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**WHAT IS SEXUAL PLEASURE?: NON-MONOGAMOUS
PEOPLE’S DEFINITIONS**

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Resumo

O prazer sexual é um indicador relevante do bem-estar sexual. Tem sido frequentemente associado a outros constructos como o orgasmo, a satisfação e o próprio bem-estar. No entanto, todos estes são aspetos individuais da vida sexual das pessoas, e cada um merece ser explorado de forma independente. As definições de prazer sexual têm sido baseadas em visões teóricas de especialistas, deixando de lado as experiências pessoais de prazer sexual das pessoas. Além disso, os estudos sobre este tema parecem centrar-se principalmente nas relações diádicas.

O objetivo deste estudo foi compreender a definição de prazer sexual partilhado numa amostra de pessoas que se envolvem em relações consensualmente não monogâmicas (CNM) através de uma análise temática reflexiva. Para o efeito, foram selecionados 96 participantes de um estudo maior, de acordo com a sua configuração relacional.

Através de uma análise temática reflexiva, identificámos cinco temas: "Zona de Conforto"; "Ligação Emocional"; "Práticas Gratificantes"; "Sensações Relevantes"; e "Abertura à Experiência". Os nossos resultados reforçam uma visão multidimensional e holística do prazer sexual, dada a diversidade de fatores mencionados pelos nossos participantes nas suas respostas. Segurança, comunicação, conexão, satisfação, práticas específicas e exploração estão entre as respostas mais frequentes.

Os resultados corroboram as definições anteriores de prazer sexual, ao mesmo tempo que fornecem uma abordagem mais específica e complexa sobre este constructo. Embora a nossa amostra inclua apenas pessoas que se envolvem em relações de CNM, não houve menções a práticas específicas deste tipo de configuração relacional.

Palavras-chave: *prazer sexual, não-monogamia consensual, análise temática*

Abstract

Sexual pleasure is a relevant indicator of sexual well-being. It has frequently been associated with other constructs such as orgasm, satisfaction, and well-being itself. However, these are all individual aspects of people's sexual lives, and each deserves to be explored independently. The definitions of sexual pleasure have been based on experts' theoretical views, leaving people's personal experiences of sexual pleasure aside. Furthermore, the studies on this topic seem to mainly focus on dyadic relationships.

The aim of this study was to understand the definition of partnered sexual pleasure in a sample of people who engage in consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships through a reflexive thematic analysis. For this purpose we selected 96 participants from a larger study according to their relational configuration.

Through a reflective thematic analysis, we identified five themes: "Comfort Zone"; "Emotional Bonding"; "Fulfilling Practices"; "Relevant Sensations"; and "Openness to Experience". Our findings reinforce a multidimensional and holistic view on sexual pleasure, given the diversity of factors mentioned by our participants in their responses. Safety, security, communication, connection, satisfaction, specific practices, and exploration are amongst the most frequent answers. The results support previous definitions of sexual pleasure, while providing a more specific and complex approach on this construct. Although our sample only includes people who engage in CNM relationships, there were no mentions of specific practices of this type of relational configuration.

Key-words: sexual pleasure, consensual non-monogamy, thematic analysis

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Introduction

Sexual pleasure is a construct that has often been associated with other aspects of people's sexual experience, such as satisfaction (Pascoal et al., 2013), and orgasm (Opperman et al., 2014). However, satisfaction reports to the appreciation that each individual makes of one's sexual life as a whole, and therefore can be present without sexual activity, while sexual pleasure refers to the emotional and/or psychological experience connected to sexual activity. Furthermore, orgasm is not a synonym of sexual pleasure, but a moment in which pleasure is experienced in a more intense way (Opperman et al., 2014). Hence, these are different concepts, and each deserves to be studied individually.

To obtain a deeper understanding of why pleasure matters, we can look at the extensive analysis on the reasons why people engage in sexual activities, in which Meston and Buss (2007) concluded that the feeling of pleasure is amongst the most frequent. Furthermore, Anderson's (2013) literature review allowed the author to find a positive relation between sexual pleasure and mental health, physical health, sexual health, and overall well-being. In their study, Ford et al. (2019) obtained data consistent with this view, designating pleasure as a fundamental motivation for participation in sexual practices, pointing out pleasure as an important part of sexual health. The authors also argue that untying sexual pleasure from health is unrealistic and detached from people's desires and worries and that pleasure is a key component of well-being and, therefore, its promotion and recognition are fundamental (Ford et al., 2019). Sexual pleasure should be a basic universal requirement for everyone (Gruskin, 2019) and the pursuit of sexual pleasure is a part of sexual rights (Maticka-Tyndale & Smylie, 2008). The World Association for Sexual Health (WAS) (2019) also stated that "sexual pleasure is a fundamental part of sexual rights as a matter of human rights".

Jones (2018), from a feminist and queer intersectional point of view, examined the lack of discourses about pleasure in the scientific community. The author also points out that most research about sexuality is written based on heteronormativity and focused on dysfunction and disease, leaving sexual pleasure behind. In addition, most studies on this field tend to neglect social minorities regarding race, age, gender, sexual identity and class. Hence, researchers in this field must explore human sexuality in the most meticulous way possible (Jones, 2018).

The study of sexual pleasure has also mostly been conducted from a heteronormative perspective centered on penile-vaginal intercourse, excluding other types of sexual activity, such as masturbation (Barnett & Melugin, 2016). However, Goldey et al. (2016) found that there is a significant distinction between solitary pleasure and shared pleasure in women, one being strongly linked to eroticism and autonomy and the other associated mostly to trust, closeness, and nurturance, respectively. Masturbation is a sexual practice of exploration and self-knowledge that promotes increased sexual pleasure, and its frequent practice allows for greater effectiveness in sexual stimulation (Carvalheira & Leal, 2013); (Rowland et al., 2019).

A first theoretical model on sexual pleasure has been developed by Werner et al. (2023), in which the authors state that pleasure is a multifaceted concept that can be categorized both as a state and a trait, the first referring to a momentary and contextual experience of sexual pleasure, and the second to the tendency some people have to experience sexual pleasure on their sexual encounters overall. Although this model has yet to be tested, it offers a different and innovative view that can help researchers have a more in-depth understanding of the inherent processes of sexual pleasure and how people experience it.

Socio-cultural context

Although this is not the main focus of our study, some socio-cultural factors must be taken into account when studying sexual pleasure. It should be noted that power discrepancies between genders lead to differences in the experience of sexual pleasure, particularly in the limitation of women's sexual pleasure (Laan et al., 2021). Throughout time, women have reported that it is important to “give” their male partners pleasure and orgasm, possibly at the expense of their own pleasure (Nicholson & Burr, 2003) and tended to value the sexual pleasure of their partners more, disregarding and having little expectations towards their own pleasure (Petersen & Hyde, 2011). This view is reinforced by Klein et al. (2022), who found higher levels of sexual pleasure in men compared to women, observing that pleasure is present in men's lives as something common and constant, while in women it is less prioritized and, therefore, less frequent. Furthermore, sexual minority women and other gender sexual minorities have been linked to higher chances of experiencing orgasm coercion than sexual majority women and men and sexual minority men (Chadwick & van Anders, 2022). It is therefore essential to continue promoting gender equality in order to improve overall sexual experiences, and pleasure in particular, especially in women.

Besides being influenced by gender differences, sexual pleasure can also be affected by a person's beliefs about sexuality. In this regard, there is a great influence of sex education on the experience of sexuality in adulthood. Sex education programs in schools that cover more than abstinence-only contribute to a healthier experience of sexuality (Brotto, 2018). Laan et al. (2021) argue that sexuality education should openly explore aspects of sexuality that allow young people to learn about pleasure and how to experience it, and not be limited to a reproductive and sexual risk-focused approach. Health professionals should also be educated on sexuality issues in order to provide

information that allows access to pleasure for all, regardless of age, sociodemographic characteristics or sexual identity (Gruskin et al., 2019).

Consensually non-monogamous people

Studies concerning human sexuality have been repeating a pattern of sticking to a mononormative perspective, and CNM relationships have been neglected from a scientific point of view. The studies that do exist about this population have focused primarily on their relational contexts, such as types of non-monogamy (Cardoso & Klesse, 2022) and relational satisfaction (Klesse, 2006). Regarding their sexuality and the way these people experience it, there has been a focus on motivations to engage in sexual activities (Kelberga & Martinsone, 2021) and on sexual satisfaction (Mitchell et al., 2020) which, as noted above, is a different construct from sexual pleasure. On the other hand, CNM has been getting more attention and is starting to be viewed as a way of getting more of people's needs met, through the engagement in multiple relationships at the same time (Balzarini & Lab, 2020). CNM people are an understudied yet growing population, therefore it is important that we can start to have a deeper understanding of how these people experience their sexuality, especially when it comes to sexual pleasure. Paving the way in the scientific community for this population's experience of sexual pleasure will allow mental health professionals to have greater theoretical knowledge about their specificities and thus carry out more effective psychological assessments and interventions.

Previous Definitions

A number of definitions of sexual pleasure have been developed over time, and we are going to consider some of them. In 2007, De la Garza-Mercer stated that:

“Sexual pleasure primarily refers to the positive physical and subjective sensation and emotional experience resulting from stimulation of the genitals, breasts, and other erogenous zones” (De la Garza-Mercer, 2007, p. 108; cf. Abramson & Pinkerton 2002).

The author appropriates this perspective with the intention of facilitating his discussion on the history of sexual pleasure and this description illustrates a generalized conception of pleasure that was used at that time where the emphasis is on the stimulation of erogenous zones.

The Global Advisory Board’s (GAB) (2016) working definition of sexual pleasure offers a more complex and detailed view. They declare that:

“Sexual pleasure is the physical and/or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment derived from solitary or shared erotic experiences, including thoughts, dreams, and autoeroticism. Self-determination, consent, safety, privacy, confidence, and the ability to communicate and negotiate sexual relations are key enabling factors for pleasure to contribute to sexual health and wellbeing. Sexual pleasure should be exercised within the context of sexual rights, particularly the rights to equality and non-discrimination, autonomy and bodily integrity, the right to the highest attainable standard of health and freedom of expression. The experiences of human sexual pleasure are diverse and sexual rights ensure that pleasure is a positive experience for all concerned and not obtained by violating other people’s human rights and wellbeing.” (GAB, 2016).

This definition is considerably more complex and demonstrates that pleasure is a much richer and more complex concept than previous notions made it to be. The authors refer to pleasure as both an individual and shared experience, and they mention cognitions as a part of this experience. Additionally, this perspective includes social factors that refer to shared experiences of consent, safety, security, and communication, which are significant indicators of healthy human interactions and contribute to sexual health and well-being. Finally, a valuable view is brought to attention on societal aspects such as

bodily integrity, freedom of expression and sexual rights, which are fundamental human rights.

More recently, WAS (2021) provided this updated version of the previous definition:

“Sexual pleasure is the physical and/or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment derived from shared or solitary erotic experiences, including thoughts, fantasies, dreams, emotions, and feelings. Self-determination, consent, safety, privacy, confidence and the ability to communicate and negotiate sexual relations are key enabling factors for pleasure to contribute to sexual health and well-being. Sexual pleasure should be exercised within the context of sexual rights, particularly the rights to equality and non-discrimination, autonomy and bodily integrity, the right to the highest attainable standard of health and freedom of expression. The experiences of human sexual pleasure are diverse and sexual rights ensure that pleasure is a positive experience for all concerned and not obtained by violating other people’s human rights and well-being” (World Association for Sexual Health, 2021).

Here, the authors decided to complement the GAB’s (2016) definition with emotions and feelings, which illustrates that pleasure can be viewed as an even more multifaceted process than previously thought to be.

Given these different definitions, we point out a shared characteristic they all present – these were developed by experts according to purely theoretical research on the topic of sexual pleasure. Thus, it is important to find a definition based on lay people’s views of sexual pleasure regarding their own lifelong experiences, in order to obtain a thorough perspective on what people really need in order to experience pleasure in a way that is satisfactory and, consequently, contributes to their overall well-being. Since a robust theoretical reference model about sexual pleasure is yet to be built, we are at an exploratory stage. With this study, we aim to understand the underlying processes and

characteristics of partnered pleasure experienced by people in CNM relationships: how it happens, its specific features and what differentiates it from other constructs.

Method

Recruitment

The present study was part of a bigger research project resulting from a collaboration between the Lusophone University of Humanities and Technologies, the Portuguese Society of Clinical Sexology, the Pedagogical Sex Museum (MUSEX) (<https://musex.pt/>), and Generator (<https://gerador.eu/>). The qualitative data was collected through an online survey presented in Portuguese that was shared on social media between January and March of 2023. To be a part of the study, participants had to (1) be over 18 years old; and (2) have good comprehension and expression of the Portuguese language. For the purpose of our study, only people who reported to be in a CNM relationship configuration at the time of response were selected.

Participants

We selected 96 participants from the larger dataset based on their self-described engagement in consensually non-monogamous relationships. The mean age was 37.37 years (SD = 12.05) ranging from 19 to 74. Most participants identified as heterosexual (46,3%), followed by bisexual (18,9%), queer (10,5%), “other” (7,4% further specifying as asexual, demisexual, heteroflexible and pansexual), gay (6,3%), “without label” (4,2%), lesbian (3,2%) and “questioning” (3,2%).

In terms of education, most of the respondents had a college degree or higher levels of education (70,5%), whereas the rest had at least completed high school or an equivalent formation level (29,5%).

Procedure

The larger study was approved by the research center's ethics and deontology committee (i.e., Comissão de Ética e Deontologia da Investigação Científica da Escola de Psicologia e Ciências da Vida da Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias). The online survey was developed and pilot tested for language use and usability, and was revised according to feedback to ensure engagement and in-depth responses. Commentaries resulted in changes in format (font size) and the inclusion of examples unrelated to the topic to avoid priming participants of rich responses that fit the purposes of a reflexive qualitative analysis. Then, it was deployed through the Qualtrics platform for the purpose of the larger study, containing both quantitative and qualitative sections and shared through social media. Before answering the survey, participants were advised to read the informed consent page, in which they were presented with the study aims, the component parts of the survey, researcher's identification and contact information, inclusion criteria, and the anonymous and confidential nature of the collected data, stating that they could not be identified at any moment, as well as their IP address. They were also informed that inclusive language would be used to assure the survey's inclusion to people of all genders.

After consenting to participate in the study, respondents began to answer sociodemographic questions about their age, gender identity, nationality, residency, sexual orientation, education level, relationship configuration, and religion. Next, they proceeded to answer the qualitative parts of the study, including different scales and questionnaires. Finally, they answered the open question which forms the basis of the present study: "According to your experience, how would you define sexual pleasure derived from activity with other people? If it does not apply to your experience, please indicate that it does not apply to your experience".

Data Analysis

We followed the procedures of Braun and Clarke (2023) for reflexive thematic analysis. This is a flexible method that allows researchers to create broad themes through the analyses of patterns perceived in primarily generated codes. In the present study, we followed an inductive approach, starting from the data to reach our final themes. The first phase of the analysis was the familiarization with the data through repeated reading. Then, we proceeded to code the data, creating semantic codes (i.e., labeling data using specific words or expressions used by the individuals), and latent codes (i.e., extracting underlying patterns of meaning from the participants' quotes to create labels), which allowed us to find some patterns of meaning, developing the codes into initial themes. Next, the coding was revisited and improved with the help of co-authors, leading to a new set of themes. We established brief theme definitions to have a better understanding of what each theme represented. After revisiting the themes several times, we reached agreement and made some final adjustments, which resulted in themes being merged together, defining the final theme names and creating subthemes that made sense according to our data. Finally, the theme definitions were further elaborated, resulting in more in-depth descriptions of what they encompass according to our data. We presented excerpts identifying the participants' age, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Results

Based on the very rich and diverse answers to the question "According to your experience, how would you define sexual pleasure derived from activity with other people?", we created five themes: 'Comfort Zone'; 'Emotional Bonding'; 'Fulfilling Practices'; 'Relevant Sensations'; and 'Openness to Experience'. The majority of the answers aggregated more than one code and sometimes more than one theme, and were

interrelated. The examples we chose to present were selected based on relevance and suitability to illustrate the codes, themes and subthemes. The thematic map is represented in Figure 1.

Theme: Comfort Zone

This theme emphasizes the importance of safety and comfort during a sexual encounter in order to experience sexual pleasure. Our interpretation of the data is that without the presence of security, safety, and comfort (i.e. both physical and emotional) people struggle or are incapable of experiencing sexual pleasure. We noticed two different ways in which people refer to safety, leading to 2 subthemes.

Subtheme: Feeling Secure

This subtheme is about the sense of comfort and security people need to feel in sexual situations that allow them to experience sexual pleasure. This feeling encompasses emotional security, overall comfort, the sense of a safe space, the lack of judgment, and the presence of comprehension, trust, and acceptance. This data indicates that people really value being able to express themselves in sexual settings without being judged, having the other person showing accepting behaviors towards them. It is also important for them to feel like they can trust their partner(s).

Subtheme: Practicing Security

This subtheme reflects the importance of specific actions and behaviors people have in order to be secure on a concrete physical level. These behaviors are essential to assure the safety and comfort of people involved, which translates into honest communication, the presence of consent at all times, the respect of each person's boundaries, the definition of safe words, and the lack of aggression.

The following examples illustrate both of the described subthemes:

“I need to have a great sense of emotional security. Define safe words, or in my case, since many times when I feel like I'm reaching a limit I can no longer speak, code movements that are the equivalent of a safe word” (22-year-old queer non-binary person).

“Sexual pleasure for me comes from a mutually consenting relationship, where there is clear and honest communication, with the intention of creating a safe space in which everyone involved feels comfortable.” (21-year-old bisexual non-binary person).

“(…) This security depends both on not feeling judged (in relation to characteristics of my body or my behavior, for example) and literally feeling that the person is not going to hurt or attack me.” (24-year-old woman, unlabeled sexual orientation)

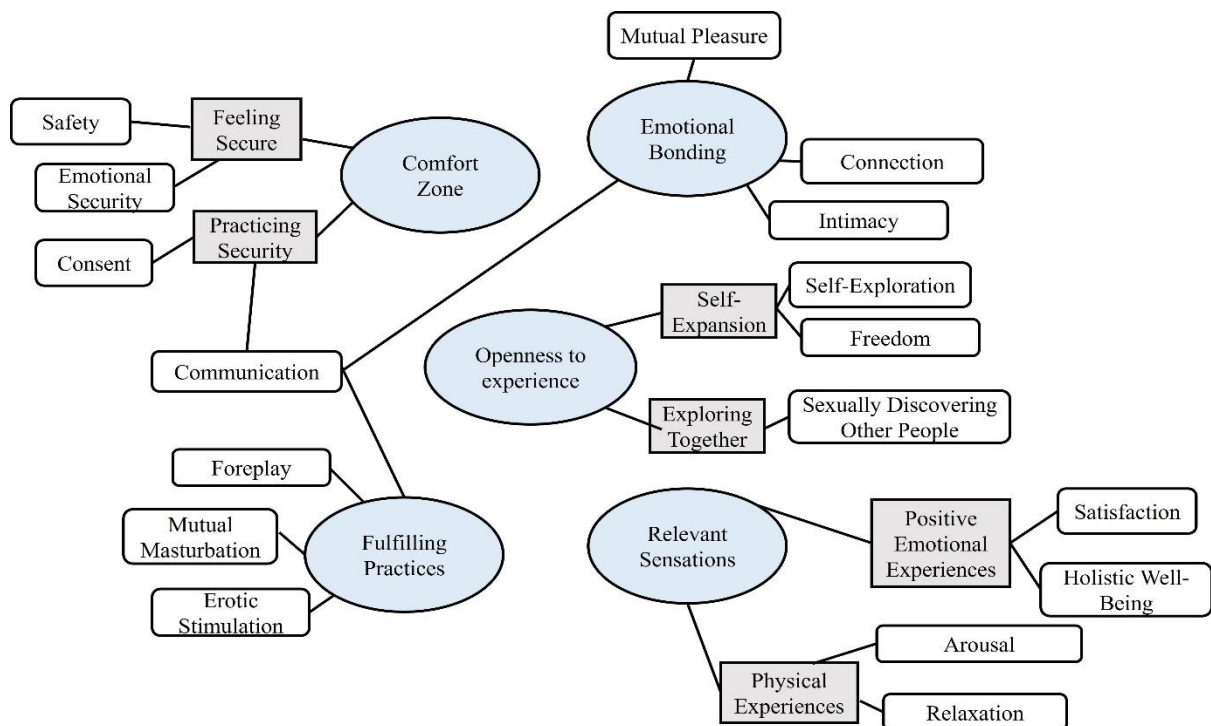


Figure 1 - Thematic Map of people's definitions of sexual pleasure

Theme: Emotional Bonding

This theme illustrates the importance of a sense of mutuality or reciprocity between the people involved in the sexual setting. People value the feeling of equally giving and receiving, which not only allows one to experience sexual pleasure, but has the potential to enhance it, when present in different aspects of this emotional bond. Having mutual pleasure, mutual desire for each other, and mutual respect for each other, or affective experiences such as attraction, connection, love, intimacy and compatibility are some of the main conditions of this theme. Mutual communication is also relevant since it's a tool that allows people to get to know their partners better when it comes to their affective and sexual needs, likes and dislikes. Other emotional bonding facets include sharing, vulnerability and caring for each other.

“When I'm with someone, my pleasure depends a lot on the other person's pleasure. The more pleasure I provide, the more pleasure I feel. Feeling desired, that is, realizing that someone finds me attractive or beautiful, also gives me a lot of pleasure.” (24-year-old woman, unlabeled sexual orientation)

“For me, sexual pleasure goes beyond physical contact, and it is essential to have an intellectual, mental and even spiritual connection to enhance the energy generated in the union.” (42-year-old demisexual woman).

“It's sharing such an intimate moment with someone, being connected to them as if we were one during the sexual act.” (25-year-old heterosexual man).

Theme: Fulfilling Practices

This theme encompasses the specific practices that people mentioned as important components to their experience of sexual pleasure, meaning the things people like to do, or things people enjoy being done to them in their sexual interactions. These practices can be kissing, touching, eye contact, foreplay, mutual masturbation, penetration, oral sex, anal sex, stimulation, massages, observation of the other person's pleasure, a longer duration of the sexual interaction, and communication, such as in the following examples:

“I like to be choked, touched everywhere firmly and with an almost carnal desire” (21-year-old bisexual non-binary person).

“Foreplay is essential, and being able to take our time without rushing when engaging with each other's bodies” (21-year-old bisexual non-binary person).

“I can have sexual pleasure both with anal and oral sex and through mutual masturbation.” (30-year-old gay man).

Theme: Relevant Sensations

The overall outlook that this theme represents is that one of the main aspects that characterizes sexual pleasure is the experience of different types of relevant sensations. Physical and psychological sensations are equally involved in the process of experiencing sexual pleasure.

Subtheme: Positive Emotional Experiences

This subtheme reflects the relationship people make between sexual pleasure and positive emotional states according to our data. It was often present in participants' answers that sexual pleasure is equivalent or contributes to sensations such as tranquility or stress relief (acting as a form of emotional release), a state of holistic well-being and greater satisfaction or even happiness.

Table 1. Representation of the thematic map with all the codes described

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Comfort zone	Feeling Secure	Having emotional security, sense of a safe space, comfort, lack of judgment, comprehension, trust and acceptance
Emotional Bonding		Having mutual pleasure, mutual desire, attraction, connection, intimacy, vulnerability, compatibility, love, communication, sharing, mutual respect and caring for each other
Fulfilling practices		Practicing eye contact, kissing, touch, foreplay, choking, being choked, oral sex, anal finger penetration, sexual stimuli, long sexual interactions, mutual masturbation, watching partner's pleasure, partner stimulation, anal sex, massages, smelling partner's scent, feeling skin's texture, erotic stimulation, sexual stimulation, swing
Relevant sensations	Positive emotional experiences	Experiencing happiness, tranquility, stress relief, emotional release, satisfaction, holistic well-being, mental ecstasy
	Physical experiences	Experiencing orgasm, lubrication, ecstasy, release, relaxation, chills, physical well-being, inexplicable body sensations, arousal, physical pleasure, tension

Openness to
experience

Exploring together

Sexually discovering other people, having
new sexual partners, diversity of
sensations, unique and innovative
experiences

Subtheme: Physical Experiences

This sub-theme illustrates the diversity of physical sensations that people associate with sexual pleasure. There were reported feelings of body relaxation and physical sensations of release. Additionally, people also referred to arousal, lubrication, and orgasm as physical manifestations related to pleasure.

Examples:

“Feeling arousal and desire in relationships with other people and feeling physical sensations of well-being” (35-year-old bisexual woman).

“Sexual pleasure is a physical and emotional sensation that brings satisfaction. It’s a pleasurable sensation, which culminates in orgasm.” (41-year-old lesbian woman).

Theme: Openness to Experience

This theme is characterized by the tendency people have of engaging in new and diverse experiences in sexual contexts, meaning they value breaking the routine and trying new things. This is often linked with a preference for diversity (of practices, experiences, sensations, etc.) and open-mindedness.

Subtheme: Self-Expansion

People who engage in sexual self-expansion activities are more likely to develop varied sexual interests. Essentially, this is a relevant part of openness to experience since it allows people to test their own limits, explore their freedom, use their imagination, allowing sexual fantasies, and reach higher levels of self-exploration and self-knowledge. By having this higher level of self-knowledge, people tend to communicate better their likes and dislikes, and engage in more diverse experiences with their partners, which in turn contributes to their experience of sexual pleasure.

Subtheme: Exploring Together

This subtheme focuses on the role that a diversity of experiences with sexual partners plays in increasing sexual pleasure. This can be translated into having new sexual partners and sexually discovering them (i.e. their preferences, likes, and dislikes), since every person is different and it adds the novelty factor, which people often describe as exciting. This also involves having a diverse range of sensations, and having unique and innovative experiences.

Examples:

“There is space to break taboos, experiment with fantasies” (24-year-old woman, unlabeled sexual orientation).

“Exploration of the pleasure and stimuli of the other person’s body and/or mind and mine, in an act of discovering what pleasure is for my partner and for me” (25-year-old bisexual woman).

Discussion

Studies on sexual pleasure have started to emerge, but there is yet to be developed a solid theoretical model to understand it. Furthermore, the previous existing definitions

of sexual pleasure have been created by experts, leaving some gaps on lay people's views of this concept and their personal experiences with pleasure. Our qualitative approach is an attempt to better understand this phenomenon as a whole: what elements are needed in order for pleasure to be present or enhanced.

The aim of this study was to get a clear view of how individuals who engage in consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships define sexual pleasure derived from sexual interactions with others. The thematic analysis of the data revealed five key themes, namely: 'Comfort Zone'; 'Emotional Bonding'; 'Fulfilling Practices'; 'Relevant Sensations'; and 'Openness to Experience'. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of sexual pleasure, confirming previous definitions of sexual pleasure, while adding some new insights.

Interpretation of Results

Our analysis of the meaning behind our participants' answers lead us to conclude that there is a critical role of safety and security in experiencing sexual pleasure, as explored in the theme comfort zone. Emotional security, including trust and lack of judgment, and practicing security through consent and communication, proved to be very important factors. This finding supports the broader understanding that safety and trust are prerequisites for expressing oneself, thus allowing for more pleasurable sexual experiences (Goldey et al., 2016). Furthermore, consent has been stated to play a key role in the mechanisms of desire and satisfaction (Viola, 2015). Additionally, people referred to a sense of a safe space where they can be free from aggressive behaviors. This underscores the detrimental impact of practices such as orgasm coercion, where individuals may feel pressured to achieve orgasm without their genuine desire or consent. Such coercion can threaten emotional security and trust, leading to less fulfilling sexual

experiences. Hence, fostering environments where consent and communication are prioritized is essential for ensuring truly pleasurable and safe sexual interactions.

Emotional bonding came up as a significant theme, indicating that mutual respect, affection, and connection enhance sexual pleasure. This theme aligns with the concept of sexual desire being deeply intertwined with emotional intimacy (Mark & Lasslo, 2018). The participants' emphasis on mutual pleasure, respect, and communication reflects the importance of reciprocity and connection in sexual relationships, consistent with studies showing that emotional closeness is a key component of sexual pleasure (Goldey et al., 2016).

Despite the scarce literature on sexual practices, they were mentioned by our participants as a significant part of the experience of pleasure. It makes sense that different types of people value different types of practices, and that pleasure is partially dependent on them. This phenomenon may derive from physiological or psychological reasons, given each person's type of bodily response and valuing of different types of practices. Although many of these practices are related to sexual stimulation, other types of behavior were mentioned as triggering pleasure, such as eye contact, doing and receiving massages or feeling the partner's skin texture. These findings support research indicating that different practices have different effects on sexual pleasure (Reis et al., 2021). Furthermore, Lehmiller et al. (2020) conducted a study that supports the notion of diverse sexual practices. It highlights that during the pandemic, there was a decline in the frequency of sexual activities but an increase in sexual diversity, suggesting that couples explored new ways to pursue pleasure. It is also important to highlight the mediating role of communication as a crucial practice, since it helps partners understand each other's needs, build trust, and create a mutually satisfying sexual relationship.

While in the previous themes the concepts can be characterized as conditions needed in order to obtain sexual pleasure, the relevant sensations are mainly presented as synonyms or consequences of sexual pleasure. We noticed a strong pattern when it came to sensations, both physical and emotional. Some answers were in line with the traditional model of sexual response, in which desire, arousal, and orgasm were presented as the main factors of pleasure. However, for other people, the positive emotional experiences had a leading role on their definitions of pleasure, emphasizing happiness and satisfaction. This is not surprising, considering pleasure has been described as an aspect of sexual satisfaction (Pascoal et al, 2013) and they have been shown to be theoretically associated in the other existing definitions of pleasure. Masters and Johnson's (1966) model of sexual response further illustrates the interaction between physical and psychological sensations throughout the sexual experience, emphasizing their importance in achieving sexual pleasure (Masters & Johnson, 1966). According to their model, physical sensations such as genital arousal and muscle tension are crucial components of the sexual response cycle, and they are influenced by psychological factors such as thoughts, emotions, and mental states.

The sample analyzed in this study demonstrates marked characteristics of disinhibition or openness to the experience. Openness to experience is one of the themes we created, and it is also a personality trait that has been linked to more liberal perspectives surrounding sex (Allen & Walter, 2018). According to Werner's (2023) theoretical model, we can categorize this theme in the trait-like sexual pleasure facet, meaning that openness to experience is more likely to be a tendency and not so dependent on contextual factors. This theme reflected the importance of novelty and exploration in sexual pleasure. Participants valued breaking routine and engaging in diverse sexual activities. This theme suggests that openness to new experiences can enhance sexual

pleasure by keeping the sexual relationship dynamic and exciting. The subthemes of ‘Self-expansion’ and ‘Exploring Together’ indicate that personal growth and mutual exploration contribute significantly to sexual pleasure. We do not have enough data to affirm that these characteristics derive from the specificities of CNM, or whether they determine the search for this type of relationship, but these factors are potentially related.

We found communication to be frequently present in participants’ answers throughout different dimensions of pleasure, more specifically, comfort zone, emotional bonding, and fulfilling practices, supporting previous findings that sexual communication enhances sexual satisfaction as well as sexual and orgasm frequency (Jones et al., 2017). Communication is a very discussed relational tool among CNM relationships because they encounter a lot of boundary-setting needs that monogamous couples do not face (Buchanan, 2022). Thus, it makes sense that communication is also very present in these people’s sexual lives regarding consent, preferences, feelings and emotions.

Previous definitions of sexual pleasure have some gaps that need to be addressed in order to have a clearer and more complex definition of the phenomenon. The results of the present study contribute to a better understanding of this complexity and the deeper meanings behind some of the constructs associated with pleasure. The definition provided by De la Garza-Mercer (2007) states that pleasure is a physical and emotional experience that derives from the stimulation of erogenous zones. Our results show that this is not quite the case, and that all the other elements can be just as important as physical stimulation. This is a very reductive definition, as it leaves out diversity, security, safety, emotional bonding, specific emotional sensations, communication, and other practices.

The GAB (2016) definition is considerably more complex than the De la Garza-Mercer (2007) we just discussed. This one includes safety and bodily integrity but in a

vague matter compared to our results, that demonstrate the existence of two different types of security which are feeling secure (i.e. having a sense of security) and practicing security (i.e. being objectively physically safe). There is also a lack in mentioning the emotional component that encompasses reciprocity, connection, attraction, intimacy and compatibility. Additionally, this definition also neglects specific physical and emotional sensations besides satisfaction and well-being, and doesn't address practices, diversity, exploration or any aspect related to openness to experience.

WAS' (2021) *Declaration on Sexual Pleasure* offered a more thorough definition than the others, including fantasies and diversity of experiences. However, although feelings and emotions are mentioned, it's still unclear which ones. This declaration focuses on important societal perspectives surrounding pleasure, such as sexual health, sex education, safety, and absence of violence. Nevertheless, it lacks the personal experience angle, which is important to reinforce emotional bonding, practices, and sensations, both physical and emotional, as fundamental elements of sexual pleasure.

Although our sample only includes people who engage in CNM relationships, there were no mentions of specific practices of this type of relational configuration, meaning this could possibly indicate few differences in the way this population views and experiences sexual pleasure compared to monogamous people. If this is the case, this suggests an alignment with the previously mentioned distinction between sexual pleasure and sexual satisfaction, given the findings of Mitchell et al. (2020), which revealed that monogamous and CNM people experience satisfaction in different ways. This could also indicate that people experience pleasure in similar ways regardless of their relationship configuration, taking different forms of satisfaction from their sexual experiences. Further research on this topic would be interesting to clarify the importance of differentiating sexual pleasure and satisfaction as different processes.

Practical Implications

These findings have practical implications on a societal level as to the existing stigma around people who engage in CNM relationships. Studies have emerged on the existence of a halo effect regarding monogamy (i.e. the overall positive perception of monogamous people based on this singular characteristic) and the results have shown that this phenomenon perpetuates the stigma of people who are in CNM relationships (Conley et al., 2012). This stigma means that there are still negative assumptions about this population, such as their relationships lacking passion, morality, trust and commitment (Valadez et al., 2020). The results of our study show that such beliefs are not accurate, given that the participants frequently mentioned the importance of aspects such as trust, physical and emotional safety, and emotional components including intimacy, love, connection and caring.

These findings can be helpful to practitioners working with CNM individuals or couples, as they can use these insights to guide discussions and interventions aimed at improving their patients' sexual and emotional well-being. Encouraging safe practices, clear communication, and mutual respect can help partners navigate their relationships more effectively and enjoy satisfactory sexual experiences where the pleasure is assured.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The sample size is relatively small and cannot be representative of all individuals in CNM relationships. Additionally, we can not generalize our findings to the general population, considering the specificity of relational contexts of our sample.

Despite the qualitative nature of the data, the impossibility of doing interviews made it difficult to capture the complexity and nuances of responses that present some

ambiguity. Our interpretation of the themes may be imprecise due to not having a deeper understanding of each person's social, relational, and cultural context that other data collection methods (e.g., semistructured interviews) would allow.

Future research could explore these themes with a larger and more diverse sample to validate and expand upon these findings. Additionally, it would also be interesting to conduct a comparative analysis between CNM and monogamous individuals regarding their perspectives on sexual pleasure to further clarify the differences and similarities between the two. As previously mentioned, this could also be valuable to better understand the theoretical distinction between sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

Conclusion

Through our findings we provide a more thorough definition of sexual pleasure that accurately represents its multidimensional, complex, and holistic nature. At this point, we know sexual health is more than the absence of disease (Ford et al., 2019) and sexual pleasure is a key element of sexual health (WAS, 2021), contributing to global health, hence the need for increasing its empirical knowledge. By promoting the study of sexual pleasure, providing up-to-date information, and a person-based approach, we are helping practitioners to have a more meticulous intervention when it comes to pleasure, offering more specific points to address during assessment of their patients.

Our results can also contribute to the destigmatisation of CNM individuals, proving that this population values aspects of trust, security, intimacy and connection when it comes to their sexual experiences, as they are essential for their experience of sexual pleasure.

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