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WOOD, Rachel, HIRST, Julia <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9230-1828>>, WILSON, Liz and BURNS-O'CONNELL, Georgina <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6430-8627>>

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## **The pleasure imperative? Reflecting on sexual pleasure's inclusion in sex education and sexual health**

Rachel Wood<sup>a\*</sup>, Julia Hirst<sup>b</sup>, Liz Wilson<sup>c</sup> and Georgina Burns-O'Connell<sup>d</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Chester, Chester, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK; <sup>c</sup>Liz Wilson Training and Consultancy, Sheffield, UK; <sup>d</sup>Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK.*

\* Corresponding author. Rachel Wood; r.wood@chester.ac.uk; Twitter: @racwood

## ABSTRACT

This article offers an empirically grounded contribution to scholarship exploring the ways in which pleasure is 'put to work' in sex and sexuality education. Such research has cautioned against framing pleasure as a normative requirement of sexual activity and hence reproducing a 'pleasure imperative'. This paper draws on interviews with sexual health and education practitioners who engaged with Pleasure Project resources and training between 2007 and 2016. Findings suggest that practitioners tend to understand pleasure within critical frameworks that allow them to avoid normalising and (re)enforcing a pleasure imperative. Accounts also show negotiations with, and strategic deployments of, values surrounding sexual pleasure in society and culture. While some accounts suggest that a pleasure imperative does run the risk of being reproduced by practitioners, notably this is when discussing more 'contentious' sexual practices. Interviews also demonstrate that practitioners attempting to implement a pleasure agenda are faced with a range of challenges. While some positive, holistic, and inclusive practice has been afforded by a pleasure approach, we argue that the importance of a critical framework needs to be (re)emphasised. The paper concludes by highlighting areas for further empirical research.

**KEYWORDS:** pleasure; pleasure imperative; sex education, SRE, sexual health; anal sex; rights; young people.

In 2007, the Sheffield Pleasure Project resources and training aimed to put pleasure on the agenda for sex education and sexual health (Hirst et al., 2017). These endeavours made a case for the inclusion of pleasure within a holistic emphasis on the development of sexual competencies (Hirst, 2013). In the years since then, research has addressed the potential effects of pleasure's inclusion, or how pleasure might be 'put to work' (Allen, 2012; Allen and Carmody, 2012; Lamb et al., 2013; Allen et al., 2013; McGeeney and Kehily, 2016). A key area of concern is the normalisation of pleasure through a 'pleasure imperative' whereby practitioners might (often unintentionally) reinforce social and cultural norms that position pleasure as something that young people feel they must or should achieve in their sexual lives (Allen and Carmody, 2012; Rasmussen, 2013; Lamb, 2013). These critiques have led ourselves as authors of this paper to reflect upon the ways in which pleasure may have been put to work over the last ten years by those who engaged with the Pleasure Project.

The paper draws upon ten interviews with UK sexual health and sex education practitioners who engaged with the project. Our analysis contributes to the conversation surrounding pleasure's inclusion in sexual health and education settings in two key ways. First, it highlights the specific challenges faced by UK practitioners. Much of the scholarship on pleasure in sex education hails from the USA (Lamb et al., 2013), Australia (Allen and Carmody, 2012; Ollis, 2016) and New Zealand (Allen, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Following repeated efforts, UK Parliament made Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) compulsory in all English schools from age 4 in 2017, with the new curriculum to be implemented in September 2019 (DfE, 2017). Given the historical challenges (Hampshire and Lewis, 2004), and announcements on RSE continuing to emphasise safeguarding and risk (DfE, 2017), advocates for positive and holistic approaches will likely continue to meet with barriers in an era of compulsory provision.

Second, this paper represents a crucial intervention in the literature by bringing systematically gathered empirical data on pleasure into the pleasure imperative conversation for the first time. Allen's (2012) contention that a problematic pleasure imperative runs the risk of being reproduced by workers advocating a pleasure agenda is to some extent supported by our analysis, particularly when it comes to discussing anal sex with young women. But, by analysing disclosures in detail, we add further insights into the ways in which practitioners engage in ongoing negotiation with pleasure discourses. These practitioners are equipped with critical frameworks that allow them to include pleasure in ways that avoid normalising and enforcing a pleasure imperative, and question social norms and myths around the role of pleasure in sex.

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<sup>1</sup> The national contexts for sex education in these countries have parallels but also differences with that of the UK. In the USA, provision varies widely between schools that adopt an Abstinence Only Until Marriage curricula, and those that employ comprehensive and evidence-based models (Lamb et al., 2013). In Australia, Relationships and Sexuality education is designated as part of the National Curriculum for Health and Physical Education (ACARA, 2016), although the interpretation of the National Curriculum is determined by state and territory governments (Caldwell, 2017). In New Zealand, Sexuality education is a compulsory learning area of The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), but there have been recent calls for greater inclusion of LGBTQ-relevant material (*Stuff*, 2017) and issues of consent (*NZ Herald*, 2017).

Therefore, we (re)affirm that a critical understanding of pleasure is crucial to its effective inclusion in sex education and health.

This paper does not stand in opposition to claims that sex education may (re)produce a pleasure imperative; indeed, we agree that this is an important area for consideration for both researchers and practitioners. Rather, we discuss the potential benefits and pitfalls of pleasure's inclusion from the perspectives of those who have attempted to integrate pleasure into their work with young people in challenging professional contexts. These practitioners can be understood as working in a 'dilemmatic space' (Benhabib, 1996) in which professional practice is met with a contested, even hostile, socio-political terrain, leading to a lack of confidence and support along with feelings of uncertainty about ways forward.

### **The Pleasure Imperative**

Since Fine's (1988) identification of desire as a 'missing' discourse in sex education, calls for the inclusion of pleasure emphasise that it may allow young people to feel 'greater control over sexual encounters' and adopt 'safer sex practices' (Hirst, 2013; Ingham, 2013). In recent years, however, scholars pointed out that calls for pleasure are not 'new' (Allen, 2012; Allen and Carmody, 2012; Lamb and Graling, 2013; Allen et al., 2013; McGeeney and Kehily, 2016). Thus, discussion shifted away from a primary focus on questions of silence and inclusion and towards debates around how and in what ways pleasure is being addressed in various contexts.

To illustrate, Allen (2012) reflects on her experiences in New Zealand that raised the potential limitations of a pleasure narrative in context. Recalling her experience of sexuality educators stating that pleasure 'should' be part of sex, she emphasises the risk of reproducing a pleasure imperative in which 'pleasure is cast as an ideal in sexual relations that young people feel compelled to achieve' (Allen, 2012: 462). Given wider discourses of sex and sexuality, Allen and Carmody (2012) contend that it is difficult, even impossible, to fully control the ways in which pleasure is taken up in different contexts, becoming 'untethered from its original intentions' (460).

Although pleasure is a narrative that aims to counteract dominant health/risk oriented or moralistic constructions of young people's sexuality, that does not mean that a discourse of pleasure itself does not have 'normalising' (Rasmussen, 2013: 166) or 'regulatory' effect that can 'render the experience of desire and pleasure compulsory or constitute those who don't experience these things as somehow lacking' (Allen, 2005, cited in Allen and Carmody, 2012, 459). Similarly, Lamb (2013) argues that there is 'no controlling what pleasure discourse can do in a curriculum', and that pleasure can be 'manipulated' to serve both 'emancipatory' and 'regressive' ends (148).

Calls for pleasure have emphasised its importance for strengthening women's sexual agency and decision making whilst acknowledging that pleasure is not axiomatic to empowerment. However, Allen and Carmody (2012) caution that, within wider heteronormative frameworks, this can burden young women to a greater degree than young men, particularly with the responsibility for self-knowledge and management of sexual relationships, and, Lamb (2010) contends, may be framed within highly commodified discourses of young women's sexual 'empowerment'. Despite these areas of concern, all of the authors cited above emphasise that pleasure remains a

valuable tool in sexualities education. Allen (2012) concludes that pleasure, as a 'possibility' rather than an imperative, is 'worth fighting for' in education, but that its proponents must recognise the potential, even likelihood, of its co-optation and use as an imperative.

## Methods

The interviews conducted in this study were part of an evaluation exercise for a Pleasure Principle conference, training and booklet. The Pleasure Principle conference in 2007 was attended by 75 participants from statutory and third sector organisations, and content focused on raising issues of sexual pleasure within sexual health promotion work and Sex and Relationships Education (SRE). Training courses on the same theme took place from 2009-2015 with 75 attendees in total. A training resource entitled, *Pleasure: A booklet for workers on why and how to raise the issue of sexual pleasure in work with young people*, was published in 2009 and 13,500 copies have since been distributed.

Following ethical approval, potential participants who had engaged with the Pleasure Project resources were contacted by email. The response rate was low in proportion to the number of people who attended the conference or training: ten people responded to a request to be interviewed. In part, this is explained by the numerous changes to emails following termination of posts or changes in role or employer. UK government cuts to public services (Iacobucci and Torjesen, 2017) have contributed to an overwhelming reduction in funding for sexual health (Forster, 2017) and education, and the loss of many jobs previously held by those who engaged with the project. As we consider below, this stripping back of resources is perceived as a major barrier to the implementation of a more holistic, pleasure-led approach.

Ten 60-minute individual interviews were carried out: two over the telephone, one by Skype and seven in person. All the participants had attended either the conference or one of the training courses and held a range of sexual health and education roles and identities<sup>2</sup>. Although representativeness was not achievable given the depletion of the sectors, we offer a variety of practitioner perspectives that attest to the commitment of the Pleasure Project to a holistic model that sees sexual health, wellbeing and education as deeply interlinked (Aggleton et al., 2010). In the analysis, however, we draw out themes that are specific to a particular field where necessary.

The interviews were conducted by a sexual health and education trainer and consultant who was involved with the Pleasure Project. Like many of the interviewees, the interviewer has experienced challenging work-related issues since the launch of the project, alongside a public and media backlash to the project that is elaborated in

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<sup>2</sup> Michael (freelance trans and sexual health trainer) (trans man, 30s); three sexual health promotion workers (James: cis, gay man, 40s; Laura: cis, woman, lesbian, 50s; Kate: cis, heterosexual woman, 40s); Linda (child sexual exploitation worker) (cis, woman, heterosexual, 50s); Fran (community outreach worker) (cis woman, heterosexual, 50s); Two managers of a youth charity (Simon: cis man, gay, 50s; and Susan cis woman, lesbian, 40s); Polly (researcher and educator) (cis woman, heterosexual, 50s); Ruth (sex and relationships education (sre) specialist) (cis, heterosexual woman, 30s); Marie (sexual health doctor) (cis, heterosexual, woman, 40s). All white British. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants to retain anonymity.

our conclusion. While being interviewed by a fellow practitioner may have lent the interviewer trustworthy insider status for participants, the interview approach was potentially limited in places by the (perhaps understandably) defensive position of the interviewer. Throughout the following analysis we highlight points of inquiry that were not pursued, and areas where the data is potentially shaped by these guarded positionalities.

The data provides an in-depth insight into the possibilities and challenges involved in integrating pleasure for those practitioners who still remain in post. Broader findings from the evaluation have been published in a report (Hirst et al., 2017), with this article focusing more specifically on the possibility of a pleasure imperative.

### **Using pleasure critically**

The data in this section show practitioners understanding pleasure within an informed and critical network of ideas that allow them to mobilise pleasure as a 'possibility' rather than an 'imperative' (Allen, 2012). Pleasure was not described as 'stand-alone', but instead used to frame, and embed in, wider narratives around sex and sexuality. While a valuable justification of pleasure's inclusion, the idea of pleasure being valuable in and of itself – purely for the sake of joy, excitement, and so on – is arguably lost here. The need to frame pleasure as useful and productive for other reasons could reflect the justificatory stance that practitioners feel they need to take when advocating for its inclusion.

As Kate (sexual health promotion worker) stated: 'the main thing is to thread through any kind of conversation or discussion or lesson, the themes of pleasure'. A demonstration of putting on a condom would be framed by 'sex-positive, pleasure-based messages' through discussions including 'when would you be ready for sex? How would you know that the person wants to have sex with you? What sort of sex do they want to have?' In turn, pleasure itself appeared to be understood by practitioners within wider critical frameworks such as rights, consent, and equality:

It's more about valuing yourself, having positive relationships and equality... The starting point should be that young people are entitled to enjoy sex... it's about confidence and self-esteem... Education needs to be about respectful relationships, equality, valuing yourself and others – pleasure can be these things and anything within these things. Susan (youth charity manager)

We weren't just talking about pleasure, we were obviously linking it, we were talking about gender and power and inequality and sexism and all sorts of big stuff... When you're talking about consent and preventing coercive, abusive relationships then the 'Pleasure' work to me is about rights and a right to my own body, and what I like and don't like, and how I want to be touched and not touched. Kate (sexual health promotion worker)

These quotes suggest a 'rights-based approach' to practice (Blake and Aggleton, 2017),

defined by Berglas et al. (2014: 63) as the broadening of content 'to include such issues as gender norms, sexual orientation, sexual expression and pleasure, violence, and individual rights and responsibilities in relationships'. Such an approach allows participants to place pleasure, and indeed sexual activities in general, as one possibility or option among others:

If we can start to talk about pleasure, we can start to talk about expectations, [...] about what if pleasure isn't part of that?... then we can start to have conversations about 'actually not everybody finds sex pleasurable; not everybody is interested in sex and not everybody wants to have sex'. Michael (freelance trans and sexual health trainer)

We have a card-sort[ing] exercise... called 'Why Women Have Sex', and one of them is 'to have an orgasm', and we can talk about sexual pleasure there. But a lot of them are about 'because my partner may leave me if I don't', or 'fear', or 'because I'm told to', or 'because I think I should'. It's a range of things. Linda (child sexual exploitation worker)

Here pleasure is presented as something that is legitimate, but not compulsory. The questions of whether pleasure is always part of sex, the reasons people have a particular kind of sex, or the decision to have any sex at all, are positioned as topics of critical discussion.

However, as the literature has shown, wider social, cultural and media discourse pushing pleasure as an imperative is pervasive, to the extent that it may shape ideas beyond practitioner intentions (Lamb, 2010). Indeed, the very idea of there being a 'right' to sexual pleasure has been widely appropriated by a range of consumer industries including cosmetic surgery (Braun, 2009) sex shops (Wood, 2017) and sex advice journalism (Barker et al., forthcoming 2017). Frith (2015) identifies an 'orgasmic imperative' in both scientific and popular discourse about sex, whereby orgasm is positioned as the essential 'end-point' of sex, and both men and women are impelled to work towards more efficient and rewarding orgasm experiences. As Lamb argues (2010: 302), the ideal of the young person who 'looks inward' to identify their pleasure in an expression of sexuality is tied to a neoliberal discourse which 'situates the answer to political problems in individual, personal transformation'. In contexts where the available discourses to express and discuss sexuality are often highly commodified (Holland and Attwood, 2009), it may be difficult to avoid reproducing a pleasure imperative even if practitioners deliberately set out not to do so.

It is important to note that, while this topic could potentially have been probed further in interviews, the data we do have suggests that interviewees were aware of media messages about sex and sexual pleasure, evidencing an ongoing negotiation with them in practice. As one participant stated:

[Pleasure is] just absolutely missing from conversation or dealt with in that kind of Ann Summers way. Which isn't wrong, but there are other aspects



to pleasure than ridicule, Ann Summers<sup>3</sup> or porn. There is this other middle ground. Fran (community outreach worker)

The idea of a 'middle ground' appears to suggest a critical framing of pleasure, existing somewhere between silence and commodification. Another participant elaborated on how discussions on pornography could be used to directly challenge the nature of the orgasmic imperative:

[T]he pornography messages would be 'all woman should always have an orgasm through penetration', or be 'multi-orgasmic'. So, I would counter that by saying 'some women achieve orgasm through penetration, but many don't. In fact, the majority don't. Women are more likely to have clitoral orgasms'. You can see the sheer relief on people's faces when you just say that because it's this perception that everyone should be orgasming all the time and it's the ultimate goal of sex. Kate (sexual health promotion worker)

Practitioners not only engaged in critique of these ideas, but also showed willingness to manipulate them. Harnessing popular ideas about pleasure helped practitioners adapt to young people's boredom with, or over exposure to, risk based messages about sexual health. Kate (sexual health promotion worker) explained how both staff and young people were 'fed up with the negative tone of SRE and sexual health delivery being very STI-focused and pregnancy-focused', and that in contrast 'talking in a more sex-positive way and talking about pleasure' meant that 'they're engaged'. The same participant went on to describe how pleasure could be used to 'hook in' potentially disengaged young people:

Because I've been putting on, over the years, workshops directly for teenagers, pitching them as 'good sex' or 'pleasure in sex'. 'How can you be a good lover?' They're interested in it, obviously. They want to know and they want to come... One of the main motivations for young people looking to pornography as a sex education source is to know what to do, how to be good at sex, how to give pleasure. We're not going to stop them going to porn and we don't necessarily want to stop them going to porn, but that's what they say they go to porn for. So, if we gave them more sex-positive messages and talked more about pleasure, we are providing them with what they want to know. Kate (sexual health promotion worker)

Of course, young people may want to learn about 'good sex' or being a 'good lover' for a wide range of reasons, from giving pleasure to a partner to 'bragging' about sexual prowess, although this line of inquiry was not pursued further in the interview. However, the same participant went on to discuss the critical discussions about gender and power in a workshop on pornography, showing that, in practice, this content is frequently framed by a wider critical approach encompassing political questions of equality, rather than a purely individualistic focus on pleasure.

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<sup>3</sup> A UK high-street chain of shops selling erotic products such as lingerie and sex toys.

Another response showed a practitioner's engagement with ideas of (sexual) self-work, empowerment and confidence that scholarship has linked to the pleasure imperative:

19 to 25-year-olds are not going to stand for this, you know, 'You're not allowed pleasure in your life'. And I call it the L'Oréal effect, 'I'm worth it', can have a negative effect, but also it can be positive. I am worth it and I am going to get what I want. And that aspect can be monetarial [sic] and, you know, houses and cars. But it can also be 'I expect more [things] in my life and pleasure is one of them'. Fran (community outreach worker)

This respondent highlights an implicitly feminised, consumer-driven individualism that they believe may shape young people's sense of self and chooses to harness this to enhance messages about the right to pleasurable, sought or wanted sexual experiences. This is a potentially contradictory approach, a fact that the interviewee seems to acknowledge, but it appears that a decision has been made to speak to young people in a register that the worker believes might chime with their priorities.

Together, the interview extracts in this section demonstrate the value of qualitative research in exploring how pleasure is put to work by practitioners. While some of the disclosures might appear to evidence a reinforcement of a pleasure imperative at first glance, more in-depth analysis demonstrates the nuance with which workers use pleasure to frame a range of topics, embed pleasure within critical understandings of gender, power, equality, consent and rights, and negotiate in complex ways with popular cultural ideas surrounding sex and sexual pleasure.

### **The pleasure imperative in practice**

Allen (2012) contends that suggesting pleasure as the 'best' reason to have sex, or pleasurable sex as the 'best' kind, risks obscuring the complexity of pleasure in sexual practices. This complexity encompasses experiences in which pleasure might not be experienced throughout fully consensual sexual encounters (due to various physical, emotional, financial and other factors), and those in which pleasure may arise in non-consensual, abusive or otherwise uncertain contexts. As Lamb (2010: 299) expresses in relation to young women's sexuality, 'if the gold standard of whether an act of sexuality is good or not is whether she experiences pleasure, then all sorts of problematic and unethical forms of sex will fall under the category of good sex'.

However, statements suggesting pleasure should be included also imply a more critical negotiation when viewed in context:

But it should be something that is pleasurable, that is intimate, that is potentially loving, if that's what people want to do, if they want to have it in that context or not. Kate (sexual health promotion worker)

But I guess in being honest with young people one could say it is not always pleasurable, but ideally it is, and that is what you can work towards in an intimate relationship if it is not kind of happening immediately. Linda (child sexual exploitation worker)

These statements suggest a degree of complexity in which pleasure is not presented simplistically as the best or only valid experience of sex. Although they do seem to suggest a preference towards pleasure, they also show respondents understanding pleasure as something that may or may not be wanted, may or may not occur, and may require work and communication.

However, two responses suggested a moral framework in which a particular kind of sexual practice was assumed to be less pleasurable and therefore undesirable. Discussion of young women having anal sex was where judgements about what sex young people should or should not be having were clearest:

I routinely ask about anal sex. The vast majority of girls don't [have anal sex] and look a bit shocked when I asked actually, which I'm still quite pleased about. Sometimes I do see girls, probably older women in their 20s that are – do feel under pressure to have anal sex and I think that's a pornography led thing... And occasionally I have some younger ones, which kind of worries me, because I'm not sure that that's about female pleasure either. But, you know, I don't think it is. It might be, but it's hard to know, isn't it? Marie (sexual health doctor)

Many young women, [in] my own experience... you sort of question 'why are you having anal sex'? They don't really know and they are just doing it because they feel they should, but they're not really getting any pleasure from it. I mean, some do and are okay with it. You might talk about lube and stuff to make it easier... So, educating them about pleasure puts that on the agenda... saying, "what about pleasure?" Hopefully it is about pleasure. Kate (sexual health promotion worker)

We do not suggest these extracts present straightforward moral judgements that young women having anal sex is 'bad' or 'wrong', and in fact they show practitioners grappling with the implications of shifting heterosexual practices, and providing practical advice on how to make anal sex safer and more comfortable. Alongside this, however, are suggestions that anal sex is not pleasurable for women, that practitioners can (or should) be relieved if young women are not participating in this practice, and that anal sex practices originate from porn, serve only male pleasure, and arise from 'pressure' on young women. These assumptions may draw on and reinforce heteronormative assumptions that associate anal sexual practice with men who have sex with men only.

Lamb (2010) warns against the impulse, to wish for an 'unachievable ideal' of sexuality and sexual practice for girls, one that is wholly characterised by agency and desire, and can put pressure on girls and young women to live up to a standard that may be impossible to consistently achieve at any life stage. The supposition that a particular sexual act is not chosen or pleasurable appears to add a level of well-intentioned but nonetheless problematic moral judgement. This is another area in which the interviewer could have elicited further discussion on the thought processes behind these comments.

Research on young people's participation in anal sex is limited, but qualitative research suggests that young people's narratives may normalise 'coercive, painful and

unsafe anal heterosexual' (Marston and Lewis, 2014: 1). Accounts demonstrated young men boasting about anal sex to friends; young men 'persuading' female partners to participate or 'accidentally' penetrating them anally; and young women having to repeatedly say 'no' to, or 'give in' to, attempts at anal sex (although one young woman did express enjoyment of this act) (Marston and Lewis, 2011). The study recommends that 'health promotion work' needs to involve 'harm reduction efforts *targeting anal sex*' (Marston and Lewis, 2011, emphasis added). Here anal sex is focused on as the problem, rather than the unequal and coercive heterosexual relations that shape some of the young people's experiences. This reflects the way in which our interviewees assumed anal sex was an un-pleasurable and unchosen practice for young women.

Presupposing that this specific sexual practice cannot be pleasurable or chosen, and basing interventions around reducing that practice, misses the point. Unfortunately, young women's unwanted or coerced (hetero)sexual experiences are not uncommon, no matter what sexual activities are involved (Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2007; Thomas et al., 2016), and focusing on one kind of act will not address these wider issues. As Muehlenhard et al. (2016) conclude, there are a range of reasons why young women might have sex that is unwanted, and consent is often ambivalent or constrained by contextual and interpersonal factors, not least gendered expectations and double standards. Moreover, the response of the two interviewees to young women's anal sex experiences demonstrates one of pleasure's major limitations, showing how a focus on pleasure may fail to capture some of the complexity and contradiction of sexual practice and decision making.

As suggested elsewhere, a broader conceptual framework, encompassing but extending the notion of pleasure, might allow educators and other practitioners to avoid these pitfalls. Lamb (2010: 303) suggests a focus on 'equality', implying that educators make the case to young people that 'mutuality is an ethical ideal to aim for, while sometimes hard to achieve'. Hirst, (2008: 402) explores 'sexual competence', defining this as the ability to be involved in sexual practices that have positive outcomes, involve minimal to no regret, and 'honour the rights of all involved'. A number of authors suggest a framework of 'sexual ethics' (Allen and Carmody, 2012; Cameron-Lewis and Allen 2013). Lamb (2013, 148) argues that an ethics discourse would allow practitioners to move away from the individualistic commodified framings of pleasure as an imperative, as it recognises one's own right to pleasure whilst also emphasising responsibility to the other, emphasising principles of 'justice and caring' within a critical analysis of gendered and heteronormative power relations.

In section one of this analysis, we illustrated that a pleasure narrative is already being mobilised by practitioners within wider critical frameworks such as rights, equality, and consent. A sustained framework might enable this to happen more effectively and consistently, and would allow sexual educators and health professionals to avoid the pitfalls explored in this section. On the other hand, the data above show that engagement with pleasure is often nuanced, involving the harnessing of pleasure topics such as 'good sex' to 'hook' young people in and engage them, while also involving critical discussions of pleasure discourses. It remains crucial therefore that, when and where pleasure is discussed, we continue to (re)emphasise the importance of framing it within a critical framework of ethics and consent.

## Barriers

The most discussed topic in interviews was the myriad barriers faced by practitioners. For educators, the non-statutory status of SRE and Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHEE) was a major obstacle to sex positive provision including pleasure. A focus on risk and safeguarding remains central to the government's announcement of compulsory RSE (DfE, 2017), with a policy statement describing RSE as way to protect 'pupil safety' amid 'increasing concerns around child sexual abuse and exploitation and the growing risks... [of] a digital world' (DfE, 2017: 2).

Major barriers arose from this policy-driven risk focus in both health and education. All practitioners spoke about the increasing pressure to meet public health targets for risk prevention (Department of Health, 2017. The target driven culture is made more challenging by sizeable budget cuts to sexual health services (Forster, 2017) that narrows the time and reach of sexual health services:

I believe my job is reflecting a prevention agenda much more than a promotion agenda. James (sexual health promotion worker)

There's so many pressures with what we absolutely need to deliver. Because, of course we're worried about chlamydia, of course we're worried about unplanned pregnancy. Marie (sexual health doctor)

It's very much driven around harm reduction and preventative measures. So often in very, time-limited and time-sensitive settings, there are key messages we have to deliver. Laura (sexual health promotion worker)

The focus on prevention and clinical outcomes is positioned as severely limiting practitioner abilities to take a more holistic approach, or the time to build what Laura (sexual health promotion worker) called a 'therapeutic relationship' with service users, which would facilitate space for questions of pleasure, rights, equality and so on. This reflects findings by Hanbury and Eastham (2016) that pleasure is routinely excluded from risk focused sexual health consultations.

Similar pictures are seen in accounts of work in schools, where a focus on safeguarding (DfE, 2015) narrows the scope of what practitioners feel can be discussed because a pleasure agenda may be viewed in direct conflict with protecting young people from harm:

Safeguarding and pleasure can look like they are at opposite ends of the spectrum... I think if I were really up-front about pleasure it would probably be seen as anti-safeguarding. James (sexual health promotion worker)

I think there was an anxiety with some people of "are we actually going into a coercive route of having this discussion about how to make sex more pleasurable or more satisfying?" Should we be actually more preventative in our approaches? Laura (sexual health promotion worker)

The same person remarked that there exists concern among workers that 'talking

positively about sex and sexuality' might present a 'barrier or a block for parents or commissioners who would have an anxiety about it going down a particular road of, "Are we grooming people or encouraging earlier experience of sex?"'. This was echoed in Ruth's (sex and relationships education (sre) specialist) description of a group of school nurses having been shown the Pleasure booklet: 'I got a very frosty response... they said they were afraid of the kind of reaction from schools, from parents'. Even after having been 'let in' to a school, practitioners who work in education had to carefully manage their messaging to avoid a backlash:

Whoever's let you in... they're still reticent to transfer that knowledge to parents and carers, or anxious about how you will do it... They've obviously got you in to do the SRE bit or ..., the sex bit. But they're quite reticent about how you're doing it and always relieved that you're not... going to be salacious or extrovert... It is tiring that so many people still think that you're going to be in some way controversial. Fran (community outreach worker)

As Ollis (2014, 2016) asserts, training is crucial to support workers in the effective delivery of comprehensive, positive and inclusive sex education. As Susan (youth charity manager) commented: 'having the confidence to talk about sexual pleasure is a journey for staff... they are nervous and lack confidence, they are worried about getting it wrong'. However, interviewees noted that training has also been impacted by sizeable government cuts to school budgets:

I used to have a budget to pay people to come out of school for three, four, five days on training. And we'd pay for covers for them in school. So, if people aren't going to be able to teach it, they're not going to be able to do it. Polly (researcher and educator)  
... with the training... There's not so much investment now as there was five years ago to buy it in. Kate (sexual health promotion worker)

Fran (community outreach worker) noted the changes to sex education policy on the horizon at the time of these interviews and voiced concern at the impact in contexts of other barriers described above:

I just hope we don't lose the fact that it needs to be professionally and really, really consistently well taught... I think daylight is dawning and we're at the top of the hill and about to go over the top. But I do have an issue in light of funding and all those other things - that it may be lost, and we may get to the situation where our young people, when they become adults, are saying... "We got more of it, but it still wasn't right" ... We've got to have face-to-face professional people who are well trained teaching this subject.

As this quote suggests, even the much-needed policy change for compulsory Relationships and Sex Education must be viewed with caution in the context of a risk reduction agenda, considerably restricted funding for staff, training and resources, lack

of time to pilot the new compulsory curriculum and no additional funding for initial teacher training.

### **Conclusion: ways forward**

It is important to note that many of the accounts in the preceding section focus on the threat of resistance or censure, rather than actual experiences of being directly prevented from including pleasure. While challenging, these barriers are perhaps most reflective of a climate of fear, insecurity, and lack of trust. From the 1980s and Section 28 (Sanders and Spragg, 1989), educators and health workers in the UK have operated in a context of surveillance and feelings of lack of support and confidence in professional decision making (Sex Education Forum, 2011). In our data, both interviewer and interviewees appear, at times, to be coming from justificatory, defensive and embattled positions. It is therefore difficult to ascertain the precise 'truth' of the claims about barriers and impact even if practitioner perceptions of a challenging work environment are undoubtedly genuine. Working in what are perceived to be resistant and restricted contexts clearly takes a toll on those practitioners who are able to remain in their jobs and wish to implement a holistic and inclusive approach to sexual health and education.

The motivations for and the conduct of this empirical research were initially shaped by a perceived need to defend a pleasure approach in a context of resistance. It is impossible to reflect on the Pleasure Project without noting the troublingly negative responses it received from the public and media.<sup>4</sup> This had an understandable impact on the project team and some of the interviewees who participated James (sexual health promotion worker) explained that the 'media frenzy' led to a feeling that the project had been 'sabotaged', making those who engaged with it feel 'wary'. This kind of negative reaction is not limited to the Pleasure Project, and is a key challenge practitioners have to deal with when aspects of their work become the subject of disagreement and misinterpretation by the media, local groups and the public. Michael (freelance trans and sexual health trainer) described the impact of a 'really horrific' 2013 campaign against a local service: 'it really affected especially my mental health, and probably [other people's] as well'. Continually battling this level of resistance, in addition to perceived and material structural barriers, takes its toll on practitioners, and indeed researchers when they become involved.

In planning and writing this article, we have been struck by the difficulty involved in balancing the competing priorities that face researchers in sexual health and education today. On the one hand, we are compelled and inspired to reach towards a model for practice based on theory, data and need; on the other, we are disheartened by a socio-political context where implementing holistic, comprehensive and inclusive sexual health and education approaches can seem a near impossibility. Indeed, when the Pleasure Project team first encountered the valuable research

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<sup>4</sup> After its publication by the Sheffield Centre for HIV and Sexual Health (CHIVSH), the Pleasure booklet and the Centre received a great deal of publicity. Much of the coverage was distorted by the mistaken assumption that the booklet was directly aimed at young people and not practitioners, with a *Mail on Sunday* article judging the booklet to be 'do-gooding gone crazy' (Freeman, 2009). The furore culminated with a formal complaint to the NHS Trust within which CHIVSH was located at the time, and aggressive communications to the Centre's Director.

discussions surrounding the possibility of a pleasure imperative, they wrongly interpreted it as another blow against proponents of a pleasure approach, evidencing the defensive and bruised position of the research and practitioner team.

Of course, the pleasure imperative has never been an argument against pleasure's inclusion, nor a criticism of practitioners, rather a useful call to situate pleasure critically within sociocultural contexts and remain mindful of the potential limitations of pleasure discourses (Allen, 2012). The challenge for researchers and practitioners, then, is to find ways forward with a praxis that recognises the tensions faced, while also providing an informed and comprehensive approach that recognises the cis-gendered, heteronormative power relations and cultures that so often contextualise lives. The conversation about the possibility of a pleasure imperative has been extremely beneficial in reflecting on the Pleasure Project and planning its future steps, including greater emphasis on a critical framework for pleasure (Hirst et al., 2017).

The data examined here offer a range of insights into positive, holistic and inclusive practice that has been afforded by a pleasure approach. The questions raised by responses to young women's anal sex practices warrant further research, as this was the area in which a pleasure imperative appeared most at risk of being reproduced. It is also worth pursuing further perceptions of gendered pleasure discourses within consumerism and pornography, which were gestured towards in the data but not interrogated further by the interviewer. Furthermore, it is crucial that we (re)iterate the value of a critical pleasure approach that includes cis-gendered boys and men, and not just women and girls whom many of our respondents appeared to focus on in their discussion. Indeed, moving forward with research that comes from a place of open minded inquiry and not defensive justification is vital. Overall, we can conclude that practitioners who engaged with the Pleasure Project are presenting pleasure as a possibility, not a requirement, and that they are supporting young people to engage critically and politically with recognition of the powers and structures that mediate lives.



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