

Desiring human touch – #MeToo and Queer Experience

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Author's note: This article was years in the making. The time I spent wrestling with these issues now feels like a distant past. But still, in the midst of this pandemic, the importance of mutually desiring human touch - especially queer human touch - seems at least as great to me as ever.

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Thirty-seven years ago, Christopher responded to an old-fashioned print ad that I had placed. He wrote me a letter, and we talked on the phone. When we arranged to meet in person, I knew he was older than I was. But somehow I had failed to imagine what he might look like – for example, that he might be balding. When I saw him, he did not correspond to my image of a possible sexual or romantic partner. We sat and talked, and he seemed very nice and bright and loving, but still.... And then he reached out and touched my hand. His touch was electric. That was the real beginning of everything. That moment lit a flame that for me, thirty-seven years later, has never gone out.

#MeToo is often about individual stories, but the relevance of this one may not be immediately clear. But it is relevant. We look differently at sexual encounters now, fortunately, thanks to #MeToo. Consider for a moment, if you would, how you feel about this story knowing that both Christopher and I identify as male, and how you would feel about it if I were female. The gender identity and sexual orientation of the people involved in a sexual encounter make a difference in assessing the reality or the risk of harassment or violence involved in it.

The #MeToo campaign, focusing on men's sexual harassment and abuse of women, has shown how pervasive it is. It has also trained a spotlight on some men accused of sexually assaulting or harassing other males. Gay men, like straight men, can be rapists and harassers. That they are themselves victims of straight male supremacy don't stop them from being privileged, selfish or violent. The attention to this scandalously neglected dimension in the wake of #MeToo is a good thing. But currently the spotlight on male-on-male abuse relies on an analytical grid that has been borrowed, generally unchanged and unexamined, from the analysis of heterosexual abuse.

Women and queer people share an interest in resisting violence that emanates from, and reinforces, sexist gender roles and a family system dominated by cisgender straight men. But the queer dimension of #MeToo risks being obscured – particularly when #MeToo statements implicitly suggest, as Jess Fournier has argued, that 'men are only perpetrators or "male allies", never survivors'. Moreover, as Noah Michelson has pointed out, eliding the differences between male-on-female and male-on-male abuse 'potentially diminishes – and thereby potentially dishonors' queer

stories.

Beyond this, there are other queer dimensions of #MeToo that require a complex intersectional frame that integrates class and race with sexuality as well as gender. The analysis needs to point not primarily towards ways of stopping individual men from misbehaving, but towards ways of eliminating the structural inequalities that empower some men to abuse women and others. We also need to distinguish tactics that enlist the state usefully (on balance) to resist oppression from tactics whose reliance on the state reinforces entrenched power structures. Here I want to focus on three issues in particular: age difference; affirmative consent; and the illusion of queer-straight equality.

Age Difference

LGBTIQ people have different experiences of childhood and youth than straight people. Virtually nobody growing up needs to be taught that heterosexuality is a normal phenomenon. The overwhelmingly majority of children have a male and a female parent, who were at some point a sexual couple. Children exploring non-straight sexual desires, or non-conforming gender identities, face a different reality: a strong sense of being different, and at times of feeling completely alone. Images of queer people in the media lack the familiarity and immediacy of images that comes from one's family. And for working-class and racialised kids, even they can be difficult to relate to.

This means that many LGBTIQ young people depend on older queer people, who they have actually met and can form some kind of bond with, to give them a picture of what it can mean to be queer themselves. Even queer people who remain close to their parents generally need to supplement their family of origin with a 'chosen family' that includes older LGBTIQ people. In a heteronormative society, young queers' reliance on older queers is to some degree structural and inevitable.

For some young queer people – certainly for many gay men of my generation – the process of forming bonds with older LGBTIQ people may sometimes include sexual relationships with them. In the past such relationships were often criminalised, even where homosexuality as such was not. In Britain after decriminalisation in 1967, in Canada after 1969, and in the Netherlands for most of the twentieth century, the age of consent for gay sex was twenty-one, while the age of consent for straight sex was significantly lower. Police often did their best to catch gay men having sex with a partner under twenty-one, as a way of criminalising homosexuality in general. Even where ages of consent have now been equalised (as in the European Union as a whole), age difference in queer relationships is often viewed with suspicion.

Within LGBTIQ communities as elsewhere, women in particular are sensitive to the dangers of abuse that age difference can entail. Yet lesbians too are aware of the importance of older women as sexual models. Meg Christian's song 'Ode to a Gym Teacher', recalling her girlhood crush on 'a big tough woman, the first to come along / That showed me being female meant you still could be strong', was an anthem at one time for many lesbians. Prominent Canadian lesbian writer Jane Rule met her life partner when Rule was twenty-three and her partner thirty-eight. I'm particularly sensitive about this issue because, like Rule, I was twenty-three when Christopher and I met, and he was thirty-eight. Today, now that I'm sixty and he's seventy-five, people rarely perceive any age difference between us (sometimes I wish they would). But it was different when we met. I suspect that my parents, who at first weren't thrilled about my being gay, thought that my sexual orientation was somehow Christopher's fault. (If so, luckily, they got over this long ago.)

This affects the way queers view sexual aggression, especially when there's an age difference. Precisely because young LGBTIQ people can have such a compelling need for older queers' examples and affection, abuse can have a particularly painful sting of betrayal. But there is also

danger in policing young people's sexuality in ways that deny them agency. In defending young people's right to say no, we should also defend their right to say yes, without which the right to say no is virtually meaningless. The long history of witch-hunts against LGBTIQ people that began with charges of abuse of young people should drive this point home for us. As queer activist Masha Gessen has written, as a woman she wholeheartedly welcomes #MeToo, but 'I am also queer, and I panic when I sniff sex panic ... Sex panics in the past have begun with actual crimes but led to outsized penalties and, more importantly, to a generalised sense of danger.' Gessen reminds us of Gayle Rubin's warning that 'a period of renegotiating sexual norms ... tend[s] to produce ever more restrictive regimes of closely regulating sexuality'. These more restrictive regimes can pose a special threat to young queers.

Queer teenagers still have to fight to express and act on their queer desires. Even today in supposedly tolerant societies, the law is often one of the obstacles they have to contend with. Accounts of male-on-male abuse exposed during #MeToo have revealed that the age of sexual consent has sometimes been raised in recent years. In some US states where the age of consent was sixteen or lower forty years ago, it is now seventeen - exceptionally high by international standards. For a sixteen-year-old queer person with homophobic parents, criminalising any sexual contact they might have with a nineteen-year-old adds burdens to the already burdensome pursuit of a queer life. Ages of consent this high need to be vigorously opposed.

Our focus should be less on chronological age, and more on conditions that empower young people to explore their sexuality safely, freely and in an informed way. I have argued, including in my book *Warped*, for a nuanced approach to the capacity for sexual consent, even among young teenagers. This is not an argument for the kind of uncritical celebration of 'boy love' that some gay men indulge in, entranced with tales of such relationships in ancient Athens or the eighth-century Arab caliphate. The intergenerational same-sex relationships common in many different cultures across millennia were embedded in very different sexual cultures, where the desires of the younger partner were not necessarily a major concern. The last century, however, offered more genuinely liberating legal frameworks for intergenerational relationships. In Soviet Russia in the 1920s, courts relied on medical opinion in formulating a flexible conception of 'sexual maturity' instead of an arbitrary age of consent. In the Netherlands between 1991 and 2002, an older person having sex with someone aged 12 to 15 was legally exempt from prosecution unless a complaint was made by the younger partner, the younger partner's parent or guardian, or a child welfare agency. I have argued that these two examples could be drawn on to legally define 'readiness for different sexual acts in a flexible and differentiated way, with the young person's own awareness and initiative given priority over "expert" opinion'.

We need to hope, as JoAnn Wypijewski wrote almost twenty years ago in her review of Judith Levine's *Harmful to Minors*, that 'children might learn to find joy in the realm of the senses, the world of ideas and souls, so that when sex disappoints and love fails, as they will, a teenager, a grown-up, still has herself, and a universe of small delights and strong hearts to fall back on'. Unfortunately, the trend has for decades been in the opposite direction: towards greater paternalism and tighter restrictions on young people's sexual self-determination.

Sanctified Tyrannies

Especially among queers, the fight against abuse needs to look beyond an obsession with youthful innocence and older predators. Power differentials derive from age are entangled with wealth and power accumulated by birth or career. Some of the male abusers of men exposed in recent months have specifically gained power in the fields of art and sports. Stars and teachers are often

surrounded by a celebrity aura that seems (for a time) to sanctify abuses of power that would seem grubbier in a factory or office. But the dynamics are fundamentally the same: perpetrators, without regard to the pleasure, indifference, distaste or revulsion of their target, are able to dangle promises of advancement, or threats of ruin, as a means to sexual conquest.

There are crucial differences among the victims in such cases, however, which journalistic accounts neglect. Male assault and harassment of women and trans people make all women and trans people feel less safe in public and hold them back in waged work. Often sexual harassment is part of an attempt to drive women and trans people out of workplaces, occupations or managerial positions where they are unwanted. Some of the recent decline in women's representation in blue-collar occupations, as the New York Times has reported, is due to sexual harassment. For lesbians, who are even more dependent on paid work, sexual harassment of this kind threatens their economic survival. Straight male homophobia also sometimes takes the form of sexual baiting in the workplace.

By contrast, gay men's sexual harassment of other men is rarely, if ever, an attempt to drive men out of workplaces. Men's position in the arts and sports in particular is secure and uncontested. So if employers in these fields fail to effectively combat sexual harassment by gay men of other men, they are not contributing to a hostile climate for men in general. This forms a contrast with the US prison system, for example, where a pervasive culture of male-on-male rape – an integral part of a viciously punitive, racist system of mass incarceration – clearly does create a hostile climate for young men. It also contrasts with women's situation in the US in particular, where the law rightly holds that employers that fail to effectively combat sexual harassment of women perpetuate a climate of discrimination. By failing to make this distinction, media accounts of abuse underplay the qualitatively distinct threat to women and trans people, and obscure how much is at stake for them.

The upshot is that sexual assault and harassment of men by other men, irrespective of age, is almost always embedded in class and other hierarchies. Yet analysis of this is generally foregone in news stories, which tend to focus on the age and sexual proclivities of, especially older, gay men. These stories never seem to ask where the actors' union reps were while abuse was happening, or query the intense reverence for teachers, coaches, celebrities. As long as these sanctified tyrannies are not addressed, focusing on individual perpetrators can only have a limited impact in reducing abuse.

Affirmative Consent

The 'yes means yes' standard of affirmative consent holds that a sexual act is only permissible, at any stage, with the explicit consent of all parties. It has been adopted for universities in New York and California, and written into law in Sweden. Many feminists support it as a weapon against sexual abuse.

The merits of affirmative consent as a safeguard against male abuse of women are a subject of legitimate debate. I will not intervene here in that debate. But queer experience suggests reasons to hesitate in same-sex cases. Here again I need to appeal to personal experience, to the story of how Christopher and I met: according to a strict interpretation of affirmative consent, Christopher should not have touched my hand. He should have asked first. If he had, I'm afraid that I would have said no. When I think of the possibility of Christopher's not reaching out and touching me, I'm devastated by the thought of what might not have been.

For me, that experience says something about the value for queers, after centuries of repression, of unanticipated, unauthorised desire. So many of people's desires these days are shaped by the sexualised images – mostly, still, heterosexual images – with which we are continually bombarded.

Sexual orientations are explicitly chosen earlier on average than in the past. As a result, our desires are restricted, bounded, by all sorts of expectations. Despite supposedly greater social tolerance for LGBTIQ identities, studies show that male teenagers who identify early as straight are less likely to experiment with same-sex encounters today than fifty years ago. To the increasingly entrenched virtual taboo on non-sexual touching, due to a fear of abuse and the growing sexualisation of society, has been added a particular taboo on same-sex touching, due to the increased rigidity of sexual orientation. This taboo denies the way sexual orientation shifts in the course of a lifetime, and denies its subjects the chance for real boundary crossing and new experience.

The taboo also has bloody consequences in view of the congealed legacies of homophobic prejudice. In the recent past in many US states, homophobic murderers could escape conviction for their actions by restoring to the 'gay panic' defence. They claimed to be so traumatised by a sexual advance that they were no longer responsible for their actions. So while, in many countries around the world, women are in prison today for killing their abusers in self-defence, gay and bisexual men have been effectively subject to extrajudicial execution because of non-violent, non-coercive sexual advances, which were viewed as abuse.

Given this, what are the implications of affirmative consent for queer desire? Of course, in any situation, for whatever reason, no means no. And even in the absence of violence or coercion, sensitivity and care for the other person's pleasure are vital in any sexual encounter. Men in particular, as #MeToo has reminded us, need to be less fixated on their own impulses and more alert to cues, verbal and non-verbal. The fact that many #MeToo accounts take place in the grey zone between obvious assault and 'bad sex' shows that many men still have a lot to learn.

Should a queer person, though, never make a sexual advance to a person of unknown sexual orientation without a clear invitation? Should a trans or intersex person never make a sexual advance to someone who hasn't clearly signalled openness to sex with a trans or intersex person? What would all this mean for 'the seduction of homoerotic desire', to which, the Chinese scholar Chou Wah-shan has written, the 'straight world is itself never immune'? Of course there's nothing wrong with asking. Words can be sexy. But in queer settings, a single, tentative touch can sometimes overcome barriers to transgressive desire that words alone might not.

For many women, burdened by straight men's neediness, demands and entitlement, overcoming barriers to desire might not be the highest priority. But for many queers, female and male, encouraging same-sex advances may be just as vital as fending off unwanted ones. Criminal law cannot do full justice to these competing imperatives. So criminalising misconduct (short of assault) is not the best starting place for queer sexual politics.

Make-Believe Equality

Many of the same principles that apply to women's charges of sexual assault and harassment should apply when men make similar charges. Studies have shown that false accusations of this kind are rare. Given how long victims have been shamed, ignored and silenced, they deserve the benefit of the doubt. Male victims are just as entitled to recognition and redress as female ones.

What's at stake in #MeToo, however, is not only individual guilt, but also the structure of oppressive systems. If we want to effectively fight male-on-male sexual aggression, we need to take account of the somewhat different social organisation of sex between men. When news stories mention gay and straight perpetrators in the same breath, acknowledging no salient differences between them, it plays into what Lisa Duggan has called 'homonormativity'. This is a set of attitudes suggesting that LGBTIQ people can be fully equal - if and only if they conform as closely as possible to heterosexual

patterns, preferably marrying, adopting or giving birth to kids and forming respectable nuclear families.

Coverage of #MeToo seems to take place largely in this make-believe world of already achieved gay-straight equality. Even when reporters are unaware of past prejudice and would consciously reject it, such coverage risks implicitly evoking age-old stereotypes of gay men as powerful, privileged, predatory paedophiles. This was the stock in trade for generations of anti-gay prejudice, not only on the right but also – especially where Stalinism and Maoism held sway – on the left. The evidence for this notional gay power and privilege has always been slim to nonexistent. Studies show that gay and bisexual men on average have lower incomes and are less likely to occupy positions of authority than straight men – not to mention trans people, whose economic situation is in general dire. Yet media representations of lesbians and gay men as privileged and prosperous both helps produce the dominant image of the neoliberal queer, and keeps old prejudices alive and well. Even young LGBTIQ people can be haunted by these lurking spectres – not least because of the still widespread prevalence of violence against queer and trans young people in schools, on the streets and in their families. Far from oblivious to imagery of predatory gay men, young queers are all too sensitive to it. Not only because they might actually experience abuse, but because every instance of abuse gives new life to gruesome images. Because of this, many gay men are reluctant to ever call perpetrators of abuse gay – a reluctance that, however driven by fear of oppression, also reflects a denial of the unruliness and dark side of desire.

Today, images of predatory, powerful gays serve as a stick driving queer men in the direction of homonormativity, tacitly reproaching them for failing to conform to norms of monogamy and domesticity. They reinforce, even where laws overtly prohibit discrimination, the structure of the heteronormative family, the omnipresent cult of heterosexual romance, and the still powerful norms of masculinity and femininity that haunt sexual and gender nonconformists. They also, implicitly, reinforce the fallacious idea that prejudice would disappear if only all LGBTIQ people behaved well. This pressure weighs powerfully on queer psyches. Heterosexual hegemony and the gender binary are far more powerful than the mainstream media acknowledge.

To analyze same-sex abuse adequately, therefore, we need to probe the different dynamics of different sexual and gender identities. Much more reflection is needed about why some men are victimised, and how they are viewed if they admit to being victimised. As Joy Castro has perceptively suggested, ‘the articulation of an experience of victimisation pushes one into a feminized role (thus provoking the doubt that’s always deployed against women qua women)’. One of the most traumatic aspects of abuse for male survivors is the way it can lead them to doubt their masculinity. While straight male victims can panic at the thought that their abusers perceived them as gay, gay and bisexual victims can reproach themselves for being too passive and thus somehow effeminate. Studies have shown that revulsion at effeminacy is still all too widespread among cis gay and bisexual men. By contrast, female victims seem to worry that they were too visibly, alluringly feminine, and thus somehow brought abuse on themselves. All victims risk blaming themselves, contributing to their sense of shame and their silence – but in gender-specific ways. Combating survivors’ shame and enabling them to speak out requires understanding these dynamics.

In short, queers cannot simply be folded into a general struggle against sexual abuse. Our struggle against abuse needs to be part of our ongoing fight for queer sexual liberation. For decades now, we have suffered from the reduction of liberation to equality with straights in straight-defined institutions, and from the reduction of real equality to juridical equality. It is time to renew the call that some courageous lesbian feminists made in the early 1980s for a new sexual politics. At least for queers, it is time for a politics that is alert to danger but gives the same priority to pleasure and desire – the desire that can catch fire at a moment’s touch.

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P.S.

- Salvage. May 3, 2020:
<https://salvage.zone/articles/metoo-and-queer-experience/>
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