results, but can be controlled for, in quantitative studies at least, via statistical correction. It is doubtful whether the non-inclusion of one individual would have any significant effect on the data set but given the small sample size, it is a factor that may negatively affect the generalizability of the results. However, Fetterman, (2010) states that a deliberate choice of individuals may well be positive, depending on the phenomenon to be studied.

Data were collected from 11 participants using semi-structured interviews carried out by the author. These were either face-to-face in the respondent's location of choice or conducted via SKYPE internet-based video call (Microsoft corporation) due to geographical restrictions. One participant was interviewed over the telephone due to technical difficulties with the internet service. Interviews were transcribed either by the author or a transcription service at DeMontfort University. Data were coded using NVivo version 12 (QSR International) by the author and analysed using thematic analysis. This analysis followed the process outlined by Braun and Clark (2006), where interviews were transcribed before being read through at least twice. On the third read through, coding was initiated and linked to emerging themes as these emerged more data were added, and the themes refined.

Further detail was sought either by email or face-to-face from participants for any areas that required clarity and was combined with observations of online and in scene behavior both in private and public events. Participation at these events was by the author in the capacity of observer only, and these were semi-public events generally. The main event attended was prior to the interviews, and the activities witnessed at this event helped inform some of the interview questions. Observations of participant behaviors at this event and some smaller gatherings helped to triangulate findings from the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

Nineteen individuals were approached and invited to participate in the study; 58% ($n=11$) agreed: five female and six male. Age ranged from 41 to 83, with a mean of 55.3. All were white, and UK-based aside from one who lived in South Africa. Three of the women were professional disciplinarians, with a particular interest and/or reputation for CP; the remainder of the participants had other occupations outside of BDSM (all professional/upper managerial, with varying degrees of stress and personal responsibility) or were retired. All but one participant had a bachelor's degree or equivalent, with three possessing master's level qualifications and one a Ph.D. student. Most were married ($n=6$), including two to each other. Participants identified as either Top ($n=4$), Switch ($n=1$), or Bottom ($n=6$). Sexual orientation also varied, with participants describing themselves as lesbian ($n=1$), bisexual ($n=3$), 'heteroflexible' (very happy to play with members of their gender but not generally attracted to them) ($n=2$), or straight ($n=5$). One man was an openly practicing cross-dresser. Despite all three professional dominatrices being based in areas where ethnic diversity was the rule, they all reported that seeing non-white clients was extremely rare, as was encountering these individuals at social or scene events/parties.

The cane was by far the preferred implement for all respondents aside from one, and that was because his age made self-care for the injuries caused more difficult – he lived alone and no longer had the flexibility to reach any potential wounds. Most Bottoms or Switches preferred some form of restraint during the scene, with five of the seven considering it essential to their enjoyment. Tops were mostly ambivalent about the embellishments to the scene; happy to go along with bondage or roleplay, for example, to facilitate the Bottom's enjoyment in the main, but generally focused on the CP.

A note about these findings is required at this stage. Previous studies of BDSM have noted in their samples that practitioners often come from a more educated background (Wismeijer & Assen, 2013) or higher socio-economic status (Martinez, 2018; Sandnabba et al. 1999). However, one professional domme suggested that the educational status evidence was at odds with her not insubstantial practice, stating that she:

“saw clients, none of whom are thick, [a British idiom for less intelligent,] but more tradespeople than professionals—perhaps they've got more disposable income?” (P1)

Most participants described an individual journey to CP, and not as a result of being introduced by a partner. The exception to this was P2, whose husband had held a lifelong interest in BDSM and introduced her to it, but the journey to CP was a shared one. All other participants

could recall either an inchoate interest from a young age that usually started as stimulation from media usually (films / books / TV programs etc.) that would be considered vanilla, e.g., were not designed to be sexually arousing or erotic in nature. P3 described her enjoyment of the Indiana Jones films, particularly the bullwhipping, as an example of this. One participant described a fascination with a teacher who caned at school but had not themselves been caned. Only one other participant had been caned at school and found the experience a negative one. Five had been physically disciplined by parents, but only one described it in anything approaching abusive terms. CP was the only BDSM activity practiced by two participants (P4 and P5). All others engaged in other BDSM activities to a greater or lesser degree, either concurrently with or as an adjunct to CP. P1, P2, P6, and P7 viewed CP as either an end to itself or foreplay, with P2 and P6 especially taking the latter view as their predominant experience.

The gender split noted in this study is also interesting. It is often claimed that women are more submissive/masochistic than men (e.g. Connolly, 2006), and Silva (2015) identifies distinct gender differences in pain levels desired/experienced and the context in which it is framed. At first inspection, this finding would seem to contradict established ideas of the gender distribution between Top and Bottom roles, with most participants in the Bottom role being male in contrast to the reportedly more common distribution of female Bottoms (Yost & Hunter, 2012). However, all the professional disciplinarians were female, as were the disciplinarians at the play events. While they confirmed that the vast majority of their clients and people they had sessions with socially were male (despite all three being either lesbian or bisexual) and that playing with a female Bottom was very unusual, their gender may well have impacted the sample.

Aside from P2 and P6, only P10 engaged in CP activity with their partner; while most participants had partners who were fully aware, some kept the full extent of their involvement a secret. Only two participants were almost universally open with their interest in CP, and both were pro-dommes (P1, P3). The remaining domme (P11) was open on social media (face visible, etc); while her husband knows about her activities, her grown-up children do not; neither does the majority of her family. The remaining participants' level of disclosure varied from nobody knows (P5, P7, P8), to certain close friends and family members (P2, P6, P9, P11) to wife only (P4, P10). Only three had had to disclose to a health professional with two positive and one very negative result. Fear of adverse reaction and stigmatisation was given as the main reason for non-disclosure. P7 is an active cross-dresser and felt very comfortable being out, but does not disclose their interest in CP. P8 is very active in their local church community, and while that community knows that P8 is active on US-based Fetish sites, the belief is that it is to try to 'save' people, rather than for their personal enjoyment. P6 had experienced negative discrimination when attempting to discuss CP at their workplace or raise it within a professional (nursing) context:

“I wish I could do BDSM CP etc. more... Just be more open about it, that's the main thing. I don't have regrets about doing it, about the stuff we've done, will do, why would you have a regret about something you both enjoy and brings you closer together? I wish we could be more open about it, and I wish there wasn't the judgement about it. Whether that's perceived or actual it's immaterial - I've been on the receiving end of direct discrimination because of it and I wouldn't wish that on anyone.”

Negative reactions from people that participants had told were very rare; however, whether this is due to tolerance, politeness, or careful selection of whom to tell is impossible to ascertain. Yost (2010) identified four categories of stigmatising attitudes, including that it is socially or morally wrong; that BDSM contains non-consensual violence; there is a lack of tolerance; and that traits of dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism translate to wider life. Meeker (2013) identified potential negative effects to being open about BDSM in the workplace, and this is supported by Holt (2016). Damm et al. (2018) cautioned that having to hide aspects of sexuality such as BDSM or CP engagement may be detrimental to an individual's mental health and well-being.

Three main themes emerged from the data when considering the motivation for participation in CP: sexual arousal or desire, feelings of euphoria or well-being, and the desire to push or challenge oneself. Baumeister (1991) identified similar themes in his work 'Escaping the Self,' but this paper introduces some new elements that expand upon this.

Each theme will be explored in turn. Two additional themes of perceived addiction and the importance of marks will also be discussed.

Sexual Arousal

The expectation that CP was sexually driven was the author's preconception before the study commenced, and was a view shared by some respondents — to the extent that one respondent cast doubt on the veracity of those that stated their motivation was not sexual. However, 40% of participants explained that their primary motivation for CP was not sexual; and indeed, most were vehement in this assertion to the point of offense when pressed. If one respondent had held that view, then it could be dismissed as an outlier, but this was a definite trend, supporting a conclusion by De Neef et al. (2019) that motivation for engagement in BDSM could be non-sexual. Only four respondents admitted to direct sexual arousal during CP (one Top, two Bottom, and one Switch; two female and male), and all pro-dommes identified that direct sexual arousal was extremely rare during the CP they engaged in, in contrast to other forms of BDSM play. The participants who expressed sexual arousal as their prime motivation usually found sexual satisfaction after the event, with the experience being replayed from — as P1 described it — the 'wank bank' (a mental repository of memories from a CP episode used as masturbatory resource). During the scene, evidence of arousal — manifesting as an erection in men or vaginal lubrication/vulval engorgement in women — occurred in only two participants. All pro-dommes interviewed agreed that the presence of an erection was extremely rare in their experience and practice; however, they did agree there frequently was evidence of 'precum' in male recipients, despite the lack of erection. At the play party observed, no man developed an erection at any stage while being punished — indeed in some cases quite the opposite effect (shrinkage) was observed. On another occasion however, both the male and female Bottoms became visibly aroused. P3 noted that with female recipients:

“I am close to their bum and obviously their vagina so I do see physical arousal in women from that perspective relatively often”

The production of ‘precum’ may be due to transmitted impact to the prostate, but this is hard to assess. Female arousal may again result from impact transmission, but P2 explained that it was:

“The whole scenario, the nakedness, the bondage. The first few strokes just hurt, but then the pleasure starts”

At first glance, this supports Labrecque et al. (2020), who suggest that it is not pain per se, but it is the combination of pain, scene, negotiation, clothing, and so forth that is arousing. However, in several participants, the pain was identified as the stimulating factor (P3, P4, P8, P9) irrespective of what might be termed scene extras. Labrecque et al.’s study was also only examining the appeal to bottoms rather than tops. P2 also described occasions where there was no negotiation or scene setting, and pain was administered almost without warning; she found these situations arousing as well. This couple was unusual in that they both also experienced direct sexual arousal from bottoming (P2) and switching (P6) and played with each other.

The non-sexual reasons for participation were not articulated as clearly as the sexual ones. To assess the veracity of these statements, the interviewer started asking questions about what aroused the participants or what they masturbated to. Some BDSM play or fantasy element was present in all of the respondents’ answers, but not necessarily CP.

At least one respondent displayed a strong possibility of a reactive formation mechanism (essentially when denial becomes so strong that there is no conscious awareness of the denial; Baumeister et al., 1998) when denying any sexual interest in CP. Others may have distanced themselves from it to avoid potential conflicts between sexual activity and CP in a professional sense.

Well-being

Williams, in a 2006 study of professional dominatrices, identified that they often felt a strong therapeutic element was present in their work. Irrespective of sexual or non-sexual motivation, all respondents of all genders and BDSM orientations, espoused the positive psychological and mental health benefits of participating in CP. These feelings ranged from centering or grounding (P11) to euphoria (P8) and being in a bubble of intimacy (P2 and P6):

“Yes, sexual pleasure, the... yeah... just the happiness, the euphoria that comes with it. The closeness with the person that’s administering it, particularly if it’s someone that you love, that’s... you know, very, that closeness that you can’t emulate, you can’t simulate, you can’t.” (P2)

At the play events, one of the most striking observations was how the general mood changed as the sessions progressed. Nerves and some awkwardness were observed initially, developing into a collective ‘buzz’ and sense of excitement. Some participants were very obviously in an altered (positive) mood after their caning or strapping, and one Top was positively beaming in conversation afterwards. Stress-relieving benefits were widely reported, as were elevations in mood and profound relaxation (P4, P5):

“Definitely, definitely yes. It definitely lifts your mood. Without a shadow of a doubt, definitely lifts the mood.” (P10)

Participants reported that these effects lasted for between 1-28 days post scene, but no participant could accurately predict how long the positive effects might last, or even reliably predict that they would occur to a certain level. The uncertainty as to whether positive effects would occur, or their duration and intensity, is supported by frequent comments in online literature and conversations with participants who did not partake in the study. However, the reported non-sexual positive effects can be seen in mood, contentment and intimacy, amongst other things. This belief is supported by a growing body of literature (Baumeister, 1997; Wiseman, 1996; Wismeijer & Assen, 2013).

The feeling at the time and for at least a short (up to a few hours later) time post scene is often called ‘subspace’ (Sagarin et al., 2015). This state is sought after by some participants and might be described as an altered state of consciousness (Rinella, 2013), or a transition from a state of constant compulsive thought to one of a liberating sense of single mindedness (Newmahr, 2008). While different for different individuals, it is generally regarded as a sensation of relaxation and conversely euphoria that is well recognized within the scholarly literature on the subject (Pitagora, 2017). However, the exact mechanism remains unclear, with various theories, both biochemical and psychological, being advanced. Whatever the mechanism, it is clear that some respondents will go to great lengths in their attempts to obtain it. In caution, it must be noted that subspace is usually defined as a ‘during scene’ state; the psychological benefits described in this section persist far beyond the scene and cannot correctly be attributed to subspace. P2 described the feeling after a session as ‘euphoria,’ explaining this was something she specifically sought when engaging in a scene; while P6 (her husband) explained that the most enjoyable scenes produced this euphoria, and it was an extreme form of this experience that started them both on their CP journey. It must also be noted that Ambler et al. (2017) describe a counterpart to subspace called Topspace (not Domspace interestingly enough), and as its name suggests, it is a state experienced by the Top in the scene. P9 described it as:

“I just go higher... it can last for days.”

P3 supported this, explaining that:

“when it’s prolonged, my focus is prolonged because it’s many people over a few hours then my focus is more intense and my top space much higher. It usually lasts for the rest of the day but not longer.”

Whether Topspace or subspace, the mechanism remains uncertain. Nichols (2014) suggests that subspace is obtained as a result of altered blood flow and body chemical changes, and a psychologically submissive state, but exactly what these chemicals are is unknown. There has been some research carried out in this area, with Sagarin et al. studying cortisol (a stress hormone) and testosterone (a sex hormone associated with ‘male’ characteristics) at a BDSM party (Sagarin et al., 2009), while Klement et al. (2017) considered cortisol during an extreme temporary piercing ritual event.

While interesting, these hormones are not commonly seen as pleasure mediated endorphins in the same way that dopamine might be, for example. Solenzol (2017) offers a comprehensive theory explaining neurotransmitter action in BDSM, discussing the role of noradrenaline (norepinephrine) and serotonin. To the best of the author's knowledge, none of these have been studied in a BDSM context and none explain the mechanism of Topspace or subspace.

Pushing and Challenging - The continued need

All respondents in this study admitted to a desire or need for increasing stimulus. Santtila et al. (2002), in their study of wider BDSM practices, showed that desire for stimulation increased over time, for example, with pain progressing from mild spanking to more extreme play. However, the Santtila et al. study classified clothespins as more extreme than caning, and placed flagellation in a completely different category to both caning and spanking. While this escalation of sensation was a general trend amongst respondents, some factors ameliorated this in certain cases. P8 raised concerns over his ability to self-care for wounds of increasing severity due to his age. P6, P2, P10, and P5 all identified the current need to conceal their activities from others, meaning the associated marks – if visible - would be undesirable; a circumstance P7 and P8 had experienced in their past. There was also a reduction in the individual's ability to cope with heavier levels of play if there had been a significant gap (greater than two months) between heavy sessions. These gaps occurred either because of inability to play (work, childcare, access to partners) or the desire to avoid long-term injuries. Many Bottoms expressed frustration that they could not play as often as they wanted to, with most thinking about the next time they could play within a few hours or days. P2 (female Bottom) explained that she started thinking about the next scene almost immediately and that frequent 'maintenance spankings' kept the desire at bay in the interim.

While the 'power exchange' was the most common reason offered for non-sexual motivation by the Top, the sensation, adrenaline rush, or the desire to push themselves were offered as a rationale by the Bottoms. This desire to 'push themselves' was seen as both positive and negative by participants. P8 expressed frustration that their age meant that they could not play as heavily or as frequently as they would like. P3 noted that some of her submissives would try to goad her into punishing them in a game of one-upmanship with others in her 'stable.' P7 engages in repeated attempts via social media to have their punishment increased by the Top they visit, but most saw this game playing as part of the scene.

Some Bottoms sought continually to push themselves and take more; Tops were generally very happy to accommodate this or actively pushed their partners to greater levels. As one professional put it: "it's a game they can never win, and a great business model!" There were multiple manifestations of this, but the underlying rationale is unclear. Rozin et al. (2013) advanced a theory of 'benign masochism,' where the most pleasure was derived from an activity just below the threshold of what was bearable. However, that suggestion was linked to chili pepper ingestion and not supported by respondents in his study when asked about painful massage – an arguably closer correlation to CP.

Addiction

While benign masochism may be one explanation for the desire to engage in CP, a more pervasive and hard to resist mechanism was perhaps identified by some participants. The Journal of Positive Sexuality (JPS)/Center for Positive Sexualities (and other organizations' including the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists) position statements on sexuality and addiction is clear: the addiction model is inappropriate for use when discussing pornography or sex (AASECT, 2021; CPS, TASHRA & NCSF, 2017), potentially causing more harm than good, and arising from a conservative response to cultural anxieties. The DSM manual (APA, 2013) only includes one non 'substance based' addiction (gambling), and the National Health Service (NHS) website devoted to the topic opens with the statement that 'experts debate whether sex addiction exists' (NHS, 2018). However, there were frequent analogies to drug use and addiction used to describe the respondents' desire for CP.

"You're always chasing the dragon." (P6)

"It's such a big need, a craving, that you just can't stop it." (P5)

"Always chasing that first hit." (P11)

There were also related descriptors used when discussing the length of time between sessions:

"I get a bit twitchy if I've not been able to hit someone for a couple of days."; "If I don't find myself in those positions of power... then I start getting, not depressed, but I think people with Seasonal Affective Disorder would recognize it." (P1)

"You start craving it again, the next day – the same day! It's addictive." (P5)

One individual at the play party event started to bleed almost immediately when the punishment began. In conversation with the Tops afterwards, they described how the bottom was well known for having 'weak spots' on his buttocks that broke down easily, but despite being advised repeatedly to have a break from playing, his desire to continue overrode the damage that was being caused. Kurt and Ronel (2017) postulated that participants went through various stages, including the initial experience, euphoria, intoxication, craving/withdrawal, and increased tolerance to pain, leading them to propose a preliminary addiction model. However, this work appears to be based on behavioral spin theory which tends towards a pathological approach, at odds with some approaches in the fields of sociology, psychology, and health sciences.

Some respondents identified imagined parallels between the experience of heroin users with their first high and CP players who experience a very similar feeling and spend the rest of their BDSM time trying to relive it – usually with a lack of success. For P2, P3, P6, P8, and P11 it is never as good as the first time. This was the one area where there seemed to be real negatives (either actual or potential) for participants: a failed marriage because of the inability to stop engaging in CP (P5), failed relationships (P7, P9, P10), and deceived partners causing guilt and distress to the individual (P8) doing the deceiving.

Marks

The desire to increase the level of severity as experience and skills builds makes intuitive sense, but caution must be exercised concerning CP. A cane, or for that matter most implements of CP, can cause severe injury in unskilled hands. Subspace can be dangerous here; Miller and Devon (1997) caution that “subs who are flying are unable to make decisions!” (p. 175). P3 noted that it would sometimes be:

“irresponsible to carry on, no matter how much the bottom wanted them to.”

This was noted in practice at one of the play events; blood was flowing to such an extent that the Top called a halt to the caning as they could no longer aim accurately, to the Bottom’s obvious disappointment. P1 had a similar, though slightly more cynical stance, perhaps more matching her professional persona than her actual approach in practice:

“If you break your toys, you can’t play with them anymore.”

Short-term injuries are relatively common with CP – bruises, minor lacerations, and so on. All respondents were asked if they had suffered any long term or serious injury and all replied in the negative, though long-term damage is possible; Pinson (2019) described lesions to the buttocks caused by repeated canings. These ‘weak spots’ were identified as a potential problem by all respondents, with the desire to reduce the likelihood of them occurring in the first place or the need to avoid further damage impacting on most people’s play. Weak spots appear to be more common when receiving the cane regularly, possibly due to the repeated tip impact in the same area, as opposed to a broader implement (paddle or tawse) which distributes the impact over a wider skin surface. P1, P3, and P11 had all encountered individuals with weak spots, and all assessed this before play. P3 particularly also checks for the presence of ‘leather butt,’ a condition where the skin has been beaten so much (usually by overuse of a broader implement such as a strap or paddle) it compresses, becoming tough and leathery to the touch (Miller & Devon, 1997). Skin afflicted by this condition is also much more likely to break down and bleed during impact.

The possibility of injury during CP is rarely discussed in the academic literature: De Neef et al.’s (2019) comprehensive literature review of BDSM publications does not mention it, nor does Silva (2015). However, it is mentioned in ‘how to manuals,’ but more about avoiding bony prominences or underlying organs. Injury and marks could be viewed as synonymous, but whereas injury is not desired (in the main), marks very often are and act as motivating factor, particularly for escalation of severity. At play events, comments about the marks received were always made and/or elicited. Bottoms commented:

“Yes, I like to be marked as a kind of reminder really I suppose.” (P7)

“Like most people in my position I view them as a source of pride, you’d be disappointed not to have marks.” (P10)

“I like the marks afterwards, feel the hard flesh, then slowly watch them disappear.” (P5)

“I sometimes think I wish I hadn’t got these marks on my bottom so I can’t take the children swimming LAUGHS, I sometimes think that, but I love the marks, I love the marks on my bottom. I love them while they’re there because it reminds me of a very nice time.” (P2)

“Yes, yes very much so. I think it’s like a mark of pride like they’ve done it.” (P9)

Some people the marks that they receive; that’s an even more intense high to them than the actual session itself. They gush over it and they get on a high about it.” (P3)

All Tops felt the same way and enjoyed marking their Bottoms. P9 commented:

“It is, I love marks and I love to feel the welts, I scratch them with my nails, it’s a big part of what I do. I always get them to send me photos of the marks the next day.”

P1 did not aim specifically for marks, but at the level she plays at, they just happen. Her frustration was not that some recipients could not receive marks, but rather that they complained about receiving them if they had not alerted her beforehand. P11 commented that she sometimes regretted the order she used implements if they obliterated the marks left by the one before. P6 used them as a comparator with P2 when they switched:

“Marks yes, injuries no. Marks definitely, they’re quite fun, you look in the mirror and think that’s fantastic, I remember that stroke and you remember that stroke or whatever. So yes, I like marks and my wife likes to look at them. Usually, to compare them to her own to be fair, and when its dishing out then most definitely and I’m disappointed if there aren’t any. Must try harder!” (P6)

Most participants identified that a fine line needed to be drawn between the level of severity to produce the desired effects in Top and Bottom, and the risk reduction of longer-term damage. Rather than the intensity of the sessions being the determining factor in the development of weak spots or leather-butt, frequency of play seemed to be the predominant factor – unless routinely engaged in full force ‘judicial’ type punishments, when scar tissue would inevitably form. Two individuals at the play party were not able to participate as they had planned, due to wanting to allow time to heal before a particularly intense session they had planned for later in the year. A general consensus amongst participants was that a minimum of three to four weeks should be allowed between canings of any real severity, and that total abstinence for some months was the only way to reduce the progression of weak spots once they had formed.

Strengths and Limitations

Reflexivity, writes Galdas (2017), is crucial in conducting qualitative research. The author’s involvement in this field confers several advantages but also disadvantages to the work. Had the author’s credibility in this field not been established, and vouched for, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to gain access to the participants. The author has written a

separate paper on the methodological challenges encountered in carrying out this study (Pinson, submitted), thus necessitating the quasi-ethnographic approach mentioned above, where the author became involved in the scene to a greater extent than would be routine for this type of research.

Participants who the author and the pro-dommes felt were likely to agree to take part, or had interesting stories to tell, were targeted for recruitment. This selection bias meant it was not a random sample. Individuals were invited to represent a wider demographic section than those who initially expressed an interest in participating. Doing this skewed the results to indicate a broader spread of people than would appear to participate in heavy CP, either from observation outside this study or anecdotally. It was difficult to recruit any further female recipients; all those the author tried to enlist in the study cited fears of exposure and worries about confidentiality as blocks to taking part.

As the author did all the interviews (and most of the transcribing) this limited the number of participants, creating a data set underpowered in relation to the number of people who likely practice CP. Polit and Beck (2014) suggest that qualitative research necessitates smaller numbers than quantitative. While few, the participants in this study offer unique insights into an under-researched field, and with some caution, the results can be generalized to the wider CP community in the UK. The pro-dommes all confirmed the existence of and widespread experience of the phenomena described, amongst their large numbers of clients. They also confirmed a much broader description of a demographic than this sample showed and as described above. The ethnic, gender, and socio-economic status of the participants correlate to previous work on BDSM (Richter et al., 2008), though female numbers could be influenced by the gender of the pro-dommes as could socio-economic status; as one respondent put it: it is an expensive hobby! However, very few male pro-doms are practicing, and it is generally cheaper to visit a CP specialist domme rather than a more generalist BDSM one.

Conclusion

While sexual arousal is undoubtedly a large part of the CP process for some participants, and possibly so on some level for others, it is not universal. There are comparisons with addiction (though it should be noted that these are terms used by the participants themselves) and concerns over the stigma and the inability to be as open as individuals might wish to be. However, improvements to mental health and psychological benefits in both the short and long term were common to all participants and far outweighed the potential negatives. The mechanism for this increase in well-being is unclear, and a biochemical hypothesis seems unlikely – at least on its own. It would not explain the similar effects experienced by both Tops and Bottoms. Likely it is the simple fact that when receiving the impact of a thin, hard, piece of wood, or you are the giver of the perfect stroke, having to concentrate, putting every ounce of skill into delivering it, it is difficult to worry about anything else.

Once the said stroke has landed, the importance of the marks both received and given has not hitherto been explored or identified in the literature. They act as an indicator of accuracy, severity, and a reminder of a good time had by all; a badge of honor to be shared with others or considered alone in a quiet moment. They are a reminder of the connection shared between

individuals partaking in the scene, but they are also warnings of a need to take a break or adjust the tempo and level of one's play. Long term injurious effects are rare but can and do occur; prevention is much better than cure with a gap from three to four weeks being anecdotally advised. Despite the risks, and these are truly minimal, consensual CP is beneficial to its participants, both givers and receivers.

More research into CP is needed. Questions around the multifactorial nature of Topspace and subspace and its prevalence or absence, difference in intensity or duration, or reproducibility compared to non-CP focused BDSM are intriguing: there is certainly room for further exploration into the possible biochemistry at play, perhaps considering the role that different neurotransmitters may have. Work aimed at preventing the formation of weak spots and the associated long-term damage these cause would also be beneficial to the BDSM community.

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As many rules as necessary, as few as possible. The traps of deregulated sex positive spaces with a focus on gender inequality

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Abstract

In order to explain suffering in contemporary romantic relationships, Eva Illouz (2012) looks at the consequences of the detachment of erotic and romantic encounters from committed relationships such as marriage. While this detachment is often referred to as a triumph of free choice and liberal loving, Illouz argues that it causes systemic inequalities between male and female agents. The article takes Illouz's analysis as an incentive and a basis to study deregulated sex-positive spaces with regards to their risk to involuntarily reproduce features of socio-political domination. The discussion is driven by an interest in the question how options to explore sexual and romantic relationships can be developed without reproducing systemic disadvantages of heteronormative culture.

In *Why Love Hurts* Eva Illouz (2012) describes how the deregulation of partner choice has definite positive effects like free choice of a romantic or erotic lover, but also structural downsides which produce romantic suffering. With the term deregulation, Illouz refers to the detachment of romantic and erotic encounters from committed relationships. This means that having a romantic or sexual encounter with someone does not require or entail a long-term romantic partnership. In contrast, in premodern regulated partner choice until the 20th century, romantic feelings and erotic encounters *resulted* from a committed relationship. Without wanting to depart from modern values like liberty or autonomy, Illouz argues that the deregulation of partner choice has facilitated a historically new power of men over women which is the power to dominate women emotionally through their willingness to commit to a relationship. Thus, the deregulation of partner choice seems to be both a triumph and a burden of love (Illouz, 2011, pp. 30, 254).

However, Illouz's argumentation targets especially women who want a heterosexual, monogamous relationship with the prospect of a biological family. From a perspective of social agents, who want to depart from traditional relationship worldviews and who try to find their own way of loving and having sexual encounters in non-monogamous and non-heteronormative settings in which a long-term partnership does not necessarily need to consist of a wife, a husband and biological children, Illouz's observances might sound like an old-school problem. Do non-heteronormative and non-monogamous lovers remain unaffected by the downsides of deregulated partner choice?

Leaving a traditional relationship worldview behind goes hand in hand with reconsidering the appropriate conditions for sexual encounters and vice versa (Barker, 2018;

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Easton & Hardy, 1997; Ryan & Jethá, 2011; Schott, 2020; Veaux & Rickert, 2014). In a world in which romantic and erotic encounters take place only within a committed relationship, the question of how romantic feelings and sexual encounters correlate does not need to be answered. On the contrary, in a world of deregulated partner choice, different social forms of romantic and erotic bonding reflect different answers to the question how love and sex hang together. Once questioning heteronormative monogamous culture, it appears that sexuality has more facets than biological sex (male or female), sexual orientation (heterosexual or homosexual) and a particular type of sexual practice (penetrative genital stimulation) within a particular social narrative (lifelong marriage and family).

Having said this, *sex-positive spaces* seem to host people who are curious about exploring different facets of sexuality, for instance sexual attraction, preferences and desire; emotional attraction and expression; or sexual expression and practices as well as biological sex, gender identity and gender expression. Moreover, people who visit certain sex-positive spaces seem to be curious about finding ways to form relationships according to their individual needs rather than unreflectingly pursuing heteronormative, monogamous partnerships with a fixed outcome. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that departing from a heteronormative monogamous culture neither cancels heterosexuality and monogamy nor does it say that participants in sex-positive spaces are not heterosexual and/or monogamous. Presenting the downsides of heteronormative monogamous culture does not attack heterosexuality or monogamy, but it illustrates the negative effects of framing romance and sex within a rigid worldview of only two sexes and it considers the prospect of different possible types of loving relationships which can coexist with each other.

In this text I treat sex-positive spaces as a cultural environment, in which two transformative dynamics come together and represent the detachment of romantic feelings and sexual encounters from committed relationships. These are the readiness to reconsider different types of romantic relationships and the readiness to explore sexual encounters and sexuality outside committed relationships. In brief, I treat sex-positive spaces as an environment in which people explore different ways of relating to each other (Heckert, 2010). Thus, these spaces are experimental areas for deregulated partner choice. On the one hand, I want to motivate a reflection about the emancipatory potential of sex-positive spaces. On the other hand, I want to consider how far they risk fostering socio-political domination *because* of their experimental character. For this endeavour, it will be necessary to take a closer look at Illouz's analysis of deregulated partner choice and its effects on romantic suffering in the first section of this text. In the second section, I offer a systematic description of sex-positive spaces. In the concluding part, I will present possible traps of sex-positive spaces when it comes to unintentionally reproducing social conditions even though they might be aspired to be overcome.

I hope my reflections will contribute respectful insights about the correlation between heterosexual monogamy and romantic suffering, informative descriptions about sex-positive spaces as well as productive comments for navigating in such spaces. Eventually, I hope that I can make visible, in how far the perspectives, skills and insights which underlie characteristics of sex-positive spaces show that *sex-positivity* is not sufficiently described by referring to valuing, promoting or having (more) sex. Sex-positivity is an attitude that addresses the question of how people want to live with each other, how they can connect and stay connected and how they can

enjoy themselves individually as well as in each other's company. In this sense, *integrated sex-positivity* addresses fundamental communal principles of living in a society. Thus, it is a profound answer to the question how collective co-happiness is possible.

Emotional Suffering and Gender Inequality in Romantic Relationships

In *Why Love Hurts*, Eva Illouz (2012) argues that a historically new power has developed in contemporary romantic, monogamous, heterosexual relationships which – among other factors – fuels emotional suffering in such relationships. Illouz demonstrates how a liberation of free romantic choice and erotic possibilities has developed into a structure that produces systematic gender inequalities and helps to maintain a power imbalance of men over women in romantic relationships. Illouz develops her argumentation describing the contrast between regulated middle-class partner choice in premodern times until roughly the middle of the 19th century and partner choice in modern times since the beginning of the 20th century. For her analysis of the differences between courtship in premodern and modern times, Illouz uses the novels of Jane Austen for the first. For the latter she uses qualitative interviews. In the beginning of this section, I will first present the characteristics of (de-)regulated partner choice, so that I can subsequently explain Illouz's thesis of an emotional power imbalance and the role that romantic love has for the genesis of self-worth.

In order to understand Illouz's sociological approach, it is helpful to notice that she does not locate the causes of modern romantic suffering in psychological pathologies but in the social and political structures in which people try to live and love each other. According to Illouz (2012), pathologizing dismisses the option of understanding the societal conditions producing systematic patterns of action. Thus, instead of problematizing deficient individual action, Illouz asks which societal conditions facilitate, motivate and legitimize certain patterns of action (pp. 137-139).

(De-) regulation of Partner Choice

In a 19th century middle-class biography, a long-term relationship in the form of a marriage was scheduled both for men and for women and framed by social class affiliation. Partner choice across different social classes or ethnicities was not common. Personal questions like whether a committed relationship is wanted, what form it should have and who could be the right fit were not up for debate. Structures of emotional commitment evolved because all sexes were dependent upon marriage in order to gain status and survive socially and economically (Illouz, 2012, p. 125). Marriage had an overt economic character and was embedded in family structures, since it encompassed the transfer of family property to the husband, the dowry. The dowry could be reclaimed in the case of separation or divorce in order to prevent male capriciousness (Illouz, 2012, p. 69). It had the functions to strengthen the husband's bond and to anchor the relationship in a system of domestic, economic and societal obligations (Illouz, 2012, p.127). The family monitored courtship and examined the potential husband, which clearly limited a woman's liberty but also gave her security in the case of betrayal (Illouz, 2012, pp. 55-58).

Because male agents had to prove their true intention of wanting to marry, the excessive exhibition of their affection affirmed social norms and was not interpreted as neediness. Rather

than putting men at risk, the exhibition of intense feelings assured the family of the man's honorable intentions. During courtship, women were more reactive and thus emotionally less exposed than men. Female reservation in expressing emotions and sexual desire was a Christian norm, identifying virtue with female abstinence and self-control. It was the price women had to pay for moral equality and social recognition (Illouz, 2012, pp. 121-123).

In the 19th century, courtship followed a normative choreography of rule-guided rituals, which mediated the emotional entanglement. Public knowledge of this choreography caused *semiotic consistency*. Rituals and rules supported agents to enter and exit relationships and it helped to prevent uncertainty in courtship (Illouz, 2012, p. 59-76). The promise, which expressed commitment, was central. Its function was to end courtship and stabilize the bond (Illouz, 2012, p. 73). Both the rigid interdiction of breaking a promise as well as the rule that intentions, utterances and actions needed to be consistent, served to make deception less probable and bring about certainty in the interpretation of courtship behaviour. Reputation, as the ability to keep one's promises, was a major requirement both for men and women; breaking a promise was socially sanctioned (Illouz, 2012, pp. 64-66, 70-73).

Illouz (2012) calls the system in which courtship was pre-structured and in which feelings were brought about by rituals and expressed only after the partners had passed the chronology of appeal and commitment, a *regime of performativity of emotions* (p. 62). In this regime, rules organised emotional experiences and their expression. Illouz (2012) calls the modern replacement a *regime of emotional authenticity* in which emotions do not follow from commitment but pre-exist commitment and encourage it. In the regime of emotional authenticity, individuals gain insight about their feelings through introspection or an overwhelming revelation such as love at first sight (p. 64). According to Illouz (2012), modern intimacy demands that a relationship originates in authentic feelings shared by both partners. In order to gain recognition and to fuse the identities into a loving *We*, the lovers reveal their true self to one another while they also have to maintain their autonomy (p. 77). However, the bonding based on authentic feelings is impacted by the necessary reproduction of the reasons out of which the relationship was favored. This is so, because feelings can change in the near future and because choices are not finite in modernity (Illouz, 2012, p. 78).

In opposition to modern times, the evaluation of a person's character was a public act in the 19th century. People had to act out an inner life that expressed publicly-shared values (Illouz, 2012, p. 82). The correspondence of character and societal norms served as a source for public recognition and it coined reputation. While the individualization of decision-making based on personal taste did liberate the individual will from normative confinements, it also weakened a source for social recognition (Illouz, 2012, pp. 79-81). Emotional intimacy, psychological compatibility and erotic charisma became new criteria in partner choice (Illouz, 2012, p. 82). But the transition from objective partner choice criteria (wealth, class, education) to subjective criteria (personality, attractiveness) made emotional rejection harder to bear. In modern times the reason for a romantic rejection is no longer an objective lack of wealth, but the person with her insufficient qualities, which she needs to exhibit nevertheless in order to reveal her true self (Illouz, 2012, pp. 68-69). Hence, what is at stake in modern courtship is the individual character of a person.

Summarized, a world of deregulated partner choice is a world in which there is no more obligation to engage in a life-long romantic relationship. If a permanent romantic relationship is appealing, then there is no obligatory single form, such as a heterosexual marriage, to which this relationship has to conform. Partner choice is no longer necessarily endogamous, which means that partnership across different social classes, ethnicities and educational backgrounds is possible. There is no more default choreography of chronological rule- and code-following within courtship. In a world of deregulated partner choice, romantic relationships result from free choice and authentic feelings. Instead of the family, the individual chooses a romantic partner and she is also the carrier of choice-relevant qualities. Eventually, the self of a person is no longer defined by family or class affiliation but understood as an autonomous entity unmasking its authentic character in a romantic relationship.

This concluding description might appear to be more or less the case in at least some 21st century Western societies and it is probably more appealing to modern readers than regulated partner choice, since the limitations of the latter seem to be so obvious; agents are excessively restricted in their individual scope of action, they are continuously observed and monitored, and they are not appreciated for their intrinsic value. Instead, they gain value through criteria such as wealth and status. Hence, the departure from a normative framework of courtship seems to be a triumph of free choice and romantic love. However, in the next part of this section I will explain Illouz's thesis that the departure from social regulation has facilitated the development of self-regulated marriage markets where the internalized economic character of intimate relationships is concealed and privileges are unequally distributed among male and female agents without people's awareness. But instead of tackling the social structures that produce inequality and further romantic suffering, suffering is interpreted as a consequence of a problematic female psyche so that self-doubt has become a female concept; women in particular are charged with psychological hygiene and the cure of character, thus redirecting resources which would be necessary in order to bring about societal change.

New Emotional Power of Male over Female Agents

The detachment of romantic and erotic encounters from regulated moral guidelines facilitated the development of self-regulated marriage markets, which Illouz (2012) also calls the *sexual field* (pp. 100-101). On marriage markets, individuals have more or less demanded qualities and hence they have more or less success in mating. Because partner choice is individualised, there is an open competition of individual agents, which effected a change of adequate trade objects. In Jane Austen's novels male and female agents exchanged equal goods (class, wealth, educational level). By contrast, in modern times individuals may exchange asymmetric attributes like economic status and sexiness (Illouz, 2012, pp. 101-102). In short, on the sexual field, competition is free for anyone (no endogamous exclusion), the criteria for decision making are individualized, so that asymmetric attributes can be exchanged, agents have internalized economic principles and individual choice is based on qualities expressing the authentic self of a potential partner, which is why success on the sexual field affirms a person's value (Illouz, 2012, p. 103).

Illouz (2012) argues that an important change in modern sexual relations consist in the entanglement of sexual desire and economic value (p. 113). She explains in how far culture

industry has installed an understanding of both femininity and masculinity according to sexual attractiveness, which is why sexiness has become an important factor in partner choice, individual self-design and eventually an important factor in developing social status (Illouz, 2012, p. 89). However, male agents have experienced a decrease in power in the three domains of the working space through bureaucratization, the domestic household through feminist movements and in areas reserved solely for men through the heterosexual design of leisure facilities. As a result, sexual success has become the new male status symbol (Illouz, 2012, pp. 140-141.) in a social environment, in which sexual liberty is promoted and an industry of film and photography as well as cosmetic-, fashion- and advertisement-industries distribute an imagery of sexual attractiveness (Illouz, 2012, p. 86).

The amount of accumulated sexual successes is the simplest form of *erotic capital* (Illouz, 2012, p. 108). To be sure, it is true that erotic capital has also become economic capital for women, in so far as they may trade attractiveness for wealth in order to gain social status. However, Illouz argues that male and female agents channel sexuality differently, since they have different strategies to gain social status. While erotic capital directly furthers male social status, it only contributes to female upward mobility *if* women manage to manoeuvre their erotic capital towards a committed relationship. This is why female sexuality remains subordinated under biological reproduction and marriage, whereas for men sexuality has become the most important arena for exhibiting their status. Because of the detachment of erotic and romantic encounters from committed relationships, male and female sexual strategies separate into *serial sexuality* on the one hand and *emotional and sexual exclusivity* on the other. Since sexual seriality goes along with emotional distance, it supports male agents in dominating the sexual field. However, for women serial sexuality has always existed in parallel to sexual exclusivity since the former seems to be the strategy for securing the latter (Illouz, 2012, pp. 195-199).

In addition, men still control the greater part of economic property and cash flow, which is why committed relationships are still of decisive importance for women (Illouz, 2012, pp. 107-108). Partnership with a male agent still is a major factor in securing the societal and economic existence of women. This is a systematically produced motivation for women to invest in committed relationships (Illouz, 2012, p. 151). But since relationships have become optional, this brings about advantages for male agents and their liberty of choice. While women frequently depend on partnership in order to secure their economic survival, men do not suffer from the same economic pressure and may enter and exit relationships without bearing the same economic consequences, which impacts people's readiness to make compromises and what they are willing to bear in relationships.

Based on the assumptions of the detachment of erotic and romantic encounters from committed relationships as well as the unequal economic necessity that committed relationships have for male and for female agents, Illouz (2012) argues that men have developed a new form of control over women on the sexual field (p. 108). Men gain and maintain their power over women *and* over other men through the accumulation of sexual successes. In the social context of a marriage market, male power translates into access to a greater amount of sexually available women, which is how sexual success has become the socio-economic status symbol for men (Illouz, 2012, p. 141). Because men, unlike women, are not only *not* sanctioned for accumulative sexual strategies but are also rewarded for them, and because male agents no longer profit from

marriage and a traditional family in terms of their social status, a social structure has developed which rewards men for *not* committing to romantic long-term relationships with one female agent, but instead for accumulating sexual successes. This social structure allows men to emotionally control women through their readiness to commit to a relationship (Illouz, 2012, p. 166).

A final factor that furthers men's power over women in romantic relationships, is the effect which deregulated endogamous partner choice has on competition between women on the sexual field. Because of the modern possibility of bonding across different classes, ethnicities and educational backgrounds, a greater amount of selection options became available. Again, this seems to be more problematic for female than for male agents since women have less time to form committed relationships which might lead to a biological family, and they have fewer selection options than men (Illouz, 2012, pp. 147-150). This is due to the following reasons: for the sake of education or work, women prolong their decision for a family; at the same time female fertility is biologically more restricted than male fertility. Moreover, the information of restricted female fertility is widely distributed through new information technologies, so that female courtship behaviour is interpreted as neediness in the context of the assumed female desire to form a family. In addition, statistics indicate that women tend to choose men of their age or above their age and they seem to choose men of their educational level or above their educational level as romantic partners (Illouz, 2012, p. 152). However, in accordance with feminist achievements, the number of educated women steadily increases whereas the number of educated men has increased to a much lesser degree since 1980. Statistics also indicate that men neither restrict their partner choice to a specific female age group nor to a female group of particular education (Illouz, 2012, p. 152). As a result, statistically, male agents have more mating options than female agents.

In a nutshell, because there is no dictate to marry, no external incentive like dowry, unequal economic necessity to form a committed relationship between men and women, no more mandatory connection between romantic and erotic encounters, child birth and committed relationships, unequal time restriction concerning fertility and unequal amounts of selection options for male and female agents, men are privileged to live out their autonomous life more consequently and for a longer period of time, which gives them power to dominate women emotionally (Illouz, 2012, p. 254).

The Role of Romantic Success for Self-Worth

In premodern times, class affiliation and regulated courtship dictated the behavior, which, if performed satisfactorily, would bring about social recognition. Because of the removal of class affiliation in modernity, the genesis of individual worth shifts to personal and especially to romantic relationships (Illouz, 2012, p. 214). Why can people not generate self-worth on their own and why are romantic relationships assumed to be so important in order to generate self-worth? For the social philosopher Axel Honneth, the recognition of a person in a romantic relationship promises social existence. The fear of being emotionally rejected really is a fear of being invisible, that is, being socially worthless (Honneth, 2003, pp. 10-27). Thus, the fear of emotional rejection indicates the importance of a romantic relationship for social value and its impact on self-worth (Illouz, 2012, p. 230).

Furthermore, I assume that the central role of romantic love in generating self-worth also derives from love's characteristic to bestow value on someone, which is often expressed by articulating affectionate emotions towards the beloved. This however only serves to explain love's function in contributing to self-worth, but it does not explain why romantic relationships are assumed to be the *main* source for self-worth. Illouz (2012) argues that, especially for women who gain less recognition through public channels, recognition and validation are important incentives to commit to a romantic relationship (p. 247). This is why women need romantic relationships to fulfil the function of generating self-worth. Men do not seem to be dependent upon female recognition in the same way, since according to Illouz, both men and women are in need of *male* recognition and approval in order to establish self-worth (Illouz, 2012, p. 279).

Serving as the central stage for establishing self-worth is only one demand that stresses romantic relationships. It is another challenge to relieve tension between the need for recognition on the one hand and the importance of autonomy on the other. I have suggested that self-worth has an inherent social character and develops through recognition practices. Recognition practices have shifted towards romantic relationships where they have the form of expressing loving emotions for one another. However, the practice of expressing affection towards a beloved is troubled by modernity's imperative to exhibit autonomy. As a result, individual emotional expression is being monitored in order to maintain a position of strength. Thus, recognition and autonomy are in conflict (Illouz, 2012, pp. 242-243).

Furthermore, the aim to secure autonomy causes both a commitment inhibition and an inhibition to ask for commitment. Because autonomy has such importance in modernity, the pledge for commitment has become illegitimate. Romantic partners are expected to exhibit their own autonomy but also preserve the other person's autonomy, which is translated into not demanding anything. In this structure, a promise is understood as limiting the freedom of another person to feel differently tomorrow. At the same time, though, romantic relationships have to serve as a source for recognition (Illouz, 2012, p. 248). Many of Illouz's female interviewees report their inhibition to ask for commitment in order to avoid the impression of neediness or the secret plan to drive a man into the family trap. However, Illouz (2012) argues that experiencing the question for commitment as problematic only makes sense if autonomy has already ruled out recognition (p. 245).

So far, I have explained the role of recognition in the genesis of self-worth, that this phenomenon is a modern phenomenon because individual worth has become detached from social class, why romantic relationships have become the stage for negotiating self-worth and how the constitution of self-worth is being complicated by the lived consequences of the importance of autonomy as a modern value. In this theoretical framework, Illouz (2012) claims that men are privileged to follow autonomy's imperative more determinedly and for a longer period of their life, which is why they can emotionally dominate the desire of women, who want a committed romantic relationship (p. 254). Thus, male agents control the rules of commitment as well as the rules of recognition (p. 251), which has been facilitated through the detachment of sexual and romantic encounters from committed relationships (Illouz, 2012, p. 143).

According to Illouz (2012), therapy culture does not name the societal structures and reward mechanisms, the reflection of which could further an awareness of the systemic problems

so far described. Instead, it encourages lovers to investigate their individual problems, which they bring to their relationships and which they need to cure in order to be able to have a satisfying romantic relationship. Illouz argues that women especially are being encouraged to first start loving themselves, which makes women feel deficient if they love the way that they are being taught to love, which is the exertion of care (Illouz, 2012, p. 273). As a result, women accuse and doubt themselves as a response to romantic problems. The focus on individual deficits conceals that female self-accusation is a result of an unequal distribution of the privilege of autonomy between men and women. As a consequence, self-doubt becomes a female figure of thought. This indicates that women especially find themselves torn between autonomy and recognition while they lack the social anchoring that would be necessary in order to generate self-worth and escape the damaging mechanism of contemporary romantic culture (Illouz, 2012, p. 277).

Deregulated Sex-Positive Spaces

The reason why I care to comprehensively communicate Illouz's analysis of romantic suffering is that I believe that some of the promising attributes in a contemporary sex-positive culture can be lost if the previously discussed socio-cultural context and the respective power dynamics remain invisible and people uncritically follow the idea that "everything is always possible." Since Illouz argues that the deregulation of partner choice consists in the detachment of erotic and romantic encounters from committed relationships, I look at corresponding unregulated phenomena here. What I call *deregulated sex-positive spaces* are semi-public communal meeting spaces allowing sexual interaction. I developed the following contents via critical discussions with a variety of people who understand themselves as being interested in sex-positive culture in one way or the other – some of them for thirty years or more. Amongst them are practitioners, artists, academics, therapists, body workers, sex workers, mediators, activists, educators, writers and students. If Illouz is correct, then under certain circumstances deregulated sex-positive spaces may offer an optimal stage for men to accumulate erotic capital, gain social status and extend their privileges, while women devote themselves to self-love and follow serial sexuality in order to arrive at sexual exclusivity and secure their social existence.

Regulated Sex-Positive Spaces

Not all sex-positive spaces are deregulated spaces. Brothels or swingers' clubs for instance usually have policies that share certain criteria and that regulate how sexual contact is being conducted. Contrary to deregulated sex-positive spaces, these spaces typically reproduce heterosexual couple constellations, and they have the function to facilitate sex. People go to swinger parties and to brothels *in order* to have *sex*. Similarly, the expectation to have sex might also take place in the private bedroom. In this context it is likely that the understanding of what sex *is* is guided by a narrow idea of a traditional sex-script that starts with foreplay, has penetrative genital stimulation at its center and aims at orgasm (Kalman, 2016). In contrast, a wider understanding of "having sex" might build upon a person's capability to be aware of her own body history, to enjoy sensual pleasures of the whole body and to enjoy the intimate company of others. Private bedrooms, brothels and swingers' clubs are examples for what I want to label *regulated sex-positive spaces*, which frequently but not exclusively have (heterosexual)

couples as their focus and which take place in a normative framework within which either party acts according to the expectation to have penetrative sex

A Non-Heteronormative Communal Space without a Sex-Script

The sex-positive spaces that are part of a *cultural movement* which seeks to work on the social attitude towards body awareness, bodily pleasures, sex and sexuality, differ from these regulated spaces. In this article I refer to them as deregulated sex-positive spaces. However, that does not mean that there are no rules, codes or principles. Especially the principle of consent is central in such spaces. Deregulated sex-positive spaces try to depart from heteronormativity, from a narrow sex definition and from the expectation to have sex. They give permission and opportunity to investigate practices of relating to one another in a bodily, sensual and sexual way. The difference between entering a space in order to have sex and entering a space in which sexual encounters are invited might not appear to be big. However, it does make a difference whether people focus on sex as their aim, or whether they do not have to leave a space if they want to engage with each other sexually. The attempted avoidance of a specific sexual aspiration offers *space* and *time* (Ruckert, 2018). Without the concrete intention to, let us say, penetrate someone, people get together as a group and find out what is possible in this specific social scenario. They create and pick up a dynamic that comes into being by a collective's interactions. The experience of having space and having time to expand and to find an intuition enables different participation, and it encourages different expectations and motivations to improvise, to *create* and to *co-create* a space. This is a collective and an aesthetic potential of sex-positive spaces.

A Risky Space of Self- and Collective Responsibility

Sex-positive spaces that invite sex but do not regulate what is going to happen, are risky and complicated for at least two reasons: people certainly do have desires and wishes, and they seek satisfaction. Being in a space that offers the *possibility* of this satisfaction might drive a person to forcefulness. Sometimes a desire might be so urgent that a person rushes forward, gets rejected, withdraws, tries again, and therewith creates an unstable position that causes insecurity. Another reason why sex-positive spaces are risky is that probably most people's sexual biography integrates negative, shameful or even traumatic experiences. It is common to psychologize about the psychic situation of people whose sexuality diverges from normative standards. But just like non-normative sexual desires have their respective learning history, all other desires also have a learning history. And since we still live in a sex-negative culture that associates matters of sexualities with fear and "perceived threats of actual or potential pain" (Williams et. al., 2015, p. 10); that offers a vast number of dominant negative narrative models (abuse, coercion, affairs, STDs, unwanted pregnancy); that communicates homogenous body norms and uniform sexual practices; and that furthers taboo, shame and interdictions, I find it most likely that every person carries her baggage. This baggage might become problematic in a sex-positive space, which could cause a vulnerable and existential situation.

An Emotion-Positive Space

Deregulated sex-positive spaces not only invite sexual encounters in their variety but also *emotions in their* variety. They tend to be kind(er) with emotions that have a negative connotation – at least accepting and welcoming them like the happy and positive facets that people also have. A possible attempt behind this is to avoid cherry picking of socially wanted features – pleasing features that do not rub society the wrong way. Instead, a big or a very thin body, an old body, burned, torn or loose skin, a limp penis, sexual un-arousal, crying and crashing, failing and the vigorous outburst of repressed emotions are invited. The presence of this variety might invite participants to appreciate and value different body forms, diversity of sexual practices and holistic emotional landscapes. But eventually, I would argue, it is not the aim to positivize what had been framed negatively but *to relieve sexuality from value judgement* (Emcke, 2013).

A Semi-Public Space Enabling Visibility

Since deregulated sex-positive spaces are collective situations, they oscillate between private and public. On the one hand, they are sheltered in a way that they take place in a room and within a designed scenario or a frame. On the other hand, they are public and they expose participants. For many, voyeurism is participation (as the character Justin Bond postulates in the movie *Shortbus*, 2006), so that an observant position is just another position in the collective situation. Moreover, the public character facilitates an awareness of variety. A variety of gender identities, gender expressions, desires, sexual practices and body forms is invited to become visible.

Since visibility can also have negative effects, such as presenting dominant role models that determine and limit meaning, enabling institutional control, or suggesting forced confession (Foucault, 1978), it seems that visibility does not have intrinsic but instrumental value. In a socio-political dimension, visibility might be the condition for an awareness of variety or for democratic participation. Concerning deregulated sex-positive spaces it might be observed that visibility is a condition for connection. The relation between visibility – what is to be perceived, how is it perceived, and the interpretation of the perceived on the one hand and a plenitude of ways that people can connect with each other on the other hand, is put on stage and played with. Practices of looking, gazing, observing, flirting, sensing or inviting become modulations of connection based on the principle of visibility.

Learning Culture

The aspect of visible diversity offers a multitude of models and it contributes to a learning culture. Therefore, a common feature of deregulated sex-positive spaces is a (self-organized) workshop structure in which people who have an expertise in a certain field, invite others to practice. Because of the present variety in a deregulated sex-positive space, people tend to have a broader view on what sex is. Arousing talk, caressing participation in a group scenario, watching or masturbating might all be perceived of as having sex or being sexually engaged with others. Diversity facilitates possibilities. Since some activities might not be inviting to everyone

in the same way, practices of negotiation and clarifying the meaning of a fantasy are important features of deregulated sex-positive spaces.

A Space of Negotiation and Consent

Negotiation takes the place of psychologizing and normative judgement. The aim of negotiation is to achieve consent. In a political setting, consent differs from a majority vote in that it is a procedure which strives for acknowledging each person's needs, wants and emotional situations – and which takes them into account for decision making. The concept of consent has a major standing in a deregulated sex-positive setting since there is the attempt to avoid emotional and bodily border crossings. In the BDSM scene, consent serves as the criterion that distinguishes voluntary sexual practices from violence. In order to juristically distinguish BDSM from abuse and in order to achieve a self-understanding that does justice to the caring aspects of BDSM practices, the BDSM scene emphasized their liberal decision to do exactly what they want to do. This coined the concept of liberal consent, which says: I know what I am doing and I want to do it (Bauer, 2016). Over time, the character of this liberty has been challenged, since sexual actions develop and might turn into something which couldn't have been conceived of in the beginning of the encounter. Moreover, wanting can be the object of external influence and pressure as well as internal epistemic unawareness. Thus, the concept of critical consent has developed, which emphasizes its character of a work in progress and its need for (communicative) updates while the interaction takes place (Bauer, 2016, pp. 135-139). What is encouraged in this process of gaining more certainty about what an individual wants and what someone else wants is staying in communicative non-violent contact, gentleness and error friendliness.

A Play Space

Eventually, spontaneous collective movement, the visible presence of sexual diversity and inspiring models within an affirmative and clear consensual framework, motivate people's drive to dare, to explore, to improvise and to *play*. Deregulated sex-positive spaces are play spaces. A playful attitude incorporates humor, aimless attempts, giving something a try, failing, making mistakes, and being kind with mistakes (Kalman, 2016). A distinctive feature of playfulness is that people generally tend to be rather happy. Deregulated sex-positive spaces tend to be spaces of laughter, play, togetherness, de-stressing and wellbeing.

Possible Traps of Deregulated Sex-Positive Spaces

If Illouz's analysis is sound, then agents who meet in monogamous, heterosexual erotic or romantic encounters differ in their conditions regarding the socio-economic necessity of a committed relationship, the necessity of a committed relationship for the genesis of self-worth, the available time to form a committed relationship with a prospect of a biological family, the social interpretation of their bonding behavior, the competition on the sexual field, the status that derives from sexual success, the resoluteness in which they can live their autonomy, the available time for living autonomously before parenting, the psychological interpretation of their suffering and insecurities and the learning history of appropriate romantic expressions. If only a third of this is true, then the heterosexual, monogamous romantic situation is miserable from an

emancipatory point of view and there is an urgent need to rethink romantic and sexual culture. How can sex-positive spaces manage these challenges? The rest of this section will have the form of questions rather than finite answers.

Erotic capital. Sex-positive spaces may fall into the trap of concealing the difference in status which men and women take away from their sexual successes and failures. If men acquire social status through the accumulation of sexual success, then certain individuals will have more status in sex-positive spaces than others, which allows them an easier sexual access to a greater number of women. However, while erotic capital directly increases male social status, Illouz (2012) argues that sexual successes further female social status only indirectly - if women manage to turn their erotic capital into a committed relationship. This frames the participation of men and women in sex-positive spaces differently. In the worst-case scenario, sex-positive spaces offer a stage to foster male erotic capital, while women exercise sexual liberty instrumentally in order to encounter someone with whom a committed relationship is possible. Moreover, Illouz (2012) argues that there are fewer selection options for women than for men on the sexual field. It is possible that this number further decreases since sex-positive communities are still rather small communities. And since sex-positivity is an attitude towards social life with an existential set of values, it is likely that participants of sex-positive spaces may want to form a relationship with a person who shares this set of values.

Sex and money. Illouz (2012) maintains that modern sexuality is characterized by the entanglement of economic principles and desire. What she has in mind is, for instance, the idea of weighing the best choice or calculating the most promising investment (of attention) for the best possible outcome. I hold it to be possible that the sustainability of sex-positive culture also depends on the extent to which communities find alternative ways to deal with financial resources. It is important to notice that some sex-positive events last between three and ten days and that the participation can cost a considerable amount of money. Moreover, individuals need to be able to afford not going to work within the respective time frame. Sometimes, participation is cheaper if participants work at the event. However, some events structurally depend on people who need to work as a helper if they want to participate in the event, which could lead to exploitation of socially disadvantaged people. In addition, certain style standards, gear for sexual practices or practices of body maintenance require financial efforts to buy clothing, gear and health food, to go to yoga classes and fitness facilities, to purchase beauty products or to go to a hairdresser. This might appear not to be different from a night spent in a cocktail bar and a dance club, which are possible dating environments where people stage their attractiveness. However, a critical perspective on the entanglement of capitalist economy and attractiveness needs to consider alternative ways to facilitate access to sex culture, as for instance through funding models such as pay as you like (PAL).

Equality Illusions. Sex-positive spaces may fall into the trap of enforcing and concealing power imbalances between the sexes, especially since visitors to such spaces might think of themselves as emancipated, open-minded and sharing values of equality. However, agreeing with the values of equality and emancipation in discourse does not guarantee the ability to habitually implement them in public life and in relationships. In fact, Koppetsch & Burkhart (1999) and Koppetsch & Speck (2015) suggests that couples might think that they have an equal relationship because they agree with the value of equality. However, in practice they do not equally distribute responsibilities and chores, leisure privileges and the opportunity of self-realization. This

discrepancy withholds privileges from women and it also withholds power and recognition resulting from the accomplished work if the partners pretend that they equally distribute opportunities and duties. However, pretending to have an equal relationship nurtures the self-image of modern partners with emancipatory values and it secures domestic harmony – two goods that will not be given up easily. This might be why Andie Nordgren (2012), the author of *The short instructional manifesto of relationship anarchy*, assumes that people who want to bring about change need to talk about what they are doing (differently); otherwise they end up reproducing the norm.

Pseudo-therapy. As environments dealing with the body, emotions and sexuality, sex-positive spaces can easily get confronted with the sometimes violent effects produced by a sex-negative culture. As a result, sex-positive spaces are not only learning spaces, political spaces or aesthetic spaces but also frequently understood as healing spaces. Thus, concerning the emancipatory interests of a sex-positive culture, they may fall into the trap of reinforcing therapeutic tendencies, encourage a focus on individual problems of the psyche, distract from systematic inequalities and occupy the personal and social resources which are necessary for socio-political change. Moreover, if it is true that women are already prone to self-doubt and self-accusation (Illouz, 2012), they could fall into the trap of submitting to moral superiority, advocating generosity and compersion while silencing their anger and inner revolt, which could help to take actions against conditions that are not equally good for all participants. In addition, deregulated sex-positive spaces are not professional clinical or medical therapy environments. However, body practices, work on emotional expression or verbal exchange about sexual content may encourage psychologizing a personal biography without having the respective professional skills in order to mediate such a process if an emotional damage is being touched upon.

Talk intimacy and confession culture. The emphasis on expressivity, authenticity and communication in deregulated sex-positive spaces might create the illusion that intimacy generates from stripping naked in conversation. Esther Perel calls the idea of creating intimacy through excessive verbal exchange *talk intimacy* (Perel, 2007, pp. 44-46). There are several traps to this: most obviously, talk might not be everybody's channel to generate intimacy. Moreover, stripping naked in conversation does not necessarily lead to intimacy but could lead to non-distance, which might put people in an inappropriate proximity with each other (Han, 2015, p. 20). Another trap is pointed out by Foucault's indication that talking about individual sexuality might take the shape of a confession culture which facilitates institutional regulation (Foucault, 1978). The invitation to express desires and emotional states might occur as an opportunity to break through a tabooed speech culture and start a transparent discourse. But it could also further a reveal culture, in which people incautiously share personal information in an exposing and disadvantageous way. For instance, sharing intimate information with a community might trap one into building a dependent reward structure and rescue narrative, in which people are socially rewarded if they expose their vulnerable self.

Vagueness and ambiguity. Sometimes, terms for phenomena are dismissed as labels that limit people or phenomena and put them into a category or a drawer. However, terms are the linguistic clothing for what philosophers call concepts, and concepts are the cognitive resources for thinking. While terms can be ambiguous or polysemic, concepts cannot. Concepts can be more or less appropriate and they need to be updated, but as a network of beliefs they facilitate

reference to and understanding of phenomena in the world. The trap in not wanting to label a relationship or be precise in its description in order not to limit it, or interconnect it with normative expectations, is that people might not understand their connection or relationship. Therefore, they might not understand when they are in a harmful relationship, when they are systematically disadvantaged and they might not be able to criticize aspects with which they are uncomfortable. If this is true, then it is hard to see where trust and reliability could be coming from.

Commitment inhibition and emotional sensation seeking. If Illouz is correct and recognition has been ruled out by the importance of autonomy, and thus, the request for commitment or a promise has become illegitimate, then it is hard to see how far the request for commitment can be asked without causing stress and being understood as a demand or a threat. Deregulated sex-positive spaces cover a plenitude of bodily, emotional, sexual and social learning areas such as dealing with shame, anger and rejection, speaking about sexual fantasies, recognizing and drawing boundaries or practicing negotiation. In face of the tension between commitment and autonomy and because the amount and density of emotionally and sexually engaging experiences is so high in sex-positive spaces, individuals may be tempted to continuously strive for the next thrill (Illouz, 2004). Hence, I assume that it might be helpful to also include commitment as a topic and an area of practice.

Missing social embedding. There are still few models giving examples for departing from a heteronormative, monogamous romantic relationship. Having fewer people who might give good feedback and who support the attempt to relate to one another differently, as well as a lack of guidelines and models for how to struggle through conflicts, find suitable decision making processes or renovate relationship agreements, might trap people in (social) isolation. If relating differently in romantic and sexual relationships is central for the way in which a community is built, then sex-positive spaces might contribute to a very different culture. However, if emancipatory attempts aim at social change and not at a parallel society, then sex-positive culture needs to be accessible and provide ways to bridge gaps.

Facilitation is not empowerment. Sex-positive spaces demand a high level of communicative skills, reflective skills, emotion regulatory skills, proprioceptive awareness, error friendliness, integrity and the willingness to embark on improvisation, learning and intrapersonal as well as interpersonal diversity and unfamiliarity. The reward, as I see it, is relaxed loving and a relaxed sex life.

Conclusion

Based on Eva Illouz's sociological explanation of modern suffering in heterosexual, monogamous romantic relationships, I have considered possible traps which deregulated sex-positive spaces might walk into. Despite its promise of liberal loving, Illouz holds the deregulation of courtship, that is, the detachment of romantic and erotic encounters from committed relationships, to be one major factor contributing to a social situation in which the privilege of autonomy is unequally distributed between men and women. This enables men to dominate women emotionally. Since sex-positive spaces can be understood as one form of deregulating erotic encounters, I followed the question whether these spaces are especially prone

to reproduce social inequalities as described by Illouz, or whether they are especially suitable to overcome inequalities and bring forth emancipatory change.

My response is the following: deregulated sex-positive spaces are a part of sex-positive culture and activism. As such, they address fundamental dimensions of social life. The prospect is a society that figures out answers to many important how-to questions concerning personal and social life: how to show and communicate affection, how to relate to yourself and to your body, how to relate to other people and their bodies, how to find an appropriate proximity, how to get into and out of contact, how to maintain connection, how to deal with desire, how to negotiate bodily and romantic interests, how to deal with a diversity of emotions within people and among people, how to deal with failure and error, how to communicate borders firmly, how to reject someone with respect and how to deal with rejection, how to solve conflicts as a community while respecting personal space and so forth – the list is long.

The crucial point, as I see it, is that sex-positive culture needs to be good in practice and not only in theory. This is why Illouz offers both a reminder of how circumstances that are not intentionally arranged can still fall into place and the explanation to the normative suggestion that sex-positive culture needs to be feminist. While practice does encompass critical discourse and content work, it is also necessary to translate its contents into action. There is no *good in theory but* [...]. Relating to one another is exactly what people do in practice no matter whether they are in professional, personal or sexual contact. A social program is only as good as it is in lived reality.

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We invite the submission of original manuscripts on any topics relevant to positive sexuality. We encourage submissions from diverse epistemological perspectives, and we welcome a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches, as well as theoretical and conceptual essays. Alongside the work of scholars and students, we are interested in contributions from community, clinical, and other nonacademic professionals, especially contributions that help strengthen the connection between the study and practice of positive sexuality.

While the *Journal of Positive Sexuality* has a preference for shorter manuscripts (2,000–3,000 words), longer manuscripts up to 10,000 words will be considered. In preparation for submission, authors should observe the following guidelines:

- Manuscripts should have a clear sex-positive focus.
- Given the diverse readership of the journal, authors should write in a straight-forward and non-technical manner, avoiding jargon when possible. Manuscripts should be written such that they can be easily understood by scholars and professionals outside of one's own field or discipline.
- Manuscripts should be written in a style consistent with the latest edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA). Please include DOIs for all references when available. Instead of endnotes, please use footnotes when necessary.

New submissions should be emailed to submissions@journalofpositivesexuality.org, and should include the following Microsoft Word attachments:

- A title page, including: (1) the title of the manuscript; (2) names, institutional affiliations, and contact information for each author; (3) the word count of the main manuscript; (4) a statement certifying that the submission has not been previously published and/or is not currently under review elsewhere; (5) any pertinent information about the approval or regulatory process for human subjects research; (6) any acknowledgements that the authors would like to include for publication.
- A fully-blinded manuscript, including: (1) the title of the manuscript; (2) a brief abstract, 100 words or less; (3) the body of the manuscript; (4) references
- Any tables or figures should be submitted in separate files in either Microsoft Word or Microsoft Excel format.

Manuscripts will be reviewed initially by the Editor-in-Chief and/or Associate Editors. Appropriate manuscripts will then be sent out for double-blind peer review by at least two reviewers. While not always possible, the *Journal of Positive Sexuality* strives to return editorial decisions within two months of submission.

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