

Developing Queer Joy-centered Gender-based Violence Prevention Education:

2SLGBTQ+ Youth-led Recommendations



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In Partnership with Egale Canada

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Land Engagement

The participants whose voices are featured in this report live in Canada and the US which are lands that have been violently seized through the genocidal process of settler colonialism. One of the central forces of this historical and ongoing genocide has been the rape and murder of Indigenous people but particularly girls, women, and Two-Spirit people (Deer, 2015). We cannot think about gender-based violence without highlighting the ways that exploitation, devaluation and destruction of land and animals is connected to the objectification, rape, and violence humans inflict upon each other in a settler colonial society.

We recognize the land that the researchers in the study reside on and with this recognition ask readers who are settlers to reflect upon their own relationship to the lands they occupy. The authors of the report reside in Toronto, or T'karonto, and Edmonton, which the Cree call amiskwaciwâskahikan (Beaver Hills House), the Nakota Sioux call ti oda (Many Houses), and the Niitsitapi call Amakowsis, or omahkoyis (Big Lodge). Both Toronto and Edmonton may also have been known by other names in languages that have been lost or not yet revitalized. Tkaronto is the traditional territory of many First Nations, including the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. Edmonton is located on Treaty 6 territory, where the prairie and boreal forest meet, which is the homeland of Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, Ojibway/ Saulteaux/Anishinaabe, and Inuit peoples. We are mindful of broken treaties that persist across Canada and the US and encourage readers to reflect upon their responsibilities as Treaty people to engage in a meaningful, continuous process of truth and reconciliation with all our relations.

About the Authors

Dr. JJ Wright (she/they) is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at MacEwan University. Dr. Wright's primary area of research is gender-based violence, sexual health and consent education, and issues impacting 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. As a community-engaged researcher, Dr. Wright works with regional, provincial, and national organizations to advocate for gender justice and to research ways to address gender-based violence that are trauma-informed and community responsive. Their research is inspired by a commitment to community-building and creating cultures that are more just, caring, and connected. When not researching or teaching, JJ likes to play sports, spend time in nature with friends, or tend to their garden.

Elliot Fonarev (he/him) is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. His research focuses on sociolegal studies, trans and queer studies, qualitative methodology, and pedagogy. Prior to pursuing graduate studies, Elliot was a human rights lawyer who supported queer and trans rights advocacy in Canada and South Africa. Elliot loves to travel, hike, cook, and share memes.

Ellis Greenberg (they/them) has recently completed the Masters of Education program in the Department of Social Justice Education at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Ellis is a disabled queer non-binary white settler. Their work focuses on sexual violence prevention, queer and trans sexual joy, and anticolonial conceptions of gender. Ellis has worked as a high school sex educator and is an experienced facilitator of queer and trans youth groups. In their free time, Ellis loves to go on long walks with their dog Clyde, cook delicious food, and make textile art.

About Egale Canada

Egale is Canada's national 2SLGBTQI organization. Egale works to improve the lives of 2SLGBTQI people in Canada and to enhance the global response to 2SLGBTQI issues. Egale achieves this by informing public policy, inspiring cultural change, and promoting human rights and inclusion through research, education, awareness, and legal advocacy. Our vision is a Canada, and ultimately a world, without homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and all other forms of oppression so that every person can achieve their full potential, free from hatred and bias.

Acknowledgements

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Thank you to all of the participants who shared their perspectives and experiences with us. Though this was a project on queer sexual joy, it was also about gender-based violence prevention, and some of the discussions were necessarily about romantic, sexual, or other situations that did not bring joy and instead brought harm and suffering. We thank participants for their candidness, their vulnerability, and their bravery. Shame cannot exist in the light.

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Introduction

The Queer Sexual Joy Project was led by Dr. JJ Wright and is a collaboration with Egale Canada. The project aimed to explore how queer and trans sexual joy disrupt the colonial, racist, homophobic, transphobic, sexist, ableist cultural norms that lead to gender-based violence. Between March 2022 and June 2023, 100 2SLGBTQ+ people aged 18–35 from across Canada and the U.S. participated in the study through arts-based workshops, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, or a survey.

The Queer Sexual Joy project traces queer and trans young adults' experiences of great consensual sex and queer sexual joy to develop understandings of consensual sex that challenge the violent, cisheteronormative scripts underlying rape culture. This project also acts as a contribution to the queer archival work of documenting 2SLGBTQ+ communities' narratives of liberatory sex, which challenges how queer and trans communities are systematically absented from archival processes (Ware, 2017; Ware & Wyngz, 2020).

One of the main goals of the project was to show the potential of centering queer sexual joy for improving sexuality education, and specifically for creating new models of consent education that highlight and combat the cisheteropatriarchal structures at the core of rape culture. Participants shared many insights about how to change sexuality education so that it prepares all young people to have more safe, just, and joyful sexual experiences.

In the following pages, we offer 2SLGBTQ+ youth-led recommendations for queer-joy centered programming alongside related practical examples. The six recommendations surround themes including:

1. [Teaching communication for safe and pleasurable sex;](#)
2. [Bodily autonomy and consent;](#)
3. [Anti-oppressive sexuality education;](#)
4. [Pleasure activism; expanding understandings of pleasure and care;](#)
5. [Containers for safety;](#)

6. [Grounding and embodiment practices](#) which includes discussion of gender dysphoria.

The following document offers supplementary material to the Queer Sexual Joy project report titled “Learning From Queer and Trans Sexual Joy: Cultivating Just, Pleasurable, and Affirming Sexual Cultures.” A glossary, literature review, methodology for the study, a breakdown of participants’ demographic information, and references can be located in the primary report.

Context of the Research

The research team is aware that a study on queer and trans sexual joy in a political climate of rising hatred towards 2SLGBTQ+ communities is not published without risks attached. Indeed, when the Call for Participants for the study was released on social media in 2023, the Principal Investigator of the project, Dr. JJ Wright, was subject to a slew of homophobic, transphobic, misogynist vitriol. We are living in a time when a small but vocal minority of bigots are fuelling a fire of hatred. There are a number of hateful discourses that have been on the rise as part of the backlash against human rights progress and the societal integration of 2SLGBTQ+ communities, such as the notion that all queer and trans people are groomers of children, pedophiles, or otherwise out to corrupt children. Another example is the discourse that queerness and transness is a Western concept and that the rise of 2SLGBTQ+ identities are a product of social contagion. This discourse presents an ahistorical account of queerness and transness that misses the way terminology shifts over time, how queer and trans people have always been present in societies around the world, and how non-Western cultures have identity categories—such as hijras in India, muxes in Mexico, or Two-Spirit folks in Canada—that challenge the naturalization of binary gender.

There have also been rising numbers of policies and laws that situate queer or trans people as mentally unwell vis-a-vis queerness and transness being positioned as pathological. These are just some ways in which 2SLGBTQ+ people are facing villainization and attempts at eradication. Unfortunately, the backlash we are seeing in society has been associated with rising hate crimes including gender-based

violence against 2SLGBTQ+ communities—especially those who are BIPOC, disabled, or poor or working class (Aiello, 2023; Boynton, 2023).

In the face of this violence, we could talk about queer and trans sexual joy or the other beautiful aspects of 2SLGBTQ+ communities less, and become smaller out of fear. Instead, we speak out and chose to proudly share the Queer Sexual Joy project's findings, which features narratives from queer and trans young adults about how they are finding pleasure, care, and deeply loving and respectful relationships by challenging the status quo and the violent norms it upholds for relating to each other, such as those perpetuated by cis-heteronormativity and rape culture. Given the backlash the project has already faced in its initial stages, it is even more important for the project's report and this supplementary document to be published. The research team recognizes the ways in which discourses of queer and trans sexuality are used towards homophobic and transphobic ends, and we know that some may read project findings eager to cherry-pick material and change their meanings in order to spread hate. We did not write the report or this document, however, for these people. They are for people who are open to learning about the ways in which queer and trans peoples' experiences and insights about sex, relationships, and society more broadly highlight structural oppression as well as ways that things are being done differently in the periphery to allow for more liberatory futures. Some of these readers may be curriculum or policy writers, educators, lawyers, administrators, researchers, or general community members. The project's findings were also written up for queer and trans young adults as well as older 2SLGBTQ+ people who may find feelings of joy, belonging, connection, excitement, pleasure, and hope.

The project was one of world-making, dreaming, and mapping futures that are more sustainable, just, and pleasurable. We as queer and trans people will imagine the futures we need and want, and we hope the report and document you are reading now offer inspiration in that process.

Suggestions from Participants for Queer-joy Centered Sexuality Education and Gender-based Violence Prevention Education



1. Teaching Communication for Safe and Pleasurable Sex

Key take away:

Creating safety is critical for sexual joy, and communication is key in finding that safety, thus, nuanced communication skills must be central to conversations in gender-based violence prevention.



As was highlighted over the course of the study, one of the major contributors to queer sexual joy is clear and open communication. Reflecting this, participants suggested that sexuality education should provide more guidance and examples of how to communicate about and during sex. Sex and our experiences of it are inherently unpredictable (Butler, 2011) so it is important to teach young people how to communicate through unexpected, surprising, or challenging moments in sex. Speaking about what has helped her have better sexual experiences, Darby shared:

“ I think for me, what’s been really helpful is just having examples of ways to talk about things, or how to say things or phrase things, if that makes sense. Otherwise, it comes out like the word vomit and you know you don’t know what to do.... [I wish] sex ed wasn’t so sterile as, you know, so here’s genitalia and here’s how it fits together and here’s how to say yes to it or no to it, right? But rather if it fostered a curiosity that everyone innately has about sex and a responsiveness and openness to all those questions and using language like softness, like tenderness, that I would never have associated with sex if I’m thinking about my kid self, like I would never see it hand-in-hand together.

Here, Darby highlights the importance of knowing how to communicate about sex, and identifies the need for sexuality education to engage with young people's curiosity in order to demystify sex and prepare students for more caring and engaged sex lives.

The importance of having open conversations about sex and knowing how to communicate during sexual encounters was echoed by Nox, who talked about the role of communication in preventing shame. Nox offered:

“ Making a funny face, farting during sex, sometimes like you try a new position and it's like noises happen that you're not expecting and it doesn't have to be like, 'Oh that was embarrassing,' you can laugh at it and then move on. And that can be a joyful kind of intimacy because it's not from a place of judgment... I think that shame arrives in the dark and shining a light on things can be massively helpful.. There are worse things to be than a little bit awkward during sex and [it's] better than like a potential miscommunication or breach of consent.

”

Sexuality education can help “shine a light” on sex by engaging with young people's curiosity about sex and providing them with concrete communication tools for navigating all of the funny, awkward, joyful, confusing, and unexpected moments. As with all human relationships, challenges can arise, and knowing how to communicate through conflict in ways that foster accountability for self and others helps create the conditions needed for queer sexual joy. Winter went through challenges with their partner, Alex, when Alex wanted to have more sex than they did. They navigated the situation this way:

“ Alex, they want to have sex more often than me, so that's been a huge learning process of like, 'How can we talk about difficult things, how can we have those conversations without them making me feel pressured?' And when am I projecting onto them that they're pressuring me when they're really not? I've just experienced that so many times [with cis men] that I'm quick to be like, 'Well, if you're asking me and I don't want it, then you're pressuring me,' but that's not

actually it. Like your partner's allowed to ask you without it being traumatic. They recently slept with someone where they felt like the person was kind of pressuring them and so that was really—I mean, it sucks for them—but it was really cool for me to hear from them how that felt for them. Because usually, I'm in that position, but for them to be like, 'Oh, I really get what you mean, it is a unique thing if someone you really like wants to have sex with you and you trust them, but then you don't want to have sex with them.' Like that is different than a cis man pressuring you, but it can still trigger you and bring you back there...Our consistent conversations have led to way better sex. And the type of sex we were having before we started therapy was really, I guess, like a new relationship kind of. Like spontaneous and fun and not that communicative, but then the more that we have these conversations and the longer we've been together, I just feel like it's so much more satisfying and interesting sex and way more connected.

”

By making sure they were not projecting onto their partner, Winter took responsibility for their trauma triggers rather than making them their partner's fault. This created a safer relationship for both of them where Winter had more self-knowledge and Alex would perhaps have more capacity for supporting Winter through their trauma triggers if they were not in a defensive place. Developing mutual understanding through communication helped support them in growing a sexual relationship with lots of queer sexual joy.

Participant Luciana offered some helpful concrete examples for sexual communication when she shared:

“

You can be like, 'Hey, I know sometimes we can't talk. If I ask questions, you can just nod.' And they're like, 'yeah no, maybe wait five minutes and then ask me again and I'll tell you verbally.' So we kind of get to know each other's physical communication ... sex is a very physical thing, and sometimes the body speaks louder than the words. Because you can be completely silent and still have wonderful sex even though I think that would be very hard, it

is possible...But also, sometimes when I am not too sure, I try to make eye contact again. I'm like, you know, (Luciana widens eyes at camera) try to say, 'Okay, okay,' and we continue. and it's just the tiny little check-in's that you do.

”

Here, Luciana shared the communication tools that she and her partner have developed to navigate challenges, maintain consent, and increase feelings of safety and connectedness during sex. As Luciana shows, this communication can be both verbal and physical.

For Kai, an important part of fostering queer sexual joy with partners is clear communication about sex early on. As Kai stated:

”

It's a very intimate conversation to get to know someone and to communicate between bodies and their current states and to navigate the different ways you experience pleasure too, like, how do you like to be touched? This is one of the first conversations I have with a lot of partners. It's just like, how do you like to be touched? And what brings you joy?

Kai preempts the unpredictability and ambiguity inherent in sexual encounters by directly asking about pleasure and joy, which is a skill that would likely benefit all people who engage in sex. As these examples show, communicating about sex can look many different ways, but it is an essential skill for preventing harm and experiencing sexual joy that should be taught in sexuality education.

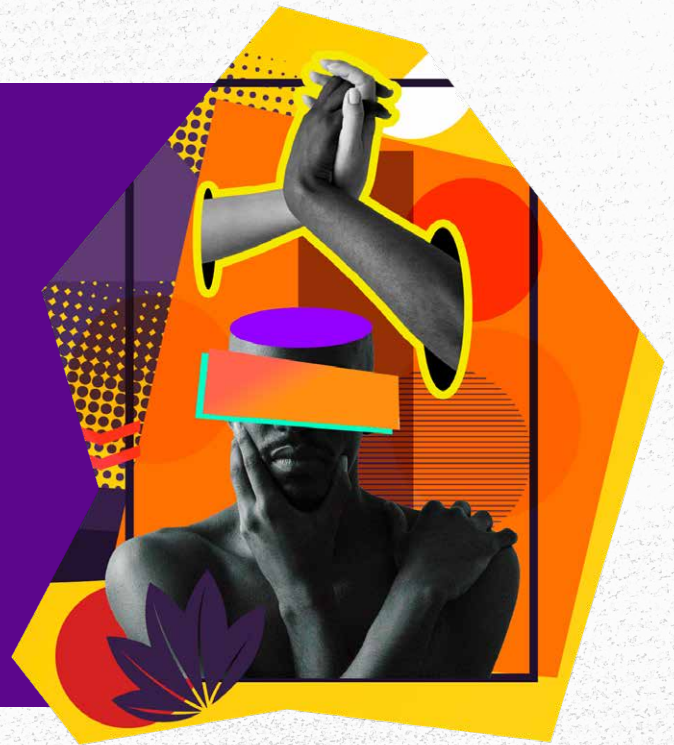
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2. Bodily Autonomy and Consent

Key take away:

Queer-joy centered sexuality education would teach youth about bodily autonomy so that they know that it is their choice what happens to their body and what others do to it. Highlighting bodily autonomy provides the message that, in order to tune in to one's needs and desires as well as a partner's, there must be respect for each others' boundaries.



Consent was articulated as a central part of safe, fun, and joyful sexual experiences for all of the participants. However, as highlighted in the literature review within the primary report, consent education often relies on a yes/no binary that fails to account for the ambiguity inherent in sex and reifies patriarchal sexual norms (Beres, 2014; Beres, 2022, Wright et al., 2022). In the Representation and Sexuality Education section of the primary report, participant Winter shared how the failure of sexuality education to teach them about their own bodily autonomy led to sexual harm. The need for consent education to focus on bodily autonomy was emphasized by Jiva, who said:

“ If you're someone who is very touchy-feely like I am, a hug may be your go-to way to welcome someone into your space [but then there could be] someone who is like very neurodivergent and doesn't like hugs. If you were to deconstruct consent and really break it down to its basics, it's about making sure that you're allowing someone the autonomy and the space to reflect on what they want in that moment, or what they need, and that looks very different from person-to-person, situation-to-situation. ”

For Jiva, practicing consent is about respecting the bodily autonomy of all people, which looks different depending on the people involved and the situation at hand. This means moving beyond ideas of consent that assume that all people are perfectly self-transparent and communicate about their needs in the same way (Wright, 2022).

A common misconception about sexual consent communication that stems from yes/no models of consent is that asking for and giving consent is necessarily sterile and unsexy, which may result in some people being less likely to establish consent in their sexual encounters (Setty, 2022). However, participants emphasized the importance of consent for sexual safety and provided examples of the ways in which negotiating consent actually contributed to the sexiness of their encounters. As Scarlett put it:

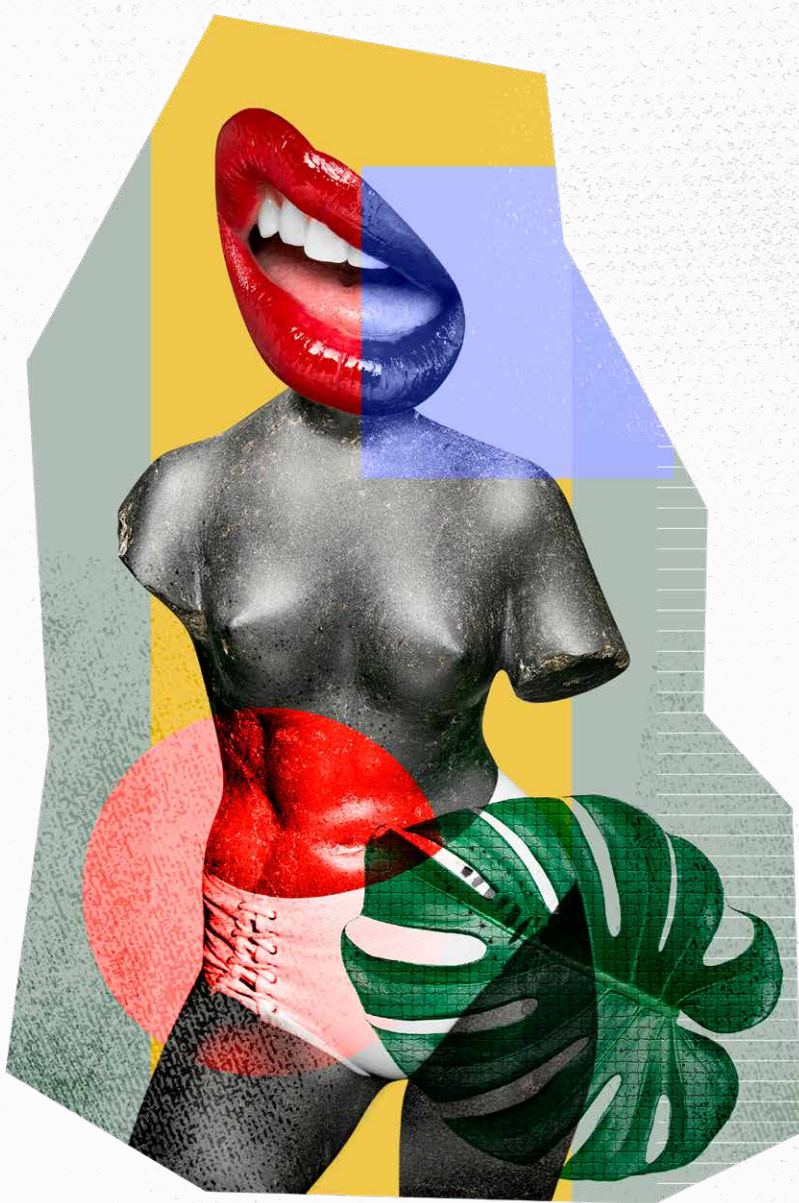
“ I really take issue with the fact that consent is often framed as something that’s like not sexy and takes you out of the moment. I can think of one of the most earth shattering kisses of my entire life was someone who literally was like ‘You’re so gorgeous, can I please kiss you?’ And it being like

one of the most romantic, intense experiences of my life...With my partner now it’s like different body language and looking at each other and making eye contact and things like that that are ways for asking for consent and checking in while still very much staying in that like sensual sexy moment.

Scarlett’s experience with the kiss shows that the mode in which someone asks for consent can actually increase the pleasure derived from a sexual act. Further, Scarlett highlights that she and her partner have developed modes of establishing consent that maintain, rather than detract from, their sexual encounters. Nox also illustrated how consent negotiation can make sexual encounter more pleasurable when he shared:

“ I do think that talking [consent] through can be an excellent form of foreplay in many ways because I think consent, it doesn’t have to be like a written contract, and we’re going to sit down and this... (Nox mimics counting on fingers). It can be integrated into a form of foreplay. It doesn’t have to be super rigid.

By incorporating consent negotiation into foreplay, Nox counters the idea that consent negotiation necessarily makes the encounter less sexy. Meaningful and ongoing consent that centers bodily autonomy was considered absolutely necessary for queer sexual joy by all participants, and participants like Scarlett and Nox showed how breaking formulaic yes/no consent scripts could actually increase sexual pleasure and joy. Therefore, consent education needs to move beyond restrictive and scripted models of consent and instead teach that consent negotiation will look “different from person-to-person, situation-to-situation” and that it can be integrated into sexual practices in a sexy and sensual way.



3. Anti-oppressive Sexuality Education

Key take away:

Sexuality education must be more critical, expansive, and anti-oppressive in both content and pedagogy.



Research shows that sexuality education often reinforces hegemonic, colonial, and binary models of sex, gender, and sexuality rather than countering them (Woolley, 2015). Participants echoed these findings, sharing their desire for sexuality education to encourage more critical, expansive, and liberatory understandings. As Jiva put it:

“ I think that integrating [sex] education from a very young age tends to be a key factor, but also, ...[sexed bodies] var[y] so much from person to person, but because we're so ingrained to think of everything in binary terms, we haven't been able to explore all of the other options...I feel like even at the very core basics of, just like not limiting our perspectives into what colonizers have essentially put in place for us to then follow and respect. ”

For Jiva, the binary colonial understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality underlying much of the current sexuality education programming limits people's ability to explore their own identities, embodiments, and desires. Willow also identified how the cisheteronormative assumptions underlying much sexuality education likely play into queerphobia and transphobia when they stated:

“

The lack of sex education is why there's still so much 'othering' happening...I wish that [educational spaces were set up to recognize that] everyone in this room has the potential to be queer. And why are we not talking about that instead of like oh yeah, everyone here is probably cishet and then there will be like these outliers, maybe, and like they can figure it [out]. Why are we not like presenting it as if everyone has to do this healthy work of exploring their own gender and sexuality norms and kind of unpacking scripts really early on.

”

Willow identifies that an important part of countering cisheteronormativity in sexuality education would be to encourage all students to critically explore their own gender and sexual orientation rather than assuming that all students fit the normative, cisheterosexual mold. This would not necessarily result in more students identifying as 2SLGBTQ+, but would help denaturalize the colonial gender, sex, and sexual orientation binaries that result in queerphobic and transphobic violence.

For Quinn, this would look like sexuality education that “acknowledg[es] the lack of choice at birth that one has to say who they are [either ‘girl’ or ‘boy’]”, and for Teddy this would look like long-term critical engagement with cisheteronorms that could help students “unpack bigoted ideas.” Although this kind of anti-oppressive sexuality education would ideally begin at a young age, Pearl provided a great example of how to make this kind of content accessible and relevant to older students who may not already have a critical perspective. Pearl shared:

“

I TA sociology classes... So what I have tried to do... is, say, using examples when I'm giving a definition of like heteronormativity, I frame it in a way that's not just going to resonate with the experiences of queer students, but also perhaps assist heterosexual students. So an example that I gave is, like you know, have you guys ever been to a party or heard a guy say that it's fine for his girlfriend to kiss another girl, which is like something that a lot of students were like, yeah, I've, like, heard and seen guys do that before. And then I frame it like,

well, would that boyfriend be okay with her kissing another guy? And everyone's like well that would never fly. And I'm like, okay, so that's sort of how you can see the way that queer women's sexuality is both devalued and fetishized. ”

By offering an example of heteronormativity that is widely relevant, Pearl encourages her students to critically reflect on their ideas about gender and sexual orientation regardless of their own positionality vis-a-vis these norms. This is the kind of norm-critical work that needs to be centered in any sexuality education program that aims to help students lead just, safe, and pleasurable sex lives.



4. Pleasure Activism: Expanding Understandings of Pleasure and Care

Key take away:

One of the most important aspects to preventing gender-based violence as well as promoting embodied sexual pleasure is knowing what feels good emotionally and physically and, thus, pleasure must be taught as a critical concept in sexuality education.



One of the most important aspects to preventing gender-based violence as well as promoting embodied sexual pleasure is knowing what feels good emotionally and physically. As Wren said:

“

I would have benefited so much if sex education had centered around ‘sex should feel good.’ ...If I'd had a lens of like, ‘Oh, sex should feel good,’ I would have questioned many elements in hetero relationships that I had where sex didn't feel good.

”

In this section, examples guide the conversation as to how sexuality education could improve by centering pleasure, safety, and care, as a method of centering queer and trans joy.

Much sexuality education has a pleasure-deficit that does not allow children and young adults to explore what feels both bad and good for their bodies (Kendall, 2013). The absence of conversations about pleasures reifies the way that cis men and masc people's pleasure is centered in Western sexual cultures, often at the expense of their partners (Gavey, 2018).

One survey respondent noted, “in cishetero scripts it's often presented as femmes/women having no agency or even fearing the idea of saying what you like/dislike in sexual activity.” Expectations that women+ people keep up the appearance of being “up for it” despite being disembodied and (self/)objectified is a norm (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012), and thus, teaching young adults to connect to embodied pleasure is critical to the project to create more pleasurable, less harmful sex. As brown (2019) notes “Being able to say no makes yes a choice” (p. 13). As a “pleasure activist,” brown asserts that it is a radical act to feel pleasure in our current world, particularly as one who is part of “othered” group(s) in society. She explains that “Pleasure activists believe that by tapping into the potential goodness in each of us we can generate justice and liberation, growing a healing abundance where we have been socialized to believe only scarcity exists” (p. 12). Using this framework, we may consider how part of pleasure activism necessarily involves challenging cisheteropatriarchal sexual norms. One survey participant shared: “my experiences with cishetero folks often looked the exact same. Most of it followed a cishetero script of what

kind of sexual activity happened, whose sexual pleasure was prioritized, and when the sexual activity ended (aka ejaculation).” This ordering of sex follows mainstream porn and absents queer and trans sexual cultures where, as one survey participant put it “Sexual activity with queer folks is less structured and prioritizes everyone's pleasure...[it] can include breaks, changes, and is open to all peoples input.” Many participants expressed that their experiences in sexuality education and the dominant ideas they encountered in society more broadly presented a narrow conception of sex that was largely not reflective of their sexual experiences. Musing on the possibility of centering queer sexual joy to counter the colonial, cisheteropatriarchal norms that result in this narrow definition of sex, Kit offers:

“ Queer sexuality and queer pleasure is an act of resistance. And I think that’s such a beautiful way to think about it, you know? The ways that queer people actually have experienced pleasure have been criminalized. Things that I do in my life and my sexuality have been criminalized or things are, you know, constantly being, I don't know the word, but

kind of just put down or constantly demonized, I guess. And I think that we have this opportunity with queer sexuality where things don't have to resemble systems that we already have. We have this opportunity to do something better and bigger and more pleasurable, more focused on consent, and we have this opportunity for growth. And I think that's really interesting to think about. I think that it could be really radical if we take the time to have conversations that promote understanding and mutual pleasure, to have that communication, to have consent. We can kind of build something really, really beautiful if we take into account those outside forces and dismantle them, even in our sex and sexuality.

”

For Kit, because queer embodiments, desires, and sexualities already break cisheteropatriarchal sexual norms, queer sexual joy can help deconstruct these norms and can offer much more expansive understandings of pleasure and sex. Wren echoed this sentiment in the context of sexuality education, sharing, “I would love to see sex education centering pleasure,

dismantling power structures, and just [talking about] the expansiveness of sex.” Although this idea was widely agreed upon by participants, Jiva cautioned that “it's hard to imagine QSJ programming when the culture outside the classroom doesn't match or build on and continue it.” Despite the challenges of imagining new sexual cultures, as brown (2019) notes “Pleasure activism is the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy” (p. 12). This activism is indeed work, though it is well worth the effort since “Pleasure is the point. Feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom” (brown, 2019, p. 364).

As highlighted by Kit and Wren, part of a more liberatory approach to sexuality education would be to greatly expand what is taught about and defined as sex by looking to the sexual practices of queer and trans folks who do not fit the cisheteronormative mold. For example, Wren shared:

“

Sex being so expansive and not so focused on anatomy is a part of what brings me great joy where I feel like now...I talk about typically with my partners about 'doing sex'

rather than 'having sex,' because it feels like this really active connection. It's not something where we're like both together going there and just having and taking, we're doing it together, we're creating it together, and there's an expansiveness in that where it's not about a particular anatomical destination and that's true no matter what the body parts are involved.

”

of how I can express myself sexually, physically, so being able to connect that sort of artistic element and also have that be something shared with my partner is something that's really special to me. I guess in essence queer sexual joy comes from seeing how queer sexuality can sort of transcend our expectations for how people do sex and sexuality and desire.

”

For Wren, queer sexual joy comes from understanding sex not as being defined by certain kinds of body parts touching in certain ways, but instead being understood as a mutual and creative act. This was similar to Frankie and their partner's understanding of sex “as a sacred ritual or a ceremony where we're creating energy between us, we're connecting.” For Pearl, looking to queer history has helped her develop sexual practices that are both accessible and affirming. Pearl shared:

”

I found connecting [to] the history that the queer community has with expressing sexuality through art deeply empowering. Also, because I'm disabled, it sort of limits sometimes the amount

The expanded understanding of sexuality and desire that exists in queer and trans sexual practices was also experienced by Frankie, who recounted the following story:

”

I went with a bunch of my friends [to a sex club during Pride] and it was really vibing, really popping. And then me and the group of friends I was with who were all femmes or queer people, everybody who was part of that group has also come out as trans so that's cool. But there was this other person who saw us and was really interested in getting a group scene with all of us and we all topped this one person together, and it was a fun friendship like,

‘Look at this bonding moment between homies, we’re all just going to dominate this guy together,’ (laughs) and it’s great. To me, you know, even talking about it now feels a little scandalous, but at the time, I had a lot of fun and just felt really included. I didn’t feel weird about my gender. I felt like it was a celebration of connection and different types of intimacy and sexual intimacy...within heteronormative standards, intimacy is only for your significant other, and it’s not something that’s public, and there’s all these rules around what it looks like, so to me that felt very freeing. And I mean obviously there were still rules of consent or understanding that people have limits, etc., etc., but it definitely did feel more like, ‘Embrace your inner freak,’ or whatever.

”

Frankie found freedom and joy in moving beyond normative limitations around the ‘correct’ contexts and relationships for sex, which helped them feel closer to their friends and more embodied in their gender. All of these examples show how teaching a limited definition of sex in sexuality education likely fails to set students up for engaging

in sex that meets their particular needs and desires.

Further reflecting on the potential differences between heteronormative constructions of sex and queer sex, Naseem offered:

“

So the sex that I have has always had multiple rounds, it’s not just like one and done. So I think that the multiple rounds allow for pauses and chatting in between. And I remember seeing this like graphic representation of heterosex and queer sex. And it was like heterosex is like slow, slow, slow, slow, peak.... And queer sex is doing loop-the-loops and going back in time and forward in time. And there’s multiple peaks. It’s funny, and also true I think. I don’t know about the going back in time part.... It’s like, Paulo Freire talks about praxis as like action and reflection. And it’s like, that is what queer sex is. Queer sex is action and reflection.

”

While Naseem’s reflection is certainly a generalization, it pinpoints an important difference between limited, heteronormative conceptions of sex

and more expansive queer and trans conceptions of sex. When sex already elides the possibility of following cisheteronormative scripts, there is more space for creativity, reflection, and a radical orientation to ethical pleasures. Teaching sex through a much broader lens than just particular kinds of genital contact with a particular endpoint in a specific relationship context would not only be more inclusive of 2SLGBTQ+ people in general, but would also likely result in more embodied, pleasurable, and consensual sex for all people. Given the dominance of porn, it is also important to consider porn literacy. As Willow explains,

“Because of where sexual health education is at, so many people will go to porn, so many people will go to their peers, and then their peers are coming back with messaging that's like, you know from the broader, bigoted perspectives. So teaching can be a kind of filtering early on of, yes, you will likely access porn at some point in your life, but how do we filter it so you can access this information and not take that as whole value and then proceed to act that out. So

just like thinking about how do we bring up pleasure in a way that isn't violent? How do we talk about porn in a way that gets to the cisheteronormative violence embedded in it, and for youth who are going to watch porn, can we talk about like consensual ethical porn, for example?”

Speaking about pleasure in a radical way means de-centering cisheteronormative conceptions of sex as discussed above, and, as Wren also put it: “I think centering queer and trans joy in sex education is taking the reproductive lens off of sex education and bringing in the joy lens.” To bring in a “joy lens”, as well as pleasure activism to sexuality education and gender-based violence prevention education requires different conceptions of pleasure than currently on offer in mainstream society. Care and softness are, according to participants, critical to fostering mutually pleasurable, non-harmful sexual cultures. Quinn raised “softness” as key to these cultures: “softness...[or] fostering connections where reciprocity is there, where we have that grounding support.” Fostering queer and trans sexual joy also involves developing an ethic of care as

discussed above. Noshi elaborated to say,

“ I think if sexual activity in general is just seen as an act or something that is like done to someone and so on, it's really easy to like forget an element of care and I think that leads down a road of needing to get something out of an activity that perpetuates more of that violence aspect or increases the risk of that violence aspect.

”

Containers for safety and care were also raised as key to centering queer and trans sexual joy in gender-based violence prevention education.



5. Containers for Safety

Key take away:

Discussion about the importance of building and maintaining containers for safety should be included in gender-based violence prevention, and lessons from BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) communities and non-monogamous communities should be incorporated into community-based programming.



Creating space with which to get connected to one's body and notice signals was easier for participants to do when they felt their partner(s) were creating a container with clear boundaries and expectations. Noshi explained,

“ I would say that one of the first times that I experienced really profound queer sexual joy was because someone sat down with me and we talked through the limits of what we were planning on doing, and all of the expectations, what we kind of hope to get out of it, what we needed in order to feel cared for. And they really centered that element of care and that element of, ‘This isn't just care in terms of what are we preventing, but care in terms of like, what do we need in this space to feel support and joy and to really feel in our own body for these experiences?’ ”

In BDSM play contexts or in non-monogamous play party settings, some participants relished in the containers that were formed with partners.

“ I think especially being in queer and trans kink-oriented spaces or sexual spaces, I mean not always, but I think oftentimes, at least in my experiences, in those scenes, people have somewhat of an understanding of consent or the importance of really checking people's boundaries...I went to a play party once and then somebody picked me up, and it was this queer woman. She was asking me all these questions in terms of setting the scene and setting safety and it took 15 minutes and in my head I'm kind of like, 'Damn, let's get started, like what are we waiting for?' but I was like, 'Actually wait, this is how it's supposed to be,' like people should be taking 20 minutes before you even think about touching another person to check in and be like, 'What's going on?' I told her I was diabetic and she's like let me go make sure I have some candy on hand. -Frankie

Community spaces like sex parties, BDSM play spaces, and in non-monogamous relationships (which are not mutually exclusive categories)

where it is a more common practice to explicitly create a container for sexual experiences, participants found safe spaces they could feel deep, embodied pleasure within. Darby noted that the ease with which conversations in these spaces around harm reduction happen is beneficial. They said:

“ I think that safety planning and harm reduction is such a critical part of feeling safe beyond, you know, validation in other ways. To actually have a difficult, sometimes uncomfortable conversation. Everything ranging from, 'Here's the last time I was tested,' or, 'Here's what I have and here's how we can engage safely around that.

While teaching about the practices of the BDSM community may not be politically viable for school-based sexuality education, community-based educational programs can consider implementing understandings derived from 2SLGBTQ+ BDSM and non-monogamous communities.

In addition to conversation before sexual activities, participants expressed how important aftercare is:

“

Taking a bit of a page from kink and BDSM communities, aftercare is super important. And I think especially for trans people or queer people where sex might be quite emotionally charged more so than it might be for cishet people because there is internalized homophobia and internalized transphobia, there are a lot more complexities in many ways. After, being able to cuddle and say like, ‘What was good, what was bad, what did you like, what did you not like, how did you feel about this specific thing,’ is super important and a great way to debrief in a way, giggle a little bit, figure out what's good and what's bad. And also build connection with a partner. -Nox

”

Luciana looked aftercare in the form of cuddling as essential to pleasurable, consensual sex. She said:

“

I'm a big believer in cuddling after sex. I know some people don't do it, I think it builds so much. You can be like, ‘Oh, I really like that, let's do that again.’ Or, ‘Oh, that took too long.’ (Luciana laughs)... And then

sometimes it's like, ‘Oh when you slapped my ass, like that was so good,’ and I was like, ‘Okay, jotting that down in my little book in my head.’ You're like, okay this worked, this didn't, we can improve this.

”

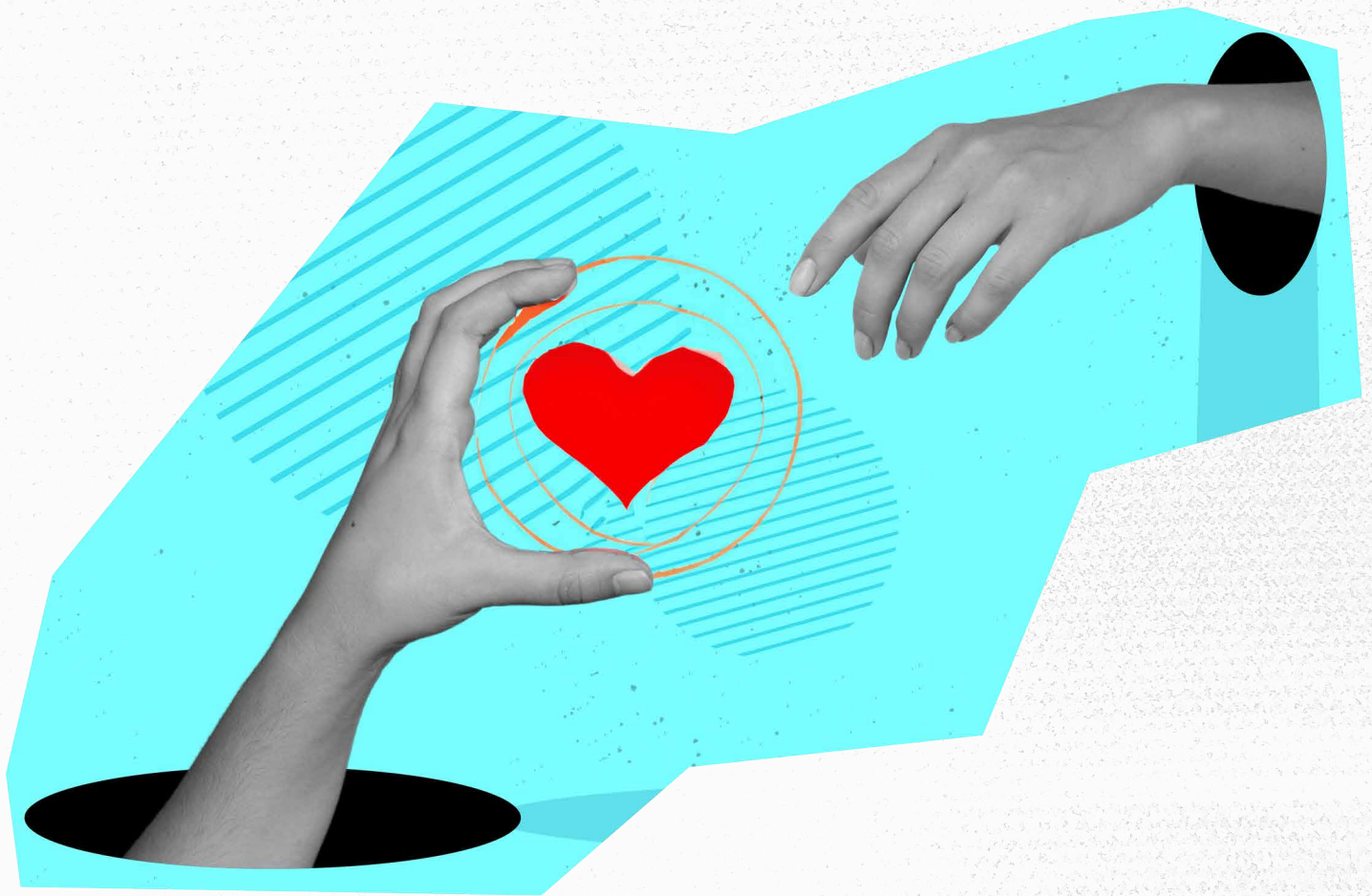
Radical, queer-and-trans-joy-centered forms of pleasure were also evident in the study through participants’ practices for casual sex. Departing from the dominant perspective of hookups as inherently about objectification and disposability of other people, participants spoke about a certain pleasure that came from ‘hooking up’ with other queer and trans people in ways that involved care and emotional and physical safety. Scarlett explained her experience:

“

Sometimes it's okay to fall in love with someone for a night... a casual encounter without it being just purely so emotion disconnected... I was like, ‘Oh, I can go and have dinner and we can have a conversation and like feel like emotionally safe in some contexts, even if I'm not planning on...any like long term relationship.’ That allows me to feel safe in my body.

”

Creating a container for an embodied sense of safety was also explicitly facilitated through grounding techniques that participants practice with partners.



6. Grounding and Embodiment Practices

Key take away:

Grounding and embodiment practices are essential for navigating sexual cultures imbued with the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of rape culture. Dominant sexual culture—compulsory cisheteronormativity—teaches us to dissociate from our bodies, whether through toxic masculine norms, the demand that cis women and femmes perform sex rather than be embodied during it, or gender dysphoria for queer and trans people. Practices for reclaiming one's body are essential to cultivating more just sexual cultures.



Building on a legacy of care around sex and consent in queer and trans communities (Bauer, 2021; de Heer et al. 2021; Fink, 2021), participants shared practical examples of how they supported one another despite facing things like gender dysphoria or traumatic dissociation related to sexual violence. In this section, we first discuss grounding and embodiment practices related to trauma and dissociation before turning to focus on gender dysphoria specifically. Unfortunately, a disproportionately high number of queer and trans people are survivors of trauma, whether from sexual violence or violence related to that of homophobia, transphobia, racism, settler colonialism, ableism, classism, and so on. Trauma survivors may deal with the psychosocial impacts of trauma which affect sex (Wright, 2021a; Wright, 2022).

Darby, a survivor of sexual violence, describes what has helped them stay grounded during sex: “like hands on your chest or hands are on your shoulders or saying certain things to ground me have been really, really helpful in not having that block.” Frankie, also a survivor, noted that being disembodied during sex was not just uncomfortable but dangerous, and they explained how they addressed this risk, both for themselves and with partners:

“ If I'm not in touch with my body and my needs then a lot can go wrong within a scene or within relating. Usually, now we take a lot of time to do a lot of cuddling and touching and just really getting physically grounded with each other. Putting each of our hands on the other person's chest, taking deep breaths, holding hands. For me, I really like physical touch and physical sensations and I'm a lot in my head all the time and overthinking and overanalyzing and so I really appreciate my partner who has a lot of experience and knows a lot about trauma being so patient and loving and kind with me. I'm selecting more and more people

who are very interested in my body's wellness and who want to take the time to check in and do that real slow intentional check-in and talking about like, 'Are either one of us trying to escape reality right now via sex?' I mean obviously, sometimes going fast is fun, but is it like is there actually an issue that needs to be addressed like, 'Have you eaten today?' or 'Have you taken your medicine? Have you drank water?' or like, 'Are you apart from your body?' Sex is good and pleasurable obviously, but we also have many other needs that we often neglect, or at least I'll just say I often do, but escaping into pleasures feels good or whatever, it's patterns that I have... it's important that I take care of myself.

The importance of taking care of ourselves as well as our partners was echoed throughout the study. Frankie's challenges with dissociation was something they spoke openly about in the study and their care planning for partners who dissociate signaled how pervasive dissociation is, at least among queer and trans communities. Something they said was helpful was

“being able to stop and be able to check in during times and be like, ‘Oh, you’ve been pretty quiet when usually you’re the opposite of quiet.” They emphasized the importance of being connected to oneself and partners in order to reduce harm and increase pleasure. It is important to tune in to partners since, as Frankie put it, “Sometimes you don’t even know that you’re quiet or that you’re dissociating until 40 minutes later.” Using a disability justice framework when approaching gender-based violence prevention and the promotion of ethical, mutually pleasurable sex is critical as it asks us to acknowledge how meaningful consent is dependent upon the care of the other to meet our needs for sex acts to be truly consensual (Wright, 2021b). Fostering a container that feels safe with sexual partners, one where everyone involved can be grounded and embodied, is what participants expressed was ideal for liberating sex.

When participants spoke about accommodating and supporting sexual partners who experience traumatized subjectivity it was not discussed as a burden. Rather, perhaps because so many participants were survivors and there are so many survivors in 2SLGBTQ+ communities, participants spoke of

supporting partners through trauma responses with grace and deep care. Luciana talked about a partner who would have intense negative reactions during sex and her response. Instead of being ‘put off’ by her partner’s reactions or feeling as if it was their individual responsibility to manage their emotional and physiological reactions, Luciana said this:

“Yeah, so immediately, I would stop all sexual activities. That is first and foremost, then get them into a comfortable position if they want to. And I always like to make this statement that’s like, ‘I still love you, I still want to be in this relationship with you. Are you okay? Do you want time alone? Do you want to talk about it? Do you just want to chill for a second?’ I always give her those kinds of options because I very quickly realized that I process things in a completely different way that she does. And so that’s been a big kind of wake-up call for me. That it’s like, okay, well if that was me, I would just go to sleep and maybe take a nap and try to forget about it. But she doesn’t want to do that and she cannot do that so let’s do

what works for her and give her the options that I think could help us right now. But it's up to her on how we would proceed.

”

This caring tending to her partner reflected other participants' responses as well. One survey respondent said of their partner's response to their own dissociation:

”

This happens often for me. I have had partners be really understanding when I dissociate during sex or find myself reverting to trauma responses. It can mean stopping or altering what we are doing, and making sure not to entirely get rid of touch so my body still feels grounded.

”

Another survey respondent said what works for them has been “Affirmation. Soothing (non-sexual) touch for co-regulating. Taking a break to talk and be physically close and feel connected, as well as ground in my body. Slowness!”

Recognizing that we are interdependent on one another for our well-being during sex in a way that goes beyond the contract or transactional quality of the dominant model for consent requires

reflexivity. Wyatt spoke about being challenged as someone with masc privilege:

And, you know, when I personally have reactions related to my history when I'm interacting with people sexually and something doesn't go well, I have to go 'Okay, have I done something here?' And I need to think about that. And 'How can I not do that future? Where does that come from?' I think there's people who don't necessarily want to ask those questions.

Kit built upon Wyatt's response to say

”

Yeah, the introspection only goes so far for some folks. Whether or not that is even intentional, you know, hard to say. But I think what you said right at the end, Wyatt was really important. People have to think 'Like this person said that I harmed them, what can I do to take accountability and why did this person not feel safe in the moment to speak up?' That piece is missing for a lot of folks.

”

Moving into sexual cultures that are more just, caring, interdependence-focused, and deeply mutually

pleasurable also requires accountability processes for self and other, which is something that transformative justice approaches provide some direction on (brown, 2019; Mingus, 2019; Wright, 2021b).

Given that there is a large number of people in queer and trans communities who identify as neurodiverse—and experiencing traumatized subjectivity is a form of neurodiversity— we may look to these communities for understanding of creative and varied practices that support people in feeling grounded in their bodies. Experiences of gender dysphoria also present challenges related to consent and sex, yet participants found creative ways to enact grounding practices to support themselves and one another.

6.1. Navigating Dysphoria

For trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming participants, sex was described as both a site of gender dysphoria and gender affirmation. Gender dysphoria can be broadly described as emotional and physical discomfort with one's body, particularly with the bodily characteristics and functions that have specific gendered social meanings (i.e., breasts, voice tone,

menstruation, genitalia, etc.) (Fielding, 2021; Perger, 2023). Gender dysphoria is something that many trans and gender diverse people experience (McGuire et al., 2016; Perger, 2023), which was reflected by our participants. Gender is heavily imbued in all sexual encounters (Fanghanel, 2020), and is often mapped onto particular sexual acts (i.e., topping is masculine, bottoming is feminine). Due to this and because sex often involves some kind of genital contact, some trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming participants experienced gender dysphoria as a barrier to queer sexual joy. As Sara, a non-binary trans woman, reflected:

“ I have spent a long time feeling dysphoric about wanting to top, wanting to penetrate people, or wanting to have sex where it was really focused on my genitals or whatever. And focused on my genitals in a way maybe that men would want their genitals touched or something like that. And I mean, that's bullshit...I feel like it's only been within the last like six months or so that I've really started to feel, 'Okay, maybe my gender identity could be more expansive.

The way particular sexual acts are gendered (topping, penetrating, particular kinds of genital touching) led Sara to feel dysphoric about her desire for those acts. However, as described in the 4.4 Knowledge Sharing section of the primary report, sexual and romantic relationships with other trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people helped Sara to develop a more expansive understanding of their own gender and sexual desires. This shift makes sense, as “gender affirmative practices within interactional experiences—the experiences that give space to bodies of difference—account for feelings of liberation from gendered obligations” (Perger, 2023, p. 14). Although not all participants who noted gender dysphoria in relation to sex could experience “feelings of liberation from gendered obligations,” several did share how engaging in creative and dysphoria-sensitive sexual practices with other trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming partners allowed them to experience sexual pleasure and joy.

Participants shared many creative ways that they accommodated gender dysphoria in sex, including the following example from Jiva:

“

I’d mentioned to my partner that I was feeling really dysphoric and uncomfortable with my body. And something that they had mentioned was like, okay, well, what about like mutual masturbation? Like, is that something that we can do today? Is that something you feel up to? And I was like, oh, yeah, like me touching my own body. That’s a great experience and like still having that be considered sex because we’re still interacting with each other and experiencing queer sexual joy, this was a huge moment for me where I got to explore like sexual joy that wasn’t strictly within the bounds of what is often parroted as what sex should look like.

”

For Jiva, mutual masturbation was a way that they could still experience intimacy with their partner even in the presence of dysphoria. Nox found that watching trans-positive porn and talking to other trans people about how they navigated dysphoria during sex helped to decrease his shame and dysphoria around sex. Frankie shared how their partner and them communicated about dysphoria to

curate sexual experiences that felt safe and affirming for both of them. Frankie offered:

“ I’m thinking about how for both of us, we’re both non-binary, both trans, both people of color, how for so long we both had to endure these horrible relationships or living in this like rape culture world where people have broken our boundaries or are not interested in engaging with us respectfully and so, you know, taking the time to really be like, ‘What feels good for us in terms of our gender today? What kind of gender terms do you prefer?’ feels really important. When I’m having sex and stuff, I don’t mind terms like ‘princess’ or whatever like that, but if we’re just at the grocery store, then maybe not that’s not something I want to hear necessarily. So thinking about it in advance: what is safe for us? Are either of us having dysphoria today? How do we want to navigate this dysphoria? Maybe if you’re not into having my head on your chest today, maybe we can just be sitting beside each other directly or we can try something different and being open to that

and recognize that sex can look so many different ways.”

These examples from Jiva and Frankie show how care and mutual understanding between gender-diverse partners in conjunction with the openness of queer and trans sexual practices allows for them to overcome gender dysphoria as a barrier to sexual intimacy and pleasure.

Winter spoke about misconceptions around gender dysphoria and how the strategies used to mitigate gender dysphoria in sex can support all people to have more pleasurable sex. Winter stated:

“ I think cis people might think of having sex with a trans person as like, maybe there are barriers because there are parts they don’t want touched, or there’s dysphoria, but I feel like with other trans people we don’t go in assuming like this person hates their body. We go in assuming like there’s probably at least some parts of their body they’re excited about and so it’s less of a barrier and it’s more like, ‘Well what do you want to focus on?’ And also

it's like, I don't know, cis people also obviously have issues with different parts of their bodies, so it's like having those kinds of conversations because we're trans can also lead us to understand better, to find out right away like, 'Does the person have some sort of dysmorphia or other body issues,' or, 'Have they experienced fatphobia in a sexual context or other sorts of oppressions?' And so, yeah, I think it can lead to just an immediate more open conversation is one thing. And then the other thing is just knowing that other trans people understand our feelings about our bodies, even if we have parts we don't like, or parts we want operated on, or parts we got operated on and it's not exactly what we wanted, like that's not the center of our sex lives just because those things are there. We don't have to focus on them.

”

Here, Winter makes clear how the strategies people use to accommodate gender dysphoria during sex are useful for any sexual context in which people have some kind of discomfort with their body, which is extremely common

(McGuire et al., 2016). Gender-inclusive sexuality education needs to include discussions on gender dysphoria and how to navigate it in sexual contexts, but it also needs to offer tools that all people can use to alleviate discomfort with their bodies to remain present and grounded during sex. Tools offered by participants such as mutual masturbation, caring conversation, and learning from others with similar experiences can be used by all people to improve their sexual experiences.



Conclusion



Overall, in this document we have provided a set of 6 recommendations that are 2SLGBTQ+ youth-led for queer joy-centered gender-based violence prevention and sexuality education. In short, these recommendations include:

- 1.** Creating safety is critical for sexual joy, and communication is key in finding that safety, thus, nuanced communication skills must be central to conversations in gender-based violence prevention.
- 2.** Queer-joy centered sexuality education would teach youth about bodily autonomy so that they know that it is their choice what happens to their body and what others do to it. Highlighting bodily autonomy provides the message that, in order to tune in to one's needs and desires as well as a partner's, there must be respect for each others' boundaries.
- 3.** Sexuality education must be more critical, expansive, and anti-oppressive in both content and pedagogy.
- 4.** One of the most important aspects to preventing gender-based violence as well as promoting embodied sexual pleasure is knowing what feels good emotionally and physically and, thus, pleasure must be taught as a critical concept in sexuality education.
- 5.** Discussion about the importance of building and maintaining containers for safety should be included in gender-based violence prevention, and lessons from BDSM communities and non-monogamous communities should be incorporated into community-based programming.
- 6.** Grounding and embodiment practices are essential for navigating sexual cultures imbued with the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of rape culture. Dominant sexual culture—compulsory cisheteronormativity—teaches us to dissociate from our bodies, whether through toxic masculine norms, the demand that cis women and femmes perform sex rather than be embodied during it, or gender dysphoria for queer and trans people. Practices for reclaiming one's body are essential to cultivating more just sexual cultures.

We hope that these recommendations will be taken up as the foundation for a novel new framework for gender-based violence prevention education and inspire new thinking about how to end rape culture.

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