LIMITS IN SEXUAL INTERACTION: A LIMINALITY HOTSPOT, RATHER THAN AN EXPLICIT BOUNDARY? (THE SUBJECTIVITY OF THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN WANTED AND UNWANTED SEX)

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Abstract: Recent studies have used methods designed to obtain a precise quantitative assessment of sexual aggression, but these are based on the presumption of a normative psychological understanding of what the questionnaire items mean to respondents. This article takes a novel approach that is appropriate for analysing the ‘grey zone’ between wanted and unwanted sex as the key to obtaining a deeper understanding of the data on sexual violence. Stenner and Clinch (2013) developed the concept of “liminal hotspots”, which refer to liminal situations in which a rite of passage occurs from one recognised ‘structure’ to another. The article draws on in-depth interviews to examine the optimal and pessimal sexual encounters and contexts participants encounter in their sex lives. The main research question concerns how the boundary between wanted and unwanted sex is constructed. One important finding is that the concept of liminal hotspots can be used effectively to investigate the boundary between wanted and unwanted sex.

Key words: sexual interaction; liminality; violence; wanted and unwanted sex.

Background and theory

In recent decades the issue of sexual violence has been dominated by both political and academic interest in child abuse. A great deal of research, campaigning, and policy-making has been directed at the prevention of such abuse. However, the concerns of young people/children regarding unwanted sexual interaction remain on the margins of scientific, public and political interest. The internet, electronic media and open channels of communication are all areas where sexual aggression and violence are on the increase among young people. Research in this area is a recent area of rapid growth (Koss et al., 2007; Krahé, 2000; Krahé, Bieneck, & Scheinberger-Olwig, 2007a; Krahé, Bieneck, & Scheinberger-Olwig, 2007b; Krahé & Tomaszewska-Jedrysiak, 2011; in Slovakia Gregussová et al. 2009, 2010a, b, c). This paper builds on our experience working on a European project, *Understanding and addressing youth sexual coercion and violence as a threat to young people’s sexual health in Europe* (EU Health Programme/Executive Agency for Health and Consumers/DG SANCO) coordinated by Rutgers WPF, the Netherlands. The project findings indicated a

high prevalence of sexual aggression and victimisation among young people across Europe. It exists in diverse forms, and a number of predictors have been identified (Krahé, Berger, Vanwesenbeeck, Bianchi, et al., 2015). The prevalence rate of sexual victimisation across 10 EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain) is 27.1% for young men and 32.2% for young women. The Slovak rate is slightly higher than the EU average, at 29.2% for young men and 35.8% for young women. Predictors of sexual victimisation include a high measure of sexual assertiveness and drinking alcohol prior to having sex (not overall alcohol consumption) (Krahé et al., 2015).

In addition to this quantitative and contextual approach, we have conducted a qualitative exploration of the subjective construction of the boundary between wanted and unwanted sexual interaction.

There are two reasons for **undertaking a phenomenological exploration** of how the boundary between what is and what is not acceptable is shaped over the course of a person's sex life: (1) the meaning of a sexual act cannot be taken for granted using the constructivist approach, and (2) recent quantitative studies have employed sophisticated methods for obtaining a precise quantitative assessment of sexual aggression, but these are based on a 'silent' presumption of a normative/universal psychological understanding of what the questionnaire items mean to respondents (see e.g. Koss et al., 2007; Krahé, Bieneck & Scheinberger-Olwig, 2007a).

Beyond these epistemological/methodological arguments, there are numerous reasons relating to the crucial role **subjectivity plays in sexuality**. Our research relies on three theoretical approaches that are relatively new in sexuality research: (1) the notion of sexual scripts, adapted by William Simon from the original work he published with John Gagnon (1984) for use in post-modern discourse, (2) conceptualisations of the subjective meaning of sex (Supeková & Bianchi, 2000) and (3) the dichotomy of (non-)linearity and acceleration of early sexual interactions and the implications for the development of a person's sex life (Symons, 2012).

William Simon (1996) highlights the decisive role sexual scripts play in sexual interaction. The syntax of sexual scripts is contained within the language and other symbolic codes used. We can distinguish three types of scripts—cultural scripts (mainly acquired), interpersonal scripts (created in interaction with others), and intrapsychic scripts (mainly a result of reflections of our personal experiences). The notion of a sexual script is by nature a constructivist one and, according to Simon, it enables us to express the tension between permanence and change. From a psychological point of view, it is a generative framework for analysis and prediction, as it enables us to understand the dynamics in the stability and variability of human sexual behaviour.

Supeková and Bianchi (2000; Supeková et al., 2005) have pointed out the importance of the different subjective meanings of sex and their relationship to satisfaction and the extent of risk-taking when sexual actors interact. They have distinguished four subjective meanings of sex: (1) sex concerning partnership, intimacy and love, (2) sex related to personal pleasure, (3) sex to please a partner, and (4) sex as a tool to improve self-reflection.

In her recent study on the retrospective self-assessment of early sexual debut (aged 12–14 years), Katrien Symons (2012) has demonstrated that there is a clear distinction between

the effects of accelerated interaction and of the non-linearity in interactions leading to first sexual intercourse. In a Goffmanian sense, acceleration refers to the speeding up of the succession of steps in which sexual partners engage (contact, touching, kissing, necking, petting and eventually penetration) when following culturally normative succession patterns. Accelerating this succession of steps does not necessarily seem to be related to a negative self-evaluation of early sexual debut. However, nonlinearity (where the culturally normative succession of steps is disrupted or some steps are omitted, e.g. kissing and touching) is a strong predictor of dissatisfaction and/or regret over first sexual intercourse.

A theoretical approach suited to investigating the ‘grey zone’ between wanted and unwanted sex has emerged. Stenner and Clinch (2013) have developed the concept of ‘liminal hotspots’, based on the liminal situations originally used by van Gennep (1960) in anthropology to refer to the rite of passage from one recognised ‘position’ or ‘structure’ to another. The idea of permanent liminality refers to liminal hotspots, or situations and experiences in which people become ‘stuck’ in transition, caught in a long-term (or even permanent) state of ‘in-betweenness’ or transition. Examples include precarious labour conditions between employment and unemployment; flows of migration that yield hybrid identities; or stress-related illnesses that leave sufferers stuck in the diagnostic limbo of being neither legitimately sick nor healthy. Another potential liminal hotspot is sexual interaction at a time when sexual, social, moral, and other norms previously demarcating good from bad, safe from unsafe, or wanted from unwanted, in sexual interaction are being deconstructed.

Method

In order to gain a better understanding of how young people distinguish between the wanted/desired and the unwanted/undesirable in sexual interaction, we have suggested a **scenario for in-depth semi-structured interviews**, consisting of three main parts:

- (1) The key element in the interview is the participant’s reconstruction of their optimal (‘best’) and pessimal (‘worst’) sexual episode and their comparison thereof (juxtapositioning). In a narrative-discursive approach this contrasting technique can be used to explore below the phenomenal surface of sexual interaction. The boundary between the wanted and the unwanted in sex can then be determined.
- (2) This interview scenario also enables us to explore contexts that may be important in the construction of limits in sex: the influence of culture, the media, social environment and social norms.
- (3) The third dimension of the interview scenario focuses on changes over the lifespan—how sexual boundaries transform/transmute over the course of a person’s sex life and how it varies in relation to sexual partner.

This paper is based on interviews with 28 heterosexual participants from Slovakia (17F, 11M, aged 21-29) who had had at least two successive sexual partners. The participants were recruited using the snow-ball technique and through a professional recruitment agency, reaching a saturation of data from the point of view of their sexual narratives. Optimal and pessimal sexual interaction episodes were analysed. The interviews were recorded and the transcripts were coded and analysed using a thematic/conceptual analysis and a discursive-analytic approach. Content validity was ensured by the fact that the interviews

were independently coded by two researchers (male and female) and then the results were integrated.

Research questions:

Where—as in a liminality hotspot—‘breakdown of order turns into permanence’:

- 1. *How is the subjective boundary between wanted and unwanted sex constructed?*
- 2. *To what extent does the exploration of the limits of sexual interaction suggest permanent liminality (a liminality hotspot)?*
- 3. *What is the relationship between the ‘breakdown of order’ and sexual satisfaction?*

Results

The results presented here are based on a transversal analysis of the interviews, ‘merging’ the participants and looking for a generalized view, where appropriate. The male and female participants were kept separate as there is substantial evidence of gender differences in sexuality.

Our main findings are presented in these two figures:

- 1. optimal vs. pessimal sexual experience and
- 2. dimensions of sexual interactions.

Figure 1. Optimal vs. pessimal sexual experience

	SUBJECTIVE MEANING OF SEX		
	all of females and most of males reporting sex as part of relationship	sex is better in the relationship - known partner	as part of relationship
	both females and males reporting sex as tool to pleasing themselves	sex as form of relax	pleasure for myself
	few females and few males reporting sex as tool to pleasing their partner	partners orgasm and satisfaction is as important as mine, or more important	for pleasing partner
females reporting performing fellatio and anal sex mostly to please partner			
only females reporting sex as tool to achieve better self-image or to gain advantage	-	-	self-image
ACCELERATION			
6 out of 17 reporting slight acceleration of sex career, 7 reporting normal acceleration and 4 females retardation	-	6 out of 11 males reporting slight acceleration and 5 normal acceleration	
LINEARITY			
4 out of 17 females reporting slight non-linearity and 13 report linearity in sex activity	progression established as touches, kisses, petting, oral sex, vaginal sex	2 out of 11 reporting slight non-linearity and 9 males report linearity in sex activity	
SCRIPT			
heavily adopted form religion, upbringing	dominant 25 out of 28	heavily adopted from media - porn	culture / society
compare satisfaction and quality	15 out of 28	compare experience	interaction with peers
what is wanted	22 out of 28	what is pleasing	interaction with partner
only females reporting	minority 4 out of 29	none	intrapsychical
border is sharp	border is partly constructed but possibly influenced by alcohol trigger	border is actively generated	form
BORDERS			
controlling partner urging partner sex for money	SAYS NO TO anal sex faecal sex insults	homosexual experience drunk partner	phenomenology
FEMALE	SHARED	MALE	

Figure 2. Dimensions of sexual interaction

The analysis of optimal and pessimal sex experiences shows important differences. There is a strong match between genders on the content of both kinds of experience, while there are also significant differences in the content between genders.

For all participants the optimum sexual experience was having sex in a stable partner relationship and pursuing bliss. However, female participants may also seek dialogue with their sexual partner and an absence of pressure, while male participants strongly emphasised the spontaneity of sex and continued to highly value their first experience of sex.

All the participants associated pessimal sex with disappointment that their freer expectations concerning sex had not been fulfilled and disillusionment with the lack of attachment from their partner. However, female participants considered the worst possible sex to involve physical and verbal violence, while for male participants it could involve an unattractive partner or disruption during the sex act.

Our analysis of the interviews using the three theoretical frameworks—subjective meaning of sex, acceleration/non-linearity, and sexual scripts—showed:

- A ‘good’ distribution of what sex means. The notion of sex as a means of improving self-image was surprisingly rare (more surprising in males!). In women it was only found in two forms—improving low self-body-image or gaining power in communication with males.
- There was little evidence of acceleration of non-linearity over the sex life.
- There were many reports of the cultural scripting of sex by participants. However, the cultural influences were completely different for females (strict religious regulation, taboo effect in family) compared to males (pornography). This is illustrated by the following quotes:

Question: How many sexual partners would you like in your life?

Answer: One would be enough. Sometimes I get so horny that I would try everybody, but as I am a Christian... My parents have never put any pressure on me, in the last three years I have become a stronger believer, my ex-boyfriend was religious so we attended (religious) seminars and so...
(woman No2)

At home there has never been any talk about sex. It's a topic that was never discussed with my mother – up to now. They [her parents] never broached this topic, or talked to us [children] about it directly. The topic was seen as 'obvious'.
(woman No4)

Question: When having sex did you do something you've seen, heard about?

Answer: ...definitely something from a porn-film or erotic movie ... that is a strong influence for sure... relating to sex and touching and how to 'make [satisfy] a woman properly'.

(man No1)

- The data show a new category relating to the sexual scripts is required—interaction with peers. This turned out to be at least as influential as dyadic interaction with the sexual partner in scripting the sex. Surprisingly, there is no intrapsychic scripting in males, indicating their strong vulnerability to media/cultural scripts—dominant in porn!

This brings us to the issue of constructing the subjective boundary between wanted and unwanted sex. Here we distinguish between:

- (1) the form of the boundary—how marked and clearly perceived it is, and
- (2) the phenomenology of the boundary—what sexual content defines it, what do people say ‘no’ to because it is beyond their subjective boundary.

Our results show that one general characteristic of the boundary holds true for both genders: it is partially constructed and vulnerable to shifting when alcohol is consumed.

I was not keen on doing it (anal penetration), but I told him ‘go either here or there’. So he started with my vagina and then shifted to anal sex. He made it by saying ‘may I try something more?’ and I replied that he could try and he was very careful. And I liked it so much that now I want to have it every time.

(woman No14)

The participant describes how his partner came to agree to fellatio:

She was out with friends, had something to drink, they talked about oral sex and when she came home... presumably this had ‘weakened’ her...

(man No1)

However, at the same time there were also distinctions in male and female perceptions of the subjective boundary—for some females it was a clear boundary, while some males constructed their boundary ‘in action’.

The gender distinction is reflected in the optimum-pessimism divide mentioned earlier. For females controlling and/or urging sexual partners were generally behind shifts in their subjective boundary of acceptance, while for males only homosexual and (extremely) drunk sexual partners lay outside the boundary.

Some of the ideas participants expressed about the boundary could have been influenced by what they perceive to be socially desirable.

Summary and discussion

If we return to our research questions, based on the data collected from our sample, we can state that:

1. There is a significant process of discursive activity among sexual participants concerning the boundary of sexual interaction. That boundary is, however, only partially constructed and liable to change. Among females it is much more likely to be more rigid. There is an awareness that alcohol consumption may be a catalyst for unexpected ‘incursions across the boundary’. It is important that such incursions are viewed in relation to the potential for unwanted sex and possibly for sexual victimization to occur. This is highlighted by a study by Krahé et al. (2015) that found that prior alcohol consumption is a significant predictor of sexual victimization.

The phenomenology of the subjective boundary differs for males and females, and can be considered one of the main sources of conflict in sexual interaction. This is especially true in light of the important gender difference in cultural scripting: females (religion, family); males (porn).

2. Our findings may indicate that it is important to take the theoretical framework of liminal hotspots into account when considering the complexity of sexual interactions in relation to sexual violence and the promotion of sexual health. The subjective boundary in sexual interaction was found to be open for a high proportion of participants (more for men than women), which may be a sign they are ‘stuck’ in transition, in a long-term (or even permanent) state of ‘in-betweenness’ or transition. This ‘open’ boundary may facilitate sexual violence and endanger sexual health—this concerns men in particular. In women, the high exposure to tabooisation and rigid/strict rules in family upbringing may result in a low capacity to effectively negotiate the boundary protecting against unwanted sex.
3. The third question, on the relationship between the ‘breakdown of order’ and sexual satisfaction, cannot be answered on the basis of the analyses performed thus far. It requires an analytic approach that primarily takes into account the trajectories of each participant and investigates causality within the sexual narratives.

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