

Orgasm as women's work? Rethinking pleasure, 'sex' and the power dynamics of orgasm through the embodied experiences of orgasmic meditation practitioners

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Abstract

Drawing upon interviews with 33 practitioners of 'orgasmic meditation' in the UK and US, I question the extent to which the practice of orgasmic meditation might facilitate ways to uncouple orgasm from negative gendered constructions. I explore how the practice in some cases enables people to establish clear bodily boundaries and encourages women to centre their own pleasure, as well as opening up space to rethink what constitutes a 'sexual' practice. Theorised through a queer feminist perspective, I argue that tensions remain with orgasm as a form of women's work, with an onus upon women to police bodily boundaries, and with moments where boundaries are broken.

Keywords

Consent, gender, orgasm, orgasmic meditation, pleasure, power, sex

Introduction

This article explores the embodied experiences of 33 people who practice orgasmic meditation (OM) in London, UK and New York, USA. Through centring the power of the

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female orgasm, orgasmic meditation presents a unique case study for considering the extent to which conventional gendered power dynamics surrounding orgasm might be transcended. Orgasmic meditation is a 15 minute practice in which a woman's clitoris is 'stroked' by a fully-clothed partner ('stroker', who can be of any gender), with 'no goal' but 'to feel' (definition from participant interviews). A woman¹ (known as a 'strokee') lies down in the 'nest', which is usually an exercise mat and pillows, and undresses from waist down. The stroker puts on vinyl/latex gloves, lubricates their finger, and ensures a 15 minute timer is set. An OM follows the same steps each time, known as creating a 'container'. As part of this, the stroker will 'safeport' before touching their OM partner, verbalising what they are about to do, and strokees can make requests during an OM, known as 'adjustments'. At the end of an OM the stroker and strokee share 'frames', a 'snapshot' of what they felt during the OM. Many OM participants also engaged in 'circles' where they undertook the practice with a partner, in a room where other people also OMed with a partner, and a circle 'holder' 'holds' the room by suggesting 'adjustments' and keeping the time. While the organisation that promotes the practice of orgasmic meditation no longer holds circles, OM practitioners can arrange their own.² As is commonplace in women's 'circle' gatherings, OM circles are 'places for connecting and for purely 'being' in the here and now' (Longman, 2018:7).

Many participants framed their participation in orgasmic meditation as not only an embodied practice, but as a 'journey' of self-development to unlock their 'true' desire. Through the practice, people do a great deal of work on themselves, and somewhat reframe their understandings of bodily boundaries, consent, pleasure and sex. As in Plancke's (2020:835) discussion of women's tantric retreats, for some women OM practitioners that I interviewed, the practice enabled them to 'relate to their sexuality in a positive, self-enhancing way perceived as respectful to the female body and female desire'. Male OM interviewees sought to connect with 'the feminine' (as an energetic force), to women, and to bring consciousness to their relationships.

One of the most important dimensions of the practice for participants whom I interviewed was that it is a bounded practice. A 'container' is established which follows the same steps each time in order that people can feel safe and know what to expect. There is a particular language for how to ask for an OM – a simple question of 'Would you like to OM?', with responses being either yes or no, with no explanation for the answer needed. Women participants in particular found it powerful to not have to do the emotional 'work' often associated with sexual encounters (Cacchioni, 2007; Frith, 2015b), namely, the work of making someone feel better for why we do/do not want to do something with them. It was this consistency of the container that enabled participants to carve out time to be fully present 'in' their bodies and to focus purely on what is happening within that moment.

This article explores how women's orgasms, or 'lack' of them, have been conventionally constructed as the result of women's failings, or cast as women's work to 'fix'. I question the extent to which orgasmic meditation as both an embodied practice and a personal journey might uncouple orgasm from these constructions. In doing so, the article explores how women participants valued the practice for encouraging them to centre their own pleasure before that of others. I further elucidate how participants framed the practice

as commonly misunderstood as ‘sexual’ due to genital touch being involved, and how they foremost saw OM as a consciousness practice. I explore what these ideas suggest with regards to embodied intimate experiences and normative categorisations around ‘sex’. Theorised through a queer feminist perspective, the article is attentive to moments when dominant discourses surrounding women’s orgasm are ruptured, in addition to the potential reproduction of conventional power dynamics. While OM as a practice opens up an important space for women to explore pleasure and bodily sensations on their own terms, there can be problematic moments where bodily boundaries are broken. Further, I illuminate discourses within participant’s narratives which invoke neoliberal conceptions of personal responsibility, and highlight the troubling interlinking of these ideas surrounding sexual consent. I argue that this can result in the onus being put back onto women themselves to police bodily boundaries, and which, somewhat inadvertently, can render orgasm to be ‘women’s work’.

Orgasm: Women’s work

Whilst orgasm is often thought of as one of the most private bodily experiences, it is far from it. Our most private acts are always shaped by social discourses and power relations. Thus, thinking about the practice of orgasm can tell us much about how the power dynamics of gender and sexuality are operating in a given context. As [Jackson and Scott \(2001:100\)](#) argue, ‘even this most personal and physical experience is always also social and should be understood in the context of everyday/everynight sexual practices’. [Potts \(2000:57\)](#) draws attention to the link between orgasm, society and identity, showing that orgasm is constructed as the ‘peak’ moment in sexual experiences. She argues that *to be able to* orgasm is a marker of ‘sexual competence and well-being in medical discourse’ ([Potts, 2000: 57](#)). This alerts us to a seeming contradiction – that there is potential ‘work’ underpinning orgasm. It is not just something which ‘exists’ or is wholly ‘natural’, but something we are encouraged to strive for to become the quintessential ‘sexually healthy and liberated subject’ ([Potts, 2000: 59](#)). Potts notes the ‘obligation’ on us ‘to act’ if we are not experiencing orgasm. Orgasm is portrayed as ‘imperative’ because it is seen as the ultimate ‘sexual truth’, as ‘*the moment when a person is most fully present* in her or his body’, a moment of ‘self actualization’ ([Potts, 2000: 57–59](#)). In Foucauldian terms, [Potts \(2000: 59\)](#) argues that we now consider ourselves ‘as being our sex – that is, our identity is our sex’ with orgasm constituting ‘our ultimate meeting with our true (sexual) selves’.

Feminist sociologists have illuminated both the gendered constructions of orgasm and the gendered *work* of orgasm. Women’s orgasm has long been socially constructed as somewhat elusive, as something ‘complicated or tricky to “achieve”’ ([Opperman et al., 2014: 504](#)). This ‘supposed invisibility...creates a need to show that it has happened as an affirmation of male performance’ ([Jackson and Scott, 2001: 107](#)), such as through making noise, for example. Much media attention has been paid to the potential for women to ‘fake’ orgasms, with advice offered to women for how to ‘achieve’ more ‘authentic’ orgasms. As [Frith \(2015b: 109\)](#) argues, magazines ‘present faking as unnecessary since “real” orgasms are readily achievable if women are prepared to learn more about their own bodies and to “teach” men about how to pleasure them’. Both Cacchioni and Frith

describe this phenomena as a ‘labour of love’ (Cacchioni, 2007: 299) or ‘orgasm work’ (Frith, 2015b: 106), namely the ‘unacknowledged effort and the continuing monitoring which women are expected to devote to managing theirs and their partners’ sexual desires and activities’ (Cacchioni, 2007: 301).

Frith (2015b: 111–112) further troubles the authentic versus fake orgasmic dichotomy, arguing that there are a variety of reasons why women might fake orgasm: to avoid problems in the relationship; wanting to end the sexual encounter; and to ‘avoid feeling abnormal’. Far from women faking orgasm as something negative, then, some scholars have sought issue with feminist accounts which position women’s faking of orgasm as constituting ‘feminine capitulation to masculinist values’ (Jagose, 2013: 178). Rather, Jagose (2013: 178) argues that fake orgasm can be political. Indeed, the notion that women might ‘fake’ orgasm further exposes the instability of the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (Butler, 1990). For as Frith (2018: 698) notes, women faking orgasm ‘draws attention to the failure of heterosex to deliver the reciprocal pleasure demanded by contemporary ethics of sexual relations’. If women’s orgasm requires women’s work rather than naturally ‘just happening’ within heterosexual sexual interactions, then the naturalness of heterosexuality is somewhat destabilised.

Popular discourse further positions reaching ‘climax’ as an ultimate ‘goal’ for facilitating sexual pleasure (Opperman et al., 2014: 507). Without a climatic orgasm occurring, both ‘the purpose and end of sex’ has not been reached since the ‘goal’ of orgasm has not been achieved (Opperman et al., 2014: 507). Sexual pleasure is thus a marketable entity. Sex toys may be sold with this ‘goal’ in mind (Comella, 2017; Waskul and Anklan, 2020), and in some instances genital surgeries are undertaken to enhance sexual pleasure (Braun, 2005). Tiefer (2002) argues that the medicalisation of women’s sexuality ‘manages’ what are constructed as sexual ‘problems’, and ‘female sexual dysfunction’ has come to be constructed as the barrier to women’s sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is thus positioned as something that women can ‘have’ if they are willing to put in the ‘work’.

This begs the question of whether these normative discourses surrounding orgasm and sexual pleasure can be rewritten. Tiefer (2002: 92) argues that ‘the only magic pill for women’s sexuality is broad-spectrum freedom’. Yet sexuality scholars invoking Foucauldian thought are sceptical of the possibility of a power-free sexuality. Jackson and Scott (2001: 104) are further critical of Potts’ (2000) suggestion that there can be a ‘fluid desire beyond the social that might free sex from the orgasmic imperative’. They remind us that ‘there can be no sexuality freed from the social’, rather, ‘[i]f we are seeking to change current sexual practices we cannot do so by disembedding them from the social, but only by changing the social contexts and relations that currently shape them’ (Jackson and Scott, 2001: 104).

I focus on pleasure in the practice of OM as a potential avenue for reconstructing problematic discourses surrounding orgasm. My work is situated within the social construction of sexuality, both at the level of discourse and in individual interactions. There is something quite important in taking pleasure as a central focus. Foucault (1978: 191) thought of pleasure as quite distinct from the normalising operation of desire. Whereas desire for Foucault was a means of establishing which bodies constituted ‘the norm’, pleasure was a different realm. He argued that pleasure, that moment of feeling

something, has at least a momentary possibility to reorder and reorient the subject's sexual self in relation to normalising discourses. More recent work in queer theory considers how sexual play can be a 'pleasurable activity practised for pleasure's sake' (Paasonen, 2018: 539).

The task here, however, is to be careful not to redraw boundaries of what constitutes 'pleasure' or around good/bad sex. As Jagose (2013: 188) points out, Foucault did not recommend 'particular sex acts or scenarios', rather, he was 'articulating the ways certain historically specific forms of sexual innovation strategically refuse the regulatory system of sexuality'. In this article, I chart how the practice of OM may both refuse and reify – sometimes at the same time – heteronormative regulatory systems of sexuality. In doing so, I take up Jagose's (2013: 189) call for queer theory 'to relax its own certainty about what sex is', and Foucault's (1978: 152) quest to not take the 'idea of sex *in itself*...without examination'. I examine how intimate exchanges within OMing might trouble normative boundaries and elicit different ways of thinking about 'sex'.

Methodology

I interviewed 33 participants (22 women and 11 men) who practise orgasmic meditation in London and New York across a 16-month period in 2016–17. I also conducted observation and recruited participants at public talks/events and one introductory course. Attending these events was a key opportunity to learn more about the practice, since I was a complete 'outsider' to the community before the research began. I have not practised OM myself either during the research period or since. The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face in cafes, with six interviews taking place online, one participant being interviewed twice, and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were semi-structured but were participant-led, centring around a narrative framework within which participants could freely explain their 'OM journey'. Some interviews lasted just under 2 hours, with the average interview length being 1 hour 13 minutes. Given the participant-led nature of the conversations, the similarities in themes between the participants were notable, indicating a strong engagement from participants with OM philosophy as well as similar embodied experiences from the practice. Interestingly, I did not ask participants if they considered OM to be a 'sexual' practice, but this was something they were keen to discuss. For one participant this was because my research title contained the word 'sexual' in it – "Sexual" leisure spaces for women' – and they were keen to correct me, but for the majority, the discussion emerged in participants' keenness to teach me the distinction between OM and sex. I found the interviews to be very moving and intense conversations, as participants gave in-depth, reflexive accounts of their OM journeys and their sexual and relationship histories. As many of these conversations were held in public (due to ethical stipulations for researcher safety), I was mindful, where possible, to pick a quiet spot if I arrived first, in the knowledge that participants may reveal deeply personal insights. I always ensured that participants selected where they wished to meet and checked they were comfortable with seating arrangements before speaking.

Participants were given the opportunity to self-identify rather than ‘ticking’ pre-selected categories. They were aged between 25 and 69, and nearly two thirds identified as White/Caucasian ($n = 21$). Nine participants gave a range of self-definitions of their ethnicity which are omitted here to protect participant anonymity in what is a close-knit community, as people gave very personalised ethnicity definitions (much more specific than would appear on a census category). Three people did not state their ethnicity (one specifically said this was for fear of being identifiable). Participants’ sexuality identifications were diverse, including: ‘straight’, ‘hetero’, ‘bi’, ‘straight mostly’; ‘polyamorous’; ‘everything’; ‘Bisexual Polyamorous Alternate Lifestyles’; ‘Heteroflexible’; ‘Heterosexual/polyamorous, in an open marriage’; ‘pan-sexual’. Participants self-identified as either female or male, with two participants noting that they were cis-gender. Spiritual/religious self-definitions were also broad (see [Pilcher, 2021: 115](#)). I interviewed people at various stages of their ‘OM journey’, including people who had been practising OM for 2 months, up until nine and a half years. Some were actively participating in OM organisational events at the time of interview, and others had distanced themselves from the organisation but still maintained an OM practice. Some participants had spent time away from the organisation and then had returned. Participants’ specific work roles have been omitted here to protect anonymity, but their occupations were wide-ranging – from unemployed through to very high-earning careers. Many participants had worked for the OM organisation in some capacity, either as ‘back of house’ (characterised as ‘volunteer work’ by the participants) which could involve helping at events, for example, as a ‘balance for numbers’ (Ben) or some held more formal positions, including leadership roles ($n = 10$). Some people who worked/volunteered for the organisation also ran their own separate businesses/held senior positions in other companies.

Informed consent was secured via consent forms and a project information sheet.³ Participants at the introductory course were made aware of my researcher presence and at public talks I introduced myself to as many people as possible. Organisation leaders granted permission to conduct the research and to attend organisational events. I utilised time at the end of events to let people know more about the research so that they could contact me if they wanted to participate. In some cases, particularly where no-one outside of the OM community knew that they practised OM, it took a while to build up trust and for participants to feel comfortable participating in the research. Some participants were also concerned about aspects of their accounts being recognisable to others within the OM community. Guaranteeing anonymity has thus been crucial, not only through the use of pseudonyms but through removing other identifying information from participant descriptions.

The data was analysed thematically. As I have not participated in the practice of OM, my writing can only go so far in comprehending such an experiential and sensory practice. I did not have access to ‘back of house’ discussions during events, for example, and did not attend some of the more expensive and immersive courses. I did participate in ‘communication games’ which are designed to elicit some of the feelings and steps of an OM, and the accounts of people’s OM experiences that I have elicited certainly bring-to-life their vivid journeys, yet my account is impacted by my lack of full participation in

what is a very embodied practice. It is also important to note that in line with participant definitions, I make a distinction between the *practice* of OM itself and the organisation who teaches the practice. Some research participants practised OM but had distanced themselves from the organisation (whilst still expressing gratitude for teaching them OM). People learn the practice through trainers who have been certified by the organisation, either privately or in a group course. At the time of my fieldwork, it was difficult to ascertain the scale of what seemed to be a rapidly expanding organisation. One participant said of the UK organisational-affiliated community that:

‘I think UK we’re like... I think at the moment, active, we’re probably 500, 600. But I know there are many more that have been trained – we’ve probably trained about 3,000 people. But you know, some people come in, come out again.’

My fieldwork took place in London and New York as these were two active communities at the time. There were more OM communities in existence, as one participant explained: ‘We’re in Paris. We’re in Brussels, Germany, Australia. And of course the States – New York, San Francisco, L.A. And some other places – Austin’.

Experiencing pleasure

Women participants spoke of experiencing pleasure through OM, as due to the careful construction of the ‘container’, these were encounters that were firmly on their own terms. Imogen characterises her OM practice as enabling her to reposition herself as the ‘director of my desire’. Through shifting her power over her own body, to articulate what she is feeling and what she wants within an OM, she is ‘tuning into what feels good to me...so it’s really about me taking charge’. Similarly, Aditi and Jodie spoke extensively about the practice enabling a woman to ask for what ‘she wants’, and the importance of knowing ‘that I can make a request and then somebody is going to respond appropriately to that request’ (Jodie). The narratives of many of the women centred upon how OM enabled them to experience pleasure on their own terms and figure out what they enjoy from intimate encounters. They could distance themselves from the ‘male in the head’ that [Holland et al. \(1998\)](#) note is so salient in women’s minds within heterosexual intimate experiences – having that voice in the head which always asks what the man would want, for his pleasure rather than theirs. It was illuminating to hear accounts from women who had radically shifted their sexual practices having been given a space to really think about what they enjoy. As Lydia explains:

‘One of the things that [OM] has done...for me is I’m totally uninterested in regular sex. I don’t want any of it and I see that other women...still crave sex and being fucked and all that and I’m, why? I don’t get that. Fingers have a lot more dexterity in your vagina than a penis does, why would I want that thing in there? I don’t even, and I’ve had plenty of opportunity and there are men that said, “I’m going to fuck you,” and blah-blah-blah, no thanks’.

For some women, a reclaiming narrative was evident in their discussions of experiencing pleasure through OM. They spoke of the practice enabling them to heal ‘trauma’ and/or to ‘reclaim’ body parts that they had previously separated off from their sense of self. As Verity said: ‘for me something so empowering about OMing is that it’s like women taking back their genitals’. Verity had experienced a long trajectory of sexual abuse and had tried a number of different therapy and recovery avenues. It was the embodied elements of OM that appealed to her. Speaking of her OM journey she recounts how she spent the first 3 months crying, as ‘[i]t was almost like...all this dis-armouring happened, you know for my genitals’. She explained that she had now ‘gone through a phase transition to where I feel so much pleasure in my genitals, which is just a whole new thing for me’.

Verity framed her experience as ‘taking back’ her genitals from both the abuse and from societal ‘conditioning’. She said that women are ‘so controlled by conditioning that we don’t own our own genitals. It’s like we have sex to please, we fake orgasms’. Her reclaiming narrative is reminiscent of Pitts’ (1998: 71) argument that ‘[r]eclaiming discourse presents the body as a potential site of symbolic resistance to oppression’, it ‘implies that social inscriptions on the body can be rewritten, and the body – especially the female genitals and breasts – can be reclaimed’. Verity mirrors this discourse in her comment that OM is a ‘way for women to take back ownership of their bodies, their genitals, their sexuality’.

Participants further explained that OM philosophy teaches that whilst a woman can be both a stroker and a strokee, she must centre herself, and her own pleasure, before becoming a stroker. Participants described this as a woman ‘filling up’ before she gives to others. Zara explained the advice she gives:

‘I definitely recommend, if possible, that women, because of the type of conditioning that they tend to be dealing with, exclusively be stroked for like a long time. Fill up on the direct stimulation for a long, long time. And then, stroke when it’s desire, but never because you feel like you should. Or not even a little per cent. It should really reverse that conditioning’.⁴

Linked to this, practitioners explained that OM philosophy teaches against ‘commerce’:

‘You’re not doing it to pleasure somebody else. Because that’s commerce, and we don’t do commerce’ (Emily)

‘When I’m stroking I’m really not trying to get the other person off, I’m doing it for my own pleasure...It shouldn’t make a difference whether I’m a stroker or a strokee, I should be just wanting this because what I’m looking for is the connection, the energy exchange...for my own pleasure.’ (Rose)

Through this disruption of ‘commerce’ discourse we can see that OM philosophy attempts to move away from the idea that a woman should feel ‘responsible’ for their partner’s orgasm (Opperman et al., 2014: 508). As Braun et al. (2003: 237) note, while

'reciprocity' is often seen as a 'basic premise of egalitarian relationships', in actuality it is akin to 'gift giving', which in itself is gendered – 'women tend to give more gifts than men' (Braun et al., 2003: 240). A 'discourse of reciprocity produces entitlements and obligations that can render 'choice' in heterosex problematic, particularly for women' (Braun et al., 2003: 237), suggesting that a 'reciprocal' exchange is not necessarily an equal one.

OM further disavows reciprocity through its teaching of the practice as 'goalless'. As Emily explains, 'it's a goalless practice, you're not chasing climax... It's just to feel what you're feeling'. This uncoupling of climax from orgasm is thus quite different from the 'orgasmic imperative' in which climax is constructed as both the 'goal' and the natural 'end-point' of sex (Frith, 2015a: 310; Opperman et al., 2014: 507; Potts, 2000: 61). Potts (2000: 60–61) documents the difficulties for her participants of attempting to resist the 'orgasmic imperative' at the same time as they ended up reifying it as the desired 'end-point' of sex. It is therefore fascinating that rather than taking on mainstream ideas about orgasm as a peak, climatic moment, OM practitioners have reframed the very definition of orgasm. Practitioners spoke of there being an orgasmic 'state' or a 'power' rather than a peak, climatic moment. Leo characterised orgasm as a 'flow state' and Verity explains that: 'orgasm is just like life force, energy'. As there is no 'goal', OM practitioners are encouraged to simply 'feel' what is there.

In one sense, OM is much closer to academic discussion around 'play' rather than conventional conceptions of orgasm. Paasonen (2018: 539) discusses how sexual 'play' can be 'practised for pleasure's sake... There need not be any functional aim, goal or pursuit beyond the autotelic activity itself'. This certainly resonates with there being no explicit goal/aim within OM. However, in writing on sexual play, orgasm is still defined in terms of climax. Paasonen (2018: 520) writes that:

'orgasm is not necessarily the key aim or purpose of sexual play. All kinds of playful experimentations with the feel, touch and smell of bodies can be categorised as sexual without them being reducible to orgasm as a teleological goal'.

Whilst discussion on 'play' goes a long way in breaking down ideas about the boundaries of what 'counts' as sex, it still to some extent subscribes to the analogy of orgasm as a specific moment by constructing play as against this moment, rather than seeing orgasm as something different – such as a state, or even a continuum of experiences, or 'waves', as some of my participants framed it.

Not a 'sexual' practice?

Orgasmic meditation not only uncouples climax from orgasm, but for a large majority of the participants, they also uncoupled OM from constituting a sexual 'act' or as being 'sexual'. As the participants explain below, OM is characterised as a consciousness practice of developing a connection, and paying attention to what you are feeling:

‘It’s a consciousness practice...It’s basically an attention practice – how to cultivate your attention....the whole purpose is just to feel’ (Amber)

‘...during the course of OMing, almost never am I sexually aroused during the actual experience. I can feel an energy, an energetic connection. I can feel the energy of the woman rising and I can tune into her orgasm...But I’m not myself sexually aroused by the experience.’ (Brian)

‘This is a connection that is not sex’. (Rose)

Some participants spoke about how the practice worked with sexual ‘energy’, but that it was not explicitly a sexual practice. As Leo told me: ‘It’s feeling with sexual energy, obviously. And obviously it’s dealing with a sexual part of a woman. But it’s about connection and consciousness’. Whilst OM leaders/teachers that I interviewed characterised OM as a consciousness practice, they sometimes would still link it to sexuality. For example, one leader said that OM is ‘a sexuality based practice’ but ‘it’s separated from sex...it’s a consciousness practice’.

For some participants, OM was considered to be something much ‘more’ than a sexual ‘act’:

‘...it goes deeper than that and that again, and double that. It never really ends because it’s all about, it is about the journey, it’s never about getting anywhere...You don’t stroke to get off...you stroke to be with whatever is there...’ (Ben)

Whilst the dominant perception of the act of stroking genitalia is that it must be ‘sexual’, literature on BDSM considers how people might engage in acts that mainstream society might presume to be ‘sexual’, but actually have very different meanings for practitioners. As Sloan’s (2015: 548–9) work importantly recognises, while BDSM involves acts which are ‘conventionally assumed to involve sexual desire and pleasure’, some participants ‘do not participate in BDSM for erotic pleasure or sexual companionship’. On the contrary, BDSM ‘offers asexual individuals a safe space to unconditionally veto intercourse or any behavior that they fear will lead their partner to expect them to have or desire sex’ (Sloan, 2015: 554). This is because within BDSM ‘partners collaboratively negotiate and script a power exchange, enact this dynamic during the scene, and dissolve it during aftercare’ (Sloan, 2015: 551).

Similarly, in my research, Janet discussed her frustration at her private partner (outside of OM) not being able to comprehend that OM is ‘sensual’, ‘it’s not sexual’. OM participants explained that ‘sex’ was separate from OMing:

‘If there’s a pressing or urging need for sexual contact, then close up the nest and choose to do it another time. There’s no shame in it, just separate it.’ (Thea)

‘It’s an attention cultivating practice. It’s really not a sexual practice...if I just look at like my own practice versus my sex life, like it’s vastly different...it’s totally separate... it’s like my

own practice for my personal awakening. So, it's not about him...even though I do it with my husband...it's not actually about him'. (Claire)

A further distinction between OM and 'sex' was made by some participants who pointed out that unlike with sexual partners, they did not need to feel 'attracted' to their OM partner. As Verity says: 'I've OMed with lots of different people and it's not like I need a partner that I'm attracted to. That doesn't bother me at all...I just want to see what I feel here'. Similarly, Leo said that: '[t]he energy can be really intense with someone that's not someone you're attracted to...For me, OM is purely about connection. It's not even about sexual intimacy'. Overall, the narratives in this section illustrate that we cannot simply 'read off' meanings about a practice that might very straightforwardly look 'sexual' because it involves genital stroking. Rather, participants draw careful boundaries to establish what they consider to be sexual or not.

Breaking container boundaries: Consent and 'personal responsibility'

This section critically examines some of the tensions that participants experienced in their OM practice. While many participants discussed the careful construction of the container, some spoke of moments where things went wrong. Seven women and one man reported quite insidious and potentially deliberate container breaks by male strokers that compromised bodily boundaries:

'...A bad OMer is a person who isn't listening to you...I have had OMs where I said something like, "Don't do that," or, "That's too hard," or whatever and they didn't, oh, okay, they heard me and then they kept going at the same, you know'. (Lydia)

'...at one point someone stuck his thumb all the way up my vagina...his other finger went somewhere. And I was like feeling this, and like, what is he doing? So I just stopped it, and was like, "Hey. Stop." I said, "You're breaking the container."... "You're breaking the rules."...And he just looked at me and said, "Oh but you want it." And I said, "I need you to stop right now."' (Amber)

'...there was one stroker...who didn't give a shit about listening to what I was saying...he basically kept stroking. And even when I said to him, "Slow down." He kept stroking and was pushing me to a climax...he pushed me over to a climax. And I had so much shame. Now, there's an aspect of all of that that was for me to deal with...I mean, why should I feel shame about having a climax? I shouldn't. However, what it actually raised for me was non-consent...' (Ella)

These examples demonstrate male strokers not acknowledging women's 'adjustments'.

Women also spoke of men having expectations beyond the container, for instance, that penetrative sex would follow from an OM. They were keen to stress that these men were not representative of the OM community, yet their experiences still raise crucial issues regarding consent and power dynamics. As Frith (2018: 699) argues, the dominant 'story

goes' that 'open communication' is a 'panacea for good sex', and that consent will necessarily 'result in reciprocally pleasurable, fairly negotiated, satisfying sex'. I have already troubled the reciprocity narrative in this paper, but Frith's point here also disrupts the notion that even within the constructed container, with the scene set for women to give 'adjustments', such 'open communication' may still not result in a consensual exchange. The container cannot always mediate for where a stroker takes it upon themselves to breach the established boundaries. Whilst participants told me that there are reporting mechanisms available within the community, there is still potential for things to go wrong, or as Alice put it: 'A lot can happen in 15 minutes'. Even in a circle environment, while a strokee can make adjustments, there is still a chance that they may feel inclined not to speak out, for fear of disrupting the flow of the other people in the room for instance, or for another reason.

Notwithstanding the women's accounts above where they gave adjustments and these were ignored, the multiple reasons why women might *not* speak out or give an adjustment were not always taken into account by OM participants. Rather, there was a binary set up in which women were constructed as either following the OM philosophy by giving an adjustment, or not, with little consideration for moments of ambivalence or the difficulties that doing this might involve. Rose, for example, told me about her experiences of being a circle holder (*italics, my emphasis*):

'I said, "If you think that they're doing internal strokes, *did you* ask them to do internal strokes, *did you* ask for heavier pressure on the internal thumb, *did you* ask them to move their thumb, *did you* ask them to do this, *did you* stop the OM?" Oh, "Oh no, I was in a circle, I didn't want to do that." Well, if *you* don't know how to make adjustments, what the hell are you doing OMing?'

Here the responsibility for what is happening within an OM is very firmly placed with the woman strokee, she is framed as responsible for speaking out if she does not like what is happening. As the women's accounts above illustrate, it is not necessarily as straightforward as this, and even where a woman *does* give an adjustment there is no guarantee that it will be acknowledged by the stroker. This was a very striking commonality among many of the women's narratives – they framed problematic moments of breaking boundaries in terms of their own 'personal responsibility'. Throughout interviews they framed this 'personal responsibility' discourse as part of OM philosophy, often in a positive sense. However, here I illuminate accounts where this idea can be troubling (*italics, my emphasis*):

'...as long as you follow the container, it's right. But if not...*it's a personal responsibility.*' (Philippa)

'...as a woman...*I'm the only [person] responsible for my own orgasm...*if it's somebody new, who wants to, or unwittingly has the tendency to break the container, there is a side of me which is the educator, which is the guide, that has to raise up...ultimately, *I'm always the one 100% responsible*'. (Holly)

'I've had some uncomfortable situations, where there's an expectation that goes beyond. Because it has genitalia involved...And in that situation, *I have to be, because I'm the more practised person, I have to be the person* [that] says, "No. I'm not willing to do that."' (Ella)

Within these narratives, the use of the 'I' and the repetition of their personal responsibility is striking. The responsibility of the stroker is noticeably absent, and there is little room to explore what it means if someone did not listen to the woman, aside from herself being to blame. This is a discourse of individualism which returns us to the notion of orgasm as 'women's work' – if it is a woman's 'personal responsibility' to make adjustments, then by default, if she does not do this, she is framed as not putting in that 'work' to have her desires fully communicated – of not taking responsibility for herself.

O'Neill (2015: 4.2) similarly documents how the London seduction community deploys a neoliberal narrative of individual 'responsibility', but primarily for men. For men in the seduction community, 'success' with women is framed as 'a matter of individual "graft" and a capacity for "hard work"'. While OM participants similarly invoked neoliberal ideas of personal responsibility and framed their OM journey as 'work' towards their self-development, OM diverges from seduction community discourse as it is 'goalless' – it does not strive for a particular 'success' or a 'goal'. I have spoken about the progressive potentials of a goalless practice in this article, yet if it is considered alongside the 'personal responsibility' discourse, the onus for what is actually experienced is put back onto the participants themselves. Whilst the steps of an OM are set up in the same way each time, if there is no tangible goal, or no set 'feeling' that one can expect, there is also no clear 'right' or 'wrong' experience. It has great potential in terms of opening up capacities of feeling and sensory experiences and not being prescriptive about what one should or should not feel, but on the other hand, the emphasis is thus firmly on the strokee to do the 'work' and take 'responsibility' if they are uncomfortable in an OM, thus absolving both the OM organisation, and the stroker to a great extent, from 'responsibility' for the experience. Within this framework, there is also no room for ambivalence – women consent to the OM and then must make clear adjustments throughout. Yet as Frith (2018: 699) argues, women 'frequently experience ambivalence and uncertainty about their sexual wants and desires', therefore, assuming that the 'open communication' framework of the container/adjustments somehow can mediate any ambivalence is problematic.

The overall impact of this neoliberal emphasis upon OM practitioners putting in the 'work' to take full personal responsibility for themselves was complicated, as on the one hand many participants framed this as a key part of their self-development. On the other hand, however, the often insidious and somewhat invisible ways in which this personal responsibility discourse could be potentially quite damaging was particularly evident in discussion surrounding sexual consent. It manifested in a gendered sense, in that women sometimes blamed themselves for problems that they have little control over, as seen above when clear instructions were given yet boundaries were broken. It was also apparent in an interview with a woman who discussed one of the OM organisation's courses that she took part in. When discussing the task that the course required her to do, her uncomfortableness is evident as she describes how 'it fucking makes me feel sick every

time I talk about it'. She said the course required her to 'list every single person in your life, who you have any kind of resentment with', and to use columns to write down what the resentment is, with the final task, she noted being 'the most, the one that everyone wants to avoid', where 'you write down what you brought to the resentment. What your responsibility was.' In our discussion she told me about a past non-consensual sexual experience which she had clearly said no to, multiple times. Through the course she had reconceptualised the experience to be around what *she* had brought to the encounter and what *her* part was in it. This is not to argue that her understanding is wrong, as this was for her a part of her recovery process, but to think about the wider impact of this line of teaching, for as the opening of her account suggests, she is still experiencing a level of trauma in thinking about the exercise itself that facilitated her considering this experience to be part of her own personal responsibility.

Conclusion

It is clear that the practice of OM can be experienced as a life changing practice. Participants felt the practice had made a significant intervention in their lives, and none of the participants spoke of an intention to end their practice anytime soon. As Oliver framed it: 'I plan to be Oming until the day I can't raise my finger anymore'. Whilst participants discussed tensions with the OM organisation, all of them were immensely grateful to it for teaching them what they perceived to be a life altering practice. Women spoke of the OM community as a novel space which 'put[s] female sexuality as a priority' (Rose). Moreover, men valued OM for providing a unique space to discuss their 'vulnerabilities', and to share insights about themselves that they often had not disclosed to others. There is evidently something quite unique about orgasmic meditation. While it bears similarities to, and may borrow from, other practices (e.g. BDSM), it does not fit neatly into existing categories of analysis, and this article has explored OM's novel elements, widening our understanding of the diversity of intimate practices.

For many participants, conceptualising orgasmic meditation as a 'sexual' practice would be a gross misunderstanding, and an underestimation of the power of their practice. I have demonstrated that we cannot 'read off' meanings about a practice that might very straightforwardly look 'sexual' because it involves genital touch. Indeed, as Jackson and Scott (2010: 84) argue, 'what makes an act, a desire or a relationship sexual is a matter of social definition: the meanings invested in it'. Asking orgasmic meditation practitioners themselves about how they understand their practice is thus fundamental. As other researchers have found in relation to witchcraft rituals (Ezzy, 2014) and polyamory (Klesse, 2006), mainstream society can have great difficulty in comprehending anything associated with genitalia to be 'non-sexual'. My findings in relation to non-sexual touch resonate with both Plancke's (2020) and Longman's (2018) work on genital touch between women in women's circles. Plancke (2020: 845) describes a touch that works with sexual energy that is not sexual. Longman's (2018: 8) account of touch between women discusses women feeling safe and not threatened by men in women's circles, and of the touch of a woman being perceived as non-sexual. Yet there is a slight danger here of (re) constructing heteronormative essentialising stereotypes of women's touch as necessarily

or naturally sexually 'passive'. Arguably, OM goes somewhat further in that definitions of touch can be experienced as non-sexual regardless of the gender identity of the stroker.

Moreover, Potts (2000: 70) wrote of the possibilities of 'multiple pleasures' that could be engendered from climax not being the primary goal of sexual encounters. One of the radical notions of OM is that it uncouples climax from orgasm, centring embodied experience over a 'goal'. Importantly also, OM gives people the scope to centre their own pleasure before that of others, and participants spoke of being on a path to living a life led by their desire. This framing of desire as a pathway, or a journey, bears similarities to Grosz (1995: 294–5) conception of how:

'desire need not...culminate in sexual intercourse but in production...the production of sensations never felt, alignments never thought, energies never tapped, regions never known'.

Yet Foucault (1978) cautioned that desire is always constrained by a normalising framework, it creates norms that people live by. In this sense, the extent to which OM practitioners are following an inner 'truth' of desire, as opposed to a path that is at least in part laid out to them by the teachings of the OM organisation, is questionable. Further, my critique regarding personal responsibility discourses and the breaking of bodily boundaries suggests that the operation of normalising discourses of desire are still salient.

Where a 'container' was followed, this could be a particularly powerful space for women to feel able to 'reclaim' their bodies from past trauma, in ways that talking therapy had not facilitated. OM was considered an important means to (re)connect with their bodies and to write alternative embodied narratives for themselves. Pitts (1998: 81) points out that because for her participants their reclaiming bodily modifications were carried out on private parts of the body, it creates a tension between how visible their resistance can be. For OM practitioners, however, whilst OM involves a bodily practice centred upon what is considered to be a 'private' bodily area – genitalia – and whilst some OMs take place in private, there was also a feeling amongst the participants of a collective resistance – they knew that other women were sharing this practice for similar reasons, even while they were not with them. This was engendered through talks and workshops, where women openly shared their reclamation narratives, and further, was directly felt through women's participation in OM circles, with many participants documenting the 'shifts' that they had seen in other women.

While we cannot expect one bodily practice to 'solve' everything, the tensions identified in this article cannot be ignored. Despite OM's somewhat transformative potential in reshaping how we conceive not only of orgasm itself, but also 'sex', establishing boundaries, and pleasure, a discourse was still operational which inadvertently (re)centred orgasm as women's work. OM's radical potential is hampered by a reversion to neoliberal, and distinctly postfeminist conceptions of women's sexual agency – in which women are at one and the same time presented as liberated sexual agents through following their desires, and yet, through the language of personal responsibility, and difficulties women experienced in having 'adjustments' respected, there is a tension in which the focus shifts back onto the woman stroker to manage bodily boundaries, and if

she does not do so, responsibility lies only with herself. Moreover, whilst OM is a ‘goalless’ practice, as a journey of self-development practitioners have to be ‘willing to put in the work’ (Emily), to live this life led by desire. Whilst on the one hand OM is distanced from neoliberal notions of goals and achievements, on the other, it falls back into postfeminist neoliberal notions of a ‘pedagogy of the body’, as Frith (2015a: 310) frames it, in which women are taught what their bodies ‘need’, and how to instruct a stroker if they do not follow OM scripts. Thus encapsulating quite a strong ‘work’ ethic into a practice that is characterised by many as requiring little more than ‘to feel’. To *be able to* feel requires a degree of work, and it seems that this orgasmic work can at times become constructed, once again, as women’s work.

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Notes

1. While one of the leaders interviewed stated that ‘[T]here always needs to be one clit. It could be a transgender clit, a straight clit, a gay clit, it doesn’t matter, but there has to be a clit and a finger’, the majority of participants spoke about strokees as being (cis) women, and the strokees that I interviewed identified as women, hence the overall definition constructed here.
2. I did not observe/participate in any OM circles.
3. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Languages and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at Aston University.
4. While one woman actively spoke of her role as both a strokee and a stroker, other than some women who were staff/leaders, the majority of women spoke primarily of being strokees.

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