

FEMALE EROTIC DESIRE

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Abstract: This paper explores the epistemology and methodology for describing sexual/erotic desire in women. Culture provides a variety of discourses which create possibilities for individual agents to think, experience and act. This paper outlines the dominant discourses of sexuality. The main focus is on the emerging psychodynamic understanding of erotic desire as a cultivated way of experiencing and expressing intersubjective embodied desire. The story of a female research participant has been selected to illustrate the journey from undifferentiated physical and mental experiences of desire to the peculiar integration of both aspects in her lived experience. A combination of interpretive methods is employed.

Key words: desire; eroticism; sexuality; agency; discourse

Introduction

Researching sexuality is invariably complex and multidisciplinary in nature. In the discursive approach different notions and definitions of desire (e.g., the drive to reproduce) emerge within specific discourses (e.g., evolutionist discourse). In writing about desire meaning is produced through the selection and use of ideas embedded within the various discourses. These choices are made as part of an awareness of the re/productive power of knowledge and many strands of thinking, which are beyond the scope of this paper.

Dominant discourses of sexuality

Discourses provide the language, meanings and practices that are drawn upon in the construction of subjectivities and agency. Agency is the ability to use discursive means to create meaningful and livable representations of the self. The dominant discourses foster and maintain power relationships and structures by defining normality. Requests to conform to the norm do not have to be explained, because the idea that there is a desirable behavior, thought or emotion is one that is widely shared (Foucault, 2000; Gavey, 1997). Large heterogeneous and complex cultures invest less into stabilization via conformity. Greater variability enables the existence of parallel discourses and therefore of “mixed messages” about sexuality (Fafejta, 2016).

Gagnon and Simon (1973; 2004) use the metaphor of sexual scripts to explain social norms and expectations within sexuality. These scripts are the result of social learning and provide meaning to biological events (e.g., pleasure). Cultural scripts draw upon the available discourses within a culture, while people adjust their interpersonal scripts in relation to their expectations. Intrapersonal scripts include fantasies and unique combinations of the cultural and interpersonal scripts.

According to Hollway (2011), the psychodynamic approach used in postmodern psychology combines psychoanalytic ideas and object relations theory, and takes emotional investment into account. Emotional investment explains a person's motivation to repeatedly take up certain positions in discourses, as it brings the person satisfaction or "enjoyment" (e.g., participating in unwanted sex to maintain a relationship). Through the psychodynamic approach we can gain an understanding of the history of an individual's positioning within discourses and the subsequent production of subjectivity and explain why only some of the many available discursive positions are desired (Hollway, 2011). This interpretive framework is especially useful for exploring intrapersonal sexual/relational scripts that give rise to the needs, wants and desires which are communicated to the partner(s). This self-knowledge and these communication skills constitute agency, especially in liberal discourses.

The traditional discourses on sexuality (religious, predatory, respectful) are heteronormative and promote sex differences. These tend to disembody female sexuality.

In *traditional religious* discourse the subject is controlled through guilt. According to Kleinplatz (2012) the gendered dualism of body/soul that reached its zenith in the Victorian era locates female desire within the Madonna/whore distinction with its heavy moral connotations. Only the Madonna is ascribed legitimacy and agency, and desire is closely tied to procreation or the fulfillment of marital duties.

The traditional predatory discourse is also known as "the male sex drive discourse" (Hollway, 1984). Here desire is ascribed to the "conquering" male subject, and the woman is discursively positioned as its object. Women situated in this discourse derive their agency from their desirability (self-objectification) and capacity to eroticize the other's desire (projection and identification with the predator's desire). Being "a good object" requires so-called token resistance. Token resistance is a symbolic form of resistance that raises the value of the conquest for the man. This practice leads to variation in how refusal is understood in sexual encounters. Overcoming resistance goes hand in hand with a sense of entitlement reinforced by the notion of men having a "natural and uncontrollable" sex drive (Fafeita, 2016; Hollway, 1984).

The traditional respectful discourse or "have-hold" discourse (Hollway, 1984) is mostly to be found in scientific discourses on sexuality. Sexologists, psychologists, and counselors provide advice on how to improve marital satisfaction and mutual understanding. They stress the differences between the sexes in terms of expectations, needs and ways of fulfilling them. Agency is based on the successful performance of masculinity and femininity. Women are constructed as the "gatekeepers" of the male drive, while men are supposed to respect their partner's wishes. The practice of "gatekeeping" provides women with a primary strategy for rejecting male sexual offers and for putting aside their own desires in order to avoid the risk of becoming pregnant or being devalued if they "give men sex" in the wrong circumstances (before commitment and intimacy) (Hartley & Drew, 2001). Once in a committed and

intimate relationship, women describe sex as “relationship hygiene”. Sex is framed as a means of maintaining the relationship. Although pleasant, the scheduled sexual activity is performed to promote the wellbeing of the partner/couple. Sex can be undesired, but consensual (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015). Female desire is channeled into love and care. A “pleasing woman” sexually “feeds” her adult partner. In this motherly care, desire fades sooner or later. Put simply, maternal behaviors and sexual (incestuous) scripts are mutually exclusive (Perel, 2007).

In traditional discourses, sexual objectification is one of the most salient cultural practices affecting desire in women. Many scholars have pointed out that objectification and subsequent self-objectification play a major role in reducing desire. According to Nussbaum (1995), objectification involves one or more of the following: denial of autonomy, agency, interchangeability, violability, ownership, denial of subjectivity. Objectification elicits feelings of body shame and depression, lowers self-esteem and self-efficacy and thus limits agency (Garcia et al., 2015; Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003; Phillips & Slaughter, 2000; Tolman et al., 2006). Women who support traditional notions of femininity (slimness, importance of appearance, importance of romantic relationships) score higher on body shame (Hurt et al., 2007). Body shame is correlated with low sexual satisfaction (Claudat & Warren, 2014; Wiederman, 2000). Recent acculturation studies suggest that socialization via shame feeds into different levels of feeling and expressions of desire (Benuto & Meana, 2008; Brotto et al., 2011; Woo et al., 2010; Woo et al., 2012).

Sexual objectification is an interpersonal phenomenon that occurs in both public (being evaluated as a sex object) and private. The experience of unwanted sex (being used as a sex object) seems to be most detrimental to the subjective feeling of desire in women (Ramsey & Hoyt, 2014). There are many kinds of unwanted sexual experience: undesired but consensual sex, sexual abuse, sexual coercion and rape, repeated rape (Tolman, 2002; Impett & Peplau, 2002). In everyday interactions undesired but consensual sex is the most conspicuous cause of diminished desire in women with partners (Spurgas, 2013). Affiliative motives for consent are usually a wish to please her partner or deepen the emotional connection. Aversive motives include wishing to avoid conflict, getting her partner to do something for her, placating her partner or circumventing her partner’s bad mood. Women who consent to unwanted sexual activity for aversive motives report lower levels of physical pleasure and satisfaction and subsequently low levels of desire (Birnbaum, 2010; Impett & Peplau, 2002; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). In the long-term desire usually does not survive affiliative reasons for engaging in unwanted sexual activity (Hall, 2004; Perel, 2007). Simply being aware of objectifying practices and interactions within traditional discourses does not mean subjects can evade being exposed to them by positioning themselves within liberal discourses. Nevertheless, if subjects are aware of the positions they are keen to take up or are forced to take up, they may decide to alter their response or remain silent when the target of certain conversational gambits (Gavey, 1997).

Liberal (democratic) discourses are emancipatory and tend to enhance the agency of the subject and democratize intimate relationships. In this discourse the emancipation of female sexuality may be articulated in terms of equality (through the law, practices in the public and private spheres, and through subsistence), the sovereignty of the body (access to information, access to contraception and abortion) and positive attitudes to one’s sexuality (self-

acceptance of the body, acceptance of needs and feelings, decision making and negotiating in intimate relationships). The ideological substrate of democratic discourses reflects the social, cultural and power dimensions of sexuality. Central to them is equal demand for mutual pleasure in consenting individuals. In this discourse agency is based on knowledge and the ability to reflect and negotiate one's expectations and desires. This kind of agency is deemed difficult to attain in many socio-political and relational circumstances (Diiorio et al., 2003; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2002), as is the case, for example, with the multidimensional biopsychosocial model of sexuality (Tiefer, 2010).

It is possible to distinguish between two discourses: liberally-liberal and liberally-intimate.

The liberally-liberal discourse, also known as the “permissive discourse”, has been described by Hollway (1984) as allowing any form of sexual expression that is not harmful to the parties involved. As in the predatory discourse sex can be separated from the relationship (recreational sex), but satisfaction is demanded by men and women alike (Fafejta, 2016). The subjects of this discourse are allowed to sexually objectify one another so long as nobody feels used. Although both sexes are ascribed sexual desire this does not mean that subjectivation removes the old limits or taboos.

In the *liberally-intimate* discourse sexuality is legitimized within a stable relationship between partners of any sex or gender. Priority is ascribed to intersubjectivity and gender fluidity, not to genitality and sex differences. The relationship provides sexual satisfaction and fulfills the emotional needs of both partners. Love and support are communicated through intimate physical contact (touching, kissing, and cuddling) and emotional closeness in a relationship valued by both parties is also maintained in this way.

The liberally-intimate discourse is a matrix of embodied erotic desire as postulated in contemporary psychodynamic discourse, which has adapted to the linguistic turn in social sciences and is inspired by feminist emancipatory efforts. Erotic desire can be conceptualized as a whole-being intersubjective experience of pleasure and excitement under the conditions of perceived trust and security. Intersubjectivity presumes differentiation and the ability to become the subject and object of another's desire. The traditional notion of care entrenched in the female role excludes men from adopting the position of a good Winnicottian object as fathers. This creates/reinforces the hierarchical economic and political social structures that reinforce the autonomy/care, public/private, man (subject)/woman (object) dichotomies. This dichotomy is believed to be the product of traditional heteronormative discourses. For sustainable sexual and intimate fulfillment, it is important for both partners to balance the tension between the desire for self-assertion (independence) and for caring for another (dependence) (Benjamin, 1990; Chodorow, 1978; Flax, 1980; Fonagy, 2008; Lichtenberg, 2008; Eichenbaum & Orbach, 2012; Perel, 2007; Schnarch, 2000).

The regulation of two basic affects leads to pleasure and excitement. Lichtenberg (2008), who has written on psychodynamics, is interested in integrating attachment theory and object relations theory. He highlights the importance of pre-linguistic embodiment. The capacity for pleasure is developed in infancy through sensual interaction (holding, caressing, bathing, tickling etc.) with primary caregivers (Fonagy, 2008; Lichtenberg, 2008; van der Kolk, 2014). Excitement is an affect that is connected to active exploratory efforts, object manipulation and stimuli seeking behaviors (Lichtenberg, 2008). That is to say that

in sensitive, responsive and pleasurable care the body is made to feel good at an affective level (onset of emotional regulation) in nonverbal interactions even before infants develop language. During this process the ability to recognize one's needs and dis/trust another's willingness and ability to meet those needs is developed. Both are deemed essential to agency in the liberally-intimate discourse.

At the emotional regulatory level, the inhibiting affects of "inappropriate" exploratory efforts (e. g., masturbatory self-exploration) are shame and guilt, linked to the fear/anxiety of losing a connection with a significant person. According to Lichtenberg (2008) it is the anxiety-driven parental shaming of pleasurable activities (curious exploration, masturbation) that creates the sense of prohibition and separates sensuality from sexuality. Later on in adolescence and adulthood negative emotions (shame, guilt, fear, and anxiety) restrict both pleasure and excitement and lead to lower levels of trust and security and thus to a reduction in desire (see effects of objectification above).

Early interactions are governed by the way in which the parents position themselves within the discourse (e.g., believing that infants should cry themselves to sleep rather than being doted upon) which contains messages about gender roles and the available sexual identities as well as appropriate behaviors. Gender socialization is also based on parental beliefs concerning differing the bodily capacities of boys and girls. Traditional beliefs shape care giving practices, which, for example, tend to limit exploratory efforts in girls due to their perceived vulnerability (Mondschein et al., 2000). Lichtenberg (2008) concludes that exploration and sexual excitement are more typical in male sexuality and passivity, while receptivity to stimuli and sensual pleasure are more typical in female sexuality (Lichtenberg, 2008). The latter is more likely to be devalued. The liberally-intimate discourse questions the difference in values and portrays agency as being based on the ability to eliminate differences and re-create subjectivities anew in erotic encounters.

Data analysis: an example from a larger study

In order to illustrate the epistemological framework outlined above, we shall now turn to a brief analysis. The aim of the qualitative research was to find out the following: *How do women who self-identify as heterosexual experience desire? What are the forms and meanings of desire and how do ways of experiencing it vary over the life span?* The story of one female participant has been selected from a larger data sample (Škubalová, 2017). The data on this participant were obtained during three narrative based interview sessions with a six-month interval between each. The interviews lasted about one hour and were held in a quiet environment chosen by the participant. The method of recruitment was opportunistic, based on the participant's interest in exploring her desire with the researcher. Informed consent was obtained verbally. The participant rejected the invitation to check the transcribed data.

A combination of interpretive methods was employed: narrative reconstruction, the agency focused discursive approach and the metaphor of polyphony.

Subjective experience and a sense of self are central to both the narrative and constructionist approaches in psychology (Avdi & Georgaca, 2009). In the narrative approach subjectivity is viewed as being internalized by the person and expressed through

(polyphous) speech. Discourse analysis draws upon social constructionism and traces the ways in which subjectivity is construed through interactional processes and the deployment of wider discourses. In both approaches, subjectivity is seen as fluid, multiple and contradictory (Avdi & Georgaca, 2009).

The nature of the discursive analysis influences the data collection/production and to a certain extent enables us to separate the text from the producer. From a distance it presents subjectivity as fragmented and “governed” by language from outside. By contrast the narrative approach to data collection and narrative analysis organizes utterances into a coherent narrative, which is closer to the act of experiencing oneself as a more or less coherent and continuous subject who “reigns” over the language. For the purposes of this data collection/production the narrative interview seemed less intrusive. For this analysis the polyphony metaphor (e.g. Tolman, 2002) was adapted from an analysis of a phenomenological description of an erotic call (Aanstoos, 2001). This erotic experience can be described as an embodied intentional erotic call, response, play and fulfillment (Aanstoos, 2001). Only an embodied subject/object can be brought into interaction with another embodied subject/object to continue the play and fulfillment. Therefore the call and the response must be heard by both sides: a clear, resounding and somewhat harmonious call “I want it with you”.

The polyphony enables the researcher to listen to the various voices of the respondent (narrative self) and pay close attention to the subjectivity and agency or lack thereof (discursively positioned self). The voices indicate how desire is experienced in the context. Some voices may be muted or too quiet. Where this is the case the missing sign (?) is used.

I distinguish the following possible voices: “I” – I as a subject endowed by will, agentive instance; “Want” – one’s conscious relationship with one’s wants, affirming one’s needs, relationship with oneself; “It” – the body’s voice. It includes various forms of sensual and sexual contact and bodily capacities; “You (with you)” – the other as an attachment object, that is to say recognized as a subject. The unconscious motivation and experience of desire as an impulsive tension leads to “I” being replaced with “That”. In this mental structure desire is not experienced as “owning the wanting” (Perel, 2007), but as “being owned by wanting”. Understandably replacing “I” with (?) poses a serious ontological problem for the modern subject and its agency.

Data analysis

Andrea¹ (25) had her first nonsexual but emotionally intimate relationship (A) when she was 12-15 years old. Her second relationship (B), at the age of 16-17, lasted one year. She is now in the seventh year of a relationship with her current boyfriend (C). This last relationship became sexual in the first year of their living together. She is Caucasian and from a middle class family background. By the time of the last interview she had finished her master’s degree in psychology.

¹ The participant’s utterances are given in italics.

Her sexuality was *disturbed by her bad upbringing*. Her relationship with A, at the onset of puberty, attracted attention in the small town neighborhood she lived in.

It was always disapproved of, it was dangerous. They said: you'll get pregnant, what are you going to do with the child! So I felt guilty about my desire.

Her mother *lectured her on contraception* while avoiding any references to sexual activity. At that time they were *not doing anything or even thinking we should be doing something*. She was experiencing a *nice and emotionally complete relationship*. Maintaining this relationship against societal odds taught her voice how to say “I want (?) with you.” Her body’s voice was silent.

When her relationship with A ended she was already attending a catholic school. There her verbal resistance and *irony* were silenced. She surrendered to the *pressures of society* and became a *good normal girl*, who *suppressed her desires*. The “Want” voice was muted. She was situated within traditional discourses but opted for the *Madonna position*. The guilt she experiences refers to a morally unacceptable part of herself.

Her parents’ inability to orient themselves in their daughter’s emotional landscape led to a profound distrust. It also gave rise to her main subjectivation need: “*I need to fulfill a need... the desire for recognition*”.

While at secondary school she met B. She experienced a desire for *sharing* and intimacy. B was a few years older and he shared stories with her about his *sexual adventures*. The way he spoke about other women was *physical* and *perverted*. She encountered male desire situated within an objectifying, predatory discourse – “I want it (?)” – and it did not make sense to her. All she *felt sexually* was *repulsion*. She decided not to sleep with him. Her father’s sudden phone call was *traumatic*. He called her a *whore*. Her father was an *indifferent* and *weak man*. She seeks the opposite of him in a man. From now on she understands her family is not a place where she can be recognized. It fosters separation, not differentiation.

I desire to be with another person in a connection, even a physical one, but as proof that he loves me as a person, as a human inside.

She mentioned one person in the family that she identifies with and that is her grandmother. She married four times, and is the *black sheep*: a woman who set herself free three times. The notion of *freedom* became important in her story.

Her current partner C is eight years older and his *sexual experiences* troubled her. She felt *pushed* into sleeping with him. Her first time was a very nice *spiritual connection, a fulfillment of the relationship, a merging of bodies and souls*, but the second time was not like that at all. He wanted to *do the sex he was used to*. His ways were *learnt and automatic*. She felt *disturbed* by his experiences. She demanded the *freedom to explore* her own sexual expression, but he touched her *as if he were horny and willing to sleep with anyone*.

She situated his desire in predatory discourse. She felt that only her body is being targeted, but her need was to be *recognized as a person, as a human inside*. She separated her personality (good “pure” girl) from her body (bad “naughty” girl).

The need to please him was stronger than the need to take care of myself, and that was not good.

She submitted to his desire on several occasions. Her body fell silent. *The technique was the same*, but “It” just did not come. When she felt connected and engaged in the sexual interaction out of desire, she orgasmed *four times in a single session*. Her bodily capacity for pleasure made her to listen to the voice of “It”.

After experiencing unwanted sex, she became *allergic* to the way he initiated it. After much conflict he *gave up*. The *pressure* ceased and in that space she realized that when she did eventually desire him she could not initiate the act. She was used to responding (gatekeeping), but not eliciting. Her wanting voice was weak “I (?) it with you.”

In the third year of their relationship she had a *significant dream* which resolved the deeper issue of her wanting. The dream began in a *tower where she was dancing a sensual tango with a man*. She was interrupted by her relatives and dragged down to a *barn* to attend C’s sister’s *wedding*. The guests were *drunk* and the whole scene was dark and *repulsive*. She escaped the unappealing wedding celebration. Outside the barn she found a *circus owner who was torturing a beautiful black horse*. She *rescued* the horse. The *ungrateful* beast kicked and bit her at first, but eventually it calmed down and she *set it free*.

I realized I could set my passion free and be kind to it.

Subsequently they came to three agreements on initiation, ban and non-ownership. This signaled a shift into a liberally-intimate discourse. The initiation:

Fortunately I have a strong man, so I told him: this is my situation, tell me how I can refuse you, but not hurt you.

When she refuses him, she is supposed to initiate it the next time. She can experience herself as an active agent when her voices say “I want it with you”. She experiences his refusal too, and that enables her to *empathize* with him. They now play active/passive, initiating/gatekeeping roles. The ban:

I told him: look, we don’t HAVE to have sex, so let’s not do it. It was great, once it was forbidden it was tempting and exciting.

She is working hard to de-institutionalize sex. Sexuality has been transferred into a space of negotiation and construction. It has been extricated from the “doing of sex” as an obligatory role performance. Andrea also seems to be exercising the power her parents had to create prohibitions on her own terms.

The non-ownership: in the seventh year of their relationship they allowed themselves to satisfy their needs with whomever they wanted, but did not tell each other about it.

I needed to be given some freedom from that relationship. I needed him to let me go and trust that I would come back, but accept that it was possible I wouldn’t.

The relationship was not functioning well. She felt she *desired other men* and wanted to *try something else*. She suggested the agreement for a year’s duration. C was *scared* at first, but then he *coped*, because he *trusted me to do meaningful things*.

“A woman is able to release her desire in the hands of a man, who is perceived as strong, that is to say whose strength enables him not to be dependent on her” (Benjamin, 1990,

p. 15). The ideal lover can be compared to the ideal teacher: someone who provides some structure but enough freedom at the same time, so the other can immerse themselves into their own imagination. There she can explore and make mistakes as long as it is necessary, in order to express her own world view. Love is not guaranteed on the basis of submission (Benjamin, 1990). Andrea had experienced the denial of love because she had not submitted and obeyed in adolescence and that fueled her need to be recognized in her rebellion.

I needed to get into a different role. The “naughty” girl who could afford to experience some excitement, be horny and self-realize...Now I feel free, I don’t feel owned, I rule my own body.

It takes more detailed analysis, but in the end she does not in fact want to have sex with other men. It is an attempt to resolve the distinction between the conflict and attaining recognition as an embodied sexual subject who owns her erotic voice. Her partner’s approval enabled her to get in touch with the voice of her “Want”. After six months of non-ownership she feels more anchored in her body.

He puts me in the role of the competent one. The power has evened out. I am less submissive and he is less dominant and it is very pleasant.

Her role as a woman now is to reflect on how she *feels beside her man* and to say *what she needs from him*. The commitment is felt very strongly, but it is not represented in exclusive access to one another (monogamy), but in an exclusive agreement over the current situation of independence.

I feel my desire is perceived as more...wild, because I was able to ask for conditions which are unthinkable for a woman.

After getting in touch with her active, initiative, *aggressive male part* she finds it easier to express her desire *through her body*. The original I-person-subject/body-object dichotomy ceased to exist as integration occurred and her partner’s desire seems non-threatening. “I want it with you” has been enabled in the liberally-intimate discourse of negotiated intimate life.

Discussion and conclusions

In this analysis the discursive shift can be described as emancipation from a traditional predatory and respecting discourse. The religious discourse has been marginalized, but probably refers to family values in the context of the moral reprehensibility of “premature” sexual behavior. Andrea is repeatedly punished through norms and commanded to be a decent gatekeeping woman. She is socialized into the traditional female role: a nonsexual, obedient good girl. Her lack of trust in the prohibiting and punishing instances (Lichtenberg, 2008) and her positive experiences of love (“I want (?) with you”) allow her to find value and meaning in resistance. Her partners’ desire (B, C) is initially situated within a traditional predatory discourse. Her body’s voice was not important in the story of her desire until she experienced unwanted sex. Then her body spoke through “its silence”, signaling a lack of pleasure. She cannot satisfy her partner’s sexual needs at the expense of her own. The female

role in the traditional respecting discourse did not feel right on the bodily level either. Her desire for recognition is located within the liberal (democratic) discourse which provides arguments in favor of freedom, autonomy and entitlement to satisfaction. The location itself does not guarantee access to the script or the skills for enacting it. Eventually with the “permission” of her intimate partner she uses the position of the naughty girl (*sassy* and *aggressive*). Her desire is recognized as *wild* and is newly experienced within and through her body. All this occurs under conditions which are *unthinkable for a woman*: the cancellation of mutual ownership, dealing with the power imbalance, and zero tolerance of unwanted sex.

Furthermore the psychodynamic account of differentiation essential to an erotic experience can be experienced as the flexible expression of identifications. The person can alternate between the feelings of “I as a subject without gender”, “I-woman”, and “I-similar to a man”. The ability to achieve and maintain this flexibility contributes to the person’s self-acceptance and ability to accept the other (Benjamin, 1990). These identifications are progressively achieved in Andrea’s narration of her sexual subjectivity. Her relentlessly positive relationship to the voice of “want” and bodily capacity for pleasure under the circumstances of “wanted sex” transformed the power dynamics of the relationship and her sense of agency and desire.

In her analysis of gender discourses Zábrodská (2008) claims that in the fantasies analyzed it is possible to pinpoint the key motive (often unconscious) for subjection in each individual. Andrea’s metaphor for her desire is “two playing at black horses”. The black horse represents the *free* and ungendered aspect of her psyche. The idea of “play” is embedded in the liberally intimate discourse and draws upon the Winnicottian notion of intersubjectivity. In Donald Winnicott’s theory of object relations the “object” is an attachment figure responsive to the person’s needs who thus shapes the person’s subjectivity. Play is a creative endeavor in which the “object” is sought in the other; it dissolves the binaries and is accepting of difference. In this process the mode of “just being” emerges and has a restorative effect on the human psyche and body. The other is not reduced to a narcissistic projective fantasy and nor are they used as an instrumental object (typical of predatory discourse) (Barša, 2002; Lichtenberg, 2008). In Andrea’s narration the motive of “play” appears in her dream where she “is dancing a sensual tango”. This motive became a conscious part of her intrapsychic script and provided the solution (transgressive energy) to her inner conflict caused by parental shaming. Once conscious of it and having explored it she experimented with ways of translating it into her interpersonal script, albeit with difficulty.

To conclude, this paper presented the dominant discourses of sexuality which shape different experiences of gendered subjects and desires. Value judgments should not be formed in relation to any form of desire, experienced (emotionally invested) in any discourse. Nonetheless the way the discursive position of the subject produces (gives voice to) and limits (mutes) the various types of action should be examined. The paper explored the concept and an illustrative analysis of embodied erotic desire as one way in which desire can be experienced. A combination of interpretive methods was used to gain insight into the participant’s understanding (biographical work) of subjectivity and desire, enabling all three levels of “scripts” to be examined as proposed by Simon and Gagnon (1973). This

psychodynamic approach enables a deeper examination of the emotional investment into discursive positions and thus contributes to a more profound understanding of the sources of agency and its limits over the person's life course. The narrative reconstruction highlights the fact that stories of desire are stories of how we relate to ourselves and to others. They are woven out of the tender threads of meanings ascribed to what the person should/can expect, want and obtain from intimate life and sexuality. These threads also form part of the "webbing" of the emergent discourses that dominate in a particular culture, era or family.

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