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Go With the Flow: How young people define and practice good sex at techno parties

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Abstract

The way young people engage in the techno scene has been described in highly contrasting ways. On the one hand, the techno scene is portrayed as a place of risk, where partying becomes a vehicle for excessive sexual behavior. On the other hand, it has been attributed a culture of sexual avoidance. This ethnographic study demonstrates that neither of these two opposites are true. By conducting participant observations, interviews and an analysis of social media activity, this study provides an account on the definition and practice of good sex from the perspective of young people themselves. The results demonstrate that good sex at the techno party can evoke experiences of flow by addressing its autotelic nature. Due to the high level of self-determination and control perceived by its visitors, the techno party enables its visitors to engage with sex and sexuality in a way they experience as pleasurable. The open and friendly environment allows a fluid and elusive understanding of sexuality which leaves much room for individual interpretations of sexuality. Although this pleasure found in flow is experienced on an individual level, it does not mean that is not social. Even more so, in order for sex to transform into flow, it is necessary to have a social other who guarantees a socially safe space by eliminating feelings of insecurity, hesitation and awkwardness. This study therefore does not only provide an alternative view on the way young people engage with sexuality at techno parties, but also demonstrates that the experience of flow during good sex is autotelic, but requires a social other as well.

Keywords: Sexuality, youth, techno, flow, autotelic

1. Introduction

During the 1960s and 1970s, counterculture movements have challenged and altered conservative ideas on sex and sexuality. Whereas previously, the enactment as well as the understanding of sex was strictly guided by the principles of marriage and reproduction, society has now started accepting that young people do not necessarily become sexually reproductive as soon as they become sexually active. It leaves a period in which young people are able to adopt alternative modes of interacting with sexuality (Russell, 2005).

However, these developments of sexuality have been subject to many different interpretations. Whereas some seem to laud and encourage this sexual liberation, the high number of policies and programmes concerning youth and sexuality illustrates that there is apparently also a societal need to manage and control sexual behaviour. The level of urgency for these type of interventions seems to be particularly high regarding sexual behaviour in clubs (Van Hasselt & De Wit, 2013).

The Trimbos Institute exemplifies the way mediation of club conduct is institutionalized in the Netherlands. The institute has been set up to provide municipalities with knowledge and resources to develop prevention policies. According to their report *Het Grote Uitgaansonderzoek 2013 Uitgaanspatronen, middelengebruik en risicogedrag onder uitgaande jongeren en jongvolwassenen* ((Trimbos Instituut & Netherlands Institute of Mental Health and Addiction, 2013) young adults go out more frequently, during which they are under the influence of alcohol and drugs and thereby are more at risk regarding traffic accidents, injuries and risky sexual behavior. Nightlife settings such as cafes, clubs and festivals are therefore a suitable entrance for prevention.

The examination of the relation between the club, the use of alcohol and drugs and risky sexual behavior is not just limited to institutions that inform policymakers on these topics. Clubs have provided the context for these cross-examinations in many academic studies as well (Lenton & Davidson, 1999; McElrath, 2005; Fileborn, 2016; Hutton, 2016). Even though it certainly has not been proven in every case that the club is a danger to sexual well-being, research continues to link these concepts together in a negative way.

The techno scene is particularly prone to this kind of negative research (Moore & Valverde, 2000; Engels & Ter Bogt, 2004; Anderson & Kavanaugh, 2007). Remarkably, it is arguably one of the most popular scenes in the Netherlands at the moment. Although the techno scene used to operate under the surface and was mostly known for its illegal underground raves, it has now manifested itself in mainstream commerce as well (Hunt, Joe-Laidler, Moloney, Van der Poel & Van de Mheen, 2016). It leaves one to wonder, how it is possible that the techno scene has attained such great popularity among young people, if its parties are that dangerous and threatening to their sexual well-being.

On that account, some scholars have contradicted this idea of excessive sexuality within the techno scene. They argue that sexuality at the techno party is obsolete (McRobbie, 1993). Young ravers, as visitors of techno parties like to call themselves, are far more occupied with experiencing the club on an almost spiritual level, so that sexuality is rendered irrelevant. Even if it is practiced, it is in a childlike and innocent matter and has nothing to do with the danger and threats that have been put forward by other scholars (O'Grady, 2012).

Nonetheless, this perspective raises questions as well. If sexuality in the techno scene is indeed absent, why does the Dutch government still find it necessary to fund research and develop policies concerning sexuality in clubs? It leaves an academic debate in which only the opposite sides of the spectrum are represented: sexuality in clubs is either highly threatening or non-existent.

Remarkably, there has not been given much room to the thoughts, ideas and experiences of young people themselves. The limited approach that has been applied hitherto therefore has excluded alternative interpretations of the way young people engage with sexuality at techno parties. This study aims to address this gap in the understanding of this group in society by answering the following research question:

RQ: How do young people define and practice good sex at the techno party?

This account is based on a four months ethnographic research that included participant observations of techno parties, interviews with young ravers and an additional analysis of the event pages on social media.

Before the existing literature and the results are discussed below, it is important to note that this study does not adopt a prescribed definition of sex nor sexuality. The way people understand and engage in sex is not just informed by the physical act but is also constructed through social cultural factors. Sex encompasses the “experiences and practices that young people define as sexual, at the discursive level of text and talk but crucially also at the level of embodiment and activity.” This perspective on sex is taken from a larger study of youth and good sex and allows for an inclusion of different aspects of sexuality (Van Oorschot, Van Bohemen, Van Zoonen, Schinkel & Krijnen, 2014).

Just as the definition of sexuality is subject to its context, so is youth as well. There is hardly any consensus on what ages exactly delineate youth. However, for clarity purposes, when young people are mentioned, it refers to people aged from 18 to 25. Even though 16 is the legal age for sexual consent, regarding the age limit of 18 years for entrance in licensed venues in the Netherlands, this range has been adopted.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Youth and Sexuality

Being young encompasses many changes. Besides the alteration of the physical state of the body, young people also face many changes on a social level. Even though certain rights, obligations and their corresponding responsibilities are gained through ageing, aspects of childhood still characterize the youth’s daily life. Due to these transitions, this period is characterised by instability, uncertainty and upheaval (Hodkinson, 2007).

This volatility also manifest itself in the way youth engage nowadays with sexuality. During earlier periods, the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood was much shorter, as sexual maturation on both the physical as well as the social level took place at the same time. However, in post-industrial societies people tend to postpone marriage, children and leave the home at a later stage. This produces a periodic gap in which the body is sexually active, but this activity is not so strictly directed to traditional ideas as it used to be (Russell, 2005). It makes the involvement with sexuality less restricted and opens up a broad range of possibilities for young people to engage in sexuality.

Especially in contemporary societies, where the amount of social resources to draw upon has expanded enormously, sexual identities, behaviour and interactions are rather fluid and fragmented than fixed and structured (Beck, 2002). This can on the one hand be seen as a liberation for the youth to explore their own understandings of sexuality, but at the same time, this abundance of opportunities also produced the need for an individual to actively negotiate sexuality (Beck, 2002).

2.2. Sexuality and the club

Probably one of the most significant places where youth try to define and give shape to sexuality is the club. According to Grazian (2007), clubs are highly sexualised spaces. Besides the fact that the public display of sexual activity is normalized in clubs, they are often even actively produced as a setting for sexual engagement. Club management often relies upon answering to the desires of their public to engage in sexual encounters in order to attract large crowds to their parties. Practices of sexuality are thereby constructed by both the setting of the club as well as the agency of its visitors (Williams, 2008). This process underlines the idea that clubs have cultures of their own (Thornton, 1996). Clubbers display collective behavior, shared norms, values and symbols that construct a social context which is clearly separate from other social spaces.

Additionally, the spatial and temporal distinction of the club make the contrast even more explicit. This cut off from daily life evokes understandings and practices of sexuality that are out the ordinary, non-normalised and non-restricted. The club offers a place to explore new ways of identifying, engaging and interacting on a sexual level (Fileborn, 2016). Although many club cultures have been described as a place that promotes the exploration of alternative modes of sexuality, the description of sexuality in the techno scene diverge to a large extent from this perspective (Anderson & Kavanaugh, 2007). The current academic debate on youth and sexuality in the techno scene is dominated by two highly contrasting conclusions: one in which the techno club is a threat to one's sexual well-being and one in which sexuality is non-existent.

2.3. Sexuality as a threat

Studies that argue that the techno scene is dangerous to one's sexual well-being take upon a rather negative disposition. It has been argued that techno events legitimize inappropriate behaviour and promote the disintegration of morals through the acceptance of drugs use and overt sexuality. It has been scrutinized for its lack of boundaries and the pre-eminence of pleasure (Fitzgerald, 1998). Opportunities of sexual experimentation are not viewed as positive but rather as exhibitionistic and uncontrolled. Even though many studies did not confirm a significant relationship between techno events and drugs abuse and risky sexual behaviour, this link is still persistently examined (Lenton & Davidson, 1999; McElrath, 2005; Hutton, 2016). It perpetuates the idea that the techno scene is intrinsically related to STD's (sexual transmitted disease) such as AIDS and drug overdoses and violence (Moore & Valverde, 2000).

2.4. Sexuality as non-existent

On the other hand, scholars argue that the techno scene has surpassed the notion that the club is about sex and finding a potential mating partner. In this process, sexuality is rendered innocent and childlike (O'Grady, 2012). According to Pini (1997) a techno party is one of the few places where open physical pleasure can be exercised without traditional and patriarchal preconceptions of sexuality.

McRobbie (1993) even takes a step further by arguing that the rave is a culture of sexual avoidance. This can be attributed to the Techno style of music which invokes bodily pleasures through dancing rather than sexual experiences. This argument is supported by Richard and Kruger (1998) who found that the Techno style has triggered men to move themselves from a voyeuristic stance to a more sensual mode of dancing, which eventually leads to a less misogynist atmosphere. This atmosphere of tolerance extends itself beyond sexual relations between men and women. It emphasizes a childish attitude towards sex, rendering stereotypes and assumptions irrelevant (O'Grady, 2012). This discussion within the literature shows that there are large contrasts within the way the techno scene is portrayed as a place where sexuality is exercised. On the one hand, it

is seen as a place of risk and a threat to sexual well-being, but on the other hand it also presented as a non-sexual space where friendship and unity are central to the experience. From this discussion becomes evident that the debate on sexuality in the techno scene is characterized by incongruent results and diverging conclusions.

2.4. Clubbing as flow

Apparently, a consensus on the role of sexuality within the techno scene is hard to reach. Considering the polarized conclusions on the role of sex at the techno party, it is all the more remarkable that there exists a large body of literature that recognizes the potential for the techno party as a place of pleasure and enjoyment (Wilson; 2002; O'Grady, 2013). What must not be forgotten is that young people attend parties first and foremost because of the fun that it incites. They do not attend parties to deliberately resist underlying social structures that influence the way they identify themselves nor behave sexually (Malbon, 1998). It is therefore important to understand that one of the main reasons to go clubbing is because of the fun that it incites. When young people go out, they want enjoy themselves.

One of the reasons why a techno party is particularly fun to attend is because it has the potential to provide its visitors with a flow experience (Malbon, 1999). The phenomenon of flow was first coined by Csikszentmihalyi (2014). He found that flow is an experience of inner sensations, emotions and feelings of enjoyment. It evokes a moment of absolute pleasure that eventually takes people beyond boredom and anxiety.

However, flow is not readily accessible at any given time. According to Csikszentmihalyi (2014), there are certain aspects that an activity must adhere to in order to transform into an experience of flow.

What seems to be the starting point for a flow experience is that one is completely immersed and occupied by the activity. Performing the activity resembles the notion of being swallowed by a giant bubble in which an outer world does not exist. Attention is solely put into the activity and one is not bothered with external influences.

These external influences do not refer to issues such as noise or weather conditions but refer to distractions from the inside of one's mind. According to Csikszentmihalyi

(2014), during the activity there should be no social pressure, no critical self-reflection and no sense of time. Activities that requires an active negotiation of actions will hardly ever result in flow. Wondering whether or not you are doing the right thing is highly unfavorable towards the experience. It is therefore important that an individual has a heightened sense of control over the activity. This disables the emergence of distracting thoughts.

Besides these feeling of control and the high level of attention, Csikszentmihalyi (2014) stresses the importance of the autotelic nature of flow. An autotelic activity is an activity undertaken for its own sake. It is not aimed to achieve any particular goal or gain benefits, other than the fun of doing it. Thus, it is intrinsically rewarding. By discarding any potential gains, pleasure and joy become the main focus of these activities and are therefore most suitable to facilitate flow.

However, the fact that this intrinsic reward is key to the experience challenges the conceptualization of flow. It concerns feelings and emotions sensed on the individual level and is therefore not easily pinned down.

2.5. Techno as flow

As mentioned before, Malbon (1999) argued that clubbing in the techno scene can transform into flow. It appears that the context of these parties are particularly suitable for young people to undergo these moments of extreme happiness and pleasure.

First of all, the techno parties addresses the condition to abolish any outside influences well for its young visitors. Many of them go there to let go of their daily struggles for a while. Not only does the club separates itself spatially from daily life, but is also temporally the reverse. Techno parties often only start after midnight and thereby contradict daily life. Additionally, studies on the techno scene very often put forward that it beholds an open atmosphere in which social classes and differences seem to matter less. As the focus at these parties lies within the embodiment of the music in the form of dancing and the engagement in spontaneous social ties, it seems to be less concerned with stereotyping and adhering to normative standards. In that sense, it facilitates flow in

the way that it offers a temporarily free space in which one is liberated from social pressures and stigmas.

According to Thornton (1996) who examined the techno scene, the loss of these kinds of boundaries refers to the social stigmas and stereotypes that young people forget once they enter a techno party. They are free to explore and experience pleasure in a non-restrictive way. Contrarily to what Lenton & Davidson (1999), McElrath (2005) and Hutton (2016) say, this loss of boundaries creates a harmonious the scene itself also de-emphasizes traditional sources to validate social identity. It does not matter where you are from, what your background is, the techno includes all persona and paradoxically emphasizes the neglect of denotators such as class, race, gender, age and status (Thornton, 1996). As mentioned in the introduction, the techno party celebrates the ideology of PLUR, peace, love, unity & respect. It has accordingly been referred to as a culture of neo-hippies (Wilson, 2008). It uses social bonding, harmony and the collective experience as its starting point. It is all about individual emotions forming a united collective. At the same time, however, it also emphasizes the freedom of self-expression and individual sensations. It is mainly through all night dancing that one can let go and experience pleasure at a higher level. This occurs within a socially 'safe' place (Wilson, 2008). The use of ecstasy, an energizing drug, is hereby central to the experience of many ravers. Interestingly, where some scholars argue that the rave celebrates and stimulates the use of drug, personal accounts of ravers state that drugs is a means to an end, and not a goal in itself (Richards & Kruger, 1998). The use of ecstasy functions as an accelerator of the sensation of the rave and the experiences of unity, but it should not be mistaken for a mental shut down of the mind (Wilson, 2008; Richard & Kruger, 1998).

From these results derives the conclusion that the techno scene is a space in which young people can let go of the increasing pressure of leading an adult life and thereby enables them to get into flow. It offers a temporarily free space in which one does not face obligatory tasks. At the same time, the techno scene emphasizes a mode of interaction in which people neglect certain social resources to draw upon in social discourses.

Malbon (1999) also described how the presence of many other people around you in a club can also be disruptive in the process towards flow. When one becomes conscious of the eyes of others aimed at them, it can also become an experience of self-reflection and

a constant negotiation of one's social position in the crowd. Especially the edges of the dancefloor, where you can find those not dancing watching others, inhibit a certain threat. At the same time, those very edges can also become a stage for those who wish to put their skills at disposal, thereby accelerating the sense of self-control and thus their flow. The emotions that clubbers experience when they are dancing go beyond the idea of just having fun. Even though people live their daily realities as a timeline of responsibilities and worries, they are able to find a time and space where they can sense positive emotions for themselves. He argues that clubbing and dancing is a way of making yourself significant, for the self and for social others. Flow at the techno party is therefore best understood as an energy and a euphoric emotion which is experienced in the presence of others, created partially by the presence of others, and is at the same time a form of escape against one's individual daily worries and responsibilities.

2.5. Sex and flow

Literature has demonstrated that the techno scene is a site of pleasure and fun due to its provision of flow experiences. However, as soon as sexuality enters the discussion, the discourse takes a different turn. Even though sexuality is integrated into the context of the club, the current body of literature does not seem to address to what extent these experiences of flow intertwine with experiences of sex.

⁵⁴ 3. Methodology

3.1. Method

The following account is based on data collected by three different qualitative methods, namely ethnographic research – in the form of participant observations-, in-depth interviews and an analysis of social media content. All three methods examine a different element of the way good sex is defined and practiced by the youth in the techno scene, which adds to the richness of the data. However, most importantly, it allows for data triangulation. Linking the empirical results gained from this multi-method approach will increase the validity of the outcome of this study (Flick, 2004).

The participant observation were conducted at several techno parties in Rotterdam, the second largest city in the Netherlands. The selected techno parties were organized at licensed clubs known for their accessible character. The venues are part of the regular nightlife of Rotterdam and they are open several days a week. The parties are open to anyone on the condition that an entrance fee is paid, which rarely exceeds ten euros. There are no requirements for membership or special invitations. None of the clubs have a specific door policy, except the employment of an age limit of 18-years, which is according to Dutch standards.

Additionally, all clubs are readily available online and are active on social media. Their online visibility is used as a marketing tool to attract a large crowd. They create separate event pages for each of their events to which people can subscribe to stay updated. These event pages have delivered the content for this study.

Even though the objective of this study is not to make any generalization of the youth's definition and practice of sex, examining the underground techno parties would limit a broader interpretation of the data due to the niche audience it attracts. Due to the visibility and accessibility of techno clubs in Rotterdam, it is less likely that there is a strong self-selection among its visitors which allows me to better examine the influence of participation at the techno party itself rather than a particular raver "lifestyle" (Thornton, 1996).

The participant observations have allowed me to examine the second part of the research question, namely: how do young people practice good sex? By observing the way people flirt, dance, engage, but also dress up before going to the rave it is possible to view how sexual practices are articulated within the context of the techno party (Spradley, 2016). A number of five observations have been made. The observations have been documented by means of handwritten memos, which functioned as guidelines for the later production of an extensive report. The memos have been taken during various stages of the night and various places in the club, which guided a chronological and accurate description of the development of the techno party.

As this study also aims to examine how young people define good sex at the techno party, fifteen to twenty in depth-interviews were held. Open-ended questions were used

to structure the conversation and introduce certain topics, but allow space to go deeper into specific topics. A few example questions are:

Can you tell me about what kind of parties you usually go to?

Can you describe how you prepare yourself for such a party?

Is sexuality also a part of these parties, from your experience?

The rationale for choosing this method of interviewing stems from the possibility to allow respondents to articulate their own perceptions, ideas and experiences, whilst minimizing implying any predefined notions on what good sex is or should be (DiCiccio-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). By foregrounding the interviewee's personal thoughts and experiences, the interviews produced rich data from which definitions and perceptions of good sex could be identified. Respondents were selected via snowball sampling, using my own network as a starting point. I have interviewed a diverse group with considerable differences in demographics, backgrounds, and sexual orientation, with the common characteristic is that they are aged between 18 and 25 and visitors of techno parties in Rotterdam (Appendix A). Although a comparison of the respondents' characteristics is not the focus of this study, a diverse group strengthens the argument for the techno party as a distinct location. The interviews lasted for one and a half hours and were recorded on tape and were transcribed to paper at a later stage.

Two of the observations took place in company of a respondent. This strengthens the link between the observational data and the interview data. In addition, engaging as a participant observer in the activities of an interviewee often enables a researcher to reach to a much wider spectrum of information (Spradley, 2016). This has attributed to the insider-outsider perspective of the study. Rather than aiming to detach oneself completely from the setting and the scene, participant observant can be of added value because it allows the researcher to gain knowledge and a deeper understanding of the motivations and objectives behind certain practices. A complete distant approach would refrain anyone from accessing such information (Spradley, 2016).

Lastly, a content analysis will be made of the social media activity of techno clubs in Rotterdam. The inclusion of this third source of information adds to the interview and

observation material, because it underlines the discourses of sexuality within the techno scene and potentially shows how the techno party evolves as a sexualized space. By gathering data on the way visitors engage online with the organization of the techno party and vice versa, discourses that are part of the techno party and the youth's perception of good sex at the techno party were uncovered (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The content analysis concerns the event pages of the techno parties I have attended to complement the observations and interviews.

3.1. Analytical approach

The analytical process was guided by the principles of grounded theory. As it is not the aim to fit the data into a theoretical model or to test it against predefined hypotheses, an inductive analysis was conducted to uncover the youth's definition and practices of good sex within the techno party. The results are derived from the data through a circular process of viewing, thematising, categorizing and reviewing as described by Hildenbraun (2004). The interviews as well as the observations and the social media texts were simultaneously coded according to their content from which particular themes arised. From these themes concepts unraveled which were consequently analyzed in relation to each other and explain how the youth, good sex and the techno party connect. However, as data was simultaneously coded, thematised and then conceptualized, there has been a constant reflection on the formation of concepts. In this way, the process of analyzing remained open for interpretation and avoided a narrow perspective or exclusion of data through previous assumptions. Formulating concepts made it possible to establish the intersection of the data gathered via a multi-method approach and thereby infer the key processes that underlie the youth's definition and practices of good sex within the setting of the techno party (Flick, 2004).

4. Results

4.1. Reflection on the research process

Before I will discuss the findings of doing four months of extensive research in the techno scene, I deem some reflection on the research process fitting. Ethnographic accounts are often prone to critical remarks on the research process due to the immersion of the researcher in his or her field of study. This participation that comes with ethnographic research might disable the researcher to take a step back and analyze underlying process from an outsider point of view. It is seen as a disadvantage which could lead to bias (O’Grady, 2012). Although I recognize the potential pitfalls of being a participant observer, I argue that the duality of being an insider as well as an outsider actually strengthens the argument. Without immersing myself in the techno scene, I could never have produced this account. Experiencing myself what these young people experienced has attributed to my understanding of the way they engage with sex. Not only during my interviews and observations, but also during spontaneous conversations with people who heard about my research and offered me their insight, I noticed that many of them struggled to present a coherent and concrete story. They, and I initially too, argued that sexuality is not really a part of techno parties but at the same time they were all able to say something about it. Many people told me for example that bodily contacts such as kissing are very visible at these parties. This ambiguity within the answers of my respondents symbolizes the nature of sexuality at these techno parties. It is fluid, ambivalent and paradoxical at times, which made the participant observations of intrinsic value in producing this phenomenological account.

4.2. Good sex as flow

As my aim was to examine how young people define and practice good sex at techno parties, I was also curious to find out how young people view good sex on itself. By asking them directly what their idea of good sex is, it was clear that there is not much active discussion about this topic. Many respondents took a deep breath before answering, while others commented that my questions really challenged them to think about their own behavior. However, even though respondents apparently struggled to come up with a definition of sex, their personal experiences of good sex showed many similarities which eventually led to the conclusion that good sex is an experience of flow.

According to the young respondents, good sex gives them a feeling of ultimate pleasure and enjoyment. It was overall described as an activity which is above all exciting and fun to do. Good sex evokes flow, which eventually takes one beyond boredom and anxiety.

Good sex appeared to be a great facilitator for the experience of flow, due to the complete involvement that is required. During good sex, the involvement becomes so large that it creates that bubble in which any outer reality disappears. As Paige (22) told me: *“Good sex should really take you out of this world for a while.”*

But it is not just the outer reality that disappears during good sex. Besides the high level of focus, good sex also frees the mind of critical self-reflection. Sex was argued to be best when the young respondents did not actively think about which step to take next. This consciousness of making the right move disappears after which everything follows up on each other automatically and almost naturally. Moss (22) captures the liberation of these thought processes shared by the others through stating:

“Normally you think about all the think you do, but at a certain point it’s like a switch. It becomes a blur in which everything goes by itself.”

But flow requires more than just fun or attention. As discussed above, one of the most important requirements for an activity to be transformed into an experience of flow is its autotelic nature (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Although sex is not necessarily autotelic by nature –it can also be done to the benefits of reproduction or to increase one’s social status for example-, the descriptions all indicated that sex becomes good sex when it is performed for its own sake and for the pleasure and joy the moment brings. It might sound odd at first, to think of sex as a means to an end, but it would not be strange for one to think of sex as a way of strengthening a bond between two people in a relationship or increasing one’s social status in a group of friends. However, none of the respondents referred to sex in that regard. There was a high emphasis on the moment of sex itself and valuing the experience by the pleasure and fun of it. It seems that good sex is valued for its intrinsic reward.

Interestingly enough, this intrinsic rewards concerns feelings and emotions gratified on the individual level. However, the personal accounts of the young respondents demonstrated how good sex is, besides a source of individual pleasure, also a highly social activity. This might sound obvious because sex is an activity which is often performed by two (or more) people. However, the social other appears not be simply a component of the setting of activity, it was considered a prerequisite to have good sex and get into the flow experience. None of the respondents mentioned self-sex for example. However, it is not enough for a social other to just be present and participate. It turned out that good sex first and foremost includes a person that you like and you have a connection with. This connection was not related to a particular time span nor based on a relationship status, but it entailed what most respondents termed chemistry or a click. It is a mutual force of attraction. Benji (19) told me it is one of the most important elements of good sex for him. *“As long as you have a connection, really everything else is fine. Then you already get excited because of the other person’s way of being.”*

Apparently, a social other with whom you share a mutual liking is key to transform sex into flow. I was curious to find out what this chemistry and attraction facilitates for them. Why does it seem to be the first and foremost condition for flow to happen during sex?

I argue that chemistry for these young respondents is necessary to ensure a socially safe environment in which sex is experienced as good and pleasurable. Safety discussed here does not concern health related issues, but refers as a social space in which one can be him- or herself. Another person liking them guaranteed a free and open sphere in which they can do whatever feels right without the fear of being conflicted in any way. These conflicts came forward as inner feelings of insecurity, hesitation or awkwardness. Rory (22) illustrates the way a social other can liberate them from these distractions in her mind:

“Well there must be a click or chemistry for sure..I have been, and still am, quite insecure. I would never take off my clothes for just anyone... If I get naked, somebody must really make me feel comfortable and pretty. So it’s good sex... as long as you know

it's about you, but then I guess we are back to the point where it has to be someone that likes you."

In the majority of the cases, the respondents described not only that the sex was experienced more negatively when they experienced insecurities or awkwardness, but it even put them out of the mood entirely. Fela (23) even told me that he struggled to keep an erection when he felt uncomfortable around a girl. *"I cannot do it with any girl, especially not the first time. For me, safety and comfort really counts."*

The social aspect of flow was confirmed by Laura's story. The person you have sex with is not only supposed to create a social space by eliminating the potential for unsettling emotions, the social other must be free of such distractions as well.

Laura, 19: *"I think it is really about sensing each other. I find it very annoying when it is awkward. That you are both like: what are we going to do? So when everything just flows, I find it very pleasurable. When you have that chemistry, everything is fine, but as soon as someone is a little hesitant, I'm not in the mood anymore."*

The elimination of insecurities and awkwardness therefore becomes one of the most important elements to get into flow during sex. These conclusions substantially divert from previous studies on flow, where the social aspect was simply discussed as context and not as a prerequisite for flow (Malbon, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

4.3. Good sex at the techno party

The experiences of the respondents carried on in the way sex is defined and practiced at the techno party. Also within this context, good sex takes them beyond boredom and anxiety. However, the fluid nature of the techno club as a social space that separates itself from ordinary daily life clearly has an influence on the way young people define and practice sex. A much broader perspective on sexuality is adopted when it is practiced at the techno party than when it is discussed as the physical act itself.

Already during my first encounters with the techno scene I noticed that the enactment of sexuality at these parties is very ambivalent. On the one hand, people seem

to care less about impressing the other out of sexual interest, and they seemed to do it less too. Not only did the respondents tell me that ‘hooking up’ is not something they look for at a techno party, I also experienced that the setting of the techno scene does not really enable much ‘hooking up’. Standing in a fully crowded and dark basement with a music volume too loud to even have a conversation and lights too dark to lit up the place, do not allow much interaction. On the other hand, I could not necessarily say that there was less kissing, dancing or talking than there was at other parties I attended. Some of the events organized by these venues were even promoted by subtle and less subtle references to these type of interactions (e.g.: one of the events is called ‘The Love Movement’).

Thus, sexuality is a part of the techno party, but hardly lets itself be put in concrete terms. For example, when I asked Benji (19) if he thought sexuality was an aspect of techno parties, he told me that it definitely was because he would see a lot of people kissing on the dancefloor. However, at a later point in our conversation he told me this:

Benji: “Yeah sometimes we have these kissing sessions with friends.”

Interviewer: Kissing sessions?

Benji: Yeah, just kissing for fun.

Interviewer: Would you say it is sexual?

Benji: No, it’s not. I would not want to have sex with my friends.

So at two points in the conversation we discussed the act of kissing of which one was sexual and the other was not. This fluidity of sex was confirmed by others as well. Joan says:

“Sometimes you see people kissing, but it’s not like I connect that to sex. Kissing is not interesting for me like that. Although, it’s different when I like someone, then it can be sexual.”

It demonstrated how the techno scene facilitates an elusive and non-static engagement with sex and sexuality. It opens up the possibility for each individual to interpret sexuality the way they want.

This ambiguity and elusiveness was most evident when people discussed the act of kissing, but was certainly not limited to this. Dancing at a techno party is also a double-edged activity. The dance floor is perceived as the collective of dancers who are involved with their bodily gratification. Many respondents stated that the dance floor is the place to spend time alone and think about nothing for a while. It functions as an escapist platform where daily struggles are expelled. This is exemplified by the positions dancers take on the dance floor. It is hard to distinguish people in groups from people who stand alone because the majority is faced to the DJ.

Nonetheless, dancing is also used a way of interacting. Especially, in showing a particular interest for someone, dancing is perceived as a way of demonstrating you liking for another person.

Fela, 23: "It sounds strange, but it kind of start with a mating-dance. So, you start dancing and you move closer and closer. And it can end after a few dances together of course, that's okay too. But it is through dancing that you slowly notice there is something more than just the dance."

Derived from what I observed myself and understood from the young respondents during the interviews, the way interactions on the dance floor become sexual is concerned with much detail. At one of the techno indoor festivals I attended I spend about an hour at the edge of the dance floor. While at first I only saw dancers jumping up and down and following the beats of the music, it gradually developed into a site of flirting and kissing. It demonstrated the different ways in which the young visitors made use of the spatial locations within the club. This variation has to do with the way people perceive the sexuality themselves. It's like Iris says:

"It becomes sexual, when you make it sexual."

Regarding sexuality at the techno party, this is the red line through which sexuality is understood and practiced. The techno scene provides a safe space in which sexuality is open for interpretation. The fact that it is more open, leaves sexuality with an ambiguity

and elusiveness which makes it hard to pin down when something is sexual and when something is not. That does not mean, however, that people do not have control over their sexuality and lapse into excessive risky behaviour. On the contrary, the techno scene facilitates this self-determination and self-agency in multiple ways. In general, the use of drugs were cited very often as an central aspect to the atmosphere at the techno party. My own experiences were not different. During one of my smoking breaks, I got into a conversation with a local drug dealer who spends his weekends in techno clubs. I asked him whether he was scared to get caught or thrown out, but he told me that he never felt more at home. Evidently, drugs are commonly accepted here.

Many respondents told me that under the influence of XTC or MDMA they felt a sense of euphoria which can last for hours. According to them, that is what makes people so open and welcoming towards each other at a techno party. However, they argued as well that the use of drugs is not necessary to have a good time but it does attribute to the way people interact with each other. It becomes easier to start a conversation:

Iris, 24: "It does not really matter what you say, everything is okay. It usually starts with a random compliment, like, oh I really like your shirt, or just a hi, how are you doing. Actually, those bad pick-up lines you know from the bar seem to work at the techno party."

Overall, many people I talked to underline the loss of social boundaries as a central element of the techno party. However, remarkably enough the loss of boundaries through the use of XTC or MDMA was never explained negatively. Where previous literature attributed dangerously excessive sexual behaviour to the use of drugs, respondents indicated that they limit the use of drugs carefully. Moreover, they recognized that their behavior under the influence of alcohol often caused them more problems than drugs ever did. They argued that the use of XTC and MDMA made people more loving and respectful, whereas alcohol often blurs people's ability to maintain their own limits in terms of sexuality. Especially the girls I talked to, had in common that they valued techno parties because the atmosphere made it a lot safer for them to move around and to dance freely. I noticed this during my observations as well. I have been asked twice if I was

okay with a continuation of the conversation, which is something that almost never happens at the bars I usually go to. Iris (24) gave me an example of the way she perceives a heightened level of agency:

"I can best explain it with an example. I was talking to this guy, and at a certain point he asked me if I wanted to go with him to another room in the club. But I thought to myself, why would I want to go? All my other friends are here. And when you drink alcohol, you are like, hmm, I don't know. And then eventually, you would go. But now, I was very honest and clear: No, I want to stay here. It's like, when you use these type of drugs, you know better what you want and you are better able to communicate it."

Iris' experiences uncovers the way young people, and especially girls, feel in control instead of out of control with respect to sexuality. There was much congruence in the way respondents described how alcohol made them more likely to undertake actions they later regretted and that drugs made them more likely to act upon whatever they feel they want at that moment.

The results thereby contradicts previous ideas that sex is threatening or absent. It is experienced freely and allows for much self-determination. However, it would be too narrow to attribute these fluid interpretations at the techno party to the use of drugs only. It is also the design of the parties which creates a certain safety. Techno parties take place in dark dungeons, lit up with only a few bundles of laser lights. It is the darkness and the loud music that helps people to disappear in the collective and to get into the flow. Additionally, one of the managers of a techno club in Rotterdam explained that they also deliberately create a sphere of relaxation by placing the couches in the room and by pursuing an active door policy which excludes anyone who does not adhere to the accepting and tolerant attitude the techno party entails. It contradicts the earlier described place of risk for sexual well-being. It seems that the dark and raw atmosphere is not perceived as dangerous at all, but that it actually creates an environment in which an individual can move freely and openly.

Richard (23): "It is a rule at the techno scene that there are no sexual intentions. Nobody goes there to take someone home. And the fact that there are no intentions, makes me a lot less nervous in approaching someone. Because nothing has to happen, it is actually easier to make contact."

But again, this self-agency and self-determination is enabled through the expected acceptance of social others at the techno party. Due to the socially safe environment that the techno scene provides, the respondents feel less inclined to adhere to social pressure and expectations that sex and sexuality involves at clubs. It aligns with the definition that respondents gave during the interviews. Sex is experienced as good when it is an act that provides the individual with a positive feeling, and there is no reason to be insecure or feel awkward. In that regard, the techno scene facilitates the transformation of sex into flow as it helps its visitors to externalize negative emotions of insecurities and awkwardness. It thereby makes it on the one hand autotelic, but on the other hand social.

The techno party therefore facilitates an open environment in which sexuality can be defined and practiced to the liking of the individual. Nevertheless, sexuality remains conditioned a social other who accepts and respects these varying modes of sexuality.

4. Conclusion

During the process of talking to people involved in the techno scene and visitors of these parties as well as going to these parties myself demonstrated that the way young people define and practice sex is unquestionably different from what previous literature describes (Lenton & Davidson, 1999; McRobbie, 1993; Pini, 1997; McElrath, 2005; Hutton, 2016). Instead of portraying the techno party as a place of dangerous sexual excess or describing it as a place of non-sex, the results unfolded that the techno party actually is a pleasant setting to perform sexuality. It can even evoke experiences of flow. The experience of flow is achieved because young visitors of techno parties experience a high level of self-determination and agency to engage in sexuality in a way they prefer. Not only through the use of drugs, but also due to the specific characteristics of the techno party an open and accepting sphere is constructed. As sex is de-emphasized as the ultimate goal of the party, the techno club creates a fluid and elusive understanding of

sexuality. This leaves sexuality open for individual interpretation which means that young people are eventually much more in control to engage in sex how they prefer and when they prefer.

This freedom to engage in a form of sexuality that is experienced pleasurable makes the techno party particularly suited to transform the practice of sex into flow. However, theories of flow emphasize the idea that flow is most likely to happen during activities that are autotelic (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). It means that the activity must be undertaken without the expectation of achieving any goals or benefits and is only aimed at providing intrinsic rewards to its performer in the form of feeling of absolute pleasure. This individualistic perspective on the experience of flow was altered by the descriptions of flow evoked during good sex. It appears that flow in this case is highly social. Results have shown that the social other is a prerequisite to evoke the experience of flow. This social other must not just participate but must evoke the idea of chemistry. There must be a mutual force of attraction through which a socially safe space is guaranteed. This social safe space concerns the disposal of emotions such as awkwardness, insecurity as well as hesitation and doubt. It seems to be a key element as it eases the mind of the person getting into flow. The social other thereby facilitates the circumstances of getting into flow and is a necessary condition for it.

This study has not only demonstrated that the current academic debate has failed to address definitions and practices of sexuality from the point of the youth as the outcomes show that they are neither threatening nor absent. In order to explore this gap further, suggestions are made for examinations focused on sexuality and gender and sexuality and ethnicity. Although it was not possible to include all findings from the data gathered for this research, many other interesting aspects of the techno scene came to the surface during the analysis. It was particularly interesting to see the level of importance that was attributed to the afterparty as a spatial location for the engagement with sexuality. Unfortunately, it was not feasible to include this perspective into the scope of this study, but recommendations for future research certainly include the examination of the afterparty as a distinct site of sexuality.

Besides addressing the gap in the literature on sex and sexuality in the techno scene, this account has shown that flow can be both autotelic and social. This dual character of flow

and the way it is intertwined with sex and the techno party is an interesting phenomenon that evokes interest in further examination of the social aspect of flow. Regarding sex, this social context concerns a social other who has to provide a socially safe zone, but this can be different in other settings or during other activities that require a social other. By observing what conditions flow, it becomes possible to get a better insight of the way social activities exactly take people beyond boredom and anxiety.

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