

Sexual Violence and Lived Experience: New Futures

Project report

Principal Academics: Dr. Tina Sikka

Principal Artists: Lady Kitt, Sarah Li

Project background

This project was funded by the UKRI Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network as part of its workstream on artistic and public engagement around violence, abuse and mental health.

The project ran for a total of 11 months



Project team:

- Dr. Tina Sikka, Newcastle University
- Lady Kitt, Artist and Drag King
- Sarah Li, Artist
- Emma Atkinson, Newcastle University



Project summary

Background

This project investigated the intersections between consent, sexual ethics, gender-based violence, and new forms of sexual relationality using arts-based participatory workshops. These workshops consisted of conversations around sexual ethics while engaging in the crafting of paper objects. The crafting activity involved working with a template figure of a scale (as in the scales of justice) which could be folded out of the card provided to create a 3D object. The card itself had the six principles of our novel approach articulated in the presentation (a pleasure and care-centered ethic of embodied and relational sexual Otherness – see below) written on it. The participants were invited to design, shape, and cut the card as they saw fit. They were also asked questions about sexual ethics while engaging in crafting. They were rooted in lived experience but did not require engaging directly in personal trauma. They included:

1. What are your Impressions of the consent model based on lived experience?
2. What are your thoughts about the criticisms of consent I have made;
3. What are your thoughts about ‘a pleasure and care-centred ethic of embodied and relational sexual Otherness’:
 - a. Is it feasible?
 - b. Does it address the shortcomings of the consent model?
 - c. Does it represent a real alternative?
 - d. How might it work in practice?
 - e. What would it require to be fully embedded?
4. What other kinds of sexual ethics/norms/values do you desire/envision?
5. How could accessibility be increased in the session? Are there any gaps or ways to improve?

Methods

The methods employed were qualitative and included creative arts practice, craftivism, thematic analysis, and visual thematic analysis. Creative arts practice set the stage for the workshops while an ethos of craftivism, wherein crafting is used to empower and engender self-reflection and activism, was used to produce new knowledge. Thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts and notes. It involved reading and re-reading transcripts and notes (data familiarization); the generation of preliminary codes and themes; the confirmation of key themes; and, finally, report production. Visual thematic analysis involved using a similar framework consisting of the close analysis of visual data followed by the generation of preliminary themes and a basic coding template used to solidify relationships, excavate meanings, and demonstrate the significance of the art to the project.

Findings

Through extensive analysis of collected data the following findings were identified:

1. Consent as the dominant model of sexual ethics needs to be transformed.

Criticisms of it and contemporary sex education included that:

- a. It is ethnocentric, meaning that it does not reflect the cultural backgrounds of students, many of whom are international or have different experience learning about and experiencing sex;
- b. It relies on gendered sexual scripts that need to be challenged, not managed. These scripts give men sexual agency, while women function as gatekeepers to sex. It also perpetuates gendered norms related to 'people pleasing'/'not wanting to be a bother,' and only apply to relationships that are heteronormative;[LK1]
- c. Its heteronormativity privileges heterosexual relationships and Others nonbinary and queer relations making them less likely to be accepted by wider society – while also leaving space for misinformation to spread;
- d. Its elision of pleasure needs to be reconsidered, particularly in sex education. This includes queer sex and pleasure for women. This approach was seen as critical and aligned with the goals of pleasure activism wherein pleasure is seen as a political objective.
- e. Its reliance on binary logic (male/female; consent/nonconsent; yes/no) is insufficient and ignores a significant amount of complexity as it relates to sex;
- f. Its minimising and suppression of anger as a useful and acceptable reaction to the state of sexual relations (which is also a gendered reaction). It was argued that anger needs to be embraced for its potential to facilitate change;
- g. Its tendency to constrain how we relate to the Other (as a means to an end) rather than as an ethical subject for whom we are responsible and which reflects an ethic of care;

2. A pleasure and care-centred ethic of embodied and relational sexual Otherness (a model of sexual ethics suggested by the PI) was judged to be a viable alternative. This approach:

- a. Understands that all sexual acts are formed out of assemblages: i.e., bodies, technologies, norms, laws, intensities – not just individual acts. Sex is thus contingent, contextual, and value-laden;
- b. Agrees that sex must centre mutual pleasure – capaciously defined to include arousal, excitement, intensity, drama, even danger but also not so great sex. It must also reflect care for self and Other while leaving room for transactional sex (i.e., sex work) and everyday sex.
- c. Prima facie accepts sexual practices that push 'queer' boundaries and treats sex as an unbounded practice which captures its risky, excessive, energetic, and frenetic dimensions;

d. Requires an ethic of communication to be made manifest. This can be communicated verbally or via bodily cues and need not be burdensome or legalistic;

e. Centres an orientation to the Other understood as the Other with whom you are co-constituting the sexual act, general sexual Otherness, and the Other with whom you have an epistemic obligation to recognise as an ethical subject;

f. Reflects how sex is an embodied, practice that is also relational, co-determinative (rather than individualistic) and contextual.

3. Creative practice workshops drawing on craftivism and social art methodologies is essential in projects like this. Students felt engaged, relaxed, excited, challenged, and proud. The pieces they created are persistent, engaging, and contributed immensely to these findings.

Recommendations/Conclusions

1. As it relates to sexual ethics, consent is no longer fit for purpose and needs to be rethought in the context of higher education.

2. What is needed is a model that:

a. Is culturally expansive;

b. Challenges gendered sexual scripts;

c. Is non-heteronormative;

d. Is pleasure-centred (for all involved);

e. Embraces complexity;

f. See the 'Other' as an ethical subject (an ethic care of as a starting point)

3. A pleasure and care-centred ethic of embodied and relational sexual Otherness as a model needs to be considered as an alternative.

4. More creative practice workshops rooted drawing on craftivist and social art approaches are needed – particularly in this area of research.

Public impact

Kitt is taking learnings from the project and applying them to a social art and policy residency with artist run space The NewBridge Project particularly supporting them to create a “Solidarity Policy”. Kitt is also working with the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance as part of a working group developing their annual national conference asking “what now? What needs to happen at a personal, organisational, and political level to bring creativity and health together, and to break down the silos that have separated them?”

We made some important connections, had an audience of over 50-80 participants at any one time, received positive feedback, and are fielding requests for further collaboration.

Our policy work has now begun and our ‘Arches’ project will take place on April 28th a feedback and participation component (which will speak further to impact).

Survivor involvement

The role of survivors in advocating for embodied practices in research to minimise harm in “lived experience” informed settings. For example it was vital for us to ensure that our project didn’t itself become a site for harm. One activity that was mentioned by participants as being particularly effective was a physical warm up and breathing exercise.

...a positive thing for (me) I'm autistic, the warm up (was) really helpful, because it's kind of like stimming. And it really relaxes me.*

This activity practically warmed up our bodies in preparation for the safe, enjoyable use of the crafting tools. It offered us an opportunity to focus on our physical presence, drawing on, attending to and enacting embodied practices and knowledge. The breathing techniques also calmed and centered us after engaging in potentially upsetting subject matter.

[The warm up] helped me thinking about playing and things that make me feel more connected to my body.

Final Outputs

Artwork

To view images of the final objects and the artwork created by attendees of the workshop, click [here](#).

Justice Beyond The Binary Power Object Making Activity Instructions

These set of instructions created by Lady Kitt allow you to integrate the project's methods into your own work. Lady Kitt explains more below:



“Power Object” is a phrase used by activist Sarah Corbett. It describes a hand-made object which reminds the maker of the power they have to create change, physically & conceptually. Making these objects out of paper printed with the 6 guiding principles of Tina Sikka's framework, aims to form a backdrop to conversations about her research. By inviting you to cut up & re-craft Tina's text, we encourage you to literally dissect the framework, focusing on specific words and phrases, considering your emotional, intellectual & creative responses to these. How does it work: The act of re-crafting the 6 principles offers a practical opportunity to see them in a different way. The completed object(s) can be kept, reminding us of our agency in making (objects, connections, changes and decisions). The “justice beyond the binary” template has been designed to support multi-sensory learning techniques. It can be folded & un-folded many times, prompting memories of the conversations which took place whilst the object was being originally created. Folding & unfolding the template can be used in future moments / conversations as a reminder of Tina's research, the conversations, feelings, & ideas you had while making it. The form of the scales was chosen to encourage specific discussion around how Tina's research might inform approaches to justice for victim-survivors of gender-based violence, rooted in an alternative vision of sexual ethics. Please feel free to download, print & use these instructions in your own work and contexts.



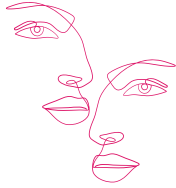
To access the instructions, click [here](#).

Key messages

Top 3 key messages from the project



Contemporary sexual ethics (based on consent) needs to be transformed.



Students are well aware of what is wrong vis-à-vis sexual ethics and how to engender change.



For studies that involves lived experience of trauma, creative practice (craftivism in particular) offers an excellent and non-exploitative way to engage.

The Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network

We will be sure to keep our members updated on any outputs linked to this project in the future. To keep updated you can sign up to our mailing list and receive our monthly newsletter. You can also follow us on our socials . All links can be found at the bottom of this page.

About the VAMHN

We are a network of individuals and organisations aiming to reduce the prevalence of mental health problems by addressing associated violence and abuse, particularly domestic and sexual violence. We bring together and support research by experts from a range of disciplines, sectors, and backgrounds - some with personal experience, others with expertise from the work that they do, and survivor researchers with both.

The activities of the network are organised into 3 themes:

Measurement	Measuring the extent and impact of domestic and sexual violence in relation to mental health. Our first year activities focused on the theme of measurement
Understanding	Understanding the pathways that lead to domestic and sexual violence and their relationship to mental health problems
Intervention	Planning interventions and services to prevent, reduce and address domestic and sexual violence in people with mental health problems or at risk of developing mental health problems

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