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Table of Contents

Preface
P. 5

Abortion goes mainstream
P. 6

Migration development in Romania
P. 20

Normative Reconstruction, Constructivism and the Idealisation of Ethical Life
P. 35

Navigating Mediatised Tools of Othering in the Case of Muriel Degauque
P. 44

Towards a Feminist Peace?
P. 54

Colonial Polygamy Discourses and Algerian Disenfranchisement
P. 62

Trial and Error: Nuance of Pornographic Research
P. 75

Closing Statement
P. 87


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Preface

The Amsterdam Journal of Social Sciences (AJSS) didn't begin with an institutional plan or top-down initiative, it started with frustration and ambition. A group of students, frustrated after being denied the opportunity to publish their own research, decided to create the kind of space they wished had existed for them. What followed was an entirely grassroots effort: a journal by students, for students.

What began as a simple idea grew quickly. With a shared drive to amplify student voices and showcase the incredible range of work coming out of social science classrooms, the team pushed forward. Eventually, the University of Amsterdam took notice, and AJSS secured institutional support. That support allowed the project to flourish, while the core remained rooted in student initiative and editorial independence. Fast-forward two years, and we've hit an exciting landmark. This is our first-ever printed edition, a tangible product that reflects the energy, dedication, and talent of everyone involved. Within these pages are the first seven articles we published this year, selected not just for their quality, but for how they reflect the intellectual diversity and curiosity of students working across disciplines.

AJSS has grown into more than a journal; it's a platform, a training ground, and a statement. It shows what students are capable of when given the tools and trust to build something of their own. This print edition is just one step in our journey, but it feels like a big one. We're proud to share it with you.

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Abortion Goes Mainstream: Abortion (De)stigmatization strategies in the eyes of activists

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Abstract

Abortion stigma is a multifaceted issue impacting both those seeking abortions and activists supporting them. Rooted in societal norms and power dynamics, this stigma reflects Goffman's concepts of moral and tribal blemishes. It manifests through negative discourse, structural fears, and internalized shame, exacerbating isolation and marginalization for clients. Activists face enacted stigma, including harassment and abuse, while working to destigmatize abortion. Transnational networks like Abortion Without Borders provide essential support, aiming to decriminalize abortion and shift public perception. Their efforts encompass both practical assistance and broader advocacy, challenging stigma and advocating for reproductive justice. This research, based on authography (personal experiences as an abortion activist), interviews, netnography and ethnography aims to explore the scope of the abortion stigma and the destigmatization methods. The implications of this research suggest that addressing abortion stigma requires both cultural and legal shifts. Destigmatization involves decriminalizing abortion, normalizing it as routine healthcare, and challenging the societal structures that perpetuate stigma. By reshaping public discourse and aligning reproductive rights with broader social justice movements, activists aim to foster greater societal acceptance of abortion and dismantle the power dynamics that restrict bodily autonomy.

Keywords

Abortion, Reproductive justice, Stigma, Transnational activists movement, Destigmatization

Context and Positionality

This research was conducted due to my deeply held belief that everyone has the right to make decisions about their own body, as well as years of experience with pro-choice activism. Back in 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, the government in my country (Poland) decided to change the abortion law, effectively banning the reason for 90 percent of abortions performed in Polish hospitals (Statista, 2023): fetal abnormalities. At the time, I was already living and studying in the Netherlands, but I felt a deep need to do something to help my fellow Polish citizens—and, in fact, anyone facing an unwanted pregnancy. During one of the protests in Amsterdam, I learned about the existence of Abortion Network Amsterdam and decided to join them as a volunteer. Over the years, I have gained significant knowledge about stigma, activism, and advocacy, which has culminated in this research.

The case I have researched is a delicate aspect of human life, playing on the edge between political and personal. Therefore, there are some ethical aspects I have taken into account. Firstly, I was conducting this research due to

my deep feminist views and belief that one should have full right to their body. Therefore, this research aims to show the experiences of women to break the taboo and spread information about abortion.

Introduction

On a cold, rainy evening at Amsterdam Schiphol Airport, I anxiously awaited Monika (a pseudonym to protect her privacy). Monika was in the late stages of pregnancy, traveling abroad alone for the first time, and facing an abortion the next day. Scared and unfamiliar with the language, she relied on the internet and strangers for guidance. I had gathered necessities—pads, light food, painkillers, and water—knowing she couldn't eat past midnight. When we finally met, she was terrified and confided, "I'm scared I won't leave the clinic alive. I read reviews calling it a slaughterhouse. What if there are major complications?"

It took an hour to calm her fears enough to send her to her hotel. Afterward, I felt emotionally drained and angry—angry at the Polish government for forcing women like Monika to travel so far for a procedure, angry at the patriarchy that restricted her choices, and angry at the abortion stigma that had terrified her into thinking she might die from a safe medical procedure.

This encounter deeply impacted me and became a catalyst for my research. I volunteer with Abortion Network Amsterdam (ANA), part of Abortion Without Borders (AWB), which provides comprehensive support for those seeking abortion care abroad. Over the past four years, I've heard countless heartbreaking stories from individuals denied access to safe abortions in their home countries. Motivated by these experiences, I dedicated my research to exploring reproductive justice, abortion stigma, and the transnational feminist movement.

My study examines how pro-abortion activists in the Netherlands work to destigmatize abortion—within themselves, with clients, and within the broader system. The current literature primarily focuses on the experiences of people obtaining abortions, their beliefs, and their struggles with stigma. However, this research aims to address a gap in the literature: while much attention has been given to the stigma faced by individuals accessing abortion care, the stigma experienced by pro-choice activists has been largely overlooked. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the origins of abortion stigma, how activists navigate it, and the strategies they employ to destigmatize abortion care. Additionally, I examine how community-based initiatives and support groups contribute to reducing stigma, as well as how activists cope with both internalized and external forms of stigma.

This research aims to answer the question: "How do abortion activists in the Netherlands cope with the stigma surrounding abortion, and what strategies do they employ to destigmatize abortion care?" To address this, I first focused on abortion narratives and the origins of abortion stigma, as understanding these foundations is crucial for exploring how stigma affects the lives and work of abortion activists. Building on this understanding, I investigated how community-based initiatives and support groups contribute to reducing abortion stigma and how activists manage both internalized and external stigma.

While my primary interviewees were activists working in the Netherlands, some had moved between organizations for various reasons. Moreover, the abortion activism network is transnational, so although most interviews were

conducted with individuals working in the Netherlands, the findings should not be interpreted as exclusively rooted in the Dutch context.

While abortion is commonly associated with women's reproductive rights, it is important to acknowledge that it also affects all individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB), including transgender men and nonbinary individuals. For this study, "AFAB individuals" is used interchangeably with "women" to encompass the experiences of transgender men and nonbinary people.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in three key sociological phenomena: stigma (and, by extension, abortion stigma), Foucault's concept of biopower, and the phenomenon of transnational advocacy networks.

The primary one is the concept of stigma, specifically abortion stigma. Goffman defines stigma as an attribute that discredits an individual, transforming their identity into a "tainted, discounted" one. Importantly, he emphasizes that stigma refers to the disgrace itself, not just its visible effects (Goffman, 1963). Stigma's impact extends beyond the individual to the broader group, with Das highlighting that it is perceived as contagious, affecting the collective and emphasizing its social nature (Das, 2001). Goffman's framework illustrates how stigma shapes social dynamics, influencing societal perceptions of individuals and their actions.

Abortion stigma, unlike an intrinsic truth, is a social construct sustained through various means within local contexts (Kumar et al., 2009). It is a label imposed on AFAB individuals who terminate pregnancies, marking them as inferior to societal ideals of womanhood. Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell (2009) conceptualized this notion as the "circle of abortion stigma."

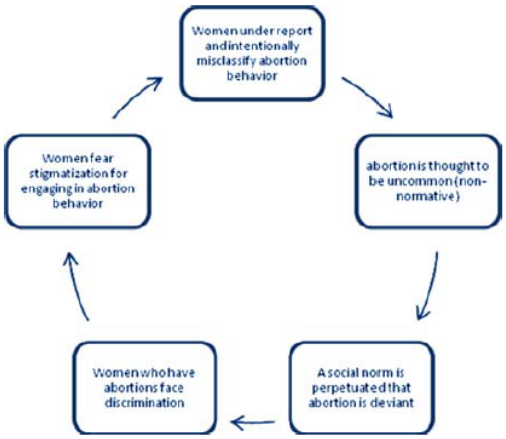


Figure 1. The prevalence paradox: the social construction of deviance despite the high incidence of abortion.

Figure 1. Circle of abortion stigma. Adapted from "Conceptualising abortion stigma" by Kumar, Hessini, & Mitchell, 2009, p. 629, in Social Science & Medicine, 73(5). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.06.032

Abortion stigma operates on five levels. At the discourse and cultural level, it associates individuals seeking abortions with negative traits, creating stereotypes (Kumar et al., 2009). Government policies and laws then embed this stigma into societal structures. On the institutional level, separating abortion services from general healthcare misses opportunities to address broader health needs, while insurance limitations reinforce stigma (Kumar et al., 2009). On the community level, stigma shapes local perceptions and behaviors. Finally, at the individual level, internalized stigma leads to shame and guilt, positioning abortion as "unnatural" and against cultural or familial expectations (Kumar et al., 2009).



Figure 2. Levels of abortion stigma.

Figure 2. Levels of abortion stigma. Adapted from "Conceptualising abortion stigma" by Kumar, Hessini, & Mitchell, 2009, p. 631, in Social Science & Medicine, 73(5). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.06.032

Abortion stigma manifests in three ways: enacted stigma involves overt and implicit prejudice; felt stigma is the awareness of stigma, prompting alignment with societal norms; and internalized stigma is the acceptance of stigma's legitimacy, regardless of the context (Kwiatkowska et al., 2023). Abortion stigma also shapes narratives around those seeking abortion. Historically, portrayals like the "helpless victim" have garnered support for legal abortion by fitting gendered expectations, while the "irresponsible pill user" reflects concerns about unregulated abortion pill access (Calkin, 2023). This dichotomy establishes "good" and "bad" reasons for abortion, reinforcing societal judgments about "good" and "bad" womanhood.

Abortion stigma is a "compound stigma," intertwined with other forms of discrimination and structural injustices. It leverages power to delegitimize a legitimate medical procedure, discredit those involved, and undermine advocates for legal and accessible abortion (Kumar et al., 2009). Stigma prompts coping strategies, such as portraying the fetus as innocent or framing the decision as morally right despite reservations about abortion. Hoggart (2017) explores these varied approaches, showing how individuals navigate stigma by aligning their decisions with notions of good motherhood or personal values around family and economic stability. Some manage internalized stigma by transferring it to healthcare professionals or advocates (Cockrill & Nack, 2013). Others hide their abortions to protect their reputations, while some address stigma openly, aiming to normalize their experience. Despite the hardships, negative attitudes often inspire individuals to advocate for improved abortion experiences (Cockrill & Nack, 2013).

In Poland, where abortion is heavily stigmatized and illegal in most cases, some doctors offer clandestine services, which Agata Chełstowska describes as "turning sin into gold." This intense stigma drives abortion seekers to clinics abroad, often advertised in Polish with services like transportation to neighboring countries (Chełstowska, 2011).

Pro-choice activists also face stigma, though it is under-researched (Giovanneli et al., 2023). Activists report feeling dehumanized, labeled as immoral or selfish, and perceive themselves as targets of negative attitudes, particularly from anti-choice groups (Giovanneli et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, research shows that while some activists resort to self-censorship, most openly discuss their work and views on abortion. They see openness as a tool for asserting their identities, organizing life experiences, and encouraging personal agency (Giovanneli et al., 2023).

This research connects stigma to Foucault's concept of biopower. Foucault (2003) argues that sexuality lies at the intersection of individual bodies and populations, subject to both disciplinary practices and regulatory mechanisms, a concept known as biopolitics. Reproductive policies exemplify this intersection, involving both disciplinary power (control over individual bodies) and biopolitics (governance of populations) (Vivaldi, 2020). Restrictive abortion laws reflect this control by dictating reproductive choices, while abortion stigma acts as a societal mechanism that aligns individual behaviors with state objectives. Vivaldi (2020) further argues that individuals begin comparing themselves to scientifically generated norms rather than laws, reinforcing homogeneity and perpetuating stigma through normalization. Examining reproductive policies through the lens of Foucault’s biopower reveals how disciplinary power and biopolitics shape abortion rights and sustain stigma.

Finally, the concept of transnational advocacy networks is crucial to abortion work and activism. Abortion Without Borders exemplifies this phenomenon, where relevant actors collaborate internationally on reproductive issues. These networks share values, discourse, and resources, crucially contributing to reproductive justice (Moghadam, 2022). Actors in these networks provide abortion pills, schedule appointments, offer financial assistance, and contribute to education and destigmatization efforts across Europe. They operate as "outsiders," collaborating with civil society organizations and supportive "insiders" to influence national and international policies (Moghadam, 2022).

Calkin (2023) expands this idea into the concept of a transnational abortion activist movement, identifying three roles for its members. First, they operate outside legal and political institutions to provide abortion medication and information on safe usage. Second, they engage with scientific authorities and lawmakers, leveraging years of experience in facilitating clandestine abortions. Lastly, they practice prefigurative politics, focusing on immediate change and building institutions that embody the transformations they seek.

Methodology

Data collection

My research employed a multi-faceted approach to explore abortion stigma and the experiences of activists combating it. I combined different qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observation, autoethnography and netnography to capture diverse perspectives and employed triangulation to enhance the depth of the study. The goal was not only to answer research questions but also to give voice and agency to the participants.

For data collection, I used snowball and convenience sampling methods. Snowball sampling involved distributing calls for participants via social media, email, and digital channels, while convenience sampling leveraged my position within Abortion Network Amsterdam (ANA) to identify interviewees. Informed consent was a priority—participants received detailed consent forms, and data was only used from those who signed after understanding the study's purpose.

Data analysis began with transcribing interviews, translating Polish interviews into English for consistency. I used a combination of on-the-fly notes and summary notes to document daily and weekly experiences within ANA, contributing to the autoethnographic aspect of the research. The next step was coding the data using in vivo coding, inspired by Leavy and Harris (2019), which focused on the participants' exact language to generate categories that structured the final results.

My research focused on activists within Abortion Without Borders (AWB), a cross-European initiative assisting people in Poland with abortion access. I interviewed volunteers from various collectives, including Abortion Support Network (ASN), Abortion Network Amsterdam (ANA), Samen Naar de Kliniek (which provides "buddies" for clinic visits), and Collectief Vrije Keuze (which works to destigmatize abortion through protests). These activists, with experience ranging from two to over twenty years, shared insights into how they confront abortion stigma and the challenges they face.

I conducted semi-structured interviews to understand the personal and professional challenges activists encounter in their fight against abortion stigma. These interviews revealed their resilience and strategies for addressing stigma, offering valuable insights into the struggle for reproductive rights. To protect participants' anonymity, they were given the choice during interviews to be identified by their real name or to select a pseudonym. However, all participants chose to keep their real names.

Stigma is also discussed extensively online. Netnography, a form of ethnographic study of online communities that relies heavily on observation (Bryman, 2016), was employed to explore these digital spaces. I monitored digital platforms, including the Women on Web forum and social media, to understand how stigma is addressed in online environments. This approach focused on the experiences of both activists and users of these forums and platforms. The primary reason for using this method was to gain insight into how stigma operates in digital spaces and how activists engage in efforts to destigmatize abortion online. Although this method was not my primary approach, it served to deepen my understanding of the issue. Incorporating autoethnography, I documented my experiences as an activist within ANA, reflecting on how stigma affects activists' lives, mental health, and coping strategies. This insider perspective deepened my understanding of the emotional labor involved in abortion activism and the cultural contexts that perpetuate stigma. Finally, participant observation allowed me to engage directly

with activists and support seekers, gaining an immersive understanding of the logistical and emotional challenges these groups face. This method highlighted the resilience, solidarity, and innovative strategies activists employ to combat stigma and promote reproductive rights.

I decided to employ these methods for several reasons. One was to enhance the objectivity of the research. As noted, given my background in activism, personal beliefs, and the use of autoethnography as one of the methods, there was a risk that my views and results could be somewhat subjective. Methods such as interviews and netnography were incorporated to provide a broader perspective and to help me move beyond the informational bubble I might otherwise inhabit. Additionally, these methods complement one another, addressing gaps left by any single approach. For instance, the stigmatization experiences shared by digital platform users provided a valuable starting point for interviews with activists. Similarly, employing autoethnography offered an opportunity to compare and contrast my own experiences with those of other activists.

Methods to ensure objectivity and research limitations

Due to the use of autoethnography, my research is not entirely free from subjectivity. To ensure accurate representation, all participants were given the opportunity to review the final thesis and provide feedback. If participants did not respond within two weeks, despite my best efforts to contact them, I proceeded with the assumption that the insights were approved.

I have also used a consent form to ensure that every aspect of this research is conducted with the participants' full, informed consent. Additionally, this guarantees that their stories are represented accurately and respectfully, in a manner that aligns with their wishes.

The research faced several limitations. Due to time constraints and limited access, the study primarily involved individuals within my network, restricting broader generalization. Additionally, the rapidly evolving legal landscape around abortion may render some findings outdated over time. While this research focused on key issues experienced by activists, it acknowledges the complexity of abortion stigma and the need for further exploration of its cultural, societal, and psychological dimensions.

Results

To fully understand the spectrum of stigma surrounding abortion, it's essential to view it from two perspectives: the clients who face the stigma and the activists who work directly with them. Abortion stigma intersects with two of Goffman's (1963) types of stigma: blemishes of individual character, which suggest that someone who has had an abortion is morally bad, and tribal stigma, which marks and excludes individuals who have had the procedure.

Stigma is Power

When I spoke with Mara, a freelancer and one of the creators of the Abortion Support Network and co-founder of S.A.F.E, an organization supporting grassroots abortion activists, she emphasized a common thread between these types of stigma: power relations. Mara noted, "Stigma is anything that gives the minority of people who are against abortion (because that is the global minority of people who are against abortion) their beliefs power over abortion

access." This view was echoed by many of my participants, highlighting that abortion stigma is rooted in power and biopolitics. It functions as a systemic tool of governance, intertwining personal beliefs and institutional power to control reproductive choices and maintain societal power dynamics.

The foundation of abortion stigma is deeply connected to female sexuality and societal norms (Kumar, Hessini, & Mitchell, 2009, p. 628). Women's bodies and sexuality are constantly politicized. They are held responsible for their bodies and actions, yet are simultaneously taught to be submissive, with their desires deemed unimportant (Angel, 2022). The societal ideal for women is to become mothers (Kumar, Hessini, & Mitchell, 2009). Abortion, in this stigmatic sense, signals something different: that the woman was not only sexually active but also chose to defy the "natural order" of motherhood by not continuing the pregnancy. This dichotomy results in the division of women into "good girls," who conform to societal norms, and "bad girls," who are sexually free and do not feel the need to fulfill these norms (Nack, 2002).

This division often leads to ostracism, prompting women seeking abortions to justify their reasons by categorizing them as "good" or "bad." Good reasons typically include financial difficulties, concerns about the future, or fetal abnormalities. On the other hand, "bad" reasons are often seen as no reason at all, such as simply not wanting to be a mother, which can lead to slut-shaming. As I have seen in numerous comments under articles about abortion, people often say, "If she didn't want a child, she shouldn't have opened her legs." Mara also touched on this, saying, "I often hear, 'I'm against abortion unless it's a 12-year-old, unless the woman was raped.' What you're really saying is, you're okay with abortion if she was a 'good girl' by your definition—if she 'earned' that abortion, if she didn't do something 'slutty' that we should punish her with a child for."

Tropes depicting abortion-seekers as "helpless victims" with culturally potent reasons for abortion—such as youth, poverty, or family pressure—have long been used to garner support for legal abortion. These narratives align AFAB individuals' reasons for seeking abortions with societal expectations and moral judgments about female sexuality (Calkin, 2023). Clients often emphasize that the pregnancy was wanted, trying to align with the "good girl" tribe, and that they sought an abortion due to unfortunate circumstances rather than being categorized as part of the "bad girl" tribe.

Manifestations of abortion stigma

One of the key aspects I want to focus on is the manifestation of stigma. As mentioned earlier, abortion stigma operates on several levels. One of these is framing discourses—the way abortion is talked about, leading to misconceptions, such as the notion that abortion clinics are dangerous or unsanitary. The goal is the "awfulization of abortion," portraying it as something more than just a medical procedure, but rather a life-threatening or morally wrong act (Calkin, 2023). Kasia mentioned that there is a widespread belief that abortion is carried out in some back alley, surrounded by imagery of coat hangers. "This is definitely part of the stigma," she said. "It is evident in the emails we receive after the procedure. Rarely does anyone express how humanely they were treated or how well they were cared for. They do not say it directly, but it clearly reflects their initial expectations."

On a structural level, there is often fear of being arrested or prosecuted upon returning to Poland after an abortion. These fears are usually the result of misunderstandings of the law and misinformation. While ending someone else's pregnancy is illegal in Poland, one can still end their own pregnancy abroad or with pills without legal consequences. However, this misunderstanding adds an emotional stressor, making another manifestation of stigma—internalization—even more apparent. Clients we work with rarely ask for someone to accompany them to the clinics. They travel alone to other countries, not only because of financial reasons but also because they fear communal stigmatization and alienation after the procedure.

These fears are well-founded. Mara shared a story about a woman who sought help from her neighbor because she did not speak English and wanted an abortion. The woman asked her neighbor to accompany her, but the neighbor responded chillingly, threatening to expose her as a "baby killer" if she went through with the abortion and returned home not pregnant. In one of my interviews, a participant referred to such individuals as "abortion exiles," people who face stark realities, leaving behind support networks for distant, isolating journeys. This journey isn't just physical but also emotional and psychological, confronting condemnation and stigma. The term highlights their displacement and marginalization, emphasizing their fight for dignity and acceptance alongside medical care.

An important but often overlooked part of stigma is the language used to talk about abortion. Researchers Chełstowska and Ignaciuk (2023) describe this as a "lost battle for language," driven by the church and anti-abortion activists, affecting public discourse and medical practices. This has pushed many abortion services underground, and the stigma is so pervasive that women avoid the word "abortion" even in private, reflecting deep-seated fears and societal pressures. Clients of ANA often try to avoid using the word "abortion," instead asking for an "appointment" or referring to "what will happen after the action or procedure." This linguistic manifestation of stigma is also evident among medical professionals. Sterre shared her story of feeling unsupported by the medical system during her abortion: "I felt very lonely and unsupported by my then partner, but also by the medical system. Back then, you still had these five days that you had to take before you could get an abortion. So I had to go to the doctor, and the doctor was like, 'Yeah, of course, we can make an appointment at the abortion clinic for you, but you do have to think about it because sometimes people... they remove their baby.' She literally was like, 'removing a little child,' and that makes a really big impact on them." Sterre described this interaction as not only unhelpful but, in her view, unprofessional and traumatizing. It can be attributed to a lack of appropriate language to discuss abortion, as well as the use of language that perpetuated stigma.

These manifestations of abortion stigma significantly impact the role of activists. Our responsibilities extend far beyond providing financial assistance and scheduling appointments. Often, we find ourselves acting as therapists, medical advisors, legal specialists, or simply supportive friends who offer reassurance and comfort in moments of fear. Complicating matters further is the reality that many of us grapple with our own internalized stigmas and experiences.

Several activists I spoke with have experienced enacted stigma based on their support for people accessing abortion and their open advocacy for reproductive justice. Mara, for instance, mentioned being stalked, receiving hateful emails, tweets, and Facebook messages, and being portrayed as the face of the pro-choice movement within the

"anti-abortion" environment. Similarly, Sterre, an activist from Collectief Vrije Keuze, spoke about the abuse of law and hate she faced from pro-life groups: "They have posted a few blog posts where they put a picture of me in there. They mentioned my name, including my last name. They were like, 'So she's part of a satanic sect, and they sacrifice babies.'" These behaviors, though they might seem like personal animosity, are largely driven by enacted stigma. Such phenomena expose the prejudice faced by those involved in abortion support: physical or emotional abuse, discrimination, hate speech, verbal judgments, assumptions, avoidance, and even displays of discomfort, anxiety, or disgust (Cockrill and Nack, 2013).

Destigmatization of Abortion

A significant part of abortion activism, therefore, involves working towards the destigmatization of abortion. This is done through the transnational abortion activist movement, which I've focused on in this research, particularly groups like Abortion Without Borders (especially Abortion Support Network and Abortion Network Amsterdam) and their collaborators in the Netherlands, such as Samen Naar De Kliniek and Collectief Vrije Keuze. These networks are vital for several reasons. They facilitate knowledge sharing and practical tips for smoother client experiences and pool expertise and resources to enhance support capacity. Collaborative efforts help overcome individual limitations, providing a safety net that transcends geographical and financial barriers. This cooperative approach ensures clients receive timely, safe, and empathetic care regardless of their circumstances. Thanks to services like these, clients do not have to worry about finding themselves alone in a foreign country, grappling with an unfamiliar language, and feeling abandoned to fate. Moreover, they are often concerned about the financial burdens associated with the cost of the abortion and related travel expenses. Networks such as Abortion Without Borders ensure that these financial and logistical hurdles are addressed, making the process less daunting for the client.

Samen Naar De Kliniek goes even further by accompanying clients to appointments, providing emotional support, and ensuring safe transportation and accommodation in the Netherlands. This holistic approach addresses both practical needs and emotional well-being, reducing the isolation and anxiety clients may experience.

On a practical level, these organizations work toward two main goals: breaking taboos and empowering clients. When it comes to clients, they don't require justification for needing an abortion. Paraphrasing Nikki, they don’t make a big deal out of it. The core belief is that abortion is a human right, and clients are reminded that they deserve access to abortion services no matter the circumstances. Kasia from ANA emphasized that one of their goals is to transform stigma into empowerment by helping clients understand that the "problem" lies within the system, not with them. Sterre shared how her personal experience with abortion was the catalyst for her involvement in activism. Sterre's abortion experience had such a significant impact on her that it led to the creation of Collectief Vrije Keuze. She wanted to ensure that others would not feel as isolated and unsupported as she did during her own abortion.

Activists also address their own internalized stigmas. The transition from feeling ashamed to becoming an unapologetic abortion activist, as Nikki put it, involves a process of unlearning societal shame and embracing full support

for abortion rights. Personal experiences, workshops, and engagement with supportive communities aid in this transformation.

Abortion Goes Mainstream

Another important aspect of destigmatization is incorporating abortion into mainstream discourse and connecting it with other movements, such as queer liberation. Nikki explained: "We are very much linked to queer liberation movements. Not only straight or cis people have abortions. This is also related to stigma because we're working to normalize both abortion and the existence of multiple genders and sexualities." This approach, known as "frame extension" (Snow 1986), broadens the scope of advocacy to challenge biopower effectively by addressing both individual and group-level stigmas, expanding resources and goals.

Activists use various platforms, including social media, conferences, marches, and workshops, to disseminate information and normalize abortion—a process Chełstowska and Ignaciuk (2023) describe as "deawfulization." For example, the Abortion Dream Team uses engaging online content to challenge negative perceptions, while networks like AWB work towards broader societal acceptance and understanding. Demedicalization is another key focus, aiming to present abortion as a safe, routine healthcare procedure rather than a highly medicalized or dangerous act. Medication abortion activists strive for social decriminalization by educating the public and advocating for reduced medical oversight and destigmatized access. This shift in perception is crucial for legislative reforms that ensure accessible and compassionate abortion care. Through this autoethnographic journey, I've come to understand that advocating for abortion rights transcends providing services; it involves navigating vulnerabilities and affirming shared humanity. As we collectively work towards empowerment and understanding, it is imperative to dismantle misinformation and fear, crafting a future where personal health decisions are met with support, not scorn. Our stories serve as powerful calls for justice, demanding to be heard.

These organizations and activists aim not merely to facilitate easier access to abortion but to achieve the ultimate goal of decriminalization. By systematically challenging stigma, utilizing legal avenues, and reshaping perceptions, they work towards comprehensive legal and social reforms. As Calkin (2023) highlights, pro-choice activists, through the social decriminalisation are trying to change the social status of abortion from illicit to licit, even while it remains illegal. The ways mentioned above shift public perception, recognizing abortion as routine healthcare rather than a crime. As societal values evolve, increased public pressure can lead to policymakers reforming restrictive laws. This transformation in public opinion acts as a catalyst for legal changes, ensuring abortion becomes accessible and destigmatized for all who need it. By looking at the experiences and examples of the abortion stigma, as well as current rise of Global Right it is important to mention that pro-choice activism reaches more than just the local (in this case dutch) context. The very idea of transnational (abortion) activist network calls for collaboration on the global scale in support of people needing the abortion care. Therefore this article and it’s results should also be understood only as an example of tools and ways of working for the global context.

Conclusion

The discussion begins by exploring the origins of abortion stigma, particularly how it is shaped by societal control over female sexuality and traditional gender roles that primarily view women as mothers. This stigma is deeply

rooted in beliefs about abortion and the power these beliefs hold, which creates societal categories of "good" and "bad" reasons for seeking an abortion. As a result, individuals facing unwanted pregnancies often feel isolated and view abortion as something shameful, leading to further stigmatization. Activists advocating for reproductive rights also face hostility and threats, as their work challenges not just individual beliefs but the complex web of power relations that sustain these views.

Fighting against abortion stigma is thus about more than just changing personal opinions; it involves confronting deeply ingrained structures of power that restrict women's autonomy. Activists work to raise awareness, change language, and mobilize support across society to uphold and respect bodily autonomy and reproductive choice. Despite the deep stigma, activists do not view their work as morally wrong. Instead, they use various strategies to combat stigma, including ignoring or ridiculing it, transforming it into motivation, and finding solidarity among fellow activists. This journey often involves confronting personal stigma and expanding understanding of its roots.

By examining the experiences and examples of abortion stigma, as well as the current rise of the global right, it is important to highlight that pro-choice activism extends beyond the local (in this case, Dutch) context. The concept of a transnational abortion activist network emphasizes the need for global collaboration in supporting individuals who require abortion care. Therefore, this article and its findings should be understood as an example of the tools and approaches that can be used within a global context.

Conflict of Interests

There were no conflict of interests that I am aware of.

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Migration and Development in Romania: An Aspirations-Capabilities Approach to Romanian Migration

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Abstract

Despite significant development since the fall of the communist regime in 1989, migration rates from Romania to the West remain consistently high. This paper adopts an aspirations-capabilities approach to analyse how development leads to changing ideas of a good life among three Romanian migrant groups – practically educated, higher educated, and students. It argues that transformations in five social dimensions – political, economic, demographic, technological, and cultural – alter ideas of a 'good life' in Romania. The findings indicate three distinct understandings of a good life which are better pursued abroad. Practically educated migrants aspire to pursue more financially stable lives abroad. Higher-educated migrants leave Romania in search of more flexible employment opportunities where they can develop professionally and contribute to the wellbeing of their communities. Lastly, students migrate both due to better educational opportunities abroad and also as a result of an inherent desire to explore the world. Ultimately, the study realises an image of migration as an integral part of larger social transformation processes.

Keywords

Migration, Social transformation, Aspirations and Capabilities, Romania

Positionality

This research has been shaped from its incipient stages by the process of *active reflexivity* (Soedirgo and Glas, 2020) involving the constant inquiry regarding my own positionality, social location, and set of assumptions. My initial presupposition was that being Romanian would be the most relevant aspect of my identity in this research. In a way, I presumed that the intimate knowledge I had of the Romanian culture, granted by my upbringing, would create an immediate link between me and the participants. To a certain extent, this proved correct. Often, the participants took for granted that I would understand certain nuances of the lived experience of Romanians in the origin context. To this end, the familiar environment to discuss the topic allowed for more nuanced elaborations of their migration rationales. Consequently, at the level of analysis, I was able to include certain subtleties that emerged through the text, which otherwise could not have been interpreted as such. However, other aspects of my identity, such as age and social status, weighed heavier. During the interviews with the lower-educated and higher-

educated groups, it proved difficult to create a working relationship due to my age and limited life experience. It was often assumed that I would not fully comprehend the challenges faced by migrants. This often made the participants reticent to share the full extent of their experience, which proved to be a difficult step to overcome during the research. This brought further important questions regarding the ontological ideas we have about 'natural communities' based on common citizenship.

Introduction

In 2018, the Romanian diaspora was the largest in Europe and the fifth-largest among OECD countries (FES, 2019; OECD, 2019). Due to the consistently high emigration rates to Western Europe since the 1989 anti-communist revolution, emigration has become a highly politicised social and cultural phenomenon in Romania (FES 2019; Pripoaie, 2022). On repeated terms, Romanian politicians blamed migrants for "abandoning" their country and called the diaspora a "parallel electorate" (Gazeta Românească Italia, 2022; R., 2022; Basiul, 2020). Similarly, the academic debate surrounding the migration phenomenon in Romania remains largely functionalist and economic-centred. Whilst some argue that migration hinders economic development in Romania through "brain drain' (Gavriloaia, 2020; Goga, 2020), others hold that the Romanian diaspora is, in fact, an important vector of economic, political, and social development in Romania (Horvath & Anghel, 2009; Filip & Branaşco, 2022). However, such binary arguments hold the erroneous presupposition that development will reduce migration and advance politicised migration narratives.

My study examines Romania's case and explores the social transformations behind the consistent migration drive to Western Europe, despite increased national development. To this end, the question guiding this research is: *how have social transformation processes in Romania altered migrants' subjective understandings of a 'good life'?* An aspirations-capabilities framework is adopted to illustrate how development produces a gap between individual life aspirations and opportunities in Romania. I argue that macro transformation processes in the political, cultural, economic, technological and demographic social dimensions alter ideas of a 'good life'. Consequently, life aspirations no longer match the reality in origin, which drives people to pursue better lives abroad. Eventually, this approach is instrumental in proposing an alternative narrative of migration as a symbol of development and an integral part of larger processes of social transformation.

Henceforth, this paper is structured as follows; first, the theoretical section discusses the main perspectives in the migration-development debate, introduces Zelinsky's (1971) mobility transition theory, and de Haas' (2021) aspirations-capabilities framework. Second, the case study of Romania is discussed in two parts. Part one provides a broad overview of social transformation in Romania. Part two analyses Romanian migration trends and patterns since 1990. Then, the research methods and approaches are discussed in the methodology section. Furthermore, the findings of each research group are assessed individually. Lastly, the final part discusses the limitations and conclusions of the paper.

The Debate on Migration and Development

The development–migration debate has long been contested (Schiller & Faist, 2009). Broadly, two general competing perspectives have dominated the discussion so far (Taylor, 1999). On the one hand, "pessimists" claim that

migration "drains" sending areas of essential human and economic capital, hence hindering economic development in origin states (Gamlen, 2014; Lipton, 1980; Carrington & Detragiache, 1998). On the other hand, "optimists" argue that migration contributes to the development of both origin and destination countries. Specifically, the flow of migrants' experiences, knowledge and capital support development in destination states (Gamlen, 2014).

However, contemporary literature often condemns the simplistic assumptions underlying the two perspectives (Castles, 2009). De Haas (2010a) draws attention to the presumed functionalist linearity contained in this debate – that migration is a consequence of underdevelopment. Furthermore, the academic insistence on the economic impact in origin regions fails to account for the influence of more extensive social transformation processes in migration decision-making (Schewel, 2019, p. 29). To this end, it is crucial to consider both agency and structural impediments when analysing human mobility (de Haas, 2021).

The Mobility Transition Theory

Migration has long been discussed as a result of various development processes and structural forces but only scarcely studied as an integral part of larger societal changes. Wilbur Zelinsky (1971) is one of the first scholars to elaborate on the non-linearity of migration processes and how development leads to changing migration patterns. He conceptualises in his model five stages of development – (1) premodern; (2) early transitional, (3) late transitional, (4) advanced; and (5) supra-advanced societies – each coinciding with different levels of mobility (pp. 230-231). As a society develops through the stages, it is accompanied by increasingly higher levels of migration (p. 233). It is only when a society has gone through a prolonged period of transformation and growth that emigration finally starts to decrease and immigration increases (p. 233). Despite its universal, deterministic assumptions, the relevance of the theory stems from its early analysis of migration as part of broader processes of development and social change and not just as an isolated event (Piche, 2013, p. 144). Through the transition hypothesis, Zelinsky effectively contests the presupposition that development leads to less migration. Conversely, the model shows us that migration "shifts systematically with development", and the connection between the two is not linear (Skeldon, 2019, p. 395).

The Aspiration-Capabilities Model

Zelinsky's transition theory paved the way for a new body of literature conceptualising migration as an intrinsic part of broader social transformation processes. In line with this, de Haas' (2021) aspirations-capabilities approach is an illustrative example of the new approach in migration and development studies. De Haas (2021) argues that development leads to the expansion of migrants' aspirations and capabilities to pursue better life opportunities. Building on Sen's (1999) understanding of development as freedom, the aspiration-capabilities framework conceptualizes migration not only as instrumental but also as a "potentially wellbeing-enhancing factor in its own right" (de Haas, 2021, p. 20). As such, migration can serve both instrumental and intrinsic purposes (p. 15). Instrumentally, it can provide individuals with access to better opportunities, while intrinsically, it can enhance well-being by offering the chance to explore new environments, going beyond just its practical value.

When referring to capabilities, Sen essentially means "people's ability to enhance the substantive choices they have" (p. 24). Consequently, de Haas conceptualizes aspirations as "a function of people's life aspirations" and

capabilities. Specifically, although living conditions in society improve, people's life aspirations might develop faster, which results in consistent migratory aspirations (de Haas, 2021, p. 17). However, people's migration aspirations are more or less constrained by personal capabilities and structural to do so. As such, the model aims to include the notions of agency and structure in a common framework (de Haas, 2021). Agency refers to "the limited – but real – ability of human beings (or social groups) to make independent choices and to impose these on the world and, hence, to alter the structures that shape and constrain people's opportunities or freedoms" (p. 14). Structure represents the "patterns of social relations, beliefs and behaviour" (p. 14). Consequently, the two concepts link back to the notions of aspirations and capabilities, respectively. Whilst people can have the aspirations to migrate, their agency – and thus capabilities – can be more or less restricted by structural factors.

Case Study: A Brief Social History of Romania

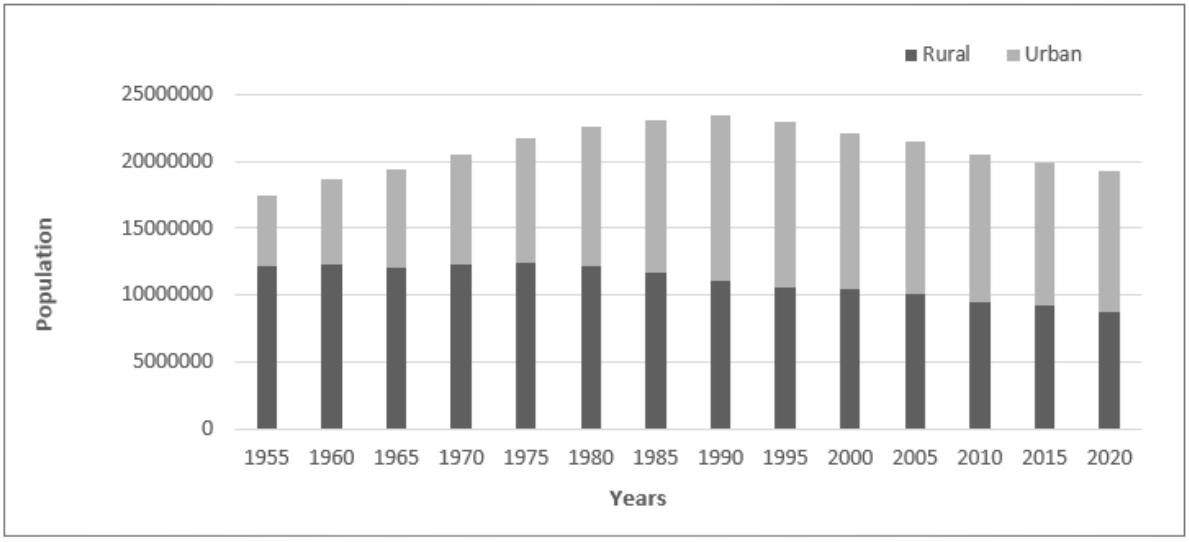
In an attempt to step away from notions such as 'modernization' due to the deterministic and Eurocentric underlying meanings retained by this terminology (Omar, 2022), this paper adopts the terminology 'social transformation' as an alternative to development. De Haas et al. (2020) define the term as macro-level "societal shifts on a deep structural level" of all social patterns (p. 15-16). Consequently, they theorize a model of measuring social transformations in a society composed of five interlinked dimensions – the political, the demographic, the cultural, the technological and the economic (p. 18). Together, these five elements constitute 'the social realm', and by assessing them together, one can account for the larger processes of social transformation in society. This section uses secondary sources to analyse long-term transformations in Romania according to the five dimensions presented by de Haas et al. (2020) – demographic, political, economic, cultural, and technological. In line with this, I provide an overview of Romania's latest migration trends and patterns and how these were influenced by macro social changes in the five dimensions.

Changes in Romania's Five Social Dimensions

The communist period in Romania between the 1950s and 1989 represented a period of high urban development. During the 1950s, the communist party sparked a forced process of rural-urban migration through extensive deportations and agrarian dispossessions (Mioc, 2017). The process was further structurally endorsed by technological and economic changes, which led to the creation of large industrial urban spaces and increased regional interconnectivity across Romania (Giurescu, n.d.). Consequently, by 1990, the rural population had decreased by half and reached 47% of the total population (see Figure 1). Importantly, this transformation provided the ground for the post-1989 international migration.

Figure 1

Rural vs urban population – Romania 1955-2020



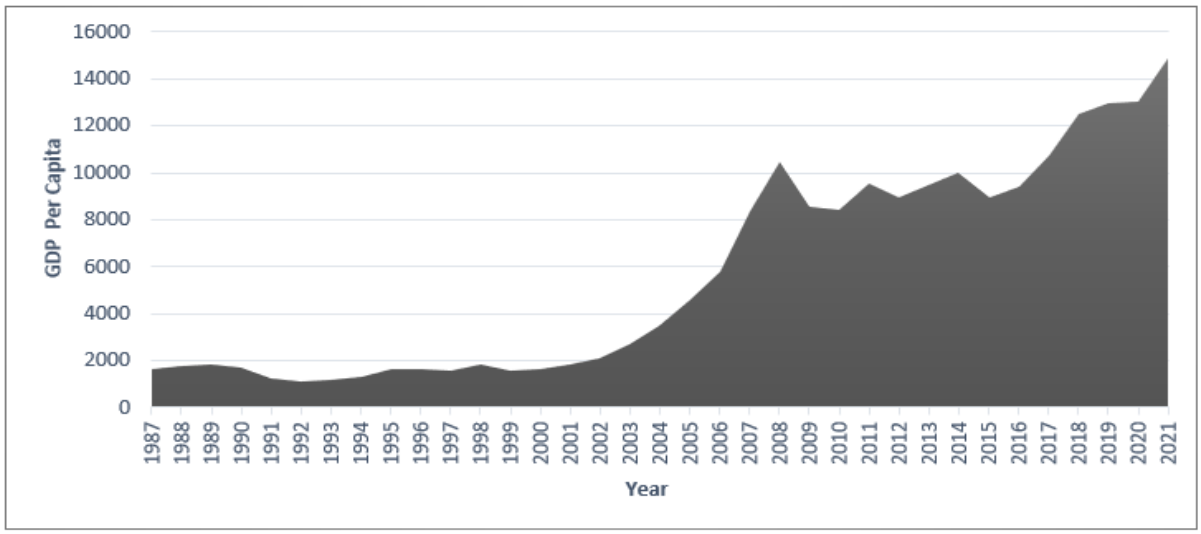
Note: Figure illustrating the development of population numbers living in rural vs urban areas in Romania between 1955 and 2020. Based on figures from the Worlds Meters Open Database.

After the 1989 anti-communist revolution, although there was a hope that the situation in Romania would improve, the democratic transition remained fragmented (Pridham, 2007). Struggling with the legacy of communist politics and a weak civil society, Romania repeatedly failed to address some critical deep-rooted political challenges (Mihas, 1997). Presently, Romania still struggles with systemic corruption (Hein, 2015) and a lack of transparency at the governmental level (Androniceanu, 2021). On a social level, an inability on the side of politicians to manage corruption issues generated a sense of political mistrust, which often represents a driver of out migration (Kolczynska et al., 2020; Berriane et al., 2021, pp. 20-21).

Furthermore, migration patterns were also shaped by Romania's economic development, which, in turn, was highly influenced by urbanisation and European integration processes. Increased connectivity with the more economically developed EU labour market provided cultural exchanges and structural encouragement for consistent emigration rates from Romania. As illustrated in Figure 2, the country's GDP per capita has followed a path of consistent growth since 1990. Moreover, preceding urbanisation processes led to the diversification of the Romanian labour market (see Figure 3). From a highly industrial economy, the Romanian labour market developed into a service-oriented economy.

Figure 2

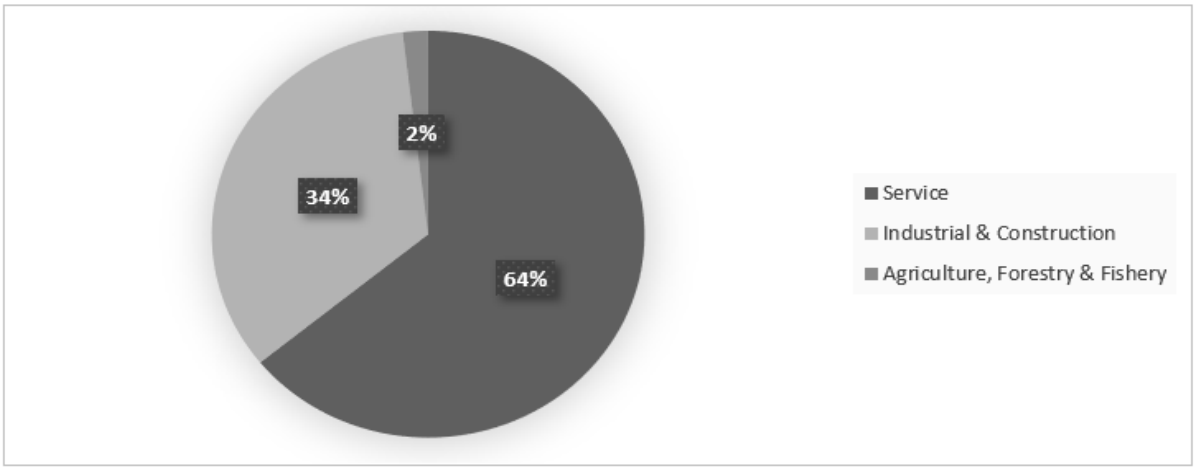
GDP (current) per capita measured in US Dollars – Romania 1998 – 2022



Note: Figure illustrating the GDP (current) Per Capita development in Romania since 1987. Based on figures from the World Bank Open Database.

Figure 3

Labour market sector distribution – Romania 2021

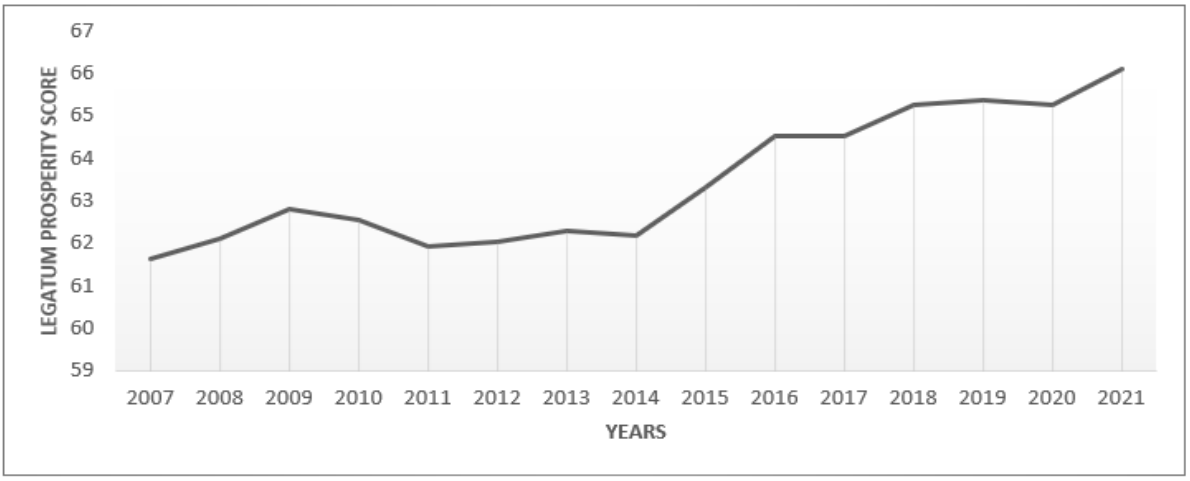


Note: Figure illustrating the dominant sectors in Romania's labour market. Based on figures from the European Commission Open Database.

Furthermore, economic growth was accompanied by transformations in the country's welfare regime. This is especially visible in the rise of its Legatum Prosperity score (LPI) (see Figure 4) and Human Development Index (HDI) score, which significantly increased from 0.689 in 1990 to 0.832 in 2019 (United Nations, n.d.). Other studies on the development of Romanian welfare, looking at health, income, education, and consumption since 1990, also show improvement in all four elements (Toader et al., 2016). Despite significant comparative drawbacks at a healthcare and educational, technological advancement level, Toader et al. (2016) showed the beginning of a convergence tendency with Western European welfares, which is expected to continue in the following years.

Figure 4

Legatum Prosperity Index – Romania 2011 – 2021



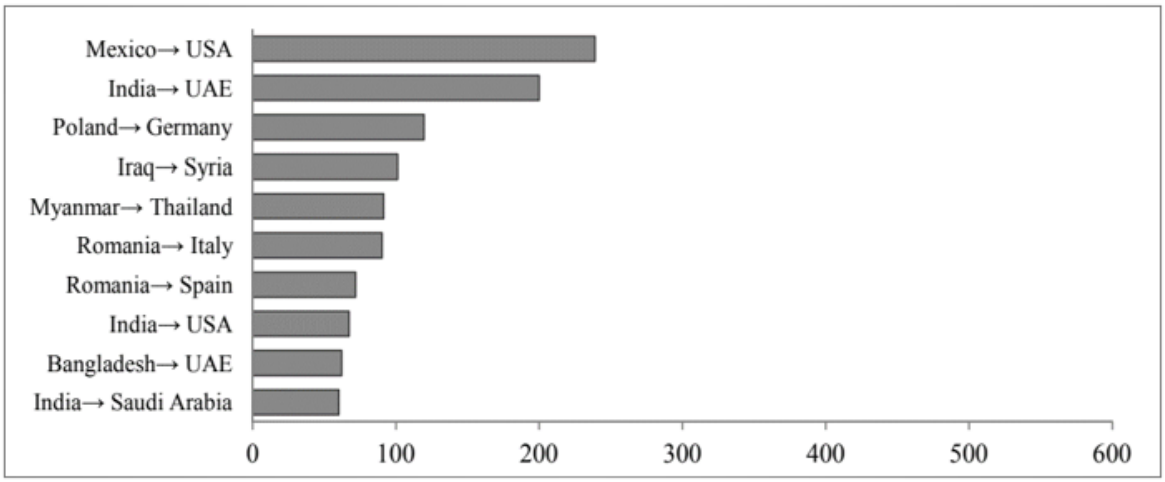
Note: Figure illustrating the development of the LPI score in Romania since 2007. Based on figures from the Legatum Prosperity Index Open Dataset.

Migration Trends Development

Changes in the five dimensions of social transformation radically altered Romanian migration trends and profiles. Broadly, Romanian migration to Western Europe took place in three waves. The initial wave of migration during the 1990s was dominated by lower-educated workers and Romanian citizens with a German ethnic background (Încalţărău, 2012, p. 730; Sandu, 2010, p. 39). From 1990 to 2002, despite mobility restrictions, Romania continued to experience high levels of lower-educated irregular migration to Western European countries – especially Italy and Spain, but also France, the UK, Germany and the Netherlands (Sandu et al., 2006, p. 387). Furthermore, the magnitudes of the Romanian emigration phenomenon can further be seen in Figure 5, illustrating that during the 2000-2010 period, the Romania-Italy and Romania-Spain migration corridors were among the top 10 bilateral corridors globally.

Figure 5

Ten bilateral migration corridors with the largest average annual change in the number of international migrants, 2000-2010, measured in thousand



Note: Based on figures from United Nations International Migration Report 2015.

By 2008, a new group of higher-educated migrants had grown to dominate migration patterns to Western Europe. The beginning of the 2000s already saw increasingly higher rates of highly educated Romanian emigrants to the West and by 2015, 46.6% of Romanian emigrants were highly educated (Sandu et al., 2004; Sandu, 2005; Stan & Erne, 2013, p. 30; OECD, 2019). As of 2002, once Schengen visas were no longer required for Romanians to emigrate to the EU, the first high wave of Romanian regular migration took place and increasingly more young people began migrating (Încalţărău, 2012). Hence, a third important group of student migrants emerged after 2002. During the past few years, Romanian students have become some of the most numerous international students in countries such as Italy, France, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain (Education Fair, 2020; Schengen Visa News, 2022). However, as Horváth and Anghel (2009, p. 389) point out, the particular features and dynamics of various forms of Romanian migration since 2007 have yet to be thoroughly analysed.

Methodology

The study uses 16 in-depth interviews to explain the consistently high emigration rates to Western Europe despite increased development. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed using Taylor's (2018) phronetic iterative coding methodology, which entails the consistent shifting between existing literature and new emerging data. The method was chosen because it provides a good analytical balance between investigating initial research interests and creating space for new findings to advance previous theoretical understandings (Tracy, 2018).

Qualitative research produces insightful data with low participant numbers, which I selected using non-probability purposive sampling to strategically identify individuals relevant to the study (Hossain, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Since significantly less is known about migratory drivers between 2007 and now, my research collected data from people who emigrated during this timeframe. Additionally, representativeness was ensured to a certain extent by selecting participants from one of the three most representative Romanian migrant groups today –

lower/practically educated workers (LE), highly educated workers (HE), and students (S). The participant selection was made only among migrants from the primary Western European destinations using a combination between snowball and convenience sampling from various diasporic groups. All interviewees migrated between the ages of 18 and 45 to account for the primary age group of Romanian migrants (Iftimoaei & Baciu, 2018; OECD, 2019). Eventually, 16 participants were chosen for the study, of which eight were men and eight were women, to reflect the gender ratio among migrants today (OECD, 2019).

Thinking Beyond Tomorrow – Changing Social Aspirations Among Practically Educated Workers

"Our understanding in that time [*under the communist rule*] was that yes, you manage to reach Occidental Europe, you struggle, but you FIND a place to work", discusses a practically educated participant when asked about his decision to migrate to Spain. He explains that upon the fall of the communist regime, people finally had access to the long-desired Western European lifestyle. Soon after, practically educated workers learned that life abroad is a life of security, where part of their financial problems could be solved.

To this end, it is essential to understand the decision to migrate in a framework of constraints and opportunities. The economic reality of practically skilled workers in Romania often remains hard. Participants discussed difficulties in making ends meet, providing for their families, and supporting their children's education. Despite the national economic growth, lower-educated workers in Romania find it hard to get a job which allows them to gain a sense of financial security: "when I got my paycheck, I'd draw the line, and I'd still be in debt".

Conversely, increased access to Western European lifestyles expanded the social imaginary of lower-educated workers. "The West" came to represent a land of prosperity, where everyone could enjoy a prosperous existence. Important to note here is also the realization among interviewees that newly formed ideas about a good life could not be pursued in Romania:

> In the West I realized that the normal man - and when I say normal, normal means the ordinary worker - if he's moderate, if he's ok, if he's like that, he can afford one weekend outing, one holiday a year, change his car once every two years, I don't know what... So the normal man. You didn't have that in Romania.

Although financial motives remain central to the decision of practically skilled workers to migrate, the complexity of the lower-educated Romanian emigration phenomenon goes beyond the economic sphere. Migration has a transformative impact on the personal life of low-educated Romanian migrants. Specifically, here I refer to the psychological dimension of self-worth. The work culture in Romania appears to regard practically skilled jobs as 'inferior'. Conversely, when moving abroad, the participants reported feeling valued and appreciated for their work:

> [*Before*] I didn't think I could be someone who others say is capable and say it out loud. It's a really nice feeling to hear from someone only words of appreciation.

Consequently, this positively affected their overall quality of life and self-worth, as migration expands the psychological capacities of people to visualize themselves as important societal assets. To this end, the well-being enhancing the character of migration can be observed:

> Aspirations come as you begin to know yourself, your self-confidence is at an all-time high, and then you allow yourself, no matter how much money you have in your pocket, to have some aspirations.

Giving Back to the Community – Aspirations Which Shape the Social Environment Among Highly Educated Migrants

"It's not about money. I was making enough money in Romania too", explains one of the highly educated participants from France. Unlike practically educated workers, the mobility of highly educated migrants is not so much explained by the pursuit of better financial situations as it is linked to their experiences in the professional sphere and disappointment with the political class. Monetary gains are no longer sufficient for a 'good life'. To this end, unravelling the subjective meanings allocated to the notion of a 'good life' among highly educated migrants is critical in understanding why people choose to migrate despite having a good financial situation at home.

Educational opportunity expansion in the past few decades in Romania created a class of highly educated workers, which impacted their life aspirations (Schewel, 2019, p. 201). Highly educated workers are now looking for opportunities to develop professionally and to produce creative and highly qualitative work. However, the qualifications of academically educated migrants are frequently higher than the labour market requires, which often leads to a plateau in their professional development. Furthermore, this explains the consistency of mobility aspirations among highly educated people, despite experiencing high living standards in origin:

> Months before I moved I was already feeling that professionally I was no longer evolving in the direction that interested me. Job offers in the direction that interested me were not attractive in Romania.

Lastly, a central reason for migrating among highly educated migrants is dissatisfaction with the political class. The 2007 EU accession generated hope among highly-educated Romanians migrants – which might also explain the relative stabilization of emigration rates during that time. However, subsequent chronic political disappointment and daily experiences with systemic corruption altered the ability of highly educated workers to project their life in Romania, which represented a critical structural incentive to leave.

Living in a Migration Culture – Student Migration from Romania

Growing up in a culture of migration, the young generation learned from an early age that a good life is better pursued abroad. Young people appear highly receptive to deterring narratives from older generations which incentivize their decision to leave. As one informant explains, the discourse she heard growing up was: "you need to leave the country because we are woeful, and don't come back, go anywhere but don't stay here!" Henceforth, it becomes visible that social values associated with mobility as success influence young people's ideas of a 'good' life and aspirations. This indicates an emerging generational understanding of mobility as success.

Modern media, earlier international touristic experiences and wider education opportunities granted by the system of open borders towards the EU shaped ideas of a good life among young migrants. The young generation was raised in a highly globalized world, where Western values and modern conceptions of social justice are promoted on media platforms. Additionally, increased financial capabilities among Romanian families to go on international holidays led to young people's early exposure to different cultures. These factors generated feelings of curiosity and relative deprivation towards other young people living in Western Europe, fueled by consistent access to their private lives via social media. Interestingly, this reality is highly distinct from the more communitarian-oriented feelings of relative deprivation experienced by practically educated migrants.

Next to professional fulfilment, the non-economic aspirations of young migrants make their ideas of a 'good life' radically unique to previous generations. Personal growth is a central aspect of their discourse. Informants often link their ideas of a good life to a flexible, healthy work environment, which allows them to prioritize self-discovery and personal growth. This conceptual delineation is also formed in comparison to the experience of their parents. Especially when it comes to work life, young people have an acute awareness of the unhealthy work environment experienced by their parents. Conversely, mobility is now perceived as a personal growth vector in itself, as a new life aspiration:

> I have this aspiration to continue to grow and develop and to be in environments that I am challenged - I would very much like to, for example live in other countries besides [*current emigration country*]. I mean I can't stop moving now!

The interview findings highlight the non-economic reasons for migrating adopted by young people. International migration is now driven by curiosity and the will to discover new places. Student participants make use of multiple opportunities to experience life elsewhere – from gap years to scholarly exchanges, work-aways or volunteering projects. This highlights the intrinsic value attributed to migration, which is far from conventional understandings of migration as solely functional. This can be linked to the experience of higher mobility freedom among young Europeans and how, in turn, this shaped their ideas about migration. Ultimately, the inherent value attributed to mobility thus illustrates a new cultural understanding of a good life, representative of a generation raised in a world with less mobility restrictions.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the concrete ways in which macro social transformations alter life aspirations and ideas of a good life among Romanian emigrants. The analysis builds on 16 in-depth interviews with the dominant contemporary migration groups – lower/practically educated workers, highly educated workers, and students. For lower educated workers, migration represented a channel for improving their financial abilities in living a comfortable and secure life. In the case of highly educated workers, the decision to migrate was a 'balancing' act of pursuing the aspirations enabled by their level of professional preparation and lack of opportunities in the Romanian labour market. For students, migration is closely linked to their understanding of a good life, whereas emigration itself is an achievement. The former are now pursuing flexible, European lifestyles, where mobility represents an opportunity for discovery and personal growth.

Adopting an aspirations-capabilities framework advanced our understanding about the internal mechanisms behind consistent emigration rates from Romania to Western Europe. The study illustrated the non-linearity of development processes and the mobility aspirations associated with it. Finally, the findings invite us to question the assumption that development will reduce migration and to understand human mobility as naturally embedded in larger social changes.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Normative Reconstruction, Constructivism and the Idealization of Ethical Life

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to make a methodological assessment of Axel Honneth's project of 'normative reconstruction' (Honneth, 2014a). I argue that its main justificatory goal is not accomplished: normative reconstruction fails to offer a superior and distinct model of normative critique to constructivist moral theories. Normative reconstruction abstracts away from historical forms of injustice and domination in a similar way as constructivism. The source of this problem lies in the fact that the practice of reconstruction relies on the privileging of certain ethical experiences at the expense of others, thus producing an idealized and exclusionary image of a given ethical community. Furthermore, reconstruction entails an idealized ontology which hypostatizes social norms and institutions, neglecting their embeddedness in historical relations of power. Rather than providing a practice-sensitive approach, normative reconstruction provides an 'ideal-as-idealized' moral model which fails to produce a workable image of social reality from which to engage in normative critique.

Keywords

Normative Reconstruction, Constructivist moral theory, Ideal theory, Ideal-as-idealized models

Introduction

In political theory, there is a method of social analysis called normative reconstruction. According to Axel Honneth, this method consists of identifying the normative principles that guide social recognition in a given society, and judge whether they are fully realized by existing institutions. The scholarly debate around normative reconstruction has significantly focused on whether normative critique should solely address 'recognition' as an all-encompassing social need, or advocate for a more plural approach that also distinguishes social claims for 'redistribution' (Honneth and Fraser 2003). Yet, less attention has been paid to another dimension of Honneth's method: namely, its tense relationship to constructivist moral theory.

The paradigmatic example of constructivism can be found in the work of John Rawls (1999), whose theory of justice consists in deriving moral principles from a hypothetical thought experiment where participants lack knowledge of their social position and are thus set to choose non-arbitrary social norms. We can also find contemporary applications of constructivism within critical theory in the work of Rainer Forst (2017), who argues that social relations are mediated by socially accepted justifications whose fundamental validity lies not in this general acceptance itself but from the fulfilment of transcendental criteria of 'reciprocity' and 'generality'.

Honneth makes the case for his method by arguing that constructivism wrongly relies on 'abstract' ideals or procedures that are theorized from hypothetical or transcendental standpoints, failing to acknowledge that the validity of normative ideals is always derived from their recognition by subjects in *actual* social relations.

However, this move from the 'abstractness' of constructivism to the apparent 'concreteness' of normative reconstruction needs to be qualified. The main problem that I identify is that normative reconstruction over-idealizes the social relations of the Western societies whose normativity it aims to reconstruct. In that sense, his model fails to theorize certain moral experiences of social dissatisfaction and historical forms of domination. This line of thought has not gone unnoticed in the literature on Honneth's method. For instance, Schaub (2015) has criticized normative reconstruction for being too conventionalist, that is, for uncritically endorsing the existing status quo of social values in a community and thus failing to theorize that certain individuals do not see their interests being advanced in those values. Alternatively, Allen (2016) has criticized Honneth for endorsing the moral superiority of Western institutions and norms as the starting point for social criticism, thus neglecting the reality of colonialism and falling prey to imperialist assumptions. My objective in this paper is to redirect these objections into an assessment of Honneth's main methodological commitment: that is, his goal to produce a method of critique superior and distinct from the 'abstractness' of constructivist theories.

My analysis confirms, with some qualifications, that normative reconstruction fails to provide such a model. On one hand, if the failure of constructivism lies in deriving normative principles from idealized abstract procedures, the failure of normative reconstruction lies in creating an idealized image of social relations over which normative ideals ought to apply. On the other hand, despite using evidently different strategies, both constructivism and normative reconstruction share an idealized ontology of social values and institutions that render both methods unable to theorize the role of power and domination in social reproduction.

Therefore, the paper will unfold as follows. First, I will outline the main premises of normative reconstruction, its justification over and against constructivism, and show what it would take to undermine such justification. Second, I will delineate the key insights of alternative critiques of Honneth, namely Schaub's and Allen's, to showcase how the method in question conceals certain moral experiences. Third, I will show how this concealment is connected to the method's notion of progress and its overly idealistic ontology of social values and institutions.

Methodology

In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth states four methodological premises that define his method (Honneth, 2014a). First, social reproduction is maintained through institutions that embody shared ethical goods. Second, that our ethical values are entangled in the actual existing institutions that safeguard social reproduction. Third, that reconstruction is concerned only with those institutions that have a true potential to realize the values in question. Finally, that reconstruction has the task of pointing out how certain institutions and social practices fail to realize our ethical goals (Honneth, 2014a, p. 3-10). In short, this method grounds itself in the reconstruction of existing sources of normativity that circulate in a community after which institutions are judged according to the degree to which they accomplish their own normative expectations.

The question is, however, why should moral and ethical inquiry make this detour through reconstruction? Why are other methods of critique not better equipped to make normative claims about present institutions and social practices? For Honneth, the answer can be traced back to the differences between Hegelian and Kantian approaches to morality and ethical life. The problem of Kantian moral philosophy, up from which Hegel and then Honneth build upon, is the following paradox: whereby universal moral claims that are "generated through an act of autonomous self-subjection or through an uncoerced consensus" already assume the existence of moral principles at work that guarantee that very minimum level of autonomy or intersubjective agreement (Honneth 2014b, p. 817). In other words, the construction of justifications for abstract moral norms always already takes place in a context that has its own moral values and whose normativity is presupposed.

Thus, a moral norm that is derived from an "isolated act of reflection removed from everyday practice" inevitably leads to conflicts of moral compliance: subjects are confronted with 'external' moral norms which might not conform with their given social practices and moral sensibilities (Honneth, 2014b, p. 820). To overcome this problem, Honneth appeals to Hegel's concept of ethical life. Human activity counts as 'ethical' when the members of the community see themselves as being both "authors" and "addressees" of existing moral principles such that individuals evaluate each other's actions accordingly (Honneth, 2014b, p. 819). Furthermore, if the subjects can see their ethical goods being advanced through the application of those norms, the latter become not mere restrictions on their behaviour but vehicles for their personal self-realization. From this standpoint, the former Kantian split between norms and practices is resolved because now subjects can be seen to have an active involvement in the preservation of the existing norms and the continuous application of their underlying values.

This is how Honneth ultimately justifies his method over other forms of critique, especially, over constructivist moral theory. The latter is said to be 'powerless' because it is profoundly separated from the moral and ethical practices that define the very community it is meant to reflect upon. In contrast, normative reconstruction moves away from abstract formalism and actively engages with the existing normative resources that guide a given community. The question remains, however, whether this 'reconstructive detour' guarantees that our analysis will not fall prey to similar forms of abstraction as in constructivist moral theory. If the concern is to anchor normative inquiry to social reality, it is worth considering whether normative reconstruction, as proposed by Honneth, is actually capable of producing an appropriate image of social reality from which to conduct a suitable normative critique.

To be sure, the attempt to overcome the abstractness of constructivism is also found in other types of immanent critique and is not exclusive of normative reconstruction. For example, Rahel Jaeggi (2009) also rejects constructivism; however, she points out that normative critique should not only show how certain institutions *contingently* fail to realize their underlying normative potential but how this failure is a *necessary* feature of the values and institutions at work. From a different angle, Stahl (2023) argues that our social ideals are always produced and dependent on the social practices in which we are situated and hence no social ideal could claim to be the definitive horizon of our normative aspirations. Social progress thus happens not only by adjusting institutions to ideals which are already fixed but by changing both the social practices *and* the ideals meant to be

realized. Honneth's model, instead, posits that social development is already directed to the realization of values which, from his point of view, constitute roughly fixed normative horizons.

Against this idea that society runs its course towards the greater realization of fixed normative values, I will raise a similar criticism as the one that Charles Mills raises against Rawls' constructivism. Mills points that Rawls' approach abstracts *away* "from realities crucial to our comprehension of the actual workings of injustice in human interactions" thereby guaranteeing that our ideals will never be achieved (2005, p. 170). What Mills has in mind here are the relations of structural domination, oppression and historical injustice that are concealed at the expense of constructing an idealized model of justice. In other words, an ideal of justice is constructed without the relevant facts on actual injustice. In the case of Honneth, the practice of reconstruction reproduces the same exclusions and yields an idealized image of the ethical community purified from relations of domination and injustice. In the following section, I will showcase how certain moral experiences are privileged over others through the practice of reconstruction.

Reconstruction and its discontents

The exclusionary tendencies inherent in normative reconstruction are crystallized in the two major objections to Honneth's work. To start, Schaub's objection can have a weak and a strong version. The weak version argues that grounding normative critique on existing values and principles implies already an uncritical endorsement of the ethical status quo and, thus, there cannot be room for critique. Honneth does recognize this challenge when he states that "every reconstructive procedure of social criticism faces the problem that it cannot really justify what makes the ideals from its own culture chosen to be a reference point normatively defensible or desirable in the first place" (Honneth, 2009, p. 50). Elsewhere, however, he does attempt to provide a distinction between merely *existing* ideals and *valid* ideals for critique. He proposes a pragmatist reading of Kant from which to validate certain principles as irrevocable progressive achievements of moral rationalization. Since this is a dimension of his theory more closely connected to the Allen's critique, I will engage with this element at a later stage.

However, there is a stronger version of Schaub's objection which poses a greater challenge to Honneth's rejoinder. This version recognizes Honneth's attempt to address the weak version, but it claims that there are further implicit elements in his theory that lead the method to a status quo bias. From the second and third premise of the method, we understand that reconstruction is exclusively concerned with those institutions that can realize the normative values underpinning them and which have proved to be valid standards for critique. In that sense, critical inquiry can only aim at showing how *existing* institutions can better realize *existing* norms and values. Normative reconstruction in this way cannot account for radical changes in the ethical structure of a society: whereby "*new* institutions with *new* underlying norms, are established in the void left behind" by the former ethical structure (Schaub, 2015, p. 114).

Here we can see that Honneth's exclusive focus on achieving a correspondence between norms and institutions misses the fact that our relations to both are much more varied and complex. Our relation to norms and institutions is not reducible to our greater or lesser understanding of how certain values could be better institutionalized. As Schaub points out, subjects also experience several forms of disillusion and withdrawal from existing ethical

structures: subjects can reach the conclusion that certain institutions do *not* have the potential to realize values, or that their very realization can create unhappiness or social suffering (2015, p. 123-126). These negative experiences also have a normative dimension that remains, nonetheless, unexplored under the methodological premises of normative reconstruction. This method does not account for those negative moral experiences and, in fact, prevents them from achieving a theoretical status within the reconstructed model of the ethical community.

Furthermore, these forms of exclusion embedded in reconstruction become more substantive when we look at the Allen's objection. Honneth's reliance on a concept of progress is invoked to justify the normative superiority of the Western moral order (Allen, 2016, p. 82-87). Following Kant, Honneth argues that the very fact that individuals in western societies actively engage with the values and institutions of their community bears within itself an implicit claim to the normative superiority over previous arrangements of values and institutions: in other words, any abandonment of the ethical structure of the West would implicitly be regarded as a regression. Only by recourse to this concept, is Honneth able to regard the norms and institutions of western societies as *valid* and not merely *existent* sources for social critique and, thus, overcome the weak version of the Schaub's objection.

As Allen points out, however, this gesture can give Honneth's reconstructive method a rather imperialist profile, since we would have to infer that all previous and contemporary non-western societies should be regarded as backwards. In doing so, Honneth's method yields a rather awkward depiction of the ethical life in Western societies: in his reconstructed image, the 'moral infrastructure' of the West is characterized as an inherently progressive space that tends, although with some discontinuities, towards the continuous expansion of the ideals of freedom and social recognition. The defining characteristic of the moral development in the West is, then, the progressive increase in inclusion and individualization through which individuals can enhance their opportunities for self-realization (Honneth, 2003, p. 184-185).

How to reconcile this reconstructed image of 'ever-growing freedom and recognition' with the histories of colonialism and the continuities of racial oppression in the core and the peripheries of the West? These forms of historical injustice and structural oppression have a central role in the historical emergence of Western societies and can hardly be seen as external elements foreign to its political constitution or moral and ethical structures (Mills, 2021, p. 239-240). The need to resituate these forms of injustice within a reconstructed image of Western ethical life becomes more urgent when the very principles of freedom and equality have historically been used as ideological tools to enforce colonial and racial relations of injustice.

To be sure, normative reconstruction does contemplate a way to account for the coexistence between the expansion of social recognition in the West's core and its underlying histories of racial and colonial violence. It could be argued that the limited extension of social recognition to racialized and colonized subjects was due to a 'pathology of reason': whereby dominant groups undermined the collective understanding of established valid principles, like social freedom and legal equality, and thus excluded certain subjects from the interpretation of those norms (Honneth, 2009, p. 31). In that sense, specific dominant rationalities distorted the general process of directed moral development (Honneth 2009, p. 36). However, this concept of pathology does little to alter the fundamental image of Western ethical life as a space for 'ever-growing recognition'. By placing racism and colonial violence under

the rubric of 'pathologies' or 'distortions', they constitute at most *deviations* from an already assumed progressive motion towards development. In that sense, these negative moral experiences *do not* reach theoretical status as *constitutive* elements of Western ethical life. Hence, the operation of reconstruction produces an idealized western ethical community where the moral experiences of colonized subjects are underprivileged in relation to those of western, non-racialized subjects.

In both critiques we can observe that the practice of normative reconstruction is performed at the cost of privileging certain moral experiences over others. In this way, normative reconstruction universalizes the moral standpoint of those who are benefited through the preservation of the ethical structure and marginalizes the standpoint of those whose position and interests fail to be advanced within the ethical community. The result is an idealized image from which certain constitutive ethical relations remain undertheorized.

Reason and power

In the previous section it has become clear how the method of reconstruction fails to give a workable image of the very social reality it is meant to reflect upon. The exclusionary gestures contained within the practice of reconstruction suggest that this method is not all too sensitive to the actual configuration of social practices. To clarify this point, I will appeal to Charles Mills' classification of moral theories. I will use such classification to introduce the idea that normative reconstruction employs an 'ideal-as-idealized' moral model that tends to create a hypostatized image of ethical life removed from historical relations of power.

For Mills (2005), even if all forms of moral theory are committed to certain moral ideals and require some form of abstraction from social reality, we can distinguish between two kinds of moral models: 'ideal-as-descriptive' and 'ideal-as-idealized'. The first kind consists of models which abstract the totality of events in social reality and identify only those which are essential to its nature or belong to its fundamental dynamic. The second model, instead, delineates "what people *should* be like (character), how they *should* treat each other (right and good actions), and how society *should* be structured in its basic institutions (justice)" (Mills, 2005, p. 168). The key difference between the two models then lies in the fact that ideal-as-idealized models do not theorize *actual* social events or social relations, such that it "tacitly represents the *actual* as a simple deviation from the *ideal*, not worth theorizing in its own right, or claims that starting from the ideal is at least the best way of realizing it" (2005, p. 168). From this perspective, ideal-as-idealized models rely on an idealized ontology of social values and institutions; thereby, "the ways in which systematic oppression is likely to shape the basic social institutions (as well as the humans in those institutions) will not be part of the theory's concern, and this will manifest itself in the absence of ideal-as-descriptive-model concepts that would provide the necessary macro and micro-mapping of that oppression" (2005, p. 168)

This distinction leads Mills to criticize ideal theory on metanormative grounds: if the purpose of moral theory is to guide our practical dealings with the world, the idealization of ethical relations and social institutions is not only unhelpful but also antithetical to the task of understanding how injustice actually operates, and how it is best to resolve it (2005, p. 170). To be sure, one could argue that constructivist theory does attempt to attune its abstract principles to non-ideal circumstances. For example, in the case of Rawl's theory of justice, even if the principles

of justice are derived from an idealized original position, they ought to be adapted to real-world experiences in later constitutional, legislative and judicial stages based on the knowledge of actual society (Rawls, 1999, p. 171-176). Yet this gesture may not be sufficient: if actual injustices are not thoroughly theorized in the original position, there is no guarantee that the ideal principles would have any bearing on actual social relations even if they are 'modified' for that purpose. For example, if the ideals of justice happen to be solely *distributive* in nature, even at a legislative stage with knowledge of racial domination, the principle will likely fail to fully address the latter problem since it is not only distributive but structural in nature.

Mills' point is relevant because it raises a similar critique to that which Honneth raises against Kantian-inspired constructivist theories. Just as Mills does, Honneth aims to ground ethical inquiry in social reality and avoid the abstract idealizations of constructivism. The practice of reconstruction, then, is initially proposed as an attempt to make an ideal-as-descriptive model which can abstract the diversity of social relations of a community and identify its fundamental ethical structure. However, we have already noted how the exclusion of certain ethical perspectives produces rather an idealized ethical community where the sole concern is to achieve a correspondence between existing norms and institutions. Insofar as institutions are primarily understood in terms of their normative potential, their implication in relations of power and domination remains undertheorized. This results from his notion of progress given that in the differentiation of valid from existing norms of critique, the first are taken to embody a process of irreversible moral rationalization or development. In turn, existing institutions and norms which are regarded as *valid* are *primarily* treated as *embodiments of the realization of practical reason.*

As such, the main criterion that is used to judge such values and institutions is their irrevocable normative potential rather than their deployment in historical and ongoing structures of domination. This amounts to saying that once an ethical structure is 'reconstructed', it is hypostatized as an ideal source of normativity detached from the historical structures of power from which it emerged, and which continue to regulate its reproduction. The ethical structure is fundamentally characterized by its *idealized* normative potential rather than its *historical* or *actual* realization, which corresponds to an ontology of ideal-as-idealized moral models. Honneth is well aware of the problems that stem from a separation between moral rationalization and historical power structures. In fact, normative reconstruction is also concerned with overcoming such a split between moral reason and power. Nevertheless, my argument is that - despite Honneth's efforts - the method of normative reconstruction is essentially dependent on an idealized treatment of social values and institutions and, thus, operates under a strong separation between reason and power.

To clarify this point, it is worth considering once again how the concept of pathology is used in Honneth's work as an attempt to overcome the previous separation. A social pathology implies a general distortion in the realization of reason, such that dominant groups impose a specific rationality under which the interpretation of existing norms and social practices remains restricted. In this way, the irrevocable normative potentials contained in the ethical structure remain curtailed. Thus, it initially seems that the implications of power in moral development are indeed theorized to some extent. However, this conceptualization leads to the idea that the prevalence of power relations is only a *defection* from a state of 'undistorted rationality' or 'undistorted moral learning'. The latter appears as a purified ideal standard from which to judge the present, defective state of affairs. In this way, not only is the

distinction between power and reason enforced, but the *actual* state of the ethical community is regarded only as a *deviation* from the ideal and not theorized in its own right. In such circumstances, the concept of pathology of reason is still circumscribed to the ideal-as-idealized model of social values and institutions.

To say that normative reconstruction relies on an idealized ontology of social values and institutions serves to undermine the very idea of 'ethical life' as a sphere of mutual self-recognition and freedom. If relations of power and domination are as constitutive of the West as their opposite, we cannot endorse the idea of an ethical community as a self-corrective structure that merely resolves its own 'inconsistencies' or 'defects'. Instead, social relations seem to be forming a set of contradictory and antagonistic whole in which the realization freedom is not the result of an inner tendency of the structure but of the struggle of each individual and group at a given point in time.

Conclusion

This paper constitutes an immanent critique of Axel Honneth's work, insofar as the latter has been evaluated based on its own methodological standards of justification. Despite Honneth's concern for grounding normative critique in social analysis, the practice of reconstruction fails to provide a workable image of social reality from which to engage in normative critique. Instead, it produces a hypostatized image of ethical life for which certain ethical standpoints must be privileged over others and in which social institutions are idealized at the expense of their actual and historical manifestations. In that sense, reconstruction employs an 'ideal-as-idealized' moral model which, like constructivism, can be criticized for abstracting away from ongoing structures of power, historical injustice and domination.

Even if Honneth aimed to historically ground normativity in existing social practices, and thus avoid constructivist moral theory, he can only do so by appealing to a notion of progress as moral rationalization which, after Schaub's and Allen's objection, proves to conceal colonial and racial relations of power within the West's core and the periphery. On balance, Honneth's method fails to prove that it offers a superior and distinctive model of critique to constructivism: not only do both normative reconstruction and constructivism fail to thematize actual social relations, but they are also highly committed to an idealized ontology of social institutions and values. Honneth articulates a sophisticated model of ethical life which, unfortunately, after a series of detours, falls prey to unwarranted abstractions.

Conflict of Interests

The author states no conflict of interests.

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"From Mild Christian to Islamic Zealot" –Navigating Mediatised Tools of Othering in the case of Muriel Degauque

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Abstract

This article scrutinises the media narratives surrounding Muriel Degauque, the first 'Western' suicide bomber. Degauque, born in Belgium and raised as a Catholic, does not fit into the profile of the typical suicide attacker. Despite her 'ordinariness', I show how she was classed as an outsider in English- and Dutch language media narratives. Through the interaction of her class, gender and religion, she is denied agency in her violence, thus her motivations to commit a suicide attack are reduced to either a 'working-class rebel', an infantilised woman who loses her femininity or an erotomaniac who pursued violence because she was 'brainwashed' by her husband.

Keywords

Suicide bomber, Working-class, National identity, Muriel Degauque, Erotomania

Introduction

Muriel Degauque, born in Belgium and raised as a Catholic, was the first 'Western' woman to commit a suicide bombing attack in 2005 in Iraq (Brown, 2011). Muriel Degauque grew up in a working-class family in Charleroi, Belgium, the daughter of a cleaner and a crane operator (Smith, 2005). She had a tumultuous adolescence due to her issues with drugs and alcohol (Brown & Watson, 2005). Unable to keep a stable job, she moved to a 'poor' neighbourhood in Brussels with her second husband and converted to Islam. Together, they travelled by car to Iraq, where she detonated her suicide vest in Baquba in November 2005. She injured one soldier, but there were no casualties other than Muriel (Brown, 2011). Her death challenged the perceptions surrounding the "profile of suicide attackers", as she was a white, Catholic-raised woman who later converted to Islam, as opposed to a "young Muslim man, usually of ethnic appearance" (p. 705).

Some previous academic accounts tend to reduce women's violence to personal motives, such as revenge, earning respect, influence by male figures in their lives, general unhappiness and redemption (Bloom, 2007; Bloom, 2010; Jacques & Taylor, 2008). Other scholars problematise these narratives, suggesting that women's violence is often depoliticised because it contrasts gender stereotypes about women's innate peacefulness, passivity or motherly sacredness (Åhäll, 2015; Brown, 2014; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008). Whenever women commit violence, Sjoberg and

Gentry (2008) suggest that mass media aims to "explain away the possibility that women make a choice to kill or injure" (p. 5), arguing that women's violent acts are sensationalised in a way that preserves women's submission to men, either by portraying them as sexually defective– for instance, by being unable to give birth to their own children– or sexually obsessed– committing violence because they are influenced by a male figure in their life, be it their husband or father.

This paper aims to investigate the mediatic narratives surrounding Muriel Degauque's violence, trying to uncover how gender, class, and religious stereotypes reduce women's complex motivations to engage in terrorism, leading to a denial of their agency (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008). I, therefore, pose the question: *How was Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing framed in Western media in relation to her subjectivity (class, femininity, whiteness, and religion) directly following the suicide attack in Iraq in 2005?*

This paper enriches the academic debate surrounding women's violence and, in particular, female suicide bombers because it considers the atypical case of Muriel Degauque, whose agency–as a white Belgian woman–is harder to deny through "gendered neo-orientalist discursive strategies" according to which women from the Global South are controlled by their husbands (Bogain & Jackson, 2024, p. 368). However, I attempt to assess how Muriel Degauque is recast by Western media from a white woman to a racialised outsider through the interaction of her class, gender and religion. I use critical discourse analysis to explore English and Dutch media sources which covered the event, examining argumentative and discursive elements which construct and assign different meanings and narratives surrounding her identity and her violence.

This paper begins by outlining the academic debate covering women's violence, referring in detail to previous academic accounts studying female suicide bombers. Next, I discuss the methodology, going over the process of data collection and data analysis, and explaining the approach I follow for the critical discourse analysis. The paper culminates with the analysis of the media sources, where I discuss notions of how Muriel Degauque's identity is depicted using markers of class, femininity, whiteness and religion. I lastly explore the reasons constructed in the media for Muriel Degauque's violence.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand how female suicide bombers are depicted in media narratives, I first draw from different scholarly perspectives which reflect upon women's motivations to pursue violence. Both media and academic literature place women's participation in violence outside the realm of politics, often explaining their engagement in violence based on personal motives. Notably when it comes to suicide bombers, Bloom (2007) describes women as revenge-seeking subjects who "usually become suicide bombers in response to a personal tragedy" (p. 97), thus reinforcing the gendered assumption that women are more emotional than men in the face of adversity. Only in exceptional circumstances, out of the desire to escape "the predestined life that is expected of them" (Bloom, 2007, p. 97), do women want to make a statement "in the name of their gender", and hence commit suicide bombings. In contrast, male-dominated terrorist organisations have a more calculated and rational understanding of terrorism, being described as employing a "tactical response" (Bloom, 2007, p.98) by recruiting women due to both the need for manpower and their ability to increase the efficiency of suicide attacks by subverting gender roles through their

violence. This male-female divide is believed to be the case despite female suicide bombers being on average better educated and older than men, as well as outlining political motivations in their own video statements of martyrdom before the suicide attacks (Åhäll, 2015). Bloom (2007) thus seems to consider women's agency as an anomaly, describing suicide bombers as merely 'pawns' at the bottom of the male-female hierarchy by suggesting that they are easily manipulated and instrumentalised for men's deliberate strategies. In a later article, Bloom (2010) acknowledges that women can simultaneously have political motivations and personal reasons, which she calls "the four Rs–revenge, redemption, respect and relationship" (p. 95), completing her earlier piece with the latter three motivations. Redemption refers to women's desire to "reinvent themselves" due to previous wrongdoings or due to their incapacity to achieve 'true womanhood' by being unable to conceive or to marry. Respect is described in antithetical terms: respect is an *individual* desire to be perceived as noteworthy as a result of fighting for a *cause* (such as improving women's status), notwithstanding that the *cause* itself is not only a collective wish, but also intrinsically political and not personal. Lastly, relationship suggests that women become suicide bombers because they are influenced by a male figure in their life: husband, father or son.

Jacques and Taylor (2008) mirror the perspective outlined above in their study, which reveals that male and female suicide bombers exhibit important differences in their motivations, with men being more prompted to participate in violence due to religious or nationalistic motives, while women do so due to revenge and personal motivations, such as family issues, money, drug abuse, and unhappiness. Importantly, the data underpinning their analysis consists of open-source materials including newspaper articles which contained information about motives, personal backgrounds and recruitment. However, while the authors triangulated the data in their study, it was not scrutinised against gender stereotypes, which, as I will return to below, are prevalent in media narratives.

Therefore, it seems that the authors avoid attributing political motivations to women's violence, thus reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes (Bloom 2007; Bloom 2010; Jacques & Taylor 2008). In contrast, other scholars criticise these accounts of women's violence for stripping women of "their gender and humanity", by portraying them as "anomalies" (Brown, 2014, p. 449). Women's violence is both depersonalised and depoliticised due to the inability to understand "things whose existence is not morally comprehensible" (p. 451). Collective morality is subjectively constructed and informed by dominant gender norms depicting women as naturally peaceful, passive, and sacred (through motherhood)–therefore it is impossible to even fathom "how mothers became murderers" (p. 451). As a result, Sjoberg and Gentry (2008, p. 5) suggest that mediatic accounts of women's violence "explain away" the possibility of women's engagement in violence by instead *stripping them of their womanhood*, an attribute for which violence renders them unworthy. As such, because "women's agency in violence would interrupt dominant discourses about women's roles" (p. 6), women commit a "double transgression": the violence itself and the violation of the gender stereotypes which "deem her incapable of that violence" (p. 7).

Therefore, women's violence is marginalised and their agency denied through narratives which suggest women are either sexually obsessed with men–and hence commit violence as a result of being manipulated by their husbands or other male figures–or erotically dysfunctional–and therefore unable to marry and have children or unwilling to do so due to their homosexuality. Sjoberg and Gentry (2008) suggest that these narratives are not limited to gender but are also racialised: Western women engage in violence due to their rebellious character and

refusal to cater to men, whereas Islamic women are "unable to please men" (p. 17) as a result of an inner dysfunction. As such, women's violence is depoliticised and depersonalised because the violation of gender norms appears so inexplicable that women are deemed incapable to act violently out of their own volition, especially if they are Muslim. In the next section, I discuss aspects of religious identity in more detail, particularly emphasising the conversion to Islam.

Most of the literature on female suicide bombers pays little attention to female converts to Islam who take part in suicide bombings. Perešin (2015) draws attention to "Western female migrants" (p. 22) who join ISIS, but suggests that most of them are "second or third-generation Muslim immigrants" who find themselves "between traditional and liberal values" (p. 24). Up to date, only two studies have examined detailed case studies of converts. Bogain and Jackson (2024) emphasise the story of "two unlikely jihadists" (p. 354), Christine Riviere and Sally Jones, who, despite appearing "at first glance typically French/ British" (p. 355), were characterised in media through "matrices of privilege and marginality" which constructed them as *others*. Intricately, Bogain and Jackson (2024) show how gender is a "crucial marker" (p. 357) for national identity, describing how the 'atypical' mothers were cast as "dangerous inside Others" (p. 357) through notions of class. The working-class background of the two women placed them outside the "boundaries of 'good' French and British society", helping reinforce the imaginary frontiers of the "superiority and goodness of the national community" (p. 368). As such, framing their status as undeserving outsiders to the national community was crucial in *explaining away* other motivations for violence, notably those related to the internal problems of their native societies.

Lastly, Brown (2011, p. 715) is the only academic to offer an in-depth analysis of Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing, suggesting that her Muslim faith–which she adopted later in life–was key in her *othering*, marking her as radical and unlike other Western European women. As such, despite being white, she was racialised and became a "victim of Islam". Albeit limited, the previous literature referring to converts shows that in order to excuse any factors which might make individuals more prone to radicalisation, such as poverty and lack of access to education, social narratives are intricately crafted to deem converts as improper citizens.

Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing poses an empirical puzzle. She does not originate from a "suspect community" for radicalisation, as she was a white, Belgian-born, and Catholic-raised woman, and, as a result, her agency was more difficult to deny through "gendered neo-orientalist discursive strategies" (Bogain & Jackson, 2024, p. 357). As such, this paper aims to uncover processes of racialisation perpetrated against Muriel Degauque using insights from Bogain and Jackson (2024) about the intersection of race, gender, and class, which similarly rendered her as *other*. In addition to Brown (2011), I explore both sources in English and Dutch and attempt to conduct a comparative analysis of media portrayals, distinguishing between different forms of *othering* perpetrated against Muriel Degauque and showcasing that Belgian media more evidently placed Muriel Degauque outside the border of the 'good' nation.

Research Design

Data Collection

Using the LexisNexis database, two searches were conducted using the search term "Muriel Degauque". One search included all newspaper articles in English and the other search included all newspaper articles in Dutch. The date parameters were set between 01.12.2005 and 31.05.2006, reflecting a period of 6 months' worth of media sources following the date of Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing in Iraq. This period coincided with the large majority of the search results. Only the search results generating at least two hits of the search term "Muriel Degauque" and simultaneously amounting to at least 400 words were considered in order to ensure that Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing was mentioned substantially and not just in passing. After discarding duplicates and very similar search results, a total of 19 news articles were found, 10 in English and 9 in Dutch, which were analysed in detail.

I want to note that I only have an intermediate understanding of the Dutch language which may have impacted or obscured the coding process. However, a dictionary was consulted where necessary to mitigate the risks resulting from this. Despite my limited understanding of the language, the reason behind including both Dutch and English-language sources in the data set was to conduct a comparative analysis between the two, investigating the similarities and differences in how Muriel Degauque is portrayed. My initial expectation was that Dutch sources were more likely to cast Muriel as an outsider to the national community than English sources, as I believed Belgian media would be more inclined to obscure the structural conditions regarding the Belgian society leading to Muriel's violence.

Data Analysis

This paper employs critical discourse analysis to examine the argumentative and discursive elements of the news articles selected, following the belief that language is not a neutral medium, but rather "profoundly shapes our view of the world and reality" (Hajer, 2006, p. 66). Discourse analysis allows for the exploration of different narratives which are producing meanings about a problem. It also explores how "language has the capacity to make politics" (p. 67) through signs, symbols and metaphors. To understand how Muriel Degauque was portrayed in the newspaper articles, I follow the approach of Bogain and Jackson (2024), who focus on three main aspects of discourse: the general topic, the discursive strategies, and the linguistic methods. In terms of discursive strategies, I pay particular attention to how Muriel Degauque is referred to in the articles, what traits are attributed to her and what arguments are used to explain her violence. In terms of linguistic methods, I analyse strategies used by journalists in the construction of different narratives: hyperbola, antithesis, and allusion. These strategies help sensationalise (and delegitimise) Muriel Degauque's violence. This approach served as the basis for the coding process, which involved three rounds of inductive coding using ATLAS.ti. No codes were predefined in the first round, rather the codes emerged from the text and were later grouped into similar themes. In the first round of coding, articles were first categorised based on dominant themes, investigating how Muriel Degauque's violence was portrayed (for instance, based on her past or on her relationship with Muslim men). If multiple frames were present in the same article, then only the dominant frame was coded. Next, I coded for the traits which are attributed to Muriel and how she is referred to in the article (for example, as pretty woman). In the third and last coding

round, I considered the linguistic methods, which were in explored in relation to their function in the text (for instance, depoliticising Muriel's violence).

A limitation of discourse analysis is its reliance on the researcher's subjective interpretation, which may lead to less reliable results (Halperin & Heath, 2020). To address this, multiple rounds of coding were used, and short memos were recorded in the researcher's notebook to reflect upon initial impressions of the text and potential bias. Furthermore, due to its interpretative nature, the research might be difficult to generalise to other cases. Due to the time and word count limitations of this paper, it was impossible to expand the research beyond one case study. However, this is an avenue for future research to analyse cross-national discourses about female suicide bombers.

Media Depictions of Muriel Degauque

Muriel as a Working-Class Rebel

Media accounts of Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing render her as an outsider to the boundaries of Belgian national identity. Muriel Degauque's class background is alluded to consistently across all articles. She started life in a "coal mining *corner* of Belgium known as the black country" (Cas, 2005) or an "arbeiderswijk" (from Dutch: working-class neighbourhood) (Dirks, 2005) in an "*ordinary* family" (Brown & Watson, 2005, emphasis added). She "spent her formative years" in "a social housing complex" (Smith & Tihon, 2005). The daughter of a cleaner and a crane operator, Muriel Degauque worked at bakeries and cafes after finishing high school (Smith, 2005). She is often described as unable to keep a job–"she was accused of stealing" (Brown & Watson, 2005) from the bakery, she had "frequent absences" (Smith & Tihon, 2005), and showed signs of drug abuse–and, as a result, she was "claiming state benefits" (Brown & Watson, 2005). She later moved to "one of the poorest [...] areas of Brussels" with her husband Issam Goris before the two headed to Iraq by car, "determined to kill themselves and as many Americans as possible" (Brown & Watson, 2005).

The language used to describe Muriel's background is imbued with symbols denoting her *otherness* since her birth. The word "corner" emphasised above places her outside the imagined national community of 'good' Belgian citizens, pointing to a shared understanding of a marginalised, classed, geographical identity which comes with an implicit moral evaluation–the Belgian "rust-belt" town facing industrial decline, poverty, and crime (Bogain & Jackson, 2024). This moral evaluation associates working-class people with, at best, *ordinariness*, and at worst, delinquency, suggested by the emphasis on Muriel's habits–"Ze rookte en dronk" (From Dutch: She smoked and drank) (Dirks, 2005). These habits hold cultural significance, revealing stereotypes particularly perpetrated against working-class women, who are often depicted as "low achievers who struggle to hold down employment" (Bogain & Jackson, 2024, p. 361). Furthermore, the fact that Muriel received state benefits reinforces her "marginality" (p. 362), placing her in a lower class, an outsider to the "respectable" national community. This depiction reveals the narrative that Muriel was pulled by the vortex of an inevitable, inescapable *class habitus*, reasserting a fatalistic understanding of working-class women's lives (Maton, 2008). This fatalistic understanding of her class helps discoursively reinforce an inner, almost destined dysfunction of working-class individuals deliberately constructed in order to secure the imaginary borders of "good society" (Bogain & Jackson, 2024) and to evade responsibility for structural problems faced by the working class which might explain their actions. The interaction between her

gender and class is also evident, as a white woman's violence produces great shock due to evading the perception of an imagined ideal white femininity–"België vraagt zich af hoe een *autochtoon* zo kon radicaliseren" (From Dutch: Belgium asks itself how a *native* could radicalise like this, my own emphasis) (*Dirks*, 2005). Through her violence, Muriel committed a "double transgression" (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008, pp. 6-7): the violence itself and the violation of gender roles imposed upon her, and, as a result, she needs to be cast as an outsider–a deviant working-class woman–to remove the threat of radicalisation from the "good" national community (Bogain & Jackson, 2024: 362). This depiction of Muriel is discursively constructed by her belonging to an "abject social class" (p. 362).

Loss of Femininity and Infantilisation

In the newspaper articles analysed, Muriel's physical appearance and her behaviour as a child are used as instruments to infantilise her and deny her agency in her violence. Muriel's physical aspect is often emphasised in the news articles analysed and often conflated with her childhood looks. Attributes such as "pretty blonde" (Smith & Tihon, 2005), "friendly, pretty face" (Brown & Watson, 2005), and "pretty daughter" (Cas, 2005) reveal the shock created by the violence perpetrated by a *good-looking* white woman, as if "pretty" women are incapable of violence. This is in line with Brown's (2014) analysis, which suggests how hegemonic notions about femininity–such as beauty–contrast with the pursuit of morally incomprehensible acts. Muriel's appearance–a white blonde woman–only serves to augment the shock, and as a result, her agency is denied and her violence is attributed to other factors, namely her conversion (Sjoberg & Gentry 2008). Through antithesis, her appearance as a child–"adorable little child, smiling all the time" (Smith & Tihon, 2005) – is contrasted with her image as a veiled Muslim–it was hard to "recognise her because her face was concealed by a veil" (Smith & Tihon, 2005). This stark contrast simultaneously alludes to her radicalisation–"from mild Christian to Islamic zealot" (Brown & Watson, 2005), suggesting that, through conversion, *she also lost her femininity*, which makes her an anomaly. Furthermore, by depicting elements of her childhood–"She was just like all the other girls, dreaming I suppose about becoming a teacher or a nurse" (Smith & Tihon, 2005)–Muriel is not only infantilised through the implicit expectation that her adult life would resemble her life as a girl, but also her apparent trajectory to achieve ideal "white femininity" (Bogain & Jackson, 2024). This trajectory which would subordinate her to gender roles is shattered by her conversion to Islam–"the little girl who had played with their [neighbours'] children had chosen to end her life so brutally in the name of Jihad" (Smith & Tihon, 2005). Therefore, by forces outside of her control–her husband who "brainwashed her" and recruitment by terrorist organisations (both discussed in detail in the following section)–her childhood purity and beauty, as well as her whiteness, are lost the moment she converts, leading to a process of racialisation which renders her "a victim of Islam" (Brown, 2011, p. 715).

Reasons for Violence

In this section, I compare the reasons attributed to Muriel's violence in English and Dutch-language sources. A majority of the English-language news articles describe Muriel Degauque as an *erotomaniac* from an early age throughout her life–"She was more interested in boyfriends than studies" (Brown & Watson, 2005); after her divorce from her first husband, "she had several boyfriends" (Smith, 2005); "she was [...] so popular with boys she wasn't even sure how many boyfriends she'd had" (Smith & Tihon, 2005). Her marriage with Issam Goris is mentioned 21 times across all the English-language news articles as the primary cause for her violence–"Goris [...]

brainwashed her daughter. When Muriel returned to Belgium, [...] she had become 'more Muslim than Muslim'" (Brown & Watson, 2005). This narrative mirrors Sjoberg and Gentry's (2008) notion of "erotomania" suggesting that Muriel Degauque was "sex-crazed" (p. 10), due to her relationship with a male terrorist, thus being stripped of agency and "forgoing her womanhood".

Interestingly, the portrayal of the *erotomaniac* Muriel is inconsistent with previous accounts of her personality in the very same news articles, which describe her as hard to control and even rebellious during her teenage years– "She showed the rebelliousness of a teenager" (Brown & Watson, 2005), "Muriel [...] was running away from home, one time disappearing [...] 100 miles away without her parents' knowledge" (Smith & Tihon, 2005). In an antithetic way, after her marriage to Issam Goris, her character is constructed as opposite to the previous rebellious teenager, despite having two previous relationships with other Muslim men (Brown & Watson, 2005). This suggests that her marriage to Issam Goris served as a key aspect in her racialisation by the media, mirroring the Western-Islamic dichotomy presented by Sjoberg and Gentry (2008). As a white woman, Muriel's violence results from her unwillingness to conform. Once she becomes Muslim, she forgoes her whiteness and her agency.

In contrast, Dutch-language news sources, while still mentioning Muriel's marriage with Issam Goris, tended to focus more on the arrests of individuals believed to have recruited her and her husband to go to Iraq–"Muriel Degauque maakte [...] deel uit van een organisatie die in Belgie en Frankrijk zelfmoordenaars ronselt" (From Dutch: Muriel Degauque was part of an organisation which recruits suicide bombers in Belgium and France) (*De Stem*, 2005). Nonetheless, the reasons why women join such organisations were vastly omitted from Dutch-language media, signalling, similar to English-language media, a denial of agency, albeit more implicit. The focus on national security and anti-terrorism efforts also aligns with Bogain and Jackson's (2024) observations surrounding the discursive narratives whose aim is to defend the 'good' national community by placing the problem of radicalisation on racialised outsiders–here, Belgians of Arabic and Middle-Eastern descend who become recruiters for terrorist organisations–instead of admitting the domestic factors which aggravate their radicalisation. Therefore, English sources predominantly use the erotomania narrative to describe Muriel's motivations for violence, while the Dutch sources emphasise the gravity of recruitment performed by terrorist networks as a national security risk.

Conclusion

Using critical discourse analysis, this paper examines the media narratives surrounding Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing in Iraq in late 2005 present in both English- and Dutch-language newspapers. As a white, Belgian-born, and Catholic-raised woman, she is an atypical suicide bomber, less likely to face "gendered neo-orientalist" stereotypes which deny her agency (Bogain & Jackson, 2024, p. 357). Nonetheless, using insights from several scholars, I show that she is still classed as an outsider to the Belgian nation through notions of class. Muriel Degauque is depicted as the daughter of working-class parents, a crane driver and a cleaner, who is unable to keep a job and claims social welfare benefits. She is also portrayed as a "delinquent" who smokes, drinks and does drugs. As such, through discursive strategies, newspapers construct her identity as an "inside *other*" who does not belong to the respectable national society (Bogain & Jackson, 2024, p. 354). I further show that her marginalisation is not only classed, but also gendered, as her violence evades stereotypical white femininity, which makes her

repel her womanhood by committing a "double transgression of violence" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008, pp. 6-7). Through discursive narratives which emphasise her (white) beauty, her transgression becomes even more apparent, suggesting how women's violence contrasts the collective mentality's perception of gender roles (Brown, 2014). Lastly, I show how English-language media constructs her as an *erotomaniac*, a woman who is sex-craved and thus engages in violence not out of her own volition, but as a result of being manipulated by her husband (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008). This narrative contrasts depictions of her rebellious childhood and adolescence, when her being out of control implicitly rewards her some level of agency. This suggests that Muriel Degauque went through a process of racialisation once she became a Muslim, being stripped of her agency. In contrast, Dutch-language sources tend to focus more on the national security risks caused by terrorist organisations, despite still mentioning Muriel Degauque's husband, in order to externalise the danger to outsiders, instead of looking inside the imagined "good" national community (Bogain & Jackson, 2024).

Due to time limitations, this article only focuses on the case of Muriel Degauque. The advantantage of a case study is that it can discuss rich political phenomena in detail, thus uncovering causal mechanisms while being attentive to the socio-political context. However, it is difficult to generalise based on only one case. Therefore, future research should attempt to analyse more cases of convert suicide bombers from different countries in order to assess how these are portrayed in relation to their gender, class, and nationality.

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Towards a Feminist Peace?

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Abstract

This theoretical essay reviews the different strands of literature on positive peace, problematising its lack of engagement with feminist theory, despite discussing ideals such as inclusion and non-domination, which are very close to the feminist ethos. I show how different conceptualisations of positive peace – continuous, local, and relational – serve as a starting ground for envisioning feminist peace (or feminist *peaces*). The continuity of peace is synonymous with the resistance of feminist activists and scholars, as there is no end point to either peace or activism. Local peace permits the affectual interpretation of women's daily experiences, allowing for the valorisation of some of our strongest feelings. Relational peace introduces a space of non-domination and inclusion, which feminists have long strived for – a communion. My aim in this article is to show how we can normatively and empirically devise a version of positive peace whose focus is to better women's lives, and to question that idea that peace is only necessary after war.

Keywords

Positive peace, Affect, Communion, Non-domination, Utopia

Introduction

There is a growing scholarly consensus that peacebuilding should be defined in positive terms, moving away from the idea that the absence of war alone amounts to peace (De Coning, 2016; Paffenholz, 2021; Van Iterson Scholten, 2024; Soderstrom et al., 2020). *Building peace* implies that peace constitutes "a phenomenon in and of its own" and, hence building the absence of peace is "a priori absurd" (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 2). Departing from liberal, top-down, security-centric notions of peace, the positive peace literature on the one hand posits the necessity of a "local turn" to peacemaking by emphasising the importance of including local voices in the peace process (Autesserre, 2017; Van Iterson Scholten, 2024). Positive peace is thus given "local" meanings, which are context-dependent based on what peace signifies to people's "everyday lives" (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 5). On the other hand, as noted by Van Iterson Scholten (2024), some scholars critique the dominant ontology surrounding peace itself, by suggesting that peace is more than "a state of affairs" (p. 5), rather it is a continuous process, an emerging phenomenon, and a relationship between complex webs of actors.

Paradoxically, while discussing about peaceful "relationships [...] characterised by non-domination", "non-domination" as a "republican ideal", and notions of "inclusive social relationships", the literature on positive peace is largely gender blind (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 8; Paffenholz, 2021, p. 370; Soderstrom, 2020, p. 3). Despite huge potential, positive peace scholars often fail to recognise that peace has different implications for men and women beyond stressing the severity of gender-based violence during wartime and the contested involvement

of women in peace negotiations (Anderson and Golan, 2023; Bell, 2017; Christien and Mukhtarova, 2020; Krause et al., 2018; Thomas, 2024; True and Morales, 2018).

In this essay, I offer a literature review of the scholarly work on positive peace. I then suggest several ways in which the conceptualisation of positive peace and its associated elements – continuous, local, relational – are helpful for a critical understanding of peace, which is imperative to dismantle gender hierarchies, and which goes beyond the war–peace dichotomy. My aim in this article is to show how we can normatively and empirically devise a version of positive peace whose focus is to better women's lives, and to question the idea that peace is only necessary after war. Naturally, while my main focus revolves around women, I acknowledge that women's oppression is not only gendered but also classed and racialised. For this reason, my paper also explores these dynamics, albeit in less detail.

Three Kinds of Peace

Continuous Peace

Paffenholz (2021) suggests that peace must be seen as "perpetual", thus consisting of "continuous negotiations and re-negotiations" (p. 368). She indicates that there is "no end point" (p. 369) to peace, arguing that peace agreements are not "make or break" (p. 369) moments. Rather, peace involves malleable webs of actors in continuous movement, for whom peace has different meanings over time. In this sense, Paffenholz (2021) departs from the idea that peace needs to be achieved, but rather it must be *sustained*. Peace, therefore, cannot be situated within the success–failure binary; the absence of a "fixed destination" renders peace "utopian" and "subjective" (p. 378). Peace is "unending" and, as a result, we can only "strive towards peace" (p. 378).

Paffenholz's (2021) work has great potential as a starting point for envisioning a notion of feminist peace(s). First, recognising that peace eludes finality implies that it is a continuously evolving process which necessitates constant (re)imagining (Chao and Gusia, 2022). (Re)imagining peace provides leverage to feminist theorists and activists for whom the struggle is omnipresent, requiring continuous resistance: "oppression and patriarchy are constantly there, never-ending, and changing their form continuously" (Chao and Gusia, 2022). Striving towards peace in the way described by Paffenholz (2021) thus allows for a terrain of contestation in which *unfinished* feminist activism – "continuously questioning and contesting, continuously reacting, continuously organising" (Chao and Gusia, 2022) – is given the possibility to thrive. Thus, if we conceptualise peace as lacking finality, we are ontologically required to look at peace as a continuum in need of permanent transformation. This in turn creates gates for feminist resistance to re-assess, re-position, and re-imagine peace in relation to the ever-changing faces of oppression.

Continuous peace also has intriguing implications for societies "where war seems *unthinkable*" (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 7, emphasis mine), as peace needs to be maintained everywhere, regardless of the level of formal conflict. Based on Hawkesworth's (2020) analysis of the "*feminicidal* state" (p. 314, emphasis in original) – a concept denoting (un)purposeful state complicity in conserving "modes of male power by maximising women's vulnerability" (p. 314) – I posit that *women do not enjoy peace anywhere in the world*, not even in the supposed tranquil waters of the Global North. States are architects of difference legitimating gender inequality, and as a

consequence, "finding [...] a peace that speaks to us [women]" (Chao and Gusia, 2022, p. 56) is a continuous effort of resistance. Striving towards feminist peace cannot be reduced to the *a priori* absence of sexual and domestic violence emerging through the re-negotiation of gender roles during (armed) conflict, which is the focus of mainstream feminist foreign policy (Gerard and Pickering, 2013; Krause, 2015). For instance, even Denmark, rated the most gender-equal country in the world according to the most recent data in the UN Gender Inequality Index (2022), has a 15% pay gap between men and women and a highly gender-differentiated labour market between 'feminine' (the public sector and care work) and 'masculine' (the private sector and STEM) professions (Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The continuity of peace thus allows us to depart from the colonial North-South binary, which assumes that states in the Global South lack the knowledge and expertise of states in the Global North, by emphasising that all governments must treat peace "as a positive project" (Autesserre, 2017; Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 7). It is also worth pointing out that Western governments have historically legitimised their *civilising missions* in the Global South using a patriarchal logic according to which *weak brown* women must be protected from *harmful brown* men by the *protective white* colonists (Mani, 1987). This suggests that, instead of treating peace "as a positive project", peace was regarded as an export from the Global North to Global South (Autesserre 2017). Therefore, if we envision peace as continuous, we can understand how all states are, in practice, architects of difference, hindering feminist peace(s). We can thus depart from neocolonial assumptions regarding peace.

Lastly, striving towards peace as a utopian, subjective future implies that peace is an ideal and not an achievable reality, which prevents us from returning to a pre-conflict "normalcy" predicated on other's domination (Paffenholz, 2021). I argue that this utopian notion of peace presupposes that only "approximations" (p, 378) of peace exist, and as such there can be no return to peace because peace is a utopia. The impossibility of returning to peace in turn helps us avoid the conflation of peace with "normalcy" (Stravrevska et al., 2022). In this sense, pre-conflict normalcy is not in any way peaceful, as it is predicated upon somebody else's disempowerment and disenfranchisement", namely feminised and racialised subjects. Romantising the past as a peaceful state of affairs impedes us from acknowledging injustices that were constitutive of the pre-conflict order. This potentially explains why women who participated in armed conflicts as combatants and commanders in equal positions to men are often stigmatised upon their return from battle and adhere back to traditional gender roles (Alison, 2004). In this sense, normalcy cannot be peaceful as long as it is based on relations of domination, which are antithetical to positive peace (Soderstrom et al., 2020). I discuss the concept of domination in more detail in one of the following sections, as I believe that engaging with Soderstrom et al.'s (2020) ideas about relational peace is crucial to show how women's domination prevails everywhere in the world. Nonetheless, we can only devise feminist peace(s) by acknowledging that the idea "normalcy" is imbued in oppressive social relationships and, therefore, should be scrutinised.

Local Peace

The "local turn" to peacebuilding emerged in an effort to create bottom-up, "locally legitimate" (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 5) notions of peace which acknowledge that different meanings of peace exist for different communities and that these meanings can change over time. Some researchers studying local peace make the

explicit aim of their research to include marginalised voices whose notions of peace are unheard, such as women, creating indicators commonly agreed upon by the community in order to study and monitor peace.

Acknowledging the plurality and dynamism of local peace(s) is also an ontological shift useful for building an inclusive feminist notion of peace, which goes beyond classifying bodies as numbers and statistics. Importantly, peace is sensed "affectively and physically" in a "coming apart of the body [which] takes place" before and after conflict and cannot be captured using rigid indicators (Stavrevska et al., 2022, p. 46). Even when the war has formally ended, the result of affective and physical deterioration suffered during war necessitates a reconstitution of the body "in new ways" and with "often missing pieces" (Stavrevska et al., 2022, p. 45). The visceral description of a woman's vision of peace "as the moment when her toenails started to grow back" suggests that peace should be treated as plural to encapsulate different and maybe even conflicting interpretations of peace that emerge from our non-rational (emotional) knowledge (Stavrevska et al., 2022, p. 45). These interpretations can become conflictual as women are thought from a very young age that they should prioritise rationality at the detriment of emotions, which have been rendered "a sign of female inferiority" (Lorde, 2020, 53). Nonetheless, our affects constitute a crucial source of knowledge for understanding ourselves and our bodily sensations.

Looking at peace as affect allows us to destigmatise the use of the erotic, which Audre Lorde (2020) defines as a "resource vilified, abused, and devaluated within western society [...] misnamed by men and used against women" (p. 108). The diversity of local meanings of peace encourages women and marginalised groups to embrace "the chaos of our strongest feelings" (p. 109), demystifying affective sources of knowledge. As a consequence, the turn to local peace is useful to escape the assumption of the rational, calculated (read: neoliberal) subject in the liberal peace tradition, which is necessarily masculine (Marhia, 2013). By this, I do not mean to suggest that women cannot be rational and that men cannot be emotional. However, the so-called universal category of the human in security studies enshrines tacit masculinisation by assigning the human features traditionally associated with masculinity, such as rationality, whereas emotions, traditionally associated with femininity, are sidelined. Liberal peace is in the same way guided by a liberal internationalism "convinced of the superiority of its ideas" (Mac Ginty, 2020, p. 579), resulting in other non-liberal ideas being "cast as irrational, antiquated and exclusive" (p. 579). This includes, I posit, any affectual meaning that can be attributed to feminist peace. Nurturing one's self is tightly connected to the erotic, to "how acutely and fully we feel", and to "reclaiming [..] our [women's] loving" (Lorde, 2020, p. 109). Healing thus becomes incompatible with neoliberal peacebuilding. Again, as emphasised in the previous section, the continuity of peace is paramount to understanding that the healing of the self is a slow, affective process (Stavrevska et al., 2022). Hence, feminist peace must employ the radical utopian potential of love and vulnerability for healing the bodies and non-rational selves pillaged by war (hooks, 2001).

Relational Peace

Soderstrom et al. (2020) suggest that deliberation, non-domination, and mutual recognition and respect are constituents of relational peace. First, deliberation refers to the "exchange of views" (Soderstrom et al., 2020, p. 6-8) between the deliberating actors and presupposes that they recognise each other's legitimacy. Second, non-domination implies both the "lack of interference by another", and the freedom from "arbitrary power" (pp. 6-8). Lastly, mutual recognition symbolises the status awarded by the actors to one another, which can be thin – legal

recognition – or thick – prestige and self-esteem. At least one of the three characteristics needs to be present in order for a relationship to be classified as peaceful.

While speaking at length about non-domination, Soderstrom et al. (2020) omit mentioning structures of domination and how they are perpetrated against vulnerable groups, in particular women. I argue that their conceptualisation of relational peace is useful not only when it comes to warring parties, but also within social groups, as war and peace can coexist. I suggest that, once again, women nowhere enjoy peace because none of the criteria set by Soderstrom (2020) are met. Firstly, women's access to forums of deliberation is severely limited. Only 27% of seats in national parliaments globally are held by women (World Bank Group, 2024). This renders the exchange of views between men and women severely unequal. Moreover, women's legitimate participation in deliberation processes is increasingly contested with the rise of far-right parties which vehemently preach that women should assume traditional gender roles, reinforcing the perception that women cannot be political (Politico, 2024). Relations of domination are ever more present, with women's reproductive rights under attack. Thus, women's entitlement to act as agents in control of their own lives is slowly fading away, with government interference enabling domination through abolishing gender equality departments and legislation safeguarding women's rights, such as the right to abortion. Thus, not only is the "institutional or legal solution" (Soderstrom et al., 2020, p. 9) to ensure women's non-domination missing, but the very same institutions are maximising men's control over women's bodies (Hawkesworth, 2020). Lastly, even the "thin" legal recognition present through legislation is being undermined in many parts of the world (Soderstrom et al., 2020, p. 10). In courts of law, the "ideal victim" of a rape case "is preferably sexually inexperienced or at least respectable", with evidence of using dating apps or wearing 'attractive' underwear working against her in the court (Angel, 2021, p. 13). It is also important to mention that although all sexual harassment and rape allegations are met with defiance, sexual violence against black women is more easily discounted, as they are perceived as more "adult-like" and "sexually knowing" than their white counterparts (Angel, 2021, p. 11).

However, Soderstrom et al.'s (2020) ideas can be useful to advance a notion of feminist peace. Post-colonial feminist theorists often discuss interdependence and community as the key to resisting and dismantling gender oppression, which involves a process of "nurturing the self, the community and the territory" (Akibayashi et al., 2022; hooks, 2001; Stavrevska et al., 2022, p. 45). Not only is interdependence a means to this utopic end, but also vital to finding serenity, which according to some theorists who strongly reject the "worship of individualism", takes place in a communal, interdependent setting – "thriving is about interdependence; it's about how we maximise the potential of the human race in its beauty" (Akibayashi et al., 2022, p. 102; hooks, 2001, p. 214). Akibayashi et al. (2022) describe this as "collective peace" (p. 102). hooks (2001) also depicts healing as "an act of communion" (p. 215). She says, "rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation" (hooks, 2001, p. 215). De Coning (2016) similarly suggests in his analysis of peace using complex system theory that the "holism" (p. 168) of such systems makes us interconnected parts of a system which creates new meanings and relationships, developing a "whole" that would not exist otherwise. I argue that collective peace is incompatible with the lack of deliberation, non-domination and recognition of women, in the way advanced by Soderstrom (2022). However, the departure from conceptualising peace as the absence of war to a positive relationship emerging out of a complex web of relationships at least helps us strive for a non-dominating and inclusive peace. Looking at peace as relational

and interdependent teaches us all, dominator and dominated, men and women, privileged and marginalised, to seek community with each other, as we are part of the same whole and only then can we truly find serenity. By this, I do not want to suggest that we should not question relations of domination, but that such relations of domination come to an end once we have emerged ourselves in community, and once we have recognised our interconnectedness. I also want to posit a question perhaps for another essay: if there is no peace and if, just for a moment, we pretend to agree with Waltz's (1954) definition of peace as the absence of war, what does the absence of peace imply for war? Is there then a war on women's bodies, women's agencies and women's thriving?

Conclusion

This essay constitutes both a critique and a commencement to the scholars of positive peace. It is a critique because it emphasises that the positive peace literature is gender-blind, despite addressing ideas very close to the feminist ethos, such as inclusion and domination. It is also a commencement because it recognises the potentiality of the very same strand of literature as a starting point to develop a notion of feminist peace. I try to at least highlight this potentiality in three ways. I first discuss Paffenholz's (2021) idea of perpetual peace, suggesting that *perpetually* attempting to strive towards peace is more or less synonymous with the feminist struggle to resist, even in states where formal peace has been apparently 'achieved', but are still marked by gender inequalities, such as Denmark. I also suggest that returning to a 'peaceful' normalcy preceding conflict is impossible, as normalcy is always predicated on someone's marginalisation. Second, I reflect upon the local turn in peacebuilding, discussing why it encourages a plurality of local peace(s), with a fluctuating meaning for each individual and community (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024). I use the idea of affect to show why local peace allows for affectual re-imaginings of what peace means in women's everyday lives, whose use of the erotic and non-rational knowledge should be encouraged to nurture one's self and community and to create affectual healing. Lastly, I look at Soderstrom et al.'s (2020) notion of relational peace and explain that when peace is described as an interdependent phenomenon, women do not enjoy peace anywhere in the world. However, I emphasise how this conceptualisation hints at feminist ideas about collective peace and communal healing, and how communal care of one another can bring about a utopian version of feminist peace.

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The authors declares no conflict of interest.

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How Colonial Discourses on Polygamy Disenfranchised Algerian Muslims and Supported the Right to Vote of French Women

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Abstract

The French ‘anti separatism’ bill, which portrays polygamy as oppressive, highlights the significance of understanding how colonialist views on polygamy in the 19th century shaped the perception of the Algerian Muslim ‘Other’ in terms of their citizenship and gender. This paper will investigate the role of French feminists in shaping these gendered views and the resulting racialized and gendered narratives. The institutionalization and scientization of monogamy and polygamy led to the creation of a colonized ‘Other’ in Algeria, particularly Algerian Muslims, with different citizenship statuses assigned based on proximity to Western monogamy. French feminist discourse added a gendered dimension, framing polygamy as nonconsensual due to its deviation from monogamous nature of women, while men's sexuality was presented as more inclined towards polygamy, justifying the denial of citizenship. This reinforced the subordinate position of the colonized through the education and 'enlightenment' of colonized women about their supposed inferior status due to polygamy, while colonized men were branded as sexual predators due to their polygamous nature. At the same time, this strengthened the status of white women and gave them credibility in the fight for the right to vote.

Keywords

Monogamy, Gender, Algeria, Citizenship, Feminism, Polygamy

Positionality

In this paper, I use constructionism as a vantage point and assume that societal structures and systems of oppression are discursively produced yet have a real impact on individuals and their position in the hierarchy of power. My education background in gender and sexuality studies as well as political theory has fostered an epistemological approach which strives to give a multidimensional and complex account of the ways in which power operates and impacts certain groups of people. I believe that by acknowledging the adaptability of power to different contexts, its complexity, and internal contradictions and by shedding light on these complexities, its impact on certain groups and individuals might be accounted for in a more holistic manner. This background has also made me aware of the intricacies of colonial power and has sensitized me to how pervasive it is in different areas of society. My

positionality as a white European middle-class woman limits my understanding of the implications these systems of power have on the lived experiences of marginalized individuals; I hence take an outsider perspective to the subject. My privilege as a white person of French heritage, however, I think provides me with a responsibility to shed light on the structures that have enabled the oppression of Algerian Muslims. My inevitable position of privilege in a white supremacist and capitalist system combined with my education leaves me very conscious of the impact of my research, the biases within myself that I need to address and my responsibility to question and challenge these systems.

Introduction

The French 'law consolidating respect for the principles of the republic' or commonly called the 'anti-separatism bill' issued on the 24th of August 2021 (Vie Publique, 2021) has been denounced by civil society as targeting Muslim people, since it is supposed to target Islamist separatism and has led to the closure of mosques around the country, heightening scrutiny of Muslim religious spaces (Le Monde, 2022). This 'thinly veiled' attempt to control Muslim religious spaces (Le Monde, 2022) implicitly reproduces stereotypes against Muslim people (Lallab, 2020): the bill aims to 'combat any exploitation of a polygamous situation' (Ministère de l'Intérieur et des Outre-Mer, 2022, p. 7) in an aim to improve equality between men and women, cited in the same context as the declaration to go against forced marriage. According to a feminist and antiracist French organization, this perpetuates stereotypes against Muslim people because these laws are already enshrined in the Civil Code and are reiterated to condemn 'behaviors perceived as Muslim' (Lallab, 2020). The anti-separatism bill bases its combatting of polygamous relationship structures in the commonly called 'Pasqua-Debré' law of 1993 which foresees that a resident card cannot be delivered to a foreign national if they live in a polygamous arrangement, nor to foreign nationals who are the partners of a polygamous foreign national under article 15, a law in place since 1945 (Légifrance, 1993). Under article 30, the resident permit of any additional partners in the relationship can be refused or withdrawn, as well as that of the polygamous partner who made more than one partner come to France and the resident permit of the children from one of the other partnerships (Légifrance, 1993).

Despite the marginal phenomenon of marital polygamy in France (it is vaguely estimated to be between 8000 and up to 20000 households (Commission National Consultative des Droits de l'Homme, 2006)), its legislation makes it a political issue. Polygamy has been politicized in Europe as a sexual phenomenon belonging especially to Islam, assuming a sexual deviance of Muslim peoples compared to the monogamous superiority of Christian Westerners (Krafft-Ebing, 1894, p. 5). Therefore, exploring the origins of stereotypes of polygamy as an oppressive relationship structure becomes relevant as we see these stereotypes perpetuated by the French state today.

The question that will be investigated in the following is how colonialist views on polygamy led to the creation of a purported Algerian Muslim 'Other' both in terms of their citizenship and gender, showcasing the role of French feminists in shaping these gendered views. I theorize that different citizenship statuses for Algerian Muslims and other Algerians were legitimized through the degradation of polygamy.

I will identify gendered and racialized narratives that shaped how polygamy was perceived by the French colonizers and which, in turn, justified granting Muslim Algerians a lower citizenship status. Moreover, I will also

examine how these narratives were used to advance the cause of French women in their struggle for the vote and greater recognition as citizens.

Broader literature on polygamy was reviewed to identify prominent narratives surrounding polygamy, race and gender. Subsequently, I selected studies that, by reviewing historical accounts and archival material of discourses surrounding polygamy, give more insight on the connection between polygamy, race and gender, among which studies on discourses surrounding Mormon polygamy are the most broadly published. I then selected primary sources to achieve a better understanding of the exact discourses at hand during the colonization of Algeria in the 19th century. Due to the lack of accessible primary accounts of Algerian Muslims from the 19th century and in an attempt to better comprehend how discourses on Algerian Muslims polygamy came to be constitutive of citizenship, primary sources that were accessible to me from French authors were selected.

Despite the prominence of ideas relating polygamy to racial inferiority as in Hegel's work (Hegel, 1837/2007, as cited in Denike, 2010, p. 858), few empirical accounts exist that focus on the discursively established connection between polygamy and racial inferiority, with most studies concentrating on the United States. Ertman's research demonstrates that the ban on polygamy in the US was motivated by the politicization of Mormon polygamy and the perception that it was a form of 'race treason' (2010, pp. 288–289). Mormons were stripped of their citizenship rights, including the right to vote, due to their polygamous practices (2010, pp. 287–288). The ban on polygamy was justified by the belief that it was natural for non-white people but unnatural for white people and engaging in the practice was seen as the creation of a 'peculiar race'. This shows how central whiteness and monogamy were to obtaining full citizenship rights (Ertman, 2010, p. 292).

While the ties between polygamy and citizenship and Algerian's rights during the period of colonization by France have been investigated by Surkis (2019) whose work I will draw from, such analysis lacks a gendered lens that examines the power dynamics of French feminists and Muslim Algerian women and a racial lens which investigates what racializations in combination with gendering took place to legitimize imperialism. Additionally, the existing literature on the topic is missing the racialized stereotypical portrayal of Arab men which plays a role in denying them citizenship. This paper adds to the academic discourse by adding a gendered and racialized lens to the analysis of the ties between relationship structures and citizenship, therefore providing a multifaceted account of agency, oppression and colonization in Algeria.

In the following, I will explain how different citizenship statuses for Algerian Muslims and other Algerians were legitimized through the degradation of polygamy before moving on to uncover underlying Western discourses on monogamy and polygamy which were prevalent in the French colonial administration in Algeria and that equalled monogamy with civilization. Furthermore, I will delve deeper into how these perspectives on polygamy shaped discourses on gender and the women's movement, focusing mostly on French feminists' role in the creation of those discourses. Moreover, I will detail how monogamy was created in Algeria under French colonial rule and what racial and gendered aspects underlied those narratives. Finally, this paper will shed light on the role of French feminists in creating a stereotypical image of the Algerian Muslim woman which is in line with the 'Average Third World Woman' concept introduced by Mohanty (1984).

How citizen status depends on perspectives on polygamy in Algeria

During the French colonization of Algeria, citizenship status was accorded differently, depending on religion, ethnicity and practice of polygamy, as Kaiser (2015) shows (p. 195). While nationality was extended to the whole Algerian population after 1848, citizenship remained exclusive to certain groups. For instance, Jews were granted French citizenship under the 1870 Crémieux decree while Muslims were largely denied citizenship (Kaiser, 2015, pp. 195–196). This separation between religious and ethnic groups in Algeria was created based on which groups polygamy is more prevalent in (Surkis, 2019, p. 57). In 'Polygamy, public order, and property', Surkis (2019) mentions that 'For […] advocates of Jews' legal assimilation, Muslims' greater attachment to polygamy justified the Jews' qualification for French citizenship' over that of Muslims, showing that relationship structures played an essential role in determining who obtains access to French citizenship (p. 57). In doing so, a fragmentation of society was reinforced which reduced cohesion and thus the potential for resistance among the colonized.

French feminist newspapers also played a role in fragmenting Algerian society along ethnic lines in the process of acquiring citizenship. In French feminist newspaper articles such as in 'La Française', the so-called Kabyle myth was reproduced, contending an alleged superiority of Kabyles (a predominantly Muslim Berber ethnic group in Algeria) over Arabs because – it was claimed – they had more liberal kinship traditions and were thus 'less polygamous' than Arab Muslims (Boittin, 2010, pp. 136–137). In that, they were portrayed as 'colonizer-friendly' and closer to the colonizer which was supposed to grant them a higher status in citizenship than their Arab counterparts (Boittin, 2010, pp. 136–137). The Kabyle myth created by French feminists is hence a prime example of how hierarchization of Algerian society was brought about by the colonizer on the basis of relationship and kinship practices. This hierarchization aided the fragmentation of the Algerian Muslim community and it is conceivable that this weakened resistance against colonization.

Monogamous marriage and practices were not legally imposed in Algeria which was an important aspect of dissent as will be elaborated on further, but it became contingent to obtaining citizenship. As a consequence of holding on to one's 'personal status', such as religious law and practices in the case of Algerian Muslims, one would have to relinquish full French citizenship. Surkis (2019) mentions the Enos case jurisprudence which purported that maintaining 'personal status law', thus religious law, leads to a continued status of the colonized as subjects (p. 58). Citizenship therefore becomes inaccessible when one seeks to maintain their personal status law as it required individuals to relinquish their local civil status and to adopt the Civil Code instead (Surkis, 2019, p. 58).

The reasoning behind why citizenship required the adoption of the Civil Code in addition to the renunciation of personal status which was used as a justification, was that personal status was in some instances incompatible with the French Civil Code and with French morals. It was invoked that rights would clash and contradict each other when personal status was deemed incompatible with morality and 'good order' of family life as it is enshrined in the French Civil Code (Surkis, 2019, p. 58). Because of that difference in morality, it was argued, French citizenship could only apply to those that fully assimilate to French morality and hence to the French Civil Code. This shows that Quranic law and Muslim religious law were framed as incompatible with morality, thereby justifying that Algerians must choose their allegiance.

Moreover, 'morality', 'the good order of families' and 'public decency' are very general terms taken as having universal appeal. Quranic law is here implied to be opposed to a supposedly universalistic definition of what is 'moral' and in 'good order'.

Western discourses on monogamy and polygamy

The underlying narrative serving to justify a different citizenship status for Algerian Arab Muslims is that polygamy is deemed 'uncivilized' and therefore 'un-French'. The idea of a civilized metropolitan France can be put in the broader context of the West purporting to be more 'civilized' than the rest of the world, and therefore also more 'civilized' than the peoples colonized by the West. Rademaker (2017) finds that 'Western societies have long conceived of heterosexual, monogamous marriage as the foundation of a stable nation as well as the means for the state to regulate a gender order and property.' (p. 642), therefore highlighting the role of monogamy as an institution in the creation of the nation.

The establishment of monogamy as an institution through marriage in the West led to it being perceived as 'common sense', a notion used by Cott (2000) which is, in its definition, universalistic and homogenizing (p. 5). The notion of 'common sense' is homogenizing because it makes claims about ideas and practices that humans should have in common when it is in actuality context-specific and – in the context of monogamy – contingent on beliefs, kinship and other societal arrangements specific to a society. The insistence by Western and – in the case of Algeria – French colonizers that there is such thing as a 'common sense' concerning how relationships ought to be structured has detrimental consequences for cultures and societies not fitting this very narrow idea as the case of the downgrading of Arab Algerian Muslim's citizenship has shown.

In Western Christian societies, monogamy became analogous to the Church where Christ was seen as head of the Church and that same structure was replicated in the household with the husband being hierarchically superior over his wife (Cott, 2000, p. 6). This then also applied to the state as the husband held to role of citizen in the household and having dependents and caring for them became a responsibility because of his citizenship (Cott, 2000, p. 6). What underlies traditionally monogamous ties is the idea of a contract between two people, analogous to the 'contract' between the state and the citizen (Cott, 2000, p. 15). During the American revolution, the idea of reciprocity between the state and its citizens became a requirement for justice (ibid.). This results in the view that, in polygamous relationships, without a two-sided contract, there is no reciprocity as the relationship involves more than two people and thus no justice.

Polygamy came to be viewed as non-consensual because it became analogous with views on the state. Monogamy was viewed as analogous with a democratic state based on a social contract between the ruler and the citizens. In contrast, the harem which emerged as the Western stereotype of polygamous relationships was equated with a tyrannical government which is non-consensual since it is not based on approval of the governed (Cott, 2000, p. 6). Thus, polygamy came to be seen as an oppressive and coercive structure and something analogous to the public realm. Therefore also, adopting polygamous practices has broader implications for the structuring of Muslim Algerian society, as this comparison of relationship structure with state structure implies. This extends relationship practices beyond the private realm and into the public realm, making it subject to contention.

While marriage evolved into a symmetrical tie between husband and wife, the underlying moral prerogatives remain that elevated monogamous relationships above polygamous ones and links to views on the nation remained. During the French revolution, monogamous marriage was seen as the foundation of national morality whereas polygamy implied immorality of the citizen since marriage served as the metaphor for a consensual relationship between the state and its citizens and one of voluntary allegiance (Cott, 2000, p. 10).

This supposedly symmetrical union that monogamous marriage provided came too be seen as the ground for what was to be deemed 'civilization'. Krafft-Ebing (1894) sees the moment when the woman was acknowledged as equal to the man in their partnership – a union consolidated through legal, moral, and religious institutions – as the moment when Christian peoples gained moral and material superiority over what he calls 'polygamic peoples', especially over Muslims people (p. 4-5).

In making claims about what was 'civilized' and 'uncivilized', polygamy obtained a racialized connotation. Polygamy was a point of distinction for the colonizers who saw it as the 'other'. People practicing polygamy were explicitly called 'polygamic peoples' or 'polygamic races' while monogamy remained without racial connotation (Krafft-Ebing, 1894, p. 5; Frankenberg, 1997, and Morrison, 1993, as cited in Willey, 2006, pp. 531–532). Given that monogamy was un-racialized unlike polygamy, it can be seen as a marker of whiteness and polygamy as a marker of the racialized 'Other' (Krafft-Ebing, 1894, p. 5; Frankenberg, 1997, and Morrison, 1993, as cited in Willey, 2006, pp. 531–532). The 'Other' in Edward Said's definition is a prejudiced fiction created in Western thinking about the 'Orient' (Mohrem, 2020, p. 2), thereby homogenizing entire populations, cultures, religions and ethnicities into an entity different from the Western subject.

The claim that non-monogamous people were 'uncivilized' was not only justified in moral terms but was also rooted in the (pseudo-)scientization of monogamy, which gave it a more authoritative character, as Willey (2019) notes (p. 98). It was justified as inborn by pseudoscientific phrenology and therefore said to be more prevalent among white people and white women especially; in contrast, non-white people could be said to be inherently 'less monogamous' (Willey, 2006, p. 537). Through the scientization process, polygamy came to be seen as a racial characteristic, beyond discourse and in what was seen as 'biological'. From the Christian lens especially, it spurred the representation as 'a marriage practice allowed by Islam and prohibited by Christianity as a manifestation of atavistic sexual tendencies of the biologically inferior.' (Willey, 2006, p. 103). Therefore, any relationship structures outside of those of heterosexual and heteroromantic monogamy were constructed as perversions in opposition to an ideal claimed to be 'natural' which justifies superiority over all other kinds of relationship structures (Willey, 2006, p. 103). Instead, polygamy was constructed as an atavism and as a sign of barbarousness from the perspective of the Western colonizer (Surkis, 2019, p. 44). Scientization served the political and imperialistic purpose and pursuit to improve and facilitate the means of social control over the colonized because it could be framed as pursuit to 'improve the race' and society (Surkis, 2019, p. 44).

Moreover, through scientization, it became easier to essentialize polygamy as an inherent trait to people of a certain race, ethnicity, or religion and to create a hierarchy. Polygamy thus becomes sexuality, therefore essentializing it and erasing its meaning as a way to structure kinship relations.

French feminists such as Hubertine Auclert (2014) saw 'barbarousness' and being 'uncivilized' as the result of adopting polygamous marriage practices (p. 20). She observes that:

> Arabs, healthy while they had one wife, became weaker and lost their health as soon as they had several. Polygamy not only hastens physical decrepitude, it brings with it intellectual degeneration. Concentrating their cerebral activity on bestial instincts, it destroys their intelligence and atrophies their brain. (Auclert, 2014, p. 20)

Therefore, atrophy and atavism are said to be brought about by the adoption of polygamous practices.

That polygamy is an atavism inherently tied to race is the product of the idea that the colonized have remained in a space where time has stopped, as if they were 'remains of the past', which is what McClintock (1995) calls 'anachronistic space' (pp. 30–31). This narrative then serves to justify the brutal endeavor of 'improving the race' or 'bringing modernity', to the colonized.

Similarly, in late 19th century France, there was quite broad consensus among French feminists that the Civil Code must be applied universally in Algeria for Algerian women to achieve emancipation because they diagnosed Quranic law as the source of their oppression (Kimble ,2006, p. 125). This was only contested by Algerian Muslim women such as Madame Séhir Hacène who emphasized the importance for Algerian women to adhere to cultural mores and claimed that French feminists were misinterpreting the condition of Algerian Muslim women. Colonialism was seen by French feminists as the best way for Algerian women to achieve emancipation (Kimble, 2006, p. 125). However, Hacène and Zenati viewed cultural practices and lack of educational opportunities as the main causes for a lack of women's emancipation in Algeria (Kimble, 2006, p. 122).

The discourse of monogamy as constitutive of the nation and 'civilization' justified creating a difference between the colonized Muslim Algerians and white French people. Pseudoscientific claims about how polygamy renders individuals 'atavistic' further spurred the process and made it seem like intervention through the 'mission civilisatrice' was needed to prevent the physical degeneration effects that polygamy was said to bring about. Through that, the quest for women's rights in metropolitan France and imperialism could be connected because French women could claim to defend women's rights as polygamy was seen as inherently oppressive.

The implications of polygamy for gender discourses prevalent in the French feminist movement

Through the rejection of polygamy as 'barbarous' and 'primitive', women were subordinated, spoken for, and agency was taken from them because they were victimized by white colonizers claiming to be able to 'save them' from their position. This trope is coined by Mohanty (1984) who calls it the 'Third World woman' trope through which white colonizers constitute the colonized woman as helpless, uneducated, poor, and dependent on the non-

white man who exploits her (p. 337). In that, Orientalist myths are recurring too. This purported position of absolute subordination is what, according to Mohanty, posits the white colonizers as saviors of the 'Third World women' because they can free non-white from their oppression by offering them education, 'giving them a voice' by speaking for them and demonizing non-white men as predators.

White women especially play an essential role because of Christian missionary work where they sought to 'educate' the local population for instance and could breach the gender divide that male colonizers could not. This was observed by Pruitt (2005) who claimed that Orientalist myths created and maintained by colonizers and missionaries portrayed 'Oriental' women as imprisoned in the domestic sphere and in their own ignorance and being degraded by their culture (p. 44). Therefore, white women saw themselves as the only people able to access their 'sisters' to bring them salvation (Pruitt, 2005, p. 44).

Algerian Arab and Berber Muslim women were seen as having been rendered 'inferior by their male counterparts' under 'personal status law', resulting in a lack of education, poverty, and legal inferiority. As a remedy, French feminists with ties to the metropole proposed a stricter application of French law and of the French Civil Code and no exceptions made for 'personal status' (Kimble, 2006, p. 110). The underlying idea was that a French citizenship model would bring about education and secularism and thus 'republican mores' (Kimble, 2006, p.110). In general, a stricter imposition of French law was supported by French feminists since its lax application was seen as what led to the continued oppression of women. Hubertine Auclert puts that indignation into words:

> France, under the cover of its civilizing mission, has dispossessed Arabs of Algeria's territory, and now it claims its respect for the barbarism of the vanquished in order to keep them outside the very civilization in the name of which it conquered them! This is unimaginable! (Auclert, 2014, p. 23)

In general, the influence of Islam and the incomplete French 'mission civilisatrice' pertaining to marriage is seen as the continuation of oppression of Algerian women. Therefore, a dismantling of Shari'a jurisprudence and Islamic courts was supported (Kimble, 2006, p. 115).

In late 19th century France, there was quite broad consensus among French feminists that the Civil Code must be applied universally in Algeria for Algerian women to achieve emancipation because they diagnosed Quranic law as the source of their oppression (Kimble, 2006, p. 125). This was only contested by Algerian Muslim women such as Madame Séhir Hacène who emphasized the importance for Algerian women to adhere to cultural mores and claimed that French feminists were misinterpreting the condition of Algerian Muslim women. Colonialism was seen by French feminists as the best way for Algerian women to achieve emancipation (Kimble, 2006, p. 125). However, Hacène and Zenati viewed cultural practices and lack of educational opportunities as the main causes for a lack of women's emancipation in Algeria (Kimble, 2006, p. 122). The voices of Algerian women who contested the French feminists' opinions, however, remained underrepresented among feminist discourse which was dominated by French women.

The universal framing of the Muslim Algerian woman in line with the myth of the 'Third World woman' was done in terms of her allegedly being pliant to her oppression and finding content in it. This characterization of the Muslim Algerian woman is put forward by Marie Bugéja, a white French Algerian feminist who claimed that the 'Maghrébines' are 'content' in their position as passive victims, isolated and uncultured and secluded in the patriarchal family structure (Bugéja, 1931, as cited in Kimble, 2006, p. 111). The purported oppression of the Algerian colonized woman thus was claimed to not only lie in her submission to the Algerian man and in the polygamous relationship structure she was in, but also in her ignorance of her oppression. This justified the intervention by white French women to 'save' her from her oppressive polygamous marriage.

The subordination of the 'Third World woman' by white women was reinforced by pseudoscientific racializations by French feminists. Bugéja maintained that for the Muslim woman to become 'modern' and educated, she needs the intervention of French law and legislation and the work of French feminists which would help her 'break out of her ignorance' induced by her 'primitive brain' (Bugéja, 1931, as cited in Kimble, 2006, p. 121-122).

A recurring trope in French feminist discourses is one that sees Muslim Algerian women as collectively against polygamy because it hurts their feelings as it is not about 'true romantic love', but centers around the sexual fulfilment of men, therefore exploiting the women in the relationship (Auclert, 2014, p. 28). Polygamy is perceived by French colonizers as a sexual fulfilment for men which requires coercive means such as 'buying off women' since it is claimed that they would not enter a polygamous partnership by choice, according to Saint-Simonian historian Berbrugger (Berbrugger, n.d., as cited in Surkis, 2019, p. 50).

Through Western myths by non-polygamous colonizers that polygamy leads to jealousy as observed by Cott (2000, p.10) in the Aboriginal context and perpetuated about Muslim Algerian women by Auclert (2014), polygamy was equalled with adultery (p.21). The very idea that polygamy makes women jealous centers men as women's object of desire in polygamous relationships. Compulsory monogamy further devalues other relationships such as community ties and friendship ties and posits the monogamous relationship as higher in a hierarchy of relationships (Willey, 2006, p. 531).

The gendered nature of myths on monogamy and polygamy in colonized Algeria

Male colonizers in Algeria conceived of polygamy as a sexual privilege instead of a form of kinship and relationship. Thus, women were seen as the property of the man and available for sexual services for the man. Conceiving of polygamy as a sexual privilege of the colonized was one of the reasons why indigenous legal status was refused by colonizers: this sexual privilege being denied to French men was inconceivable and considered 'unequal' (Surkis, 2019, p. 58). In turn, renouncing that privilege as which polygamy is framed, is seen as an 'honorable sacrifice' because man is not giving into his 'natural sexual instincts', making him eligible for French citizenship. It therefore also puts French citizenship on a pedestal because it requires some alleged 'purity' found in monogamous marriage and French men are those upheld as morally superior because they did not 'give into the temptation of polygamy' (Surkis, 2019, pp. 59–60). This idea links to the portrayal of the colonized 'Other' as overly lascivious, sexual, and sex as 'primitive' because polygamous relationships are claimed to center only around sex and the domination of women, hence framing Muslim Algerian men as sexual predators.

The framing of Arab men as predators because of the prevalence of polygyny in Algeria during its colonization was perpetuated by French feminist Hubertine Auclert. She claims that Muslim men are uninhibited because Quranic law allows them to and that they are unfaithful and volatile since their partners or concubines constantly fear being 'downgraded' from being the favorite (Auclert, 2014, pp. 18–19, pp. 19–20). She further portrays Arab men as objectifying women who serve to satisfy their needs, which is most prevalent in her text about polygamy where she states that ''Woman has been created for man's pleasure', say the Arabs, 'how could only one wife amuse a man his whole life? Polygamy and repudiation are necessary.'', stereotyping Arab men as overly sexual (Auclert, 2014, pp. 19–20). Muslim Arab men are claimed to profit off their wives by treating them as mere sexual objects but also because they are said to see them as property: when they do not provide men with sexual services, the men can sue for damages because the 'property they bought', in Auclert's words, was not fulfilling his needs and instead those of another (Auclert, 2014, p. 30).

In contrast to the inherent nature of men to be polygamous portrayed in the latter example and in the repression of the urge of colonizer men to have multiple partners, women are said to be inherently monogamous. An alleged 'closeness to nature' and lack of sophisticatedness are said to be reasons for the monogamy of women (Auclert, 2014, p. 22). Auclert states that even in the situations where women are the most demeaned, they are choosing a monogamous relationship, implicitly alleging to the fact that polygamous marriages go against any choice of the involved women even when she is already demeaned. This view encourages the intervention of white French feminists as the metaphor for the Muslim Arab woman in a polygamous relationship used by Auclert and Bugéja is that of a plant: Muslim Algerian women are portrayed as fragile and easily shattered by the brutishness of their male counterparts in polygamous relationships (Auclert, 2014, p. 28). Bugéja claims that the Muslim Algerian woman 'has no preparation for her milieu [for a life in the outside world]. She is less like a beautiful plant and more like one that must be pruned and trained in order to grow at all.', thereby encouraging a French imperial feminist intervention into the domestic life of Algerian Muslims (Bowlan, 1998, as cited in Kimble, 2006, pp. 121–122). Because the Muslim Algerian woman is alleged to have a 'primitive brain' (ibid.), she is said to need saving from French women in order to reach her 'full potential' or to grow as a person and independently assert herself. This implies that Algerian Muslim women are passive because they rely on outside forces to provide them with the tools for their own emancipation (such as through education). To paraphrase Spivak (1993), this example shows that white women are attempting to save non-white women from non-white men, an endeavor supported by the white man as part of the imperialist project (p. 93).

Quranic law was not just seen as the root of oppression of Muslim Arab women because it allowed polygamy, but also because it was said to condone marriage with minors. By imposing that narrative, French colonizers could reinforce the myth that Muslim Arab men are degenerate and sexual predators, both for their wives and for children, and that Islamic law is oppressive. The allegation that Muslim women are in need of intervention by white women makes them look childish and innocent and worthy of protection from sexual predators by higher-ranked French officials.

The role of French women's campaign against polygamy for demanding the right to vote

French feminists capitalized off the few cases of child marriage that occurred in Algeria among Muslims to emphasize their campaign against Quranic law and the 'personal status law'. Though Islamic law forbade marriage with a minor, French feminists framed the few cases where that law was breached as an issue that lies within Islamic law (Kimble, 2006, pp. 112–113). These cases created an outrage by French feminists and led to them petitioning the French government to apply the Civil Code to its colonies (Kimble, 2006, pp. 112–113). This case shows that instead of letting Muslim Algerian feminists take matters into their own hands and address the issues that lead to child marriage, French feminists imposed their point of view to further their own agenda.

This 'speaking for' Algerian Muslim women and framing polygamy as an issue undermined the efforts of Algerian feminists who had to go against patriarchal structures in their country. Conversely, however, in claiming to defend the cause of Algerian Muslim women against polygamy and positing themselves as being in a prime position because of their 'access' to the colonized, French women could justify their quest for the vote in showing that they can play a role in the French imperialist project or 'mission civilisatrice' (Boittin, 2010, p. 138). Disenfranchised in France until 1944, they attempted to compensate their lack of recognition through engagement in other social causes overseas (Boittin, 2010, p. 134). Repeatedly, they emphasized their crucial role in educating the local population and in advancing the cause of Muslim Algerian women, especially when it comes to 'freeing' them from polygamous relationship structures as has been shown before. Because it could be claimed that Algerian women and children were in need of help, French feminists could claim the right to vote for themselves. More than an imperialist mission, French colonized Algeria provided a ground for the white French women to enforce their agenda and have influence, even though that came at the cost of the dehumanization of Algerians in favor of spurring the campaign of French women for their right to vote.

Conclusion

The creation of a colonized 'Other' in Algeria, particularly Algerian Muslims, was facilitated through the establishment and scientific validation of monogamy and polygamy. Monogamy was seen as a form of consent-based governance, while polygamy was deemed its opposite. Consequently, different levels of citizenship were assigned to the colonized in Algeria based on their proximity to Western monogamy. In French feminist discourse, a gendered aspect was added, which argued that polygamy was nonconsensual due to its conflict with the monogamous nature of women. On the other hand, men's sexuality was framed as more inclined towards polygamy, which was used to justify denying citizenship to them, as they were perceived as oppressing women. The endeavor of educating and 'enlightening' the colonized women on their purported inferior status induced by a polygamous relationship structure reinforced the status of white women and gave them credibility in the struggle for the right to vote.

By exploring how closeness to monogamy led to different citizenship statuses, the paper contributes to the growing field of social science research on the importance of relationship status for citizenship. Additionally, the paper highlights the processes of gendering and racialization, making clear that understanding how citizenship rights were gained for French women also involved racializing polygamy. This multi-faceted account of citizenship rights and oppression of the colonized 'Other' in Algeria opens new avenues for further research, including the area of citizenship rights for immigrating polygamous families in France, which is policed through the Pasqua-

Debré law (Légifrance, 1993). Investigating racialized and gendered discourses surrounding polygamous family structures in the context of immigration from previously colonized countries to France is an under-researched area that is relevant to understanding minority citizenship rights.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Trial and Error: Nuance of Pornographic Research

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Abstract

Pornography distribution has undergone a massive change in the age of information. It is far more accessible, cheaper, and anonymous than it was before. Due to these advances in distribution, the popularity and use of Pornography skyrocketed, providing possibilities for sexual exploration and satisfaction to more people than ever. Yet, despite its large popularity, the effects of Pornography are largely still unclear. Studies that researched the subject have had contradictive and contested results. Without clear results, it is difficult to combat the problematic effects of pornography, if they exist. Therefore, this article aims to provide four different aspects or points of contention, which can explain the inconsistency of results. These are: theoretical background, internet use, consumer type, and variety of pornography. As such, I claim that in future studies, these should be considered so that there is a higher chance of consistent results. In conclusion, I argue that studies should not over-generalize any of these points of contention and should focus on analysing smaller groups of users, rather than looking for general trends.

Keywords

Sexually Explicit Material, Pornography, Violent behaviour, Sexual Script Theory

Introduction

With the onset of the information age, pornography has become more widely available than ever before. It is cheaper, faster, and more discreet than previous analogue versions. Furthermore, the variety of pornography one can access has also increased, as the industry grew with the influx of consumers and the logistical practicality of the internet, where all kinds of pornography can be found simply by googling them. It is evident that the developments of modern technology have changed the pornographic industry, and the way and type of pornography people watch.

A growing body of studies has dealt with the effect modern pornography has on a consumer. The results of these studies, however, are inconsistent. Some show a correlation with problematic behavior (e.g. Kim & Ward, 2004; Kunaharan et al., 2020; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006), and other studies show a positive effect on sexual self-exploration and curiosity. Some studies deny any connection whatsoever, stating that the connections found in other studies are a result of faulty methodology (e.g. Ferguson & Hartley, 2022). As evident, there is ongoing confusion in this field of study. Without clear results, there is no way to determine the effects of pornography. In turn no action can be taken to prevent any negative effects if these are proven to exist. Therefore, this literature

review aims to highlight possible points of contention, as to why this body of studies has mixed results. Through an extensive analysis of studies, we have summarized five factors of influence. The article will first analyse the definitions of pornography and its known effects. Furthermore, it will elaborate on four factors or "Points of Contention". These are addressed as the following: Theory, Internet, Consumer and SEM Variety. Methodology as a factor of influence is excluded from these points of contention, as it has already been analysed and proven to affect results in this specific field of research (Ferguson & Hartley, 2022).

The structure if the literature review is as follows, firstly, I will briefly explain the method used for finding and comparing studies. Secondly, I will present four different points of contention, which I conclude are possible reasons for different results I studies. Lastly, I will conclude the review with a general suggestion on how to approach this field in future, as to have a higher chance of getting valid and reliable results.

Methodology

I gathered information through an extensive investigation of a large body of relevant research articles. Studies were firstly gathered through Google Scholar and Web of Science search engines. Afterward, additional studies were identified based on their citations in studies gathered through search engines. These articles were analyzed based on their definition of pornography and whether they found a connection between pornography and behavior. Altogether we analyzed 43 articles. After analyzing the articles based on these two factors, we grouped the articles together based on the factors which differentiated them from each other. This was done through a framework matrix. Through our analysis we found that the most prevalent distinctions articles differ on are factors of theoretical basis, sample type, whether they included online pornography, whether they accounted for different kinds of pornography and different kinds of methodology. After discovering these factors, we found additional information on each of them and attempt to provide an explanation as to why these factors or "points of contention" may affect the results of a study.

Definition and Effects of Pornography

We refer to pornography as sexually explicit material or SEM based on the term's use in previous studies (Carrol et al., 2008; Malamuth & Impett, 2001; Morgan, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). SEM encompasses media that tries to increase sexual arousal with images of nudity and/or sexual behavior (Morgan, 2011). These images are meant to enhance the sexual fantasy and are not predominantly grounded in reality nor would the consumer necessarily enjoy these depictions in real life (Weinberg et al., 2010).

Previous studies have cautioned that the majority of SEM depicts physically aggressive behavior (Bridges et al., 2010) as well as female subordination (Bridges et al., 2010; Brosius et al., 1993; Dines, 2010; Jensen & Dines, 1998; Sun et al., 2016). These depictions are argued to affect a person's sexual attitudes and behavior (Kim & Ward, 2004; Kunaharan et al., 2020; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Studies have shown that early exposure to SEM can lead to promiscuity and risky sexual behaviors (e.g. Braun- Courville & Rojas, 2009; Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Carroll et al., 2008; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006) and a loss of the distinction between porn and reality (Peter and Valkenburg, 2008 a, b, Peter and Valkenburg 2010). Furthermore, multiple studies have found a connection between the consumption of SEM and decreased sexual satisfaction with, and attraction to real-life partners (e.g.

Zillmann & Bryant, 1988; Sun et al., 2016; Morgan, 2011, Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). SEM contributes to sexual aggression (Ferguson & Hartley, 2009; Fisher & Kohut, 2017; Linz, 1985) and is also associated with a preference for porn-like sex (Miller et al., 2019 a, Morgan, 2011; Sun et al., 2016) and expectations for porn-like sex (Miller et al., 2019 b). Considering that the majority of SEM is aggressive (Bridges et al., 2010), these preferences and expectations for porn-like sex point to a worrying trend.

Consequently, under the influence of SEM, people expect more aggressive types of sexual behavior from their partners. While aggressive behavior is not inherently bad, we must note, that it is problematic when inexperienced adolescents under the influence of SEM begin to internalize SEM expectations through their continuous consumption of SEM content. This can lead to a distorted view of vital concepts like consent, communication, dominance etc. Due to this distorted view, there is a danger that consent will not be asked, and boundaries will not be respected leading to risky and coercive sexual relations, which can cause trauma to the parties involved. It is imperative to also recognize that the victim party in the majority of these cases are women and girls (Mumford et al., 2020; Sobsey et al., 1991), who are expected to fulfill the expectations of men who are the predominant consumers of SEM (Carrol et al., 2008; Hald, 2006; Johansson and Hammarén, 2007). As researchers, we are obligated to consider this possibility and warn the institutions responsible for adolescent care about this worrying trend of adopting aggressive sexual expectations.

However, SEM is not uniform, behavior exhibited in them varies. Studies that solely measure SEM use (as those cited above), cannot portray an accurate effect of SEM, just the general trends of the majority (Sun et al., 2016; Morgan, 2011). Multiple studies have highlighted the positive effects of SEM, like sexual education and sexual self-exploration (e.g. Hesse & Pedersen, 2017; Tiefer, 2004; Weinberg et al., 2010). Furthermore, people tend to view their experiences with porn positively (e.g. Ciclitira, 2004; Hald & Malamuth, 2008; Loftus, 2002). The effects of SEM, therefore, are varied, and there is no clear distinction that would determine it to be solely problematic, however, enough studies have shown a worrying trend, so a cautious approach is warranted. Furthermore, the difference in findings can be a result of using varying supporting theories or, as Ferguson and Hartley emphasize, lackluster methodologies (2022).

By the majority, we mean that these studies aggregate information from individuals who belong to different subgroups of society, without necessarily distinguishing between them. Furthermore, the same can be stated about the SEM content itself, there are very different kinds of SEM available online. Therefore, because the consumers and the provided product can vary, simply looking at the overall trends may not provide a clear or even truthful picture of the situation. For example, some subgroups may consume non-aggressive SEM, and do not experience any change in their expectations, furthermore, they may even benefit their personal life. Multiple studies have highlighted the positive effects of SEM, like sexual education and sexual self-exploration (e.g. Hesse and Pedersen, 2017; Tiefer, 2004; Weinberg et al., 2010). Furthermore, people tend to view their experiences with porn positively (e.g. Ciclitira, 2004; Hald and Malamuth, 2008; Loftus, 2002). The effects of SEM, therefore, are varied, and there is no clear distinction that would determine it to be solely problematic.

Varied results, however, are not a reason to disregard the results of the cited studies. The potential harmful effects of SEM consumption should still be considered, and preventative action should be taken by government institutions to ensure that expectations for SEM like intercourse do not become expected. This is especially dangerous for adolescents, as it can lead to dangerous behaviour such as disregarding consent and not respecting boundaries. Similarly, the studies citing SEM content as a way to explore sexuality should also still be considered, as they may provide benefits for queer individuals. The inconclusive as well as sometimes being methodologically unsound (Ferguson and Hartley, 2022) results of studies on the influence of SEM are not a justification to disregard the consequences these may have. Preventative measure should be taken regardless of whether the academic field agrees.

First Point of Contention: Theory

The above-mentioned studies explain the connection between SEM and its effects, through two different theories. These theories are the crucial mechanism, through which the studies explain why and how SEM is connected with people's behavior. Furthermore, they serve as a possible explanation for why studies produce different results.
Sexual script theory or SST is the first of these approaches, it derives from social learning theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Crucial to SST is the concept of social constructionism, which deigns reality because of shared beliefs within a social group (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Essentially SST states, that SEM serves as a heuristic script we learn through watching SEM, which we apply to our real-world sexual interactions. So, the behaviour an individual exhibits during coitus will be the one they are familiar with because they have seen that behaviour in SEM content. Not all scripts are accepted, however, as people tend to select scripts that are more accepted within their societies (Weinberg et al., 2010), such studies using this theory doubt that the most extreme scripts will be accepted. Neither will they be re-enacted exactly as they are seen in the SEM content. SST provides a sensible explanation, as to why SEM can cause a behavior change, while to an extent accounting for the nuance of the varying human behavior under the effect of similar SEM content.

Two sociobiological (or evolutionary) approaches were present within the body of studies we have analyzed, Adult Attachment Theory and The Coolidge effect. Adult attachment theory (AAT) was developed by Hazan and Shaver based on the Attachment theory by Bowlby (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The theory states that the romantic behavior of adults is a result of how they were treated in their childhood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). This approach believes that certain types of attachment styles (avoidant and anxious) are more prone to SEM and that these attachment styles represent the third variable, which affects both SEM use and behavior (Park, Blomkvist & Mahmut, 2021). The other approach is the Coolidge effect, which states that males view SEM because they are programmed to seek new mates, as that helps them spread their genes (Wilson, Kuehn & Beach, 1963). Current research on this effect is skeptical (Sculley & Watkins, 2022), however it is not refuted.

These theories are relevant as they highlight and attempt to explain the behavior and SEM influence or use. Yet they differ in how these variables interact with one another. Sociobiological approaches differ from SST, as they do not believe SEM to affect behavior, instead, they claim a third variable, the combination of a person's biological disposition and childhood is the underlying variable affecting both SEM consumption and behavior. With different

underlying mechanisms of interaction, results cannot be interpreted similarly and differences in results emerge, hence theory is a crucial point of contention for the difference in results.

The Second Point of Contention: Internet

The Internet is a vital component of the massive popularity SEM has. In July of 2023, the top five websites that distribute free pornography altogether measured online traffic of 30.4 billion visits from a little less than seven billion unique users (Semrush Traffic Analyticsm, 2024). Along with the development of the Internet, pornography has become more popular, diverse, and accessible (Ogas and Gaddam, 2011). Internet SEM attracts a massive global audience, as well as creating more frequent pornography use (Buhi al., 2009). Furthermore, adolescents often use the Internet to find health information, which can include sexual topics (Rideout, 2001). However, it can also expose them to abnormal sexual media and interests (Nixon and Düsterhöft, 2017).

The Internet is, therefore, a vital component of how we interact with sexuality and SEM content and should be examined when considering the mixed results of previous studies. The reason why the Internet affects the use, frequency of use, age of the user, and sexual interests can be explained by the Triple-A engine (Cooper, 1998). The triple-A engine stands for affordability, accessibility, and anonymity. Cooper (1998) argues that the Internet enables users' easy access to stimulation no matter the time, is free, therefore, affordable, and anonymous. The model explains all the above-mentioned findings. SEM has grown in popularity as it is now cheap and constantly available to people through their electronic devices. Adolescents encounter it sooner, as they stumble upon it through the use of the Internet. The anonymity provides individuals with the ability to explore their sexual interests without fearing public exposure or humiliation. Lastly, it is more difficult to resist the impulse of consuming SEM (Cooper, 1998), if it is constantly available to you for free. The connection between Internet SEM or Internet Pornography (IP) is further elaborated on by Wetterneck and his colleagues (2012). To clarify, the terms internet SEM and IP are interchangeable, but the IP and SEM are not, as SEM also encompasses offline forms of pornography (Malamuth & Impett, 2001). They propose a more nuanced view of how the Internet changed the consumption of SEM. They built on the work of Young (1999), who introduces the component of addiction to Cooper's (1998) Triple A engine.

According to Young (1999), IP consumption can lead to a form of Internet Addiction. Based on how people can get addicted to IP, Wetterneck and colleagues research how compulsion and impulsion are connected to IP use. They found that the IP enables addictive behavior by making consumers more prone to SEM addiction through a cycle of using IP on impulse to relieve sexual urges. This use of IP then become perpetuated through physiological reinforcement, leading to more use of IP. To explain the mechanism behind this cycle, they refer to sexual impulsivity and compulsivity (Wetterneck et al., 2012). Although the exact relationship is still unclear, their findings support the model where sexual impulsivity is the trigger for consuming IP and sexual compulsivity is the mechanism that perpetuates the behavior. Whether there exists a feedback loop between IP use and impulsivity is unclear (Wetterneck et al., 2012). The study of how IP affect impulsivity and compulsivity is part of a larger body of studies, which study IP addiction as a sub-category of Internet Addiction. The consensus of these is that SEM distributed over the Internet is a different consumer relationship than other forms of SEM consumption. The original Triple A Engine as proposed by Cooper (1998), which highlights the accessibility, affordability and

anonymity is crucial for this claim. It is important to be aware that this engine does not simply work for the consumer but also for the provider. The selling of SEM became faster and more efficient due to development of the Internet. The "adult section" of a local video rental shop can hardly compete with Pornhub.com. An almost endless source of new SEM, which can constantly entertain your brain with new forms SEM, which is accessible at the tip of your fingers. It is evident that the Internet plays a vital role in how SEM affect consumers.

Therefore, we believe it crucial to consider the Internet a vital component of contemporary SEM use. The use of Internet SEM although unregulated, should not be considered as solely negative or positive. Due to its vast and diverse use, its effect cannot be generalized. Wetterneck and colleagues (2012) found that problematic SEM use is associated with both positive and negative effects. One of the findings of Internet SEM is that individuals can explore abnormal sexual interests, in other words, explore their sexuality. Exposure to SEM can sexually empower individuals and normalize unconventional sexual behaviors (Weinberg et al., 2010) and is a safer alternative for queer consumers, compared to other mediums (Grov et al., 2008). *Hence, the internet serves as a great liberator for those, who do not fit the norm, providing a possibility to express themselves and explore their sexuality when that is not possible in the real world.* On the other hand, this same freedom to explore sexuality also allows for the consumption of questionable SEM content such as rape fantasies, child pornography, and bestiality (Harrison and Ogden, 2018) . Therefore, we must again exercise caution when determining the benefits and problems of SEM. Regardless of the benefits or faults though, it is evident that future studies should consider whether their research participants consume SEM through the Internet and how that may affect their behavior. Given the profound impact of the Internet on the accessibility, frequency, and nature of SEM consumption, it becomes clear that failing to account for the medium through which pornography is accessed may be a key reason behind the inconsistent findings in research on its potential link to violent behavior.

Third Point of Contention: Consumer

It is important to keep in mind that the type of SEM content that is produced is to an extent determined by the consumers. The more views, comments, and likes (in other words, engagement) a SEM product generates, the bigger the incentive to create more. As such it is vital, that we understand who consumes SEM. Gender, low impulse control, and dark triad traits all correlate with higher SEM use. Men tend to use more SEM (Carrol et al., 2008; Hald, 2006; Johansson and Hammarén, 2007) and begin to use it at a younger age (Carrol et al., 2008). They also get more aroused by SEM than women (Paul, 2009) and tend to consume it alone, while women prefer to consume it with a partner (Ferree, 2003; Hald, 2006; Johansson and Hammarén, 2007). Bigger consumption of SEM by men is often attributed to most SEM being tailored for male fantasies (Brosius, Weaver, and Staab, 1993; Jensen and Dines, 2013), which often include male dominance and female submission. Similar fantasies could potentially also be associated with individuals with low impulse control and dark triad traits, both of which have been associated with higher SEM use (Egan and Parmar, 2013; Burtăverde et al., 2021). Many studies did focus solely on young men (e.g. Egan and Parmar, 2013; Sun et al., 2016 Miller et al., 2019 a). Yet as seen in the report from the Year 2023 in review from Pornhub, the consumer base is varied. Young adults from 18 - 34 make up 53 percent of all users. Furthermore, men make up 64 percent of all users. As such, there is a large body of SEM consumers who are excluded from studies. These consumers may be affected by SEM differently compared to the young male population, and these differences may contribute to the varied results of studies examining the

connection between SEM and behavior. This highlights how overlooking the diversity of SEM consumers may distort findings and contribute to the inconsistency in research outcomes regarding pornography's potential link to violent behavior.

Fourth Point of Contention: Variety of SEM

As previously established, the effects of SEM on sexual preferences and behaviour are mixed and further research that differentiates types of SEM is needed so that correlations become more transparent. A crucial medium of SEM, that has not received the necessary attention it needs, is hentai. The unique properties of Hentai SEM will serve as an example of why separating SEM content is necessary. Hentai is the most searched term for online pornography, as evidenced by the yearly insights of Pornhub (2023, 2022, 2021), its popularity is on the rise since 2004 (Walker, Makin and Morczek, 2016). The term originates from Japan, where it is used to describe the most extreme types of animated SEM (Ortega-Brena, 2008), literally translating to »abnormal sexual desires« (McLelland, 2006). Globally, however, it is used to describe all animated SEM (Paasonen, 2017).

It is considered a type of paraphilia called fictophilia (Bhugra, Popelyuk and McMullen, 2010) and it is considered to be more prevalent among men (Bhugra, Popelyuk and McMullen, 2010; Långström and Seto, 2006).The genre differs from other SEM as it is presented through animation, comic books, video games, etc. (Freedman, 2020). Freed from realistic bodies and legal limitations (Kunaharan et al., 2020), hentai creates fantastic and unrealistic narratives often involving non-human beings (demons, monsters, tentacles, etc.) as well as physically impossible sexual acts (e.g. Paasonen, 2017; Ortega-Brena, 2008; Josephy-Hernández, 2015). Harrington and Neilson (2009) found that inflicting pain on the female body is often shown in hentai. Some hentai borders on or outright depicts otherwise illegal SEM (Ortega-Brena, 2008), such as child pornography otherwise known as lolicon hentai (Galbraith, 2011). Because hentai can be more problematic than other traditional versions of SEM, we believe it is crucial to analyse it separately.

Few studies have dealt with hentai, a recent study done by Almeida (2023) discovered a connection between the frequency of hentai use and sexually aggressive behaviour in both genders and a connection between the intensity of hentai use and sexually aggressive behaviour through the mediation of rape myths. A different study noted that hentai use had no effect on attraction to real humans, only on attraction to and a romantic desire for animated characters (Park, Blomkvist and Mahmut, 2021). Lastly, Harrison and Ogden (2018) highlight that hentai allows people to explore sexuality more freely, than traditional SEM. However, it is important to consider that this sexual exploration can include child pornography (Galbraith, 2011). Lastly, studies done by Almeida (2023) and Park, Blomkvist and Mahmut (2021) both emphasize the lack of research on this topic. As evident from these studies, even the effects from one type of SEM are different, therefore, a further specification regarding typology of SEM is needed. Furthermore, Hentai functions as a medium through which SEM is portrayed, rather than defining the specific content of the material. As such, it often overlaps with other SEM genres and preferences. Therefore, distinguishing between different types of Hentai is essential for more accurate analysis and understanding.

As proof of its controversial nature, attempts have been made by the Australian government to ban all Japanese hentai. The government decided that this was the best course of action to prevent the distribution of child pornography (Butler, 2020). However, even if physical products are stopped, the content is still widely available online even with governmental barriers in place. Furthermore, a government cannot affect the production of said

material, if it is being produced legally in another country, leaving it unable to affect the production of hentai SEM. Hentai is crucially different from other forms of SEM, as it presents unique scenarios, otherwise not depicted. This different content makes it difficult to argue, that the effect of this SEM is similar to the effects of other SEM forms. It serves as an example, as to why SEM differentiation is crucial for a deeper understanding of the connection between SEM and the consumer. As such, hentai exemplifies why differentiating between types and mediums of SEM is essential, as failure to do so may obscure important distinctions in content and consumer impact, ultimately contributing to the inconsistent results found in studies examining the link between SEM and violent behavior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, all four points of contention can affect the results of any study done in this field. Firstly, by choosing either SST or sociobiological approaches, the assumed connections between SEM and behavior begin to differentiate. This variation in connection leads to researchers making different assumptions and getting different results. Secondly, overlooking the significant influence of the Internet leads to similar shortcomings in outcomes, as it has become a central channel through which SEM content is accessed and consumed. Thirdly, analyzing different consumer types is necessary, as current studies have focused solely on the majority, neglecting large groups of users that differ from the majority and are not represented in research. Lastly, as shown through the example of Hentai, the type of SEM consumed is crucial, as the behavior presented in SEM varies depending on the type of SEM it is. These points of contention justify a more nuanced approach to researching the connection between SEM and behavior. However, by only analyzing specific kinds of SEM or consumers, studies cannot make general assumptions about the relationship between SEM and behavior, therefore, these specified studies tend to be less appealing compared to generalized studies. Despite this, we believe that specificity is crucial, as assuming a simplified view of any of these points of contention will lead to a generalized finding, which will continue to be inconsistent with other studies. Therefore, in future studies, we recommend that researchers focus on specific cases of SEM use rather than general studies of the entire population.

Conflict of Interests

There are no identifiable conflicts of interest.

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Closing Statement

Universities are supposed to be spaces of inquiry, imagination, and critical thought, but in recent years, those ideals have come under threat. In the Netherlands and beyond, higher education is feeling the squeeze of budget cuts, and the consequences are real. Programs shrink, staff are let go, and opportunities for students to thrive, especially those just entering academia, begin to dry up.

In times like these, projects like the Amsterdam Journal of Social Sciences take on a new kind of importance. When resources are scarce, student-led initiatives often become lifelines. They offer spaces to imagine alternative academic futures, particularly for those who are often hit hardest by austerity: international students, early-career scholars, and anyone without a prebuilt network in academia. It's a reminder that students can, and must, create the conditions they need to succeed. That means not waiting for permission to share ideas, not relying on overstretched institutions to open doors, but building new ones altogether. While we're lucky to have received support from the University of Amsterdam, the core of this project has always been students supporting one another.

As we close this chapter, we do so with both pride and urgency. Pride in what we've built together. Urgency, because we know this kind of work is needed now more than ever. Here's to continuing that work, on the page, in print, and beyond.

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